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Attempting affirmative political ecologies: Collective transformative learning for social justice in Nepal's community forestry

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Abstract

Whilst political ecology scholarship has contributed much to articulating social injustices associated with Nepal's community forestry, here we took a different approach, by attempting an 'affirmative political ecology.' We drew on feminist and activist scholarship to inspire collective action that engaged directly with challenges of social justice and those charged with delivering it through their work. Guided by theories and practices of 'transformative learning' and a range of associated reflective practices, our participatory action research involved 4 facilitators and (up to) 25 participants who work across Nepal's forest bureaucracy (and for some, the wider community-based natural resource management sector). Together physically, remotely and through our writing, we reflect upon the operation of power in our professional – and personal – lives, exploring how that may enable a more informed and meaningful engagement with social justice within the workplace, and beyond. This article presents the process of our collective reflection and learning, and shares some of its initial outcomes based on the experiences of the 15 co-authors. Whilst 'simply' having the time and space to come together was hugely important, it was the *form* and *feel* of that space that was particularly significant, as we focused on co-creating a safe space which was non-judgmental and based on mutual respect, enabling comfortable and open discussion of often unspoken and uncomfortable issues. Ultimately, this article argues that collective practices of reflection and transformative learning can create shared learning, understanding, empathy and solidarity, and thus that it offers hope in the face of on-going social injustices. It therefore urges political ecologists to work towards such caring and affirmative collective engagements with practitioners as one way in which to affect change.

Key words: affirmative political ecology, transformative learning, practitioners, action research, social justice

Résumé

Alors que les études sur « political ecology » ont largement contribué à articuler les injustices sociales associées à la foresterie communautaire au Népal, nous avons adopté une approche différente, en tentant une « affirmative political ecology. » Pour ce faire, nous nous sommes appuyés sur des études féministes et militantes afin d'inspirer une action collective qui fait face directement aux défis de la justice sociale et à ceux qui sont chargés de la mettre en œuvre à travers leur travail. Guidée par les théories et les pratiques de « l'apprentissage transformateur » et une série de pratiques réflexives associées, notre recherche-action participative a impliqué 4 facilitateurs et (jusqu'à) 25 participants qui travaillent dans la bureaucratie forestière du Népal (et pour certains, dans le secteur plus large de la gestion des ressources naturelles au niveau communautaire). Ensemble physiquement, à distance et par le biais de nos écrits, nous avons réfléchi au fonctionnement du pouvoir dans nos vies professionnelles – et personnelles – en explorant comment cela peut permettre un engagement plus informé et plus significatif en faveur de la justice sociale sur le lieu de travail et au-delà. Cet article présente le processus de notre réflexion et de notre apprentissage collectifs, et partage certains de ses résultats initiaux basés sur les expériences des 15 co-auteurs. Alors que le fait d'avoir « simplement » le temps et l'espace pour se réunir était extrêmement important, c'était la *forme* et l'*atmosphère* de cet espace qui étaient particulièrement significatives, car nous nous sommes concentrés sur la cocréation d'un espace sûr, sans jugement et basé sur le respect mutuel, permettant une discussion confortable et ouverte sur des questions souvent inexprimées et inconfortables. En fin de compte, cet article soutient que les pratiques collectives de réflexion et d'apprentissage

transformateur peuvent créer un apprentissage partagé, une compréhension, une empathie et une solidarité, et qu'elles sont donc porteuses d'espoir face aux injustices sociales persistantes. Il exhorte donc les chercheurs « political ecology » à œuvrer en faveur d'engagements collectifs bienveillants et positifs avec les professionnels, afin d'influer sur le changement.

Mots-clés : écologie politique affirmative, apprentissage transformatif, professionnels, recherche-action, justice sociale

Resumen

Aunque los estudios sobre ecología política han contribuido en gran medida a articular las injusticias sociales asociadas a la silvicultura comunitaria de Nepal, aquí adoptamos un enfoque diferente, intentando una "ecología política afirmativa." Para ello nos basamos en estudios feministas y activistas para inspirar una acción colectiva que afrontara directamente los retos de la justicia social y los encargados de hacerla realidad a través de su trabajo. Guiados por las teorías y prácticas del "aprendizaje transformador" y una serie de prácticas reflexivas asociadas, nuestra investigación-acción participativa contó con 4 facilitadores y (hasta) 25 participantes que trabajan en la burocracia forestal de Nepal (y para algunos, en el sector más amplio de la gestión comunitaria de los recursos naturales). Juntos físicamente, a distancia y a través de la escritura, reflexionamos sobre el funcionamiento del poder en nuestras vidas profesionales - y personales -, explorando cómo esto puede permitir un compromiso más informado y significativo con la justicia social en el lugar de trabajo, y más allá. Este artículo presenta el proceso de nuestra reflexión y aprendizaje colectivos, y comparte algunos de sus resultados iniciales basados en las experiencias de los 15 coautores. Aunque "simplemente" disponer de tiempo y espacio para reunirse fue muy importante, la *forma* y la *sensación* de ese espacio fueron especialmente significativos, ya que nos centramos en la creación conjunta de un espacio seguro que no juzgara y se basara en el respeto mutuo, permitiendo un debate cómodo y abierto sobre cuestiones a menudo tácitas e incómodas. En última instancia, este artículo argumenta que las prácticas colectivas de reflexión y aprendizaje transformador pueden crear aprendizaje colectivo, comprensión, empatía y solidaridad, y por lo tanto ofrecen esperanza frente a las injusticias sociales constantes. Por lo tanto, insta a los ecologistas políticos a obrar con miras a este tipo de compromisos colectivos solidarios y afirmativos con los profesionales como una forma de lograr el cambio.

Palabras claves: ecología política afirmativa, aprendizaje transformador, profesionales, investigación-acción, justicia social

Abstract, Nepali

अफोर्मेतिभ पोलिटिकल इकोलोजी प्रयास: नेपालको सामुदायिक वनमा सामाजिक न्यायका लागि सामूहिक ट्रांसफोरमेटिव लर्निङ्ग पोलिटिकल इकोलोजी अध्ययनले नेपालको सामाजिक चुनौती सम्बन्धि सामाजिक अन्यायलाई स्पष्टिकरण गर्न ठुलो योगदान पुऱ्याउदै आएको भएपनि यस अध्ययनमा हामीले अलग्गै दृष्टिकोण " अफोर्मेतिभ पोलिटिकल इकोलोजी" अपनायौं । यसमा हामीले सामाजिक न्यायका चुनौतीहरूसँग सिधै संलग रहि सामूहिक कार्य गर्न प्रेरित गर्ने नारीवादी र सामाजिक अभियानताहरूलाई उनीहरूको काम मार्फत प्रवाह गर्न लगायौं । ट्रांसफोरमेटिव लर्निङ्गका सिद्धान्त तथा अभ्यासहरूबाट निर्देशित हाम्रो सहभागीतात्मक अनुसन्धान कार्यमा ४ जना सहजकर्ताहरू र (धेरैमा) २५ जन सम्म सहभागीहरू सामेल थिए, जसमध्ये केहि नेपालको वन कर्मचारीतन्त्र (र अरुकोहि फरक माध्यमबाट समुदायमा आधारित प्राकृतिक स्रोत व्यवस्थापनमा काम गर्छन्) । अध्ययन क्षेत्रको भ्रमण, प्रविधिको प्रयोगगरी टाढै बाट र हाम्रो लेखाई - सबै माध्यम प्रयोगगरी व्यवसायिक र निजी जीवनमा शक्तिको प्रयोग कसरी आफ्नो कार्यक्षेत्र र अरु ठाउँमा पनि धेरै सुचनात्मक र मूल्यवान बनाउन सकिन्छ भनेर मन्थन गर्यौं । यस लेखले १५ सह-लेखकहरूको सामूहिक मन्थन तथा सिकाईहरूको प्रारम्भिक परिणामहरू प्रस्तुत गर्दछ । सामान्यता सबैका लागि एकैसाथ उपयुक्त स्थान र समय मिलाउनु निकै महत्पूर्ण र अर्थपूर्ण थियो, किनकि हामी सबैकालागी सुरक्षित ठाउँ जहाँ भेदभावरहित वातावरण, पारस्पायीक सम्बन्धका साथ धेरै जसो नबोलिएका र बोल्न हिचकिचाइएका मुद्दाहरूमा सहभागीहरूले खुला र निर्भिकरुपमा प्रस्तुत हुनु भन्ने कुरामा केन्द्रित थियौं । अन्त्यमा, यस लेखले तर्क गर्दछ कि रिप्लेक्टिभ र ट्रांसफोरमेटिव लर्निङ्गको सामूहिक अभ्यासले साझा शिक्षा, समझधारी, सहानुभूति र एकताबद्ध गराउनुका साथै यसले चलिरहेको सामाजिक अन्यायको सामना गर्न आशा प्रदान गर्दछ । त्यसकारण यसले पोलिटिकल इकोलोजी सम्बन्धि काम गर्नेहरूलाई सुरक्षित र सकारात्मक सामूहिक संलगतामा आधारित अभ्यासकर्ताहरूले गर्ने एक साच्चिकै परिवर्तनकारी तरिकाको रूपमा प्रेरित गर्दछ ।

मुख्य शब्दहरू अफोर्मेतिभ पोलिटिकल इकोलोजी, ट्रांसफोरमेटिव लर्निङ्ग, अभ्यासकर्ता, कार्य अनुसन्धान, सामाजिक न्याय

1. Introduction

Nepal's community forestry program is world-renowned for its long history and levels of investment, progressive policies and strategies, ambitious targets, and its ecological and social achievements to date. Arguably however, much remains to be done to tackle on-going social inequalities and injustices which persist as a result of patriarchy, casteism and other engrained systems of oppression. Inequalities and exclusions occur both within Community Forest User Groups across the country and within the governing forest bureaucracy, including both government and non-governmental institutions. It is important to understand and recognize the layers of power relations at all institutional levels that result in exclusions of certain groups, and political ecology scholarship has contributed much to articulating these social and environmental injustices. We feel, however, that some of that work risks 'black-boxing' community forest institutions, and it presents a critique from 'outside' (Staddon, 2021). In contrast, recent feminist political ecology work highlights the need to engage directly and sympathetically with environment and development professionals and their work (Resurrección & Elmhirst, 2021).

