

January 2015



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations



Gender and forests in a changing landscape

Understanding women's participation in forestry in Sri Lanka

Policy brief



Photo by Evan Gershkovich

Key messages

- Although more than two-thirds of rural women participate in and contribute to forest use and management, their voices are rarely heard in forest-related management and planning.
- Development of a gender mainstreaming strategy and action plan in the Forest Department (FD) backed by an institutional capacity development programme and provision of sufficient financial resources would help to promote gender-sensitive forest policies and practices.
- Investment in evidence-based gender- and forestry-related research would help to improve perceptions of women's roles and contributions to the forestry sector among stakeholders at different levels.

Background

As a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action as well as the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Government of Sri Lanka has undertaken various initiatives at policy and institutional levels to promote gender equality. This is exemplified by the establishment of the National Committee on Women under the Ministry of Women's Affairs in 1993; it has the mandate to safeguard women's rights and mainstream gender across all government agencies (MoAF 1995). President Mahinda Chintana's 2010 'Vision for the Future' as the development policy framework, acknowledges women's contribution to the country's economy, and specifies that future policy direction will emphasize the creation of an enabling environment for women to exploit their knowledge on emerging opportunities.

This institutional framework has contributed to reducing gender gaps in the education and health sectors in Sri Lanka, but women's low participation in the labour force and politics (e.g. only 5 percent representation in the national parliament) remains an obstacle. The labour force composition issue and minimal participation in decision-making have resulted in a Gender Inequality Index (GII) of 0.565, indicating a relatively wide gender gap. For example, women account for 38 percent of the total work force in agriculture and account for more than 70 percent of subsistence production efforts. They are heavily dependent on forests for subsistence and fulfilling the various needs of their families (Athukorala 2013).

Women's participation in forestry was acknowledged as early as the 1970s when up to 70 percent of afforestation activities for watershed management was being conducted by women. During that period the FD produced about 3 million plants annually with 90 percent of the work accomplished by women. However, this was done without proper measures to enable them to engage in and share equitable benefits (WOCAN 2013).

Gender disparities in Sri Lanka are largely attributable to cultural norms that reinforce the notion that forestry is an exclusively male profession. Perversely, 68 to 100 percent of work related to gathering of non-wood forest products and approximately 60 to 80 percent of planting and conservation measures in home gardens is done by women but their contributions to forestry are still perceived as secondary to those of men (Athukorala 2013). Such perceptions have inhibited women from participating in forest-planning and management meetings, resulting in women's low representation in forest-related decision-making.

This brief discusses how gender perspectives are being integrated in Sri Lankan forest policies in terms of women's representation, participation, access to and decision-making in forest use and management. It also highlights key challenges and offers recommendations for further promotion of gender mainstreaming in forestry.



Gender concerns in forest policies

One of the objectives of the National Forestry Policy (1995) was to enhance the contribution of forests to the welfare of the rural population while paying special attention to making the nation's economic development equitable. It also recognizes the traditional rights, cultural values and religious beliefs of people living in and around forest areas. Moreover, the policy recognizes that deforestation is a significant environmental and social problem with a negative impact on communities. However, it does not make specific reference to women and the impact of deforestation on them, nor does it outline a gender strategy or the need for integration of gender considerations.

The first Forestry Sector Master Plan (FSMP) was introduced in the 1980s. It was criticized for failing to involve all key stakeholders in the planning process. To address this shortcoming, the government conducted an environmental review in 1989 and based on its recommendations, developed the current Forestry Sector Master Plan (FSMP) (1995-2020). The FSMP covers environmental, socio-political and economic aspects of the forestry sector; it provides opportunities to enhance forestry practices by exploring engagements with communities, NGOs and the private sector for joint forest management and leasehold forestry (Athukorala 2013). The current FSMP emphasizes empowerment of people and rural communities for the sustainable management of multiple forest uses, for their own benefit, but overlooks gender rights and responsibilities as well as benefit-sharing mechanisms. In addition, the FD has no gender strategy to facilitate the inclusion of women's concerns in forestry plans and interventions.

Although the National Forestry Policy and the current FSMP fail to facilitate the inclusion of women's concerns in forestry, they provide a potential entry point for mainstreaming gender in Sri Lankan forestry.

