

Gender mainstreaming of Fiji's forest policies — Issues, challenges and the future for women in the development of the forest sector

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Introduction

Fiji is a patrilineal society and tribal land ownership passes down the male line. In terms of their use of land and other natural resources including forests, men and women in Fiji have traditional and distinct gender roles.

Food, fruit, nuts, herbal medicines and building materials for most Fijian traditional communities have been sourced from forests (Bynoe et al. 2011). Women have good knowledge of forests and plants that are used for traditional herbal medicines for all types of ailments.

Women also use the forest to collect firewood and food such as wild yams. Seasonal abundance of food crops, fruits, nuts and vegetables are well known to both men and women.

Men dominate decision-making processes concerning the management of forests and use of forest products. They also dominate decision-making on management of other natural resources and any form of development targeting traditional Fijian communities in villages. Women's participation in forest governance at the national level or traditional community level is therefore very limited.

Customary land tenure is a key issue, with 82 per cent of Fijian land owned by customary landowners. Land ownership follows the traditional structure recorded by the British colonial administration (Nayacakalou 2001). The primary land-owning unit is the clan, often headed by the most senior male member.

The clan is then further subdivided into kinship groups based on patrilineal descent. But generally each male member of the clan will be allocated a plot of land to plant for his and his household's use. In some cases, women will have user rights to access customary land for their use and that of their households, although Fijian women are generally excluded from inheritance rights to customary land.

The Fiji Legislative Assembly approved the first Fiji Forest Policy in 1950. Then in 1953 the Forest Act

was endorsed. The Forest Act was formulated primarily for timber production according to the forest managers. In 1988, the Forest Sector reviewed and initiated changes to the forest legislation. However, in 1990, the Forest Act was reviewed, but the revised act was short-lived and was replaced by a Forest Decree in 1992. The Decree took into account social, economic, environmental, cultural and political developments.

In 2003, there was a need to redefine Fiji's Forest Policy to reflect the adoption of sustainable forest management and to ensure full implementation of strategic directions and landowners' aspirations for the management of their resources. Several issues provided opportunities for wider stakeholder consultations. These included the focus on sustainable forest management, increased landowner aspirations, climate change and globalisation of concerns for the environment. In 2004, a full review of the Forest Policy was undertaken and this was endorsed in 2005 by the Rural Land Use Policy (RLUP; Framework for Fiji Forest Policy on Sustainable Land Use). The Forest Policy was approved and endorsed in 2007 (Fiji Forest Policy Statement 2007).

Fiji's Forest Policy context and key challenges

Despite the Fiji Government ratifying its commitment to eight major international programmes and developing legislation, frameworks and action plans to enable women to fully participate in the socio-economic development of the country, there are still challenges.

The key challenges include the fact that women are under-represented in managerial positions but tend to be well represented in lower administration positions in the sector. There is still a lack of gender policy details in the two main relevant policies (Fiji National Forest Statement and the Fiji Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD)-Plus Policy). There is also a lack of gender mainstreaming in the national programme for the sector and no budget for specifically addressing gender issues and undertaking targeted activities.

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Initiatives to support gender equality in the forest sector

There have been several initiatives undertaken by government institutions and non-government organisations to promote and encourage the participation and empowerment of women in the forestry sector. These have included workshops on traditional medicine and “women and forests”. In addition, International Women’s Day activities have focused on discussions and displays relating to women and forests.

National women and forest workshops

The Fiji Government has organised national women and forest workshops in response to women’s requests for awareness workshops, and non-government organisations have held community-based forest awareness workshops and built nurseries in Fijian villages. Some of these workshops have identified the value of trees and forests that supply fruits, nuts, husks and leaves. Most importantly, these workshops have identified trees that supply materials for handicrafts and medicines. Awareness of the need to protect these valuable trees from fire and logging has been identified in the workshops. Biological diversity surveys have also been important aspects of the workshops for both men and women.