Our article aims to build on this latter work by offering an 'affirmative political ecology' (Batterbury, 2018), which attempts "moving on [from critique] to try and repair what is still possible to repair ... exploring opportunities in the present to crack open spaces for agency" (Alhojärvi & Sirviö, 2018, p. 1). In order to do so, we draw on feminist and activist scholarship to inspire collective action that engages directly with social justice challenges and those charged with delivering actions through their work. Our project involved those working across the forest bureaucracy (and for some, the wider community-based natural resource management [CBNRM] sector), to reflect upon the operation of power in their professional – and personal – lives, exploring how that may enable a more informed and meaningful engagement with social justice within their work. Facilitated by two political ecologists from the so-called Global North and two experts from Nepal (one specializing in gender and social inclusion in CBNRM, and one in reflective practices and transformative learning in development), our participatory action research took place sporadically since 2019, at times in-person, at times virtually and at times through our writing, and included up to 25 Nepali practitioners. A subset of people continued to the 'final' stages of this project, and we are the 15 co-authors of this article.

Our collective action was guided through theories and practices of 'transformative learning' and a range of associated reflective practices. It has been argued that transformative learning supports development practitioners in their day-to-day practice, enabling them to be better prepared to tackle the challenges of messy environments in order that they can engage with power dynamics and address gender equality and social inclusion (Gonda *et al.*, 2021; Staddon, 2012). Indeed Freire (1970) argues that reflective participation is a core element to addressing social justice. This article presents the process of our participatory action research and practicing of transformative learning, and shares some of its outcomes. What we present should be read as a tentative interpretation of an on-going process, and one which is necessarily a partial account of the relationships and engagements that have taken place to date.

Ultimately, we argue that collective practices of reflection and transformative learning can create shared learning, understanding, empathy and solidarity, and thus that it offers hope in the face of on-going social injustices. Our contributions and audiences in this article are threefold: firstly, we offer an example of the practice of affirmative political ecology for an academic audience. Secondly, we offer an example of engaging with the operation of power for those interested in promoting environmental and social justice in Nepal's community forestry and CBNRM. Thirdly, we offer an example of transformative learning for those interested in its potential for generating a more humanized and transformational development practice.

The article is structured as follows. Literature and conceptual groundings are followed by our methodology of collective reflecting and learning. Findings and discussion firstly highlight our reflections on collective transformative learning for social justice, and secondly our attempts at affirmative political ecologies. Finally, we offer our conclusions.

2. Literature and conceptual groundings

As our project and this article emerge from collective endeavors that reflect multiple and diverse positions and interests, we necessarily draw on a number of fields of literature and conceptual groundings. We

introduce those here under three distinct themes, starting with the context and challenges of social justice in Nepal's community forestry, which we see as indicative of and closely related to the wider CBNRM sector in Nepal (including watershed management and biodiversity conservation). We then move on to introduce and ground our (feminist) affirmative political ecology approach in pursuing this collective participatory action research, and finish by synthesizing work on reflective practices and transformative learning that provided the theory and practices to guide our engagements.

Challenges of social justice in Nepal's community forestry

Nepal's community forestry (CF) program is world-renowned for its long history and levels of investment, progressive policies and strategies, ambitious targets, and its ecological and social achievements to date. The Forest Sector Strategy 2016-2025 (Government of Nepal, 2016) promotes gender equity, inclusive development and economic upliftment of the poor, women, Dalits, Janajatis, Adivasi and other marginalized groups of people. In line with the National Gender Equality Policy 2077 (2020/21) (Government of Nepal, 2021) that aims to build Nepal as a nation with gender equality, gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) and poverty reduction are identified as the seventh strategic pillar of the Forest Sector Strategy (GESI is the gender and diversity mainstreaming instrument designed to ensure inclusivity). The National Forest Policy 2019 (Government of Nepal, 2019) states that forest sector institutions, policies, programs and budget will be formulated on the basis of GESI principles, and it establishes the working strategy of having 50% women's participation in decision-making in all forestry sector institutions, strategies, laws, programs, budgets and practices. The Community Forestry Development Program Guideline 2014 (Government of Nepal, 2014) stipulated that at least 50% of the Community Forest User Group (CFUG) Executive Committee must be women, and that at least one of the two decision-making positions (Chairperson or Secretary) must be held by a woman, thus ensuring at least one woman in a signatory post. The Forest Regulation 2022 (Government of Nepal, 2022) states that 35% of the CFUG income must be spent on targeted pro-poor programs as identified by participatory well-being rankings. The Ministry of Forests and Environment (MoFE) (previously Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation, MoFSC) has developed the Forest Sector Gender and Social Inclusion Strategy 2008-2009 (MoFSC, 2007) that focuses on four areas:

1. GESI-sensitive policy and guidelines,
2. Good governance and GESI-sensitive organizational development,
3. GESI-sensitive budget, program and monitoring, and
4. equitable access to resources, decision-making and benefits.

The Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan of Forest and Environment Sector 2020-2030 is a revised form of the earlier strategy and is currently awaiting official approval.

Arguably, despite Nepal's community forestry program's great achievements, much remains to be done to tackle on-going social inequalities and injustices which persist as a result of patriarchy, casteism and other ingrained systems of oppression in the country. Inequalities and exclusions occur within CFUGs across Nepal, as well as within community forest institutions themselves, including both governmental and non-governmental institutions, which thus also act as barriers for inclusion. Wagle *et al.* (2017, p. x) capture this paradox well:

The formal rule of the game in community forest is institutionally robust in favor of women. Their access to forest resources, space for their leadership development and equitable benefit sharing is instituted in the case of community forestry. However, the social norms and values, which are the informal institutions, often prevent women from realizing the full rights and benefits the formal institutions offer to them.

Many factors, including the provision in Nepal's new 2015 constitution for inclusive governance, have resulted in the adoption of GESI policy instruments in forestry. However, actual policy implementation

demands making the instruments explicit and responsive to needs, priorities, interests and capabilities of people historically discriminated and situationally vulnerable (IDPG, 2017). Prevailing policies consider women and marginalized groups as mere beneficiaries and not as primary stakeholders, and GESI is side-lined as a cross-cutting theme (WOCAN, 2017). Evidence is hard to find that the GESI policy commitments in forestry have brought about intersectional transformative changes, either in Nepal (Shrestha *et al.*, 2023) or globally (McDougall *et al.*, 2021). Studies, prevailing movements and processes indicate that there have been insufficient influential discourses or interventions on understanding and addressing the barriers to delivering on policy commitments.

Social justice outcomes are assumed in community forestry when CFUGs are portrayed as robust grassroots institutions for forest management and group governance. However, many researchers have shown that CFUGs are still governed by some influential local elites who do not practice equity and inclusion in their daily governance (Acharya & Upreti, 2015). Ironically, in practice, women with leadership qualities may not be included in CFUG committees unless they have political affiliations, with less powerful women chosen to fill the quota instead. Implementation of pro-poor targeted programs are widely considered ineffective (ICIMOD & UN Women, 2021). While the community forest program in Nepal is recognized as a success story in including women, of the 22,531 CFUGs in Nepal, 42% of membership were women, only 5% are women-only CFUGs and only 6% are chaired by women (HIMAWANTI, 2020).

At the national level, community forestry institutions center on the Ministry of Forests and Environment, and social inclusion and gender equality within the Ministry is just as significant as within CFUGs. Considering employment and representation in the MoFE, the number of women recruited has increased from 4 in 2010, to 10 in 2014, to 24 in 2016, and to 14 in 2018 (MoFE, 2020). However, there are gaps in staff diversity in terms of GESI, as revealed by a GESI assessment of the forestry sector in 2011. In a survey of 6,836 personnel, there was overrepresentation of men, Brahmin and Chhetris (57%), and to some extent Newars (6.26%), with women comprising only 3.25% of staff, Dalits 2.0%, and Muslims 1.6%. Gender-disaggregated data of MoFE showed that of 58 staff members, 25% were women, of which 87% were in technical roles and 13% in administrative positions. From the 7 divisions within the Ministry, only one was headed by a senior woman officer (MoFE, 2020). Similarly, in the Department of Forest and Soil Conservation (DoFSC), out of a total of 41 incumbent staff members, only 12% were women, all of whom were in technical positions and only two of whom were in leadership roles. Furthermore, at the district level, of 84 District Forest Officers only 4% were women (DoFSC, 2020).

