

# Mother Nature:

## The female potential to nurse our rainforests



Source: [http://www.iucn.org/knowledge/news/focus/2009\\_redd/ground/?3958/REDD-putting-women-at-risk-or-providing-opportunities](http://www.iucn.org/knowledge/news/focus/2009_redd/ground/?3958/REDD-putting-women-at-risk-or-providing-opportunities)

In a year the U.N has dedicated to remember people's actions in sustaining the world's forests and on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of International Women's Day; today should be used to reflect on the significant role women play in nurturing forest dependant livelihoods and biodiversity in less economically developed countries.

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As holders of at least half of all traditional knowledge in rural forest communities, women have become experts in utilising forest resources. Fully dependant on these resources to sustain their livelihoods; women have also become the most vulnerable to the escalating rates of deforestation and degradation occurring across the globe. The U.N Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) have quoted forest loss in the range of 13 million hectares, an area roughly the size of Costa Rica, within the last decade.

For the international forest community, Lorena Aguilar, the IUCN's Senior Gender advisor emphasises,

*"Taking a gender perspective in forestry has nothing to do with political correctness"*

*awareness of the dynamics between men and women in forest resources can only help ensure that these resources are used sustainably and equitably. If we ignore gender, there is no doubt that we will fail in our efforts to strengthen forests' contribution to poverty reduction, biodiversity conservation and sustainable development."*

From urban jungles to rural rainforests, community roles still differ according to class and gender. In forest societies women are responsible for collecting vital sources of food, fuel and shelter, making them the main users of non-timber forest products. With extensive knowledge of forest crops, medicines and fodder for livestock, women have become attuned to

the environment in which they working. Selecting the variety of crops best suited to local conditions and working within the limits of their natural environment, they have become the principal caretakers and guardians in these communities.

Traditionally, men have been more involved in the cash economy i.e. mining, logging, large-scale agriculture or other roles that give them greater control over forests resources. Although this provides important income to many families, external market forces provide no limitations on the scale of these activities. Under these circumstances not only are the needs and concerns of women being ignored, they are the ones being the most affected by deforestation or access denial.

A few impacts of deforestation include soil erosion, risk of flooding and increased distances to fodder, water and food. Apart from creating hardship, these effects are detracting from valuable time that could be spent on improving community livelihoods. Nutrition, health and education of everyone, not just women, is suffering as a consequence.

## Messages from Success Stories

In an effort to acknowledge women's roles in forest management, attempts to mainstream their participation have yielded some promising results. Since the 1970's, women's opportunities and achievements in forestry have enormously increased. For example, the Mama Watoto Women's group in Kenya formed to address the scarcity of fuelwood and poverty of rural women. When community forest reserves ran low, women were forced to retrieve resources from the neighbouring nature reserve thereby exposing them to legal penalties. In response, the women established "women-made forests" in sections within

their own farms. The afforestation programmes improved soil fertility, reduced illegal harvesting, and increased the vegetation cover in the Kambiri region. Essentially the care work women have practised within the household for years has proven effective in this forest management. More importantly, the new preservation morals and techniques practised by these women can instil a conservation ethic in their children contributing to the long term sustainability of the Kambiri forests.



With these morals at the forefront of women's roles, they have also voiced their enthusiasm to participate in the commercial sector. The women of South-East Cameroon have shown their willingness to increase community forest areas to provide more sellable resources, such as fruit and materials for making crafts. The NGO, Equilibrium Fund, helps

women across Central America do just that: to date it has supported 10, 000 women to plant Maya Nut trees. The plantations not only provide food and income but also many key environmental services, for example the increased number of planted trees will store more carbon, which could help control the impacts of climate change.

These examples show the successful management of forest projects by women. Their role in decision-making, planning and environmental governance, though still very limited, has also proven effective in environmental conservation. Research by Bina Agarwal of the Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi, revealed that in the Nepalese and Indian communities where executive committees have high numbers of female participants, forest conditions were significantly better. Also, despite working with smaller and more degraded forests, regeneration and canopy growth in the areas solely run women was greater. Women's knowledge of plant species, product extraction, as well as their great co-operation, compliance with forest protection and rule, helped achieve these outcomes.

