



# Challenging Perceptions about Men, Women, and Forest Product Use: A Global Comparative Study<sup>☆</sup>

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**Summary.** — This study uses a multi-case dataset to question current assumptions about the gender differentiation of forest product use. We test some of the commonly held ideas on how men and women access, manage, and use different forest products. Overall, we found significant gender differentiation in the collection of forest products, which seems to support the claim that there are distinctive “male” and “female” roles associated with the collection of forest products. However, we also found that men play a much more important and diverse role in the contribution of forest products to rural livelihoods than previously reported, with strong differences across tropical Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

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**Key words** — gender, forest products, global comparison, income, livelihoods

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It has been repeatedly asserted that the roles, knowledge, and skills of rural men and women differ with respect to forest use and management (Agarwal, 2009; Bechtel, 2010; Hecht, 2007; Mai, Mwangi, & Wan, 2011; Peach Brown, 2011; Rocheleau & Edmunds, 1997). Gender-differentiated tasks and responsibilities in food production and provision, as well as in the generation of cash income, often result in different needs, opportunities, priorities, and concerns for men and women. Previous research has suggested that while the specific roles and responsibilities of men and women vary across regions and cultures, they often follow similar broad gender divisions of labor (Bechtel, 2010; Mai *et al.*, 2011). For example, men are typically reported to manage and use natural resources for cash-crop based agriculture, hunting, logging, construction, and the harvest of a smaller portfolio of high-value forest products for sale (Cavendish, 2000; Shackleton, Shackleton, & Cousins, 2001; Shively, 1997). In contrast, women are said to focus more on subsistence agriculture and

to be primarily responsible for collecting wild resources for household use, with a particular focus on those products that contribute to immediate household-level food security (Cavendish, 2000). Yet, although women seem to commercialize forest products less often than men, the sale of forest products is believed to be an essential source of cash income for women, who lack many of the opportunities for generating cash-income that are more commonly available to men.

<sup>\*</sup> The authors are grateful to all of the PEN partners whose work has contributed to this global overview. Particular thanks to the following for additional contributions: Carol Colfer, Amy Duchelle, Pam Jagger, Esther Mwangi, Christine Padoch, Frances Seymour, Sheona Shackleton, and Patricia Shanley. Sven Wunder and Brian Belcher provided invaluable first comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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Women, and particularly those in female-headed households, are therefore often thought to be, overall, more directly reliant on consumption and sale of forest resources than men (Dovie, 2003; Khare *et al.*, 2000; Vodouhe, Coulibaby, Greene, & Sinsin, 2009). These divisions of responsibility and resource use have been attributed to factors such as the physical nature of certain tasks, historical patterns of natural resource use and ownership, and cultural barriers to accessing markets and harvesting infrastructure (Shackleton, Paumgarten, Kassa, Husselman, & Zida, 2011).

However, despite the oft-reported gender differentiation in the management and utilization of forest resources, research has also documented how in certain instances men and women work jointly or in complementary ways (Bechtel, 2010). For example, the harvest and sale of high-value products such as Brazil nuts (*Bertholletia excelsa*) in Latin America (Duchelle, Guariguata, Less, Albornoz, Chavez, & Melo, 2011; Stoian, 2005) or bush mango (*Irvingia* spp.) in Central Africa (Sunderland, Asaha, Balinga, & Isoni, 2010) are often undertaken jointly by both men and women. Additionally, in forest-based swidden agriculture, men often clear forest for farmland and women subsequently plant and tend crops (Howard, 2006). Cavendish (2000) also noted this labor sharing, particularly in cases where the harvesting activities require more than one adult laborer. As these examples show, the gender patterns in the use of natural resources can be diverse and context specific.

