



GENDER DYNAMICS AND AGROBIODIVERSITY

UNDERSTANDING THE GENDER SPECIFIC VULNERABILITY CONTEXT

Men and women play important, often distinctive roles, in the management and conservation of agrobiodiversity. Frequently, there is a clear gender differentiation in terms of labour division, roles and responsibilities in agriculture. This causes men and women to be responsible for the management of different aspects of agrobiodiversity having different purposes and demands. This in turn has an impact upon men's and women's knowledge of the management and utilization of specific elements of agrobiodiversity.

In order to understand better gender dynamics and their linkages to agrobiodiversity, it is important to analyse biodiversity from a livelihoods perspective. Moreover, a number of trends and shocks impacting upon the management and conservation of agrobiodiversity and local knowledge should also be analysed.

- © **Change in dietary habits:** Culture and cultural values are, and have been, the driving force of biodiversity management and conservation. This is because cultural diversity is closely related to biological diversity. In other words, food cultures and dietary habits are an important aspect of people's culture. The role of women in the domestic sphere includes cooking, preparation of meals and often entails the growing of specific crops. A woman's task is mainly the gathering and preparation of wild plants and their management (Howard, 2003). With the increasing availability of convenience food, such as pasta and bread, it is found that local food habits are changing in rural communities. In many cases, the increasing workload of women contributes to the change in diet, as women have less time to spend on food preparation. This is especially true in women-headed households because of migration or HIV-AIDS. Changing dietary habits can lead to the erosion of women's related knowledge of processing, preparation and storage, as well as to the erosion of plant diversity, family food security and health (Howard, 2003).
- © **Replacement of local crops:** Local crops, intended for production-for-use, are commonly replaced by introduced crops for commercial purposes. This often means men take over from women. Among others, this change may have repercussions on the ability of women to meet household obligations, including traditional food provision, food security and plant diversity. For instance, a case study from Mali (Wooten, 2003) showed that the changes in horticulture production, surrounding Bamako, led to a change in crops and to a change in the roles of men and women. Commercial horticulture production took place in the fertile river basin. Women, therefore, had to find other places to grow their traditional plants required for sauce production. Over the past few decades gardening, which was once closely associated with women and the food economy, has become a man's affair and a commercial venture.



- ⑥ **Development of market infrastructure:** There is a rising trend towards the integration of communities and individuals into markets. With this move towards the increased commercialization of agriculture, modern technologies and innovations have created high external-input dependent systems, which have often bypassed women. Reasons are many, including women's limited access to credit facilities and to information, because of the lack of training opportunities. In many cases, these development trends have had a neutral effect on women, or have led to the displacement of women's agricultural activities. Women had to move to increasingly marginal land, leading to the replacement of local crops and animal breeds. This in turn can have major implications for household food security.

- ⑥ Today, in many parts of the world, the trend is towards **an increase in the feminization of agriculture**. As men's participation in agriculture declines, the role of women in agricultural production becomes ever more dominant. War, sickness and death, caused by HIV/AIDS, have reduced rural populations. Another major cause of the feminization of agriculture is male migration from rural areas to towns and cities in search of paid employment, in their own countries or abroad. In Africa, for example, the male population in rural areas is falling rapidly, while the female population remains relatively stable. In Malawi, the rural male population plummeted by 21.8 percent between 1970 and 1990. During the same 20-year period, the rural female population declined by only 5.4 percent. This trend resulted in an increase in the proportion of households headed by women. Now, approximately one-third of all rural households in sub-Saharan Africa are headed by women. Studies have shown that women heads of household tend to be younger and less educated than their male counterparts. Generally, they have less land, less capital and lack labour for farming. These changes often lead to adjustments in cropping patterns and farming systems (FAO. No date).

Shocks, within the vulnerability context, have an impact on gender relations and interaction with other livelihood assets. HIV/AIDS is an important example of this because millions of households across Africa have been affected.

For households that are dependent on agriculture, the consequent intra-household re-allocation of labour can lead to a decline in crop production, which can result in food insecurity and an overall decrease in financial assets. Households may then respond with a further range of coping strategies. For example, in Uganda, a farming household's typical initial response is to change the mix of farm products. This would be to first focus on producing enough for subsistence; then to grow a surplus to sell in the market (Armstrong, 1993). Another common response is to reduce land under cultivation, resulting in reduced outputs (FAO, 2003). A recent case study from Uganda, showed that this was particularly evident in affected female-headed households, which cultivated only 1.3 acres on average, compared with affected male-headed households cultivating 2.5 acres on average (FAO, 2003).

It has been observed that some AIDS-affected households have turned to livestock production as an alternative to crop production. This strategy was adopted when soils became infertile and crop management practices too demanding for the available labour. Other households sell cattle more frequently to pay medical bills and funeral expenses. A trend has been identified whereby households raise smaller stock, such as pigs and poultry, which is less labour-intensive and is often readily available to women. A shift has been identified where farmers change from cultivating labour-intensive crops to those needing less labour, are drought-resistant and that can be cultivated throughout the year, such as cassava and sweet potato. A reduction in the cultivation of cash crops has been observed. Farmers choose to focus available labour on the production of secondary subsistence crops, often to optimize household food security (White and Robinson, 2000).

The response of a household that is affected by HIV/AIDS is to return to local crops and livestock-based agricultural systems. This illustrates how shocks can impact upon gender relations and the management of livelihood assets.



Key points

- Men and women play important, but often distinctive roles, in the management and conservation of agrobiodiversity. There is an obvious gender differentiation for labour division, roles and responsibilities in agriculture.
- A number of trends and shocks impact the management and conservation of agrobiodiversity and local knowledge. These also influence gender relations.
- Culture and cultural values are, and have been, the driving force of biodiversity management and conservation. Changing food culture and dietary habits can lead to the erosion of women's knowledge of processing, preparation and storage. It can also lead to the erosion of plant diversity and family food security and health.
- With the tendency towards more commercialized agriculture, modern technologies and innovations have created high external-input dependent systems. These often rely on introduced species and varieties, which have introduced changes in gender roles.
- Changes within the household composition affect available labour resources and have a profound impact upon agricultural management practices and agrobiodiversity.
- Shocks, such as HIV-AIDS, within the vulnerability context, have an impact on gender relations and the interaction with other livelihood assets.

References

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Web sites

FAO Web site on Plant Genetic Resources: www.fao.org/ag/agp/agps/pgr/default.htm

FAO Web site for Agrobiodiversity: www.fao.org/biodiversity/index.asp?lang=en

FAO Web site on Gender, Agrobiodiversity and Local Knowledge: www.fao.org/sd/links



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