Within Nepal, there are a number of forestry-related civil society organizations (CSOs), including the Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN) and Himalayan Grassroots Women's Natural Resource Management Association (HIMAWANTI). These CSOs have been seen to play important roles in creating platforms for policy-makers, civil society and forest user groups to dialogue. Despite the GESI commitments and support from donor agencies, these forestry-related CSOs have still not been able to effectively represent and engage women and marginalized groups. It has been argued that the CSO platforms for GESI participation have largely become spaces for showcasing their engagement rather than a democratic space for influencing policies and programs in the interest of these marginalized groups. In 2020, FECOFUN was chaired by a woman, but of the five-member national executive committee, only two were women, even though 52% of the 79 executive members were women (FECOFUN, 2020). The FECOFUN secretariat was led by a woman and of 20 staff members, 35% were women.

Despite more participation of women in community forestry governance, both within CFUGs and the forest bureaucracy, studies show that just counting the number of women participating in forestry institutions at either the national and community levels does not guarantee the actual equality of women in terms of empowerment and equity in power relations (Gurung and Bisht, 2014; Nightingale, 2002). It is important to dig deeper, to understand and recognize the layers of power relations at *all* institutional levels that result in exclusions of certain groups, including women and those of particular castes. As highlighted by Wagle *et al.* (2017, p. 221) "Among the forest-dependent communities, women, indigenous people, and economically poor families are directly dependent on forest resources, so that gender, ethnicity, and class are important lenses through which to consider the policies and practices of forestry institutions and the governance of Nepal's forests."

Reflecting the practice in Nepal of always considering gender alongside other intersectional identities, such as caste and class (hence GESI, rather than simply gender equality), we focus our article on the all-encompassing concept of social justice. Our action research (as detailed fully in the methodology) reflected an engagement primarily with gender and caste, but also with geography, language, seniority, role, nationality and the Nepali notion of *afno manchhe*.² Our work involved us reflecting upon our professional – and personal – experiences of marginalization and privilege, to explore how that may enable a more informed and meaningful engagement with social justice and relations of power within our work. As outlined above, inequalities and hierarchies of power operate both within community forestry programs and 'beneficiary' communities, as well as within the institutions and staff that develop and implement these programs. In both cases, unequal relations of power, and resulting experiences of marginalization or privilege, stem from the same systems of oppression, namely patriarchy, casteism, classism etc. Taking an actor-oriented perspective on power, these systems are seen as constraining or enabling the agency and exercise of power by individuals (Svarstad *et al.*, 2018), be they practitioners or community forestry users. 'Power resources' are those things that actors can use in the exercise of power, and reflect not only gender or caste, but also access to capital and resources – thus connecting with neo-Marxist perspectives on power – as well as discursive power resources – thus connecting with post-structural perspectives on power (Svarstad *et al.*, 2018).

Drawing on these conceptualizations of power, and understanding power as situated, relational and performative (Nightingale & Harcourt, 2021), enables a reflection upon situations in which, at times, marginalization is experienced, whilst at other times, privilege is experienced. Digging deeply into those experiences allows the identification and articulation of the power resources involved, a greater understanding of what is required in the promotion of social justice, and ultimately, the promotion of opportunities for challenging and transforming power relations. Our project engaged those working across the forest bureaucracy and wider CBNRM sector, and whilst we have insufficient space here to outline challenges of inclusion and social justice in the context of other CBNRM sectors in Nepal such as watershed management and biodiversity conservation, we believe the issues detailed above in relation to community forestry to be indicative of those. Our collective work involves professionals from both forestry and other CBNRM sectors, and our perspectives, as outlined below, attest to shared experiences of oppression and injustice which cut across sectors.

We next consider what political ecology has done with regards to digging deeper into social injustices in Nepal's community forestry and CBNRM and explore what a feminist 'affirmative' approach might offer as a way to engage directly with these challenges.

Towards a (feminist) affirmative political ecology engagement with environmental governance

Political ecologists have been amongst the most persistent critics of Nepal's community forestry. They have highlighted the lack of meaningful participation in community forestry projects discussed above (Nightingale, 2002; Staddon *et al.*, 2015), the (re)creation of marginalization and exclusion through everyday community forestry practices (Nightingale, 2006; Staddon *et al.*, 2014; Lund, 2015), and the hegemony of scientific knowledge and subsequent lack of engagement with the knowledges and practices of local communities (Nightingale, 2005; Rutt *et al.*, 2012; Toft *et al.*, 2015; Ojha *et al.*, 2016). We argue, however, that this political ecology work risks 'black-boxing' the policymakers and practitioners who work within Nepal's forestry institutions, i.e. presenting them as a homogenous group who share similar perspectives, practices and positionalities (Staddon, 2021). Doing so may shut down interest in and opportunities for working *with* these diverse professionals, and of working across differences, and with alignments, to collectively reflect on and resist on-going social injustices.

Feminist political ecologists are increasingly interested in understanding, acknowledging, and working *with* the embodied everyday practices of forestry and environmental professionals in their pursuit of social

² "*Afno manchhe* is a Nepali term that can be translated as 'one's own people.' It refers to relationships of reciprocal nature with an implicit hierarchy. It may partly be based on ascribed principles derived from kinship and marriage, but ... may [also] include people working in the same profession or the same field, business stakeholders or members of a particular organization. The way it has been used in Nepal indicates more than relationship; *it may lead to the misuse of power and constitutes a unique path for corruption*" (Subedi, 2014, pp. 56-57, emphasis added)

justice (Arora-Jonsson, 2014; Arora-Jonsson & Basnett, 2018; Bee and Basnett, 2017; Staddon, 2021). In their book *Negotiating gender expertise in environment and development: Voices from Feminist Political Ecology*, Resurrección and Elmhirst (2021) unpack and unsettle 'the gender expert' and offer a sympathetic account and series of co-written stories with such practitioners. This work aims to reveal the 'slow revolution' that arises from practitioners' "small, messy, fragmented and everyday kinds of subversions, conscious and unconscious" (p. 404), concluding that "vigilance and reflexivity help resist hegemonizing rationalities that depoliticize and technocratize the work of advancing gender equality in technical environments" (p. 227). Our own work aims to create and cultivate opportunities for such 'vigilance and reflexivity' around issues of social justice with Nepal's community forestry professionals.

Whilst critique is said to be "in political ecology's DNA", Braun (2015, p. 103) asks whether something has been lost as a result. Loftus (2015, p. 180) questions how political ecology might be "[re]framed as an effort to heighten the capacity to know *and* act." Questions of political ecology as praxis have a long history, from Robbins' (2012) classic framing of political ecology as both 'hatchet' (i.e. critique) *and* 'seed' (i.e. action), to the seminal work *Liberation Ecologies* by Peet and Watts (1996). More recent efforts at praxis include those engaging in the 'experimental turn' in political ecology (Braun, 2015), activist political ecologies (Heynen & Van Sant, 2015) and affirmative political ecologies (Alhojärvi & Sirviö, 2018; Batterbury, 2018). Our work aligns with affirmative political ecologies' calls for "moving on [from critique] to try and repair what is still possible to repair ... exploring opportunities in the present to crack open spaces for agency" (Alhojärvi & Sirviö, 2018, p. 1). Through our collective participatory action research, we attempt that praxis of epistemological *and* political work, in order that we might "generate new ideas, new powers, and perhaps new possibilities for composing socio-ecological assemblages otherwise" (Braun, 2015, p. 106). Participatory action research is the ideal approach for this, as it seeks to 'understand and improve the world by changing it' and 'at its heart is collective, self-reflective inquiry that researchers and participants undertake, so they can understand and improve upon the practices in which they participate and the situations in which they find themselves (Baum *et al.*, 2006).

Some early praxis-oriented political ecology work has, however, been criticized for failing to extend its critique to political ecologists themselves, as producers of knowledge in often highly politicized research situations (Sundberg, 2015). We are therefore mindful in our collective praxis of "the need to see such experiments as themselves outcomes of struggle and sites of struggle" (Braun, 2015, p. 111). Discussing engaged and feminist political ecologies, Sundberg (2015, p. 120) is clear that:

there is no pure place from which to engage in research ... there is no way to conduct research that will absolve us of imperial complicity or ethical dilemmas ... the challenge is how to start from a place of entanglement or how to replace epistemologies that enact hierarchy and distance with those that assume interdependency and entanglement in asymmetrical conditions.

