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New Suite of Research shows Economic, Social, Ecological Benefits when Women's Rights are Secure; Warns that Asia is Unlikely to Achieve Climate, Poverty Goals Unless Critical Role of Women in Asia's Forests is Recognized

Based on Emerging Trends from Across Asia, Experts Propose New Framework for Improving Gender Justice and Securing Women's Land Rights

BEIJING, CHINA (21 JULY 2012)—New research released today by the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) shows that despite more understanding, more resources, and policy recommendations, women continue to be largely marginalized and ignored or exploited in resource management processes throughout Asia – to the detriment of global climate and poverty reduction goals.

This suite of analyses, released today at the *International Workshop on Gender and Forest Tenure in Asia and Collective Forest Tenure Reform in China*, demonstrate that exclusion and inequality on gender grounds are still rife and complicated by the intersection of cultural and social norms, economic pressures, and inadequate legal and institutional frameworks. Authors of the studies call for emerging programs and policies to combat climate change or encourage sustainable development to incorporate lessons learned.

“The volume highlights continued discrimination against women, despite the positive ecological, economic and social benefits enabled by their inclusion in the management and decision making processes regarding natural resources,” said Arvind Khare, Executive Director of the Rights and Resources Group (the coordinating mechanism of the Rights and Resources Initiative). “Asia is unlikely to achieve its climate and poverty goals if women’s rights to forest and land resources are not recognized.”

This new research links analyses on the status of forest tenure rights and gender rights across South and South East Asia. Today’s workshop in Beijing, hosted by the State Forestry Administration’s Chinese Academy of Forestry in coordination with RRI and Landesa-RDI, and includes high-level participation from provincial and national government agencies in China, leading experts on gender and forest tenure from throughout Asia and voices from Chinese civil society.

Women's Rights Critical in Fight against Climate Change and Environmental Degradation

Securing tenure and access rights to natural resources has long been a critical step towards achieving environmental and social justice; however, these issues have again become timely in relation to new forest sector initiatives for mitigation and adaptation to climate change, particularly Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD+) strategies and programs, posing a danger that past failures to address gender will only be repeated in the new plans and interventions.

In the last decade, climate change has become more prominent in the global discourse, and the REDD+ agenda is re-invigorating interest in the relationship between gender, on one hand, and forest tenure, governance and enterprise on the other, in order to ensure the success of climate intervention strategies. Without this linkage, Asia is unlikely to achieve the climate and poverty goals to which it has committed.

According to Jeannette Gurung and Abidah Billah Setyowati from Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management (WOCAN), REDD+ can provide significant benefits for countries in Asia if properly designed; however, limited participation by women and other marginalized groups, is a huge problem: "Despite the evidence of women's extensive engagement in forest management, few institutions in the countries studied have incorporated gender into their activities and plans. The current, almost complete neglect of gender issues and women's roles as stakeholders within REDD+ policies, plans and projects globally provides evidence that little has changed in the way that members of the forest sector view these concerns - this is despite the fact that gender equality is currently understood by development practitioners as key to reaching goals for poverty alleviation and human development."

It is not just women that are harmed by their disenfranchisement. According to Cécile Ndjebet, President of The African Women's Network for Community Management of Forests (REFACOF), "If women are left out of the land rights equation, we will see a drastic drop in agricultural production, leading to increasing food insecurity and potential famine. Poverty and displacement will increase, and we will see a drastic rise in conflicts over resource ownership and usage."

It is clear that rural women will continue to play a critical role in the global fight against climate change and environmental degradation. Without secure tenure rights, and enforcement of the proper social and environmental safeguards, REDD+ initiatives run the risk of worsening the situation on the ground.

Despite Recognition, Women Remain Left Out of Land Rights and Sustainable Development

Despite the recognition of equal tenure rights for men and women in the law of many Asian countries, women continue to be excluded from property rights and are seldom the owners of the land they cultivate.

According to Xiaobei Wang, a gender and land tenure specialist in China, a 2012 study by Landesa-RDI on the gendered impact of China's recent forestland reform shows that women, despite the laws aiming to protect their rights, are still in a vulnerable position when it comes to land rights.

