

Gender and forests in a changing landscape

# Understanding women's participation in forestry in Fiji

Policy brief



Photo by Maria Ratutokarua

## Key messages

- Women's participation in decision-making in the management of forests and forest resources is very limited despite their skills, knowledge and involvement in forestry.
- Proper support mechanisms to promote women's access to credit and markets would help to foster their participation in community-based forest enterprises to enhance their livelihoods.
- The Department of Forestry should promote women's leadership in policy-making bodies and ensure adequate human and financial resources for gender mainstreaming.

# Background

Fiji's commitment to gender equality is evidenced by development of the National Women's Plan of Action (NWPA) and adherence to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Additionally, Fiji's Road Map for Democracy and Sustainable Socio-Economic Development 2010-2014 has targeted gender equality and the empowerment of women in development schemes (Vuki 2013).

Men and women in Fiji have distinct roles, skills and knowledge in relation to forestry. Women collect fuelwood and different types of food, herbs and raw materials for consumption and sale from forests. Despite their heavy reliance on forestry-related products, women are under-represented in decision-making positions, as men dominate decision-making about the management of forests and their resources. Consequently, women's participation in forest governance at national and community levels is limited. In addition, women's share of formal employment in forestry is significantly lower than that of men and tends to be concentrated towards the bottom of the pay scale in the labour market (Narsey 2007; Vuki 2013).

As Fiji is a patriarchal society, tribal landownership is ceded to men and in many cases women only have user rights to tribal land. Farmland leases are issued to men as heads of households and are not registered under the names of both spouses, so women are excluded from inheritance rights over customary land. Women's lack of land rights contributes to their poor access to credit facilities and limited agroforestry and forest-based livelihood options as they cannot use land title deeds as loan collateral. Customary land tenure is a significant issue in Fiji as 82 percent of the land is owned in this fashion (Nayacakalou 2001; ADB 2006; Narsey 2007).

