

## Biodiversity and equality between women and men

### **Attention to gender-based differences and roles can strengthen biodiversity initiatives**

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The Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) is designed to protect the planet's biological diversity including genes, species (plant and animal) and ecosystems. It is based on the recognition that biological diversity is a global asset under threat and commits governments to conservation, the sustainable use of biological diversity and the sharing of benefits.

Mainstream agricultural, environmental and related policies and programmes tend to see farmers as men. They often fail to recognise women's work, knowledge, contributions and needs. This has important consequences for biodiversity as well as gender equality.

**Women's knowledge (as well as men's) can contribute to biodiversity:** Given the gender division of labour, women and men often have different knowledge of plants – uses, growing conditions, characteristics, and different species.

For example, women are often experts in the use of 'neglected' species (rather than primary cash crops). According to FAO documentation, this "has important implications for the conservation of genetic resources because the decision to conserve a plant variety and to favour the development specific characteristics of certain plants... depends to a large extent on their perceived usefulness to the farm household and to the community as a whole. The experiences and practices of women as gatherers, cultivators, natural resource managers and providers of sustenance and health for their families constitutes a substantial indigenous knowledge system that can contribute to the conservation and use of agricultural biodiversity."<sup>\*</sup>

**Improved land tenure for women can support biodiversity:** Evidence suggests improving women's control over land would promote more environmentally sustainable agricultural practices. Insecure land tenure rights undermine farmers' intentions and commitments to conservation. Without title to land, women are also often denied access to support services that would strengthen their capacity to work the land and promote biodiversity.

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<sup>\*</sup> *Incorporating Gender-Sensitive Approaches into Plant Genetic Resources Conservation and Use: Background and Purpose.* IPGRI/FAO Working Group Meeting, October 1996. <http://www.fao.org/sd/wpdirect/wpre0012.htm>

**Equitable access to agricultural resources and inputs can support biodiversity:** Access to land is just one resource female farmers require. Both women and men working with plants and animals need credit, technical support, and extension services.

Women's crops and activities are often overlooked or not considered good targets for investment. For example, women's small-scale home gardens are often considered deserving of technical assistance. Yet, women often use these gardens to try out and adapt wild plants – thus contributing to the preservation of biodiversity. For example, research on 60 home gardens in Thailand found 230 different species, many of which had been rescued from a neighbouring forest before it was cleared.

**Increased involvement of women in decision-making structures can contribute to biodiversity:** If women are left out of the planning and implementation of local initiatives, valuable input is lost. As well, there tends to be very unequal participation among women and men in official biodiversity initiatives. Given educational biases, cultural obstacles and gender stereotypes, women often find it difficult to enter into relevant professional fields and gain specific expertise.

In addition to increasing the number of women in decision-making structures, the capacity of policy makers' (men as well as women) to work with gender equality perspective as requires improvement. A related challenge faced by community-based biodiversity initiatives (increasingly based on participatory planning methodologies) is to move gender-specific insights from the local level up to the policy level.

### **Many of the global trends threatening biodiversity also threaten gender equality**

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Gender equality advocates have argued that the dominant development model must be changed too both preserve the environment and achieve gender equality. They point out that the current economic system fails to value both environmental sustainability and women's unpaid labour.

This relationship was further acknowledged in the *Platform for Action*: "governments have expressed their commitment to creating a new development paradigm that integrates environmental sustainability with gender equality and justice within and between generations" (para. 249).

## Gender Equality and Biodiversity: International Commitments

Successful implementation of the 1992 **Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)** will depend on the active and equitable participation of plant genetic resource users at all levels. The CBD recognises “the vital role that women play in the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity” and affirms “... the need for the full participation of women at all levels of policy-making and implementation for biological diversity conservation.”

One of the objectives of **Agenda 21** (UNCED, 1992) is the recognition and promotion of “the traditional methods and the knowledge of indigenous people and their communities, emphasising the particular role of women, relevant to the conservation of biological diversity and the sustainable use of biological resources” and the guaranteed “participation of those groups in the economic and commercial benefits derived from the use of such traditional methods and knowledge.” (Chapter 15.4)

Under Strategic Objective K.1 in the Beijing **Platform for Action** (1995), governments agreed to “encourage, subject to national legislation and consistent with the Convention on Biological diversity, the effective protection and use of the knowledge, innovations and practices of women of indigenous and local communities, including practices relating to traditional medicines, biodiversity, and indigenous technologies and endeavour to ensure that these are respected, maintained, promoted and preserved in an ecologically sustainable manner, and promote their wider application with the approval and involvement of the holders of such knowledge; in addition, safeguard the existing intellectual property rights of these women as protected under national and international law; work actively, where necessary to find additional ways and means for the effective protection and use of such knowledge, innovations and practices... (para 253.c)

## Women’s and Men’s Perception of a ‘Good Plant Variety’: One Example of Gender Differences

A researcher conducted an exercise with male farmers to explore the qualities that they look for in millet varieties. Preliminary data suggested that men ranked particular plant characteristics higher than others did. They looked for varieties suitable for a broad range of soil types and that store well. They also gave priority to varieties with a high potential yield and which are good for beer brewing and beer taste.

The researcher conducted the same exercise with a local women’s group. These participants were interested in varieties that have a short cooking time, good meal quality and food taste. They gave priority to varieties that are resistant to bird damage and that have seeds that are easier to collect, process, preserve and store.

The data indicated that women and men have different preferences regarding millet varieties that reflect local gender roles. In this case, men were responsible for many of the farm-related activities (planting, harvesting, etc.) while women were responsible for the processing and preparation of food, bird scaring on the farm and seed selection, processing and preservation activities.

Adapted from: *Guidelines for Integrating Gender Analysis into Biodiversity Research*, Sustainable Use of Biodiversity Program Initiative, International Development Research Centre, Ottawa. July 1998.

## Elements of a Strategy to Address Gender and Agro-Biodiversity

According to the FAO, a long-term strategy for the conservation, utilisation, improvement and management of genetic resources requires:

- Recognition that there are gender-based differences in the roles, responsibilities and contributions of different socio-economic groups in farming communities;
- Recognition of the value of men’s and women’s knowledge, skills and practices and their right to benefit from the fruit of their labour;
- Sound and equitable agricultural policies to provide incentives for the sustainable use of genetic resources, especially through in situ conservation and improved linkages with ex-situ conservation;
- Appropriate national legislation to protect ‘threatened’ genetic resources for food and agriculture, guarantee their continued use and management by local communities, indigenous peoples, men and women, and ensure the fair and equitable sharing of benefits from their use;
- Enhancing women farmers’ access to land and water resources, to education, extension, training, credit and appropriate technology;
- The active participation of women, as partners, decisionmakers and beneficiaries.

Source: *Women: Users, Preservers and Managers of Agro-Biodiversity*. Prepared by the Women in Development Service (SDWW), FAO Women and Population Division. Posted 5 October 1998.

<http://www.fao.org/sd/wpdirect/wpan0025.htm>