

The Role of Women in Asia's Community Forest Enterprises

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1. Introduction: Forest Enterprises in the Context of Women, Gender and Forest Research

As the international community has increasingly focused on poverty reduction and rural development since 2000, forestry research has responded in kind with a corresponding increase in literature on the production, commercialization and consumption of timber and other non-timber forest products (NTFPs).

These studies highlight the importance of NTFPs to rural livelihoods, disaggregate data by gender to illustrate the different ways in which men and women value certain forest products, and illustrate how the gendered utilization of forest products affects markets and commercialization. Research on forest enterprises and markets in Asia exhibits a slightly broader range than the majority of gender-focused forestry research – due in part to the importance of forest economies in China and Southeast Asia, as well as in Nepal and India – and points to two main conclusions: first, women and men utilize NTFPs differently, with women's incomes more highly dependent on NTFP production; and second, women's lack of market access precludes them from realizing tangible benefits from forest resources.ⁱⁱ This paper draws on existing literature to explore the gendered elements of community-based forest enterprises (CFEs), focusing specifically on the role of women. It identifies the overarching challenges that prevent women from realizing full participation in and economic benefit from CFEs, and argues that they can overcome these challenges, in part by organizing into networks and associations.

2. Characteristics of Small and Community-based Forest Enterprises

Small and medium and community-based forest enterprises (SMFEs) and broader CFEs are crucial to the forest economies of many forested countries, to the livelihoods of their citizens, and to poverty alleviation. Typically, SMFEs and CFEs employ 10 to 100 employees, with annual turnovers of US\$10,000 to \$30 million.ⁱⁱⁱ They comprise approximately 80-90 percent of total enterprise numbers and between 50 and 64 percent^{iv} of forest industry jobs, with nearly 400 million people worldwide dependent on NTFPs generated by enterprises for either sustenance or income.^v CFEs are increasing in number because of the dramatic shift in community forest tenure, with 31 percent of developing country forest lands now community owned or administered. In Cambodia, for instance, more than 41 percent of rural households derive between 20 to 50 percent of their total livelihood value from forest use, while 15 percent of households derive more than half of their total livelihoods from forest use and harvesting.^{vi} In Indonesia and Nepal, women engage in numerous activities in forest areas, to collect fuel wood and other NTFPs.

CFEs and poverty alleviation

CFEs are well-placed as catalysts for poverty reduction. As grassroots democratic institutions, they can engage local entrepreneurship, improve social capital within and across communities, preserve cultural identity, ensure ecological sustainability, and reinvest profits into much needed community resources, such as education and health facilities. CFEs play a fundamental role as mechanisms for sustainably managing forest resources, securing livelihoods, and addressing broader dimensions of poverty and well-being.

However, the forest-dependent poor in many countries face substantial threats and challenges to realizing these benefits. Forest dwellers and their enterprises are critically underrepresented in policy fora and have weak institutional relationships with decision makers. Having little or no means to influence policymakers, local communities must often face inappropriate legal or policy frameworks and regulatory burdens that prevent them from realizing income-generating benefits. Moreover, forest dwellers are often isolated (geographically and/or culturally) from infrastructure and support services, resulting in lack of information, networking prospects, and knowledge of laws and policies currently in place.

Gendered characteristics of forest enterprises

Within the enterprises themselves, age, class, caste, ethnicity and gender often dictate individual roles, responsibilities, and associated benefits. In CFEs, there is a marked division in how men and women use, govern, and benefit from forest resources: women work predominately in the informal forest sectors as primary collectors and sellers of NTFPs, while men dominate more formal sectors and timber trade.^{vii}

Forest products produced and managed by women are considered less commercially valuable than those managed by men, which contributes, among other factors, to their lower status in community enterprise and forest resource governance. While women's traditional knowledge and skills for NTFP cultivation and management are widely cited in both academic and policy literature, commercially-oriented CFEs remain largely governed by men, particularly elites. This is highly shaped by the traditional view in the timber industry and in many cultures that forestry, particularly timber extraction, is naturally a male domain.^{viii}

Two studies in Nghe Anh, Viet Nam^{ix} and Xishuangbanna, China,^x illustrate the connection between household demographics and gender composition, and dependency on NTFPs as income sources. In Viet Nam, female-headed and lower-income households depend more on commercial NTFP collection, but benefit less from NTFP sales. In China a longitudinal analysis revealed that female-headed households, or households with no sons, depend more on NTFPs and less on rubber, traditionally the most profitable forest product in the region. However, when women have full participation in enterprises, and especially when they are involved in decision-making processes, they draw multiple benefits, such as an income independent of their husband's, increased livelihood security, and the ability to provide improved health and education services to their children.

