

Gender issues in environmental sustainability and poverty reduction in the community: social and community issues

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Introduction

One of the most important lessons we have learned is that the consideration and inclusion of gender issues in environmental management and poverty reduction activities is crucial if development programs are to be relevant and sustainable. This paper explores some Pacific island experiences.

Gender issues vary between Pacific island countries according to geographic locations, level of economic development, social and cultural norms and values, population, migration and emigration, religion, media, legal institutions, level of education, political climate, and environments (UNIFEM, 1998). Different land ownership patterns, employment opportunities, economic policies and economic resources (agricultural, forest and fisheries resources) influence the roles of men and women in Pacific island countries. Short-term export of male and female labour, migration of Pacific islanders overseas, and rural to urban migration have all had an impact on the roles of men and women. Religious beliefs and the images of men and women projected by the media can either reinforce or weaken gender biases and gender stereotyping in Pacific island countries.

Ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and constitutional and legal provisions have affected men in different ways across the Pacific. The level and quality of education for boys and girls creates gender differences as do the gender stereotypes in the curriculum. Commitment of Pacific island countries to the advancement of women, including the provision of resources to promote affirmative action, and the provision of mechanisms to facilitate active and full participation of women in the development process, are major factors influencing gender relations.

Environment through the gender lens

Men and women in the Pacific perceive their environmental surroundings according to their gender roles in their respective community or country. Gender roles have been classified by UNIFEM (1995) in the following way:

- *reproductive roles* are tasks related to the production and socialisation of human beings within the family setting;
- *family care roles* are the nurturing of children and looking after the elderly members of the family;
- *productive roles* are income generating activities, paid work, subsistence agriculture or food growing for household use (food security);
- *community roles* are the social roles of men and women in community efforts for example, church, traditional obligations, parents meetings, women's groups;

- *decision-making/political roles* are the social and leadership/membership roles of men and women in larger public organisations.

Resource mapping undertaken by Pacific island communities reflect how differently men and women perceive their environment. These perceptions are closely linked to their roles in their own communities as the following examples show.

Fiji Islands, Ekubu Village, Vatulele

A resource map (Ecowoman, 1999) drawn by the married and young men of the village showed the traditional village structure and the importance of religion. The chief's house, his clan's houses, guide of the chief's house, chief's fishermen's house were highlighted in bright red ink. They also highlighted the sacred areas of the chiefly burial ground, and two old sites from which the clans were founded. Also drawn in red ink is the home of the church minister depicting his importance in the community. The map includes the airport, roads, church, school, health centre and post office. Agricultural activities include the cultivation of *masi* (for mat weaving), yams, coconuts as well as cattle farming. Marine resource use is confined mainly to fishing and transportation. Fishing methods in the map include spearfishing, line fishing and net fishing. The fish species caught are listed. Their map showed two types of boat, the smaller one that was used mainly for fishing and the boat with a hood that is the mode of transport to the mainland. The inclusion of a pond in the map highlighted its significance to the men as a landmark of their village. A bore hole is also shown as is the bush and grassland area that is used for grazing. They even named the tree species that grow in their bushland. Men of Ekubu village cultivate land for agricultural purposes, utilise their forest and marine resources and are involved in traditional leadership and religious roles. These are clearly shown on their map.

The women's maps on the other hand highlighted water sources, village boundaries, airport and resort locations. The women indicated three types of agricultural activities, that of *masi* cultivation, subsistence farming and coconut planting. *Masi* cultivation is shown concentrated inland on the eastern side of the island, sheltered by the cliff. Subsistence farming is concentrated on the east coast while coconut plantations are predominant in the windiest parts of the island. Water sources were indicated by green circles. *Masi* features significantly in the map indicating its importance as a cash crop for the women. Livestock were shown fenced as free ranging animals damage planted crops. The women showed the shop in their map and mangrove growing areas.

The women's map depicted the roles of women in tourism, transportation, agricultural activity, cash cropping (handicraft), health, and their concern for basic needs like water. There was no reporting of marine resource use in their map, indicating clearly that their role does not include fishing. It showed that the way the women of Ekubu village perceive their environment is closely linked to the division of labour.

It is useful to note that roles of men and women differ even within the same province depending on whether the village or community is coastal or in the highlands.

Gender roles in Palau Islands, Angaur State

Division of labour in the Angaur community is clearly defined (South Pacific Commission, 1995). Men's roles are confined to fishing activities and they have a close relationship to the sea and its resources. They can illustrate the types of fish, types of baits and the fishing methods that are appropriate to catch the desired fish species.

Women on the other hand are involved in in-shore coastal fishing and agriculture. They cut trees to make way for their vegetable and root crops gardens. They dig, cultivate the soil and plant seeds and seedlings. Angaur has poor saline soil so the women have learned to make compost manure that provides the medium for crops to grow. They take intricate care of their vegetable gardens visiting and making note of germination time to harvesting time of crops. They are also aware of pests, diseases and signs of nutritional disorder in the crops. Monkeys are a major pest on the island and women scare them by placing scarecrows in their plantations. Rats are another pest. Women mix grated coconut with leaves of a leguminous tree (*glyricidia*) to make a poisonous rat bait. To improve soil fertility women plant nitrogen-fixing trees. These trees are multi-purpose and can be used as firewood, insecticide, windbreaks and green manure. For iron deficiency problem in crops women mix rusted pieces of iron in water and spray the mixture on crops. Women know the seasons for crab and the species of crabs that are available for consumption.

