

Short Note

Women and biodiversity: The long journey from users to policy-makers

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Abstract

Although there has been a broad acknowledgment that women's local and traditional knowledge is fundamental to guarantee food security and conserve biological diversity, few women are represented at the managerial and decision-making level of environmental movements and organizations. The United Nations, its agencies and agreements have long promoted the full and effective participation of women in decision-making processes. So how can commitments contained in international agreements be translated into concrete actions? By using the case of the Convention on Biological Diversity, one of the key agreements adopted at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, this article analyses how gender-equitable initiatives tend to assume an ad hoc character with few governments effectively involving women in their sustainable development strategies.

The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the United Nations or its subsidiary bodies.

Keywords: Gender; Biodiversity; United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity; Women's participation; Resources management.

1. Introduction

Life, nature and the planet Earth have been generally portrayed with female features throughout different civilizations and times. Coatlicue was the earth goddess of life and death in the Aztec mythology. Papa was mother Earth with the Maori people of New Zealand, while Pachama personified the Earth with the Incas. Nantosuelta was the goddess of nature for the Celts. Bharat Mata is the modern Hindu Mother India. Gaia, Mother Earth for the early Greeks, was worshipped as the universal mother for centuries. Also in Greece, Demeter was the goddess of agriculture, recognized as Ceres within Roman mythology.

The notions of fertility, nativity, beginning, birth and renewal have always been associated with females, because of their natural function of conceiving, thus ensuring the continuity of species. Their role as caretakers in the growth of children and in the daily provision for the family's subsistence has also made women the primary users of natural resources for non-commercial purposes

in the preparation of food, clothes, shelter, utensils and medicines. Nature and its wonders have also inspired art and creativity, making women the talented, but unknown, authors of thousands of craftworks.

The strong link between women and nature is therefore not only a romantic or mythological notion. Women, through their uses of natural resources for building, cultivating, breeding, nourishing and healing, have preserved biological diversity and developed knowledge of possible uses of biodiversity, which have been transmitted from generation to generation, helping to enhance livelihood security.

Despite widespread recognition at the international level that women have an essential role to play as users and managers of biological resources, women's participation in biodiversity-related decision-making processes still remains limited. Given the relevance of the issue to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, this article discusses factors constraining women's effective involvement in resource management and decision-making.

2. A difficult role as managers

There is little evidence to suggest that women are inherently more conservationist than men (Agarwal, 2000). Nevertheless, as a result of a gendered division of labour

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across many societies, women and men hold distinct forms of traditional knowledge related to biodiversity. Thus, the marginalization of women leads to the marginalization of the knowledge that they preserve, which is indispensable for maintaining livelihood security.

There are several examples of women's involvement as users and custodians of biological diversity. Women are responsible for the selection, improvement and storage of seeds, and management of small livestock in countries like Bolivia, Colombia, Peru, Viet Nam, Indonesia and India. In sub-Saharan Africa, women have grown over 120 different plant varieties in small areas alongside cash crops handled by men. In general, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) reports a trend towards the 'feminization of agriculture' prompted mainly by the occurrence of war, pandemics (i.e., the increasing death toll from HIV/AIDS) and migration of men to urban areas seeking paid work. As women's population has remained stable in rural areas, their responsibilities in the household for food production have increased (FAO, 2004).

Nevertheless, women's role as managers is constrained by a series of inter-related socio-economic, cultural and political factors, varying from 'rules of entry' to aspects affecting women's responsibilities after they are included in policy or decision-making forums.

One of the factors reducing the efficacy of their intervention is the lack of secure access to land. It should be noted that women hold title to less than 2% of the world's private land. Women have little incentive to devote efforts to conservation of resources, as tenure laws in many countries limit their ownership and use of land, thus reducing their opportunity to invest resources and obtain support services. In many cases, the existence of legal rights still does not guarantee women access to land and to natural resources, where customs prevent them from *de facto* control. This is the case, for instance, in Zimbabwe, Burkina Faso and Cameroon (Sass, 2002).

Women's role is also limited by their often adverse financial condition, as they comprise 70% of the world population living in absolute poverty. Their situation is exacerbated by a limited access to credit. Women encounter difficulties in obtaining loans and other means of financial assistance from banks that could assist them in the management of their activities. Lack of access to education further limits their competitiveness and technical knowledge on biodiversity conservation and sustainable practices.

In addition, public policies based on assessments performed by government conservation agents have traditionally focused on the male population as heads of household. Consequently, new technologies and tools are targeted to men's needs and priorities, which may differ significantly from those of women.

For instance, development workers did not consult with the women in developing countries before the introduction of new varieties of rice, but only with 'village leaders,' who were mainly men, to explain how the new crop should

be managed. Consequently, much of the rice was wasted, as the actual planters were women, and men did not transfer the new knowledge to them (McNeely, 2003). Similarly, in Thailand, forest officials consulted with village men to implement a community forestry project. Men advised that they needed more hardwood tree species for commercial purposes. Three thousand hardwood seedlings were provided, but were left to die. The reason was that women in that region care for the seedlings, and, as the providers for family subsistence, they preferred softwood species for fuelwood. Women were included in a second round of consultations, as forestry officials realized the need to take into account all stakeholders. Finally seedlings of both varieties were provided, fulfilling the needs of women and men in the village (Sass, 2002).

The 'green revolution' also had an impact on gender structures through the mechanization of agriculture. Mechanized agriculture substituted for traditional methods, which were labour intensive and commonly employed by women, increasing their labour burden, reducing available opportunities and forcing them to undertake underpaid farming tasks (Huvio, 1998).

