

Gender and forests in Nicaragua's autonomous regions

Community participation

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Key messages

- Although most of the state agencies and NGOs studied have some kind of gender policy or strategy, very few promote indigenous women's participation in decisions related to natural resources or forests.
- Even in communities where women believe they have influence over many important decisions, they do not have similar influence over forest-related decisions.
- Lack of confidence in local authorities has paralysed the participation of both men and women community members. Thus, efforts to address women's participation may be ineffective if local governance and accountability are not addressed.
- Both communities and outside institutions need to reflect critically on their gendered assumptions regarding forests and design and monitor specific strategies to support women's effective participation.

Introduction

Nicaragua's indigenous peoples are in the process of obtaining titles to large multi-community territories, in which natural resource governance is key to the future for both livelihoods and culture. This raises an important question for gender issues: What role do women play in forest use and decision-making? A study titled 'Gender, tenure and community forests in Nicaragua' used literature and field research to explore how indigenous women participate in the management of forests and forest resources.

The North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN) is one of two autonomous regions that together comprise 52.6% of Nicaragua's national territory (Envío 1981). The RAAN contains nearly 40% of the country's forests, totalling 1.48 million ha (INAFOR 2009). More than half of the population lives in poverty (Ortega 2009). In the RAAN, indigenous women who have been closely linked to empowerment processes in governmental and political spheres now serve in a variety of positions of power. However, this process has moved more slowly at the community and territory levels.

The study began in 2010 as a collaborative effort between the Nitlapan Research and Development Institute of the Central American University and the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR). The Austrian Development Agency provided financing. The research in Nicaragua, in turn, was part of a comparative study of similar issues in Uganda. CIFOR has prepared two *Infobriefs* highlighting results of the Nicaraguan study. The

other brief examines the legal architecture, and this one explores community participation. It focuses on two questions:

1. How do key institutions (state and non-state) support women's participation, and to what extent do they promote participation in natural resource spheres specifically?
2. How do women participate in forest-related decisions in their communities and territories?

Institutional implementation on gender and forests

Bina Agarwal (see Box 1) has characterised participation along a scale from nominal (physical presence) to interactive (demonstrating initiative and influence). In the interviews and focus groups conducted for this study, these definitions were used as the reference point for understanding the actions, activities and comments made by different actors.

A few key entities in the RAAN are working on gender and/or land and forest resource issues. Most public and private institutions have made little progress in promoting initiatives that generate more empowering conceptions of women's participation within communities; indeed, there is little understanding even of how or why to do this. Donors that require women's participation often do so without supporting mechanisms for serious reflection or analysis of gender issues. Hence, the result is often an emphasis on physical presence as a measure of participation.

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Box 1. Concepts of participation

Agarwal (2001) identified six levels of participation:

- Nominal (referring to an individual's presence as a group member)
- Passive (when an individual expresses a point of view without making decisions)
- Consultative (when an individual expresses an opinion on specific issues but without necessarily influencing decisions)
- Active-specific (when individuals voluntarily take on a task, or are asked to do so)
- Active (when individuals express an opinion and take initiative in diverse matters whether requested to or not)
- Interactive (when individuals take initiative on diverse matters and influence group decisions).

This characterisation refers mainly to participation in the public arena, which was the focus of this study. Women also participate in important ways in private arenas and may have substantial influence on decisions, including natural resource issues, through more informal channels (but these were not included in the study).

For this study, interviews were conducted with five state institutions, seven non-governmental entities and one multi-stakeholder council.

Government offices at the regional level:

- National Forestry Institute (INAFOR)
- Natural Resources Commission of the RAAN Regional Council
- National Commission on Demarcation and Titling (CONADETI)
- Women's Secretariat of the RAAN Regional Government
- Natural Resources Secretariat of the RAAN Regional Government (SERENA)

Non-governmental entities:

- Center for Studies and Information on Multiethnic Women (CEIMM) of the University of the Autonomous Regions of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast (URACCAN)
- Institute for Natural Resources, Environment and Sustainable Development (IREMADES), URACCAN
- Masangni (forestry professionals organisation)
- Center for Research and Documentation of the Atlantic Coast (CIDCA)
- Center for Autonomy and Development of Indigenous Peoples (CADPI)
- La Gaviota Women's Collective
- Association for the Development of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua (Pana Pana)

Multi-stakeholder platform:

- Forestry and Environmental Advisory Committee (CCF-A)

Three of these 13 entities work specifically on women and gender issues: the regional government's Women's Secretariat, La Gaviota Women's Collective and CEIMM. Most of the others focus on natural resources, forests or land, and three of the NGOs work on development issues more generally.