We – the political ecologists and Global North scholars in the team, i.e. Sam and Clare – have taken this challenge seriously throughout this collective work, both in the process of engaging in the research and in its writing. Our affirmative political ecology praxis builds on engagements to date with ethics and positionality in research and teaching (Staddon, 2014; Staddon, Barnes *et al.* 2021; Staddon, 2022), and it attempts to promote interdependency in entanglements that we recognize are asymmetrical and potential sites of struggle.

In order to help negotiate this 'ethics of entanglement' (Sundberg, 2015), we looked to feminist concerns of 'creating community' (hooks, 2003) and to participatory and activist academic praxis (Askins, 2009; Askins & Blazek, 2017; Maxey, 1999). We are particularly interested in how these fields help to articulate the importance of relationships and emotions (Sultana, 2015), which have yet to be discussed in connection with affirmative political ecologies and their ability to foster interdependency and connection. Feminist activist-academic bell hooks (2003, p. 197) urges us to resist 'dominator culture' (i.e. imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal values) by 'creating community', writing that "[d]ominator culture has tried to keep us all afraid ... Moving through that fear, finding out what connects us, revelling in our differences; this is the process that brings us closer, that gives us a world of shared values, of meaningful community." Rather than simply

'preaching to the converted', hooks (2003) views speaking across differences as 'radical intervention', and we take this as instruction to move beyond political ecology's critique-as-judgement for an already-interested academic audience, to take seriously the potential to create community through affirmative political ecologies that revel in difference.

Community is said to create hope for a more just future, however it requires care (hooks, 2003), and to that end we take inspiration from participatory and activist academic scholarship which, in line with a broader feminist 'ethics of care', recognizes the affective and epistemological power of emotions (Askins, 2009; Lawson, 2007). In order to negotiate the ethics of entanglement that affirmative political ecologies demand, we aim to practice our collective work through an ethics of care that adopts a social ontology of connection (rather than dependency) and which is "concerned with structuring relationships in ways that enhance mutuality and well-being" (Lawson, 2007, p. 3). Whilst (academic) activism might typically be thought of as dramatic, explicit, public acts of resistance, some argue for greater focus on 'implicit activism', i.e. everyday practices which are "small-scale, personal, quotidian and proceeding with little fanfare" (Horton & Kraftl, 2009, p. 14). In this article, we are interested in the potential of implicit activism in our own academic and professional practices (particularly given the slow revolution suggested by Resurrección & Elmhirst, 2021), as well through our collective efforts to create community in this research.

Ultimately, our work attempts a care-ful, feminist, affirmative political ecology praxis that can create community and change with and through Nepal's community forestry and CBNRM professionals. Our collective work seeks to "crack open spaces for agency" (Alhojärvi & Sirviö, 2018, p. 1) and to create opportunities for "vigilance and reflexivity" with regards to issues of social justice (Resurrección & Elmhirst, 2020, p. 277), recognizing us all as (potentially) 'implicit activists' in our daily work (cf. Horton & Kraftl, 2009). We aim to "empower the situation", thereby "prioritiz[ing] the conditions of possibility within practice" (Loftus, 2015, p. 184). We use 'transformative learning' as a practice in order to do so, as described and detailed next.

Transformative learning as an approach to tackling social injustices

Reflective practices and transformative learning support development practitioners, including in CBNRM, in their day-to-day practice, enabling them to be better prepared to tackle the challenges of messy environments in order that they can engage with power dynamics and address gender equality and social inclusion (Gonda *et al.*, 2021; Robertson, 2012). Reflective participation, Freire (1970) argues, is a core element to addressing social justice. Without this, development risks the perpetuation of injustice and exclusion, accompanied by continued manipulation to reinforce the status quo. Yet to date, development practice has been weakly positioned to engage with reflective practices to bring about transformative change, in part due to reliance on 'instrumental' learning (Eyben, 2014; Leach *et al.*, 2021). Defining reflective practices and transformative learning can be complex and confusing. Consequently, here we offer clarification on several interconnected concepts: *reflective practice*, *reflective learning*, *critical reflection*, and *reflexivity*, within a *transformative learning* framework (Mezirow, 1990). In doing so, we draw widely on adult learning theory (Boud & Walker, 1990, 1998; Brookfield, 2010; Mezirow, 1990; Moon, 1999).

Reflection is useful and necessary to make a set of practices work more smoothly and achieve the consequences intended for them. *Reflective practice* reframes experience to value the use not only of objective knowledge, but also that which is subjective and understood individually (Schön, 1983). Further, Schön (1983) advocates reflective practice to encompass the 'whole person', as the inner subjective self is interconnected to the external objective self. Reframing knowledge in reflective practice opens opportunities for practitioners, firstly to be ethically responsive to "complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflicts" (p. 14), and secondly to articulate knowledge that "is ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patterns of action and in our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing. It seems right to say knowing is in our action" (p. 49).

Reflective learning is an essential part of adult learning (Boud & Walker, 1990, 1998; Mezirow, 1990) "to reflect in and on the problems" (Brookfield, 2010, p. 215) encountered by practitioners in everyday practice. By focusing on the nitty-gritty of practice, reflective learning enables a questioning of what has gone before to refine practice to achieve the intended result (Brookfield, 2010). A limitation of reflective learning lies in a rhetoric that can camouflage its poor implementation due to misunderstanding (Boud & Walker, 1998),

particularly given the context of development practitioners' instrumental learning orientation. Consequently, reflective learning presents a paradox. On the one hand, it is useful in aiding practice, while on the other hand the lack of embedded critical analysis is a limitation and can cause problems arising from a prescribed reflection. Being 'critical' in reflection is important because "it is quite possible to practice reflectively while focusing solely on the nuts and bolts of process and leaving unquestioned the criteria, power dynamics, and wider structures that frame a field of practice" (Brookfield, 2010, p. 216). Greater possibilities can open up in moving "beyond the individual towards the social context" (Boud, 2010, p. 36). Thus, the location of the practitioner in their social context with consideration of the ensuing interaction ensures engagement in communicative learning. This creates the opportunity for individual learning to become 'critical' and shared collectively.

Critical reflective learning takes reflective learning one step further, as it addresses power dynamics to understand contexts and work out "practices considered to be technically effective" (Brookfield, 2010, p. 216). Being critical opens opportunities to identify an appropriate practice for a particular situation, given that critical reflection "involves a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built" (Mezirow, 1990, p. 1). A more in-depth understanding develops with critical reflection, where "in the absence of fixed truths and confronted with often rapid change in circumstances, we cannot fully trust what we know or believe" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 4). Critical reflection confronts the validity of assumptions from earlier learning, with a reassessment of meaning perspectives to transform perspectives, if necessary (Mezirow, 1990). Critical reflection, related to critical theory, helps to understand "the ways dominant ideology limits and circumscribes what people feel is possible in life", and "keeps alive the hope that the world can be changed to make it fairer and more compassionate" (Brookfield, 2005, pp. 8-9). Critical reflection situates the person reflexively to engage in a contextual power analysis where the individual becomes interconnected with their subjectivity of emotions and feeling (Dirkx, 2006).

Reflexivity facilitates "greater insights into personal and social experience" (Finlay & Gough, 2003, p. 1) to place subjective, gendered 'self' into practice. As a process, reflexivity involves "thoughtful, conscious self-awareness" with which to appraise subjective responses and intersubjective activities to bring understanding of "how we actively construct our knowledge" (Finlay, 2002, p. 532). From a feminist perspective, knowledge influenced by "the dominance of patriarchy" necessitates contributions from "women's experiences and their relationship with the world ... to generate different and better knowledge about the human condition" (McLaughlin, 2003, p. 55). Therefore, *critical* reflexivity supports the articulation of stories to embrace messiness and complexity (Etherington, 2004), and combined with historical consciousness, emotion and memory, can influence practice processes (Boud & Walker, 1998; Brookfield, 2006; Mezirow, 1990).

Transformative learning is a theory and practice that is reflexive and reconstructive (Mezirow, 2009), and is the framework within which the reflective concepts outlined above were applied in our collective work. Mezirow (2009) highlights a series of interconnected phases in the transformative process, including addressing a 'disorientating dilemma' embedded in experience. Disorientation arises where an existing presupposition is challenged and a person tries to make sense of this different perspective, thus integrating theory and practice. With an application of reflective practices, reflective learning, critical reflection and reflexivity, a practitioner – or indeed an academic – is better positioned to transform their habits of mind to be more responsive and appropriate in the messiness of their practice environment. Transformative learning opens up opportunities for practitioners "concerned with freedom, social change, environmental stewardship, personal growth and spiritual exploration" (Brookfield & Holst, 2011). Learning to become critical is the bedrock to tackling social injustices (Freire, 1970); however, learning to learn to become critically reflective is not easy and takes time (Mezirow, 1990).

The literature and conceptual groundings offered here have set the context for our collective work. They have necessarily been multiple and diverse, as is necessary in a piece of collaborative and transdisciplinary research, i.e. one that spans multiple disciplines and involves sectors beyond academia. We began by providing an overview of current challenges related to social justice in Nepal's community forestry and CBNRM, which ultimately we wish to tackle from our varied professional positions. We then moved on to ground our (feminist) affirmative political ecology approach in pursuing collective participatory action research and finished by synthesizing work on reflective practices and transformative learning that provided the theory and approach to

guide our engagements. Next, we outline how our collective reflecting and learning emerged and the forms this took over a period of time, including how we approached processes of analysis and writing.

