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## **Examining Agency in Agriculture: The Feminization Debate in Nepal**

By Hritika Rana<sup>1</sup>, Mahesh Banskota<sup>2</sup>, Sagar Raj Sharma<sup>3</sup>

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the nature of the feminization of agriculture, and factors influencing the phenomenon in citrus producing pocket areas of Sindhuli district in Central Nepal. Presenting the intra-household division of work in agriculture among better-off family members in rural farms, emerging themes from narratives of women farmers' lived-experience as farmers are discussed. Based on the narratives, this paper explores how household members' everyday lifestyles regarding agriculture and non-agriculture shape their lives differently. Outlining the problematic of gendered agricultural engagement, three in-depth case analyses of farm families have been presented through data collected from narratives and participant observation as part of ethnographic study. These case studies highlight how women attribute economic and non-economic rationales for their life choices, using agency as an analytical lens. Finally, given the choice dilemma individuals face to reshape their lives, this paper shows how and why women farmers' socially ascribed responsibility for livestock rearing spurs the feminization debate. It also demonstrates the need to further explore the extent of livestock feminization to the pattern of gendered mobility and non-mobility.

*Keywords:* Feminization of agriculture, agency, lived-experiences, Nepal

### **Introduction**

This paper examines intra-household division of labour and how it influences the phenomenon of feminization in citrus producing areas of Sindhuli District. By presenting cross-case and intra-case analyses, the paper addresses the gendered division of labour in agriculture, gendered patterns of crop and livestock ownership, and day-to-day agricultural work. The gendered division of labour has been conducted to critically examine task-based responsibilities of husbands and wives in four production domains in a mixed farming system prevalent in the study site. Who does what in agriculture within the household has been crucial to understand gendered patterns of involvement in different activities. Despite of the importance of the exercise of segregating agricultural work by gender involvement, it presents an oversimplification of sexual division of labour (Dolan, 2001). Narrative cases backed by ethnography have thus been imperative in supplementing the data collected through informal interviews and participant observation that provided information on sexual division of household labour. Intra-household labour distributions have been further explored by highlighting three case studies, which present

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gendered pattern of crop and livestock ownership, and day-to-day agricultural work that shape the nature of feminization.

The ‘feminization of agriculture’ in Nepal has been mostly associated with migration (Tamang et al., 2014; Maharjan et al., 2013; Gartaula, 2010). Male out-migration and male off-farm employment are considered to be the major reasons for the occurrence of the phenomenon. Armed conflict is another factor associated with increasing numbers of women in farm decision-making and in the labour market (Advocacy Forum & International Center for Transitional Justice, 2010; Upreti et al., 2016). Backed by the population census and labour census (CBS, 2013), along with reports prepared by development agencies (FAO, 2011; The World Bank, 2009), the feminization of agriculture has been considered an axiom. This over-generalized packaging of the feminization debate is, however, problematic in the analysis of changing gendered patterns and farm dynamics in rural Nepal. With recent literature pointing towards the changing scenario of women’s involvement in agriculture influenced by the agriculture transition (Tamang et al., 2014; Adhikari-Thapa, 2013; Adhikari and Hobley, 2011), it has become essential to understand the phenomenon in more detail even within the agricultural context. Some scholars suggest that men might return back to agriculture when they see the opportunity to earn more cash, resulting in de-feminization (Adhikari-Thapa, 2013). Scholarly work suggests differential engagement of men and women in agriculture based on crop marketability, and provides an opportunity to look at gender-based power dynamics in trans-local market spaces. Given the variability in agricultural engagement based on production domain and its market out-reach, this paper provides an in-depth case analysis of farm households that are engaged in mixed farming. In this scenario, studying feminization through women’s experiences and their subjective views of their lives is the major focus of this paper.

### *Setting the scene*

The three cases are framed within the context of citrus producing pocket areas of Sindhuli district in the mid-hills of Nepal. Citrus producing areas vary from 800-1500 meters above sea level. Compact settlements with dense citrus orchard were selected as the study site. Based on the narratives of citrus farmers, government support and road construction has been considered two major reasons for the emergence of agricultural transitioning from subsistence based cereal to market oriented citrus crop production. Emphasis on high value crops such as citrus in the mid-hills of Nepal has been a government priority (Pokhrel et al., 2007) over the past few decades. Along with agricultural support, road construction that connected Sindhuli district to Kathmandu valley and Bardibas since 1994, provided more impetus to farm land transitioning from cereal crops to citrus crops. Despite gradual transitioning, all farm households still practice mixed farming, with mainly four types of agricultural production: citrus, livestock, vegetable, and cereal.

### *Introducing the Women*

From Household 1 (H1), we meet Maya Kumari Thakuri, who is a proud citrus farmer. She has been involved in citrus farming since 1980. She and her husband jointly worked on the farm. They belong to the first generation of farmers who opted into citrus production in a commercial manner. Maya is currently a member of the *Junar*<sup>4</sup> cooperative, and was a chairperson of the district *Junar* association in 2015. She is eager to plant vegetables in addition to expanding her citrus orchard. She has recently bought land and added citrus saplings. She feels that she can make household decisions, but sometimes seeks consent from her husband. They have five daughters,

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<sup>4</sup> *Junar* is a local name for sweet orange or *Citrus Sinesis*.

but none is living with them in their rural household. She is one of the very few women farmers whose name is occasionally referred to by both male and female citrus farmers in citrus producing areas.

