
Volume 18

Issue 1 *Empowering Future Generations of Women and Girls: Empowering Humanity: Select Proceedings from the Second World Conference on Women's Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka*

Article 12

November 2016

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Upreti, Bishnu Raj; Ghale, Yamuna; and KC, Sony (2016). Effects of Armed Conflict on Agricultural Markets and Post-conflict Engagement of Women in Export-led Agriculture in Nepal. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 18(1), 156-180.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol18/iss1/12>

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Effects of Armed Conflict on Agricultural Markets and Post-conflict Engagement of Women in Export-led Agriculture in Nepal¹

By Bishnu Raj Upreti, Yamuna Ghale and Sony KC²

Abstract

Nepal entered into a new era after ending 10 years of civil war through signing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the government and the rebel radical Maoist party in November, 2006. Women's positions were constitutionally secured and space widened for the engagement of women in the broad social, political and economic spheres. Therefore, the post-conflict context provided tremendous opportunities for women to engage in high value commercial agricultural business. The main objectives of the study were a) to examine the effects of armed conflict on agricultural markets, and b) to analyse the state of women's engagement in high value agricultural exports and its role in market revival. This study involved qualitative research to analyse women's engagement in commercial agriculture with a specific focus on the marketing of large cardamom (*Amomum Subulatum Roxb.*), which does not include the small cardamom (*Elettaria Cardamomum*, Maton). The main finding of this study is the proactive engagement of women in high value, low volume commercial agriculture and its positive contribution to the social, economic and political spheres at individual, households and community levels in Nepal. Women were recognised more in society once they engaged in commercial agriculture especially when they were members of cooperatives and in the position of sanctioning the loans as members of the executive committee to local people (including men). They were also offered political positions in the party structures. They were, comparatively, economically stronger and independent. However, while the government's efforts were appreciated they were not able to secure better prices for the cash crops and tackle the disease problem. Women were not able to secure a better price in the study area due to lack of up-to-date market price information. Further, in the past 7-10 years their cardamom plants suffered heavily from disease (appearance of black spots on leaves, shrinking, and gradually drying of the leaves which people locally called *Chhirke-Furke*) affecting production.

Keywords: export agriculture, women farmers, Nepal, post-conflict engagement

¹ **Acknowledgment:** This research is funded by Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) and SDC under the Project called 'Feminization, agricultural transition and rural employment: Social and political conditions of asset building in the context of export-led agriculture' (FATE). We acknowledge the support of SNSF and SDC and thanks to the Project Leaders and FATE Nepal Researchers Ms Sharmila Shivakoti, Mr Basu Prasad Subedi, Ms Apsara KC, Ms Pratikshya Acharya for their support in different stage.

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Introduction

Nepal faced a bloody armed insurgency waged by the United Communist party of Nepal (Maoist) [hereinafter referred to as the UCPN (M)³] for a decade (1996-2006). It ended after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the government of Nepal and UCPN (M) in November 2006. Several scholars (Upreti & Müller-Böker 2010; Upreti *et al.* 2010a&b; Upreti 2009, 2006a&b) have examined the effects of the conflict on politics, society, the economy, and the women and children of Nepal. The agriculture market and work of women in the agricultural market were some of the sectors most significantly affected (WFP-FAO 2007; Ghale and Upreti 2005; Upreti 2006a; WFP 2004).

The main objectives of this study are a) to examine the effects of armed conflict on the agricultural market, and b) to analyse the state of women's engagement in high value agricultural exports and its role in market revival in the changing political landscape. In this context, this paper looks at questions of how the agriculture market was affected by the conflict, and how women farmers are reviving their engagement in highly value agriculture after the signing of the peace agreement (Upreti *et al.* 2010b).

Study area and methods

Study area

This paper is the result of data collected at two levels and during two different time periods to answer the questions related to its two objectives as stated above: 1) to examine the effects of armed conflict on the agricultural market, and 2) to analyse the state of women's engagement in high value agricultural exports and its role in market revival.

Figure 1: Map showing one of the study sites (Chitwan)



³The CPN (M) and the Unity Centre united in January 2009 and the name CPN (M) was changed to the United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) or UCPN (M). Small breakaway faction of the CPN (M) kept its original name CPN (M) once the renaming of UCPN (M) had taken place. Hence, UCPN (M) is used in this chapter to avoid the confusion with the name of the breakaway faction as CPN (M).

At the first level, the main author of this paper was engaged in a study of impacts of armed conflict in the agriculture market. For that, the primary data were collected in 2006-2007 from the Chitwan district (see map) because the agriculture market was severely affected in this area by the armed conflict. At the second level, data related to the second objective (to analyse the state of women's engagement in high value agricultural exports and its role in market revival) was collected from the ongoing 6 years of study (2014-2020) called titled 'Feminization, Agricultural Transition, and Rural Employment' (FATE) funded under the Research for Development funding scheme (R4D) of the Swiss National Science Foundation and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and coordinated by the Interdisciplinary Centre for Gender Studies (IZFG) and the Centre for Development and Environment, of the University of Bern and implemented in Nepal in collaboration with the Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research (NCCR). The Eastern Hills in general and the Ilam district in particular, are famous for growing cash crops such as cardamom, tea, broom grass, ginger and round chillies and women's engagement is said to be higher (DADO 2014). Hence, the data related to the second objective were collected from the cash crop-producing districts of the Eastern Hills, especially Fikkal, Ilam Bazaar, Chamaita, Nayabazar, Barbote and Jirmale of Ilam district (See Figure 2) and Phidim of Panchthar district (see Figure 3). Further, market related data was collected from the Birtamod Municipality of the Jhapa district of Nepal (Figure 4) which is the main hub for cardamom and ginger entrepreneurs and exporters.

Figure 2: Map showing the study sites of Ilam District

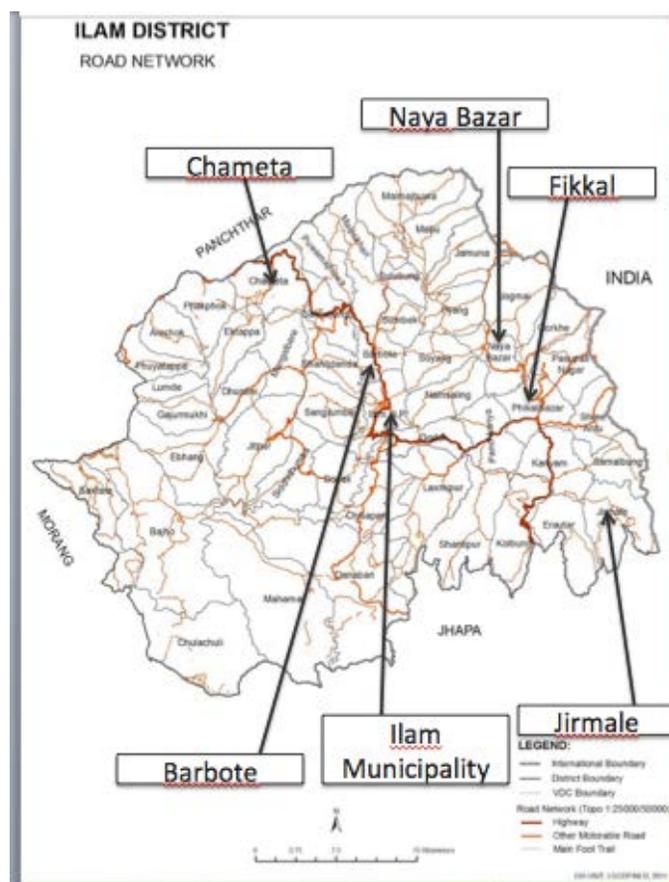


Figure 3: Map showing the study site of Panchthar district (Phidim)

