



Indigenous women's knowledge, roles, decision-making and ownership of land and forestland in Nagaland: Exploring customary practices

Info brief



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Context

The Naga are Indigenous Peoples who live in northwestern Myanmar and northeastern India. There are about 80 Naga tribes, each with its own language, culture, dress and customs. Customary practices and tenure arrangements of the Indigenous Peoples in Myanmar are not recognized in policies and laws. Lack of legal protection of long-used customary practices leaves indigenous territories insecure and threatened by investments and other forms of land concession.

There is little evidence that indicates how indigenous communities are managing and using land and forest resources. Very little attention is paid to indigenous women's knowledge, roles and decision-making in both customary practice and under national laws and policies. This is despite the fact that women are key actors in forest resource management.

Research questions

- What knowledge and roles do Naga women play in relation to land and forest resource management?
- How do women participate in land and forest resource management in customary systems in Naga land? Which opportunities and challenges do they face to exercise their rights to access, use and manage land and forest resources?
- What are the similarities and differences in terms of women's rights to tenure between customary forest rights and practices and legal laws and provisions in community forestry?

This study collected data from six Naga tribes in Layshi Township: Tangkhul; Para (Jajare); KoKa; Khamniungan; Longphuri; and Makury.

Primary data were collected using both qualitative and quantitative methods, including questionnaires for household surveys, individual interviews, focus group discussions and SWOT analysis. SWOT analysis is a framework for identifying and analyzing an organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

The informants included local resource persons, villagers from the target communities, civil society organizations and community-based organizations in the target communities. They also included village leaders, women's group representatives, youth group members and members of land management committees and administrative groups. Focus group discussions were held separately with women and men.

It was challenging to access to study sites due to the COVID-19 outbreak and the political situation following the military coup. Therefore, data were collected with the help of volunteers from the target communities. The research team developed a survey form. The research team gave orientation on how to collect data to local leaders and young people in the target communities, who conducted the interviews and focus group discussions. Standard procedures for securing the respondents' free, prior and informed consent were followed. The volunteers followed up by organizing online meetings and through phone contact.

Findings

Traditionally, forest lands customarily managed by a local community are inherited only by men because men are

considered to be the custodians of tribal property. The customary practices of the six Naga tribes surveyed restrict women's ownership of land. They do allow women to access land and forests and to manage agricultural land and certain forest resources. Each of the tribes surveyed has its own rules for allocating land and regulating resource use.

Gender roles of women and men are assigned by tradition. Men are heads of households and key decision-makers. Women are considered economically dependent on men. The gender division of labour is unequal but women do not question it. Women and men acknowledge that women are involved in almost all activities on which a family's livelihood depends. However, women's contributions are recognized primarily for what they do at the household level.

Women work in agriculture and seed conservation and men are responsible for forest governance. Naga women depend daily on the forests to supply their families' needs for food, water, firewood, shelter and health care. These traditional values and norms are widely accepted and reinforced from generation to generation.

Most women and men in the target communities believe that women participate in decision-making but this is only at the household level. Women do not participate at the clan and community levels of management of land and forest resources. When meetings regarding land and forestry are going to be held and the male head of household cannot attend, the wife may be allowed to go but this rarely happens.

Significant barriers to women's effective participation in community forestry decision-making include weak community organization, pressure from spouses, difficulty organizing among themselves and informal sanctions. Women also lack education. Only men are educated.

Conclusions

Naga women of the six tribes surveyed face a range of challenges to participating in managing forest lands customarily managed by their communities. This is mainly due to traditional cultural restrictions. Naga women take part in all spheres of work in their households and community. However, their participation and representation are persistently considered as being supporters and followers of their male counterparts. This is due to their lack of education, strong resistance by their male counterparts and strong traditional practices in Naga society.

These challenges and barriers need to be addressed at multiple levels to promote Naga women's meaningful participation in making decisions about forest lands traditionally and customarily managed by their communities. Members of the Naga tribes and other Indigenous communities should be educated to change discriminatory practices around women's rights to forest land and resources.

Recommendations

- and rights to land and forest resource management. This will provide evidence that can be used to promote gender considerations in sustainable forest resource management.
- National gender and women's rights networks should bring the experiences of indigenous women into their advocacy agendas and promote them at national, regional and international levels.
- Civil society organizations should have plans not only for gender mainstreaming but also specific programs for building indigenous women's skills and confidence.
- National gender and women's rights networks should design and promote testimonial events for indigenous women. These could be platforms for them to tell their stories so that their voices are heard in processes to change institutional mechanisms and develop informed gender policies.
- Further research should document the customary practices of other indigenous groups that discriminate against women. This should include how such practices have changed over time and whether national laws influence such practices.
- Support and empower women to obtain land titles to enable them to control their land and other productive resources.
- Encourage the effective participation of women in land and forest resource management.
- Researchers, community organizations and women themselves should document women's knowledge, roles

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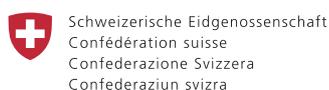
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