

Participation of rural indigenous women in community governance

Selmira Flores, Kristen Evans, Anne M. Larson, Alejandro Pikitle, and Roberto Marchena

Key messages

- Miskitu and Mayangna women from rural forest-dependent communities in the North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (*Región Autónoma de la Costa Caribe Norte, RACCN*) of Nicaragua still have a limited presence and are at a disadvantage in representation in decision-making arenas, due in part to weak community governance. Strengthening women's participation improves community governance.
- Cultural rules continue to favor men. The road to gender equity requires spaces for women to reflect on their role in community forest governance, but it also requires men's commitment, respect and support.
- Participatory governance monitoring has provided an avenue for women to express their concerns about natural resource management issues and conflicts and has also generated hope for change.

Introduction

Despite legal reforms and institutional efforts to improve women's participation in governance processes,¹ women from five indigenous communities studied in the North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (RACCN) do not participate significantly in decision making on community issues related to natural resource management.² Poor governance and cultural barriers continue to restrict women's participation. This assessment is derived from the results of the participatory research implemented in 2014 and 2015 between the Nitlapan Research and Development Institute of the Central American University and the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR).

Over the course of two years, we observed gender dynamics using multiple participatory methods: participatory monitoring, collective reflection, interviews and participant observation. Results of this process indicate the following: first, indigenous women in rural communities continue to be marginalized with little voice or vote in communal and territorial government decision-making structures (field notes November 2015), with the exception of 'token women'

(Bareiro et al. 2007); second, indigenous cultural norms favor men, in spite of arguments that male–female relationships in the indigenous cosmovision are complementary and harmonious (*Cumbre de Mujeres Indígenas de América* 2003). Reducing gender exclusion involves accepting and facilitating women's open reflection on forest management without putting the indigenous collective good above gender differences (Ulloa 2007; Parrado and Isidro 2014) in the household or in community structures. We discuss the results in more detail below.

Few women participate in decisions on community forest management due in part to weak governance

The indigenous governance structure in the RACCN is divided between the community and the territory. The community is the traditional form of organization. By law, the 'community' refers to territorial space, identity and forms of self-organization, including the communal authority. Indigenous Territorial Governments (*Gobiernos Territoriales Indígenas*, or GTIs)³ are relatively new bodies created in the context of the country's

1 For example, the Law of Equality of Rights and Opportunities (Law 648) of 2008, the Gender Policy of the RAAN (now RACCN) of 2010 (Mairena et al. 2012), and Electoral Law 331, as amended by Law 790/2012) requiring that 50% of offices be held by female candidates.

2 The participation of indigenous women in rural communities is often limited to the culturally designated roles assigned to them. Women in communities are responsible for organizing activities associated with the church, their children's education and health.

3 A GTI "is responsible for the political administration of its territory, systems of education, health, economy, and sports. It is elected democratically in a territorial assembly. Its main bodies are: the board of directors, composed of the president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, attorney, and a representative. Its members are elected for a period of not more than four years and may be renewed only once if agreed by the territorial and communal assembly" (Hellmann and Unger 2012, 15).

communal land titling process, underway since 2003 with the approval of the Law of the Communal Property Regime of Indigenous Peoples (Law 445) (Hellmann and Unger 2012). In the indigenous community and GTIs, the primary authorities are the *wihta* (judge) and *síndico* (authority in charge of land and natural resources), and the president. These officials make decisions, manage and coordinate with government agencies, businesses and nongovernmental organizations, and they also receive a percentage of taxes from the national government deriving from forest resource use. At both levels, in the community and territorial governments, women are significantly underrepresented. Of 22 total positions in three GTIs, only four are occupied by women. There are 43 total positions in the five communal governments: 35 men and eight women (Castle 2015). The main positions, *síndico* and *wihta*, are nearly always occupied by men. Women are sometimes nominated for the treasurer position for their ability to ‘*take care of*’ and ‘*respect money*,’ but in reality they are unable to utilize those qualities because GTI presidents personally control the money they receive from the government. Therefore, while the selection of women for this position might seem to present opportunities for greater participation, it has instead served as a mechanism to reinforce the role of a ‘woman caregiver,’ while the *síndico*, *wihta* or president positions are associated with decision making and are therefore dominated by men.

During the participatory monitoring activities, community members identified a number of governance issues and weaknesses. For example, in one of the communities, most community members – particularly women – claimed that they do not participate in or receive information on their leaders’ organizational activities. At one of the monitoring sessions on women’s participation in forest management, one participant wrote: “meetings are held only between the *wihta* and the *síndico*; they hire people they have already chosen and work without the community knowing what they do or having the chance to intervene regarding the income earned from granting forest permits” (discussion, community ‘K,’ 8 May 2015).

When people not in leadership positions were surveyed, more women than men said women were seen as an obstacle: “... they do not involve us... because if we get involved in boards of directors, we will evaluate and monitor them” (discussion with Miskitu women, 22 May 2015). In addition, “women are not given the right to participate in meetings where timber harvesting is allowed... because they would not keep silent about what would happen; they would tell all the communal family; they would not cover up the poor decisions made by the leaders in their own interest. When they feel that women are about to listen to or intervene in matters related to this, the authorities meet at night with a small group of people from their board, and when they feel threatened, they say: ‘How can women possibly tell us what to do? They have no voice or vote in the decisions we make...’” (group discussion in monitoring activity, 9 May 2015).