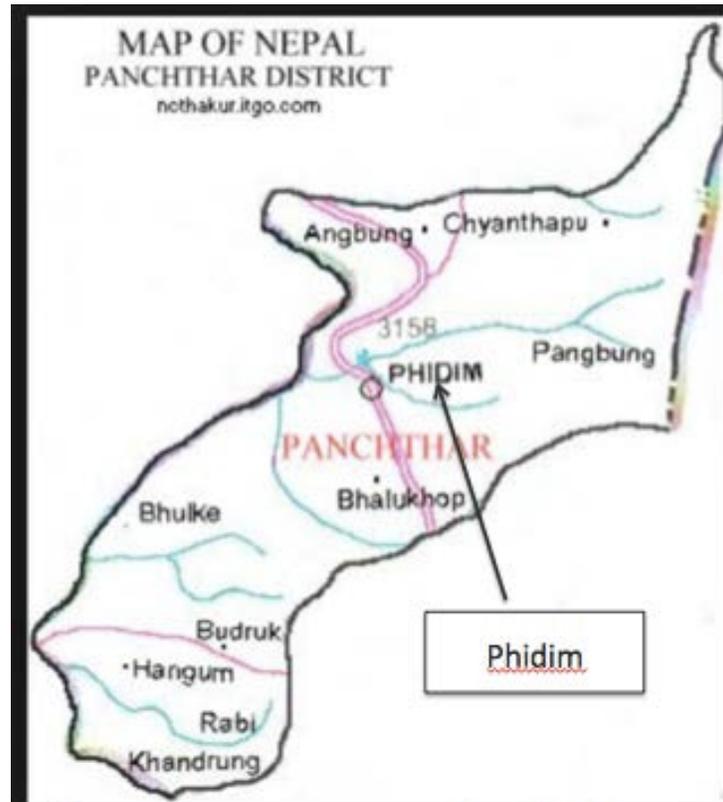
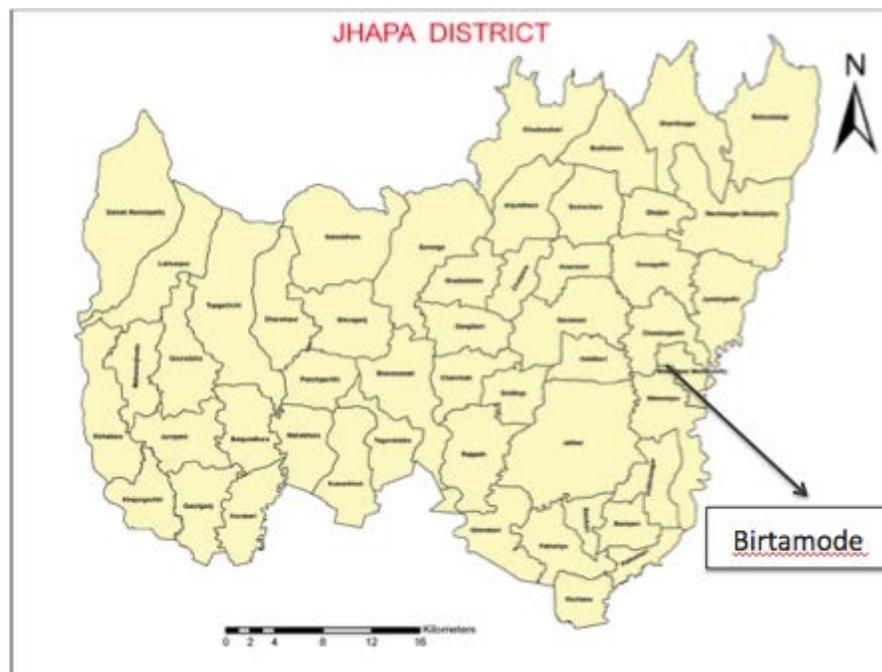


Figure 4: Map showing the study site of Jhapa district (Birtamod)



Methods

Qualitative methods were used to collect data from the study sites. For the first objective (to examine the effects of armed conflict on the agricultural market), qualitative data were collected from the Chitwan district of central Nepal (See Figure 1) during the period between October-December 2006 by the main author only⁴. In the qualitative data collection, in-depth interviews with 55 agriculture entrepreneurs and eight focus group discussions (FGDs) (five members in each FGD) were conducted in addition to the observations of the researcher. The specific questions asked in the in-depth interviews and the FGDs were related to: damage of physical infrastructure of the market, level of obstruction of local markets, effects on market price, extortion and collection of forced donations, and the security situation in local market areas. The respondents were purposefully selected from the people engaged in commercial agriculture for marketing (Chitwan ranks the highest in commercial agriculture). More than 80 percent of respondents were male (because they were directly engaged in agriculture marketing at that time).

Secondary data were collected from the documents of the Nepal office of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and World Food Program (WFP), National Planning Commission of Nepal and other organisations working on the issues. Information from the published reports, books and journal articles were also used in this paper to compliment or supplement the primary information.

Similarly, data related to the second objective (to analyse the state of women's engagement in high value agricultural exports and its contributions to market revival) were collected by using key informant interviews, in-depth interviews and FGDs. All total 21 key informants were interviewed: six from the District Agriculture Development Office (DADO) Ilam and four from DADO Panchthar, three from the Cardamom Development Centre (CDC) Fikkal, two from the Ilam Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and six from cardamom traders and exporters of Birtamod Municipality. Further, 12 in-depth interviews were conducted with the women leaders of cooperatives, cardamom and ginger farmers groups, local units of political parties and the Ilam Chamber of Commerce. Similarly, two FGDs each from Fikkal, Ilam Bazaar, Chamaita, Nayabazar and Barbote villages of of Ilam district (most cardamom growing areas) and Phidim Bazar of Panchathar district were conducted with the size of four to five members in each FGD. In Jirmale Village four FGDs were conducted.

The specific questions asked during the interviews were related to the level of women's engagement in high value agriculture especially in cardamom, and its contributions to market revival. All three authors of this paper were directly engaged in the collection of primary and secondary data. All respondents of key informant interviews, and two thirds of the respondents of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, were women. Most of the field work in Ilam and Panchthar was conducted between February and March, and June and July, 2015.

Further, secondary sources of information were also gathered from the reports and documents provided by the DADO of Iam and Panchthar, CDC Fikkal and village profiles from the Village Development Committee (VDC) and other profile books and district statistical handbooks obtained from government offices and NGOs.

⁴ Involvement of the main author of this paper in collecting primary and secondary data in 2006 for a study related to effects of armed conflict on the agricultural market.

Findings and discussions

We are presenting the main findings of the study in this section according to the objectives of the study: a) to examine the effects of armed conflict on agricultural markets, and b) to analyse the state of women's engagement in high value agricultural exports and market revival.

Effects of armed conflict on agricultural market

This section examines various effects of the decade-long armed conflict (1996-2006) on agriculture market functioning and revival of agricultural markets in Nepal thereafter.

Agriculture was one of the most affected sectors from the armed conflict in Nepal in terms of production, processing and marketing. Several direct and indirect effects of the conflict have been observed in household food security and agricultural production and marketing sectors in particular (Upreti 2006; Jha 2011).

