Gender, tenure and community forests in Uganda

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Key messages

- Despite greater participation of communities in forest management in Uganda, women have been largely shut out of decision making.
- More women need to take up leadership positions so that they are better able to set the agenda.
- Formal forest-user groups (unlike informal ones) appear to elevate the quality and extent of women's participation in decision making in forest management.
- Better information and finances could enable women to participate more effectively in the management of forest resources in the country.
- Women represented only 5% of political and technical leadership positions in the three study districts. There is a clear need for affirmative action.
- District and sub-county technical staff and political leaders need training in gender issues.
- Educated women are often not particularly good at representing womens' needs: their urban elite lives are too different from the lives of poor, rural women.

Introduction

Despite legal and policy rhetoric about attention to gender issues in forestry management, women continue to be marginalised in decision making, including collaborative forest management (CFM) and forest user-group meetings in Uganda (Obua *et al.* 1998 and Kugonza *et al.* 2009). Social norms, the gendered division of labour and gendered behavioural norms, as well as gendered spaces and species, all limit women's participation in decision making and in forest management (Howard and Nabanoga 2007). These social norms and cultural practices constrain women's visibility, mobility and behaviour, even when they are members of informal or formal groups (Mwangi *et al.* 2011).

This study examines to what extent women in three districts of Uganda are involved in making decisions, defining the agenda and sharing benefits at multiple levels of forestry governance. It explores the support of external actors for women's participation in community forest management. Finally, it proposes ways

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and means to encourage the inclusion of women in forestry decision making.

We studied Mpigi, Masaka and Rakai districts, which are part of the Lake Victoria agroecological zone and feature central and local forest reserves, as well as private and communal/sacred forests (Figure 1). Several forces drive deforestation in the study area: weak forest governance institutions, high demand for forest produce (due to increasing population) and poor implementation of government policies in the environment sector (Banana *et al.* 2010).

Apart from diverse tenure regimes, these districts involve a range of external actors seeking to empower local communities' participation in forest management and development more generally. Within this context, we explored the extent to which gender features in forestry-relevant (central) government and non-governmental organisations and programmes, in forest communities and in local government councils/committees that make decisions on forestry and allocate budgets.

Gender in organisations and programmes

Most organisations and programmes surveyed are not specifically involved in forestry, but rather work with communities to improve food security through better soil and water conservation, as well as to enhance energy technologies. Of these, three-quarters had a written gender policy, but less than one-third reported success at integrating gender.

Most forest-specific organisations were private companies involved in large-scale tree planting or public agencies that managed local and national government forest reserves. Private tree growers largely had no interest in promoting local participation in forest management or analysing gender roles. Despite their legal obligations, government agencies involved in forestry do not feature gender prominently in their projects and programmes.

Only one government initiative, the Farm Income Enhancement and Forest Conservation project (FIEFOC), promotes the involvement of women in on-farm tree planting. Still, women make up only about 30% of FIEFOC applicants. The low rate is attributed mainly to gender disparities in land ownership, cultural norms and practices, heavy domestic work loads and provision of seedlings for timber and poles instead of the preferred fruit and fuelwood.

Overall, the main obstacles for integrating gender in forest-specific organisations and programmes include inadequate budgets for
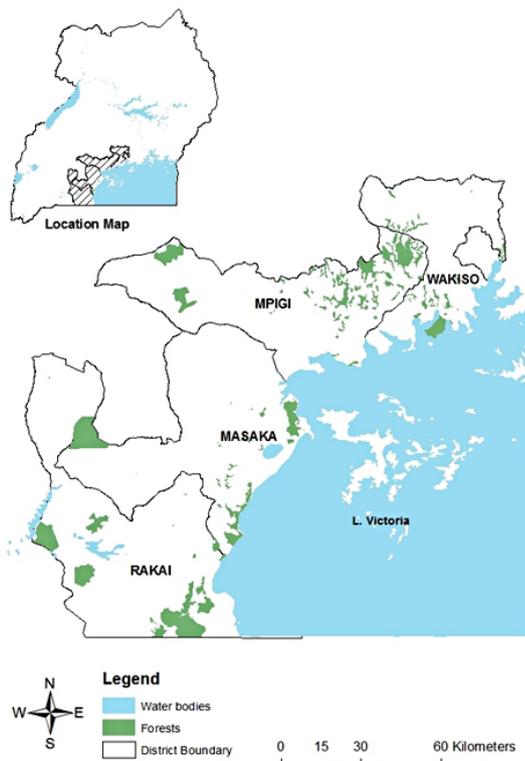
Figure 1. Lake Victoria Crescent covering the study districts of Mpigi, Masaka and Rakai

gender mainstreaming coupled with limited staff training in gender planning and analysis.

