



Indigenous women's knowledge, roles, decision-making and ownership of forestland in customary practice and their links to community forestry emerging practices

Info brief



Mada Buga Village, Waimaw Township, Kachin State, Myanmar

Nhkum Brang Awng and Kyaw Thet

Context

Understanding gender roles and how women and men share power is vital for managing resources in a sustainable way. These roles are shaped by the values, norms, customs and culture of the people.

This study was conducted to explore and analyze the experience, traditional knowledge, roles, ownership of forestland and customary practices of indigenous women in Mada Buga Village, Waimaw Township, Kachin State. Mada Buga is the name in the Kachin language and Aungmyay-2 is the official name of the village.

Research questions

- What is the status of women's roles in customary land and forest governance?
- What are the existing knowledge, roles and rights of women to land and in forest governance?
- What are the opportunities and barriers of customary practice to increasing gender consideration in land and forest governance?
- How can the barriers to empowering women and achieving gender equality in decision-making be addressed?

Methodology

The research focused on one village to learn the trends of changing customary practices in community forestry there. Primary data collection at the grassroots level was conducted by interview surveys and focus group discussions with local stakeholders during the last week of March 2022. The interviewees were women and men living on forest land using forest resources. They were divided into sub-groups. Qualitative and quantitative reviews with local experts were used as quality control.

Findings

- Women in Mada Buga face a lack of access to forests, a lack of information and a lack of opportunities for leadership roles for making decisions about forestlands and community forestry.
- Women's customary rights of access, use, management and benefit sharing are weak compared to men's. In addition, women have limited customary rights to inherit property. This is compounded by a lack of legal rights for women generally and particularly to a lack of legal provisions that incorporate an understanding of women's traditional practices in forest lands.
- Culturally, women have rights only for basic sustenance because they hardly have any access to forest land. Women have taken on more responsibility and generate extra income for their families by selling herbs and other non-timber forest products. Their

contributions are rarely acknowledged and their rights are still less than those of men. However, women can control this income and use the money to educate their children and improve their children's social mobility, while promoting their own roles in household and community decision-making.

- The focus group discussions with people of Mada Buga Village revealed that most of the men are reluctant to recognize women's roles in managing forest lands and other activities outside of the family. This means that there is limited space for women's involvement in making decisions about community forest management.
- There has been controversy over whether to adopt and recognize customary practices or to raise voices for women's rights.
- Educated women and men have a sense of gender equality and equity. However, only a few educated women know the roles and rights of women in land and forest governance.

Conclusions

Further exploration of the roles of women in managing and conserving forestlands is urgently needed. This will help ensure that women's roles are not neglected and will be promoted in efforts to sustain the forest resource base for future generations. Younger women need to be made aware of the gender issues that arise in customary practices. This awareness will help them deal with them in the context of forest conservation and management in the future.

Women have been culturally conditioned to be skillful at juggling their household work along with the limited roles they are allowed in community forestry. Women's active representation and participation in community forest management needs to be encouraged. Their contributions, voices and responsibilities should be acknowledged and advocated for and they should be given decision-making roles for managing resources.

Recommendations

- Women's rights to access, manage, use and share the benefits from community forestry need to be legally recognized.
 - Women's education needs to be promoted over the long term, in particular with respect to the roles women can play in community forest management.
 - Indigenous women's knowledge of forests and forest products needs to be documented.
 - Younger women in rural areas should be given opportunities for training in forest management. They also need opportunities to build their awareness of gender issues in customary practices as well as in modern community forestry.
 - Community forest membership should maintain an equitable gender ratio and ensure equal rights to access, manage, use and share benefits.
- Women and men in indigenous communities need equal rights to their forests. These rights need to be recognized from community level to national level. The power relationships between indigenous women and men that are obstacles to women's enjoyment of the bundle of rights need to be acknowledged and addressed.
 - Women's role and participation in forest resource conservation should be raised by empowering women to ensure sustainable livelihoods.

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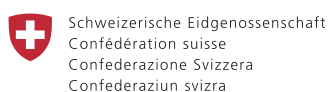
PO. Box 1111
Kasetsart Post Office
Bangkok 10903, Thailand
T +66 (0)2 940 5700
F +66 (0)2 561 4880
info@recoftc.org

@RECOFTC



recoftc.org

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