Damage to the agricultural market as a result of the armed conflict was related to disruption of road infrastructure, imposition of illegal taxes, forced donations, and obstruction of transport by the state through several points of security forces (WFP-FAO 2007). During the time of armed insurrection, one of the common approaches practiced were protests and agitation often in the forms of *bandh* (closure) and *naka-bandhi* (closure of the routes). The *bandhs* were often used for the forceful closure of markets, industries, schools and transport/vehicles. These *bandhs* were of different types: partial to complete closures of specific areas (as well as nationwide) such as schools, markets or vehicular movements. Through the *naka-bandhi*, the agitating parties prevented vehicles carrying essential commodities in certain areas/districts. During the *naka-bandhi*, no movement was allowed to and from the declared area, and any violation to *bandh* and *naka-bandhi* was resulted in severe penalties (such as burning of vehicles carrying produce, destruction of the produce, and beating of drivers) by the *bandh* organizers (Upreti 2010a&b; NARMA 2005).

The responses of the key informants has clearly indicated that agricultural markets suffered severely from the conflict induced disruption of markets, damage of market infrastructure, taxation and donations, and shortage of agricultural inputs for production in both rural and urban areas from the armed conflict. In this context, one key informant said,

"Agricultural enterprises faced severe setback of armed conflict because people were not able to sell their products in a timely manner (vegetable and cereal seeds, or fresh vegetable and perishable fruits, or milk and milk products) because of general strike and closure of rebels. Hence, they threw milk and fresh vegetables in the streets to protest."⁵

This situation was also documented by a WFP-FAO study. According to the WFP-FAO (2007) vegetables and animal products were the most affected by the armed conflict because of their perishable nature. Reflecting on the bleak situation one key informant said,

"Commercial producers from the most common agricultural production sites such as Chitwan, Kavre, Dhading were severely affected by the conflict once the fighting forces (both security forces and the rebels) obstructed. Major problems

⁵ Interview on 22 October 2006 at Narayanghat, Chitwan District.

faced were related to storage, transportation and marketing. This was followed by the grain market⁶".

Similarly, highlighting the difficulties faced by agricultural entrepreneurs, another respondent said,

"The rebels come and asked either to provide four to five hundred thousand rupees or prepare face physical punishment that ranges from physical attack to kidnapping to killing. So, there was no option than to give the donation. On the other side, state security forces came and threatened blaming that rebels are supported by local people. People were facing a double edged sword⁷".

Such a situation has not only created feelings of insecurity among the agricultural traders and producers but also hindered the entire marketing chain.

However, over the past 10 years, since the armed conflict ended with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) on 21 November 2006, the agriculture market has fully revived and is advancing well. Farmers have not only expanded their agriculture enterprises but also established their own processing plants and storage facilities to get better prices for their products. Some sectors are even claiming that they are able to supply the required amounts. For example, poultry farmers have demanded the prevention of import of chicken and chicken-related products as they are able to create the supply. The Poultry Farmers Association frequently claims that they are able to supply the required chicken if the government is supportive⁸.

Major effects of the insurrection to agriculture and agricultural markets during the time of the armed conflict are discussed as follows:

Damage to market physical infrastructure

Sabotage and obstruction of infrastructure was one of the most frequently used tactics by the CPN (M) rebels. Telecommunications and transport infrastructures (roads, bridges, civil aviation towers, suspension bridges, etc.) were major targets that had directly and indirectly impacted the functioning of agricultural markets in Nepal (WFP-FAO 2007). In this context the conclusion of the one of the FGDs is worth stating. The FGD conducted in Narayanghat concluded,

"Commercial farmers and traders were regularly getting market price information over the telephone, and based on the available information on the best prices, they arranged the truckloads to fetch the agricultural product. However, once the telecommunication towers were damaged, they were not able to get up to date prices of the wholesale markets of Kathmandu and even if they decided to send truckloads irrespective of market information, because of perishable nature of their product, it was not possible due to the damage and or blockade of roads⁹".

⁶ Interview on 25 October 2006 at Bharatpur area of Chitwan District.

⁷ Interview on 22 October 2006 at Narayanghat, Chitwan District.

⁸ See <http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/printedition/news/2014-08-29/chitwan-poultry-farmers-demand-ban-on-imports.html> for details

⁹ FDG conducted 12 November 2006 at Narayanghat, Chitwan District.

During the time of the armed conflict, many buildings of the agriculture offices, e.g. the Regional Agriculture Directorate in Biratnagar¹⁰, Agriculture Development Office in Dhankuta, agriculture offices in Khotang¹¹, agricultural service centres at villages, marketplaces, and link roads were also damaged by the insurgents (Upreti 2010a). It was reported in several FGD meetings that key stakeholders of agricultural marketing such as producers, processors, transporters, traders, and retailers faced both physical and psychological threats and disturbances and economic losses. Their feelings of insecurities, fear, frustration, psychological pressures (such as extortion and donation) and damage of agricultural infrastructures severely affected agriculture production, processing and marketing severely for nearly a decade.

Damage and destruction of local markets (Haat-bazaar)

Nepal is known for *haat-bazzars* (local market systems) and they were well-established and operating for centuries in different parts of Nepal before the armed conflict. However, according to almost all the respondents of the Chitwan, the decade-long armed conflict had severely affected and the frequency, total hours of transaction, numbers of buyers and sellers and diversity of agricultural items that had negatively affected the small landholders, marginal producers and buyers with low purchasing power.

The long existing practice of bartering and exchange of goods as well as selling of commodities produced in self-owned farms in the local *haat-bazaar*, and purchasing of the required food and non-food items from the money earned by selling their agriculture products were frequently disturbed in rural areas, because the state security forces did not allow people to gather at *haat-bazaar*, suspecting the possibility of penetration of insurgents in such gatherings.

Reflecting the conditions, one respondent said, "*People of our area stopped going to local hat-bazaar because of fear and risks of being caught between the warring parties (the security forces and the insurgents)*"¹². Truckloads of foodstuffs and trucks fetching buffalo from the Terai were burnt by rebels. Consequently, several times farmers of Chitwan, Kavre and Dhading districts who often brought their agricultural products that could not be preserved for a long time, such as milk, eggs, and fresh vegetables, had to throw away their commodities on the highways as a protest against the obstruction by insurgents and security forces, due to the lack of markets. Hence, the local market was totally disturbed.

Market price variation

Another severe impact of the armed conflict was price variation of agricultural products and food commodities (Upreti 2006). Different conflict-related factors affected the price of agricultural commodities. First, the rebels fixed the price in their controlled areas which was often less than the normal market price. Second, high fluctuation was observed in price due to *bandhs* and blockades (increase in final market points but decrease in production or collection centres). Third, the traders, middlemen and retailers used the crisis as an opportunity to hike the price of commodities. Fourth, increased transportation costs led to price hikes. Small and medium scale growers of perishable products such as milk, poultry products and fresh vegetables suffered the most. Longer duration of the blockades (some time even indefinite and often several days), caused price variation and affected supply of poultry feed, small chickens (*challa*), dressed meat, eggs

¹⁰ The incident happened in 23 Baishakh 2061 BS (5 May 2004).

¹¹ Maoists attacked district headquarters of Khotang on 21 June 2005 (11 Ashad 2062) where 11 government offices were damaged (Nepal Weekly, Year 5, No 64, 19 Ashad 2062 (3 July 2005).

¹² Interview on 29 October 2006 at Bharatpur area of Chitwan District.

and vaccines and forced the poultry farmers to close their farms or incur huge losses. Vegetable farmers faced a similar situation.

A woman respondent from the retailer group shared her experiences, saying that:

"The price of meat, especially mutton and chicken was almost tripled once the general strikes were announced by the Maoists rebels. The same happened to fresh vegetables, we were not able to sell milk, yoghurt and leafy vegetables as they were not available in the gross market. Once rumours began spreading about the calling of a general strike people started buying a lot of storable food to keep in stock, which led to shortages of even non-perishable foods. The government administration was not able to control price hikes in the market¹³".

