

---

## India: Women more affected than men from deforestation

It is common for people living far away from the forests to perceive deforestation as an exclusively environmental problem. However, for people whose livelihoods depend directly on them, forest loss is more a social than an environmental tragedy. And what is seldom perceived is that women suffer the consequences more than men. The following extracts from a case study on community forest management in India can be useful to begin to understand the issue:

"Deforestation affects women much more than men, and the poorer they are the worse it is for them. Although in traditional forest communities, particularly tribal ones, there has often been a greater degree of equality between men and women than in mainstream Indian society, there still has been an unequal division of labour.

Thus, in the late 1980s a study found that tribal women in Orissa played a major role in the economy, working on average three hours a day longer than men, a workload that significantly increased with deforestation. Tribal women have been traditionally involved in collecting water, fodder, fuel and other non timber forest products, while the men have done most of the cultivating and hunting. With deforestation, women's work of fetching and carrying becomes more difficult, since they have to go farther and farther from their villages to reach the receding tree line.

One study in Orissa found that, over a twenty-year period from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, the average distance that people (mainly women) had to walk to collect firewood, bamboo, fodder, and other products increased from 1.7 to 7.0 km. Other studies have shown that the situation deteriorates over time: while working longer (often up to 14 hours a day), they collect less, and their lives become even more difficult. A study in one area of South Bihar in the early 1980s, describes how every day 300 women went into the forests to collect firewood from illegally cut timber. They earned Rs.120/month, an amount so paltry that half of them were permanently in debt. To reach the forest, they walked as far as 12 km and then, when they had finished collecting wood, travelled by train with their head-loads to town. During the whole process they were obliged to bribe the village headman to allow them to do it, the forest guard to look the other way, and railway staff to allow them to travel 'free' on the train. Hardly surprisingly, they were not left with much profit at the end of it.

One obvious outcome of all this is that women have less time to take care of themselves, even when they are ill. Several studies in India and elsewhere have shown that, in situations of social and economic disintegration, the proportion of men to women attending primary health centres is five to one. This is in spite of the fact that women are likely to be less healthy than men, because they are less well-nourished and are working so hard. They are also less likely to have to hand the pharmacopeia of herbal medicines that was available before forest destruction."

Article based on information from: Joe Human and Manoj Pattanaik, "Community forest management. A casebook from India." UK, Oxfam, 2000