3. Challenges for Women in Smallholder and Community-based CFEs

Women face two main barriers to realizing benefits from the SMFEs in which they participate. In this context, “benefits” are defined broadly in three terms: 1) political - the ability to actively participate in governance and decision-making, 2) economic - the tangible income returns and livelihoods development, and 3) social - the recognition of contribution to the enterprise.^{xi}

Low participation in institutional governance

Despite their instrumental role in forest sector production, women continue to be excluded from most enterprise management, governance and planning. In South Asia, women have less access to information and are under-represented in decision-making bodies. Without adequate women’s active participation in community forest or enterprise governance (a threshold defined by Bina Agarwal as one-third of total participants)^{xii} women’s interests will not be represented, and as such, will not factor into the institutional priorities of the enterprise. Women’s involvement in CFEs exists on a spectrum from passive participation to co-ownership at different threshold levels.^{xiii} The rate of women’s participation in CFEs has also been shown to positively affect enterprise productivity and sustainable resource use.^{xiv}

There are two schools of thought on women’s participation in community institutions, including CFEs. One advocates for women-only enterprise groups, arguing that social deferment to men limits participation, thus women are more confident and able to speak out in separate “safe spaces.”^{xv} A 2011 study of small-scale furniture producers in Central Java, Indonesia concluded that women felt less effective as a minority among men, however close to 50 percent representation was attained.^{xvi} Another camp attests that separate gender groups worsen segregation, while groups with both genders perform better on governance and management indicators.^{xvii}

Barriers to market entry

Successful CFEs are able to identify and enter markets (and adapt to changing ones), gain a certain level of technological competence, and invest in production or processing technologies.^{xviii} However, throughout Asia, producers of forest products currently receive less than 10 percent of the total selling price of market goods.^{xix} Women comprise the majority of producers in many Asian CFEs and face two distinct barriers to successful market entry: lack of access to information and lack of participation in value chain addition.

Women producers have limited access to financial services due to widespread gender discrimination^{xx} and higher illiteracy rates in women than in men.^{xxi} Many women also lack sufficient technological knowledge, which limits their access to forest markets.^{xxii} Women are disadvantaged in all levels of the value chain, and often marginalized by men when a forest product historically managed by women gains commercial value.^{xxiii}

Gendered discrimination?

Within communities, individual tenure rights of men and women vary. Discrimination against women can be deeply rooted in customary law and traditional forest management regimes, or embedded in statutory law meant to increase community-wide rights to forest resources. For example, women’s

claims to forestlands under India's landmark 2006 Forest Rights Act are often subordinate to men's—meaning men submit claims on women's behalf—and they are processed in district level institutions where the vast majority of employees are men. The local forest elites, while differentiated along religious and caste lines, are also men, which can further undermine women's tenure access.^{xxiv} In China, the Land-Contracted Responsibility System appears gender-neutral, but in practice serves to deprive women of control over land, as was evident in a 2004 case study of bamboo forest enterprises in Yunnan Province.^{xxv} Wage discrimination is another problem, as evidenced in a Nepal case study in Dolakha District, which assesses socioeconomic variables, including gender and income distribution, and finds discrimination in wage structure in all three enterprises studied – even where women had higher proportional representation in the governing body than men.^{xxvi} These challenges make it difficult for women to take up potential economic and diversified livelihoods opportunities offered by engagement in CFEs.

4. Positive Role of Networks and Action Research

Women across Asia can achieve greater participation in, and benefit from, CFEs by organizing into networks and associations. Networks have become widely recognized by small CSOs and international NGOs alike as mechanisms for sharing information, building social capital and exchanges, and spurring effective social action. As networks expand, they can achieve a “boomerang effect”^{xxvii} by simultaneously mobilizing domestic civil society to influence international policy and, once empowered by international successes, turn pressure inward towards national or local level governance. Macqueen identifies two broad types of networks,^{xxviii} both of which can serve their members by managing income generation and controlling local access to resources:

- a. Umbrella bodies for a particular sector (e.g. bamboo producers' networks) that advocate on behalf of sectoral needs
- b. Small community-based enterprise associations that work towards poverty alleviation

These networks are distinguished from organizations to achieve scale, like cooperatives, and can serve as a valuable tool for championing women's interests if well-organized and well-resourced. They can build members' capacity; sensitize women to the particular demands of CFEs; reduce transaction costs; scope new market opportunities; connect women to policy processes and the opportunity to shape reforms – including tenure reforms; and close information gaps within and between CFEs. The African Women's Network for Community Management of Forests (REFACOF) in Central and West Africa is an extraordinary example of a participatory network that has served to organize disparate women's groups and become a powerful advocate for tenure reform. (For more on REFACOF, see Interview with Cécile Ndjebet, this volume.) In Orissa, India, a federation of forest protection groups, the Maa Maninag Jungle Surakhya Parishad (MMSJP) has transformed its agenda to include and prioritize women's needs, and subsequently gained political space for forest-dependent women to bring livelihood issues to the fore, both within the network and in broader political spaces.^{xxix} Supporting women's networks and collective CFE associations can help strengthen CFEs and increase women's market share.

Research focused on gender-disaggregated value chain analysis could help identify other ways to promote inclusion of women in CFEs and local forest-based economies. Lessons from other countries and regions on how women producers have acted collectively to gain market access and information, build members' capacity and enterprise organization, and achieve greater equity and livelihoods benefits for women, can be applied globally.

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ⁱⁱ See Fu et al, as cited in Endnote 7; Quan and Anh, as cited in Endnote 6; Shams, N. and M. Ahmed. 2000. Common and Private Property Linkages in the Low-land Forest-fishery-farming systems of Cambodia. *Journal of Sustainable Agriculture*. 15(4): 59-87.