Gender roles in Tonga Islands, Vava'u

Men in Tonga are traditionally responsible for farming and off-farm work to provide for food and income (Secretariat for the Pacific Community, 2000). Women's traditional roles include household and community activities, child-care, cooking, handicrafts, in-shore fishing and small-scale vegetable farming mainly for subsistence purposes.

Services and resources to assist commercial agricultural production have usually favoured men. Most agricultural officers are males who are more comfortable in dealing with male farmers. Men find it easier to access credit as they usually have land as security while women, who seldom own land, have to get a male relative to endorse a loan application.

Commercial farming of vanilla in Vava'u has resulted in the redefinition of women's and family roles in farming. Women now are seasonally employed in the vanilla production process: pollination of the flowers; curing vanilla beans; and sale of green peas in local markets.

Project case studies

Development projects that have been implemented without considering gender are seldom as successful as they could have been as the following case studies show.

Tuvalu Islands, Trochus Shell Rehabilitation Project: The Fisheries Department of Tuvalu initiated a project to rehabilitate the trochus shell population (Nimo, 2002). The department conducted meetings with the leaders concerned and trained some men to distribute the new seedling shells once offloaded by the helicopters. In addition, men were employed as watchmen to prevent people from harvesting the shells. Men participated in meetings, distribution of shells, planting of shells, monitoring and evaluation of the project. Women were not consulted at any stage of the project.

When the fisheries officer made his third evaluation trip he observed that the trochus shell population was greatly depleted. After discussion with the leaders, trained men and watchmen, it was found that the women had unknowingly harvested the shells for home consumption. They had not been informed of the project. It was also learned that some of the 'trained' men were harvesting and selling the shells.

Kiribati, Seaweed Project: Seaweed farming is a recent development and has become the second major earning activity in Kiribati (Tekinati, 1998). About 85 per cent of seaweed farmers are women who play a major role in planting and maintaining the seaweed farms. The Atoll Seaweed Company assists farmers by providing planting

materials such as ropes, raffia and seedlings, on credit. Once the farmers have established their farms and the seaweed has been harvested the loan amount is deducted. In most cases men market the dried products since they are too heavy for women to bring to the market place, thus men receive the income. However, on two islands, the company has provided a handcart and bicycle which farmers can borrow when taking their harvest to market. This has been very useful for women as it enables them to be involved in marketing and receiving benefits from their activity.

Two major constraints have been encountered in the seaweed project even though the importance of women's participation at all stages was recognised. These constraints are:

- women's involvement in seaweed farming was affected by their traditional commitment to the community. A good example is when the *maneaba* or meeting place needs new thatches, women are expected to collect pandanus leaves, make thatches and prepare food for the men until the *maneaba* is completed. This often takes one to two months and during that period seaweed farms are neglected causing a significant reduction in seaweed production;
- women have limited access to financial support as their loan applications are seldom successful. Most women are not in paid employment and do not have land as security for their loans.

Solomon Islands, logging forests: Fifty percent of the Solomon Island's economy is derived from the export of logs (Kari, 1998). Rural communities own these forests. Forestry, however, has brought problems rather than improvements in living standards. Village women see the disappearance of their forests but have no idea where the money from logging is going. The impact of logging is particularly devastating in densely populated areas where it has contributed to soil degradation and decline in soil fertility, thus affecting food production.

The impact on women is considerable. Women make their gardens in the forest, where they also harvest vines and tree plants, to feed their family. Due to large scale logging operations women have been forced to move further and further into the hills and mountains, where their cultivated gardens can be destroyed by roaming wild pigs. Food, herbal medicine and fuel are now either harder to collect or no longer available.

The impact on men has been a reduction in animals to hunt as most animals and birds move away from traditional breeding grounds to safer environments (Sanday, 1994). Men also lost access to building materials and wood for crafts.

Conclusions

Gender roles need to be acknowledged and respected by development agencies involved in environmental programs as lack of knowledge or consideration for gender issues can discourage or inhibit development efforts if not handled wisely. Development programs need to capitalise on the different ways in which men and women utilise their natural resources.

The lessons learned in the Pacific are:

- women and men are part of their environment;
- women and men's perception of their environment is a reflection of their gender division of labour;
- gender roles can change with economic development;
- women need to be included at all stages of the development projects: identification, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation;

- gender issues need to be identified by conducting an environmental impact assessment and social impact assessment before and after project implementation;
- the effect of a development project on the multiple roles of men and women must be considered to avoid overburdening them;
- women's striving for economic development is inhibited by their not owning land;
- natural resources are sources of livelihood for community members who needed to be consulted about any development efforts that target their resources; and
- cultural values must be considered in development programs because they influence the roles of men and women.

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