

Forest Policy and Environment Programme: Grey Literature

More than woods and women: the Gender debate in rural development forestry

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The uneven distribution of benefits amongst different social groups, such as the men and women involved in rural development forestry, has been an important area of interest in all the thematic areas in the literature. The focus on gender in rural development forestry has covered a number of aspects. These include firstly the differences in participation in the design and implementation of projects between men and women, secondly uneven access to benefits from these activities, and thirdly the strategies that can be used to overcome the constraints faced by women in benefiting from such activities.

It is easy to fall into the trap of approaching 'gender' as if it simply related to all issues concerning women. Gender analysis regards gender as being "a culturally specific and socially conditioned identity of men and women. It is not fixed nor is it biologically determined" (Sayes, 1982). Hence, gender issues concern relations *between men and women*. Burley (2001:65) argues that "although these are more commonly to the detriment of females, gender should not be seen as solely a woman's problem but rather as a result of relations at political, social or administrative levels".

The debate about gender and forestry has, above all, emphasised differences in the relationship to, and the uses and methods of management of, natural resources among women and men. Many studies have shown that women are primary users of forests through their involvement in food production for subsistence, herb gathering or planting for medicine, fuel-wood collection, and small-scale forest industries producing cash products. Some have emphasized the contribution of food collection by women to feed the household, while others have shown forests as being a major source of income for women. For example, a study in Uttar Pradesh, India, showed that women derived 33 to 45% of their income from forests and common land, compared with only 13% for men (FAO, 2006). As well as often being the primary forest users, women are active and knowledgeable managers and caretakers of the forests. In the home gardens of a single village in Thailand, researchers reported 230 different plant species, many of which had been rescued from a neighbouring forest before it was cleared (FAO, 2006). Leach (1992) has also drawn attention to the asset-creating activities of women through the trade of natural products, and to the ways in which the use of natural resources link them with the political and social life of their communities: "Women's work involves them very closely with the environment and its resources... [hence it] make[s] them clearly dependent on, and give[s] them distinct interests in, natural resources" (*ibid*).

The focus on gendered uses of forest resources has helped to highlight the differentiated access of men and women to natural resources. Women who rely on natural resources will be adversely affected by their degradation as it will undermine women's ability to perform their roles, and may increase the amount of time and energy women must invest to perform them (Agarwal, 1989). For example, in some cases the clearance of

communal forests for agricultural production or commercial forestry has reduced the access of women to forest products and resulted in the need to commute longer distances for both subsistence and cash products.

In examining the relation of women to nature, some scholars have linked the degradation of nature to the violation of women. One of the most influential eco-feminist writers, Shiva (1989: 47) asserts that “women and nature are intimately related, and their domination and liberation similarly linked”. Similarly, many other eco-feminist writings supported the assumption that women, due to their proximity to, and intuitive relationships with, nature, relate to the environment in a positive manner unless forced by poverty to do otherwise. These arguments are supported by the way in which women have led, or been actively involved in, environmental movements. The ‘Local 1’ movement in the USA, led by Judi Bari, sought to unite timber workers and environmentalists in pursuit of sustainable forestry practices, introducing a working-class feminist perspective to radical ecology (Shantz, 2002). Similarly the influential Chipko movement of Jakeshwar Shiksan Sangsthan (J.S.S.) was established by women in India, who recognized the link between deforestation and recurring floods and landslides and used this as a way to raise resource equity issues (Carr-Harris, 1991)

As a result of this many development agencies have stressed the role of women in “win-win” scenarios that were assumed to simultaneously meet gender interests and achieve environmental conservation objectives (Jackson, 1994). Others argue that too much emphasis on women’s close dependence on natural resources and as “the victims” of environmental degradation can lead to a simplistic assumption that environmental improvement will directly benefit women. In this vein Leach (1992:12) points out the dangers of conceiving women’s roles in relation to nature in a narrow and static way. She stresses that women’s relationship with their environment, just like that of men, is shaped by specific social and economic processes, and that their interests and opportunities change as an outcome of their relations with men and with each other (see also Burley, 2001). She challenges the current assumption that there is a “special” relationship of women with nature, and argues that this assumption can adversely affect sustainability and equity in the design and implementation of projects. In a similar critique of eco-feminist analysis, Agarwal (1992) formulates an alternative perspective, termed *feminist environmentalism*. Agarwal argues that “women’s and men’s relationship with nature needs to be understood as rooted in their material reality” which includes issues of class/caste/race as well as of gender.