Of the total, six considered that they had some kind of gender policy, and all but one claimed to have some kind of gender strategy. Policies ranged from a state law promoting numerical equity (which governs all state institutions) to the university gender policy designed under the leadership of CEIMM and the Women's Collective focusing on women's rights.

Of the five state institutions, only one, the Women's Secretariat, had a staff member for gender issues and a (very limited) budget for gender activities. Five of the seven NGOs had staff for gender issues, but only two had a budget dedicated to gender activities (the two organisations focusing on gender), although one other organisation had sometimes held project funds for gender activities. All of the NGOs had staff with training on gender issues; for the state agencies, training was more sporadic. More than half of the NGOs had specific indicators for monitoring progress on gender issues (although these often referred simply to the physical presence of women), but none of the state agencies did.

Despite these weaknesses, there are also notable opportunities. The autonomous region has its own gender policy, adopted in 2010 and developed by the regional government's Women's Secretariat and the regional council's Commission for Women, Youth, Children and Family. The policy promotes equality between men and women among the region's indigenous, ethnic and mestizo populations, with the aim of creating conditions for the effective empowerment of women and their insertion into the region's social, economic, political and cultural life. In addition, most of the entities interviewed had undertaken at least a few meaningful activities to promote women's economic empowerment and/or political participation at different scales, although little has been done with regard to natural resource management.

Of the entities working specifically on natural resources, only Masangni, the association of forestry professionals, had a gender policy that explicitly considers women's participation in forestry resource management and administration. However, it had weaknesses in terms of the gender strategy (focused on numerical equity), budget and monitoring. Interestingly, a year after these interviews were conducted, the multi-stakeholder platform CCF-A, led by SERENA and including several of the other entities interviewed, had demonstrated interest in developing a gender strategy.

Community-level participation

Focus groups were conducted with men and women in 18 indigenous communities to explore forest uses and concepts and perceptions of participation and decision-making. The research found that even in villages where women participate fully in community meetings and believe they influence many kinds of important decisions, they do not have similar influence over forest-related decisions.

Some communities consider forests to be men's 'territory'. Indeed, women's focus groups more frequently cited agricultural crops as the most valuable resource, whereas men's focus groups more often cited wood; this may indicate that male community members hold a more timber-oriented vision of forest resources. Survey data found that women in these communities extract forest resources far less frequently than men, although they participate almost equally in their sale.

Decision-making institutions

The Miskito and Mayangna are organised around the community and the territory, which are recognised by the law of communal property (Law 445) and the autonomy statute (Law 28). A territory is a large area comprised of multiple communities and of complementary areas that may not belong to any individual community.

In communities, the communal assembly elects communal authorities who collectively comprise the territorial assembly. The territorial assembly, in turn, elects territorial authorities, the Indigenous Territorial Government (GTI), which resembles a board of directors. Community and territorial organisations elect two main authorities: one to exercise social control, known as the *whita* (or communal judge), and the other to administer natural resources, known as the *síndico* (communal and territorial).

Natural resource administration, in fact, occurs at several levels (see Figure 1): the family (which cares for small plots assigned by the communal authority); the communal assembly (which delegates responsibility to the *síndico*); and the territorial assembly (where the territorial *síndico* coordinates with each communal *síndico* within the territory to manage natural resources). Both communal and territorial *síndicos* are required to consult their respective assemblies, adhere to traditional regulations and agreements, as well as to formal legislation (Laws 28 and 445), and coordinate with sectoral leaders.

Participation in community assemblies

Most of the 18 communities hold assemblies to make decisions about community issues, including natural resources. Only a few communities take attendance, and in most cases only leaders possess records. Communal authorities, usually the *whita* and the *síndico*, establish discussion points.

Focus group members stated that women's participation in these meetings is often limited to physical presence: they rarely share or voice opinions except on certain aspects of community life, such as children's education. Some communities reported that meeting chairs do not see women's opinions as relevant. In a few cases, women are not even invited to meetings. In the worst cases, men prevent their spouses from attending, dismiss spouses'

opinions during meetings or otherwise ridicule them; women also occasionally ridicule other women who speak out or try to take a leadership role. In contrast, in a few communities, women actively voice opinions and believe their input makes a difference.

Both women and men identified several obstacles to women's participation, including fear (emphasised more by men), lack of time and shyness. Women in one community also said that attending would add one more burden to their workload.

