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## Challenges for women's participation in communal forests: Experience from Nicaragua's in digenous territories

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes sex-differentiated use, decision-making and perceptions regarding communal forests in indigenous communities of Nicaragua's Atlantic coast. Methods include a survey, focus groups, participant observation and adaptive collaborative management processes over a two-year period. Results revealed that while a higher percentage of men than women participate in the harvest of eight forest products, women participate substantially in product sales and have some control over income. A majority of men and women believe that women participate in decision-making, but that participation was of low efficacy. Women face significant obstacles to effective participation in forest decision-making in the community: weak community organization, pressure by spouses, difficulty organizing among themselves and informal sanctions. Improving meaningful participation of women in decision-making requires addressing challenges and obstacles at multiple levels; obstacles at the communal level, where the future of the forests will be decided, cannot be overcome without attention to the household.

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## Introduction

Attention to improving the participation of women in decision-making about forest resources has recently gained prominence (Colfer, 2013; Mai, Mwangi, & Wan, 2012), as organizations, researchers and policy makers look to integrate gender strategies and priorities into their research, planning and policy (Manfre & Rubin, 2012). However, improving indigenous women's participation at the local level has proven to be a complicated matter. Studies on the topic have focused on experiences in southeast and southern Asia and Africa (Kusumanto, 2007; Mai et al., 2012; Mutimukuru-Maravanyika & Matose, 2013). There are few studies about improving the participation of women in decisions about the forest in Latin America, and fewer about indigenous women. Empirical research on this topic is needed to better understand participation and decision making as key issues related to gender relations in forest management in indigenous territories. Improving women's participation and decision making provides opportunities to enhance women's wellbeing and livelihoods. However, we do not know enough about rural indigenous women's participation in forest management to understand how addressing gender inequity at the household and community levels could affect women's participation and roles in forest

governance. Agarwal (2001) explored the exclusion of women in participatory spaces in community forest user groups in India and Nepal and identified multiple obstacles to their participation in public arenas. Mai et al. (2012) found that gender and forests in Latin America have been less studied than in other parts of the world, in spite of the fact that the largest stands of forest are found in this region. Furthermore, in general, more research is needed on gender relations and the factors behind them in order to understand strategies that can meet the needs of both women and men and also prevent backlash against women's participation (Mai et al., 2012).

Little research exists on indigenous women's participation in forest use and management in communal lands or territories (Schmink & Gómez-García, 2015). In general, studies in Nicaragua about women have focused on *mestiza* women (Agurto et al., 2008; Espinoza, 2004; González, 1998; Hagene, 2008; Renzi & Agurto, 1997), either from the middle-class or rural farmers. There are few studies of Mayangna or Miskitu women in the English academic literature, but there are local resources. An example is Cunningham (Cunningham, 2011), who explored the vision of female elders in Miskitu communities; "las abuelas" (grandmothers) argue that indigenous knowledge can make a difference, for instance, in the context of climate change and forest destruction, and advocates for adapting and reinventing ancestral practices to respect the forest.

This article aims to increase knowledge and understanding specifically related to the participation of indigenous women in communal

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lands in Nicaragua where forests are an important natural resource and the source of power conflicts between different social groups. This article is based on findings from the action research project “Gender, Tenure and Community Forests in Uganda and Nicaragua” implemented by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) with the Nicaraguan research organization Nitlapan of the Universidad Centroamericana. (A similar survey was undertaken in Uganda; those findings are not included here.)

We argue that indigenous women's participation in decision-making about community forest resources depends on a complex and interlinked set of interactions at multiple levels within the community. By analyzing the gender interactions at both community and household levels, we are able to identify the barriers to a more interactive and empowering participation for women. We argue that, while the data suggests that women have some important decision-making power over forest resources and potentially over forest based income at the household level, meaningful participation in decision-making in the communal arena – key to the future of indigenous forests – is very weak; obstacles at the communal level, however, cannot be overcome without attention to the gender relations within household.

In the following sections, we describe the context of the research site, the theoretical framework, material and methods, findings and conclusions. Our analysis of participation uses Agarwal's typology of participation (Agarwal, 2001) and our approach to gender analysis draws on Colfer's Gender Box (Colfer, 2013; Colfer & Minarchek, 2013) and is complemented with theory on gender justice developed by Fraser (2008). The overall goal of the action research has been to improve women's tenure rights to forests. While focusing on participation in community forests – both in decision-making and livelihood benefits – we hoped to develop a clear understanding of the obstacles to, and the motivations and conditions necessary for the emergence of active participation by women in decision-making and in positions of authority over natural resources. Three research questions guided our work: first, how are women participating in decision-making about forest resources (i.e. what does women participation “look like”); second, what are the constraints and opportunities to equitable participation by women in decision-making; and finally, what strategies can improve the participation of women?