Tenure plays an important role in women’s activities and in decisions over their use of natural resources. Rocheleau (1988) shows that women may rely on the sale of tree food products from communal lands because they do not have access to income from trees in private holdings. In addition, their lack of secure rights over land, trees, and their products may limit women’s opportunities and incentives to invest in environmental management (Fortmann and Bruce, 1991). The common supposition that women care for agro-forestry crops ignores the realities of the opportunity costs of this activity and gendered property rights (Leach, 1991). Projects based on this supposition have subsequently failed because women could not tend trees without undermining their other responsibilities (Rocheleau, 1990). Similarly, other studies have revealed that decisions over the preservation of trees are divided by gender (Leach, 1992). In many cases, male tree crop owners maintained decision-making control over which trees to preserve, often resulting in the removal of trees cultivated by women. In Sierra Leone, although valuable crop trees were subject to individual tenure providing women with secure and convenient

access, male farmers often destroyed the trees, as the food, fruit and oil seeds which they bore was collected only by their wives (*ibid*: p: 21). Moreover, the enforcement of the prohibition on hunting in conservation parks has also had gendered impacts on women (Tiani et al., 2005). Significant reduction of women's access to cash by selling wildlife products openly was followed with a shift from female to male sales due to the market's more clandestine nature (*ibid*).

Another important debate concerns lack of participation by women in the design and implementation of forestry projects. Many studies point out the dearth of appropriate strategies to improve women's participation in forestry projects. The study by Mishra-Panda (2001*) explores the links between gender and forestry, and observes that most forestry institutions in developing countries are male-dominated. In this paper she develops a framework that could serve as a guideline to assess gender sensitivity in forest management, to frame policy guidelines and enhance the capacity of institutions to deal with this issue. There has however been some criticism of the way in which attempts to institutionalize women's participation have led to the tendency to apply standardized gender frameworks.

Some social forestry and other community forestry projects have been heavily criticized for gender bias even in their attention to gender issues. Agarwal (1986), for example, discusses the way in which tree species chosen for plantations often reflected the preferences of forest officers or men rather than women. Similarly, Leach (1992) argues that, attention to 'gender' has resulted in women being treated as cheap labour to meet the objectives of social forestry projects that did not really serve their interests.

The lack of effective participation of women in the development and implementation of rural development forestry projects has, in many cases, led to the uneven distribution of benefits to the detriment of women, especially poor women (Skutsch, 1986). Agarwal (2002) points out that household level cash benefits given to men by community forestry groups are often not shared equally, if at all, within the family. A similar situation has been observed regarding the allocation of funds raised by community user groups through the sale of forest products. The distribution of these benefits is often restricted to members of the community forestry group, and often this group does not have effective representation of women, particularly those from poor households.

The Nepal-Australia Forestry Project (NAFP) actively attempted to address the issue of the participation of women through a specific 'Women in Forestry' program and a strategy of Focused Integration. This strategy sought to integrate women and institutionalize their involvement in forestry projects at the community as well as the project management level. In his assessment of this strategy Siddiqi (1989) argued that there had been inadequate conceptualization and organization. He showed that although women's participation had been incorporated to some extent into regular activities of NAFP, "women were 'invited' but not supported to participate". This was partly due to a lack of understanding of the situation facing women in rural areas, and partly to a lack of expertise.

Williams' (1992a*) report on the strategies for promoting women's involvement in forestry activities in Africa explores the constraints to women's participation. She discusses how these have tended to be identified as restricted mobility, restricted access to resources, lack of land and tree tenure rights, lack of human capital and economic capital, and the limited organization of women. Moreover, she identifies further

constraints such as women's limited participation in decision-making, cultural beliefs and taboos, and men's control over women which can prevent their participation. Williams (1992b*) argues that women can be empowered through giving them greater access and control over resources. She further argues that governments should re-examine gendered impacts of their policies, and should adapt their general policies of development, education and land-tenure more closely to women's needs.

Finally, perhaps the most important contribution that the gender debate has brought to rural development forestry is to highlight the importance of power. The lack of an understanding of power relationships in gendered environments has resulted in the dominance of certain interest groups and the unequal distribution of costs and benefits within the community. For example, Pierce-Colfer (2005) in his work on Nepal discusses how local elites often dominate community forest management, frequently in cooperation with the district forest officers, in an explicitly hierarchical way, making the involvement of marginalized groups such as women very difficult. Skutsch's (1986) paper addresses power relations in the forestry sector and relates these to the unequal access and participation suffered by women. It is clear, therefore, that understanding power relationships both within and outside the community is essential to explore possibilities for providing spaces where both men and women can define and pursue their interests.

Note: The references with an asterisk (*) are included in the ODI Forest Policy and Environment Programme's *Forestry Grey Literature Collection*: www.odifpeg.org.uk/publications/greyliterature

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