Suku Maya Magar, is our second woman from Household 2 (H2). Suku considers herself to be a farmer, but is reluctant to call herself a citrus farmer. She recollects a memory of the citrus plantation, explaining that the orchard was first developed by her father-in-law and later by her husband who added 400 more saplings. She feels like she is not capable of making major decisions, and is always looking for her husband's consent. Her husband is well educated and has a non-farming profession, but his involvement in citrus farming is tremendous, making him the winner of the best farmer award in 2016. They have two daughters studying in the Sindhuli district municipality. Her father-in-law also lives with them in their rural home.

Ranjana Koirala, is from Household 3 (H3) and the daughter-in-law of a wealthy Brahmin family. Like Suku, Ranjana feels reluctant to talk about citrus farming. Her husband studied in Kathmandu, and lived there for several years post-education in order to establish a business. Later, after the business did not succeed as planned, her husband returned to the rural house and engaged himself in citrus farming. He was also awarded the best farmer award in 2015. Their two daughters and a son are currently studying in Sindhuli. Their rural household consists only of husband and wife.

All three households practice mixed crop and livestock farming. Like other households in the study area, they own cattle, goats, pigs and chickens. In terms of citrus plants, they have more than 500 fruit bearing trees, along with saplings and small trees which are non-fruit bearing. None of these households engage in agricultural exchange labour. They hire labour as required, but do not provide their own labour to other people's farm as is common in the study site. Men from H2 and H3 had migrated previously to Kathmandu for six years and three years respectively. Changing family structure (Razavi, 2013; Boochever, 2011) over the years is a factor influencing household labour distribution, with the family living in more than one household. At present, husband and wife share household work, including of agricultural work, except in the case of H2 where the father-in-law also assists in some agricultural labor. Table 1 presents basic household characteristics of three cases, with differences in male and female participants within the household.

**Table 1. Household characteristics**

Household characteristics	Household 1		Household 2		Household 3	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
1. Occupation	1	2	4	1	3	1
2. Education	Literate	Literate	Bachelors	4 <sup>th</sup>	Intermediate	10 <sup>th</sup>
3. Migration	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
4. Circular Mobility	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
5. Age group	55-65	55-65	35-45	35-45	35-45	35-45
6. Exchange labourer	No	No	No	No	No	No

Source: Field based interview survey and narrative interview, 2016

## **Methodology**

Ethnographic field work was conducted, in order to capture the value and meaning of women's experiences and involvement in agriculture. Participant observation, and a biographical narrative interview method (BNIM) were used for data collection and analysis (Wengraf, 2001). Subjective perceptions of respondents have been triangulated with data collected from participant observation that provided information beyond narrative discourse. To initiate conversation, we began with a broad interview question: 'Tell me about your life as a farmer, mainly citrus farming. How was your life before and how is it now?'. Data presented in this paper have been gathered during nine months of field stay from 2015 to 2017. Analysis of data has been conducted through constant case comparison of narratives after carefully organizing the data chronologically, with critical incident narratives as the focus of analysis. Verbatim transcription of interviews was coded based on emerging themes and plots, alongside storytellers' interpretation of the given experience.

## **Women as Agents in Agriculture**

From considering women as passive recipients of development to active agents in the process of change and development, scholars have emphasized women's agency in recent academic debates. Gammage et al., (2016) have emphasized the concept of resistance and conflict within household decision-making as agency. They suggest that such decision-making is not carried out by one individual, but often takes place between individuals who are positioned differently in the decision-making process. Using agency as an analytical lens to understand the raw data gathered from the field, the paper also assesses social norms as discussed by Agarwal (1997). According to Agarwal (1997) social norms govern the division of roles, responsibilities and resources between household members along the lines of age, gender and marital status (Gammage et al., 2016). Kabeer (2016) has also pointed towards women's behaviour that leads them to accept socially assigned responsibilities as a given feature of their lives, but has also stressed cases of active dissent. Compulsion rather than choice, in addition to the process of negotiation is duly noted by Kabeer. This paper thus focuses on the concept of agency that not only includes pro-active decision-making on the part of women, but also incorporates adaptive preferences in light of decision-making which is influenced by social norms as much as it is shaped by the structures of existing arrangements. Since women's role in agriculture is both a struggle for continuity and discontinuity of certain practices and norms within the underlying structures of constraints, the agency perspective provides a varied space for analysis (Kabeer, 2016) of the (de) feminization debate.

Of the 140 individuals interviewed during household screening, three cases have been selected for this paper. In-depth case analyses of three better-off farm families, with special case significance have been selected using a theoretical sampling procedure (Kolb, 2012). Commonalities between these three cases include, i) all families have houses in rural and urban centers, with multiple livability options; ii) the family entity has been broken down into two households, one in a rural area, another in an urban one, with children living in urban centers for education or work; iii) each family is renowned in the village as early investors in commercializing citrus farming.

