



Gender and Natural Resource Governance:

Addressing inequalities and empowering women for sustainable ecosystem management



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Key messages

- Women and men have different roles, responsibilities, rights and knowledge regarding natural resources, with unique contributions to livelihoods and sustainable ecosystems.
- Women face social, cultural, economic and legal barriers that affect equitable natural resource governance, meaning their unique contributions to conservation solutions are at risk of being lost.
- Addressing gender-related barriers and challenges and championing equitable natural resource governance leads to better conservation and livelihood outcomes, together with women's rights and empowerment outcomes.

Gender equality for social equity in natural resource governance

Around the world, women and men hold different roles and responsibilities, knowledge and experiences and rights and power when it comes to governing natural resources. In most contexts, women and men have varying levels of access and control over these resources. The diverse values and priorities related to natural resources between women and men derive distinct and vital benefits for livelihoods and ecosystems.

In their roles as users and managers of natural resources, women are critically important in providing food, water and fuel for their communities and households. They drive innovation and demonstrate cooperative solutions, for example, using knowledge in formal and informal resource management processes. But despite their unique needs, capacities and contributions in natural resource management, women are often excluded or disenfranchised when it comes to making decisions over inputs, use and management of resources.





Gender equality is central to achieving social equity in natural resource governance and the protection and fulfilment of human rights. Analysing the structures, processes and norms regarding decision-making that constitute structural barriers to women's active participation can uncover the factors underpinning gender inequalities, but also barriers to realising conservation outcomes. An effective gender-responsive governance assessment can highlight different inequalities and power relations, not merely between men and women, but also recognising differences in vulnerability and resilience within groups that ultimately determine the ability to participate in and influence decision-making.

It is essential to emphasise that groups are not homogenous. Other social factors, such as age and ethnicity, intersect with gender, making some people experience marginalisation and discrimination to different extents and in different ways compared to others. Understanding and addressing these layered inequalities in natural resource governance are key to achieving women's empowerment and inclusive and effective natural resource governance, which in turn will lead to better conservation and livelihood outcomes for all.



Natural resource governance refers to the norms, institutions and processes that determine how power and responsibilities over natural resources are exercised, how decisions are taken, and how people – including women, men, youth, indigenous peoples and local communities – participate in the management of, and benefit from, natural resources [1].

Gender-differentiated responsibilities and knowledge of natural resources

Women and men have unique responsibilities and knowledge concerning natural resource use, collection and management that hold different important contributions to understanding and sustaining livelihoods, including for subsistence and income.

For instance, in Latin America, men bring about seven times more income from unprocessed forest products to the household than women [2]; while a study in Amazonia found that women were able to identify a broader range of plant species and usable plant parts compared to men [3], mainly as related to food, medicinal and other household usages.

Conserving natural resources and biodiversity also enhances conservation of the unique preferences, priorities and knowledge of both women and men,

which can be crucial in coping with food shortages and adapting to weather and climate variations. A study from South Africa highlighted that women stockpiled seed varieties from their home gardens that were drought tolerant, and during an extreme drought season, they planted these seeds in family farms along with indigenous plants to ensure crops would survive [4]. By conserving diverse seed types with different adaptive properties, women contributed to maintaining food and nutrition security during extreme climate shifts, underscoring the importance of conserving gender-differentiated traditional knowledge.

Due to their unique responsibilities in managing natural resources, women and men face different risks completing tasks,

especially when their access is disrupted or changed. Women often hold the primary responsibility for water and fuel collection to meet household needs. These demanding tasks puts them at risk of injury, animal attacks and physical and sexual violence; the time they spend, along with the risks they face, increases with changing availability and scarcity of natural resources.

A recent study of 22 African countries estimates that women and girls spend an average of two hours each day just collecting fuel [5].



Barriers to equitable natural resource governance

Women face social, cultural, economic and legal barriers that impact equitable natural resource governance,

