

UNIT 11

GENDER AND EQUITY

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11.0 INTRODUCTION

The move towards people's participation in forest management necessitates involvement of both women and men. This recognition has resulted in emergence of the concept of gender, which is different from the term sex. Although gender does not follow automatically from biological sex, social attributes, expectations, roles, position, and behaviour that are expected from females and males are based on biological differences.

11.1 GENDER AND EQUITY : THE CONCEPT

The term gender deals with the roles and relationships between man and woman which are determined by the social, political and economic context and not by biology. It is socially constructed and changeable while biological sex is natural and permanent, under normal circumstances (ICIMOD 1997). Therefore, the term gender is not synonym for the word women or abbreviation for women and men. It is socially created relationship and differences between women and men and not variations due to the naturally given biological sex. Thus, by using the term gender, it becomes possible to transfer the relations between men and women from biology to society and, therefore, their roles are subject to transformation.

Equity is defined as 'fairness' or 'resource to principle of justice'. It aims at reducing existing inequalities rather than reinforcing them. In the context of Joint

Forest Management (JFM) the gender and equity issues are inter-related as they deal with *intra-community differences*. People participating in JFM programme, differ not only in terms of gender but they are also not homogenous within gender. The communities exhibit inequalities based on caste, religion, class, and occupation. These inequalities create profound differences in terms of access and control over resources, position, opportunities, and behaviour.

Thus the gender and equity issue deals with the question as to whether, women are marginalised and other forest-dependent communities are better off after the introduction of JFM than before JFM ?

11.2 GENDER AND EQUITY RELATIONS IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

The majority of population in north-eastern India is tribal. Although the gender and equity relations vary between tribes, it is widely recognised that tribal women enjoy better status than women in non-tribal Indian society. This is primarily due to the land tenure system prevalent in most tribal communities, the land owner-custodianship rests with the women. Besides, a number of tribal communities are matrilineal and the overall responsibility of looking after the family rests with women. At the same time, north-eastern tribal women as elsewhere in the country are major gatherer and users of a variety of forest products compared to men.

11.2.1 Status of Woman in North-East India

In north-eastern India the status of women is much better than in the rest of the country. This is, as noted above, primarily due to the land tenure system prevalent in most tribal communities where most often women predominantly assert the land owner-custodianship. Besides, a number of tribal societies are matrilineal and the overall responsibility of looking after the family mostly rest with them. Like other tribals in the country, the north-east tribal women do most of the household works, participate in various activities under jhum cultivation such as forest clearing, sowing, weeding, guarding, harvesting, etc. and also undertake various activities for additional earnings such as pig rearing, poultry farming, collection of NTFPs and trading, etc. Because of these activities and overall family management responsibilities, women of north-east occupy a much higher respectable position than their male counterparts. The higher status of women in the society and several other region-specific reasons necessitate evolving suitable ways and means to ensure involvement of women in JFM programme.

11.2.2 Necessity for involving Women in JFM Programme in the North-East

The role of women in JFM in north-eastern states is much more important than in the plains of the country. This is due to the following factors :

- (i) Substantial forest areas are under the private ownership and the productive utility of the land most often rests with the women, particularly in rural areas. Thus, the implementation of JFM programme has to begin from the active participation and consent of the women.
- (ii) Considering the influence of woman in the society, women should be at the centre stage while constituting the village level JFM committees for facilitation of various activities under JFM.