3. Methodology: Collectively reflecting and learning through workshops and writing

This article represents (parts of) a set of relationships that have grown over time, and a series of interactions and engagements from 2019 to the present. One of the starting points of our collective work was Sam's PhD work in 2008 in Nepal under the supervision of Andrea Nightingale, and a Fellowship a decade later during which she got to speak with practitioners across Kathmandu working in CBNRM (including forestry) institutions. It is through this latter work that Sam met Dibya and Gael. Dibya has worked in community forestry and CBNRM for over 20 years in donor agencies, NGOs at grassroots levels and independently, and is considered a national expert on GESI in Nepal and elsewhere in South and South-East Asia. Gael originates from Scotland, but has lived in Nepal for over 20 years, working in social development with donors and independently. Gael completed a PhD in transformative learning and development practice based on her own experiences in Nepal. We mention these connections and timeframes as they speak to the central importance of building relationships and trust over time in collective work such as ours – processes that are hard to 'speed up' or 'impose.' Rather, they must be nurtured to evolve.

In September 2019, Dibya, Gael and Sam facilitated a two day, in-person workshop in Kathmandu entitled *Reflective Learning for Social Inclusion*. They invited a range of practitioners, women and men, working in forestry and CBNRM known to them, and 25 attended, including most of the co-authors of this article. Whilst we cannot claim to understand or represent all of those participants here, we suggest that the main reason for them attending the workshop was an interest in social justice and a desire to work towards more inclusive and just CBNRM in Nepal. Issues of justice were discussed at length during the workshop, both at the 'small' scale, in terms of within CBNRM projects, and at the 'large' scale, in terms of national and societal inequalities and injustices relating to gender, caste and other factors, resulting from patriarchy, casteism, *afno manchhe* etc. Our assumption, as facilitators, was that as there are limited 'formal' opportunities for (critical) reflection in their daily work lives, participants would also be interested in the novel transformative learning approach we were using, and the collective nature of that. The workshop thus included discussions on GESI in Nepal's CBNRM (led by Dibya) and on transformative learning theory (led by Gael), and involved a number of activities through which people reflected individually and shared with the group, focusing on the operation and outcome of unequal power relations in their own lives and work. Our facilitation approach centered on equality-based participation principles, including genuine engagement, empathy, listening and respecting a diverse group. This helped to enrich the discussions and learning.

After the workshop, whilst facilitators maintained email contact with participants, it was not possible to regularly meet due to a lack of funding. With the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, everyone was necessarily focused on other priorities. In the summer of 2020, recognizing an interest amongst Nepal's CBNRM professionals in online meeting platforms and opportunities to engage, a short series of online monthly workshops were held during June, July and August. Clare joined the project at this point, having worked previously in environmental governance in India and with university students in Nepal. The workshops aimed to revitalize the initial in-person workshop, and to revisit its intentions in the context of the pandemic. We centered care and solidarity at that still fraught and frightening time. Some, but not all, of the original participants took part in these online workshops. We note that internet connections were a real challenge for some participants, and that content and discussions were not entirely accessible to all. This diminished the experience for all involved, because online interactions did not allow us to capture body language and to understand the emotional aspects of the discussions. Further, for some, expressing ourselves in English was also hindered due to the online format, though efforts to interpret between English and Nepali, and use of the chat function to check understanding, were useful.

During and following the online workshops, several writing tasks were set for all participants and facilitators. Those participants who undertook this writing, along with the facilitators, are the co-authors of this article. The writing tasks were designed to allow us to articulate our own reflections and learnings, and to share any impacts in our own professional and personal lives. We then worked in pairs to read each other's writing

and to make comments and ask further questions of the author, to promote further reflection. The topics covered in our writings were diverse, but interestingly grouped around several themes, as indicated in the findings below. Analysis of our writing was done collectively, supported through two dedicated online meetings to discuss what to present and argue in this article. We also worked collectively on shared online files that all co-authors commented on. Whilst Sam and Clare took responsibility for drafting the findings section, all co-authors commented on it and approved the final drafts.

What we present in this article should be read as a tentative interpretation of an on-going process. It is necessarily a partial account of the relationships and engagements that have taken place to date. It only represents what the co-authors think, i.e. those who continued to the 'end' of the process, and it does *not* aim to represent the views of the wider group that were present in the initial physical workshop. It also only represents what we think at the time of writing (although many of us are part of on-going participatory action research work, as outlined in the conclusion). The article does, however, offer insights into parts of the process we have collectively undertaken, and allows us to articulate the points we wish to share with others.

Unless specifically attributed to individual co-authors (in which case their first name is given), in the findings and discussion section below, we use the collective personal pronoun *we*, and the related determiner *our*, to signify the writing and views of *all* co-authors as a collective. We present our findings as excerpts, i.e. quotes and reflections, from our writings (including comments on each other's writing), i.e. first-hand narratives, in order to give primacy to embodied experiences and emotions. As Cameron (2012, p. 574) states, "stories express something irreducibly particular and personal, and yet they can be received as expressions of broader social and political context, and their telling can move, affect, and produce collectivities." The narratives shared here express multiple subjectivities and reveal the weaving of the individual life with wider social processes in a fluid manner. They also allow for reflections on emotions and memories, connecting the personal and professional as a reflective practice of the whole person (following Schön, 1983). Whilst the narratives offer a window into the messy process of transformative learning, to connect with and make contributions to the existing scholarship reviewed above, they also ask the reader to join them: assumptions and fixed truths may be challenged as readers jostle with the narratives shared. In keeping with affirmative political ecologies, narratives can help to foster a collective praxis which includes the reader.

4. Findings and discussion: Reflections on collective transformative learning for social justice and attempts at affirmative political ecologies

Our findings and discussion are structured in two parts. In Part I, we reflect on our experiences of collective transformative learning, and consider what that has achieved in terms of promoting social justice in Nepal's CBNRM. This section comprises writing from all participants in our project, including facilitators, and speaks primarily to an audience interested in promoting social justice and/or in processes of transformative learning, be it in Nepal's community forestry and CBNRM, or elsewhere or in other sectors. We then move on in Part II to speak more directly to a political ecology audience and reflect on the process of attempting an 'affirmative political ecology', primarily from the perspective of the Global North academics amongst us. We argue that engaging in such praxis is one way in which political ecologists can contribute resistance to on-going environmental and social injustices.

Part I: Collective transformative learning and promoting social justice in Nepal's CBNRM

Whilst the reflections and writing presented below necessarily overlap, we structure this section by first considering the value of engaging with environment and development professionals as 'the whole person.' Secondly, we discuss the ways in which we can 'learn to learn' through so-called 'disorientating dilemmas', and be/come critical, i.e. attentive to power and privilege. Thirdly, we explore the necessity for spaces in which to practice self-reflection and transformative learning, which we present as a hopeful and collective process.

Being 'the whole person'

Reflective practice promotes the explicit valuing of our external objective self and inner subjective self, i.e. being a 'whole person' (Schön, 1983). Whilst practitioners were invited to take part due to their professional identities, many of the memories and stories shared were messily woven together from the personal and professional self, with questions raised about the meaningfulness of such a distinction. An example of this aspect of the complexity of practitioners' lives which was frequently shared was that of being a working mother (notably, fatherhood was not raised as an issue in the same way). This brought with it practical challenges around taking children to project sites (Anita, Srijana), and deeper questions of identity and the self: fielding comments from family, friends and colleagues about the whereabouts of their children and the added responsibilities to be "juggled" (Rachana). Notably, for Sam, as a foreigner who had previously visited project sites for research before becoming a parent, being able to take her children with her to project sites at a later date enabled the building of stronger relations with village members (see also Staddon, 2022).

Others discussed their shifting motivation for their work, with one practitioner initially drawn to his job to support his studies, with ongoing motivation connected to his upbringing in a rural household (Sanjaya). Another shared how he brought his "ground reality" of experiencing Dalit issues and caste discrimination in natural resource governance, connected to personal pressures from Maoists and the Nepal Army, to his work (Sunil). These are aspects of the self that are hidden from the pages of project reports or even project team debrief discussions, yet these are intricately intertwined with professional identities and practice. Following Schön (1983), the workshops allowed, albeit fleeting, space and time for practitioners to make explicit how their professional objective self is shaped by, and made sense of through, their personal self. The space gave permission to include the whole person as well as grow in confidence (Gael).

