FACTORS AFFECTING WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN THE MANAGEMENT OF FOREST RESOURCES AND DECISION MAKING PROCESSES IN THE REDD+ PROJECT IN THE BALE ECO-REGION, ETHIOPIA

SUMMARY

Women shoulder more than 50% of management responsibilities in the household and at community level; however, there are still many sociocultural and economic challenges around their participation in decision-making and management. The study, carried out in the Bale Eco-Region, revealed that women play a pivotal role in Participatory Forest Management (PFM) but still lack sufficient visibility, voice and leadership. Their participation is limited by cultural and religious practices, including polygamy and gender stereotypes. Exclusive registration of men as household heads with the incorrect assumption that husbands’ registration will ensure the participation of, and benefit for, their wives, calls for change. Women often lack access to sufficient money as men control income generation. Therefore, to address this issue it is essential to focus on income-generating activities as per the needs and requirements of women in the different communities. This particular study was conducted with the objective of reviewing legal frameworks, policies, programs, customary laws and practices at the national and regional state level, pertaining to REDD+. It also studied gender dimensions in decision-making, and access rights or benefit-sharing from forest-related revenue. The study presented the major socioeconomic factors that influence women’s participation in participatory forest management and REDD+ activities.

BACKGROUND

The Bale REDD+ project is a pioneer project in Ethiopia working towards strengthening the capacity of regional institutions and local communities to ensure sustainable forest management that will generate sustainable finance for better conservation of natural resources and improvement of the livelihood of communities. This pilot project, carried out in Bale and West Arsi zones, was designed to ensure the full participation and equal involvement of men and women communities living close to forests. The active participation of local communities is a very important component to the conservation of forest resources. In this regard, women play an important role in conservation of forest resources. At the same time, they are considered as primary users as they are involved in utilizing forest products to supply basic needs for their families. This particular study was conducted with the objective of reviewing legal frameworks, policies, programs, customary laws and practices at the national and regional state level, pertaining to REDD+. It also studied gender dimensions in decision-making, and access rights or benefit-sharing from forest-related revenue. The study presented the major socioeconomic factors that influence women’s participation in participatory forest management and REDD+ activities.
METHODOLOGY
Qualitative and quantitative study tools, including document review, key informant interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and survey were undertaken with the relevant stakeholders, including project implementers, government partners, community leaders and PFM member and non-member communities in selected sites. Altogether, there were 373 community members (91.4% of whom were PFM members and 8.6% non-PFM members) targeted through the survey. Out of these, 50.7 and 49.3% were female and male respondents, respectively. The Harvard Framework was used to explore women’s/men’s participation and decision-making roles in the PFM. The tool also identified the activity profile of women and men in the selected target groups, as well as women’s and men’s access to, and control over, resources.

FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY
Policy environment regarding gender
A review of national- and regional-level documents revealed that there are policy and legal frameworks conducive to improving gender equity. These include: National Policy of Women (1993), Constitution that provides for equal rights in all sectors (1995) and Amended Oromia Family Law (2007). The latter law prohibits polygamy and provides equal rights of ownership and administration of land. Other legal instruments such as the Oromia Region Proclamation No 130/207 also outline equal rights and responsibilities of women and men with regard to rural land use and community forest utilization. However, despite some conducive legal, policy and project frameworks, further measures are required to put in practice equal involvement of women and men in project activities.
Participation on productive, reproductive and community management activities
More than 50% of women in the target areas are engaged in productive, reproductive and community management roles. They spend as much time as men in productive activities except in some activities, which require hard physical labor. On the other hand, men are usually involved in labor-intensive activities and have minimal roles in household work that does not generate income, such as childcare, cooking, cleaning, etc. Women participate actively in PFM activities yet they have a limited leadership role. One of the reasons was the assumption that husbands can represent their wives if the men are registered in the cooperatives. Despite some changes in the culture and way of thinking, women are still expected to become invisible in the public sphere, such as in meetings and gatherings. The study revealed that husbands do not allow their wives to engage and participate in meetings/forums/open discussions because of their perception that women’s place is not in the public sphere. Somehow, this has affected women’s roles in PFM. It was commendable to note that the participation of women who are already members of the PFM
cooperatives is stronger than that of those who are not members. Their participation is minimal in decision-making activities.