ⁱⁱⁱ Macqueen, Duncan. 2008. Supporting small forest enterprises – A cross-sectoral review of best practices. IIED Small and Medium Forestry Enterprise Series No. 23. London, UK: IIED. Online at <http://pubs.iied.org>.

^{iv} Macqueen 2008, as cited in Endnote 2.

^v Molnar, Augusta et al. 2007. Community-Based Forest Enterprises in Tropical Forest Countries: Status and Potential. Co-published by Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) and International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO).

^{vi} Gurung, Jeannette, Kalpana Giri and Abidah Setyowati. 2011. Gender and REDD+: An Asia Regional Analysis. Washington: USAID.

^{vii} Molnar, Augusta et al. 2010. Small Scale, Large Impacts: Transforming Central and West African Forest Tenure and Industry to Improve Sustainable Development, Growth and Governance. Washington: Rights and Resources Initiative.

^{viii} Gurung, Jeannette. 2002. Getting at the Heart of the Issue: Challenging Male Bias in Nepal's Department of Forests. *Mountain Research and Development*. 22(3): 212-215.

^{ix} Quang, D. V. and T.N. Anh. 2006. Commercial Collection of NTFPs and Households Living In or Near the Forests: Case Study in Que, Con Cuong and Ma, Tuong Duong, Nghe An, Viet Nam. *Ecological Economics*. 60(1): 65-74.

^x Fu, Y. N. et al. 2009. Rain Forest Dwellers' Livelihoods: Income Generation, Household Wealth and NTFP Sales, a Case Study from Xishuangbanna, SW China. *International Journal of Sustainable Development and World Ecology*. 16(5): 332-338.

^{xi} The following section draws heavily on data from the Asia region, but cites several studies from Africa and Latin America from which lessons can be applied to Asian CFEs.

^{xii} Agarwal, Bina. 2010a. Gender and Green Governance: The Political Economy of Women's Presence Within and Beyond Community Forestry. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

^{xiii} Agarwal, Bina. 2010b. Does Women's Proportional Strength Affect their Participation? Governing Local Forests in South Asia. *World Development*. 38(1): 98-112.

^{xiv} Vernooy, Ronnie, ed. 2006. Social and Gender Analysis in Natural Resource Management: Learning Studies and Lessons from Asia. Thousand Oaks, CA: IDRC.

^{xv} Shackleton, Sheona. 2011. Opportunities for enhancing Poor Women's Socioeconomic Empowerment in the Value Chains of Three African Non-timber Forest Products (NTFPs). *International Forestry Review*. 13(2): 136-151; Agarwal 2010a, as cited in Endnote 12.

^{xvi} Purnomo, Herry. 2011. Scenario-based Actions to Upgrade Small-scale Furniture Producers and their Impacts on Women in Central Java, Indonesia. *International Forestry Review*. 13(2): 152-162.

^{xvii} Agarwal, Bina. 2001. Participatory Exclusions, Community Forestry and Gender: An Analysis for South Asia and a Conceptual Framework. *World Development*. 29(10): 1623-1648; Sun, Yan, Ruth Meinzen-Dick and Esther Mwangi. 2011. Is Gender an Important Factor Influencing User Groups' Property Rights and Forestry Governance? Empirical Analysis from East Africa and Latin America.

^{xviii} Macqueen 2008, as cited in Endnote 2.

^{xix} IFAD. 2008. Gender and Non-Timber Forest Products: Promoting Food Security and Economic Empowerment. Rome: IFAD.

^{xx} Macqueen 2008, as cited in Endnote 2.

^{xxi} World Bank, FAO and IFAD. 2008. Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook. Module 15: Gender and Forestry, Thematic Note 3: Gender in Forest-based Small and Medium Enterprises. Washington: World Bank.

^{xxii} Quang and Anh 2008, as cited in Endnote 9.

^{xxiii} Shackleton 2011, as cited in Endnote 15.

^{xxiv} Bose, Purabi. 2011. Forest Tenure Reform: Exclusion of Tribal Women's Rights in Semi-arid Rajasthan, India. *International Forestry Review* 13(2): 220-232.

^{xxv} Yang, Elsie. 2004. A Gender Assessment Study on Bamboo-based Rural Development and Utilization Activities: A Case Study in Yunnan, China. Preliminary review and analysis report. Beijing: International Network for Bamboo and Rattan (INBAR).

^{xxvi} Acharya, R.P. 2009. Socio-economic Impacts of Community Based Forest Enterprises in the Mid Hills of Nepal – Case Study from Dolakha District. *Banko Janakari*. 15(2): 43-47.

^{xxvii} Keck, Margaret and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

^{xxviii} Macqueen 2008, as cited in Endnote 2.

^{xxix} Singh, Neera. 2007. Transgressing political spaces and claiming citizenship: the case of women kendu leaf-pluckers and community forestry federations, Ranpur, Orissa. In Krishna, S. (ed.) *Women's Livelihood Rights: Recasting Citizenship for Development*. London, UK: Sage Publications.