- (iii) The need of better management of forests for fuel wood, fodder and various Non-Timber Forest Products is better understood by women than men because in a family women are the direct beneficiaries of forests and its products. This is due to the traditional ways of division of labour between the man and woman in the family.
- (iv) Women in traditional tribal family have a more active and influential role in decision-making processes particularly on issues relating to family welfare.
- (v) Women contribute equal labour and participate in all the activities in jhum field which earns for them an equal status with men in the society. Under the JFM programme, women have to work more or less in the same proportion as in jhum field and hence the success of JFM would be heavily dependent on the participation of women.
- (vi) Because of their close intimacy with the forests, women have a better knowledge about the physical and biological resources of the forest proposed to be managed under JFM. This knowledge becomes helpful in preparation of a good microplan and its subsequent implementation.
- (vii) Women are involved in making of various handicrafts, the raw material for which can be best met from the JFM forests. Thus, women might show extra interest for JFM in order to fulfil their raw material needs for various handicrafts.
- (viii) The north-eastern region has a long tradition of conservation of forests and forest resources where women play a key role in decision-making, judicious use of resources, regeneration and protection.

11.3 GENDER AND EQUITY IN JFM : THE CONTEXT

The present National Forest Policy (1988) and Government of India circular issued in June 1990, to all the States and Union Territories for involvement of people in the development, protection, and management of forest have resulted in adoption of JFM by 24 States, so far. Out of seven north-eastern states, six of them viz., Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura have already implemented the JFM programme. Recently (September, 2003) the Govt. of Meghalaya have also adopted the JFM resolution.

The rules of membership in general body and management committee, automatically allow or deny access and control over resources and the right to participate in JFM. The JFM rules in north-eastern states allow one representative from each household for general body membership. In case of Arunachal Pradesh the membership includes one representative from each household with a condition that 30 per cent of them will be women. In Manipur out of 9 elected representatives, 3 should be women. Regarding the criteria of membership in management committee, Nagaland State specifies that only landless are eligible for the same.

11.4 STRATEGIES FOR GENDER AND EQUITY SENSITIVE JFM

As discussed above, the existing JFM framework does not specify rules to address gender and equity concerns. At the same time, change in the rule will not automatically lead to change in practice. Some of the strategies, which can be tried to address gender and equity concerns for translating the goals of JFM are dealt with in this section.

11.4.1 Role of Women

Due to socio-cultural tradition of women being the custodian of the land in traditional societies, like Khasis and Garos, substantial forest areas are under private ownership. The productive utility of these lands, most often rests with the women. Therefore, the beginning of JFM programme requires active participation of women. Thus more space in general body and management committee may be created for women.

11.4.2 Role of Forest Department

The forest department, being state agency can create legitimate space for marginalised forest-dependent groups. They can always emphasise maximum number of people (both women and men) to participate in the JFM meetings. Besides, overall presence in general body meetings, presence of 50 per cent of women and/or members of other forest-dependent communities may be made mandatory for completing the quorum. In this regard, representative of forest department may facilitate their participation to ensure that their needs will be taken into account during the implementation of JFM programme.

11.4.3 Empowerment

The people (women, men and members of marginalised groups) may start attending the general body and management committee meetings, but they may feel inhibited to speak in public gathering, in the beginning. After their acceptance as members of the committee, to ensure their meaningful participation, the list of issues to be discussed, and background information related to those issues may be provided in advance. This will allow them to discuss the issues in sub-groups, before the actual meeting, and they will be motivated, develop confidence and participate more effectively.

11.4.4 Capacity Building

Creating the compulsory space for women and marginalised members in various bodies is more dangerous without their capacity building. To ensure their participation, these voiceless groups should be facilitated by skill development in the areas like reading, writing the minutes of the meetings, handling of the bank account, and monitoring their regular participation.

11.4.5 Use of External Facilitator

Despite the presence of women and forest-dependent groups in the meetings, their participation often remains limited. Experienced grassroots non-government organisations may be involved to analyse different uses of forest areas and products, impact of JFM and protection rules on various groups, access of information to different groups and their traditional rules. For example, women are additionally handicapped because they are not represented in certain tribal institutions. Thus, they are traditionally excluded from community decision-making process. In such situations, separate meetings of traditionally excluded groups may be organised to understand their needs, priorities and motives. This will work as an effective strategy for moving towards more gender- and equity-sensitive JFM to achieve its goals.

11.5 REFERENCES

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