**Decision-making and control over resources**

As the study showed that though women and men have similar roles in productive activities that generate income, men seem to have higher decision-making power and control over the management of larger income, while women are mostly in control of the income obtained from petty trading. The study further revealed that though access to different resources is almost equal (except for some items such as collecting honey) there was unequal distribution of monetary assets whereby men have more access to, as well as more control over, money. Furthermore, women tend to participate more in informal markets (e.g., petty trading) while men participate more in formal markets.

**Major factors that influence women’s participation in PFM**

In general, in most of the study areas the participation of women who were already registered in the cooperatives was relatively stronger than that of those who were not registered. In some areas, women seem to have minimal roles in various PFM activities, limited decision-making and limited access to information for different factors. Some of the socioeconomic factors include women’s triple role constraints in their time, access to information, and participation in PFM cooperatives. Moreover, their labor input into the household as well as in productive activities is usually unaccounted for and unpaid. In addition, being unable to pay the registration fee have limited their participation. Moreover, exclusive registration of men as heads of the households associated with the grassroots implementers’ assumption that husbands’ registration will ensure the participation of, and benefit for their, wives, was also another constraint. Likewise, there are also negative attitudes towards women being active in the public sphere and in cooperatives. With regard to programmatic concerns such as planning and implementation, the study indicated the importance of a gender study during the initial stages of the project so that the practical as well as strategic needs of women and men could have been addressed. It was also possible to infer insufficient gaps in human resources to reach women at the grassroots levels, as well as gaps in coordination between Women’s Affairs Offices, Cooperative Promotion Offices (CPOs) working at the grassroots

**KEY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Overall, community perception on the roles of women has to be changed. CBOs, therefore, need to have a clear plan in not only increasing the number of female participants but also in changing the knowledge, perception and practices on gender equality through trainings and sharing experiences. Besides, good examples of women being active in some of the intervention areas should be shared with others cooperatives. The role of government and NGOs in facilitating the coordination and planning should strengthen the involvement of more women. In this regard, care should be taken to ensure the availability of sufficient staff and grassroots implementers who can reach women. In addition, grassroots implementers, especially CPOs, need to receive gender-awareness trainings. Equal participation of women and men could be strengthened by setting quotas in every activity, such as meetings, trainings and in other consultations with the community. Finally, reducing women’s domestic workload through labor-saving technologies could help improve their livelihoods. Efforts to provide women with such technologies have to be strengthened.

**CONCLUSION**

Women in the study areas are not a homogenous group, and have different experiences, needs and realities even in close locations or within a district. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct an assessment on the practical and strategic needs of women prior to implementation so that the intervention mechanisms can be tailored to promote women’s engagement. Women who are already engaged in PFM cooperatives seem to have active roles in forest management and protection activities, but still they lack visibility, sufficient voice and a leadership role; hence, this needs to be strengthened. Given that women expressed willingness to participate more in PFM cooperatives, implementers should identify suitable times, spaces and mechanisms for engaging women. Women, who are assumed to be part of the PFM cooperatives because their husbands are registered, lack sufficient information when compared to those women who are registered. In some areas, the practice of registering both spouses was noted and is found to be commendable. Hence this should be taken as one mechanism to enhance women’s participation in intervention areas. Women’s low literacy level, their work overburden and limited access to information also play a role in limiting their participation, especially in leadership positions. Moreover, women’s lack of access to sufficient money and project activities that aim to reduce reliance on forest resources should also focus on enhancing women’s income-generation opportunities, as per the needs and requirements of women in the different communities.
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