The above statement indicates the hardship for people who are not able to purchase in bulk and store, during the period of general strikes. Livelihoods of small collectors and retailers of agricultural products were ruined as they were not able to collect and sell agricultural products (Upreti 2010a). The conclusion of the FGD about the distortion of market prices was largely due to the interference of the CPN (M) cadres, since the rebel leaders were fixing prices (generally cheaper than the market price) of local agricultural products and other merchandise goods. For example, rebels had set retail prices of mutton, chicken, ghee (oil) in the northern and southern parts of the Bajura district, all of which were 19%, 33% and 20% less than the existing market price in the district headquarters. The price of rice fixed by rebels in Binayak of Achham district was Nepali rupee 14 per kg against the market price of Nepali rupee 20 per kg in Mangalsen¹⁴. The CPN (M) operated cooperatives to sell food commodities at the retail price in the areas controlled by them and sold rice 5-8% less than the price of the subsidized rate by the Nepal Food Corporation (WFP 2004 p. 5).

The Maoist rebels collected food items from local farmers; therefore, they prohibited farmers from selling their products in district headquarters or other larger market centres. For example, farmers of Toli VDC of Bajura district were prohibited from selling their ghee in Sanfebagar, a bigger market centre of the nearby Achham district. Consequently, 12 -15% of livestock growers of this VDC gave up livestock growing (WFP 2004). Such cases of restrictions were observed in several areas controlled by the rebels.

Taxation and forced donations

Collection of taxes and donations from farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs by using coercion and threat of violence was quite common during the war, in the study areas. Often they had to pay regular donations to the rebels to continue their business, otherwise, the rebels forcefully extorted or engaged in physical violence including thrashing, kidnapping individuals or burning property. One key informant stated: *"in our area Maoists imposed taxes on all local agricultural goods, even collected tax in the transportation agricultural products and we were asked to pay part of the earnings from the marketing of products. It was not possible to refuse--or be ready to be tortured physically¹⁵".*

One of the conclusions of the FGD at Chitwan was that

¹³ Interview on 12 November 2006 at Padampur village of Chitwan District.

¹⁴ WFP Nepal (2004, p. 3)

¹⁵ Interview on 12 November 2006 at Padampur village of Chitwan District.

"the Maoists had imposed a heavy levy on the transportation of food items and agricultural products' exported from their areas to external markets such as Kathmandu and Pokhara. They often charged taxes to transporters for the transportation of agricultural goods to hilly areas from the Chitwan¹⁶".

Imposing a levy on the transporters while fetching agricultural goods, was common during the time of conflict. For example, the Maoists charged 800 Nepali rupees per month per mule, which generally fetched 80 kg of food per trip from Sanfebagar to Dolpa¹⁷. The most frequently affected districts from the tax and donation related market obstructions were Darchula, Achham, Baitadi, Bajhang, Bajura, Dadeldhura and Doti of Far Western region and Dailekh, Dolpa, Humla, Jajarkot, Jumla, Kalikot, Mugu, Puthyan, Rolpa, Rukum, Salyan, and Surkhet from Mid-Western region (WFP-FAO 2007) and Chitwan of central region (Upreti, 2006).

Further, in the Maoist-influenced areas of Bajura, Doti and Achham districts, the CPN (M) imposed compulsory donations of 2 kg of cereals or other crops per household and collected tons of food. In addition, local people had to feed one to two CPN (M) cadres on a daily basis. The WFP VAM report indicates that feeding one or two extra members added a 17 to 35% of food burden on a family of 5.7 members. Taxes on road transportation combined with the price hikes caused severe food insecurity (Upreti 2006). The WFP (2004, p.6) states, *'In most parts of the mountain and hill districts, the CPN (M) also requires each farming household to surrender a proportion of its produce every season. In general this proportion equals seven days of household food consumption.*

Market obstructions from insecurity and fear

During the time of armed conflict, fear and insecurity were rampant. The transporters felt insecure because of the potential damage (burning, vandalising, or capturing) of their vehicles from landmines while their vehicles were required to be moved by security forces at the time of *bandhs* and strikes organized by rebels. One respondent of the key informant interview representing the transport sector (he was transporting agricultural products from Chitwan to Kathmandu, Pokhara and other parts of country) said,

"I am in the mood to stop this business and go to India. The Maoists and security forces were a problem (we are transporting perishable nature of products) and we had stop for days; our drivers and helpers are nervous and not willing to take truckloads as often the Maoist cadres had burnt the trucks full of food stuffs. The threat of rebel attacks forced the vehicle operators to operate as per the instructions of the security forces which were often seen by Maoists as aligning with security force. State security forces frequently created obstructions to local markets by imposing several restrictive rules on transportation, operating of market places etc."¹⁸.

Often, the Maoists announced blockades nationwide or on specific regions that restricted access ranging from the movement of foodstuffs and agricultural products, to the movement of both people and goods (Upreti 2006). For example, the blockade of November-December 2004 caused

¹⁶ FGD conducted on 13 November 2006 at Padampur village of Chitwan District.

¹⁷ WFP Nepal Food Security Bulletin No 7 (2004).

¹⁸ Interview on 13 November 2006 at Narayanghat village of Chitwan District.

a 25% increase in the price of rice in the district headquarters of Rolpa and Rukum districts. Rumours of possible blockades caused price hikes of agricultural commodities¹⁹. Local people accepted any alteration in commodity prices, because of the fear of insecurity, since Maoists often physically attacked those who did not obey their orders. Often, the Maoist cadres restricted supplies of local agricultural crops to the district headquarters from rural areas.

Highlighting the difficult situation for local people and agricultural traders, Seddon & Hussein (2002) explain that security forces restricted people from carrying enough food for more than one day, because of fear of the food going to the Maoists. Hence, many travel companies withdrew their services from conflict-affected areas mainly because of the increased risks and threats from the warring parties. The Government was not able to provide security to the farmers but its actions caused trouble by imposing several restrictions. The Government security force had created obstructions such as physical restrictions on mobility, including landmines placed on major roads by the rebels, physical damage to vehicles (burning or blasting of buses, loaded trucks, motorbikes, etc.).

A respondent representing commercial farmers group said,

"We could have produced more if there were no frequent bandhs and restrictions on access to markets. We were not able to get agricultural inputs such as fertilizers, pesticides and seed in time due to transportation strikes but the cultivation season does not wait for us. So, we lose a whole year. Many times, security forces had even prevented growing crops like maize around the security base camps citing them as security risk where rebels could hide. In such a situation how can farmers and their business survive? We are the most neglected group in this country²⁰".

Contestation of land and its negative effect on agriculture

The Maoist rebels in their stronghold areas evicted local landlords, captured their lands, and distributed them to landless people. Hence, local owners were not able to invest in agriculture and kept their land barren. Those who received the redistributed land were not able to cultivate it due to fear of the security forces. Consequently already scarce land resources were underutilized. The Maoists had a slogan, 'land to the tillers' and forceful evictions threatened landowners (Upreti 2006a). In this context one respondent shared,

"Large areas of land in our village were owned by rich people who were not cultivating, themselves but renting to other farmers. Once, the Maoist rebels announced we should stop paying rent to land owners but instead to pay to them, and if the people renting the lands do not obeying their instructions they will face physical punishment. Hence, people were fearful and did not cultivate the rented land, severely affecting production²¹".

