

Biodiversity for Development



BIODIVERSITY FOR DEVELOPMENT:

THE GENDER DIMENSION

The biological diversity of the world's plants and animals provides essential services on which society depends – purification of air and water, protection of the soil, control of disease, and reduced vulnerability to natural disasters. Rural people living in poverty rely heavily on the biodiversity around them for food, fuel, shelter, medicines and livelihoods. In fact, it frequently provides the 'welfare system of last resort' for poor communities. This safety net for the rural poor is currently under threat from habitat destruction, invasive species, pollution, climate change and over-harvesting, trends fueled by weak environmental governance, harmful incentives and a widespread lack of understanding about the importance of nature's diversity.

The loss of biodiversity has a disproportionate impact on women. The ways in which water scarcity and contamination and deforestation make women's water and fuel gathering tasks more taxing and time-consuming is well documented. The centrality of a healthy, biologically diverse environment to the spiritual and cultural belief systems of indigenous communities, particularly indigenous women, has also received significant attention.

Less widely understood is women's role as custodians of plant resources and as reservoirs of traditional knowledge on edible and medicinal plants. As farmers and managers of the home, women predominate as gardeners, herbalists and gatherers of wild plants. They also have a leading role in plant breeding, conservation and domestication. In societies that depend upon food gathering as opposed to cultivation, women provide almost 80 percent of all the wild vegetable food collected. Home gardens, which women tend, have greater species diversity than cultivated fields, and are central to the transmission of knowledge and survival skills from mothers to daughters. The World Health Organization estimates that four out of five people in Africa use plant medicines for their primary health care needs, and herbal specialists are usually women. Rural women produce between 60 percent and 80 percent of food in developing countries, and in their role of farmers, they improve and adapt plant varieties, cultivate plants, and store and exchange seeds.

Men and women know and value different things about the natural environment. Women's use and knowledge of biodiversity are, however, comparatively invisible. Moreover, despite their reliance on natural resources, rural women often have limited access to and control over them. The commercial uses to which men generally put land, water, plants and animals are



privileged over the domestic uses to which women commonly put such resources.

PROMOTING CONSERVATION AND

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Women have the broadest knowledge of local plants. They are responsible for most of the conservation and management of the domesticated and wild plants that humans use, and their survival strategies are highly dependent upon biodiversity. These factors make women a key 'entry point' for biodiversity programming. Yet many women's advocates and experts argue that the Convention on Biodiversity and the Bonn Guidelines are not gender-sensitive. In addition, although many projects have addressed women's immediate needs as users of environmental services and managers of natural resources, few environmental efforts have addressed critical underlying questions of ownership and control. Indeed, some projects have taken an instrumentalist approach that overburdens women. Where gender has been mainstreamed, the chief reason for doing so has been to make environmental initiatives more effective and sustainable – not to promote equality.

Biodiversity projects offer opportunities to empower women and improve their standing in their communities. But to seize these opportunities, UNDP and its partners must develop more systematic strategies for bringing the voices and views of women into the creation of national strategies for sustainable development. They must help make visible women's expertise as farmers and herbalists as well as the role they play in biodiversity management and conservation (as the Equator Initiative is doing), and ensure that women are involved in participatory resource planning. They must strengthen policy and regulatory frameworks to protect and enlarge poor women's access to natural resources. More critically, UNDP needs to address the strategic issues of land tenure, inheritance rights and accountable, transparent local governance.

UNDP IN ACTION: BOLIVIA

The highland village of San Agustín is set 3,800 metres above sea level in the southwest corner of Bolivia. The Quechua have discovered that many of the plants endemic to their harsh but beautiful region have curative properties, such as the aromatic *rica rica*, which settles an upset stomach, or *chinchircoma*, which helps ward off a cold. A group of women in San Agustín are capitalizing on their ethno-botanical heritage by harvesting those plants and packaging them as medicinal teas, working with support from the Global Environment Facility's Small Grants Programme.

San Agustín's desert-like environment and isolation – seven hours by a once-weekly bus from the nearest city, Uyuni – long kept its citizens below the poverty line. The lack of income options pushed the town's women to migrate to Chile for work as household servants (men could not get Chilean work permits and remained in the village). "We now work with a lot of enthusiasm," said Fabiana Huanca, as she clipped bits of foliage from a *chinchircoma* bush. "We don't want to go back to Chile anymore."

The harvesting of wild plants for sale may seem contrary to the goal of preserving biodiversity. But according to the national coordinator of the Small Grants Programme, Rubén Salas, that is exactly the criterion for which the project was approved. He said that the more benefits the community receives from medicinal plants, the more likely it will be to protect the areas in which they grow. "We can't turn every wild area into a national park, which is why we have to find other ways of promoting conservation."

Source: UNDP, Transforming the Mainstream: Gender in UNDP

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

The Equator Initiative's Learning Exchange Programme is facilitating the development of community-level partnerships and peer-to-peer interactions for the exchange of local expertise and knowledge. For more information, go to <http://www.undp.org/equatorinitiative/secondary/learning.htm>