

Gender in ABS Governance



Photo: Agni Boedihartono

- The benefits derived from the use of all biodiversity aspects, ecosystems, species and genes have to be distributed in a fair and equitable manner, without discrimination regarding to gender, ethnic group, age, socio-economic level or place of origin (NBSAP Guatemala). According to Bhutan's NBSAP rural women's livelihoods depend significantly on the genetic value of crops. Women are more informed about their crops' genetic potential and the compelling environmental determinants. Given their dependence and knowledge, rural women could play an important role in the strategies developed to utilize genetic resources and should receive a fair share of the benefits.
- Up to 80% of the population of some developing countries relies on traditional medicine as their primary source of health care, and women often have a more highly specialized knowledge of wild plants used for medicine than men

(Sillitoe, 2003). In a study conducted in El Salvador, women were found to have a greater knowledge of the diversity of plants and animals used for medicinal purposes. This knowledge is due to their traditional role as carers and has a positive impact on the health of the community (NBSAP El Salvador).



Photo: Paz Bossio

- As men are increasingly drawn to seeking paid work away from their lands and resources, women are responsible for the control, development and transmission of significant traditional knowledge (TK). Subsequently, TK is passed through generations of women, from grandmother to granddaughter, aunt to niece, mother to daughter and older sister to younger sister (Turner, 2003).
- While a small number of species provides a large proportion of the world's food needs, hundreds of other species are used by specific communities to complement their diets. In many regions, women have a key role in growing and preserving these underutilized species. In Yemen, women grow certain crops such as groundnuts, pumpkins, leafy vegetables, cowpeas, cucumbers and sweet potatoes, which have the effect of raising biodiversity and food security on the farm. These crops have been identified as "women's crops" and require a lot of precision and patience in planting, weeding, harvesting, processing, preservation and food preparation (NBSAP Yemen).
- In many countries, women play a crucial role in managing agriculture and are the primary savers and managers of seeds. Up to 90% of planting material used in smallholder agriculture is derived from seeds and germplasm which women have produced, selected and saved (FAO, 2001). However, women's knowledge is not restricted to edible plants. In Mali, for example, certain vegetable species are valued due to the ingeniousness and tenacity of women, that preserve them

and use them for basket making, weaving, pottery, etc (NBSAP Mali).

- The genetic diversity of many species is preserved because women prefer specific characteristics. For example, Andean women choose potatoes with characteristics that reflect their cooking requirements (Howard, 2003). Rwandan women are reported to produce more than 600 varieties of beans; and Peruvian Aguaruna women plant more than 60 varieties of manioc (FAO, 2001). Yemenese women select seeds with preferred characteristics such as colour, size, genetic stability, disease tolerance, palatability and good processing qualities for planting (NBSAP Yemen).



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- Gender imbalances exist in land access and ownership, and on average fewer than 10% of women farmers in developing countries own land (Henri, n.d). In Kenya, although statutory laws do not prevent women from owning land, they still face numerous difficulties in trying to own land (NBSAP Kenya). Lack of land ownership could hinder women's access to many of the benefits derived from the use of genetic resources.
- Women have proven to be aware of their rights. For example, Natura, a Brazilian company that produces cosmetics, personal hygiene and perfume products, made use of the traditional knowledge of the Ver-as-Ervas women. The Ver-as-Ervas women initiated an administrative procedure before the competent authority, in order to claim benefits associated with the use of the knowledge they supplied. This agreement has been signed by Natura and the Ver-as-Ervas, but has not yet been approved by the Genetic Patrimony Management Counsel of the Environment Ministry, given the complexity of the issue and lack of clear legal guidance on access and benefit sharing associated with traditional knowledge (CBD, 2008).
- Women in many societies face numerous impediments which limit their participation in decision-making processes at the local and international level in relation to ABS. The effective inclusion of women and their concerns is limited because of cultural, social and economic constraints. For example, in many countries, men are still the ones who are in charge of public spaces; and in many workgroups,



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there is the misconception that their participation guarantees their vision. Also, women have practical impediments such as illiteracy, limitations of mobility and lack of access to information.

The third objective of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) seeks “the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources, including by appropriate access to genetic resources and by appropriate transfer of relevant technologies, taking into account all rights over those resources and to technologies”. The achievement of this goal depends on the mainstreaming of gender considerations in ABS and TK governance, since gender equality is an essential element of any action to ensure the conservation of nature and the fair and equitable distribution of benefits. In particular, mainstreaming gender considerations could help prevent the exploitation of women’s TK and could transform unequal social and institutional

structures that prevent women from having fair and equitable access to benefits. The use and development of genetic resources, if carried out without taking into consideration the needs and practices of communities, could endanger their livelihoods.

Mainstreaming gender in ABS governance is crucial to the realization of obligations under human rights law, sustainable development law and the CBD. In the end, meeting international obligations on gender equality in relation to ABS and TK governance will be a win-win situation for all. Conversely, failure to do so will further delay the realization of all three of the CBD’s objectives and marginalize the Convention’s role in helping to secure the MDGs and meeting the 2010 targets on reducing biodiversity loss (Tobin and Aguilar, 2007).

It is urgent for all stakeholders (users, source countries, source communities and resource owners, user countries, researchers, and others) to have some gender basis to take the appropriate actions to protect women rights. To promote this inclusion of gender, the Secretariat of the CBD (SCBD) has established a gender focal point at the

Secretariat and elaborated a Gender Plan of Action, in collaboration with IUCN. Also, IUCN's Office of the Senior Gender Adviser has developed specific recommendations and guidelines for the international community, national authorities, national or regional focal points, competent authorities, ABS coordinating communities, providers and users.

Recommendations

- Gender equality should be included as a key element in the discussions surrounding the international regime on ABS and related TK.
- The ABS regimes must comply with human rights frameworks, and international and national commitments on gender equality, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).
- Parties associated to the CBD ought to ensure no discrimination against women arises from the adoption of ABS law and policy.
- The CBD and its associated parties should: invite gender-environment experts and local and indigenous women to the discussion and debates on ABS; commission background studies; and build gender-specific capacity among negotiators and decision makers at the international and local levels.
- CBD and its associated parties should identify the interests, needs and rights of women regarding genetic resources, through investigations, discussions and consultation processes.
- Capacity building and empowerment (educational, technical, legal, financial) must be promoted to allow women and men to effectively participate in the discussions and negotiations involving agreements on the access to, and sharing of, benefits arising out of genetic resources.
- Gender mainstreaming would require that the Bonn guidelines, sui generis law and policy on TK, and ethical codes of conduct for TK also reflect a gender perspective in their provisions.
- Mechanisms should be designed to ensure that women's knowledge and contributions are made visible and are valued and protected.
- Measures should be put in place to prevent misappropriation of TK, including disclosure of origin requirements; certification of origin/source/legal provenance of resources and/or TK; and development of databases and registers.

- The international community should promote the development and implementation of Prior Informed Consent (PIC) and Mutually Agreed Terms (MAT) processes that are in harmony with the human rights of women, in a manner that promotes equality.
- ABS negotiations should integrate a gender-specific approach into mechanisms to guide the distribution of monetary and non-monetary benefits, including gender budgeting.
- Information on gender aspects of ABS should be widely distributed and communicated.
- After the implementation of National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) and ABS legislation there should be an assessment of the consequences and implications for women and men (gender impact assessment).

This fact sheet was prepared by Gabriela Mata, Andrea Quesada-Aguilar and Paula Zúñiga under the technical supervision of Lorena Aguilar, IUCN Senior Gender Adviser.

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