## Discussion

### *Gendered division of labour in agriculture*

Labour allocation that points towards differential time-use, unequal work patterns, and hierarchy of work, have been used as factors by scholars (De Schutter, 2013; Zhang et al., 2006; Deere, 2005; Barrientos et al., 2005; McMurry, 1992) to explore the trend of (de) feminization. Who does what in agriculture is the basis for exploring the gendered division of labour. In this paper, agriculture has been broadly categorized under four production domains, in which the gender-based division of labour has been further assessed.

**Table 2. Gender-based division of labour in agriculture**

Type of work	Household 1		Household 2		Household 3	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
<b>Cereal</b>						
Supervision	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓✓
Post-harvest	X	✓✓	X	✓✓✓	X	✓✓✓
<b>Citrus</b>						
Land preparation, plantation	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	X	✓✓	X
Watering	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓	X
Mulching, weeding	✓	✓✓	X	✓✓	X	✓
Apply fertilizer	✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓
Prepare Bordeaux paste, spray insecticides	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	X	✓✓	X
Cutting and trimming	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓
Harvest, selling	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	X	✓✓	✓
<b>Livestock</b>						
Fodder collection	✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓	X	✓✓
Prepare <i>Kudo</i> <sup>5</sup> , milking, feeding, manage dung	✓	✓✓✓	X	✓✓✓	X	✓✓
<b>Vegetable</b>						
Prepare soil, planting, watering, mulching, weeding, harvesting	✓	✓✓	X	✓✓✓	X	✓✓

Source: Field based interview surveys and narrative interviews, 2016

Table 2 presents the breakdown of major agricultural work under each production domain. Since these households are the first households in each pocket area that started earning high incomes from citrus farming, the agricultural transition has resulted in less household labour needed in cereal crop production. These households use outside labour to work on remaining lands that still cultivate maize, millet and paddies. Since cereal production is not new to the labourers, the supervisory role in cereal production is considered to be minimal. Usually the role of women

<sup>5</sup> *Kudo* is a feed prepared by cooking combination of flour in boiling water. This type of feed is fed to milking cows.

household member during cereal production and harvesting includes preparing food for the labourers, but in these three households the role of food preparation is also allocated to women labourers. Thus the workload of women during cereal production is similar to that of their male counterparts. However, post-harvest activities are found to be entirely the role of female farmers. Post-harvest activities for millet include drying, threshing, winnowing, storing, and cleaning. Allocation of time for drying and winnowing of millet as per the weather condition is considered as the responsibility of women. Preparing *jaand rakshi*, a local drink made out of millet, is also the responsibility of women in H2 especially during the festival season. The father-in-law on the other hand independently prepares local drinks for his own daily consumption. The other two households don't belong to the drinking caste; therefore, they use millet only for household food consumption or for preparing feed. Post-harvest handling of maize mainly includes of storing, shelling, and removing corn from the cob. As women are culturally responsible for preparing food, and feeding the family on a daily basis, by default women take the responsibility of allocating grains for post-harvest handling. Male members of the family provide their labour, post-harvest only if assistance is asked. Such situations usually occur when the weather conditions changes instantly, or when women have to leave the household premise for community meetings.

Stark differences in household labour use can be found in work related to livestock and vegetable farming. Labour work for these activities is solely the responsibility of women. Occasionally, H1 and H2 use outside labour to ease their work, with some support from their male counterparts or another male member present in the family—the father-in-law in the case of H2. Like cereals, vegetables and livestock are not considered to be market-oriented commercial crops by these households. Although livestock and some vegetables are occasionally sold in the market for cash, these families still consider livestock and vegetables to be produced for the purpose of household consumption. Large livestock such as buffalo and cows are used for milk and manure. These cattle are sold and replaced by other milking cattle when needed. Small livestock such as goats, chicken and pigs are raised to feed the family, and when the livestock is butchered then part of the meat is sold in the village which provides partial cash to the family. Although vegetables and livestock have income earning potential, these production domains are not considered cash oriented as compared to the citrus crop which is regarded as the cash crop by each household member. Work allocation in both vegetable and livestock shows similarities within and between cases with less men engagement in both activities.

Intra-household labour allocation in citrus production is balanced by higher male engagement in fewer citrus farming activities, and higher women's engagement. In the case of citrus farming, the use of wage labourer is also common among these households unlike with livestock and vegetable farming. In H1, responsibility of citrus is almost equally divided, with women's more labour work in weeding, mulching and application of fertilizer. The work pattern of male members from H2 and H3 in citrus farming is identical, except for cutting and trimming. For both households, citrus related work is mostly done by men, except for mulching, weeding and application of fertilizer where women's work is more in all three cases as shown in Table 2. Except in the case of H1, men solely perform the task of land preparation, plantation, preparing Bordeaux paste and spraying insecticides. The division of labour shows a pattern of work allocation, illustrating two distinct cases—one in which a woman farmer is equally active in citrus farming, and another where a woman farmer is active but under the supervision of her male counterpart. Gender based task division within citrus farming is associated with the level of skill needed to perform the task, resulting in either more men or women's involvement in performing a particular task.

