
Women's Voices Coming from the Forest

Forests are home to many peoples, including a substantial population of indigenous peoples. A 1992 European Union-funded study on the situation of indigenous peoples in the tropical rainforests estimated about 12 million of them or 3.5% of the total population of covered areas lived in the rainforest areas of the world. This was apart from those who lived in other types of forest areas.

Forests provide the source and means of survival. Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) Director General David Kaimowitz says: "One hundred million people depend on forests to supply key elements needed for their survival, either goods and services or incomes. At least one third of the world's rural population depends on firewood, medicinal plants, food, and compost for agriculture that come from forests. Forests are also a major source of income for large populations of the rural poor especially in Africa and Asia, and to a more limited extent in Latin America."

Forests are vital for the healthy state of our global environment. And in the area of forests women play a major and critical role. They are intimately familiar with the forest like the nooks and crannies of their home. In many societies, women have for centuries been the firewood and minor forest product gatherers and water-fetchers. They are the herbalists and ritualists. These are tasks that take time to accomplish, and must be done on a regular, if not daily, basis. These activities keep them in close touch with the forest and enable them to have a vibrant knowledge of its diversity.

In its work with women in the forestry sector, the Food and Agriculture Organization has come to the conclusion that "throughout the developing world, women make a significant contribution to forestry." It cites lessons learned in the process: [1] Forests are often a major source of paid employment for rural women. [2] Rural women are often the principal caretakers and guardians of the forests. [3] Women have an extensive knowledge of forest resources. [4] In many areas, women have demonstrated that they are not only the primary users but also the most effective protectors of the forests.

Forests are also considered the physical representation of women. The forest-dwelling Amungme of Irian Jaya regard women as central to their society, thus equally entitled to rights and access to land, forests and other natural resources. The mother is a very powerful figure in Amungme beliefs – the living habitat is Mother. The highest elevation of the physical environment represents Her head and is thus a sacred place. Nobody desecrates a mother. Thus when the mining company Freeport McMoran destroyed their Mother, the Amungme filed a suit in a court in the United States.

The increasing integration of rural communities into the cash economy that has resulted in male migration has further entrenched women in agroforestry work. Like any other income they earn, the women use the cash they get from the gathering and cultivation of forest products to put food on the table and meet their family's other basic needs.

Unfortunately, in the development process, in programs intended for forest dwellers and users, in forest exploitation projects, the voices of women are not heard. Nor are their traditional rights to the forests respected. Yet it is they who bear the costs of forest destruction and forest-use

transformation.

The impacts of forest change or loss are not gender neutral. In Papua New Guinea, the money men generate from logging activities has become a source of problem for the women. The social cost of cash in the hands of the men is increased drunkenness, sexually transmitted diseases, law and order problems, and violence against women.

Women may have to take destiny into their own hands. As mothers who ensure the life of future generations, we have to take concrete affirmative action. We must assert our right to be heard in all processes and stages of development. We must struggle to be heard on our own definition of what development is and how it should be undertaken in our forests. The women of the Chipko Movement in India are famous for this. We need not be dramatic. We are experts in agroforestry, silviculture, and other forest-related works.

Let us harness our indigenous knowledge and our treasure trove of experience: the Javanese women with their centuries-old forest gardens, the Thai hilltribes with their home gardens, the Sahelian women with their drought food, the women traditional healers of the world with their medicinal preparations, the world's women firewood gatherers with their knowledge of trees, the Cote d'Ivoire women's organizations with their forestry cooperatives, the Cameroonian women's organizations' environmental protection work, the Central African Republic women's associations' rehabilitation of urban forests, the Amazonian indigenous women with their rich knowledge of the forest ecosystem and biodiversity.

In this way we ensure not only biological but also cultural diversity, and the respect for rights of all peoples. In this homogenizing world, the forces of dominance can only be thwarted if the marginalized, most of whom are women, link arms, reach out and act. If forests give life, as women also give life, we should ensure that the world is a better place to live in for our children – with equal access, use and ownership of the world's resources without discrimination as to gender. Just like any good homemaker.

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