

SDG 5: Gender Equality – A Precondition for Sustainable Forestry

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Abstract

Taking SDG 5 seriously in relation to forests brings to the forefront what is usually taken for granted in forest debates: people, their relationships to one another and to the forests that determine forest outcomes. In this chapter, we bring to light the invisible labor and relations that underpin good forest management. We show how systemic and contextual factors such as health, gender-based violence and unpaid care work by forest peoples in the forests and outside are crucial to the welfare of forests and forest dependent peoples. So far, little progress has been made in implementing SDG5 targets within forestry. Political will is needed to transform unequal relationships and to support demands for forest justice. There is a need to challenge privilege based on sex, class, ethnicity or caste and to destabilize inequitable micro- and macro-economic structures such as commoditization and support democratic forest governance to work towards greater sustainability. It is also important to keep in mind that well-intentioned efforts, such as gender programmes can have adverse effects if not cognizant of contextual power relations. The welfare and dignity that achieving SDG 5 would bring to forest peoples and livelihoods is essential to ensuring better managed and sustainable forests.

Keywords: SDGs 5; Forest; Equality; Transform; Sustainable

Introduction

SDG 5's ambition to 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' is extremely important in forestry contexts. It brings attention to aspects that make forest livelihoods possible but often get subsumed in conventional forestry definitions, associating forests only with timber, woody biomass or biodiversity conservation. Taking SDG 5 seriously in relation to forests brings to the forefront what is usually taken for granted or backgrounded in forest debates: people, and their relationships to one another and to the forests, which determine forest outcomes.

Elimination of Discrimination: What Does It Look Like in Forestry Today?

Women are central to the work done in and around forests, yet forests have long been a male public domain. Most recently, FAO's The State of the World's Forests (2018) report, building on global data, states that women's forest-related work often surpasses that of men.

Research from both the Global South and North shows how what has been considered work or valuable in forests has commonly involved activities associated with men: activities related to the commoditization of forest products whose trade is often male-dominated. This is especially

problematic as, in many places (if not most), men and women have different divisions of labor and differences in their ability to act and make decisions regarding forests and forest resources. Not actively addressing discrimination in this sector is not only a setback for an equitable society, but also a huge obstacle for sustainable forest management.

Although research since the 1970s has highlighted gendered differences, gender-neutral approaches have colored forestry policies and programmes, both in the Global North and South. The view of institutions as gender neutral and meant for all is an important factor in discrimination against women. These institutions tend to take the interests of certain men (of a particular class, age, ethnicity and race or caste) as the norm – as is evident in past forestry programmes in the Global South, such as social forestry, joint forest management or community forestry in the 1970s–90s (Agarwal 2010).

This is equally true of the Global North (Reed 2008) and in relation to women from Indigenous communities (Mills 2006). Current programmes such as REDD+ and large land-investment schemes seem only to be repeating past errors.

A study of 23 early-stage REDD+ projects found that none listed women as a stakeholder group, although five initiatives listed fair benefits to women as an equity goal. A follow-up study three years later found that women's wellbeing in REDD+ sites had fared worse than the villages' as a whole, and that being in a REDD+ site was significantly associated with a drop in women's well-being when compared to a control group over the same period (Larson *et al.* 2018).

Similarly, studies in Indonesia (Li 2015) bring to light negative economic consequences shouldered by women and their larger communities when forest-based roles are ignored during negotiation processes with investors proposing large-scale land acquisitions. Women in particular were absent from informational meetings and had little or no knowledge of what would happen to their lands.

The insecurity of women's forest rights under national law continues to be an obstacle. A recent global assessment of the legally recognized rights of Indigenous and rural women to community forests in 30 low- and middle income countries (RRI 2017) concludes that none of the assessed countries adequately recognize women's rights.

Rights to inheritance, community membership, community-level governance (voting and leadership) and community-level dispute resolution are wanting, despite constitutional commitments to protect women's rights. Research also shows that the personal, spiritual, emotional and noneconomic aspects in women's and men's everyday lives cannot be separated from decision-making about forests.

In both the Global North (Arora-Jonsson 2013) and South (Agarwal and Saxena 2018), women have often chosen to forego economic benefits in favor of other forest outcomes they see as benefitting their communities, families and themselves.

Violence by men (and sometimes by female relatives), lack of access to birth control or decisions regarding childbearing, domestic work and lack of access to information or education prevent many women from participating, owning or managing forests and resources in and beyond the household (Colfer 2011).

As a woman from a forest in Odisha remarked, 'What is the point of protecting the forests when we cannot protect ourselves?' (Arora-Jonsson, 2013). In forest livelihoods, as elsewhere, the feminist slogan remains clearly relevant: the personal is political. Matters around bodily integrity,

domestic partnerships and household-level power dynamics are deeply intertwined with what takes place in the public sphere of management, conservation and business.

