

Gender and forests in a changing landscape

Understanding women's participation in forestry in Thailand

Policy brief



Photo by Ratchada Arpornsilp

Key messages

- Despite the commitment of the Royal Thai Government (RTG) to promote gender equality, women's decision-making and representation in leadership positions in the forestry sector remain extremely low.
- Evidence-based research and gender-disaggregated statistics in forestry are needed to enhance understanding of the diversity of forest-dependent communities and women's concerns and priorities.
- The technical capacity of forestry officials, including decision-makers, on gender analysis must be developed to promote gender mainstreaming in forestry.

Background

As a signatory to various human rights conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Thailand has undertaken various initiatives to promote gender equality across all sectors. For example, the Eleventh National Economic and Social Development Plan (2012-2016) is a departure from the previous growth-oriented approach to more of a people-centred development approach. This plan has prioritized promotion of women's participation in decision-making processes at subnational and national levels for greater contribution to national socio-economic development. The Office of Women's Affairs and Family Development of the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security¹ is mandated to promote gender equality and women's empowerment through its five-yearly National Women's Development Plans (Alizai and Apipoonyanon 2013).

Men and women in Thailand have distinct roles, skills and knowledge in relation to forestry. Women generally focus more on protecting traditional knowledge, forest rituals and keeping records of customary laws on forest protection and conservation (Box 1). More than 60 percent of forest-dependent women gather non-wood forest products (NWFPs) for subsistence and sale (Kanjana and Kaewchote 2004; Upadhyay et al. 2013). Men, on the other hand, generally enforce written agreements and laws that pertain to logging and forest patrolling, and tend to dominate decision-making processes concerning the management of forests and forest resources.

Due to women's reliance on forests, primarily for subsistence, their rights and responsibilities in forest management and protection have often been perceived as secondary to those of men. Women are rarely accepted as programme and field team leaders at the subnational level and in executive positions in forestry institutions at the national level. As a result, women are under-represented in decision-making in forestry planning and management at both levels. This is compounded by inadequate evidence-based research and data collection on women's contributions to sustainable forest management, which inhibits informed gender-inclusive forest policy planning and formulation (Alizai and Apipoonyanon 2013).

This brief discusses how gender perspectives are being integrated in Thailand's forest policies and laws in terms of women's representation, participation, access to and decision-making in forest use and management. It highlights key challenges and offers recommendations for further promotion of gender mainstreaming in forestry.

Box 1. Capacity development for women forest users

The women of Ban Thung Yao village have played indispensable roles in managing and protecting the community forest and its resources; they put inherited rituals and traditional practices at the core of all activities and enforce contemporary laws and regulations. They serve as community-based entrepreneurs, environmental monitors, researchers, decision-makers and instructors; this has resulted in greater recognition of Ban Thung Yao as a model community forest in terms of gender representation, thereby offering substantial learning to other stakeholders. Ban Thung Yao women strongly feel that they need support from various networks and organizations to develop their capacities, particularly on contemporary forest-related issues like climate change initiatives so that their voices can be heard at different levels. This would be useful in devising forest-related policies and programmes (Upadhyay et al. 2013).

¹ As the national instrument for women's welfare, the office promotes the development of women's capacity, gender equality and the strength of the family institution. It also develops policies, measures and mechanisms to promote and support other units in the public and private sectors to implement policies on the development of women's capacity, the protection of women's rights and the promotion of gender equality and social justice.

Gender concerns in forest policies

Following the devastating flash floods in Southern Thailand in 1988 and realizing the impact of increasing deforestation and degradation, the RTG enforced a nationwide logging ban in 1989. Since then, over half of the country's 19 million ha of forest has been designated as protected forest, covering around one-fifth of the total land area (RECOFTC 2013). Laws governing national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, such as the National Park Act, have made it illegal to harvest timber or even NWFPs from forests. This has affected forest-dependent communities adversely as they are unable to access what had previously supported their livelihoods.

The provisions of the National Forest Policy No. 18 (1985), the Forest Act (1941), the National Forest Reserve Act (1964), the Forest Plantation Act (1992) and the National Park Act (1961) have focused on the protection and preservation of natural resources and prohibit their collection and exploitation for the direct or indirect benefit of the state or local communities. As women are the primary users of NWFPs for both subsistence and income generation, these restrictions have affected their consumption patterns and livelihoods considerably.

The RTG subsequently began supporting increased devolution following the 1998 Cabinet Resolution, which allowed local communities to use forests for their livelihoods and live inside national parks. The Decentralization Act (1999) enabled local government units to facilitate local people's engagement in natural resource management, including forestry, by facilitating development of management plans, access to resources and networking. As a result, the Royal Forest Department was successful in formally registering approximately 7 000 community forestry sites outside protected areas by 2010 (RECOFTC 2013).

Thailand's Constitution enshrines the rights of local communities in policy planning on environmental development and conservation, including women's participation (SOHR 2007). But the recognition of gender rights and responsibilities and women's participation and representation as key stakeholders in forest management and decision-making remain absent in forest laws and acts (Alizai and Apipoonyanon 2013). To mainstream gender further in Thai forest policies and practices, more efforts are needed to address the following key challenges:

- Forest laws and regulations presume forest communities as homogenous social entities and do not take into account the rights of men and women and their different responsibilities.
- Women are under-represented in decision-making and in leadership roles at national and subnational levels in forestry institutions.
- Limited research on gender and forestry and lack of gender-disaggregated data compounded by inadequate technical expertise hinder gender mainstreaming in forestry planning.



Moving forward

Community forestry in Thailand is converging with the need for climate change impact mitigation and adaptation, which presents possible means for developing participatory forest management legislation and practices to ensure greater benefits for women and other vulnerable groups. Forest-dependent men and women, however, face many challenges that need to be addressed before these groups will be able to benefit from emerging community forestry initiatives. The RTG can address these issues through the following recommendations:

- Convene dialogues and consultation meetings at national and subnational levels for the inclusion of women's concerns in forestry-related legal instruments and measures; review existing forest plans and programmes to make them more gender-sensitive and to promote gender equality.
- Strengthen the sustained engagement of civil society organizations in national consultations to help ensure development and implementation of gender-responsive forest plans and programmes.
- Develop the technical capacities of forest officials on gender analysis to enable them to facilitate the involvement of women in forestry-related planning.
- An appropriate mechanism is required to collect gender-disaggregated data as lack of evidence-based data on gender in forestry impedes informed policy planning. This can be done by investing in research and creating a gender-disaggregated database to facilitate better knowledge generation on gender concerns and priorities in forestry.

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RECOFTC – The Center for People and Forests
P.O. Box 1111
Kasetsart Post Office
Bangkok 10903, Thailand
Tel +66 (0)2 940 5700
Fax +66 (0)2 561 4880
info@recoftc.org
www.recoftc.org

FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific
39 Phra Atit Road
Bangkok 10200, Thailand
Tel +66 (0)2 697 4000
Fax +66 (0)2 697 4445
FAO-RAP@fao.org
www.fao.org