# Sri Lanka: Deforestation, women and forestry

When we say that forest loss is increasing across the globe we are not talking only about trees. We are losing not only the physical resources --plants, animals and insects-- but an irretrievable treasure of local knowledge, that in Sri Lanka --as in many other countries-- has been preserved mainly by women. However, women's contribution to forestry is concealed behind their domestic tasks as their forestry-related activities are directly related to home maintenance activities. Forests provide the vital three F's for women: food, fuel and fodder.

Women have learned and taught for ages which are the edible species of the forests, which medicinal, which fast or slow burning and so on. In their involvement in day to day survival, women in rural areas are knowledgeable in the multiple uses of natural resources. As such, they are potential planners and designers, with the capability of changing the present negative situation.

However, "development" policies and increasing formalisation of land ownership, usually through the male line, has done much to worsen the economic situation for women. Because men are far more likely to be acting within the cash economy, their involvement with forests is almost exclusively in the production of saleable timber. Government policies are focused primarily on timber production and tree plantations. The paradigm from which they operate is overwhelmingly technological, and their aim has been to fulfil the requirements of the state rather than individual communities. Market-oriented compartmentalised crop production systems have been formed on land once used by those communities, creating an opposition between the forestry establishment and the people.

The informal work of women that is essential to household survival goes unrecognised. For example, deforestation has meant that the time and energy spent gathering firewood has increased enormously. Not only do women have to walk further to find less, but they carry heavy weights for long distances (up to 35kg for 10km), damaging their health. The need to conserve firewood then affects the family diet, decreasing variety and nutritional content, with a further deleterious effect on health. This is just one of a range of tasks made more difficult by encroaching deforestation.

Increasingly women are having to perform additional paid work outside the home, working on tobacco or tea plantations. The plantations operate in direct competition with the women for fuel-wood, for the curing of tobacco, for example. Men are responsible for getting industrial fuel-wood, while domestic fuel-wood gathering is left to women.

In this situation, women's home gardens, practically the only area in which they retain autonomy, take on increasing importance and women are reacting to changing circumstances by increasing the diversity of plants and trees they grow themselves, thus making a further contribution to biodiversity conservation.

However, as the legal owners of the land, men can choose to sell the trees as a cash crop, and men are taken as the focal point for receiving subsidies and services. Development policies thus need to change and must include women's needs and knowledge within a holistic strategy. Not only because this would be more equitable, but

because it would be much better to ensure sustainable forest use.