

## **Diversity Makes the Difference!**

### **Gender considerations for promoting an equitable access to and fair sharing of benefits arising from the utilization of biodiversity<sup>1</sup>**

Equity is a fundamental issue in the conservation of biological diversity. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) calls for building new relations between nations, communities, enterprises, different human groups and natural resources. It, therefore, refers to the need for building new relations based on co-responsibility, justice and equity. Based upon these principles one of the three objectives of the CBD state “the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources”.

The CBD stresses the importance of gender equity in connection with the use and distribution of genetic resources. Thus, most of the gender-related documents associated with the Convention, make reference to the need for local groups, especially indigenous and local communities of women and men, to share the benefits arising from the use and conservation of genetic resources.

In order to achieve the aforementioned objective, there is a need to better understand the inter-linkages between societies and biodiversity. This document seeks to contribute to this debate by introducing gender considerations based on the principle that social equity means that the costs and benefits of conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity will be equitably shared and evenly distributed. Social equity needs to be addressed within an understanding of intersectionality and how gender, age, ethnicity, race, class, aboriginality, wealth and poverty and geographical location influence and intersect with each other. Furthermore, the understanding and integration of this social complexity and how it interfaces with biodiversity will contribute to the sustainability of diverse human societies and natural environments.

### **The Convention on Biological Diversity: Promoting Gender-Sensitive Implementation**

The CBD recognizes the critical role women play in the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity resources and affirms the need to guarantee their full participation at all levels of policy making and implementation (Preamble, paragraph 13).

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper has been prepared by Lorena Aguilar and Monserrat Blanco (IUCN) as a discussion paper for the Seventh Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in the Context of the IUCN Project: “Supporting the Global Biodiversity Agenda” funded by BMZ. This work is made possible by the generous contribution of BMZ. The opinions given herein belong solely to the author and do not represent the views or policies of the organisations mentioned in this work.

The above principle points out two essential elements:

- ☞ The importance of the knowledge possessed by women including their use, rights and needs regarding local biodiversity. Women's engagement with their natural environments provides them with a wealth of knowledge and experience vital to conservation that has been repeatedly ignored; and that
- ☞ Due to gender discrimination and the impact on it of intersectionality statuses, women's knowledge and experiences have been often excluded from decision making.

The statement made in the CBD's preamble, highlights public concern regarding the integration of gender equity between women and men into development proposals. Thus, the CBD urges giving due consideration to such experiences in the elaboration of strategies and work plans at sub-national, national and international levels. However, this does not explicitly refer to the need to guarantee equitable distribution between women and men of the benefits derived from the conservation and utilization of genetic resources.

The Conference of the Parties (COP) at its Fourth Meeting in 1998 started addressing benefit sharing issues and their application. Since COP4, the Parties have specifically addressed Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits (ABS) at the meetings held by the group of experts. A main result of these initiatives is the "Bonn Guidelines on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising Out of Their Utilization"<sup>2</sup>, adopted at COP6, held in The Hague, in 2002. Despite the fact that the content of this document entails considerable progress in terms of the provision of mechanisms to put into practice the spirit of the Convention, as far as guaranteeing greater access and fair benefit sharing is concerned, it does not exceed the limitations of the CBD regarding gender equity.

If the social and economic equity concept related to the utilization of biological diversity resources is developed without consideration of existing gender gaps, its achievement will be precluded by relegating to a second place the gender relations present in the access, control and distribution of benefits of genetic resources.

**To promote equity, diversity must be recognized**

The recognition of diversity as a quality whereby ecosystems become more stable and capable of adapting to existing conditions is a fact that is increasingly stretching out towards the social and political dimensions of life on earth.

Recognition of the importance of the knowledge possessed by women, including their use, rights and needs regarding local plant biodiversity, would allow achieving the two most important objectives of the Convention on Biodiversity: the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable distribution of the benefits derived from the utilization there of (Howard, 2003).

Diversity refers to the idea of abundance and variety. It entails acknowledging differences and the multiple possibilities involved in understanding, living and working within a given reality.

Diversity recognizes differences, dissimilarities, individualities, specificity and uniqueness. When referring to diversity, the objective not only entails recognition of the difference of the "other", but also understanding the entire setting, the universe as the integration of diversity.

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.biodiv.org/decisions/default.aspx?m=cop-06&d=24>

When making reference to the world or the planet, all conforming elements look alike as a whole, acquire a common characteristic. Yet, by recognizing each of the elements involved in the diversity concept, it is possible to explain why such elements are far from alike.

