

Women are key figures in sustainable forest management

Authors: Sophie Grouwels, Kata Wagner, Laura Schweitzer

Women in many poor countries depend directly on forest resources for food security and cash income. This short chapter illustrates women's dependency on and their role in sustainable forest management.

In the majority of regions across the globe women bear the responsibility for supplying food for their families and households. Women are involved in collecting, processing, cooking, rationing and storing food. Forests, as well as trees on farms, are a direct source of food for more than a billion of the world's poorest people. The most direct way in which forests and trees contribute to food security is through contributions to diets and nutrition. Fruits, seeds, roots of trees, mushrooms, wild animals and insects found in forests provide important nutrient and vitamin-rich supplements for rural households. They do this by adding variety to diets, improving taste and palatability of staples and by providing essential vitamins, protein and calories. Forest foods often form a small but critical part of otherwise bland and nutritionally poor diets. More than 50 million people in India alone, for example, depend directly on forests for survival, while in Lao PDR, wild foods are consumed by 80% of the population daily.

Deforestation and forest degradation present major risks to food security for communities depending directly on forest products for their nutrition. In many regions of the world, the people who most depend on forests for their livelihoods do not have ownership or tenure-rights over their forest-resources. When people lack the responsibility and duty of care for the forest, an uncontrolled overuse often results. Such overuse of forest resources for food and fodder eventually leads to a deterioration of the forest resource base and diminishes the amount of food that can be gained from it. Secure tenure rights over forest resources for those whose livelihoods depend upon it are important to ensuring that access to food for the poor and marginalized communities around the globe continues and improves. The impetus for this can often come from the grassroots-level; from the people who use the forest daily to feed their families, as seen in the Tanzanian example below.

In areas where there are no forests nearby or forests have been degraded, women's household responsibilities, such as gathering wood and forest products for fuel and food and collecting water, become very time consuming and limit women's opportunities to engage in other community activities. In the Shinyanga region in Tanzania, native trees were planted by communities close to their villages, reducing the time spent collecting fuel wood, food and water by 80%. As a result, women had more time for other activities including education, income generation and social responsibilities. Making women key players in the management of forests led to significantly improved household nutrition and the ready availability of a diverse range of edible products including fruits, vegetables and insects.¹

While women's activities generally revolve around the nutritional and subsistence needs of their households, frequently women also make important contributions to the household's cash income. This

¹ Source: Barrow, E. and W. Mlenge (2003). *Trees as Key to Pastoralist Risk Management in Semi Arid Landscapes in Shinyanga, Tanzania and Turkana, Kenya*, p. 17. International Conference on Rural Livelihoods, Forest and Biodiversity, CIFOR Bonn, Germany.

often occurs through involvement in forest-based income earning activities, such as processing and sale of forest products and wood. This is typically done while still tending to all the other subsistence needs of the household, namely food supply and child care. Processing of forest products for later sale on local markets or for their own use can be done near the home and is therefore ideal for women having to combine income earning activities with household chores. Income generated through these activities can often make a significant contribution to rural households. For some households in Mozambique, for example, cash from unprocessed forest products such as fuel-wood, fruits, mushrooms, insects, honey and medicinal plants constitutes 30% of household income. However, income can be even more substantially increased through the establishment of more formal forest-based enterprises and networks with other market players. This can secure access to more distant and lucrative markets and add value to harvested forest products. FAO supports a range of activities aimed at building the capacity of small and community-based forest enterprises and producer networks. Ongoing efforts focus on connecting them with each other, with markets and with service providers in order to achieve increased bargaining power and market access. Nevertheless, in order for these enterprises to be truly sustainable, harvesting of these resources, as basis for such business, needs to be sustainably managed and carefully regulated.

A prominent example of women managing a non-wood forest resource for income generation and provision of food for their households, as well as related issues that might arise from a lack of regulations may be found in the shea butter trade in West Africa. The Shea Tree (*Vitellaria paradoxa* and *Vitellaria nilotica*) grows naturally across the West African Sahel region. There are more than 500 million fruiting shea trees across the production belt and FAO estimates that total shea nut production is approximately 600 000 metric tonnes per year. The primary export market for the West African shea butter is as a substitute for cocoa butter in the chocolate and confectionery industry. However, shea is also an important household resource in the savanna regions of Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Mali, Togo, Benin and Nigeria, where it is used as a cooking oil/fat, as a food accompaniment and for topical treatments of various skin conditions. Shea is not a plantation crop and is generally produced through natural assisted regeneration. In Burkina Faso, Mali and Ghana shea nuts are freely harvested by gatherers on a first-come first-serve basis. This lack of clear tenure regulations results in concern for the sustainability of the shea resource base and its ability to meet growing market demand for shea products. Clear forest tenure regulations could contribute considerably to the sustainable use of the shea tree, which is of particular socio-economic significance for women. Harvesting and processing is predominantly a women's activity. Across West Africa, about 4-5 million women are involved in the collection, processing and marketing of shea nuts and butter which provide about 80% of income. In Burkina Faso, exports of shea butter and unprocessed shea kernels brought in CFA 5 billion (US \$7 million) in 2000, making it the country's third most important export, after cotton and livestock.²

² Source: R.S.B Ferris et al. (2001). *Evaluating the Marketing Opportunities for Shea nut and Shea nut processed products in Uganda*. Natural Resource Institute and FoodNet.

These few examples above provide a glimpse of what is possible when women are key players in the management of their forest resources. If their determination, resilience and entrepreneurship are coupled with secure tenure-rights and the means to use forests sustainably and productively, the way may be paved to lasting food security and a steady cash income.