"At first glance, China's monumental tenure reforms seem to be making great strides towards achieving the goals of reducing poverty and directly improving the livelihoods of 400 million farmers, and, indeed, they generally succeed in protecting farmers' land rights. However, findings from Landesa's field

research show that the decentralized policy in China, which leaves much discretion to village committees to allocate forestland benefits, allows traditional gender practices, norms, and roles to influence those decisions so as to render women's forestland tenure insecure. Although the law is gender neutral, its implementers – often – are not," Wang says.

According to Khare, "appropriate, gender sensitive laws, policies and supporting systems are needed to strengthen rural women's forest land rights in China, and ensure the effectiveness and success of their forestland reform. Even when laws appear gender-neutral, they can serve to deprive women of control over land."

Gender mainstreaming has been a feature in the Philippines, Nepal and Indonesia and yet, programs and projects continue to bypass women.

The case of Nepal also shows that statutory rights alone do not guarantee the recognition of women's authority over management and the use of benefits. Despite gender mainstreaming policies at the national level, women continue to remain less visible and less heard despite some progress and the active lobbying of civil society organizations like Federation of Community Forestry Users, Nepal (FECOFUN).

For Marlène Buchy, author of the volume's introduction and a leading expert on natural resource management and gender issues, the various case studies throughout Asia "demonstrate strongly that changing the law is necessary and urgent but not sufficient: there has to be a genuine political will to implement and enforce clarified tenure systems. Discrimination against women can be as imbedded in institutional arrangements as in cultural and social norms."

New Framework for Improving Gender Justice and Securing Women's Land Rights

The Challenges of Securing Women's Tenure and Leadership for Forest Management finds that "many Asian women continue to be locked into a cycle of chronic poverty, and are denied some of their basic rights because of unclear, unsecured and unequal tenure rights, despite playing a huge role in sustainable management of natural resources."

To "unlock" this cycle of poverty and disenfranchisement, the authors, recommend a framework based on four interconnected areas of action to improve gender justice and secure tenure rights across Asia:

1. Increase Women's Visibility Through Mobilization and Networking
2. Capacity Building Within Projects and Organizations
3. Reinforce Participatory Ethos
4. Increase the Link with Policy

These areas of action are key to ensuring that women's rights are recognized, and that Asia will benefit from the positive ecological, economic and social benefits that woman's inclusion guarantees. To ensure that climate and poverty goals on forest and land resources are met, countries, programs like REDD+ and various NGOs and CSOs working on natural resources must increase focus on gender if they wish to capitalize on the benefits emerging from secure women's rights to land.

To do so, attention to the importance of networking is vital. Networks, like REFACOF and FECOFUN increase visibility of a common concern on the national and global stage, give local people a voice and a

venue, as well as serve as an important space for capacity building, information sharing and dissemination.

Government agencies, donors, research institutions, NGOs and other civil society organizations must also develop their own capacity on gender justice in natural resource management. More effort is needed to increase the understanding of women and gender rights issues, specifically on the effects of insecure tenure rights.

Empowering women – and reaping the economic and social benefits of this empowerment – will require constant and collective work on policy creation and implementation. Laws must be written or revised in favor of women and other disadvantaged groups. Where good policies exist, the international community must ensure that these laws are implemented, and actually change attitudes and perceptions of traditional gender roles.

This includes ensuring that women's views are heard, not just voiced. According to Avi Mahaningtyas, Chief of Cluster, Environment and Economic Governance for the Kemitraan-Partnership for Governance Reform in Indonesia and Mia Siscawati, a founding member of the Indonesia Institute for Forest and Environment, "gender justice is dependent on the ability of women and other vulnerable groups to participate in and influence the decision-making process at all levels, from household and community to national, regional and global levels."

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The Rights and Resources Initiative is a global coalition of international, regional, and community organizations advancing forest tenure, policy and market reforms. RRI leverages the strategic collaboration and investment of its Partners and Collaborators around the world by working together on research, advocacy and convening strategic actors to catalyze change on the ground.

RRI is coordinated by the Rights and Resources Group, a non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C. For more information, please visit www.rightsandresources.org.