Comments and views such as those quoted here emerged from the participatory governance monitoring process that provided opportunities to discuss concerns about internal governance. The process also addressed the role of women in collective natural resource management, which has been constrained by the attitudes and opinions of many men who see women as lacking the knowledge and capacity to govern and manage their forests, although some argue that grandmothers’ ancestral knowledge could be useful in readjusting ancestral practices to address forest destruction (Cunningham 2011, Evans et al. In press).

In addition, the conflict over indigenous land caused by the invasion of ‘colonists’ (*colonos*)⁴ in recent years (2014–2015) has created a hostile environment for women and has closed spaces off to them that had been opened previously. Although the conflict affects everyone, it is argued that women “should not be there,” (R. Marchena, field notes, November 2015) as “it is men’s responsibility to protect the family and the community,” (A. Pikitle, field notes, November 2015) so “women are persuaded to yield that space to men” (S. Davis, field notes, March 2016).

Cultural norms that privilege collective matters place women at a disadvantage

In the monitoring process, as well as during other moments of the participatory research, many men argued that women are not being excluded but that women are actually the ones who refuse to participate or hold leadership positions, thus holding women responsible for the problem. Reflection on women’s inclusion raised contradictory ideas. On the one hand, for a woman to occupy a position in community structures, it was argued that she should be single to avoid the risk of not meeting her duties to her children, husband and household. On the other hand, some communities argue that for a woman to be a leader she should be married and have her husband’s permission (M. McLean, personal communication, March 2016).

Paradoxically, unmarried women who are eligible for selection are usually young women, who are not believed to have the knowledge and skills needed to exercise leadership in a culture that values wisdom from age and experience. Female and male elders have the right to speak and be heard. However, elderly women may face physical health constraints, making it difficult to travel beyond their homes, communities and territories, and thereby constraining their participation. Thus, neither being young nor old is a suitable criterion for women’s eligibility to be

⁴ ‘Colonists’ refers to people who are not native to the indigenous peoples or communities in the RACCN and who take possession of land in indigenous territory with or without the consent of the community or its leaders. In many cases, the colonists are mestizos (people of mixed ancestry) from the Pacific coast of Nicaragua.

able to fill certain positions or to have a voice in decisions on forest use. Married women have constraints too, as they are told they can only hold office if they have the permission of their husbands and the other male leaders. This mindset creates a cultural barrier that emphasizes the differences between men and women and deprives women of free participation. It also serves as an obstacle to the changes needed for women to be taken into account in decision making and leadership.

In this context, the cultural norms associated with the roles assigned to men and women are also intertwined with other factors working against women. For example, male leaders often insisted on participating in the discussions during monitoring activities, which reflected some leaders' eagerness to control women's opinions and undermine them by saying that women did not know what they were talking about and should keep quiet. We also noted the case of an indigenous woman who was elected as community *wihita* and was questioned even by her own relatives for her alleged failure to provide justice – she even spent a few months in jail on charges of illegal activities. In contrast, no male community *wihita* had faced a similar process of disgrace and imprisonment although more than one had been accused of similar illicit acts. In recent elections of some community and territorial authorities, men successfully excluded women by arguing that women cannot help defend the community's territory and solve the issues of illegal land transfers to non-indigenous people. However, there is hope of change: for instance, in one community, women have recently been elected as *deputy síndica* and *wihita*. One of the priests from that community's church believes that women are demonstrating that they coordinate activities better than men in their efforts to work for the wellbeing of the community.

Conclusions

The underrepresentation of women in decision making on community forest management in territorial and community structures derives from a mindset that relegates women to the household sphere and at the margins of community decision making and governance, which is a virtually unchallenged male domain. Any efforts to improve the living conditions of indigenous people and their families must consider the implications of that reality in order to improve gender equality and participation. While there is an urgent need for the inclusion of more women in community governance, consideration must be given to the fact that inclusion in and of itself does not guarantee a change in male–female relationships in indigenous communities. Spaces are needed for reflection, discussion and awareness raising among women and men on their roles in community and forest management. These are spaces and opportunities that may be created from the process of monitoring governance and participation.

Addressing the problem of exclusion and promoting an inclusive governance process for Mayangna and Miskitu women in the rural environment requires understanding

and awareness of the underlying cultural and power aspects that are not only embedded in everyday practice and thinking, but are also reinforced by regulations that create inequality. Not only do rural indigenous women need to be included in greater numbers in major leadership positions within community structures, but spaces for women are also needed where they can reflect upon and express their concerns about conflicts over land and forests, food insecurity, deforestation, contamination of water sources and internal governance problems. The greatest challenge is to strengthen community organization beyond simply responding to the demands of indigenous people as a collective. Women's concerns about forest deterioration and community resource management must no longer be marginalized. Instead, women should be involved in creating solutions to problems at the community and territorial levels. Participatory monitoring demonstrated that it can open up spaces for discussion about improving transparency, participation, accountability and cooperation between men and women. Participatory monitoring is an approach that can help bring about change, not only for women but also for men in and outside of leadership positions, and for gender relations, thus strengthening community governance as a whole.

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