Many lessons and best practices can be learned from non-government sector and donor community initiatives that are encouraging women's participation in grassroot-level development activities for natural resource management (Box 1). However more efforts are needed to address remaining key challenges (detailed below) to mainstream gender further in forest policies and practices in Sri Lanka:

- There is no policy framework for gender in forestry; lack of adequate evidence-based gender-disaggregated statistics on women's involvement and contribution to forestry inhibits informed policy planning.
- Very little has been done to change stakeholders' perceptions and views on women's participation in forestry, as their work in forestry is still perceived to be secondary to that of men.
- Inadequate institutional capacity, lack of technical gender expertise and insufficient financial resources preclude gender mainstreaming, including the establishment of a gender working group in the FD.

Box 1. Making forestry work for women

As there is no gender-focused forest policy and strategy within the FD, programmes supported by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the United Nations Development Programme, the Australian Agency for International Development and other donor agencies and international non-government organizations have been extremely important for initiating, promoting and supporting activities related to women and forestry at the community level. For example, Australian support for the US\$5 million Community Forestry Programme is being implemented in a partnership between UNDP and the FD (URS Australia Pty Ltd 2008).

Women's knowledge and experience were highly regarded in buffer zone development in Kalugala-Kosdanda and Udailuka, as their insight was influential in selecting species for planting and nurturing in degraded lands. Their knowledge of seasonal production cycles and microhabitat conditions has been instrumental in sustainable agroforestry, rehabilitative farming, reforestation and afforestation (WOCAN 2013).



Moving forward

The following activities are recommended to help ensure that Sri Lanka's forest policies and programmes benefit communities by responding to the different needs and concerns of women and men:

- To support the development of gender-inclusive plans and programmes and to accommodate concerns of relevant stakeholders in the FSMP (1995-2020), multistakeholder dialogues and consultation meetings at national and subnational levels are crucial. It is important to capitalize on the existing opportunity for engaging relevant government staff and departments to ensure that gender-sensitive approaches are taken into account while developing and implementing REDD+ interventions in the country.
- The technical capacity of forestry officials on gender analysis and gender-responsive planning should be strengthened to help them better understand women's rights and responsibilities and their contributions to forest use and management.
- A gender working group should be formed within the FD to coordinate various internal/external activities and for oversight of gender mainstreaming practices.
- More investment is needed in evidence-based research and the development of a gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation system, with gender-responsive indicators for better understanding of gender rights and responsibilities in forestry.
- Women working in the forestry sector should be assisted in strengthening existing women's alliances and networks. This support would help women and their representatives to raise awareness about changing perceptions of women's participation in forestry.

References

- Athukorala, K. 2013. *Assessing integration of gender perspectives into Sri Lanka National Forest Policy*. Unpublished. Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MoAF). 1995. *National Forestry Policy*. Colombo, Forestry Planning Unit, MoAF.
- URS Australia Pty Ltd. 2008. *AusAID Sri Lanka Australia natural resources management project activity completion report*. Australian Agency for International Development.
- Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management (WOCAN). 2013. *Women's inclusion in REDD+ in Sri Lanka: Lessons from good practices in forest, agriculture and other NRM sectors*. Bangkok, WOCAN.

This brief is part of a project entitled 'Mainstreaming Gender Issues into Forest Policies of Developing Asia-Pacific Forestry Commission (APFC) Member Countries' funded by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and implemented by RECOFTC – The Center for People and Forests. The objective is to promote gender equality in national forest policies, including strengthening the capacities of policy-makers and relevant stakeholders in mainstreaming gender issues in national forest policies. For more information, see: <http://www.recoftc.org/site/Gender/>.

© FAO and RECOFTC January 2015
Bangkok, Thailand

All rights reserved. Reproduction of material in this brief for commercial purposes is prohibited without permission of the copyright holders. The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of FAO and RECOFTC.

RECOFTC – The Center for People and Forests
P.O. Box 1111
Kasetsart Post Office
Bangkok 10903, Thailand
Tel +66 (0)2 940 5700
Fax +66 (0)2 561 4880
info@recoftc.org
www.recoftc.org

FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific
39 Phra Atit Road
Bangkok 10200, Thailand
Tel +66 (0)2 697 4000
Fax +66 (0)2 697 4445
FAO-RAP@fao.org
www.fao.org