¹⁹ For example, the price of rice in the Salyan district headquarters simply went up one rupee per kg due to rumours of a blockade. For detail see WFP 2004, Food Security Bulletin No. 7, November-December, World Food Programme Kathmandu, Nepal).

²⁰ Interview on 15 November 2006 at Padampur village of Chitwan District.

²¹ Interview on 11 November 2006 at Rampur village of Chitwan District.

²¹ Interview on 15 November 2006 at Padampur village of Chitwan District.

²¹ Interview on 11 November 2006 at Rampur village of Chitwan District.

Most of the large landholdings in the insurgents' stronghold areas were either directly regulated by Maoists, or they exerted pressure over tenants to stop paying contractual payments to the landlords. The Maoists took the share/rent to be paid to the landowners. Such a situation not only created huge uncertainties for the farmers and tenants but also negatively impacted production and productivity because these productive lands were either uncultivated, under-cultivated or cultivated with no or low investments. Further, farmers were not able to pay back bank loans for farming and production due to the loss of their business (e.g., according to the Chitwan Poultry Association, nearly 75% of small poultry farmers of Chitwa closed their businesses). Large farmers and entrepreneurs ceased making investments due to the high risks of investing in agriculture (Upreti 2006).

Damage to agricultural infrastructure and its psychological effects

In the later stage of the armed conflict, the insurgents heavily targeted Government offices that provided services, such as police posts, agriculture offices, forest offices, post offices, village Development committee office buildings to create a governmental vacuum and to expand their own influence in these areas (Upreti, 2010). Hence, agricultural office buildings were one of the targets of the rebels. They attacked the Regional Agriculture Directorate office in Biratnagar²², the Agriculture Development Office in Dhankuta, and the agriculture offices in Khotang²³). Market centres were also the target of Maoist attacks.

A business person reflecting the worst situation during war time said,

"We were not able to go to market because of possible attack from the fighting forces as in many times security forces had attacked/bombarded in the marketplaces suspecting the gathering of the rebels. So, farmers and traders were not able to bring their products/good for marketing. Production was affected from the armed conflict that ultimately affected processing, transport, trading and retailing because of lack of commodity available. Hence, producers, processors, transporters, retailers' undergone economic and psychological stress and some of them even got threats of physical action (violence)²⁴".

Feeling of insecurity, fear, frustration and psychological pressures (for extortion and donations) and damage to agricultural infrastructure during the time of armed conflict, severely affected agricultural production, processing and marketing.

During the conflict, black marketing, artificial shortage of goods and services, physical damages of goods and foodstuffs, obstruction to production, processing, transportation and trading of agricultural commodities, physical damage to market infrastructure, variation in market prices due to taxation, donations and transportation strikes, blockades and *bandhs*, feelings of insecurity and fear, all affected market opportunities, decreased production and productivity, reduced employment opportunities and severely obstructed functioning of agricultural markets and agricultural production and productivity (Ghale & Upreti 2005; Upreti 2010a).

²² The incident happened in 23 Baishakh 2061 BS (5 May 2004).

²³ According to the Nepal Weekly Magazine (Year 5, No 64, 19 Ashad 2062 (3 July 2005) Maoists attacked the district headquarters of Khotang on 21 June 2005 (11 Ashad 2062) where 11 government offices were damaged.

²⁴ Interview on 16 November 2006 at Narayanghat town of Chitwan District.

Women's engagement in high value agricultural exports and its contributions to market revival

The previous section demonstrated the effects and obstructions to agriculture markets during the time of the armed conflict. However, the situation after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) has been gradually changing even though political difficulties are still continuing in Nepal. This section of the article presents the main findings related to the revival of agricultural markets with a specific focus on women's engagement in high value agricultural exports. Further this section also discusses how women are benefitting from engaging in cardamom as a high value agricultural commodity in the changing political context.

Cardamom field



Table 1: Status of cardamom production in Illam district

Year	Area (Hectare)	Production (Metric Ton)
2001/02	2750	1375
2002/03	2750	1100
2003/04	2735	1340
2004/05	2738	1396
2005/06	2746	1657
2006/07	2746	1764
2007/08	2469	1224
2008/09	2100	963
2009/10	2100	963
2010/11	1760	694
2011/12	1760	440
2012/13	1450	450
2013/14	1450	450

Source: DADOI, 2014.

Table 1 shows the general situation of large cardamom production over the past 13 years. There was a decrease in production since 2008, even though increase in the cultivated was mainly due to the viral diseases of cardamom called as *chirke* (mosaic streak) and *furke* (bushy dwarf) (DADOI 2014; Chapagain 2011). However, the price of cardamom has sharply increased in the

past few years, and farmers were able to get more benefit even when total production was decreased. Furthermore, farmers also expanded their production of other cash crops such as ginger, broom grass, and green vegetables.

The main conclusion of the respondents of the FGDs and key informants was that the situation of the engagement of women in commercial high value, low volume agriculture in Ilam district has been rapidly improving in the past 10 years. The main reasons given for such a change were: the improved security situation after signing the peace agreement that ended the decade long bloody civil war, additional market opportunities arising from high value cash crops like cardamom, ginger and broom grass, which was severely obstructed during the war time due to insecurity. But once the security problems due to the coercive activities of the rebel and the state security forces ended, village situation was drastically changed and cultivation and marketing of high export led agriculture were changed. Some of these changes occurring in the last decade are discussed in the subsequent sections.

Development of collection and market centres

When the production of high value cash crops like cardamom (*Amomum Subulatum Roxb.*), broom-grass (*Thysanolaena maxima*) and ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) increased, several wholesale and retail markets and collection centres emerged and expanded in the Eastern Hills (Phidim, Rabi, Taplejung, Sankhuwasawa, Bhojpur, Dhankuta, Terathum) and in Ilam district (e.g. Fikkal, Illam Bazaar, Mangalbare, Barbote, Godak, Chamaita, Nayabazar, Jirmale) and the Birtamod Municipality of the Jhapa district. Several satellite collection centres developed in the eastern region to accumulate cardamom in Ilam. According to a key informant from the Barbote, Illam Municipality, when broom-grass, cardamom and ginger growth increased in many villages, the mini-collection centres expanded in every cash crop growing village²⁵. Though engagement of women in commercial agriculture and expansion of market centres as well as collection points in the study areas were expanded mainly after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2006, they are positively contributing to the empowerment of women.

Land and commercialization of agriculture

Land was another factor in the post-conflict agricultural development and market revival. Even though women's access to land is still one of the major challenge in Nepal (Sharma et. al., 2013), the situation of the Eastern Hills in relation to high commercial agriculture is different. Unlike the findings of Sharma et al. (2013), access to land by women was not seen as a major challenge in the study area but perceived as an opportunity for advancing cash crops. The most important opportunity was the commercialization of their existing agriculture (shifting to cardamom, ginger, low volume high value vegetable seeds, fresh vegetables, broom grass farming) in available land, irrespective of who controlled and who owns. They placed their priorities on the commercialization of their agriculture rather than negotiating for land ownership or its control. Further, the respondents also shared that the government policy of exemption of the 35% of tax on land registration motivated women to register in their own names, to enhance land ownership, a practice that is more common in urban centres like Illam Bazar and less common in remote rural areas like Jirmale VDC.

²⁵Interview on 24 June 2015 in Barbote Bazar of Ilam District.