When linking the concepts of biodiversity to issues of rights, what immediately stands out is conventions and other international agreements stipulating the universal nature of human rights; that is, that all human beings have equal rights. Nevertheless, when people are analyzed separately, it becomes necessary to recognize the specific rights of some of them, for example, among others, the rights of children, of women, and the right to self-determination of indigenous peoples. Such recognition stems from the assessment of specific elements, the differences that exist between people, and the elements that become a prerequisite in order to achieve equal rights for all human beings.

Diversity is, therefore, part of everything we know and, often times, it even explains the operation of processes involving life, culture and history. Throughout the centuries, each human society has undergone an adaptation process to assure its survival. In this process, they have used the natural resources available in their environment. This situation has resulted in a wide range of cultural relations and expressions and social organizations and standards that regulate the utilization of biodiversity. From ancient times to the present, human societies have established particular relations between the environment and culture. This is what is recognized as cultural diversity.

Cultural diversity refers to the plural nature and interaction of the cultural expressions that coexist in the world, which--therefore--contribute to enrich the common legacy of humans.

Therefore, it is essential to understand cultural, social and economic processes so as to promote and facilitate equitable access and fair sharing of the benefits of biodiversity.

### **Access and benefit sharing of genetic resources by promoting equity from a gender perspective**

It is well recognized that in order to have a better understanding of nature it is necessary to comprehend its inter-relations and the fact that these are not detached from human activities. Consequently, the use of a gender equity perspective can contribute to the analysis of the links between people - men and women, rich and poor, young and old and their natural environment.

Poverty conditions experienced by millions of women across the world are closely linked to the limitations they confront in gaining access to resources, including the components of biodiversity. In spite of the fact that an increasing number of experiences are highlighting the sustainable manner in which women use biological diversity, it is often true that they do so without equitable participation in the access and control of such resources. There is a tendency to ignore the natural spaces predominantly used by women in favor of those used by men, and undervalue non-commercial (mostly female) production spaces in favor of commercial (mostly male) production spaces.

### **Common Property Resources and Biodiversity**

Common property resources need to be recognized as critical to poor rural women's food and nutritional security and survival and should not be considered as "wastelands" to be sold for easy profits. They are also places of rich biodiversity.

Rai and Sherpa Forager-Farmers in Eastern Nepal are poor rural women living in a fragile environment. They are also specialists in ethnobiology. While many outsiders choose to see *jangals* – common property resources such as forest land, fallow fields, grass and pasture lands - as "wild wastelands", for these poor women they represent a rich source of plants, seeds and nuts for food and medicines, as well as products for animal litter, compost and building and household materials. To convert wild plants into nutritious food requires extensive knowledge of plant characteristics as many of these plants have to be detoxified before they can be consumed. Women's knowledge about production, preservation and storage is essential to harvesting *jangals* and sustaining families. Furthermore, these "wild wasteland" resources are managed through complex relations encompassing gender, class, caste, religious and economic factors (Daniggelis, 2003: 83-97).

In connection with the role of women, as pointed out in paragraph 13 of the CBD's Preamble, it is recognized that in rural areas women are usually responsible for crop sowing and harvesting, including the preservation of valuable genetic resources. Women are usually more active than men in local economies, where a larger variety of species are used than those traded at regional or international markets. And there are even some societies where "women determine the utilization of wild species in order to guarantee a sustainable use" (Glowka, et. al., 1996). Women carry out tasks involving the sustainable use of biodiversity resources, but given their female gender, their activities are not recognized and valued

There are many communities where cultural control mechanisms are found based on the vast amount of traditional knowledge resulting from the interaction of people with the biological resources, which has helped them to prevent over-exploitation and establish life patterns within limits determined by their availability. Some examples of cultural control include extraction and selective hunting patterns, grazing rights, wood-cutting restrictions, protection of forest areas for religious motives and plants for ritualistic purposes, protection of water springs, etc. Women are involved in many of these activities, and there are cases where they may even have exclusive responsibility over such tasks.

In order to recognize and promote traditional practices involving the utilization of biological resources, it is essential to consider the link between local communities and the components of biodiversity, value such relations, and recognize and acknowledge differences based on gender. Otherwise, women's knowledge and experiences will continue to be ignored and will be lost.

The accelerated loss of biological diversity does not only represent a loss of genes, species and ecosystems, but also weakens the basis of human cultural diversity that has evolved with it and depends on its existence. The loss of cultural practices and languages of indigenous and local communities entail the loss of biodiversity related traditional knowledge, innovations and practices. Article 8j of the CBD emphasizes the importance of traditional knowledge in the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity.

