



# **Gender relations and forest management in indigenous mountain communities**

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## **Summary**

These case studies set out answer these questions: How do gender relations within and outside the household affect use and management of forests? What is the extent of the centrality of women in providing livelihood, especially with regard to the management of forest resources? What can we learn about gender relations from forest-dwelling societies that are characterised by the absence of institutionalised male control? Does the structure of gender relations within the household and in the community change as members respond to broad religio-cultural, social, and economic restructuring of indigenous societies?

This paper is based on 12 studies of forest-dwelling indigenous peoples in South and Southeast Asia. Of these, six studies were done in matrilineal communities, five in patrilineal communities, and one on women and hunting. Changes in gender relations in forest societies were looked at for four different situations: the imposition of colonial or national state rule over forest communities and the forests; the examination of revolts, historical and contemporary, that sought to re-establish local community control over the forest; the response of nation states to these movements for autonomy by shifting to devolution as a policy; and the current situation in which women's inclusion in committees is becoming increasingly a policy norm.

Gender relations are complex, dynamic, and socially embedded and have many interlocking dimensions. In matrilineal systems, women have effective power in maintaining the lineage and hence, owning children. They have rights over ancestral property and control and knowledge of ritualistic activity, including being the spiritual heads of the community, e.g., the Syiem Sad

among the Khasis in India and the Bobolizan among the Rungus in Sabah, Malaysia.

In most patrilineal societies, the woman's major role in reproduction and/or income-generation does not necessarily lead to social empowerment or gender equality within the household. However, women's rights to access forest resources can mitigate this inequality in gender relations, as among the patrilineal Nagas of Northeast India, and the role of women in swidden agriculture and the processing of commercial forest products. But it is largely in matrilineal systems that women's control over forests has enhanced gender equality by giving them a greater say in how forestland is to be used.

Matrilineal societies often associate women with forests through their role in healing and religious ritual. Among the Warlis in India, many women have a fair knowledge of the medicinal properties of plants, and among Tamang villagers of Chisapani in Nepal, women shamans are accepted as equally knowledgeable and powerful as the male shamans. Thus, before the advent of state pressure in favour of patriarchy, gender relations were more equitable and women enjoyed considerable space within the household and the community.

In the state-sponsored colonisation by the dominant religio-cultural regimes such Hinduism, Christianity, Lama Buddhism, and Confucianism, women were made inferior to men and excluded from political, spiritual, and community decision-making. The Naxi's matrilineal system was replaced by a system of patrilineal inheritance in which marriage for love was discouraged and replaced by arranged marriage. Confucian values of a woman being subordinate to her father, husband, and son were promoted. During the expansion of Christianity among the Rungus in Sabah in 1952-59, the missionaries dealt directly with the village headman leaving out the *Bobolizan* (a woman priest and healer who had absolute power in community decision-making). There was always an element of local male participation in this colonisation, for through this they acquired both power and representation.

For many forest dwellers, the major agency of change in their cultural system and gender relations was colonial education, which came through missionary or religious schooling, followed later by public and secular schools. Domestic science schools in Sabah forced women into domesticity, denying their past role in productive and political life, and limiting its future. Further, by centralising forest management, states weakened an important source of women's power in matrilineal societies by limiting the role of women in forest-based production, thus reducing their ability to fend off the forces of patriarchy.

State efforts to centralise forest management triggered widespread rebellions in India and China, in particular. These movements, however, did not often



reassert women's rights with respect to forest management, or any other aspect of social life. A shift in power from women to men was well underway, and local men used the movements to further consolidate patriarchy. In the historical and contemporary movements for local control over forests and political autonomy among the Santhal, Munda, and Ho communities in Jharkand, India, before every rebellion, the men undertook a special drive to 'cleanse' society by eliminating witches and poison givers, *"the dirtiest creatures who keep evil spirits."* The need to strengthen or impose male power was legitimised to enable forest-based communities to regain control of their forests and overall livelihoods.

The authors argue that women had to fight on two fronts – against patriarchy within and outside their own communities; and against the takeover of forests, their source of authority and livelihood. Some spoke publicly against growing male dominance and control of resources, whereas others, choosing not to speak out openly, exercised informal resistance in what has been described as 'off-stage defiance'. Khasi, Mosuo, Rungus, Warli, and Santhal women resisted not only their subordinate position in life, but also the conversion of natural forests into commercially useful monocultures and their overall depletion and degradation. Where women have been allowed to participate in forest management, the results have sometimes been remarkable, as in the Chipko movement in the northern hills of India.