Commercialization of agriculture and promoting women's involvement in export led agriculture is one of the important steps in political stability and state building (Upreti et al. 2010b). Locher *et. al.*, (2012) demonstrated that external economic investments could change local agrarian relationships and production processes. This observation is particularly relevant to the study site in specific, and the Eastern Hills of Nepal in general because agrarian relations in the study area have changed as a result of agricultural commercialization and women's active engagement in the cash crops value chain (e.g. cardamom and ginger). While examining women's engagement in high value agriculture and its relation to who uses land, a clear pattern emerged of the feminization of land use. Land use practices not only changed because of women's engagement in commercial agriculture but also in that they were able to protect and manage land as per the requirement of specific cash crops.

Several studies (Upreti 2004a&b, 2002a&b; 2012, Upreti et al. 2008; Pyakuryal & Upreti 2011) have shown that land is not only a source of structural conflict but also an important means for agrarian change. In analysing the relationship between land and women on a national scale, an earlier study demonstrated that when women have greater access to land and other productive resources, their social and economic status was enhanced (Upreti et al. 2008). This is still true in the broader context of Nepal. Nevertheless, the findings of this study show that women's access to land for growing commercial crops like cardamom and ginger is more important than to own and control a particular land mass.

A previous study by Upreti and Upreti (2002) indicated that when women had access to land, their engagement in agriculture lead to the conservation of agro-biodiversity and the protection of genetic resources whether or not they owned land. As the study site is one of the important agro-biodiversity areas, the dual role of women (protecting agro-biodiversity and enhancing commercial high value agriculture) is crucial, which we have called the feminization of land use. Because low external input, hill agriculture—practiced in Nepal for centuries (Shivakoti et al. 2005)—is changing due to commercial agriculture, it is essential to explore other factors of production (e.g. labour, markets, technologies) as well as access to land, instead of focusing on ownership and control of land. This study demonstrated that even though ownership of land was not a condition for engagement in commercial agriculture, interestingly enough women were still influential decision makers of land use (e.g., choice of crops to be grown, conservation and protection of biodiversity). In the case of the current study area, women were able to make land use decisions even when they did not have formal land ownership (often formal land ownership was with their male counterparts). This situation emerged because of the enhanced socio-economic status of women through their earnings from high value cash crops. Hence, women's economic status may offer a long term solution to ecological stability. Once a family becomes economically strong and diversifies their income sources, or earn more from less effort, such as from the earnings form cardamom, the immediate issue of ownership becomes less relevant.

Nevertheless, even if access to and control over land is more important than ownership in the short term for economic stability via commercialization of high value agriculture, women's ownership of land is still important for social recognition and economic security in general in Nepal. In Nepal, special policy and legislative provisions (exemption of registration fees when land is registered in the name of women, special concessions when land is registered in joint ownership, equal land rights to daughters, etc.) are operating to promote land ownership that will ultimately provide economic and social security (Upreti et al. 2008; Upreti 2002a and 2004a). But if women are already engaged in high earning commercial activities like cardamom production, women's immediate access in land is more important than ownership.

Several studies have shown that food insecurity was one of the major concerns during the time of armed conflict (Mathew and Upreti 2005; Ghale & Upreti 2005; Donovan et al. 2005; Pyakuryal et al. 2005; Upreti et al. 2010; Upreti & Muller-Boeker 2010; Upreti 2009; Upreti 2010a&b; Upreti et al., 2014). The effects of the armed conflict on the food security situation changed gradually over the past few years. Importantly, the respondents shared that there was no serious issue of food insecurity over the last few years. One of the respondents said, "*We have enough food for our family and I have not noticed severe problem of lack of food in our village*"²⁶.

The conclusion of the focus group discussions in the Mangalbare Village was the same: though there was some problem of availability of food during the conflict due to restriction from the warring parties, the situation had changed over the past 10 years. One of the main reasons of relative food security explained by the respondents was the higher income from their cash crops like cardamom, ginger, broom grass, tea and animal products (poultry, eggs, meats, and ghee, etc.). And this is due to women's involvement in commercialized agriculture.

Local committees on management of markets, cooperatives and information

Over the past decade, cash crops like cardamom, tea, ginger, broomgrass, vegetable seeds and fresh vegetables grew rapidly. Once cash crop activities increased in the study areas, marketing opportunities emerged and expanded. Consequently, several small scale market management committees were established and operated in the Eastern Hills. Some of the most popular were in Phidim, Rabi, Taplejung Bazar, Sankhuwasawa, Bhojpur Bazar, Dhankuta, Terathum Bazar, Fikkal, Illam Bazaar, Mangalbare, Barbote, Godak, Chamaita, Nayabazar, Jirmale, and Birtamod town of Jhapa district. The rapid expansion of market and collection centres had a favourable impact at the local level, because local people could engage directly in the price negotiation process with the brokers and collectors. Several local committees were established in each village to collect market information, to obtain better pricing through collective bargaining and negotiation, and to explore market potentials and support from the government. One member of the market management committee of the Fikkal, Illam said,

*"Earlier we were not able to directly deal with the cardamom collectors. Gradually some of us started dealing at an individual level. The collectors were stronger and often we were not able to get a fair price and we had to give as per their offer. However, once we established the local committees, we started collecting market information, obtaining the latest price list from phone SMS and collectively negotiated with the cardamom collectors, and thus got better prices. It is good to be member of the market committee to obtain better prices and other necessary help from each other"*²⁷.

State building requires active participation of every sector of the nation (Upreti, 2010 a&b). In Nepal, the private sector is actively involved in the promotion of the market for commercial agriculture in the post-conflict context, and is one of the centrally important components of state building (Upreti 2010 a&b; Upreti et al. 2010b). Some studies have examined the role of the private

²⁶Interview on 25 June 2015 Mangalbare VDC, Ilam District.

²⁷Interview on 24 June 2015 at Fikkal Cardamom Development Centre.

²⁷Interview on 25 June 2015 Mangalbare VDC, Ilam District.

²⁷Interview on 24 June 2015 at Fikkal Cardamom Development Centre.

sector in contributing to the peace and post conflict state building process (Ghimire and Upreti 2012; Upreti and Ghimire 2011), concluding that the private sector has great potential to address some of the root causes of conflict and promote post-conflict peace and stability. The private sector's engagement in commercial agriculture is growing in the study area, over the past decade. Therefore, there is greater potential for this region to contribute to state building through the development and advancement of the market centres, work on the value chain and transformation of agrarian subsistence agriculture to commercial agriculture²⁸.

During the FGDs, it was reported by the respondents that the emergence and promotion of agricultural and consumer cooperatives occurred rapidly in the study area, especially after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Further, the researchers observed that several cooperatives were established to address agricultural and consumer issues and many of them were established by women farmers. The constitution has recognised cooperative as one of three pillars: namely public, private and cooperative for nation's economic development. Agricultural Development Policy made special provisions to promote cooperatives that have greatly helped to increase the quantity and quality of cooperatives in the agriculture sector. One member of the local women's cooperative in Jirmale said,

"During the time of the insurgency we were suffering from the general strikes and blockades called by the insurgents and obstruction in transportation of our products by the security forces. However, now the situation has changed. Even if there is any problem, our cooperatives deal with it and we are very happy to be member of these cooperatives²⁹".

In the study areas, the flow of information on cash crops, especially in the market price of cardamom, ginger and broom grass has increased through the efforts of cooperatives, market management committees, government agriculture related offices and chambers of commerce. Information about the market price of cardamom has helped farmers significantly. The cost of cardamom increased by up to NRS 3000 per kg. A mobile phone SMS market information system was developed and operated by farmers. Now they can obtain hourly information of the price fluctuation (increase or decrease) of cardamom and as a result, farmers can sell their products more profitably.

