Improving Women's Involvement in Forestry Projects

Women have many other activities that often prevent them from participating in planning meetings.

At village level, it is women who collect fuelwood and non-timber forest products (NTFPs) both for household consumption and for sale. Women’s ability to provide food and income for their family is therefore closely related to the condition of the surrounding forest area. However, despite their role as the main users of forest resources, women are often not taken into consideration when projects are planned: their needs and priorities are often overlooked.
Impacts of deforestation on the lives of women

Lack of food security and increased poverty
- If families cannot turn to the forest for food to supplement their diet, or for products they might be able to sell, there will be an increase in poverty.

Health risks
- Lack of variety in the diet and/or supplemental protein and vitamins provided by forest products could lead to mal- and under-nourishment, particularly among children.
- Forest destruction leads to soil erosion and the drying up of springs and streams. Shortages of safe drinking and irrigation water for crops lead to increased health problems.

Increased workload
- Women have to walk longer distances in order to provide for their family: finding clean water, fuelwood, animal fodder, and forest foods.

Disruption of family life due to migration of men for work
- Fathers lose contact with their children and mothers become overburdened with daily work.
- Men who are far from their families (in search of work) might take on second wives or engage in sexual practices that increase their chance of contracting HIV/AIDS.
- Women's workload increases greatly as they try to carry out both men's and women's work and take on full responsibility for family subsistence.
- Girls from poor families need to earn income for their parents since the family can no longer live from farming and collecting forest products. They can be drawn into prostitution, as they do not have education or access to other ways of earning cash income.

Loss of traditional knowledge and traditional access and control of community land and forests
- Traditional knowledge about forest products and traditional systems of protecting the forest are lost or forgotten.
- Traditional customary land use rights, e.g. inheritance from mother to daughter, begin to disappear as more land is allocated or registered as individual property in the man's name.
- Land around the community forest is turned into plantation or farm land, and is no longer available for growing or gathering firewood.
- There is increasing conflict between the state and the community, or between plantation and logging companies and communities.
- Women in the community lose access to remaining land and no longer have their traditional control and decision-making role concerning land-use practices.
Improving women’s involvement

Correcting male bias in agriculture and forestry work

When projects gather information and implement activities, it is often a case of male staff approaching male heads of households. Having more women actively involved in extension work would help relations between women and men to become more equal as it would decrease the often-present gap in knowledge of new technologies, regulations and methods. Women should be encouraged to enter the technical and decision-making levels in the forestry and agriculture sector.

Ensuring women’s land rights

As there is a move from customary land use patterns and inheritance to more official land allocation, titling and management policies, there is a strong risk that women will lose access to and control over both family and community land. It is of vital importance that the policy of ensuring that both men and women’s names are included on land documents continues to be followed.

Cultural and social constraints

Women of all ethnic groups face cultural constraints, since the traditional division of labour assigns women responsibility for family work and men responsibility for ‘official business’ such as meetings and roles in community groups or organisations. Lack of education can also affect women’s self-confidence. Furthermore, women of ethnic minorities often face a greater language barrier than their menfolk do, since they have less exposure to the world outside of their community and are less likely to speak the Lao language. For these reasons, women are often very reluctant to speak out in meetings or join in decision-making groups.

Implementing a policy of equality means that both women and men will need to work actively to change attitudes, to encourage education and participation, and to provide opportunities for self-development and confidence-building.
Designing projects that empower women and address their priorities

There are a number of steps that can be taken to help projects better address women’s priorities:

- Using participatory methods that will involve women when collecting information for preparing rural development plans. Projects could use female staff trained in gender and development to carry out interviews and discussions.
- Consulting women for their opinions and involving women in the planning and implementation of forest projects.
- Encouraging women to participate in the management decisions concerning village forests.
- Taking women’s priorities when designing activities to help them improve their situation. Although the connection between environmental work and income-generating, health and education activities is more difficult to see, helping women to address their basic needs will also help improve their status, ability to participate in decision-making, and confidence. Certain activities, like improved water supply, may also ease women’s work burden thereby freeing up time for them to join meetings and activities.
- Ensuring that technical activities do not just reflect male priorities. For example, planting only commercial trees that can be sold by the head of household, rather than planting fuelwood trees that could improve household security and decrease women’s work burden, may actually serve to increase women’s work load without any immediate benefit.
Examples of suggestions from women for improved forest management

- Regulations on the yearly rotation of firewood collection and cutting, in order to give the forest a chance to grow back.
- Village authorities to provide leadership in replenishing firewood, either by planting it in the natural forest or by setting up a village plantation.
- Village to allocate land so that each household can plant their own fuelwood.
- Energy saving stoves should be used in each household.
- Village authorities to support charcoal making at the household level while also placing restrictions on making charcoal for sale.

*Information from a survey carried out by the Lao Women’s Union Gender Resource Information and Development Centre (GRID), 1999*