Furthermore, gender roles based on socio-cultural norms of behaviour and perceptions embedded in class divisions, race and ethnicity are often biased against women. Also, men's entrenched interests within bureaucratic institutions often obstruct the expression of women's voices. Women's forms of collective environmental action are therefore frequently characterized by more spontaneous and informal movements than the formal structures engaged by men (Agarwal, 2000). Classic cases of women's engagement are the Chipko and the anti-large-dam construction mass movements (i.e., Narmada) in India, and Kenya's Green Belt Movement, which gathered 50,000 women members who were responsible for planting 20 million trees to reverse the desertification process.

Yet, despite evidence that women have been actively engaged in the management of biodiversity resources and have taken various forms of collective action to reduce the pressure on the environment, 'women rarely find entry into the regular decision-making forums of the organizations spearheading these movements' (Agarwal, 2000: 301).

3. Inadequate participation in decision and policy-making processes

Commitments made at UN conferences throughout the 1990s reiterated the gender-sustainable development nexus (Dankelman, 2003) and promoted a series of initiatives and actions to consolidate women's role in the international and national environmental agendas.

For instance, principle 20 of the Rio Declaration (1992) affirms that 'women have a vital role in environmental management and development' and that 'their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable

development.’ Chapter 24 of Agenda 21, on the Global Action for Women Towards Sustainable Development, lists 11 commitments and specific recommendations to enhance the role of women in sustainable development (UNCED, 1992). In the Rome Declaration on World Food Security (1996), governments acknowledged the essential contribution of women to food security, particularly in rural areas of developing countries (Huvio, 1998).

Although significant progress was achieved at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), the report of the *Ad-Hoc* Committee of the Whole on the 23rd special session of the General Assembly (A/S-23/10/Rev.1), focusing on women, stresses the lack of effective participation in decision-making on environmental issues, including at the international level.

Also the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), a key international instrument promoting the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, recognizes ‘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 biodiversity conservation’ (UNEP, 1993: Preamble). Nevertheless, the decisions of the Conference of the Parties have hitherto not included any specific guidance to foster their effective involvement (UNEP, 2001: 238).

It should be noted that there is indeed a lack of information on gender empowering measures concerning biodiversity implemented at the national level. For example, according to information contained in the CBD Second National Report, only 25% of the Parties indicated that they have fully incorporated women and women’s organizations in the activities undertaken under the Convention, 20% of the Parties replied negatively and more than half of the Parties did not provide any information on the subject.

At the Conference of the Parties of the Climate Change Convention and the Convention on Biological Diversity, men regularly head the vast majority of delegations and male delegates are also preponderant. For instance, at the sixth Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity, which was held in The Hague, The Netherlands, from 7 to 19 April 2002, more than 70% of delegates were men. Amongst different groups represented at the meeting, such as governments, UN agencies, international governmental organizations, NGOs, indigenous and local communities, industry and media, the representation of women averaged 30%. Only the education and university sector had a majority (68%) of women delegates. A similar scenario applies to organizations and meetings on sustainable development based in New York.

Within UN agencies, women still remain in positions of lower status, with 60% confined to administrative and clerical fields (i.e., women hold only 20% of the geographical posts at senior management level). As the International Civil Service Commission reports, ‘at this rate, reaching gender parity will take 44 years’ (UNIFEM, 2000: 92). A research study conducted among staff personnel at specific integrated

conservation and development projects (ICDPs), based in Africa and Asia, confirms that biodiversity conservation is still a male-dominated environment, while women continue to perform administrative tasks (Flintan, 2003: 21).

With few women at managerial level, it is not an easy task to address the continued inequality between men and women, as it is deep-rooted in most governance structures. Moreover, the attention to the gender issues expressed in documents is rarely translated into action. As Bretherton (2003: 115) observed, women’s advocates and existing lobbying networks have been ‘excessively preoccupied with the insertion of words and phrases in international agreements, which has become their principal measure of success, and have failed to demonstrate similar zeal in relation to monitoring and compliance.’ In addition, few governments have effectively integrated gender policies into their sustainable development strategies, and their gender-equity initiatives tend to have an *ad hoc* character.

4. From agreements to action

While the above evidence indicates that most environmental policies are not targeted to women’s roles and needs, research and development strategies also rarely consider gender needs and priorities. Women’s local knowledge is recognized as fundamental to guarantee food security, and it is argued that, if women controlled more of the usage of natural resources, they would do more to conserve them. Thus, women’s involvement and empowerment are needed to secure sound management of biological resources.

Empowerment in this case entails the improvement of the conditions of rural women, in their role as users and preservers of local biological knowledge. Moreover, it must be recognized that gender-differentiated local knowledge systems play a decisive role in the conservation of *in situ* biological diversity. Practical solutions and alternatives are needed to meet women’s short-term needs, as well as to address longer-term environmental conservation needs.

To increase the involvement of women and enhance their role as managers of biodiversity and decision-makers, it is necessary to encourage governments and development organizations to treat gender as a cross-cutting issue, relevant in different areas of development, and to incorporate gender concerns into the national biodiversity strategies and action plans.

It is time to build on existing mandates and processes such as the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD) that recognizes the need to ‘promote women’s equal access to and full participation, on the basis of equality with men, in decision-making at all levels, through full and equal access to economic opportunity, land, credit, education and health-care services.’¹

¹ Paragraph 6(d) of the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg 2002.

The international community has reiterated several times the gender message *vis-à-vis* environment and natural resources. It is imperative now that commitments contained in international agreements are translated into tangible action.

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