

The Double Damage: Gender and Deforestation in West Africa

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Environmental resources are often the only resources available to poverty stricken women in the tropics. The fertile soil that women are able to cultivate and what grows naturally are some of the resources available to them. On a larger scale these resources are the basis for the economic development of the agricultural nations of West Africa. Forests are the basis for sustainable and predictable progress and development.

In a number of West African countries, the forests were until recently providing as much as 85% of locally produced animal protein (this includes bush meats and snails) which women trade for their other needs. They may also harvest round wood, sell fuel wood, collect fruits and nuts, grow mushroom, sell palm wine, manufacture baskets, make mobile cages as handcraft, all from palm trees, as well as raising livestock that graze within the forest environment. Forests are of critical importance to the economy of rural women in these countries and vital to their well being. This dependency on the forest decreases as one moves to other habitats as a result of deforestation, which in turn grossly reduces the quality of livelihoods.

In many parts of West Africa, tropical forests are disappearing at a much faster rate than many governments and their agencies are willing to admit. While some may argue that this is not peculiar to the region, findings indicate that the problem is more endemic in sub-Saharan Africa than in Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean. Africa's forest and woodland of 1,339 million hectares, constitutes about 20 per cent of the world's total. Over 90% of West Africa's original forest has been lost; only a small part of what remains qualifies as *frontier forest*. Deforestation is the result of an economy which thinks of the short term solution. The search for fossil fuels, more productive grazing lands for livestock, and land to grow crops in order to serve the needs of the money makers are a few of the reasons why forests are destroyed. It has environmental consequences, which impinge directly on the lives of poor rural women; their workloads are increased as they travel further to seek fodder, water and fuel, hence they have less time for income generation activities to improve their standards of living, to invest in natural living or to invest in natural resources management.

The debate about gender and forestry has, above all, emphasized differences in the relationship to, and the uses and methods of management of, natural resources among women and men. Some have emphasized the contribution of food collection by women to feed the household, while others have shown forests as being a major source of income for women. The focus on gendered uses of forest resources has helped to highlight the differentiated access of men and women to natural resources. Women who rely on natural resources will be adversely affected by their degradation as it will undermine women's ability to perform their roles, and may increase the amount of time and energy women must invest to perform them. For example, in some cases the clearance of communal forests for agricultural production or commercial forestry has reduced the access of women to forest products and resulted in the need to commute longer distances for both subsistence and cash products. "Many destructive activities against the environment disproportionately affect women, because most women in the world, and especially in the developing world, are very dependent on primary natural resources: land, forests, waters," says Wangari Maathai of Kenya.

And she convincingly argues further that "Men can trek and go looking for greener pastures in other

areas in other countries ... but for women, they're usually left on site to face the consequences, so when there is deforestation, when there is drought, when there is crop failure, it is the women and children who are the most adversely affected."

Due to lush and abundant natural resources, Ghana has been severely exploited. In ten years (1990 to 2000), Ghana lost 16% of its forest cover to logging. Women are at risk particularly because they simply are discriminated against and lack recognition. Ama Ntowaa, a 56-year-old widow who supports six children as on a small cocoa farm in Western Ghana, laid down in front of a bulldozer to stop a logging company that was intent on hauling away her trees, even though her Area Chief made a deal with the companies without consulting her. She did lose about a third of her land before she could stop them, all for the profit of the logging company and the unscrupulous chief.

Another important debate concerns lack of participation by women in the design and implementation of forestry projects. There is a dearth of appropriate strategies to improve women's participation in forestry projects. Most forestry institutions in West African countries are male-dominated. There has however been some criticisms of the way in which attempts to institutionalize women's participation have led to the tendency to apply standardized gender frameworks.

Government policy on forests should emphasize the need for rural women education on how to practice afforestation and agro-forestry in order to improve and maintain their farmland including soil fertility, which could be promoted via seminars and extension training.