### *Gendered patterns of crop and livestock ownership*

Since legal ownership of crops and livestock is not applicable, for this paper, ownership is determined based on day-to-day management and supervision of work, decision-making regarding buying and selling, and use of farm income. Women's management of certain agricultural plots and their control over crop choice (de Brauw, 2015) is an indicator of intra-household decision-making in agriculture. As per the division of labour in agriculture presented in Table 2, a slight inclination of women's engagement in cereal, livestock, and vegetable production can be found with significant involvement of men in citrus production. Gender bias in day-to-day management and supervision in agriculture as presented in Table 2 is in line with researchers who pointed out that men focus on newly introduced market prominent crops, while women are responsible for traditional food crops (Adhikari-Thapa, 2013; Elbehri and Lee, 2011; O'Laughlin, 2008). Women farmers consider themselves equally responsible for ensuring timely cereal crop production and harvesting. Women's narratives on cereal crop management is mostly associated with a reduced burden of post-harvesting of cereal as a result of an increasing number of local mills. Women's focus on changing household work over the years for food preparation emphasizes on women's embedded traditional role in contrast to that of men.

While women continue doing work previously done by women of earlier generations, men have left behind traditional agricultural work that was conducted by an earlier generation of men. However, men have inherited agricultural work associated with citrus farming that was first introduced by their fathers a few decades ago. As cereal is not sold, the question of income earned through cereal production does not arise. However, cereal is occasionally used as a tool for barter by women in return for an exchange of labour. In H2 and H3, women either provide grains or local drink to women labourers who assist them in the menial tasks of occasional weeding and hoeing. Instead of giving hard cash, a few hours of work are managed by utilizing the available household resources. For such exchanges, these women don't feel it necessary to ask their husbands for permission. However, in the case of hiring labourers for cash, the wives feel they must consult with their husbands. Like cereal, these households rarely sell potatoes, onions, soybeans, cauliflower, spinach, milk, or eggs. These products are usually consumed to enhance the family diet. Only occasionally have these households sold these products when there was surplus production. The potentiality of commercial farming of potatoes and chillies is also considered by H3, but the aspiration of commercial farming is expressed only by the husband who is eager to diversify agricultural products. In the case of selling and buying livestock, except for H1, women from other households rely on their husbands' approval. "How can I sell buffalo and goats, that includes lots of money, so *dai* handles selling and buying of livestock although I tell him when and why we should sell it" expressed women from H3. Just like the selling of buffalo that includes of transaction of large sum of money, citrus is also sold solely by men. Women from H3 shared that she sometimes sells a small amount of citrus or milk products when she needs immediate money, especially when her husband is not around. Although day-to-day management and supervision of agricultural work is mostly in the hand of women, decision-making on the use of cash for all types of production is in the hand of male members. As shared by one of the women, only a small amount that is negligible is obtained by selling agricultural products. Such amount is then used to recharge their cell phones, buy sweets or snack for young kids and guests, or provide pocket money to their children.

Although small in amount, the money that women manage to acquire provides them a sense of independence as they are capable of performing day-to-day behavior that is not constrained by



financial measures. The term that is often used by women to suggest their lifestyle includes of 'ghar-byawahar' or household behaviour which not only includes daily agricultural tasks and food preparation, but also social networking and relationship-building, for which at least a minimal flow of cash is a necessity. Despite acknowledging the importance of cash in maintaining their day-to-day lifestyle, the entrepreneurial tendency in agriculture is in stark contrast between women from H1 and the other two households. While men's conscious effort to become engaged in citrus production and its management is well-recognized by both men and women from each household, women from H2 and H3 are less enthusiastic about their own involvement in either citrus commercialization or other cash crop farming. Men's role in citrus production is emphasized during daily conversations, which is often followed by praise and appreciation for their engagement in managing the orchard. While the woman farmer from H1 asserts her initiative to expand the citrus orchard, the women from the other two households glorify their husbands' achievements.

The women from H1 represents a rare case in the study site, while the other two cases are representative of a more common scenario of women's involvement in citrus production. Despite women's engagement in citrus production as presented in Table 2, the role of men in citrus production is much more pronounced in most of the households as in the case of H2 and H3. Given the household work in agriculture, it can be argued that feminization is predominant in the cereal and livestock/vegetable domains, while less so in the market-oriented citrus crop. In this regard, if citrus is a men's crop, and remaining crops are women's crops, women tend to spend their labour in men's crops, while men hardly contribute their labour to women's crops as has been demonstrated also by other researchers (Adhikari-Thapa, 2013; Boserup, 1970). As recalled by the woman in H3, 'I sometimes look around during citrus plantation and harvesting, but only when *dai* (referring to her husband) has to leave for some emergency work [...] when he gets back he tells me that I can leave as he will take care of it'. While sharing this experience, she narrates the story with a laugh, and further suggests that she can then feed the buffalo who were left hungry for hours while she was working at the citrus orchard site. Women's supervision is thus limited in citrus production in case of H2 and H3 where men's presence automatically shifts the control over citrus plot to their husbands.

### **Women's narratives of agricultural work**

The way in which stories unfold shows how and why crops/livestock have become men's and women's domains in the three cases. Comparing their own varied involvement in the various agricultural domains, women farmers rationalize their choice and behavioural patterns based on how they have lived their own lives. Given the opportunities and life circumstances, women farmers illustrate their changing agricultural engagement as necessitated by situations on the one hand, and as an active process of negotiation to ease one's life, on the other. Through their life histories, and self-reflections of their perceptions of societal norms and values, the narrative patterns in all three cases (despite variations) raise concern over the allocation of agricultural responsibilities and how this allocation affects women's lives.