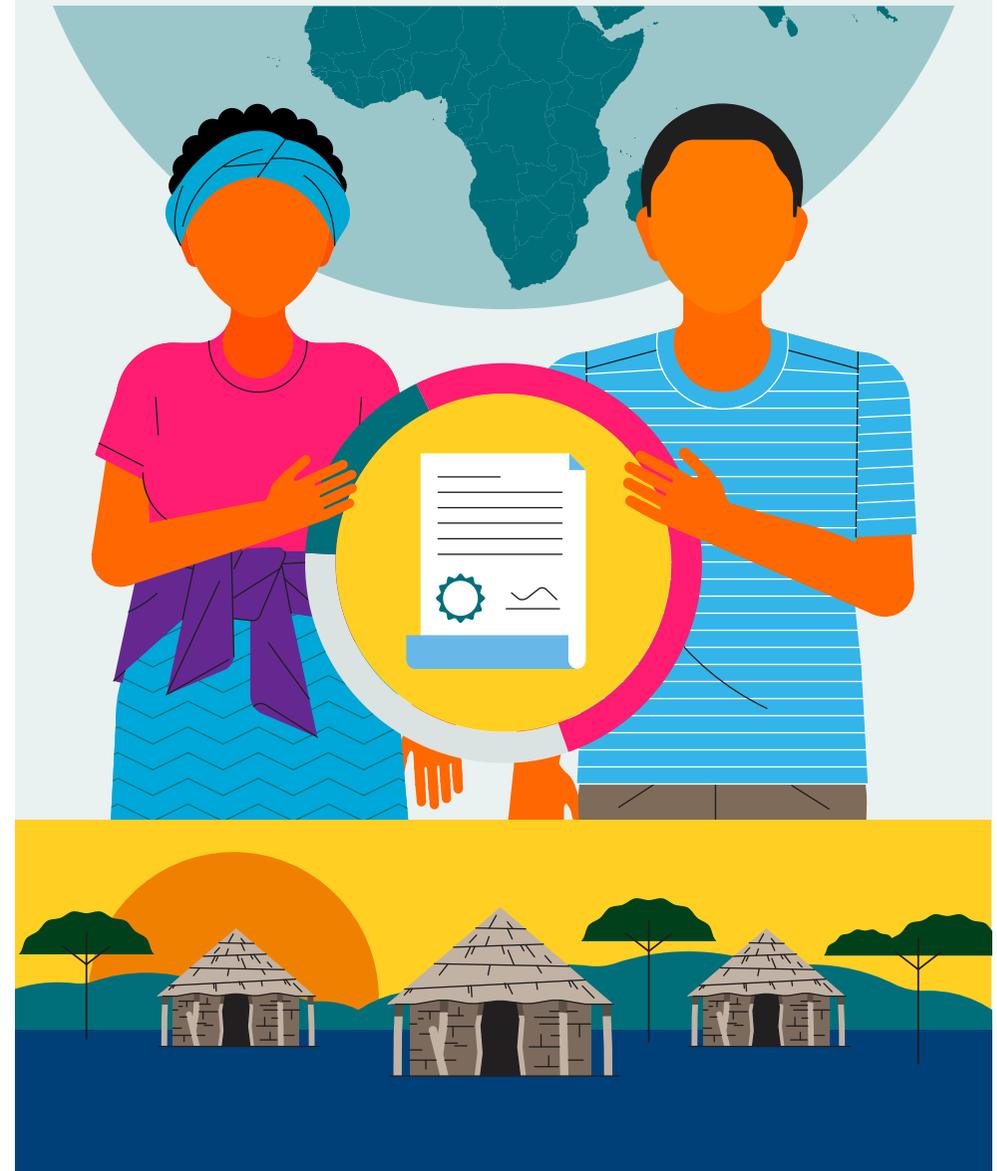
meaning their unique contributions to conservation solutions are at risk of being lost. For example, despite their important role in managing and using water resources, women remain under-represented in water governance processes at local, national and global levels [6].

In many contexts, land ownership rights are critical in determining who can make decisions about how that land and its resources are managed, and in most societies around the world, women typically have fewer ownership rights than men. Women make up only 13.8% of landholders globally [7], and about 40% of the world's economies have at least one legal constraint on women's rights to property, limiting their ability to own, manage and inherit land [8]. Moreover, when women do control land, it is often of smaller size and of lower quality than that held by men [9].

The access and use of technology, information and financial services for natural resource management will enhance the capacity to govern resources effectively;

however, women's access to these services and opportunities is often limited compared to men. A 2010 review of the levels of access to agricultural extension advice found that only 2% of female-headed households and 12% of male-headed households in Ghana reported receiving extension advice [10]. Women also have less access or face discrimination and legal barriers to loans, savings and markets. For example, women entrepreneurs receive just 1% of available credit in rural areas in Uganda [11].

Data on land ownership by sex is often not widely available and up to date, but for data available in six countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, women own an average of 17% of agricultural land area compared to an average of 52% owned by men [12].



Equitable governance leads to improved conservation and livelihood outcomes

Addressing gender-related barriers and challenges and championing equitable natural resource governance leads to better livelihood outcomes.

For agriculture, if women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20–30%. This could raise total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5–4%, which could in turn reduce the number of hungry people in the world by 12–17% [9].