### Context of the study region

This study is located in the forested Northern Caribbean Autonomous Region (RACCN for its initials in Spanish) of Nicaragua where the indigenous presence is significant. In the last census,<sup>1</sup> Miskitus were the largest group (57%), Mayangnas represented 4% of population,<sup>2</sup> and *mestizos* comprised 36% (INIDE, 2005). During the colonial period, this region was part of a British protectorate, which established an alliance with Miskitu leaders. At the early 1900s this region was annexed unilaterally as part of the Nicaraguan State in a context of indigenous protests. This region has been historically attractive to non-indigenous people for its natural resources: both foreign and Nicaraguan commercial enterprises extracted timber, gold, fish and other products for export. The rural indigenous population participated as workers, which, together with subsistence agricultural activities, provided their livelihoods. Today, many families continue to meet their needs through subsistence agriculture, fishing and the collection of forest products such as firewood. Hunting for household consumption continues, but at much lower levels as populations of game species have declined.

<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, mestizo presence has increased steadily over the decade due to immigration from other regions of Nicaragua.

<sup>2</sup> The Mayangna are comprised of three groups: Panamahka, Tuahka and Ulwa settled in 57 disperse communities within the RACN and estimated population of 17,219 (Gros & Frithz, 2010).

The territory is covered by pine forest in wide savannas stretching towards the coast as well as broadleaf forests in the inland slopes. Timber extraction, fire for clearing pasture and mining are the primary human drivers of the degradation and destruction of forest ecosystems. Land clearing is driven by colonization by peasants from other parts of the country. For example, census data from 2005 shows that population growth in the coast region was almost double the national rate from 1995 to 2005 (Larson & Mendoza-Lewis, 2009). In addition, Hurricane Felix in 2007 affected wide swaths of the forest, resulting in the destruction of an estimated 562,000 ha of tree cover (FAO, 2007). The indigenous population participates in a range of activities from commercial extraction to subsistence use of the forest; most recently, because of the paucity of commercially valuable trees, there has been little commercial timber harvesting, and most forest use is for basic needs, such as timber for firewood and the construction of houses and boats, and the use of a small plot (typically 1–2 ha) of land to cultivate crops for household consumption. In 2001 the national Map of Extreme Poverty revealed that this region is the poorest in the country, with close to 95% of population in extreme poverty (INIDE, 2001). Since then poverty reduction has been the primary challenge.

In 1987, in the wake of the Sandinista-Contra civil war, the Nicaraguan constitution was amended to recognize the country as multicultural and multi-lingual, with explicit recognition of indigenous rights to their own territory and communal land. In 2003 the National Parliament approved the Autonomy and Communal Lands law for the Atlantic Coast (Law No. 445) which protects the rights of community government institutions, with the latter establishing the basic legal norms regarding both territorial and communal level of indigenous authorities. As of March 2014, 21 of 23 territories had been demarcated and titled for a total of 36,439.98 km<sup>2</sup>, representing 28% of the national territory (CONADETI, 2014). According to the autonomy law the highest-level authority is the community assembly – the adult women and men that comprise each community. The community assembly elects the community leaders; the most important offices are the *síndico* (similar to a president) and the *wihta* (community judge). There is no specific mention of women or gender in this law, though in theory indigenous women have equal rights to participate in community decisions and to be elected to these offices. Nevertheless, only a few women have held the position of *wihta* or *síndico* historically (Flores, Evans, Larson, Pikitle, & Marchena, 2016).

In general, Nicaraguan laws and policies require the participation of all adults in community decision-making. The Law of Citizen Participation (Law No. 475 of 2003) defines citizen participation such as “the process of involving stakeholders individually and collectively in order to influence and participate in decision-making, in the management and design of public policies at different levels, and in modes of administration of resources” (Asamblea Nacional, 2003). It includes five mechanisms of participation, among them queries and presentation of proposals. The Law of Equal Rights and Opportunities between Women and Men (Law No. 648 of 2008) sets the goal of equality, while the Municipalities Law (Law Nos. 40 and 261) was amended (Law No. 792) in 2012 to require 50% representation of women and men in municipal elections. Due to efforts of the current administration, the National Assembly is 42% female, and 57% of ministerial positions are held by women.<sup>3</sup> Largely because of these gains for women, Nicaragua was ranked 6th in 2014 on the World Economic Forum's global gender gap rankings, up from 10th place in 2013.<sup>4</sup>

In spite of a policy context that on the surface may seem favorable to the political participation of women, mostly urban indigenous women have benefited; those women living in rural communities continue to play a nominal or passive role in formal and informal decision-making processes, particularly about natural resources at the community level.

<sup>3</sup> <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2014/economies/#economy=NIC>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2014>.

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