## Breaking the Gender Barriers

Despite the increasing effort to recognise women's contribution to forest management, massive gaps remain in implementing these changes. There are many socio-cultural, economic and religious barriers that are preventing women from being at the forefront of decision-making with men. Obstacles such as:

- Poverty
- Low self esteem
- Lack of women's land rights

- Lack of mobility due to household responsibilities and social customs
- Lack of time
- Limited access to information, training, education, credit and marketing channels
- Corruption

have all halted further empowerment of women. The Foundation for Community Initiative (FCI) explains some of the problems in Liberia,

*“about 95% of rural women cannot read or write in Liberia, ill-treatment from men – in many cases husbands stop their wives from participating in public meetings – , and no formal voice or space for women to be heard. If women try to participate in forest governance discussions in the community, which can mean forcing their way into meetings uninvited, their ideas are often not taken on board.”*

In reality, there are far more factors that make it difficult for both men and women to manage forests in a sustainable way. Moving away from centralised government to community based management is vital. More importantly, communities must have the support, training and resources so they are better equipped to participate. Given the differentiated roles of men and women in forest communities, it is unsurprising to find that they have different concerns. Women need to strive towards greater expertise in different aspects of the forestry sector so they too can have an active role in management. To achieve this, women need education and training with technical administrative skills. As Puala J. Williams, a forest sociologists based in Zanzibar, Tanzania, highlighted,

*“Building on women’s existing knowledge and environmental management skills is fundamental for their empowerment and their taking control of their lives. Women themselves must determine their own needs, priorities and possibilities for action.”*

Positively, there are many NGO’s, environmental programmes and schemes working towards sustainable forestry and women rights. In the state of Andhra Pradesh, India, the IFAD and World Bank projects have linked women’s Self Help Groups (SHG) to community forest management committees through micro-financed institutions (these are institutions that provide financial services to people who are poorer and more vulnerable than traditional bank clients). With more than 500,000 groups set up, affecting more than 5 million women, \$238 million U.S dollars have been channelled into helping women manage forests. The aim of the programmes is to link newly taught financial management skills to the women’s existing knowledge of natural resources. The projects are still in the training stage ; however, discussions with women indicate they are likely to invest the money from these schemes into further education, health care, the environment and other community needs.

Forest communities around the world should be aiming to include women by:

1. Analysing women's needs and roles to ensure that women can benefit from forest management.
2. Targeting information and training to women.

3. Directly involving women as project staff, village workers, and decision-makers.

## The REDD+ Opportunity

When discussing forest management, one cannot forget the initiation of one of biggest international forest policy to date, Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation. Also known as REDD-plus, this policy is proposed under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. It aims to reduce the effects of climate change created by logging and the mismanagement of forests by paying local communities to protect the forests they live in. It also aspires to deliver "co-benefits" such as biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation.

With the financial means, the potential of this scheme to empower women at all levels of forest management, from community projects to engaging in international policy making, is huge. Whether it will deliver these outcomes, is questionable.

Until recently the debate on REDD-plus has had little input from community members, especially women. Worries that women are not responsible for large-scale deforestation therefore will be less eligible for credits is one such worry they have. Single species tree plantations called monocultures (as included in REDD-plus programs) could also have negative impacts on women’s livelihoods. Monocultures cannot provide the multiple benefits of fuelwood, fodder, medicine, water and soil quality etc. Furthermore, the policy negotiations have highlighted that very few women have formal rights to lands. Most tropical forests are owned by indigenous peoples or forest dependent communities but it cannot be

assumed that women have equal rights with men to these lands.

Ultimately the problems surrounding forest management, not just gender, are very complex. Implementing REDD-plus is possible but must seek to address issues such as payment methods, monitoring schemes, gender, corruption and land rights issues. Reporting from Cancun Climate Talks, Lorena Aguilar said,

*“One of the advantages of REDD is that it's something new that no one has done before. This is not a women issue or a men issue, the communities have not yet put a tag onto these processes, so you have a tremendous opportunity to go and say: ‘This process is going to be with everyone in the community, men and women.’ So I think that the possibilities are there, the willingness in some of these institutions is there.”*



With a lot more work required to mainstream gender issues, dialogue and knowledge sharing is a step in the right direction. Forests are not only important to women because they have a closer connection with nature but because forests provide critical economic resources that can improve their livelihoods.

## The Bigger Picture

The issues of gender and tropical forestry might seem miles away, but the causes of which are much closer to home than you expect. It is our demand for timber, beef, palm oil, biofuels etc that is driving large scale deforestation. Increasing public awareness and changing consumer behaviour in the U.K can have a massive impact for the lives of men and women in these communities. Here are a few simple ways you can make a difference:

- Tell a friend about the gender issues and deforestation
- Used recycle items
- Cut back on palm oil
- Support organisations such as:

<http://rainforest-alliance.org/>

<http://mayanutinstitute.org/>

<http://www.rainforestconservation.org>

- Look for products that are insure sustainable use of forest products

