



## Asking women the right questions

[What do women already know about trees, their products and management?](#)

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Once women and their roles, and uses of trees, are made visible, there remain some specific questions to which only local women can give the answers:

- What do women already know about trees, their products and management?
- What problems are women experiencing in relation to tree resources?
- What constraints do women face in addressing these problems and how can the project help women overcome these constraints?
- How can we find out what women know?
- How can women organize themselves?

### What do women already know about trees, their products and management?

Women can explain the uses of trees and the rationale behind traditional tree management. This local knowledge is essential for designing new activities.

In Sierra Leone, women knew 31 uses of trees on fallow land and in forests and knew what forest products would be produced in a particular fallow year men identified only eight different uses.<sup>15</sup> In Zambia, it was noted that women made oil from a local tree that foresters had never considered putting in a nursery. In Thailand, women select different species of wood for cooking different items, according to their different heating qualities. One type of wood with specific burning qualities is considered essential by these women for processing good quality silk.<sup>16</sup> In Cameroon, women use branches from trees that regenerate to build animal corrals and fences. When these poles grow they form semi-permanent "living fences" that are regularly pollarded, the branches being used for building other fences, house construction or repair, basketry and fuelwood.

*Where women are heads of households - as here in the Andes - they must take on men's jobs as well as their own*

### What problems are women experiencing in relation to tree resources?

When scarcity is felt, women can often describe their problems, make proposals to address these problems and act upon them, once constraints are removed.

In Burkina Faso, women spoke out against monoculture forestry plantation projects. Although such plantations provided a source of wood for urban markets, the women said, they also removed access to "useless bush" for neighbouring families and thus removed important sources of fuelwood, food and plant material. The women asked for more multi-purpose trees as well as guaranteed access for local residents.

In many rural areas, older women complain that they can no longer prepare medicines because medicinal trees that were formerly available have been removed. They can help identify and reintroduce these trees.

In India, halebwood used by the lacquer industry is becoming increasingly scarce, mainly because it is being indiscriminately cut for fuelwood. The forest service has suggested the use of another species, but female artisans have found it does not produce as fine a product. They have suggested an alternative solution: protect the valued species when permits to cut fuelwood are given out.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, in Sierra Leone, women speak of problems caused by heavy cutting of trees: the loss of predators' high forest habitat has led to an increase in the number of grain eating rodents, while fishing yields are down due to increased silting of waterways. The women have called for the introduction of agroforestry and rat control, rather than the woodlots proposed by project designers.<sup>18</sup>

### What constraints do women face in addressing tree and forestry problems?

A number of constraints are location specific but women can describe them if asked. Some common constraints are: time, mobility, customs, lack of access to land and lack of organization.

*Men clear the land, turn the soil - women do most of the rest*

#### TIME

Being responsible for various tasks both within and outside the home, women are forced to work a "double day".

Projects must be careful that they do not add unduly to women's workload. Some forestry projects add to women's work simply because watering and weeding are traditionally women's tasks. Where women are busy, men may be able to plant and tend trees that women have helped select, and will use and help manage.

In Guinea, women said they wanted projects to be joint efforts, involving both men and women. They felt that men had more time to contribute and that men would appreciate women's input more if it was an all-community effort.

Better organization can also reduce women's workloads. In Senegal, women found that by organizing they were able to share tasks and find time to plant a woodlot. Unesco has assisted by introducing donkey carts and grain mills.

#### MOBILITY

Women in many societies have limited mobility. Most activities must be located near the household so that women can carry out their household activities. Customs also limit women's mobility: it is important to understand these customs fully so that modifications can be made if necessary.

Women who go for training or work away from home must often travel in pairs or in a group in order to gain family or community approval. In Nepal, the election of women to serve on regional resource committees provided the legitimacy needed for them to travel.

In Sudan, a project overcame customs that secluded women by using women extensionists and concentrating initially on activities that could be done inside the family compound. In this way, women were able to produce seedlings in backyard nurseries and eventually joined in planting woodlots.<sup>19</sup>

#### CUSTOMS

Customs regarding the use of trees are very location-specific. In an area of Kenya where trees denote land ownership, women were forbidden to plant or cut trees because land belonged only to men. A fuelwood project overcame this obstacle by introducing shrubs and exotic trees not traditionally identified as denoting land ownership. Thus, women were free to plant and cut these species. A second approach was to present the issue through amusing plays that provoked village discussions between men and women on how to solve the fuelwood problem.