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

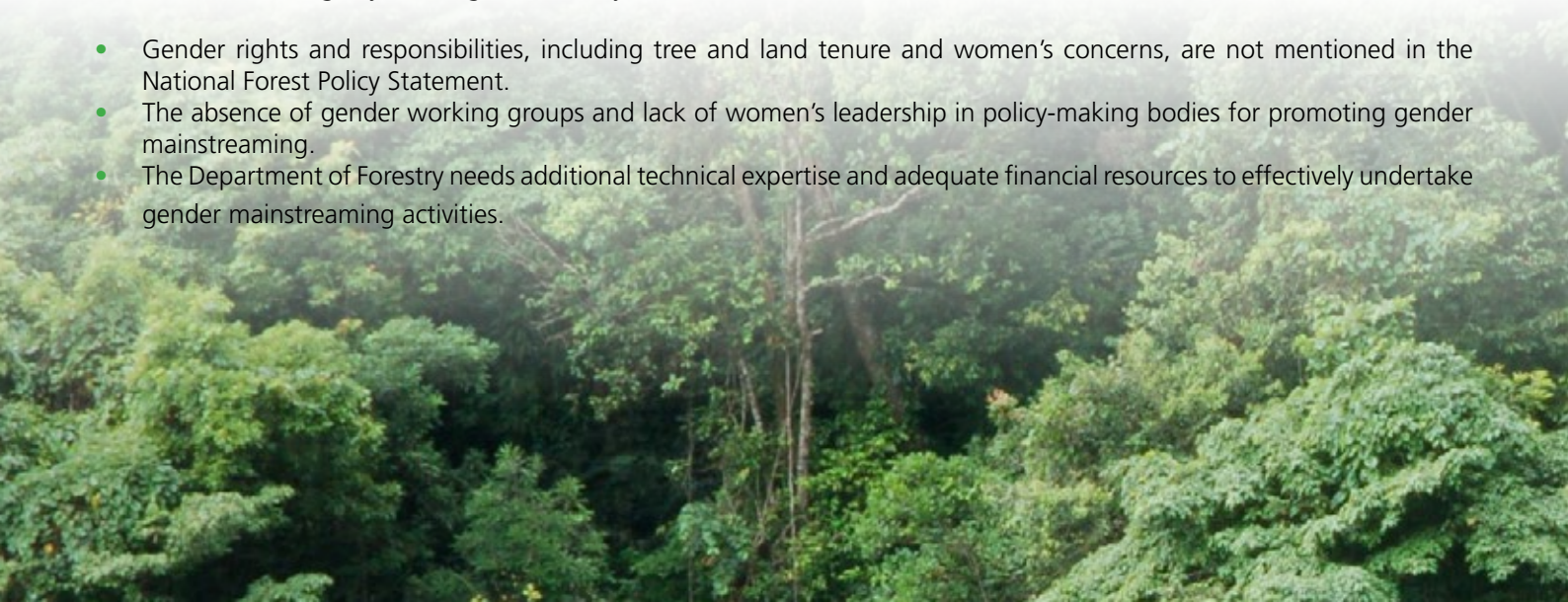
## Gender concerns in forest policies

Fiji's first National Forest Policy and Forest Act in the early 1950s viewed forestry primarily in the context of forest management for timber production. The Forest Act was superseded in 1992 by the Forest Decree, which was a comprehensive attempt to respond to several decades of changing and broadening requirements in the forestry sector and to address social, economic, environmental, cultural and political developments (MoFF 2007; MoNP 2013). Later, the National Forest Policy Statement (2007) outlined the vision for Fiji's forestry sector with primary objectives to upgrade forest industry, produce high-value products and develop an institutional framework for sustainable forest management (MoFF 2013). However, with no gender-specific guidelines to enhance women's participation and representation in forestry, inclusion of women's concerns regarding their forest-based livelihoods and land inheritance rights has been poor. Hence, women's involvement in decision-making for the management of forests and forest resources is limited compared to their male counterparts (Bynoe et al. 2011).

In response, governmental and non-governmental organizations as well as the donor community have increased promotion of women's empowerment-related programmes and projects in forestry (Box 1). For example, recently the government has initiated an equal employment policy for recruiting women in the forestry sector. Furthermore, the National University of Fiji has started to offer forestry and agroforestry courses which are altering mindsets that forestry is a male profession; they also underscore that it is essential to recognize gender rights and responsibilities in the forestry sector (Vuki 2013).

Although Fiji is making progress in keeping its commitments towards promoting gender equality, more efforts are needed to address the following key challenges in forestry:

- Gender rights and responsibilities, including tree and land tenure and women's concerns, are not mentioned in the National Forest Policy Statement.
- The absence of gender working groups and lack of women's leadership in policy-making bodies for promoting gender mainstreaming.
- The Department of Forestry needs additional technical expertise and adequate financial resources to effectively undertake gender mainstreaming activities.



### **Box 1. Women in community-based forest enterprises**

Several initiatives have been undertaken by governmental and non-governmental organizations to promote and encourage the participation and empowerment of women in forestry. For example, Wainimate, an NGO, was established to promote awareness of traditional medicine within communities.

Workshops on traditional medicine have been instrumental in promoting women's special knowledge and skills related to planting, harvesting and selling certain medicinal plants and products. Besides traditional medicines, women's handicraft work in Fiji is providing wider opportunities to promote and encourage equal participation of men and women. This is also relevant to community-based conservation and forest enterprises, microfinance business schemes, nursery management and provision of tree seedlings for reforestation.

Recognizing the potential of the handicraft industry, many women have started to use forest resources in making mats, baskets and other products for local markets. Hence, more efforts are being geared towards strengthening women's forest alliances and networks by providing information and facilitating access to credit facilities and new market opportunities for traditional herbal medicines and other forest products to promote women's empowerment in community-based conservation and forest enterprises (Salim and Ullstein 1993; Vuki 2013).

## **Moving forward**

Although some positive initiatives in promoting women's empowerment in forestry programmes and projects are taking place in Fiji, the following recommendations are suggested to mainstream gender further in forest policies and practices:

- Dialogue and consultation meetings at national and subnational levels must be conducted to help ensure the inclusion of women's concerns in national forest policy and relevant regulations, both at the formulation and review stages.
- Conduct awareness-raising workshops on gender mainstreaming; the technical capacity of relevant forestry officials on gender analysis and gender-responsive planning and budgeting should be developed to strengthen the working relationship between national entities dealing with forests and social affairs.
- Foster the relationship and exchanges of support between the Department of Forestry and the Ministry of Women, Social Welfare and Poverty Alleviation.
- Prioritize the formation of a gender working group within the Department of Forestry to oversee capacity development and awareness-raising about specific legal and regulatory barriers that women encounter in the forestry sector, as well as to promote gender mainstreaming.
- Allocation of adequate financial resources for gender-specific activities within the Department of Forestry, with a percentage allocated to recruitment, training and promotion of female staff for leadership positions in policy-making bodies.



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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](mailto:info@recoftc.org)  
[www.recoftc.org](http://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](mailto:FAO-RAP@fao.org)  
[www.fao.org](http://www.fao.org)