Commercialization of agriculture and state building

Nepali scholars working on post-conflict state building, argue that the agriculture and natural resource sectors are fundamentally important components of that process since they provide sizable revenues that contribute to state restructuring and stability (Sharma et al., 2013; Upreti et al 2010). A key informant during an interview confirmed the relationship between state building and commercialization of agriculture: "*Commercialization of agriculture generate*

²⁸ Though large scale commercialization influenced by globalization processes often negatively impact subsistence and small-scale farmers (through land grabbing or land consolidation, which increase food insecurity), agriculture labour (farm mechanisation) and indigenous knowledge (introduction of high technologies) (Locher *et. al.*, 2012) and biodiversity (replacing local seeds and genetic diversity by introduction of traitor, terminator and other technologies), disruption of local markets and many other effects, in this paper we are referring to small scale commercialization with less risk of such negative impacts.

²⁹Interview on 28 June 2015 at Salakpur of Jirmale VDC

employment opportunities in all component of value chain, generate revenues from the taxes and duties and support the state building process³⁰".

Highlighting the contribution of high value commercial agriculture to the post-conflict state building process, a Government senior officer said, "*commercialization of agriculture in our district has generated employment opportunities and developed leadership who are active local level state building debate³¹".*

Livelihood security is one of the important strategies of the state building process as it generates peoples' hope and aspirations (Upreti 2010a&b). At the time of the conflict people faced grave livelihood insecurity which affected their confidence (Upreti and Mueller-Boeker 2010). Agriculture provides diverse sources of livelihoods and contributes to the state building process.

Several studies (Pyakuryal et al. 2008; Upreti 2010a&b; Upreti & Sigdel 2011; Upreti 2006a and 2004c; Upreti et al., 2008) have documented extensively the rapid process of agrarian changeover the past two decades. Further, the peace agreement ending the decade long armed conflict, expanded opportunities for commercializing agriculture and market development as the obstructions from the warring parties ended. However, respondents of the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews expressed their concerns regarding marketing. Their main concerns were related to ongoing government support. They expressed their hope that the government should help them obtain better market prices and wider export market opportunities for their products to go abroad (beyond India). At present, they are exporting their products only to India because of easy access to the Indian market.

It is the view of the authors that the government should promote these opportunities, developing the trust of farmers by promoting export markets that would ultimately help state building. A strong component of state building is trust of the people toward their government and the state (Upreti et al. 2010). When the government facilitates export markets, it enhances relationships between the state and the people. The government has indeed been working to support farmers in recent years. For example, the government made special credit provisions and agricultural inputs to farmers. The government has also identified cash crops as priority crops and provided the credit and inputs required for their expansion into the eastern region. Respondents have reacted positively to this government support; thus, if the government also supports export markets, they will subsequently strengthen relationships between the state and the people—the farmers of the eastern hills, in particular, thereby contributing to the state building process.

During the field work period, several respondents explained that there was a need for clear regulatory measures (formulation and implementation of acts, regulations and orders to address the marketing problems of farmers). Further, they often stated that the government should give priority to human resource development in high value-low volume commercial agriculture. The Chairwoman of Ilam Chamber of Commerce said,

"Though the government has formulated and implemented some market related projects such as UNATI, CADP, more work is needed in terms of market research and agriculture extension services, development of market infrastructure, capacity development of specialized agencies such as Cardamom Development Centre, Pakhribas Agriculture Research Station, Agriculture Development Offices, designing special provisions like declaration of Growth Centre, Special

³⁰Interview on 25 June 2015 at Phidim Bazar, Panchthar district.

³¹ Interview on 24 June 2015 at Ilam Bazar, Ilam district.

*Economic Zone, and partnership between government and private sector to promote high value low volume commercial agriculture."*³²

Women and export led agricultural market dynamics

Over the past decade, especially after the restoration of peace in Nepal, women have become actively engaged in production and marketing of large cardamom, ginger, broom-grass and other high value cash crops. The main reasons for the involvement of women in cash crops in general and cardamom in specific are:

- a. changing gender relations at household and community levels,
- b. policies of the government to promote women's participation in commercial agriculture,
- c. constitutional, regulatory and procedural provisions of compulsory engagement of women in every sphere of the country's affairs,
- d. expansion of cardamom and other cash crops cultivation, and
- e. increasing political and social awareness.

Nepal is one of the largest producers of cardamom as an export-oriented commodity in the world. It is an important means of women's livelihood and enhancing social status and their economic situation. The empirical evidence from our study demonstrated that women's engagement in high value agriculture has contributed to raising the status of women through their increased household level decision-making; their increased involvement in political roles (taking leadership positions in local political structures), more involvement in social activities and higher social recognition in their villages.

Large cardamom is treated in Nepal as "black gold" and an important means to fulfil the economic and livelihood requirements of individual women, household member and ultimately contributed to improve the economic status of their village. For example, in 2013/14 Nepal had exported 2914.47 metric tons of cardamom worth of NRS 2,528,003,204 (about USD 25.28 million). Of the total export, 90% of the cardamom goes to India and then the Middle East for spices and cosmetics.

During the FGD, women members unanimously explained that their participation in large cardamom and ginger cultivation is helping them in several strategic ways. These include expanding their assets, enhancing their social standing and securing social and public respect. These components of empowerment all emerged once they engaged in commercial agricultural and cardamom cooperatives, worked as managers of cooperatives and were in a position to sanction loans and investment in women's affairs. Hence, they have been able to develop confidence and competence. In this context, Ms. Laxmi Tamang, Manager of Jirmale Women Agriculture Cooperative said,

"Our members are confident, vocal and getting social recognition, respect and leadership positions in society and taking leadership roles in social events in the village... We don't give dowries to our daughters but educate them and enable them to stand on their own feet."

³²Interview with Ms Sushila Sapkota, Chair of the Ilam Chamber of Commerce on 25 June 2015 at Ilam Bazar.

Mr. Hom Bahadur Moktan from Jirmale VDC said, *"These days more investment is made in daughters' education with the help of income received from cardamom. We do not differentiate between son and daughters"*.

Women are aware and alert to market demands of their cash crops. In addition, they have started production of organic or pesticide free agricultural products due to high demand from Kathmandu and nearby Indian cities. Shivakoti et al. (2005) have shown that hill agriculture is one of the important contributors to biodiversity and ecological specificities. Women's engagement in pesticide free and/or organic crops is expected to contribute in preserving ecological diversity of crops and improve the price of their products. It was reported by the respondents of the FGD that the big hotels and other specialised enterprises from Kathmandu and other nearby towns, cities are interested to pay more for the organic product and asking them to supply. It is quite important to note that expansion of organic methods not only mitigates the negative effects of increased chemical and poisonous inputs from commercial agriculture on the environment, but also contributes to the improvement of human health.

Women group members from Sakalpur village of Jirmale VDC in the focus group discussion³³ highlighted that their involvement with commercial cash crops helped with their social and economic empowerment. They highlighted that rural women were benefitting economically from non-traditional cash crops because they obtained increased employment opportunities and improved wages (about NRS 500 (USD 5) per day against NRS 200(USD 2) per day in normal conventional wages) as well as better savings when they were involved in the cardamom value chain (plantation to harvesting, drying, processing and marketing). Once they earned more from the sale of cardamom, ginger and broom grass, they were able to invest in their choice of crops (increased economic decision-making). Intra-household power relations have also changed as women become involved in joint decision-making about the use of the income they obtained from the sale of cardamom. Referring to the change in her household decision-making process a female farmer engaged in a women's cooperative said,

*"Earlier my husband was making every decision in my house but once we started growing cardamom, and I became member of the cardamom farmers group, my husband gradually started discussing with me expenditure related decisions. Later, once our role as members of the group expanded to approve the loan application, I was even more recognised. Now, within 8-10 years I am actively engaged in decision-making about resource allocation and my family members fully accepted my decisions and even they are happy"*³⁴.