### **Women Sustaining Plant and Cultural Diversity**

Greenburg's research with the Yucatec Mayan immigrant communities in the Quintana Roo area of Mexico indicates that Mayan women, now in urbanizing centers, continue the indigenous traditions of house lots or *solar* and with it sustain their cultural identity. House lots, a traditional practice of Mayan women involves using the house lot for a range of land-use activities such as growing gardens of a wide diversity of plants, raising small animals, having a workshop, an outdoor kitchen, a latrine, as well as it being a place for social gatherings and to raise children. The dislocation to the Quintana Roo area for paid employment did not stop women from continuing with their house lots. Greenburg documents 140 plant species in 33 immigrant house lots. Of these, 49 species are commonly used for food - fruits, vegetables and condiments - and include species from the Yucatan, the area around Quintana Roo where they are disappearing due to urbanization and from neighbors and friends. The plants women grow are intimately tied to cultural identity through their cuisine. The distinctiveness of their cultural practices and rituals are maintained through the special dishes that are prepared for life cycle celebrations such as weddings, quinceaneras (fifteenth birthdays), baptisms, etc. and in turn, women are sustaining the biodiversity of plants that are being rapidly lost to deforestation and urbanization (2003: 51-65).

However, one of the pending tasks of the CBD is to further analyze such knowledge and practices in order to clearly identify the ways in which traditional knowledge contributes to achieving the Convention's three objectives. These analyses should further recognize that the knowledge of local communities is influenced by culturally established gender relations. Such information is essential to make progress in connection with the understanding about the structure and operation of genes, species and ecosystems, as well as Based upon the above considerations, one of the first steps to achieve equitable access and distribution of the benefits of genetic resources is to understand the impacts that social inequalities have on the use, management and conservation of biodiversity.

In the, South American Andes, women play an important role in the conservation and transfer of knowledge about medicinal properties of local plants. They also play a leading role in the promotion of genetic diversity through their role in the conservation of seeds for local food production. By excluding the needs, interests and knowledge of women from the processes involving resource improvement and uses, the projects ignore information as well as practices that bear considerable impact on the sustainability of the relations established between human beings and the environment (Wiens, 2002).

To this effect, it should be clearly understood that in societies as diverse as those existing around the planet, people relate to natural resources in very different manners. The way in which they use, preserve, know and participate in sharing of the benefits offered by biodiversity, is directly dependent upon their socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, age, among many others. It is particularly important to understand how the relations between men and women affect the access, use and control of genetic resources: women and men know about different resources, the knowledge men and women have about the same resource may be different, men and women organize their knowledge in a distinctly different manner, and maintain and transmit it in differently.

In order to move forward towards equitable access and sharing of the benefits arising from the use of genetic resources, it is essential to take into consideration that:

- ? It is necessary to make **visible** the differentiated relation that women and men establish with biodiversity resources. Despite the fact that over the past fifteen years considerable efforts have been made at national and international fora, such as the Convention on

Biological Diversity, very little progress has been made about understanding the fundamental role that women play regarding the use, management and conservation of biodiversity. It is essential to recognize that women and men have particular needs, interests and aspirations, including the fact that they make distinctly different contributions to the conservation and sustainable management of biodiversity.

### **Recognition of Women's Technical Environmental Knowledge**

Indian female farmers and women cooperatives worked collaboratively with entomologists at the International Crop Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics to find improved pest-resistant pigeon peas that also had other qualities valued in traditional varieties e.g., leaf production, taste, wood biomass, market price and storability (IPRI).

Women and men are both sources of knowledge about sustainable resource management practices, but they may know about different species and practices according to their activities. In Brazil, ethno-botanical surveys conducted in the Jaú National Park found that midwives were knowledgeable about certain plants, while traditional medicine men knew about others. Gendered knowledge also varies by class, age, and ethnicity, underscoring its complexity. Understanding the different knowledge of women and men in different socio-economic circumstances helps to determine appropriate and sustainable interventions (Oliveria, P. and Elza S. Anderson, 1999).

? Making visible the role that women play in biodiversity conservation, sustainable use of resources and the survival of the human species is only the beginning. These roles should be **valued** in their broadest scope. Special attention should be given to the significance of the ancestral knowledge possessed by women about biological diversity resources.

