



Women and forestry

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Forestry has traditionally been one of the professions in which men have been most firmly and exclusively entrenched. It is not long since forestry schools - and hence the profession itself - were, in many places, open only to men. Arguments that the nature of the work makes it unsuitable for a woman persisted in forestry long after they had disappeared in other “manly” professions. The situation is changing fast. Women now make up a substantial part of the forestry student body in many if not most countries. And women are now practicing as foresters in both public and private service in sufficient numbers to have largely dispelled the earlier myths - though as contributors to this issue point out, these myths still persist in some places.

Even though the profession defined itself as man’s work, women were important in the development of forestry-but their contributions have remained largely invisible. Examples:

- Women’s clubs in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, for example, spearheaded American forest conservation efforts. Clubwomen led campaigns to protect wild areas and managed forests both, justifying their public efforts by calling attention to their ‘feminine’ interests in health, children, and education.

- The University of Minnesota professor Maria Sanford led the Minnesota Federation of Women’s groups in their efforts to protect 400,000 acres of forestland near the headwaters of the Mississippi River, which eventually resulted in a reserve that became the Chippewa National Forest.

- The Chipko Movement originated through the efforts of local village women, while also gaining support from Indian women who had long called attention to the effects of deforestation on watershed health.

- Hundreds of traditional trees useful for people like neem, lemon, sehjan, amla, jamun, mango, chironji, and mahua were planted symbolically in subdivision and District Court premises on 4th July 2011 by thousands of tribal women to protest against the plantation drive by Forest Department funded by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). A massive rally was taken out by tribal women on 4th July 2011 to assert their community rights over forests. This plantation programme by tribal was taken in massive scale under the banner of National Forum of Forest People and Forest Worker and locally-based Kaimur Kshetra Mahila Mazdoor Sangarsh

Samiti in all the lands that were reclaimed by tribal in Kaimur region of Sonbhadra, U.P., Jharkhand and Bihar in last few years.

- In Africa as well, women asserted their interest in watershed protection and forest restoration. Winner of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize for her reforestation efforts in Kenya, Wangari Muta Maathai was the first woman in East Africa to earn a Ph.D. When she returned to Kenya in 1966 after earning her undergraduate and masters degrees in the United States, Maathai was horrified by the degradation of her homeland’s forests. She believed that deforestation was leading to erosion and depletion of critical farmland, and she decided to solve the problem by having village women plant trees. She created the Green Belt Movement in 1976, developing it into a grassroots organization which taught women’s groups to create nurseries and plant trees to improve their local quality of life.

Women’s opportunities and achievements in forestry have increased enormously since the 1970s. In many forestry schools across the world, women are now a significant portion of the student body, and more professional foresters in both private and public sectors are now women. Women form more than half the staff in many non-governmental organizations devoted to forest conservation, (although most leaders of these organizations are male). Yet women continue to be excluded from many key decisions concerning forest resources, particularly at the community level in developing nations. Field studies have shown that the employment of women as field staff and officers in forest departments helps improve interface with village women in micro-planning and forest management. The absence of women among forestry field staff was recognised as a major constraint for promoting women’s participation in social forestry projects. In response, some states have recruited a few women field staff in positions equivalent to forest guards, terming them “village forestry workers” (Haryana, Tamil Nadu), “lady forest guards”. The Indian Forest Service opened to women in 1979, but its present level of 81 women officers constitute barely 3 per cent of the total cadre. Further, many states still do not allow women to enroll in their State Forest Services. In recent years, Himachal Pradesh has issued separate notifications for all cadres to allow women applicants by specifying the required physical standards. Karnataka, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh

have taken a policy decision to reserve one-third of all government jobs, including those in forest departments, for women'. In a move to empower the fairer sex, the Punjab government for the first time, has recruited 42 women as forest guard in the department of forest and wildlife preservation. Although women are a significant category of forest users, their participation in forest departments and formal local institutions is far lower than their contribution to forest-based livelihoods. Related to this recommendation are the results of a survey conducted in 1996, which indicated that women exhibit higher general regard for the environment than men. In part, it was this conclusion that suggested to the U.S. Forest Service that women specifically might be helpful in shifting the agency away from a traditional forestry multiple-use/sustained yield model to a more holistic one of ecosystem management.

Rural women and forestry : But the principal issues that need to be addressed in any consideration of forestry and women go far deeper than the question of career and job opportunities in the forestry profession, important though that is. More fundamental are issues relating to forestry and forest products in the lives of rural women in developing countries.

Women in the developing world often assume the role of “care taker” – for their families as well as for the other people and things around them. In some parts of the world, women rely on forest-related resources for the well-being of all who fall under their care. This effort typically involves the gathering of forest products for such purposes as fuel, fencing, food for the family, and fodder for the livestock. In Uttar Pradesh, India: “A study showed that women obtained 33-45% of their income from forests and common land, compared with only 13% in the case of men” (IUCN). Even given this reality, though, women are often ignored when it comes to developing policies for forest management. Given their significant role in, and contribution to, forest-based livelihoods, women have rarely been accorded due importance in planning of forestry programmes and formal forest management and protection systems. Therefore, their role in protection and management of forests largely through informal and self-initiated women’s groups (mdhila manduls) remains largely invisible and consequently unrecognised, unacknowledged and poorly reported. As a result, their ‘invisible’ forest management systems are often destabilised when, through supervision of ‘participatory’ programmes, control over forests is transferred to the male elite. The use of “women” and “forests” as synonyms has a material basis. Women spend almost 80 percent of their time in collecting fuel wood, fodder, grass, NTFP (Non Timber Forest Produce) etc from the forest and the sex ratio is higher in

forested areas. Women living in forests are not dependent on their families for their survival, instead forests provide food security to them and thus they are more independent.

As Robert Wazeka argues (1984), “When foresters seek local advice they turn, as men, to the men in the household or village - men whose perceptions of what is needed or suitable will often be quite different from those of the women....By failing to involve women, foresters not only fail to meet their needs but also lose the opportunity to benefit from their unique knowledge of what trees are appropriate.” Bina Agarwal (2001) shows in her analysis of village community forestry groups in India that “women’s exclusion from decision-making can negatively affect the long-term efficiency and sustainability of these initiatives (whatever the immediate gains). Since it is typically women who have to collect firewood and grasses regularly, their lack of involvement in framing workable forest use rules often compels them to violate the rules, in order to fulfill essential needs.” Until foresters recognize that non-timber products are key elements of forest diversity and forest economies, and those women are key players in forest resource decisions, significant improvement will be slow, but progress has been achieved in federal agencies. The challenge will be to extend these gains to all spheres of forest management and protection.

Generally speaking, forestry is not an anthropocentric field – it is about trees. Yet, the experiences of women in relation to forestry have been markedly different from those of their male counterparts, making gender issues pertinent to forestry. In comparison to men, women have often been slighted in terms of the types of jobs they are hired for and their access to and/or influence on forest policy decisions. While there is hard evidence to back these claims, women face an uphill battle in raising their concerns because, as a general rule, “forestry is not particularly responsive to social equity issues, including those pertaining to gender” While forestry can be defined beyond the limits of timber extraction, it is often equated with logging, which has historically been considered “men’s work”.

If women get independent rights to forests, it will lead to development and prosperity and the resources and assets will be utilized in a better way. There are two schools of thought in terms of women’s rights on natural resources. One is focused on efficiency and welfare and the other focuses on women’s struggle for equality and social justice. The former attempts to spread a neoliberal agenda whereas the latter is a struggle for equality and social justice, which should be the prime agenda for women’s struggle for right to natural resources.