Women leaders in the private sector highlighted that commercialization of agriculture in Ilam district has been instrumental toward their political empowerment via their involvement in political spaces in local politics. Cardamom and cash crop enterprises, in later years, provided increased space for political engagement and taking on leadership opportunities. The chairwoman of the Ilam Chambers of Commerce, Mrs Sushila Sapkota said,

"Cardamom and other cash crops in Ilam not only socially and economically strengthened the position of women, but also created spaces for women to

³³FGD on 26 June 2015 at Salakpur Village of Jirmale Village Development Committee.

³⁴ Interview on 25 June 2015 at Mangalbare, Ilam district.

establish themselves politically, and to take leadership and political positions at local level."

The formation and operation of agriculture and cardamom/ginger cooperatives provided spaces for women to take leadership positions such as chairperson, secretary and treasurer, positions that require political and investment decisions. The sanctioning of loans for many male applicants from the cooperatives, opened up spaces for negotiation, engagement and exercise of their authority. In addition, their competence, confidence and leadership skills developed, and ultimately local committees of political parties provided them with political positions. The key informant³⁵ from Ilam Bazar said that In Jirmale, Mangalbare and Babote (all three study sites) women were represented in the local political structures (village and area committee) by consensus.

Participants in the FGD and during in-depth interviews, consistently highlighted that the engagement of women in cash crops had helped them to expand their natural, social, political and economic assets. They offered examples of building natural asset/capital as: their work on the protection of landslides and soil erosion, maintaining of greenery in their region, plantation of a nitrogen fixing shade tree, Uttis (*Alnus nepalenses*), to provide protection for large cardamom. They believe that such activities ultimately contributed to maintain ecological stability in their area.

At the time of the interviews and FGDs, women who engaged in cash crop production in Jirmale, Mangalbare, and Barbote VDCs shared that they were actively participating in social activities such as cleaning of their area, organising social gatherings on special days, expansion of streets etc., and in many instances providing leadership roles for these activities. They were also members of local social networks, local organization, agriculture and cardamom/ginger cooperatives, and farmers' associations and took more social responsibilities and leadership roles.

During our FGD, the cardamom and ginger grower women, as well as the members of the women's cooperatives, forcefully and repeatedly highlighted that the number of women depositing money in the nearby bank or cooperatives increased. Further, they were able to invest in areas of their interests/choice; their decision-making power was enhanced since they could spend money at their own discretion, including buying jewellery, paying donations to schools or on social events, or spending on religious activities once they had cash in hand. All of these activities have economically and socially empowered women.

Though engagement of women in commercial agriculture, especially in non-traditional cash crops contributed to social, economic and political status and recognition, there were some challenges as well. The most significant challenge was their work burden when they had to complete both household chores as well as the new responsibilities related to their engagement in leadership, and additional social and political activities. The situation of the double burden of women is not only limited to Nepal, but reported globally (Alston 2014; Deere 2009; Kelkar 2007; Vepa 2004). When women move into productive labour, there is little or no support for their *reproductive* labour. Hence, addressing this issue (finding ways to assist women in reproductive labour—household work and childrearing) require collective and concerted efforts from the state, the private sector and men.

³⁵ Interview on 25 June 2015 at Mangalbare, Ilam district.

Additional problems and challenges

In addition to the significant problem of women's double work burden, a reality that complicates the evaluation of women's empowerment, other problems have emerged. Crop damage from cardamom diseases was the most problem most frequently cited by the respondents. The most commonly reported diseases were *chirke* (drying of leaves from the yellow spots), *furke* (drying of plants once leaves are dried off) and rhizome rot. These disease drastically reduced production of traditional varieties of large cardamom in many parts of the study district and several farmers shifted their cultivations (from cardamom to ginger, teas, broom grass and others) or replaced the traditional varieties with the new locally developed ones such as *Sakalpure* (developed in Sakalpur village of Jirmale VDC).

Farmers also lacked the appropriate technical knowledge of cardamom processing so they could not improve the existing quality. Farmers and cardamom associations have been asking the government to install modern kilns in the cardamom production areas to improve the quality and obtain better pricing. However, they have not been successful in this venture. Further, the price of large cardamom, ginger and other high value-low volume cash crops has been changing rapidly. Even though price information sharing by phone SMS had begun, they were unable to obtain up-to-date market price information because Indian brokers and collectors have been manipulating prices. To tackle this situation, the local cooperatives and farmers began a SMS system to inform farmers of the market price. However, the system was effective only within Nepal; farmers were unable to get full information about price fluctuations in the Indian market. Hence, the cardamom producers association and ginger producers association have been constantly lobbying the government to help direct export to the Middle East or other countries.

Conclusion

Women's engagement in high value, export-led agriculture is increasing in Nepal after the post-peace agreement period. Nepal's agriculture sector in general and agricultural marketing in particular was severely suffered during the decade long insurgency. However over the past ten years since the signing of the peace agreement, Nepal's agriculture and agricultural markets are reviving. The expansion of high value-low volume, non-traditional cash crops are attracting entrepreneurs and innovative farmers, especially women farmers. Nepal has made reasonable efforts to promote commercial agriculture and agricultural market in the post-conflict period but additional efforts are still needed in least in the three areas: market price stability, support for modern drying technology and addressing the disease problem.

Female engagement in high value agricultural exports in the Eastern Hills in general and Ilam district in particular are rapidly increasing and this process has contributed to the social, economic and political empowerment of women as well as towards building physical, natural and financial assets. Three cash crops, namely large cardamom, broom-grass and ginger were most attractive for women as they provide relatively easy earning, have led to social and political recognition such as political leadership opportunities in local party units, and involvement in economic organisations (leadership in cooperatives, women's groups, market committees).

The success of high value-low volume commercial cash crops in these areas, as well as the enhanced status of women indicate an opportunity for Nepal to expand to other parts of country. Furthermore, the study suggests broader implications for policy reform (i.e. introduction of modern technology, facilitation of export promotion, support for storage and processing, etc.).

Because the promotion of high value-low and volume cash crops also increases natural, economic, social and political assets of those who are engaged in its value chain, they can be a means of agrarian transformation and improvement in the economic status of farmers in general and female farmers in particular. The disease problem in the cardamom crops offers an important lesson for any successful commercial agricultural development: it can be derailed by unexpected factors and therefore government policymakers, planners and implementers must be prepared and flexible to address the problems immediately. If proper treatment had been available for *chhirke*, *furke* and rhizome rot disease, farmers would have been protected from huge losses.

Although women's political, economic and social competence are enhanced and their status raised through their engagement in high value commercial crops, it is not yet clear whether it will be a sustainable enterprise for women, because price volatility in the global market and the nature and extent of disease are concerns beyond the capacity of the influence of women. Women's engagement in high value, export led commercial agriculture has positively contributed to women's status; even though they have faced double burden, it is not yet clear about the long-term impact for women. Women's political, economic and social competence has changed the social perception of women, especially increasing their social status, economic independence and political recognition. We refer to this as the *beginning of a social transformation of gender roles* that could potentially motivate their newly educated daughters to follow the path of their mothers, not necessarily limiting to stay involved with farming but broadly to engage in other political and economic ventures.

Finally, this study engenders many important questions about the future of girls and women in Nepalese society, the role of the state, the role of men in households and reproductive roles, so that women's double work burden is addressed.

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