

## **Brief on Gender and Biodiversity**

Women and men hold and share different knowledge and practices about plants and animals. Women's knowledge of biodiversity comes from their roles as wild plant gatherers, home gardeners and plant domesticators, herbalists and seed custodians. Women across the globe possess knowledge on wild and domesticated species of edible and non-edible plants and animals, contributing to their abilities to propagate, collect, process, preserve, cook and store food items.

The majority of research on plant biodiversity, however, is not gender sensitive and has failed to acknowledge gender as central to the management and conservation of biodiversity. Scientific results, therefore, have been incomplete and lack important contributions from women's traditional knowledge and experience. This disregard has excluded women from decision-making and effective participation in discussions on sustainable biodiversity management. It is necessary to make visible the gender-differentiated practices and knowledge of women and men in their relations with biodiversity resources. It is also essential to recognize that women and men make different contributions to the conservation and sustainable management of biodiversity. In recognizing women as sources of knowledge and expertise, research and practice can be enhanced. It is crucial to achieve not just women's participation in discussions on biodiversity, but a thorough understanding of women's central role in biodiversity management.

The United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is one of the three Rio Conventions, which are the main international legally-binding agreements for sustainable development. They represent the legal outcome of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). The agreement signed by heads of state on that occasion, Agenda 21, which identifies the priority action for sustainable development, states clearly that empowerment of women and men is indispensable for sustainable development. The CBD aims at conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and advocates the fair and equitable sharing of genetic resource benefits. Furthermore, the CBD establishes a connection between sustainable conservation and development, and the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities. For example, plant genetic resources (PGR) are of significant importance and economic value as they represent an irreplaceable, locally adapted source of characteristics such as resistance to pests and disease and suitability to specific environmental conditions. However, PGR are being lost at a rapid rate, in part due to the replacement of farmers' heterogeneous traditional varieties with a relatively small number of homogenous, modern commercial varieties. This loss of crop genetic diversity poses a grave threat to long-term food security (FAO/IPGRI 1996). In effect, biodiversity is important in rural livelihood for spreading risks, as the reliance on a variety of genetic sources allows their agricultural systems to adapt to varying conditions, and generation of income from a range of natural resources.

Local-level biodiversity is maintained through knowledge and know-how of both women and men. In effect, because of gender-based roles in rural livelihoods, women and men acquire and transmit different and complementary knowledge: they have knowledge about different things, and different knowledge about the same things; they organize knowledge in different ways, and transmit it by different means (Huisinga Norem et al 1993). This knowledge pertains to domestic plant and animal genetic resources, which are the basis of both the productivity and adaptability of agricultural systems, and also to wild and semi-domesticated sources, which offer safety nets

in case of food scarcity (Koziell, McNeil 2002). Both sources also provide important goods for traditional medicine, as well as material for the pharmaceutical industry.

Failure to target both sexes in biodiversity conservation results inevitably in a loss of knowledge of local and international relevance, as well as producing a gender bias in policies and programmes which may be detrimental to the functions that women perform. It has been noted in many regions that whereas men concentrate on cash crop cultivation, women concentrate on subsistence agriculture as well as household-related tasks such as care to family members and food preparation. Thus, failure to integrate women's biodiversity knowledge in each of these functions has an impact on household-level food security and nutrition.

The Biodiversity Agenda, has been criticised for focusing on conserving rare species of global value, whereas less attention has been paid to biodiversity of local value, that helps to sustain the livelihoods of the poor (Swiderska 2002). The rural poor are the first to suffer if these resources are degraded or lost (Koziell, McNeil 2002), hence their high stake in ensuring their conservation.

Through its linkages to Women's Major Groups under the Convention on Biodiversity, WOCAN is able to raise issues of relevance to women and gender equality to this global body.

For more information:

- Gender Perspectives on the Conventions on Biodiversity, Climate Change and Desertification: [http://www.fao.org/sd/dim\\_pe1/docs/pe1\\_041002d1\\_en.doc](http://www.fao.org/sd/dim_pe1/docs/pe1_041002d1_en.doc)
- Gender Dimensions of Biodiversity of Biodiversity and Use: [http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-6233-201-1-DO\\_TOPIC.html](http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-6233-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html)
- IUCN Fact Sheet on Biodiversity: [http://www.generoyambiente.org/admin/admin\\_biblioteca/documentos/Biodiversity\\_ing.pdf](http://www.generoyambiente.org/admin/admin_biblioteca/documentos/Biodiversity_ing.pdf)
- UN Convention on Biological Diversity: <http://www.biodiv.org/default.shtml>
- International Plant Genetic Resources Institute (IPGRI): [www.ipgri.cgiar.org](http://www.ipgri.cgiar.org)