Many devolution policies target the community as the unit to take decisions once made by the government. This is true for Joint Forest Management (JFM) in India, Community-Based Forest Management (CBFM) in the Philippines, and some of the collective management policies in China. The Nepal Leasehold Forestry, which specifically targeted women's user groups and included women's needs for fuel and fodder, has had a substantial impact on women's lives whereas Nepalese forest user groups dominated by men have not.

There are also examples of Community Forest Management in India where women have played an active role in initiating forest protection and where women's committees are managing forests. However, when it comes to the inclusion of women in formal decision-making bodies, male resistance is summed up in the statement of a leading member of the Forest Protection Committee of Lapanga village, Orissa, *"We are not so modern that we would involve women in Forest Protection Committee."* By and large, devolution has resulted in promoting the accumulation of forest income in the hands of the local elite, thus excluding women from ownership, control, and institutional management of forests. Hence, forest societies have experienced widening socioeconomic disparities and deepening gender inequalities.

In Northeast India, privatisation has brought changes to women's lives. Among the changes, the status of women has depended on their ownership of

ancestral property. But the registration of former community-owned forests as 'private lands' by the state does not constitute 'ancestral' property. It becomes what is called 'self-acquired' property, whereby men are able to legislate for a right to inherit these on various grounds. Where the village itself privatised forests, however, the new property remained in the names of the women whose houses the lands were attached to.

More important have been the changes in management of property. Even in the traditional Khasi system, the maternal uncle or brother managed the woman's ancestral property, but as caretakers. Today, husbands effectively manage the land, including forestland; and, more than land, capital has become the key economic resource and capital as 'self-acquired' property is passed on from father to son.

In Meghalaya, among the landless who worked as wage labourers in logging, the timber trade that began in the 1970s with road construction for the Indian army was the chief source of cash income. Unlike upper class Khasi women, women of this class had no property of their own and the domination of men was strongly established through their wages from logging. This capital as 'self-acquired' property is passed on from father to son. Thus, the timber industry in Meghalaya has undermined matriliney.

For devolution to succeed, governments and civil society institutions must acknowledge the urgent need to close all spaces of marginalisation of indigenous peoples in general, and indigenous women in particular. They must provide them with effective assistance in reconstructing their present communities – based on gender equality, indigenous knowledge, local sociocultural practices and political systems, and self-determination in ownership and management of forests. Thus, in Asana village in Bastar, India, forest-based indigenous women have been effectively running Van Dhan Samitis (Forest Producers' Cooperative Societies), largely as a result of women's movements, but also facilitated by the space created by devolution. The Asana success, however, also shows that unless women are organised, the space created by devolution would be usurped by local youth not involved in forest production or protection. Increasing evidence suggests that where women and men form joint groups, men marginalise the women.

The state often ignores the role of women in resource generation and promotes men's control over them. But the inclusion of women in forest decision-making does make a difference in the administration of local management and gender relations. It has been generally observed that even where women play a key role in protecting the forest and managing natural resources, formalisation tends to marginalise them. In Orissa, the youth clubs hardly ever took account of the woman's knowledge and experience of forests while she continued to work long and hard, under worsening conditions, with



poor access to health care and education. Even within the community, spaces for women's participation in decision-making (households, communities, and forest management committees) are plagued by male hierarchy and power-based gender relations. Many case studies suggest that, when women started protecting their forests and began managing the local forest resources, they faced problems with the men from their own and neighbouring villages.

Women's indigenous knowledge of forest resources and technologies has often been considered non-knowledge as it is disguised in ritual and myth. In the tree plantation and nursery schemes in Nagaland, it is reported that women-managed nurseries and plantations do better than those managed by men. Yet, it is difficult for women to enter formal forest management groups, often because of rules against the inclusion of women. The formal inclusion of women in management committees is important as it increases the possibility for this inclusion to be made significant. Also, separate women's groups tend to be more effective than groups made up of both men and women. In mixed groups, men tend to dominate the proceedings, whereas all-women groups help to develop the managerial abilities of women and address gender-specific issues.

## **Conclusion**

Recognition of the importance of gender relations does not happen by itself. The inclusion of women in management committees is a result of political movements. External agencies can often play a substantial role, for instance, by making it mandatory for external project rules to include women in committees. Undoubtedly, since legislation is important in bringing about the change in gender relations, it is necessary to recognise the dialectical relation between internal struggles and enabling external rules and decisions, whereby each feeds off the other.