#### LAND

Land use and tenure reflect status, inheritance patterns, family and community structure, and national policy. Women may prize land close to home, but it may be difficult for them to obtain. They may have only customary rights to land, or they may be given land use only for dry season gardens. Where men have migrated, women may be left with land to manage but no rights over changing land use. If they have no assured land tenure they may not be interested in planting.

Projects must be careful to guard against land distribution schemes which offer no assurance of land use to women or take away their traditional access to land. Some projects help women organize groups in order to negotiate for land over which the group will have long-term use rights.

#### INFORMATION, TRAINING, EDUCATION

##### Figure

Information, training and education must be made available to women at convenient times.

Women may not be able to attend meetings during the day. Extension agents must therefore hold sessions when women are free, perhaps after the evening meal. It is also essential that the information given is appropriate to the real conditions they face. Women can often identify what they want to learn and how.

In southern Burkina Faso, for instance, women were asked at a formal meeting how they wished to be involved in the management of a previously closed forest reserve. When they did not answer, they were chided and told if they did not speak up they would lose access to all potential forest products. At this point one woman rose and said, "We are not familiar with what the forest currently contains. We do not know what your project has to offer. We do not know the costs or the benefits of participation. Once we know these things, we tell you what we wish to do."

*Extension advice for Zambian women*

In the informal discussions that followed, the women asked to go into the reserve accompanied by the project staff to identify forest products available for collecting or harvesting. They asked if the project could provide them with market information on medical plants, fruits and nuts, and if they could learn about machines for extracting honey.

In India, a project recommended that women adopt a particular silkworm that produces a large quantity of silk. However, the women objected, saying that "it is better to have a baby than to let these silkworms into your house" - the worms needed to be fed every three hours both day and night.

As in all extension, messages from outside must be extremely carefully tailored to the audience. A puppet show in Sudan that highlighted the advantages of raising trees inspired women to ask for a piece of land from a rich landholder and to request assistance in planting a multipurpose stand. In a village less than 10 km away the same puppet show caused only frustration: the villagers said that since they were landless they could only plant trees if the project could provide land for food crops as well as trees.

### How can we find out what women know?

Project designers or implementors, particularly when they are solely men, may have difficulty learning from village women. When questions are asked in public meetings, men may respond even when the questions are addressed to women. It is often inappropriate for a male outsider to talk alone with women.

There are a number of ways to help strengthen communications with local women. Often older women can speak freely with men from outside the community. Sometimes wives of school teachers or women social or health workers can act as intermediaries between the project staff and shy women.

In taking a survey in Niger, young women and men worked in pairs and spoke separately to the male and female family members at the same time so as to assure that women were able to answer questions freely.

In Nepal, a female project designer insisted on having local women gather data, despite warnings that they would never be able to work in villages away from home. It proved much less difficult than expected to find women assistants once it became apparent that this was essential to the work that had to be done. It was found that the women were perfectly willing to speak with men from outside the community, once they saw that the subject was of interest.<sup>20</sup>

### How can women organize themselves?

Women frequently lack political power to ensure continuing services and access to land, credit, decision making processes and the benefits of development. Frequently this power can be obtained only through organization.

Explore existing women's groups and leadership, or NGOs that work at the village level and include women in their activities. This may help identify existing structures that can support community forestry.

In India, for example, a group of landless women belonging to the Self-Employed Women's Organization formed a milk cooperative and sought permission to grow fodder trees on "wasteland". Because it was supported by a well-organized group, the cooperative was able to win access to the land and resisted attempts to expropriate the trees once they began to grow.

*Protests by members of the Chipko movement in India led to a 10-year ban on tree felling in Uttar Pradesh state*

In central Nepal a village forest committee formed by women, successfully modified legislation that sought to delegate forest management to the *panchayat*, an administrative unit that includes many villages. The organized women argued that management should have been in the hands of a

sub-unit of the *panchayat* as had been the tradition. This smaller unit was closer to the women and would allow women to participate more fully.<sup>21</sup>

Organized women in Kenya have raised funds to support large scale tree planting and nursery development, while in India groups of women have helped change legislation on forest harvesting by "hugging" trees, thereby drawing public attention to economic and environmental problems caused by overexploitation.

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