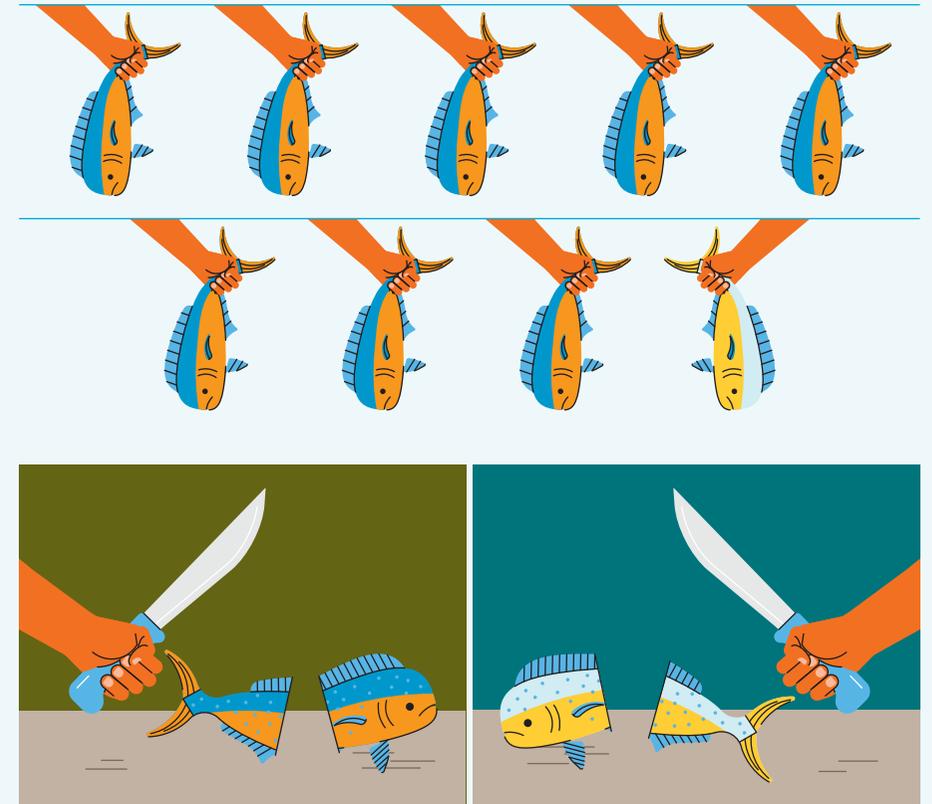
Gender equality and women's participation in decision-making and natural resource governance benefits conservation goals and leads to more effective outcomes.

One study found that countries with more women representatives in national parliaments lead to those countries adopting more stringent climate change policies [13]. Another study on women's representation in parliaments found that countries with more women representatives are also more likely to set aside protected land areas [14].

These benefits are also apparent at the community level by engaging both women and men and integrating their unique responsibilities and knowledge of natural resources.

Research on forest user groups in Indonesia, Peru and Tanzania showed that groups with a quota in place for gender balanced membership conserved more trees in a Payment for Ecosystem Services intervention and shared the payments more equally compared to groups without a quota [15]. Other studies conducted in Africa and Latin America have similarly suggested that the inclusion of women in forest management into mixed female and male groups offer an avenue for utilising their respective strengths to achieve adoption of forest enhancing behaviour [16].

At the global level, more than 59.5 million people are employed in capture fisheries, with women accounting for 14% of these workers. However, when post-harvest operations are considered in the data, it is estimated that one in two workers in the fisheries sector is a woman [17]. Evidence shows that engaging women as stewards for key fishery resources has improved the enforcement of regulations of nearshore ecosystems in the Philippines and Vietnam [18].



Tools to ensure gender integration in governance efforts

Despite women's unique and important responsibilities in the use and management of natural resources, women are typically less involved (or, at times, not even allowed) in formal governance processes, resulting in their interests, goals, knowledge and capabilities being both under-represented and under-utilised. [19]. Key tools, such as these two, exist to ensure gender considerations are taken into account in natural resource governance:

Framework for conducting a gender-responsive analysis

A gender analysis is a critical tool to better understand any governance context and inform and guide gender-responsive programming, projects and interventions. Gender analyses, which are ideally distinct but can be dedicated sub-sections of or complementary to broader social assessments, provide a deep context-specific examination of gendered roles, responsibilities, rights, representation and many other aspects of diverse peoples' lives that are fundamental to understanding and improving equitable and sustainable natural resource governance. Gender analyses explore, for example, who does what, who has access to what, and attitudes and beliefs, along with specific gender-related risks such as gender-based violence.

A gender-responsive context analysis sets a common understanding on gender and inclusion issues and identifies opportunities for reducing gaps. Importantly, the issues raised in an analysis and associated recommendations made should translate to actions.