In addition, the study found broader problems regarding participation. For example, in some communities, members of the circle close to the leaders issue invitations to meetings. Rather than serving as vehicles for consensual decision-making, community assemblies are used to channel information without discussion or debate. All too frequently, elites make decisions on their own and/or benefit personally from the concessions, agreements and projects approved in assemblies. In these cases, neither men nor women felt heard by leaders.

Participation in leadership

Community governments are dominated by male community members. The key positions of *whita* and *síndico* are almost always men. Nevertheless, half of the 18 communities studied had elected a woman as *síndico* at some point, often in the recent past. During the research, one of the communities had a female *síndico*, who had ascended from the post of community coordinator and earned a notable level of legitimacy. However, most of the other experiences were not positive, and none of the other eight female *síndicos* even held the post for the stipulated year. Community members complained that female *síndicos* were 'as corrupt and unaccountable as male *síndicos*'. It is important for women to be sufficiently empowered, supported and skilled to take on such posts, or the results may do more harm than good for promoting women in leadership.

Cross-community comparison found no clear correlations between women's participation and factors such as the presence of NGOs or forest use. Interviews with key informants and focus groups suggested the following.

1. Factors that promote women's participation in decision-making:
 - Knowledge of the laws on participation that promote women's inclusion (in equal number) in government
 - Relatively high education or capacity, which includes speaking at least two languages (native tongue and Spanish)
 - Relatively high level of awareness among men regarding women's participation and the differing gender roles in these contexts
 - Women's organisations taking a role in establishing precedents and creating arenas for exchange among women.
2. Factors that impede women's participation in decision-making:
 - Few community assemblies, limiting community participation in general
 - Community assemblies that are unwelcoming to women
 - Domestic work and the lack of initiative among men to share domestic chores
 - Prohibitions from taking part in community activities by male partners or spouses

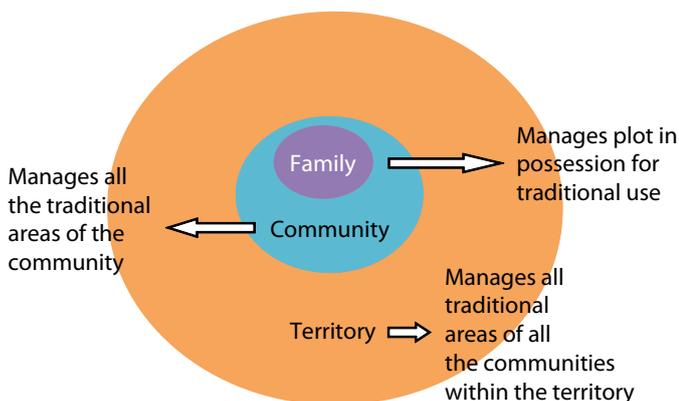


Figure 1. Levels of natural resource administration in indigenous communities and territories in the RAAN

- Avoidance of conflict and particularly meetings associated with national politics (which exacerbate divisions related to political party affiliation)
 - Risk of social punishment (gossip, innuendo, sexual slurs and criticism)
 - Domestic violence.
3. Factors that impede women's participation in forest resource decisions specifically:
- Negotiations that are limited to certain interest groups (which can exclude women unless they are part of the leadership and speak Spanish)
 - Association of forests with men's work (and religion that tends to reinforce women's traditional domestic roles)
 - Risks of travel (unescorted over long distances) or of conflict-ridden or dangerous situations (e.g. addressing land invasions)
 - Lack of knowledge about forest policy or management issues.

Conclusions

The state entities and organisations working on forests and/or natural resources in the RAAN have only barely begun to consider seriously women's interests and participation. At the community level, even where women are fully engaged in community decision-making, they are often excluded when it pertains to forests. The experience with women *síndicos* has been mixed: in most communities, women without sufficient support or knowledge were easy to criticise, but there were also notable successes.

In many cases, the integration of gender into community resource management obeys NGO mandates. However, there is little

genuine analysis of women's role or push for a more inclusive development process. Hence, the 'participation' that predominates is superficial, especially with regard to natural resources.

At the same time, a common complaint among the communities studied was the lack of participation of both men and women in decision-making; that is, community leaders' activities are not always transparent and many people feel left out of decision-making spheres. Thus, political leadership and effective governance need to be addressed more broadly, not only from a gender perspective. Indeed, efforts to address women's participation may be ineffective without efforts to address local governance and accountability – a valuable hypothesis for future research.

A new vision for managing forests means bringing in all the community members who benefit from forests and forest resources; both communities and outside institutions need to reflect critically on their actions, activities and gendered assumptions regarding forests.

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