The citrus crop in the study site is not only a source of income but also is symbolic to local identity, pride and respect. The branding of crops by citrus farmers and citrus cooperatives has helped to popularize Junar with a special identity; thus, 'Sindhuli' has become a geographic space of good quality Junar within the marketplace. Within this social space of the citrus market, citrus occupies a central position in agricultural modernization and commercialization with the

government initiative declaring Sindhuli as Junar zone (Paudel, 2016). The identity of farmers as “large citrus farmers” thus holds high social positioning within the agricultural context. Women’s narratives about their agricultural engagement and self-proclaimed identity as citrus farmers thus becomes imperative in understanding the context of feminization in the study site. Heterogeneity presented in the stories of women farmers involvement in agriculture demonstrate individual agency exercised by women farmers within the existing structures, along with the process of acting out agency that lies within, either individually or collectively.

For example, Maya and her husband worked, struggled and together transformed their land and their own roles, for citrus cultivation from the early stages of plantation. They never migrated, and both considered farming as their core occupation. She started transforming rather than conforming to stereotypical gender norms and also towards her reproductive role to engage herself more in citrus farming. Maya presents her story of involvement in citrus as follows:

“I gave birth to my first daughter when I was 17. After I had already given birth to five daughters, I went for *Junar* training in Kirtipur. My youngest daughter was only 15 months old. Villagers used to question me then, saying why is she leaving her infant behind, what if she dies? But I left, *nani* [*female child:referring to the researcher*]. I told my husband to take care of the child. My mother-in-law was also alive then so I left. After the training, I realized that the way we had planted trees were not right. That’s why so many trees died earlier. Then we started planting it like we were trained [...] *Nani*, during the training, those Japanese and Nepali women asked us whether we had done family planning. She made us think about our reproductive role. She said if a family wants a child, it’s the woman who has to take the responsibility for nine months and more. Then I told my husband to do family planning. But he did not agree. So I thought I should do it myself [...] I already had a good number of children, five daughters, why would I want another child. We were told that many people don’t even have more than two children. We being a frog in the pond didn’t know about life that existed outside of the village. Then I thought deeply and told myself ‘even if people mistreat me, I won’t try to have a son anymore’. So I did it. Without telling anyone. Then I started realizing more that women should not confine themselves in the household. I started working in citrus production more than ever before. [...] If we could earn more money, we could educate our children. So I never let my daughters cut grass, I took the burden myself. And constantly asked my daughters to focus on study, while I worked to earn money for their education.”  
(Maya Kumari, 56)

Maya’s narration of this critical incident in her life raises issues of negotiation of reproductive norms and societal expectations of her as a mother, in opposition to her aspiration to travel and learn. The way she was able to make decisions about her mobility despite opposition from villagers, or lack of consent from her husband regarding her reproductive role, shows Maya’s individual willingness to do something that she valued. With five daughters, and not a single son, Maya constantly feared being replaced by other women who bore sons. Maya turned this fear was turned into an asset: she convinced her husband to transfer land in her name, since she had already borne five daughters. This transformation in her behaviour was due to her increased consciousness and awareness after she had the opportunity to go to Kirtipur for training. After returning, she also

tried to convince her husband to engage in family planning, but his reluctance led her to take control of her own body. Without informing her husband, she went through the birth control procedure. Challenging the dominant societal and family norms over son preference, and the status given to women who bear a son, she persisted in enhancing her economic status, and focused on her daughters' educations. Comparing her life with that of other women in the village, she further asserted that unlike other women who comply with what others have to say, she relied on her own will to change her life for a better future. Despite undergoing through both societal as well as family pressures, Maya persisted and became an agricultural entrepreneur.

Ranjana and Suku on the other hand, gave education as their reason for not knowing enough about citrus farming. They compared themselves with their husbands' know-how in citrus farming and suggested that they knew nothing about citrus plantation. Field observations and their work narratives, however, suggested differently. Despite of their lack of practical involvement in planting, preparing Bordeaux paste and spraying insecticides, they had theoretical knowledge about how these tasks should be done. With some hesitation they could explain the procedures. During the agricultural season, these women would accompany their husband and perform such tasks as supervised by their husband. Since their husbands were more actively involved in the citrus crop and took control over certain activities on the citrus farm, they felt more comfortable referring their husband as a knowledgeable citrus farmers. Ranjanas' narration shows her reluctance in citrus farming, but she proudly tells her story of acquiring the skills of cutting grass, and her struggle to learn farming techniques after her marriage.