Reflections drew out the connection of learning practices between the home and workplace, with knowledges and experiences gained in one realm bleeding into the other. Towards the end of the workshops, one practitioner shared, "self-realization and internalization of GESI is an important first step in working with GESI issues. Without practicing GESI sensitive behaviors within home that can't be reflected in the work and cannot provide confidence while executing work in the field" (Sohan). This practitioner reveals here an awareness of how their subjectivity (confidence) is central to these learning practices and indeed to how they perform their work (following Dirx, 2006). Others reflected on how their work influences their personal lives: "education and engagement in job make me strong and feel confident to take decision related to my child" (Srijana). Explicitly engaging with 'the whole person' in this way allowed us to embrace messiness and complexity, as suggested by Etherington (2004), and importantly to demonstrate the limitations of seeing GESI simply as a technocratic exercise, rather than as requiring sensitization and internalization by those promoting it in their professional practice.

The sharing of stories and memories increasingly included emotive language – seemingly felt to be as, or more, important to share than the detailed 'facts' of the story itself (Clare's notes). As we all shared our feelings and vulnerabilities – of frustrations, gratitude, guilt, surprise, contentment – this helped to create space for others to feel sufficiently comfortable and safe to share. A general feeling of frustration about the slow pace of social change and organizations' politics and bureaucracies were uniting themes, but other reflections were about the emotions raised through personal everyday and mundane experiences, such as the "uncomfortable" feeling of pressure from donors to shape the report they were writing (Dibya), or the "guilt" felt when leaving children to go to work (Rachana). Emotions were also expressed when referring to the transformative learning workshops themselves. The confusion around the messiness of the process was regularly shared and that feeling was validated by both facilitators and practitioners (Clare's notes). Other emotions expressed include the guilt felt by not being able to run the workshops fully in Nepali (Sam and Clare), the joy of feeling part of something important (Clare), but also the positive feelings arising from building confidence (Sanjaya and Sarita) and for one "it helped me to an extent to be ok with the guilt I feel" (Rachana).

Reflections, whilst individual in nature, were also framed as a critique of the social contexts in which people live and work (Boud, 2010), and as such, this resonated with others in the group. For example, in discussing patriarchy, one of us referred to its existence both at home and as a structure in society (Sarita). Despite the specific reflections not being universal, and indeed they changed over time (Srijana), our sharing

both orally in the sessions and as part of this collective writing, generated empathetic responses from others, spurred further reflection and, we argue, helped to develop solidarity across differences in the group, as called for by bell hooks (2003).

'Learning to learn', 'disorientating dilemmas' and becoming critical

It was noted above that whilst learning to become critical is the bedrock to tackling social injustices, this *learning to learn* to become critically reflective is not easy and takes time (Mezirow, 2009). Our own experiences of 'learning to learn' certainly support this claim, as it was something we had to work at through concerted efforts. It was noted that "we do not learn from the experience itself, but from reflecting [on] the experience" (Sarita). Much of our writing demonstrated people questioning themselves and their own performance, and of their desire, moving forwards, to try not to jump to conclusions (Kaustuv, Anita, Srijana, Sohan). Questioning existing assumptions is a productive part of transformative learning, as it constitutes a disorientating dilemma (Mezirow, 2009), through which people can make sense of different perspectives and transform their habits of mind to be more responsive and appropriate in the messiness of their professional practice. There was a realization that "we mostly are working on gender issue without deeper understanding...our interventions are much focused on improving the condition of the GESI group, not in changing their gender roles and functions", noting that both "condition and position" need to be addressed in interventions if gender equality is to be achieved (Sohan). Another shared that whilst in the past, they had been hesitant to include vulnerable groups in program implementation for fear that it would impact its 'efficiency', through reflection their perspective has changed: now, they "have committed to implement the program in such a way that never excludes women, poor, landless and other vulnerable groups" (Sarita).

Learning to learn enabled what Finlay (2002) discusses as more thoughtful and conscious self-awareness. This awareness related both to the practices we engage in as professionals, but also our own identities, as well as those of our project participants. Some reflected on assumptions in research methodologies, and learnt to reflect and discuss these before reaching conclusions (Sanjaya), whilst others wrote about how understanding intersectionality allowed them to work through previously held assumptions about differences amongst women, and why they were being treated as they were, as an *Indigenous* woman (Mala). One of us discussed at length their realization that whilst professionals tend to 'other' project beneficiaries, we in fact may share common experiences, and that this realization can create understanding and connection across difference (cf. hooks, 2003):

I think as researchers/practitioners we are always in outward-facing roles. Talking about 'other' people/'other' women, be it in CFUGs or NRM groups – women who face marginalization due to patriarchy or casteism. We write/try to resolve 'others' problems. However, in collective reflection meeting when we were introduced with critical reflection, we faced our 'disorienting dilemma'- the fact that our situations were not very dissimilar from people we work with/write about. When we reflected collectively- our silos breakdown and we reach out with empathy and solidarity as we could see that the system that marginalized 'me' also operated in marginalizing 'you.' For others, breaking down of the silos made them question their own gender or class privileges. (Rachana)

Learning to be/come critical necessarily involves engaging with and questioning power dynamics (Brookfield, 2010). As highlighted in the quote above, this involved critical reflection on and realization of our own positionality and place within relationships of power. For some of us, that meant the recognition that we occupy positions of power. One of the men amongst us wrote that "I never realized that my behavior and thought process was male-dominated as I was growing up as a privileged boy", noting that one way of reacting to that realization is that they now support their wife in household chores (Kaustuv). Another shared that having a father who was a forester provided them both the opportunity to get to know the field of forestry since childhood, and the inspiration to pursue that as a career, which itself built their confidence and commitment to social change (Srijana).

Others found themselves reflecting on positionalities which make them marginalized in relations of power. Gender discrimination both in the workplace and in wider society was reported by many women within the group (Srijana, Anita, Mala, Sarita). As noted above, growing up in a Dalit community meant that some experienced caste-based discrimination from an early age (Sunil), whilst others recounted lived experiences as rural poor (Sanjaya). Again, these positionalities were formative in motivating these people in their professional career choices and actions, with Sunil going on to establish an organization working against casteism related to natural resources. Through learning to reflect, Sanjaya realized that "why I was able to stay in this work is due to my unconscious interest in the research work. I realized that growing up in a village, I particularly learned how rural people are connected to and dependent on their environment."

Learning to learn and be/come critically engaged with power and privilege is hugely important in tackling social injustices; however, it is not quick or easy. Our collective work, through the workshops and writing, clearly enabled individual reflection on previously unchallenged assumptions, and led to heightened self-awareness and realization of subjectivities and positionalities, as articulated above. Challenges remain however in *staying* self-aware, as captured nicely by one of us: "the challenge is whenever I do things consciously it goes right, but most of the time activities are done unconsciously and are conducted as they have always been done" (Kaustuv). As such, critical self-reflection cannot be a one-off, time-bound activity, but rather spaces are required which nurture transformative learning as an on-going process, as discussed next.

Spaces to practice self-reflection and transformative learning as a hopeful, collective process

Transformative learning, it is claimed, opens up opportunities for practitioners to transform their habits of mind in order to be more responsive and appropriate in the messiness of their professional environment. It is said to help understanding of "the ways dominant ideology limits and circumscribes what people feel is possible in life" and "keeps alive the hope that the world can be changed to make it fairer and more compassionate (Brookfield, 2005, pp. 8-9). Here, we consider the importance of understanding transformative learning as a *process*, and as one which, through collective efforts as communicative learning, offers opportunities, possibilities and hope for change that brings social justice.

We all agreed that 'simply' having the space to meet together and engage with reflective learning practices was hugely important. Some described this created space as a "bubble", going on to share that

[w]hile maneuvering the vagaries of everyday living, I do not have time to stop, think, feel and make sense of the different emotions that I encounter within myself. For the last two years, being a part of a little bubble like this Reflexive learning group, has helped me meet other women who are dealing with/have dealt with similar challenges that I have. (Rachana)

Others also noted the significance of the collective nature of these spaces: "[O]ne thing I realized is that the reflecting learning is not only thinking by yourself, sometimes it is thinking together with someone else may be a close friend or a colleague or your spouse and learning, which I felt was effective" (Suchita). Whilst some had practiced reflexivity individually throughout their professional career, it was this collective nature of our reflective learning that was new, and thus of value to them (Gitta). The difference between the approach we adopted together and other 'typical' trainings people participated in through their work was highlighted (Sarita), which some attributed in particular to our focus on *process*, rather than simply providing a physical (or online) meeting space (Dibya).

Critical reflection is said to situate people reflexively to engage with their subjectivity of emotions and feelings (Dirkx, 2006). As evidenced above when discussing how reflective learning enables a focus on the 'whole person', the collective spaces we created in this project certainly enabled us to acknowledge and engage with emotions (Dibya). Not only did this allow people to individually "understand why I feel what I feel" (Rachana), but it also engaged collectively with emotions, for example it was felt that sharing served to reduce the "invisible, often emotional burden on gender experts" (Gitta). We came to realize that emotions were in fact central to the whole approach of the project, which was based on empathy, respect and care (Dibya). Our methodology was framed around mutual respect for people's knowledges, experiences and disciplines, and

working through an empathetic lens. Whilst this approach was discussed at the start of the project, the ways in which it was embodied by all taking part, and practiced throughout our engagements, was seen as one of the 'key learnings' of the work (Dibya). As one of us wrote, "It may be oversimplification of all the complicated emotions that everybody expressed. Nevertheless, I think the process of collective reflections helps make connections between individuals and hence fosters a relationship of care" (Rachana). This care-based approach was crucial, and especially so when people shared traumatic experiences, such as those of harassment and assault (Mala). There remains an ethic of engagement here though, and this highlights a need for a deepened ethical responsibility to accommodate sensitive emotional concerns. As facilitators, we recognize a limit to the project, as we did not know all of the participants in advance, nor had we all worked together previously (Gael). We were thus learning about each other and our capacities to support participants at the same time as learning of their needs, and this learning can be unpredictable and painful. We recognize that more time should have been devoted to discussing and preparing for this at the start of the project. This ethics of engagement is also discussed further below in Part II.