In response, individuals proposed several reforms for their organisations:
- Providing incentives to staff to engage in capacity building of local communities.
- Creating awareness among staff, especially the leadership, about the role communities can play in enhancing sustainable forest management.
- Providing information to local communities in local languages.
- Increasing networking of organisations that encourage local community participation.

These responses, though relevant and useful at an aggregate level, seem to conflate gender with local community. Individuals in the sampled organizations appear not to recognize the need to disaggregate communities into men and women.

Gender in (formal) forest associations

Following governance reforms in 2001, some forest adjacent communities created forest associations to enhance rural livelihoods, and more than two-thirds are involved in Community Forestry Management (CFM) arrangements. Associations adjacent

to private forests were involved in on-farm and commercial tree planting, while those adjacent to communal and heavily degraded local forest-reserves were engaged in afforestation and reforestation.

All eight formal associations in the study are mixed user-groups, although men dominate the leadership of all but two. Most user groups reported equitable sharing of most benefits. For example, both men and women have equal access to technical and financial support from NGOs and financial institutions. They also enjoy an equal chance of networking with other user groups. However, men have better employment opportunities in the forest-based activities formed by the groups.

While men and women mostly worked together, there were some gendered activities. For example, men largely took care of planting commercial timber trees on-farm and patrolling forests, while women were mostly responsible for planting fruit and firewood trees on-farm and extracting materials to make handicrafts.

All associations reported that the majority of women members regularly attend meetings, participate fully and freely express their opinions. Still, in about 30% of cases, local politicians and wealthy individuals control the agenda, dominate discussions and influence decision making.

Gender in informal forest user-groups

We categorised 10 communities living adjacent to forests without associations as informal forest user-groups. They derived much the same benefits from forests as formal user-groups, and distributed benefits by gender in a similar fashion. For example, women manage eight tree-seedling nurseries in the study area.

Forest tenure and gender determine rights and access to forest products. In government forest reserves, both men and women

Table 1. Organisational strategies to integrate gender

	% Response (n=20)
Organisations that take gender into account during strategic planning	55
Organisations with an operational plan that includes clear allocation of responsibilities and time for monitoring and evaluation of impact of gender	25
Organisations that have a focal person to integrate gender within	35
Organisation's staff trained in gender	40
Organisation's staff trained in gender planning and analysis	35
Staff training in gender systematically budgeted for	30
Organisation budget adequate to support gender integration	35
Organisations that need reforms to integrate gender	40

can obtain permits to harvest non-timber forest products legally. Men own all private forests and often women do not have access to these resources except for harvesting firewood (after the men have harvested the timber and poles). However, women readily access firewood and fruit trees growing on family land holdings. In planted forests, access rights are restricted to family members.

The village leadership, including elders, control access to communal forests according to the area's cultural norms. These traditional institutions do not normally include women in decision making. Communal sacred forests are controlled by clan elders (which also exclude women) according to the myths and traditions of a given forest.

Gender in District councils and local committees

Committees, established by law in 1987, were strengthened by the Local Government Act 1997. The production committee, for example, makes policies and oversees all the production sub-sectors in the district. Most respondents were elected councillors on the production committees at the district and sub-county levels. Other respondents were technical personnel from forestry and other government agencies who sit on the production committees as unofficial members.

Committees make decisions by consensus. After technical staff explains issues in detail, councillors freely discuss the motion. All members, including women, are given an opportunity to contribute until consensus is reached. In some cases, however, secret voting takes place on contentious issues. The committees have made several forest-related decisions, but tree planting has received the most attention.

All female councillor respondents reported influencing council decisions during the last five years. During the dry season, for example, the sole woman on a council convinced her colleagues to put money approved for livestock toward community water tanks instead. In another case, women councillors convinced the production committee to observe the district Environmental Day by planting trees on lands belonging to various institutions, including schools and religious centres.