Studies shows that women are consistently at a disadvantage in relation to institutional support in extension, information, technical support and other services (Lambrou and Nelson 2010). In Sweden, a governmental inquiry demonstrated that male-dominated forestry networks and greater links to economic resources for men than women have contributed to the slow progress of gender equality within the forestry sector. A technical study of formalization procedures on forest tenure across four countries – Indonesia, Uganda, Peru and Nepal – shows that most government officials managing these processes in each country were men.

Only 18 per cent of the officials were women, and only 17 per cent of officials believed that strengthening the rights of special groups such as women and Indigenous peoples was a formalization objective (Duvander *et al.*, 2010).

The lack of female extension agents and officers is especially troubling in light of research showing that women often prefer female extension agents in order to discuss their interests regarding agriculture. A study in Tanzania shows that men too prefer female extension agents as they feel women are more inclined to listen to them than the male extension agents (Duvander *et al.*, 2010).

Another such example (from Arora-Jonsson 2013) is an assessment report of community forestry groups in Odisha by male authors with little direct contact with the village women that reported the women as being oppressed and lacking agency in forest contexts.

In contrast, ethnographic research by a woman at the same time and in the same place presents a different picture, pointing to the many ways in which women's groups were taking action both for themselves and for the forests, showing ways in which they could be supported for forest health and themselves.

Research in Senegal (Estévez-Abe and Hobson, 2005) shows that contact with women officers was a strong predictor of the level of women's knowledge about natural resource management (NRM) and adoption of management practices, also contributing to the level of men's knowledge. Mechanisms established specifically to have contact with women, such as employing women agents, are important for women. These examples have implications for forestry since it is clear that the lack of networks, good extension and sensitivity to the experiences of different groups is likely to hamper forest production and health.

They highlight the need for officers and researchers who might have better access to women. More importantly, research stresses that the main difference lies not in the sex of extension workers or forest officers, but in their ability and training to listen to the contextual needs of different groups and the importance of making an effort to reach out to them.

Implications

In contexts where forest issues are being debated, there is a need to work actively against gender-based violence and the lack of access to sexual and reproductive health. Legal rights are important, as is the work of state authorities, including forest authorities. At the same time, violence is not only an individual action but is tied to a larger question of gender and power, and contextual factors are extremely important.

A weak state can lead to greater gender-based violence. Efforts to counter violence have often resorted to the criminalization of perpetrators, disregarding larger structural contexts and

minimising success in reducing violence. The increasing focus on criminalization that has emerged in both international law and the international-security domain risks obfuscating and downsizing the collective and public dimension of state responsibilities to reduce violence. Indeed, criminalization strategies allow states to circumvent their duty to address the social, political and economic structural dimensions at the root of this severe form of violation of women's human rights (Ahlers and Zwartveen, 2009).

Parental support and peer networks (Behrman *et al.*, 2014), along with safe spaces for women, are important in giving women agency and safety from violence (Eduards 2002). Again, forest authorities have an important role to play: for example, in providing training within forest departments, helping to provide safe spaces for women and spaces for their participation in decision-making on their own terms.

The need for greater attention to these issues in the forest context is pressing since the official realm of forestry the world over is male-dominated. By not actively taking up questions that concern SDG 5 in other arenas because they appear unrelated to their forestry work, forest actors help to ensure that issues surrounding violence against women remain barriers to an equal, democratic and sustainable forestry.

Conclusion

One of the major conclusions from the literature overview is the importance of understanding the contextual and systemic nature of inequalities if we want to act for greater justice and sustainable forestry. There are no automatic gains in gender equality from greater development, expansion of markets for women, inclusion in forestry forums or poverty alleviation programmes.

They might bring economic benefits to some, but for others they can exacerbate adverse conditions. As is clear from the instances cited in the chapter, concern for the dignity and welfare of forest-based peoples requires contextual responses that go beyond these measures. They need institutional support and structural change from 'business as usual'.

As is clear from the research discussed here, forest governance and everyday management are upheld by a superstructure of gendered forest relations (invisible to mainstream forestry) that often disadvantages women as a social group. Paying close attention to this 'space-off' of forestry is vital if we are to reach towards sustainable and equitable forest relations promoted by the SDGs.

Forests are a key site where the goal of sustainable development and its linkages with gender equality play out. Yet, there are significant challenges and barriers to the implementation of SDG 5 across the North and South. While the contexts in these places differ greatly, similar features recur in forestry contexts across the world.

Decision-making on forests at all levels is dominated by groups of men from certain castes, class or age groups. Women often have less access to the information needed for decision-making. Men are also overwhelmingly the targets for forestry interventions – reflective of current tenure systems wherein more men than women own forest land.

However, beyond ownership, perception biases as well as gender norms and values tend to position forestry as a male domain. Poverty and the lack of supportive infrastructure in countries in the Global South do correlate with discrimination, but it is also clear that welfare and development do not automatically lead to greater gender equality and inequitable relations of power in forestry stretch across the Global North and South.

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