Traditional medicine workshops

In the past, traditional medicine workshops have been organised where documentation, usage and promotion of indigenous knowledge of herbal medicinal plants have been encouraged. Further work undertaken by the Department of Forestry in response to requests by women has included the identification and awareness of plants from native forests that are used for traditional medicine.

A non-government organisation (Wainimate) was established to promote traditional medicine awareness within the community and women’s specialised knowledge of forests, such as plant availability and habitat, was recognised at various workshops.

International Women’s Day

Events held on International Women’s Day included a panel discussion on the role of women in integrated forest management, which concluded that women have specialised knowledge of forests, such as which plants are suitable for medicinal purposes. However, men make the important decisions on forest management while women’s voices are not heard. When planning and implementing forest projects, it is important to consider how the project will affect men and women differently in the long term and to ensure women’s opinions are taken into consideration.

Displays of handicrafts made by women from raw materials harvested from forests have been a feature of most community events, especially on International Women’s Day. There is still great potential for the development of the handicraft industry for Fijian women. Currently, women earn money from handicrafts that use trees and plants from the forest to make mats, baskets and bark cloth for local and overseas markets. Development of the handicraft industry, including better access to markets and improved product design, will need to be strengthened.

Tree planting programme for women

A tree planting programme organised by the Fiji Women’s Rights Movement was specifically undertaken to promote women’s participation in the forest sector and forest conservation. Partnerships with civil societies are important in strengthening women’s participation and in integrating women into forest management. Organisations such as Future Forest, Nature Fiji, World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) and the World Conservation Society have focused on rehabilitating degraded areas and have established seedlings and nurseries for native and introduced species of trees. Stronger partnerships with civil society, government institutions and the private sector will benefit women’s participation and provide sustainable livelihoods for communities.

The future for women in the forestry sector

Although Fiji has made progress in keeping its commitment to international agreements on gender and has made some efforts in integrating gender issues into its national programme and some policies, there is still a need for gender mainstreaming in the forestry sector. Although progress has been made in the recruitment of women to fill roles in entomology, geographical information systems (GIS), database management, data analyses and reporting, women’s participation needs to be strategically planned to address gender disparity in the sector.

A review of the two most relevant policies in the sector (Fiji National Forest Policy Statement and the Fiji REDD-Plus Policy) is needed. The revision of the policies should incorporate gender perspectives in both policies and guide gender mainstreaming in the sector to help increase awareness and the design of relevant interventions and measures to reduce gender disparity.

Strengthening of forestry-related women’s networks such as Wainimate to encourage research and development of traditional herbal medicine is also needed. Funding support for the participation of women’s organisations in the sector will contribute to further research and discussion on gender issues in the forest sector.

There is a need to encourage capacity building in technical training on gender issues and development of appropriate training materials. A toolkit for gender awareness and analysis will have to be developed for the sector. Financial resources for the Fiji National University's forestry programme also need to be developed to ensure inclusion of training materials and capacity building on technical gender assessment.

Gender mainstreaming within the forestry department needs to be undertaken to increase the level of awareness on gender issues. A gender taskforce group may be required to help direct this mainstreaming within the department. Further gender mainstreaming in building technical assessment skills (gender analyses, collection of disaggregated data, gender planning and budgeting) will have to be developed with a gender focal point in the department, leading to assessment of the department's national programme to include gender-based activities. The linkage between the Ministry of Women (responsible for gender work in Fiji) and the Department of Forestry is weak and needs to be strengthened to develop future partnerships in gender training.

Adequate financing of gender-based activities by the government and funding agencies is important in addressing gender issues and gender disparity. The provision of an on-going budget for recruitment of women in the sector and to positions on relevant

boards and committees needs to continue. Continued collection of disaggregated data is needed to provide a basis for research and planning.

The promotion of women's involvement in the private sector is also vital. In particular, development of the handicraft industry and the protection and planting of trees that are used for handicraft are essential roles for the private sector. The active participation of women in agroforestry and in the establishment of nurseries is also important in promoting the role of women in the sector. The development of eco-tourism and forest conservation will ensure the sustainability of livelihoods for women in traditional communities.

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