“My father was in Nepal army, so we travelled with him most of our childhood. Due to traveling from one place to another, I did not know anything about farming. When I got married, we had to work in the fields, plant maize, millet, paddy and cut grass for buffaloes on a daily basis. Many times I had even cut my hand while cutting grass, as I was not used to it. My in-laws used to complain about it every time. But in two years I learned everything.” (Ranjana, 42)

Both Ranjana and Suku segregate their work within the confines of the household as the responsibility of a woman, while earning money and taking care of household expenses, including children's education and buying household goods [cooking oil, rice, spices, soaps...] as the responsibility of their husbands. As per their narratives, household responsibilities included cooking, dish cleaning, washing clothes, preparing feed and fodder, milking cattle, dung management, carrying manure, vegetable farming, managing water for daily use, and the use of cow dung paste to clean the house. These responsibilities are described as women's roles within the prevalent societal norms. Unlike Maya, these two women constantly strived to fit into the predominant role of women, to maintain society's expectation of them. Due Ranjana's mobile lifestyle in the early stage of her life prior to marriage, she had little knowledge and skill in farming. Based on Ranjanas' narrative, it can be interpreted that even cutting grass, which is considered one of the easiest and simplest work by every farmer, was not simple for her at one time in her life. Like Maya, who exerted her agency to learn about citrus farming, Ranjana too persisted on learning traditional agricultural skills. 'I still remember how I used to cry every day when I first got married. I knew nothing about farming, but after marriage, my day-to-day life revolved around farming. [...] It's strange to remember the past' asserts Ranjana. Ranjana's determination and hard work in learning the ways of traditional farming, while her reluctance to own citrus farming as her work, posits a question regarding socio-cultural mindset and expectation of women's integration into

citrus farming. After working and living for years in Kathmandu, her husband came back to the village and became engaged in citrus farming. First, he earned money from the inherited citrus orchard, and then started planting new saplings on land, which earlier cultivated maize and millet. While learning traditional farming was considered a skill necessary for women to survive in rural areas, neither Ranjana nor her family members considered it crucial for her to learn the techniques of citrus farming. Citrus farming was considered an additional agricultural task that was initiated first by her father-in-law and later by her husband who inherited the citrus trees. Socially, it was acceptable for women not to know the skills and techniques necessary to grow and harvest citrus. Skills regarding traditional farming were, however, considered to be an asset for women living in rural areas. Not knowing traditional farming skills resulted in day-to-day pressure as experienced by Ranjana. Her son on the other hand was never pressured to learn traditional agricultural skills:

“If I leave home for a few days, then there will be a chaos. *Dai* does not do anything in the house. He sometimes cooks, when I am not around. Sometimes helps in the kitchen when there are guests. But besides that he does not do anything. Especially when it comes to carrying loads, manure, he wouldn't even touch it. Other men do it in the village, but no [...] not *dai*. His parents didn't let him work at all in the field. So he didn't know anything about farming. Later, when he came back from Kathmandu after carpet business failed [...], he started getting engaged in citrus farming. (Ranjana, 42)

Ranjana recalls that the orchard was looked after by her father/mother-in-law. At that time, taking care of the orchard was not difficult once planted, since they did not practice modern, scientific management of the orchard. ‘Six to seven years back, many fruits used to get wasted as there was less market, and labour costs for portering was much higher’ explains Ranjana. Ranjana's narration reiterates the generational inheritance of the citrus farm by the son once the citrus market expanded. The farm, which was once developed by her father-in-law, was later enlarged by her husband. Suku's story also reflects the inheritance of the citrus orchard by her husband, and her relatively minimal involvement in citrus plantation related decision-making. In both the families, husbands also worked as local citrus traders. While other agricultural activities were an inherited responsibility of women in farm families, citrus responsibilities were taken over by men who returned back to agriculture when they realized they would earn both a higher income and also respect. Given their husbands' significant presence in citrus farming, in spite of their labour contributions, women tend to undervalue their work in the domain of citrus production. In addition to ownership and decision-making regarding citrus farming, women's narratives also emphasize the importance of mobility for being able to actively participate in the citrus market that not only includes of local space of citrus production but networks of citrus market development.

According to Suku and Ranjana, their husbands are constantly on the move. ‘*Hiddul garirakhnu huncha*’ is a phrase often used to suggest their husbands' circular mobility—physical movement from one place to another, mostly from their village to the Sindhuli municipality. Their husbands' involvement in the local citrus cooperative, the district level citrus cooperative association and their extended social network was considered a major reason for their mobility. With the Nepalese Government's effort to modernize and commercialize citrus farming, many programs, workshops and meetings were held at district and local levels. With ownership of the bike, Suku's husband did not even have to wait for public transportation. Ranjanas' husband on

the other hand had good rapport with transport operators and driver as he frequently used the vehicle. ‘They wouldn’t even ask for money from *dai*. May be he wouldn’t even take money from me because I am Karan Koirala’s wife. But I don’t ask him’ explains Ranjana. Maya on the other hand echoes a different story of her mobility as compared to her husband. She also compares her travel narrative with that of the dominant view regarding women and their mobility. ‘Even when there was no road, and no women, except for porter class women would travel to distant places, I used to gather porters, walk for a whole night to get porters from another village, then come back to the village to collect citrus. Then early morning we would move to Sindhuli. I didn’t carry the load, but I used to go with them’ assets Maya. She interprets her involvement as a move to rectify her husband’s less enthusiastic involvement. She recalls that her husband would rather sell citrus at the farm-gate price, rather than go to the market and sell it for higher prices. She did not agree with his views, however, and decided to take the lead by herself. ‘I decided to go although it was not usual for a woman to travel long distances, and he said ok. We didn’t have much argument about it’ recalls Maya. Reflecting on her residency in Sindhuli, she further adds:

“When I was a chairperson in the cooperative I used to live in Sindhuli [...] for about two years. We have a house there too. Earlier our children lived there while they were in school. At that time I used to sell *Junar* from there. But goats and cattle were in dire condition here. Nobody looked after it properly. I then came back. *Bua* (referring to her husband) could not manage it all alone, so who else could help him. Labourers don’t do such work. These household works need to be done by ourselves. There is no choice otherwise. We need manure. Farmers cannot do without it. So I came back. That cooperative still sends me letters, and asks me to join the cooperative. Whenever I go there they ask me for advice. They consider me as a lead farmer. But we need to work for ourselves, in our own farms, isn’t it? [...] if we take care of livestock and manage urine and dung properly then the trees will grow faster and it will give more fruit. People here ask me sometimes [...] how did your trees grow so fast?” (Maya Kumari, 56)

Ranjana shares a similar story. She lived in Sindhuli for a couple of months with her children. Later, she came back to the village, while her father-in-law and mother-in-law went to Sindhuli and lived with their grandchildren. After her return, she mentioned two major decisions that she undertook on her own initiative, one regarding reducing the number of livestock, and another giving away *khet* land to informal contractors. She reflects that compared to her father-in-law, her husband knew nothing about farming. His engagement in livestock was non-existent. Using this rationale she convinced her husband and her in-laws to agree with her decision. These two decisions were made in order to reduce her work burden. Despite reducing the livestock, she adds ‘livestock are not like trees or crops, as they are more vital than any other agricultural product. They need to be taken care of like humans. Giving food, water and time-to-time cleanliness is as necessary as that for humans’. She further explains, ‘If I leave the house for a few days, then there will be a chaos in the house’. Reflecting back on the need to milk the buffalo, she explained that their kith and kin in the village, or other labourers may provide their support for one or two days, but such work is to be done by household members. Likewise, Suku showed tremendous concern for her livestock after she returned from Sindhuli. Despite of her father-in-law’s presence at home, she was concerned about who might have taken care of milking, feeding and cleaning the cowshed. In the following narrative, she stresses the multi-local household responsibilities, and the

possibility of living in urban areas, but provides her reasoning for choosing to live in the rural household:

“*Dai* proposed to live in Sindhuli, with our children. But I myself decided not to. What can I do in Sindhuli? Besides sitting idle, and getting bored watching Television [...] I go with *Dai*, and live for few days with our daughters. They keep on asking me to come live with them so that I can help them in cooking. But whenever I am there I am more worried about home. I am constantly thinking about whether the buffalo have been fed or not, whether they have been milked or not. The only thing that I know well is to cut grass, so I keep thinking about cutting grass. If I don't do it for a day then I feel incomplete. Now we don't have as much cattle as we used to before. But one cattle is important [...] We are farmers so we need cattle manure. Fertilizer that we get from the market is not good. But if I leave then who will look after the cattle? And manure is needed even for *Junar*. Without proper manure the fruits will not grow properly, then how can we sustain?” (Suku Maya, 42)

Her story, like that of Ranjana, raises the responsibility of cattle rearing and manure management. Women's reasoning explains the conditions that draw them back into the rural setting, since they are responsible for rearing livestock. The expression '*maile nagare kosle garne*', 'if I don't do it, then who will?', is repeated in all three cases. Their narrative echoes that women don't have anybody else to hand over their work, like men do. In all three cases, replacement for women's agricultural work at household level was possible because of their mothers-in-law and/or fathers-in-law in the past. However, at present, men easily leave agricultural work, completely trusting their wives to look after household and agricultural work. However, when women have to make choices and leave behind their responsibilities and obligation, it is more challenging.

### **Women's agency and the feminization of agriculture**

The feminization of agriculture refers to the measurable increase of women's participation in the agricultural sector (Hanne, 2015: 29). Measures used to collect data include gathering numerical data on the economically active population in agriculture; the composition of rural labour market; the labour force by gender; the share of wage labourers and managerial positions; the nature of activities shared by gender, and sex-disaggregated time-use in agriculture (de Brauw et al., 2012; Doss et al., 2011; Boserup, 1970). The measures used by economists to gather agricultural contributions, however, have not properly recorded women's agricultural labour (Joshi, 2000; Dixon, 1982). In Nepal, according to Joshi, the 1991 census data indirectly excluded women's work in agriculture by using terms such as 'head of household', 'main farmers', 'economically active', and 'primary and secondary activity', thereby skewing women's time allocations. Given this problematic definition of gendered agricultural statistics, many researchers have stated that the feminization of agriculture is not a new phenomenon, and that they are visible only because of the current method of collecting data (Dixon, 1982). Most studies on feminization have thus focused on numerical dimension; however, as pointed by Bieri (2014) feminization entails more than just numbers. Besides numbers, the notion of feminization can be indicated by women's experiences which is more significant than earlier noted by Bieri. Despite difficulties in

gathering empirical evidence on women's experiences, it is nonetheless crucial to study women's lived experiences.