Lessons learned and recommendations

The few women leaders of forest projects and programmes are not trained in gender and have not been actively lobbying for enhanced women's participation in the sector. For example, at the time of the study, only 2 out of 110 District Forest Services were headed by women. Mabira CFR has a total of 14 workers of which only 4 are females. Indeed educated women are often not particularly good at representing women's needs: their urban, elite lives are too different from the lives of rural poor women and they lack an intimate understanding of rural women's needs and priorities in community forestry. In addition, their positions are often so tenuous: projects and programmes are often short lived with limited job security; that they dare not rock the boat. Thus, there is need for a critical mass of women before gender issues can realistically be successfully addressed.

Although women participated fully in CFM association meetings and decision making, they tend to physically participate less in labour- and capital-intensive tree planting and CFM projects compared to small-scale, grassroots agroforestry projects. This is attributed to limited capital, long rotation periods for timber trees and undesirable tree species being promoted by government agencies, NGOs and tree growers.

Table 2. Analysis of gender issues in the districts and what can be done to improve women's participation

Key Gender Concerns	Effects	Strategies
Inadequate knowledge and skills on gender equity issues	Resource allocation does not address male and female concerns equitably	Train all sector heads, heads of departments and political leaders on gender issues, including equity budgeting
Low budgeting and allocation of funds to mainstream gender issues	Poor mainstreaming of gender	Increase budgetary allocation for gender programme
The revised gender policy is not adequately disseminated within various local government councils	Inadequate/ Lack of knowledge on gender policy provisions by councillors of various local government tiers	• Disseminate the Uganda gender policy to district and sub-county technical staff and political leaders • Distribute copies of the policy to all sectoral departments. • Translate the policy into local languages
Inadequate capacity to do gender mainstreaming in sub-counties.	Limited number of technical persons to spearhead the gender mainstreaming process at the sub-county level	Ensure participation of district and sub-county staff in generation and use of gender-disaggregated data • Engender the data-collection tools • Train community development officers in gender analysis
Absence of gender focal persons as required by law at district and sub-county levels	Poor implementation of gender policy and strategies in districts	Fill vacant gender positions at district and sub-county levels
Poor recruitment of women in political and technical leadership positions	Marginalisation of women's issues in policies and administrative structures	Increase opportunities for women to occupy political and administrative positions through affirmative action

Major obstacles hindering women's participation in on-farm tree planting were gender disparities in land ownership, cultural norms and practices, heavy domestic work loads and limited access to credit and farm inputs, as well as provision of seedlings of tree species not preferred by women.

Women were represented in formal mixed-forest user-groups. They participated actively in activities, guided by association constitutions that require inclusion of women in leadership. The presence of a constitution negotiated by all stakeholders, including women, empowers women and reduces gender disparities in information and awareness. Thus, the quality and extent of women's participation in decision making in forest management appear to be enhanced when women join formal forest user-groups. In addition, the presence of a large number of women in the associations enables women to discuss and express their opinion freely.

Women's involvement in decision making and participation in forest-association activities can be further enhanced if:
- More women can take up leadership positions in formal forest user-group associations so that they are better able to set the agenda.
- More NGOs with gender affirmative strategies can be established at the grassroots.
- More networking takes place between NGOs, not only to avoid duplication but also to enhance the capacity of small local NGOs that have no gender-trained personnel.
- More networking and exchange takes place among forest associations so that they can learn from each other.

Women made up 5% of technical and political leadership positions in all three study districts. This poor representation affects women's ability to set the agenda and influence decision making in the council. Thus, there is a need for gender affirmative action both at district and sub-county levels.

Absence of gender focal persons as required by law makes it difficult to implement the gender policy in the districts. At sub-county levels, most Community Development Officer positions are vacant. At the district level, these same positions in Masaka and Mpigi were occupied by officers who were also acting in other portfolios. There are, therefore, few technical personnel with skills to spearhead the gender mainstreaming process at the district and sub-county levels. We recommend that Community Development Officer positions at all levels be filled and officers trained in gender analysis so they are able to collect gender disaggregated data for planning, capacity building and budgeting.

There is a need for the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Affairs, as well as for NGOs with gender-biased grassroots projects, to disseminate the Uganda gender policy to district and sub-county technical staff and political leaders. In addition, the Ministry should train this same target group in gender issues, including equity budgeting.

Acknowledgements

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