Find out more information on conducting a gender-responsive analysis [here](#) [20] and [here](#) [21].

The Natural Resource Governance Framework (NRGF)

Approaching gender inequalities from a governance perspective offers specific opportunities to understand the structural barriers to women's active participation in decision-making over natural resources. IUCN's Natural Resource Governance Framework (NRGF) provides a robust, inclusive and credible approach to assessing and strengthening natural resource governance, at multiple levels and in diverse contexts [22]. The NRGF guides the systematic assessment of key governance aspects to highlight structural issues that create inequalities through ten guiding principles:

1. Inclusive decision making
2. Recognition and respect for tenure rights

3. Recognition and respect for diverse cultures and knowledge systems
4. Appropriate devolution of authority
5. Strategic vision, direction and learning
6. Coordination and coherence
7. Sustainable and equitably shared resources
8. Accountability
9. Fair and effective rule of law
10. Access to justice and conflict resolution

The NRGF involves consideration of power dynamics and differing roles, responsibilities and rights of all people, including women, men, youth, indigenous peoples and local communities. A tool to assess how institutions, processes and norms enable or prevent women from participating in decision-making, it can help further unpack women's power, for example by looking at their tenure rights and access to benefit sharing and grievance mechanisms. Application of the NRGF can uncover the barriers of effective participation and by addressing them, ensure that interventions are gender-responsive, socially inclusive and participatory.

Find out more about the NRGF [here](#). [23]

Recommendations



Gender-responsive actions for CSOs:

Conduct context-specific and gender-responsive governance analyses for natural resource contexts

to recognise women's and men's unique roles, responsibilities, knowledge, rights and access to natural resources. Gender assessments can be strengthened by applying governance tools to guide a systematic analysis by examining how women's rights are considered in the law, who has access to information and decision-making platforms and if there are effective accountability and grievance mechanisms [20,21,24].

Ensure that projects employ adequate, gender-responsive monitoring, evaluation and learning

to assess the effectiveness of interventions in natural resource governance from a gender perspective, including by using gender indicators and collecting and applying gender data to better understand differentiated impacts of natural resource degradation and men and women's contributions to effective governance. This includes using a gender lens to safeguard against unintended consequences (e.g., an increase in gender-based violence) and share best practices and lessons learned [25,26,27].

Advocate for equal rights and benefits

for women and men in natural resource governance and decision-making and empower women and men to have equal access to information, training and resources associated with interventions on natural resource governance. This can include working with and supporting local women's groups through leadership training to support women's empowerment in natural resource governance [28,29].

Gender-responsive actions for governments:

Adopt, strengthen and implement gender-responsive policy frameworks and tenure rights.

At the national level, many countries have successfully enacted legislation to fight discrimination against women's land ownership [30], but legal reforms need to be accompanied by adequate enforcement and community outreach to ensure that traditional leaders, women and local communities are aware of the rights and benefits of women's land ownership [31,32,33,34].

Guarantee that policies and institutions allow for equal access

for women and men to education, training and technology, as well as financial services including loans, savings and insurance.

Ensure that men and women have equal opportunities

to participate in natural resources decision-making and action at all levels, including through parliamentary representation of women and inclusion of women in local government and natural resource management committees [35].

Key resources

Publication Title	Entity	Synopsis	URL
<p>An IUCN Natural Resource Governance Framework</p>	IUCN	The webpage for the IUCN NRGF provides updated guidance on the Framework and how it is being implemented around the world. The NRGF Assessment Guide offers guidance and resources to help design and carry out governance assessments using the NRGF.	[click here] 
<p>Strengthening indigenous and rural women's rights to govern community lands: Ten factors contributing to successful initiatives</p>	Rights and Resources Initiative (2019)	This report identifies factors from local, national and regional initiatives and processes in lower and middle-income countries that have contributed to strengthened indigenous and rural women's governance rights over community lands.	[click here] 
<p>Improving land tenure security for women: A women first approach</p>	Landesa Center for Women's Land Rights (2014)	This toolkit provides step-by-step guidance to designing, implementing and evaluating projects that work with women to improve land tenure security. The toolkit is designed to be flexible to accommodate new information and specific customary systems in local land governance.	[click here] 
<p>Gender and governance in rural services: Insights from India, Ghana, and Ethiopia</p>	World Bank (2010)	This report uses the findings and analysis from accountability mechanisms in agricultural extension and rural water supply projects in India, Ghana and Ethiopia to generate strategies on improving services to be more gender-responsive and meet the needs of women and men, including through equitable governance reforms.	[click here] 

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You can access the other tools [online](#).