? Only when the knowledge and contributions made by women are clearly acknowledged and valued, will it be possible to promote an **effective participation** of women in decision-making at the local and international levels. The meaningful participation of women in decision-making processes entails carrying out actions to overcome gender inequalities at all levels, including participation, information sharing and generation, education, empowerment, technology transfer, organization, financial assistance and training, among others. The exclusion of women as agents of development means ignoring half of the planet's population, which-in turn-affects the efficiency and effectiveness of the actions promoted.

#### **Participation**

From a gender perspective, the equitable sharing of benefits derived from the use of genetic resources, allows to overcome not only the inequalities concerning the access women and men have to such resources, but also to ensure that the design and identification of the expected benefits respond to the women's interests, thus, favorably influencing their social position and condition.

The inequality between women and men has generated different conditions regarding the access to biodiversity resources and the possibilities (legal, financial, etc.) to negotiate fair benefit sharing arrangements. The **enhanced visibility, valuation and effective participation** of women are essential requirements to redefine processes towards more equitable conditions for the access of men and women to biodiversity resources.

The identification of the role that women play in the use and conservation of biodiversity and genetic resources constitutes a significant step towards recognizing the contribution women make to local livelihoods and the maintenance of ecosystems. Much remains to be done to ensure the equitable distribution between men and women of the benefits obtained from such tasks. Even greater is the gap that needs to be overcome in order to guarantee that the people-men and women - who sustain the families and communities, may equally and equitably share the responsibility over the conservation and sustainable utilization of their resources.

From a gender perspective, the importance of an equitable distribution of the benefits derived from the utilization of genetic resources, lies not only in the possibility of overcoming inequalities that may exist concerning access by women and men, but also in ensuring that the design and identification of expected benefits may respond to the interests of women, and thus provide them with the opportunity to improve their social conditions and survival.

In this context, and in order to mainstream gender considerations in Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS) arrangements IUCN suggests the following:

1. Women's empowerment need to be promoted in ABS negotiations by:
  - Information sharing regarding ABS negotiations, especially those that include Prior Informed Consent (PIC) and Mutually Agreed Terms (MAT).
  - Promote women's participation in decision making processes by supporting mechanisms to ensure that decisions are made available to women, indigenous and local communities.
  - Promoting women's participation in leadership positions by supporting participatory processes.
  - Support measures to enhance women's capacity to fully represent their interests at negotiation venues.
2. Women's participation as fundamental stakeholders should be promoted by:
  - Providing information and training, especially regarding scientific and legal advice, in order for them to be able to participate effectively.
  - Provide support and capacity building, so that women may be actively engaged in various stages of access and benefit-sharing arrangements.
3. In relation to the implementation of MAT, it is essential to enhance the visibility of women's roles in the use and conservation of biodiversity resources, so that their knowledge, traditions and values are recognized and respected.
4. The Parties should develop gender-sensitive mechanisms in order to ensure the effective participation of women as stakeholders in the different steps of the process involving access and benefit sharing. This should include equal participation:
  - When determining access, negotiating and implementing mutually agreed terms, and in benefit sharing arrangements.
  - In the development of national strategies, policies or regimes on access and benefit sharing.
5. Monitoring and evaluation systems need to be developed to promote an equitable access and benefit sharing of genetic resources and should include gender-sensitive indicators.

6. The language used by the Convention and the Bonn Guidelines to address the subjects involving indigenous and local communities are gender neutral. Efforts should be made to explicitly state that such groups are composed of women and men, as their realities and needs are distinctly different and should be made clearly visible and adequately represented.
7. In the context of ABS arrangements, intellectual property rights and other traditional knowledge, protective measures should take into account gender differences in the conservation, transmission and acquisition of such knowledge. (Schäfer, C. et. al., 2002)
8. Gender needs to be mainstreamed in National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs).

### **Advantages of linking a gender perspective to access to genetic resources and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits**

When policies and programs have recognized differences among men and women, even within the same community, household or stakeholder groups, biodiversity conservation has experienced direct benefits.

