

ASIA-PACIFIC FORESTS AND FORESTRY TO 2020

Forest Policy Brief 08



Forests and gender in a changing environment

Addressing the role of women in forestry is central to sustainable resource management and rural livelihood improvement. Improving women's access to forest resources and effectively including them in decision making leads to greater investment in children's welfare and has positive effects on economic growth and sustainable resource management. Opportunities for women to adopt new roles and improve their livelihoods are increasing but gender imbalances still threaten sustainable development. As challenges associated with globalization, food- and energy security and climate change emerge, a renewed focus on gender in forestry is needed.

Gender has received considerable attention in forestry during the last few decades and there are many instances of women playing critical roles in the conservation and management of forest resources. Often women have been at the forefront of battle with loggers and land developers as in the case of the Chipko movement in India and in Ban Thung Yao in Thailand (Box 1). Yet the full potential of women as resource managers and as users of forest products and services remains unrealised.

Withdrawal of governments from many economic activities as a consequence of current austerity measures has led to the expansion of informal employment and increased exploitation of women as cheap labour. Women's knowledge of resource management is not utilised adequately, or worse, such knowledge is marginalised. New opportunities provided through REDD+ could bypass women unless issues such as tenure and carbon rights are resolved and asymmetries in access to knowledge are addressed. These issues require renewed effort to ensure that women play an equitable role in sustainably managing forest resources and improving the contribution of forestry to poverty reduction, income generation, health, nutrition, education and broader economic and social outcomes.



Gender and community forestry

Considerable attention has been given to enhancing the involvement of women in community forestry in the Asia-Pacific region. Improvements in forest management and livelihoods have been supported by greater inclusion of women in decision making and addressing factors that restrict women's access to knowledge - e.g., higher workloads, lower status and restricted mobility. For example, in Nepal 50 percent of representation in Forest User Group

governing bodies is earmarked for women. Similar efforts have been made in other countries yet several challenges persist:

- Formal moves to empower women are often not translated into practice, especially in the context of persistent caste and ethnic prejudices and most decisions are taken by men.
- Increasing competition for resources continues to curtail access to land and forests, particularly affecting women. This is all the more so in the context of large scale trans-border land acquisitions.

Demographic changes, and work-related migration of men in particular, has incidentally led to female empowerment in rural areas. However, lack of knowledge and lack of access to networks can hamper women in efficiently adopting their new roles (FAO 2010).

Box 1. Women claim forest rights in Thailand

In return for a support fund and tourism-related income, the people of Ban Thung Yao were asked to allow a reserve to be established in the surrounding forest. Villagers, however, feared loss of access to valuable non-wood forest products and the women of the village led the resistance: "If we had left it to the men leaders, they would have given up the forest when the officials asked. But we women will not give up. So we became the main leaders ourselves. If we had not done that, we would not have our source of food supply today because the land would have all been converted".

Source: Nabangchang 2012

Women and forest enterprises

Although gender segregated statistics for forestry enterprises are scarce, invariably women tend to be confined to low-wage “niches” and their share in employment declines rapidly at higher levels. There has been an improvement in access to credit, through the growth of micro-financing for example, but enterprise support programmes and market-led approaches to poverty alleviation and income generation often fail to address gender-specific issues. Trade liberalization and associated competition has, in many instances, undermined the viability of local enterprises and although new opportunities have emerged, few rural women have been able to take advantage (IFAD 2008). To improve the position of female entrepreneurs several Asia-Pacific countries have supported collective action by women through self-help groups and women’s cooperatives.

Gender issues in forest enterprises and large industries include discrimination in relation to remuneration and promotion, and lack of attention to gender differences that disadvantage women in the workplace (maternity leave, childcare, etc.). Exposure to chemicals, arduous and dangerous working conditions and lower wages present significant additional difficulties and economic and food crises also appear to weigh more heavily on women’s shoulders as women are often the first to lose their jobs and suffer from reduced income and higher food prices. As value chains are expanding and pushing both men and women into the paid labour force, these issues are likely to require increased attention.

Forestry institutions

At the institutional level, many community management and policy making processes fail to effectively address women’s stake in natural resources management. Women may be physically present in decision-making bodies but their voices are not always reflected

due to the prevalent social norms or because of lack of education or literacy (Agarwal 2010). In almost all countries, however, women are poorly represented in forestry institutions. The proportion of female workers in Asia-Pacific forestry institutions in the 15 countries from which data is available averages 15 percent. The Philippines, China and Mongolia score highest with around a third of employees female (FAO 2010). Neither the number nor the proportion of females has changed significantly during the last decade. The proportion of females with first or higher degrees employed in publicly-funded forest research centres is higher at around 27 percent.

The way forward

While there has been some progress in addressing gender issues in forestry, many of the old problems remain. Larger social and economic changes - demographic transition, globalisation, increasing competition for resources, development of markets for ecosystem services - have created new challenges and opportunities. While empowerment is dependent on the larger social and cultural context, the forest sector needs to take steps to strengthen women’s involvement and take advantage of emerging opportunities:

- Forest policies should explicitly outline how the sector aims to enhance the involvement of women in forest management. Many countries have strong equal employment opportunities

programs, policies and legislation that could be adapted in other countries to improve gender equity.

- More effort is required to democratise decision making in forestry institutions through enhanced transparency.
- Multi-level education and training provides the foundation for improving gender equity. At governmental levels, analysts and field staff need training in gender analysis and gender issues including how men’s and women’s different experiences, needs and priorities need to be understood to achieve equitable outcomes.
- Effective gender analysis requires gender segregated and cross-sectional data that recognize the heterogeneity of women across age, ethnic, education, marital status and other categories. The lack of reliable data on gender in forestry indicates the inadequate priority currently afforded this topic.
- In industrial settings, equal employment opportunities should be supported and must recognise that policies and programs often need to be tailored to accommodate gender differences. Gender equity considerations need to be taken into account in priority setting, programming, project design, approval and implementation at all levels. In some situations, safeguards against sexual harassment and violence may also be necessary.

References

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