The process of collectively engaging involved other challenges. Everyone who took part in the project was doing so at the same time as working in highly demanding jobs, and thus trying to balance a variety of expectations and obligations from their professional as well as personal lives. Finding time to dedicate to the project was thus a significant challenge – and demonstration of commitment – in itself. As noted by one person, however, this meant extra burdens for them, as whilst there is recognition within organizations that workshops such as ours represent "spaces to network and represent organizations", it was noted that "attending workshops/events which are not part of any project means that we need to cut-off our personal time to meet expected deadlines [of our other work]" (Gitta). For others, the part of the project that ran online due to the pandemic presented extra challenges: "[T]he online sessions I took when I was at the office or in front of the laptop, and that environment did not let me time to engage myself in the meeting. I used to have unfinished tasks and it always bothered me, it did not allow me to be in the meeting" (Kaustuv). Language was a major challenge during the workshops, which were run primarily in English (particularly when Sam and Clare were presenting and talking) with Nepali promoted as the language for discussions; all writing has been in English. Whilst Dibya was able to manage issues of language and translation using 'informal, non-judgemental approaches', Sam felt that this placed an extra burden on her, as discussed further below. Others highlighted how the participation and discussion "could have been deeper and [enabled] more fruitful learning if the meetings were held in very simple or Nepali language" (Sarita). Reflecting on an earlier draft of this article, Sarita shared further; "OMG! I'm again thinking how it would look like/feel to see this whole article in Nepali ... it would be great!" We do hope to publish a revised version of this article in Nepali in due course.

Despite these challenges, our collective work led to a wide variety of more or less 'tangible' outcomes. For some of us, we had a (re)newed commitment to fight rather than run away (Suchita), for example:

From these experiences [of gender discrimination at work], my motivation of working for achieving progress is let down. I always try to escape from the uncomfortable space and situation. This type of situation bothers my peace. But, reflecting these past experiences, now I am committed to fight with the situation whatever it is. This feeling I got from the reflective learning. (Srijana)

It was felt that the whole process of reflection – discussing, sharing, understanding concepts together and applying that individually – was empowering; allowing people to dig deeper, analyze and deal with challenges (Dibya). In that sense, our collective learning processes have helped to promote the 'vigilance' necessary to "help resist hegemonizing rationalities that depoliticize and technocratize the work of advancing gender equality in technical environments" (Resurrección & Elmhirst, 2021, p. 227). Others have been inspired to take our reflective work further: "[A]fter the workshop I have started to study various books of transformative and spiritual learning, as well as social theory to get a deeper understanding and reflect on my values, attitudes and behaviors" (Sohan), and to seek to learn more about the history of social inclusion and exclusion in Nepal (Sarita). Reflective learning practices have been integrated into the work of some of us, for example in their

teaching (Clare) and in the recruitment processes of their organization, in order "to hire staff (social mobiliser) who represent the same type of target communities [they work with]" (Sarita). For others, evidence of applying our learning is found in our personal lives: "[R]eflective learning process has now become a part of growing my child. I reflect on her behavior, my behavior towards hers, what is going around, etc. and then if it is not working I change my own approach, apply it and then see changes afterwards" (Suchita). For many of us, a key outcome of the process was growing in confidence to be more critical (Sanjaya) and feeling able to influence others (Sarita), and in becoming more empathetic and a better listener (Suchita). Others wrote about being able to move on from feelings of "anger and frustration" about a past project in which they were not able to be as critical as they wished, to feeling like they had "healed" from this bitter experience (Dibya). This was partly put down to having found the language and theory to better articulate and reframe negative narratives around social inclusion (Dibya).

We have considered here the importance of understanding transformative learning as a process, and as one which, through collective efforts, offers opportunities, possibilities and hope for change that brings social justice. We argue that our collective work engaging in reflective learning has indeed created opportunities for transformative change, in both our professional and personal lives (although again we contest the distinction between these), as evidenced above. However, as succinctly put by one of us, "it is not sufficient" (Sarita), and there was a widespread sense of frustration with the lack of 'quick answers' when tackling social injustices through approaches such as these (Clare), as captured again by Sarita: "I am desperately waiting to see the link of this personal reflection process to transforming injustices and delivering inclusive and equitable development in professional practices." Others see this somewhat differently, placing the responsibility for pushing for change with environment and development institutions, who they argue need to invest more both technically and financially if they are to take social justice seriously (Dibya). Indeed, moving beyond the individual (as we have done through this project) to work towards critical reflective practice and transformative learning being institutionalized within and across the environment and development sector, is the real challenge here. A sense of fulfilment and hope at what we managed to achieve together, but also on-going frustration with the slow pace of and resistance to critical reflection in the sector more widely, is also relevant to academic audiences and the work of political ecologists specifically, as discussed next.

Part II: Attempting affirmative political ecologies

Our work represents an attempt to practice a care-ful, feminist, 'affirmative political ecology' praxis by creating community and change with and through Nepal's community forestry professionals. For the political ecology academics amongst us (Sam and Clare), this attempt to (re)frame political ecology as "an effort to heighten the capacity to know *and* act" (Loftus, 2015, p. 180, emphasis added) is significant. We see a discipline that whilst offering so much theoretical and methodological insight and innovation, is also arguably held back by a reputation for lacking 'answers' or 'practical' approaches to dealing with complex social and environmental challenges. We seek to resist that claim by some, and to instead demonstrate that political ecology *can* be practiced to bring about change.

Through our collective reflective work and engagement with transformative learning theory, Sam learnt to articulate an earlier experience of discomfort with political ecology as a 'disorientating dilemma.' In her engagements with political ecology as a doctoral student and early-career researcher, Sam found little sympathy for professionals working in the field of environment and development more broadly, or for those working in Nepal's community forestry specifically. She became particularly aware of this whilst at an academic conference session that asked participants about the 'disciplinary assumptions' in their work. Whilst Sam's initial reaction was that there are few assumptions in political ecology, given its constructivist epistemology and critical questioning, on reflection she realized that in fact in practice, political ecology can homogenize policy-makers and practitioners, presenting them as sharing perspectives and practices that tend to reinforce social inequalities, rather than seeing them as having agency to promote transformative change (see also Staddon, 2021). Arguably, Sam's disorientating dilemma may stem from a lack of awareness of more feminist approaches to political ecology, and certainly represents a moment in time before more recent attempts at 'experimental' and 'activist' political ecology (Braun, 2015; Heynen & Van Sant, 2015). Nonetheless, engagement with theories

and practices of transformative learning, allowed Sam to better engage with the messiness and complexity (cf. Etherington, 2004) of the community forestry sector that she engages with in her research, opening up possibilities for working *with* that community, rather than critiquing them from 'the outside.'

As stated above, our work sought to 'create community' (hooks, 2003) by engaging with professionals who we acknowledge as diverse, and by working across differences and with alignments. Whilst some people in the group already knew each other through previous work or study or friendship, others were new to each other, and this created potential for concern at the start of the process. As shared by Dibya in her writing; "Even though I knew Sam and was comfortable with her, I was sceptical about Gael and Clare, both being white, with PhDs and history of doing academic writing. But I was completely wrong as this discussion group based on mutual respect for each other has been a huge platform for learning and reflecting together." One of Dibya's key observations and appreciations was on how the Global North facilitators (Gael, Clare and Sam) were very sensitive as facilitators and used their backgrounds (i.e. their power) to actually facilitate mutual respect, non-judgment, careful listening/exchange etc., and not to overtake. The spaces for engagement and learning were thus not spaces given out of generosity, but to actually learn and participate on an equal footing. These sentiments speak to the need for careful facilitation of the process of working together, and of how that evolves over time. It was noted that at the start of the project, during the two-day in-person workshop in Nepal, that whilst it was facilitated by Dibya, Gael and Sam, participants spent much time speaking with Dibya during breaks, as she was the one known to most of them and notably is Nepali. Over time, however, this reliance on Dibya decreased, as relationships and trust seemed to build, both through the workshops themselves and through regular communications (primarily by email) in between. As one participant shared in response to one such email: "I have certainly felt that there is generous effort and time being invested for the follow ups which is very rare in most of the workshops" (Suchita).