- ? More diverse knowledge is captured about the usefulness of biodiversity and genetic resources. For example, in Uttar Pradesh, men primarily use gathered forest plants for fodder and mulch for agriculture, and women's uses were more related to the household, e.g., medicines, tonics, cleansers, fiber, food and tools. Elsewhere, women's criteria reflect the diverse ways in which they use plant materials (e.g., food, nutrition and culinary preferences, thatch, mat-making, fodder, fuel). In addition, women's knowledge about "neglected" species has been tapped.
- ? More genetic resources are available for research and use. Women have a differentiated and often broader set of criteria, in comparison with men, for the selection of varieties. Howard discussed how Rwandan women produce more than 600 varieties of beans and the Peruvian Aguaruna women plant more than 60 varieties of manioc (2001).
- ? Equitable access to resources and inputs can support biodiversity. Both, women and men, working with plants and animals need credit, technical support and extension services.
- ? Biodiversity research and program decisions have included broader and more diverse perspectives at local, national and regional levels, and have better reflected women's needs and preferences (e.g., access to land and other natural resources, resolution of land-use conflicts, animal transport, livelihood diversity, household food security during difficult economic and climatic conditions).
- ? Community and national level regulations and enforcement have become more effective through broader consultation.
- ? There are some countries that are taking advantage of the compliance with CBD provisions in order to promote the creation of policies and legislation to safeguard the human rights of men and women as well as indigenous and local communities. This is a great opportunity to promote equality and equity between men and women of the communities, given the fact that, while recognizing their knowledge about biological resources, efforts are being made to promote a more equitable access to their utilization and benefits, including decisions made about them.



## References

- Daniggelis, Ephrosine. 2003. "Women and 'Wild' Foods: Nutrition and Household Security among Rai and Sherpa Forager-Farmers in Eastern Nepal", in *Women and Plants: Gender Relations in Biodiversity Management and Conservation*. Ed. Patricia L Howard. Zed Books, UK with GTZ Germany and IDRC Canada.
- Farnsworth, N.R., Akerele, O., Bingel, A.S., Soejarto, D.D. and G. Zhengang. 1985. *Medicinal plants in therapy*.
- Glowka, L., Burhenne-Guilmin, F and Synge, H. 1996. *Guía del Convenio sobre la Diversidad Biológica*. Cambridge: World Conservation Union.
- Greenberg, Laurie. S.Z. (2003). "Women in the Garden and Kitchen: The Role of Cuisine in the Conservation of Traditional House Lot Crops among Yucatec Mayan Immigrants", in *Women and Plants: Gender Relations in Biodiversity Management and Conservation*. Ed. Patricia L Howard. Zed Books, UK with GTZ Germany and IDRC Canada.
- GTZ. 2002. *Managing agrobiodiversity in rural areas*. ([www.gtz.de/agrobiodiv/english/overview.htm](http://www.gtz.de/agrobiodiv/english/overview.htm))
- Howard, Patricia. L. 2003. *Women and Plants: Gender Relations in Biodiversity Management and Conservation*. Zed Books, UK with GTZ Germany and IDRC Canada.
- Howard, P. 2001. *Women in the plant world: the significance of women and gender bias for biodiversity conservation*. IUCN, Gland.
- International Food Policy Research Institute (IPRI). [www.ifpri.cgiar.org/institute/fact\\_gender.htm](http://www.ifpri.cgiar.org/institute/fact_gender.htm)
- Oliveira, Regina. and Elza S. Anderson, 1999. *Gender, Conservation and Community Participation: the Case of the Jaú National Park, Brazil*, Case Study No. 2, Gender, Community Participation and Natural Resource Management Series, Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida, Managing Ecosystems and Resources with Gender Emphasis (MERGE).
- Schäfer, C and et.al. 2002. *The Convention on Biological Diversity: Ensuring Gender-Sensitive Implementation*. GTZ. Eschborn.
- Weins, P. 2002. *Género y la gestión de los recursos naturales en América Latina: conocimientos para el desarrollo*. En: *Género y Biodiversidad: balance y desafíos en el Ecuador*. Special supplement of the *Chacarera Journal: Gender and Biodiversity*. No. 2.

*For more information, please contact :*

Mrs. Lorena **AGUILAR REVELO**

Coordinadora Regional para Mesoamerica/ Senior Gender Advisor

Área Temática Social

UICN Oficina Regional para Mesoamérica

Moravia. De Perifericos 200m Sur

100m Este. casa esquinera blanca de porton verde

Apartado Postal 0146-2150

San José

Costa Rica

Tel: ++(506) 241-0101

Fax: ++(506) 240-9934

Email: [lorena.aguilar@iucn.org](mailto:lorena.aguilar@iucn.org)

Mrs. Montserrat **BLANCO**

Consultora, Area Temática Social

UICN Oficina Regional para Mesoamérica

PO Box 146-2150 Moravia

Costa Rica

Tel: (506) 241 0101

Fax: (506) 240 9934

Email: [montserrat.blanco@iucn.org](mailto:montserrat.blanco@iucn.org)