Previous research has highlighted two additional points in the analysis of the relations between the different genders and natural resources. First, in most cultures use and access rights to natural resources, including land, trees, water, and animal protein are often differentiated along gender lines. In many societies, women have fewer ownership rights than men (Agarwal, 2010; Coulilay-Lingani, Tigabu, Savadogo, Oden, & Ouadba, 2009; Ostrom, 1990; Rocheleau & Edmunds, 1997). Although women may frequently possess *de facto* or land use rights (compared to men's *de jure* rights), women's access rights are often mediated by their relationships with men, such as through marriage, divorce, or widowhood (Hecht, 2007; Mwangi, Meinzen-Dick, & Sun, 2011). Thus, in many cases, rural women lacking secure land tenure may depend on common property resources for their livelihoods (Agrawal, 2001). Secondly, women are frequently limited in decision making with regard to the management of natural resources. The literature suggests that although women's participation in forest management institutions, such as forest user groups (FUG), raises incomes and promotes resource sustainability (Agarwal, 2001, 2009; Upadhyay, 2005; Mwangi *et al.*, 2011), they overwhelmingly tend to be underrepresented in such groups (Agarwal, 2001; Das, 2011; Kelkar & Nathan, 2003; Sarker & Das, 2002). The reasons for women's lack of involvement in organizations dealing with natural resources management may be due to gender biases in technology access and dissemination, women's labor or skills constraints, or their lack of sanctioning authority (Bandiaky-Badji, 2011; Lewark, Gerge, & Kermann, 2011; Nuggehalli & Prokopy, 2009; Reed, 2010).

Many of the facts appearing in the gender-focused literature are rooted in case studies, and it is unclear how widely generalizable such observations might be. Gender divisions of labor and contributions to household income are influenced by variables such as age, ethnicity, household composition, marital status class, and caste, all of which may have varying degrees of influence (Byron & Arnold, 1999; Cavendish, 2000; Cousins, 1999; Shackleton & Shackleton, 2006). Location and level of market integration are also important factors influencing the relative roles of men and women in the management,

collection, and sale of natural resources (Belcher, Ruiz-Pérez, & Achdiawan, 2005; Ruiz-Pérez *et al.*, 2004). Gendered relations and responsibilities with respect to natural resources are also dynamic and subject to change (Shackleton & Shackleton, 2000). For example, male out-migration (Giri & Dranhöfer, 2010), or the increase in the number of female-headed households, as is the case in Southern Africa due to HIV-AIDS, can lead to greater *de facto* access to land and resources by women, despite such rights remaining somewhat precarious (Agarwal, 2009). These complexities mean that individual case studies may not necessarily be indicative of general patterns, and may be misleading if transferred to other contexts and used for policy guidance.

Using household-level data from the Poverty Environment Network (PEN), we test the overall robustness of previous findings on gender and forest use and explore to what degree these findings are consistent across a large number of sites, countries, and regions. We examine whether this global dataset supports common assertions about gender differences with respect to forest product collection, access, and management. Specifically, we investigate gender differences in:

- *Forest product collection and sale:* We consider the forest products brought to the household by women and men respectively across several broad categories, including types and quantities of products, whether they are processed or not, and whether they are collected for consumption and/or sale.
- *Access to forest products:* We look at the value of forest products collected in lands under different land and resource tenure systems.
- *Community forest management:* We examine men and women's participation in formal FUGs.

## 2. DATA AND METHODS

### (a) Data collection

The data were collected through the PEN project. The project itself and the data collection methods are described in more detail in Angelsen *et al.* (this issue) and on the PEN webpage.<sup>1</sup> In brief, the PEN project is a network of 33 collaborating researchers (primarily PhD students) who collected data under the framework of PEN, a project of the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR).<sup>2</sup> PEN sites, which includes 24 countries, cover the major tropical forested regions in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

For each forest product collected by the household, the gender of the main person (or groups of people in the household) bringing the product to the household was recorded and grouped into three categories: products harvested or collected (a) mostly by women, (b) by men and women equally, and (c) mostly by men. For each product brought to the household, we also inquired as to the type of property rights regime under which the product was collected.

### (b) Data analysis

We examine the relative roles of women and men in the collection of forest products and how these roles differ across different broad categories. Income from forest products is defined as the value of the product collected at market prices, irrespective of whether the household consumed or sold the output, less the costs of any non-labor inputs.

We use descriptive analysis to parse the data in several different ways. First, we examine the overall contributions of both

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