In order to study feminization through women's experience in agriculture, the current study has used agency as an analytical tool in addition to using intra-household sex-segregated division of labour and decision-making on crop/livestock ownership. Within-case and between-case comparisons were conducted to explore the concept of agency. Rather than decision-making about plots as highlighted by de Brauw (2015), inter-cropping practices which were prevalent in the study site has resulted in decision-making of the crop by gender, regardless of plots. Men's control over citrus was more evident than for other crops or livestock, as per the division of labour and decision-making. Women's narratives regarding their work on citrus farming is not as uniform as it is for their male counterparts. Due to the gendered nature of citrus ownership, the way Maya has been able to position herself as an active citrus farmer and others as wives of citrus farmer, brings forth the concept of women's agency. The sense of agency that Maya exerts and restricted agency regarding ownership of citrus by Ranjana and Suku can be interpreted as influenced by their male counterparts dominance in citrus farming. Maya, who belongs to the first generation of citrus producers has been able to challenge, transform and overcome the gendered structure of constraints over different time periods. It was her dissatisfaction with her husband's manner of taking care of the livestock that lead her to decide to return to the rural household. This reflects a strategic choice between the cost of staying in the urban household and the economic benefit of coming back. She exerts a sense of autonomy in her decisions, but also reflects adaptive preferences in her choice, which is reflected by the lack of alternative measures. Ranjana on the other hand, provides a narrative about her struggle to cope with traditional agricultural practices, yet hesitates and devalues her work in citrus farming. Ranjana shows more sensitivity while using her agency in cereal/livestock farming as compared to that of citrus. Given the family and societal pressure to learn techniques of traditional farming, Ranjana who was new to farming learnt the skills despite of hardship. However, given the existing arrangement of the intra-household division of labour, Ranjana did not feel comfortable engaging within the citrus domain of production, which is dominated by her husband. Both Ranjana and Suku indicate that the inheritance of citrus orchard is passed down from father to son, and that they are always supervised by their husband. The supervisory role of these two women in citrus farming lasts only temporarily until the return of their husbands from their travels, which automatically shifts the managerial role to them. Women's roles in agriculture as highlighted by Ranjana and Suku in particular, and also to some extent by Maya, indicate a more dominant focus on livestock. Women's responsibility towards livestock, and their habit of cutting grass on a daily basis were activities that formed part of rural women's everyday lives, which eventually limited their mobility and also their market networks associated with citrus.

Stark use of women's agency exists in all households in reducing the number of livestock to minimize their day-to-day drudgery. In all cases, the narratives suggest the importance of cattle rearing as the main reason for their engagement in agriculture at present, with their autonomous decision to return back or stay in rural household. Rather than citrus, vegetable or cereal crop production, it is the feminization of livestock production that is reproducing the role of women in agriculture among better-off farm families. Despite women's active voice in decreasing the number of livestock, the value that women gave to cattle rearing and their concern over their responsibility to do so has been reinforcing women's role in animal husbandry. The question raised by the women 'If I don't do it, then who will?' posits a situation where women, despite their own choice, or adaptive preferences (Gammage, 2016) are bound to work with livestock since there

isn't anybody else who could take over their work—not even wage labourers. In this context, the paper argues that the social structure of agrarian-based households that promote a gendered division of labour in livestock, is a significant factor in influencing women's agency in making their life choices.

## **Conclusion**

While most research on the feminization of agriculture has focused on women wage labourers, this paper has focuses on women who have the opportunity to choose between lives in rural or urban centers, or at least be more mobile due to the possibility of living in two households. It highlights how feminization is occurring within the changing agricultural context over different time periods in women's lives. Multiple forms and levels of agency have been found regarding various arenas of decision-making in cereal, citrus, vegetable and livestock rearing. The paper also shows how women's life situations are shaped by individual and collective agency, which is further influenced by societal norms on the one hand, and adaptive preferences on the other. The 'feminization of responsibility and/or obligation' (Chant, 2006), especially in livestock rearing, suggests women's restricted mobility despite of their multi-local household responsibilities. Agricultural transitioning from cereal to citrus has increased the gradual integration of men's engagement in citrus farming, as those men who had earlier migrated in search of better work have returned to farming, creating a new identity and status (Galiè, et al., 2013) for themselves as citrus farmers. Men's reentry into agriculture is, however, limited to market-oriented citrus crops. Women, on the other hand, have been taking over the extension of domestic work which is livestock rearing, gradually being handed over as the sole responsibility of wives/daughters-in-law. This is a task unattended by husbands in better-off families. As men leave, women tend to take care of all household responsibilities, including livestock management, which was looked after by both husbands and wives in earlier times. But when women leave, women's work is unattended to by their male counterparts, or is not up to the satisfaction of women, forcing women to take over their responsibilities once again. Women farmers' lived-experience thus spur the 'feminization' debate in ways, underscoring concerns towards the evolving gender norms, attitudes and practices around agriculture from an agency perspective.

Thus, the data present persisting inequalities as a result of social arrangements within agriculture and its potential linkage with gendered mobility and non-mobility that is embedded within the power relationships in rural farm households. Unlike men who are free to choose between the work that they value in agriculture, women end up choosing agricultural tasks based on their adaptive preferences under limited circumstances. This raises the question of how differently would women live their lives if they were free from the daily chores of feeding livestock? With women's narration resonating the concept of 'mobility' and 'non-mobility', influenced by their livestock care responsibility, this paper demonstrates the need to further explore the extent of the feminization of livestock to the pattern of gendered mobility (Maharjan at al., 2013; Hanson, 2010). It suggests a deeper analysis of factors that shape farm women's choices within household labour arrangements in translocal spaces.



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