Such (unprompted) efforts by participants to share their thanks and appreciation for the project were greatly appreciated by facilitators, and demonstrate the relational and reciprocal nature of care in such participatory projects. Arguably they represent the sorts of 'small acts, kind words' that are the basis of 'implicit activism' (Horton & Kraftl, 2009) which it has been argued are central to processes of social change. As discussed at some length above, our collective work was sustained by engaging with emotions and through acts of care that took many forms, and which were both intentional and sub-conscious. Reflecting on this during the process of writing this article, one participant wrote:

[I]t would be useful to talk about you guys letting go of the 'reins' as facilitators and letting the discussion take its course. Our online zoom meetings temporarily obscured the facilitator/participant dichotomy and we were all discussants sharing our experiences. The distinction between us reappeared only when we got emails from Sam/Clare with the meeting minutes or suggesting a course of action. (Rachana)

Power hierarchies have certainly been significant throughout our workshops and writing (as discussed further next), but as suggested here, those relations can be subverted somewhat (even if temporarily) by 'small acts' such as 'letting go of the reins.'

As detailed above in Part I, challenges in the process of our collective work related to issues of language, of working online, of lack of time, and of power dynamics. Such challenges speak to the 'ethics of entanglements' in which political ecologists find themselves – whether that is recognized explicitly or not (Sundberg, 2015). We were mindful in our collective praxis of "the need to see such experiments as themselves outcomes of struggle and sites of struggle" (Braun, 2015, p. 111), and issues of language and power speak well to our project as a site of struggle itself. Sam shared in her reflective writing that:

I have become aware that it is not only translation between Nepali and English that is important either, but also for some between participants' first languages and Nepali (and then English!), and again, I feel bad for this extra burden on all participants to make these translations for the project's – for my – sake. Whilst so much professional work is conducted in the international

language of English, this speaks to the power dynamics in development and in academia, and I reflect that I am part of reinforcing that power dynamic in our own action research project. In hoping/assuming that being able to all speak in English would remove barriers to communicate, I had not appreciated the efforts involved in having to translate sensitive and nuanced feelings and beliefs from participants' first language into English – and the significance of that task. (Sam)

Somewhat inevitably, when aiming to publish in an international journal such as *Journal of Political Ecology*, our writing has been in English (although everyone was encouraged to write initially in the language they felt comfortable with), which we recognize as exclusionary in itself.

Whilst not perfect or complete, our collective work has certainly helped Sam to negotiate her 'disorientating dilemma' with political ecology and to move forwards from that with hope, knowing that political ecology *can* be practiced to bring about change. Next, we conclude by considering questions of 'so what?' and 'what next?'

5. Conclusions: So what, and what next?

Whilst political ecology scholarship has contributed much to articulating social injustices associated with Nepal's community forestry, here we took a different approach, by attempting an 'affirmative political ecology' (Alhojärvi & Sirviö, 2018; Batterbury, 2018). We drew on feminist and activist scholarship to inspire collective action and 'create community' (hooks, 2003) that engaged directly with challenges of social justice and those charged with delivering it through their work. Given the 'ethics of entanglement' inherent in all research (Sundberg, 2015), and recognizing the affective and epistemological power of emotions (Askins, 2009), we sought to work through an 'ethics of care' and to "structur[e] relationships in ways that enhance mutuality and well-being" (Lawson 2007, p. 3). Guided by theories and practices of 'transformative learning' and a range of associated reflective practices, our participatory action research involved four facilitators and (up to) 25 participants who work across Nepal's forest bureaucracy (and wider CBNRM sector). Together physically, remotely and through our writing, we reflected upon the operation of power in our professional – and personal – lives, exploring how that may enable a more informed and meaningful engagement with social justice within the workplace (and beyond). This article has presented the process of our collective reflection and learning, and shares some of its initial outcomes based on the experiences of the 15 co-authors. Ultimately, we aimed to "generate new ideas, new powers, and perhaps new possibilities for composing socio-ecological assemblages otherwise" (Braun, 2015, p. 106), and we finish this article by highlighting three points of particular significance in that regard.

Firstly, our transformative learning practice sought to engage the 'whole person' (Schön, 1983), enabling us to move beyond the false binary of the 'professional' and 'personal.' This necessitated a reflection on our multiple intersectional identities, revealing lived experiences amongst us of privilege and marginalization, and realization of the need to 'internalize' issues of social justice and to practice those both within the workplace and at home. Promotion of the 'whole person' involved 'communicative learning', and an explicit valuing of talking and sharing with each other, both orally and through our writing. Such engagements were necessarily emotional, and we shared our feelings and vulnerabilities – of frustrations, gratitude, guilt, surprise, contentment – which helped to create space for others to feel sufficiently comfortable and safe to share. Sharing generated empathy from others, which in turn spurred further reflection and promoted solidarity across differences in the group, as called for by bell hooks (2003).

Secondly, we sought to *learn to learn* to be critically reflective, finding that we agreed with Mezirow (2009) that this is not easy and takes time. Our collective work enabled individual reflection on previously unchallenged assumptions, and led to heightened self-awareness and realization of subjectivities and positionalities in relation to project 'beneficiaries', colleagues, and family. We were able to give names and frames to social injustices, and to feel comfortable about identifying and discussing these; thus we feel that this makes us a group of 'implicit activists' (Horton & Kraftl, 2009). Challenges remained, however, in *staying* self-aware and of remaining conscious of the operation of power, away from the collective reflective spaces we co-created. Transformative learning needs to be nurtured as an on-going process.

Thirdly and finally, we recognized that whilst reflective work can be considered (overly) time-consuming, one way in which to nurture transformative learning is to practice it until it becomes an intuitive practice. Our collective work took place sporadically over a number of years – and for some of us is still on-going (see below) – but still, as captured by one of us, "it is not sufficient" and needs further nurturing. Whilst we all agreed that 'simply' having the time and space to come together was hugely important, it was the *form* and *feel* of that space that was significant, as we focused on co-creating a safe space which was non-judgmental and based on mutual respect, enabling comfortable and open discussion of often unspoken and uncomfortable issues.

The longer-term outcomes are also in the sense of community, support and solidarity that was created, and we are hopeful that this will continue into the future and allow us all to stay learning and practicing the challenging of injustices in our work. We note in particular the importance and value of working across/with 'difference' in creating supportive community, i.e. across/with the practitioner-academic 'divide.' There exists in Nepal a culture of *afno manchhe* and power (positional-political) which defines who should be included/excluded, whose knowledge/experience should be considered, and who is good or not good. Our collective work offered an alternative to this, as both the academics and practitioners valued each other's knowledge and experiences, and each other's power/comparative advantages (of knowledge and experiences) were acknowledged and respected throughout. This helped to negotiate the 'ethics of entanglement' (Sundberg, 2015) and we have built relationships that have enhanced mutuality and well-being (Lawson, 2007). We complemented each other well, and thus we agree with hooks (2003) that by working *with* each other, rather than against, we have generated not only 'radical intervention', but also the ability to communicate and understand each other, and thus the ability to collectively resist injustices as they operate in our work.

Building on the work presented here, we have recently completed a more structured and better-funded year-long series of monthly workshops which has involved a wider group of facilitators and participants, alongside most of the co-authors of this article. We are currently working on collective outputs from that work too, the first of which is a video in Nepali and English that articulates the value of the process-oriented relational approach adopted. Within the final workshop of that series, one participant shared that working towards social justice will take decades. For those who want 'quick solutions', that might sound terrifying, but if we are able to acknowledge and accept the demands of a 'slow revolution' (Resurrección & Elmhirst, 2021, p. 3), this gives meaning to continued collective and hopeful efforts such as ours, which are not straight roads towards neat 'outputs' at the 'end' of the project, but rather necessarily require continual renewal and support. Institutions need to invest more both technically and financially if they are to take social justice seriously, and to provide a supportive culture that truly values this. Indeed, moving beyond the individual (as we have done through this project) to work towards critical reflective practice and transformative learning being institutionalized within and across the environment and development sector, is the real challenge here.

Our affirmative political ecology praxis sought to "crack open spaces for agency" (Alhojärvi & Sirviö, 2018, p. 1) and to create opportunities for "vigilance and reflexivity" with regards to issues of social justice (Resurrección & Elmhirst 2021, p.227), seeing us all as (potentially) 'implicit activists' in our daily work (Horton & Kraftl, 2009). As evidenced above, there are many ways in which these things were enabled, from reflecting on positionality and privilege, to realizing to not 'other' project 'beneficiaries', to building confidence to resist injustices as they operate in the workplace and in personal lives. We thus see some success in our collective praxis as delivering both epistemological *and* political work (Braun, 2015), as befits political ecology, but we note that these spaces for agency, vigilance and reflexivity are small, and need sustaining – and institutionalizing – in order to offer continued resistance into the future. Our attempt at an affirmative political ecology contributes to this emerging field by bringing in feminist scholarship and work on emotions, to attend to some of the ethical and affective dimensions necessarily encountered along the way. We urge other political ecologists to work towards such caring and affirmative collective engagements with practitioners as one way in which to affect change. Ultimately, this article argues that collective practices of reflection and transformative learning can create shared learning, understanding, empathy and solidarity, and thus that it offers hope in the face of on-going social injustices.

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