

## **Gender, Resource Management, and the Rural Landscape in Africa**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Resource management and property rights in rural Africa are both gendered. This is despite the fact that there is a strong relationship between gender, resource management, and ownership of natural resources in the African rural landscape. Patterns of resource use relates to poverty and the traditional gender division of labor. Women have more user rights, than ownership, to land and natural resources, making it difficult for them to make decisions relating to land use and resource management. Women's indigenous knowledge is not respected and women are also excluded from scientific environmental knowledge, resource management, and administrative structures. However, omens' participation is significant at household and community levels. The paper discusses the role/impact of men and women on environmental degradation and resource management in the African rural landscape. It looks at how scarcity of natural resources affects women and their participation in resource management. Gender aware policies that incorporate women in policy making at regional and national level, down to the household level, are suggested. Application of gender analysis to determine gender roles, resource ownership, use, environmental impact, and resource management is recommended as crucial. Empowerment of women on their rights to natural resources and environmental information is also vital. Representation of women in resource management boards, coupled with gender responsive planning, implementation, and monitoring of intervention projects, also need to be considered seriously.

**Keywords:** Resource Management, gender, rural landscape

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

The economic and environmental crises of Africa show the continent as a very ill "patient" (Suliman, 1991). The symptoms are the spread of deserts, soil degradation, water and air pollution, and the depletion of forests, rangeland, water resources, and biodiversity. These externalities have major impacts on the lives of both present and future generations. There is, therefore, urgent need for diagnosis to ensure the administration of an appropriate remedy. In rural Africa, women provide a major part of the labor force and are involved in all sectors of production, including food production, processing, and marketing. In fact, according to James (1994), development in Africa is inconceivable without the active participation of women. Sixty to eighty percent of agricultural work is done by women, yet their interests and needs are not always taken into account (Nwomonoh, cited in James, 1994). Gender differences in environmental knowledge impinge upon how men and women manage natural resources and how they understand processes of degradation, especially in the African rural landscape where women constitute as the majority (Morse and Stocking, 1995). Since a good environment is essential to economic well-being, a strong case can be made that public policies in Sub-Saharan Africa should not only focus on economic objectives, but also on preserving the quality of the environment. One of the major agreements of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Earth

Summit) in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 was Agenda 21, which, among other things, recognizes the link between environment and development issues. Principle 20 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development highlights the importance of women as playing a vital role in environmental management and development since they constitute the majority in the world and, specifically, in the African rural landscape. Millennium Development Goal (MDG) number 7 aims to ensure environmental sustainability through country policies, which reverse the loss of environmental resources. It also calls for the increase in the number of women involved in issues of environmental sustainability, biodiversity, climate change, and protection of natural resources. Judging from what is happening on the African continent in terms of environmental management, it is unlikely that MDG 7 will be achieved by 2015, as projected. It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks to discuss the interrelationship between gender, resource management, and the rural landscape in Africa.

### **Definition of terms**

The term, gender is used to describe all the socially constructed attributes, roles, activities, and responsibilities connected to being a male or a female in a given society (March et al, 1999). This means that our gender identity determines how we are perceived, and how we are expected to think and act as women and men, because of the way society is organised. Thus, although the physical differences between the sexes are universal, gender is extremely variable between and within societies. For example, being a woman in one culture carries with it roles and expected behavior very differently from those women in other cultures (Morse and Stoking, 1995).

Resource management, on the other hand, is the skillful control of resources by those who ensure that they are used economically and with forethought (Alexander and Fairbridge, 1999). It includes those activities which are designed to govern the use of lands, forests, the atmosphere, waters, and mineral resources in a given environment, taking into account environmental constraints, social, economic, and political implications, technological inventions, national policy, and possible future needs (Clark, 1985).

The term, rural landscape, refers to the countryside and all resources that it possesses and the interrelationships that are established in it (Clock and Park, 1985). It is generally dominated by extensive land uses, such as agriculture and forestry, or large open spaces of underdeveloped land. It also contains small low-order settlements, which demonstrate a strong relationship between buildings and the surrounding extensive landscape of varied phenomena, including grass, animals, soil, rocks, lakes, and the atmosphere. According to Clock and Park (1985), the rural landscape engenders a way of life characterized by a cohesive identity based on respect for the environment and behavioral qualities of living as a part of an extensive (rural) landscape.

United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) define sustainable development as programs to improve people's quality of life within the carrying capacity of the earth's life support systems, that is meeting the needs of the present generation without damaging the earth's resources in such a way that would prevent future generations from meeting theirs (Barrs and Juffkins, 1995). It emphasizes equitable development, which bridges the gap between the rich and the poor. In the gender and development approach (GAD), the gap between the genders needs to be bridged for sustainable development to be achieved. The terms gender, resource management, and rural landscape in Africa are interrelated so much that they need to be discussed concurrently as each one of them affects the process of development.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Eco-feminists believe that there is a relationship between women, human rights, and the exploitation of nature. They argue that male domination is harmful to both women and the environment. Men desire to control women and the environment in order to have complete power. An attempt to control women and the environment leads to the destruction of the environment. Women, like nature, are viewed as objects to control, manipulate, and plunder (Momsen, 2004). Complete liberation of humans and recovery of biodiversity is closely linked to the liberation of non humans. Eco-feminists believe that there is a deep connection between earth and women, hence the terms “Mother Nature” or “Mother Earth”. Women have special affinity with nature through their reproductive rights (Shiva, 1988). It is against this background that the notion of care is central to eco-feminists who feel that women can care better for the environment. Merchant (1995) calls this “earth-care”, which is crucial if humans, non-humans, and the earth are to be liberated.

Merchant (1995) feels that women have a central role in preserving and understanding nature. Women are called to ‘lead an ecological revolution to save the planet’. However, this can be done if women’s role in the construction of environmental knowledge is recognized (Shiva, 1988). It is unfortunate that patriarchal power has made women to turn against the environment instead of living in harmony with it. Women have little access and control of environmental knowledge and the natural environment, for example, wild vegetation, plantations, wildlife, and resort areas, among others.

It is unfortunate that women’s knowledge of the environment is not considered scientific by Western scientific standards (Momsen, 2004). Their indigenous knowledge, or farming, forests and trees is viewed as linked to intuition, or supernatural knowledge, therefore excluded, despite environmental movements of the late twentieth century (Njiro, 1999). Eco feminism has, however, given rise to a twenty-first century contemporary approach; gender, environment, and development (GED), which encourages environmental programs that focus on women’s roles in environmental management.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Tools of analysis**

Gender frameworks of analysis, namely the Harvard Model and the Empowerment Model, were used to determine the roles played by men and women in resource management.

#### Harvard Model

This model focuses on roles played by men and women in a particular community project, time spent on project activities, location of the activities, and the ages of the genders involved in the project. It also establishes the extent of participation by gender as well as the influencing factors. Such factors, as discussed in this paper, include, among others, patriarchy, traditional beliefs, poverty, undervaluing of women’s knowledge, time availability, lack of information, scientific knowledge, and technology. The framework also looks at issues of access and control by gender, in this case, access and control of natural resources, information, skills, and technology used, decision-making, and knowledge of resource management. The last stage of the Harvard Model deals with intervention measures, such as projects and programs aimed at bridging gender gaps identified above. In this paper, the focus is on resource management policies and projects implemented in various countries in Africa to establish whether they are gender aware, gender targeted, gender

specific, gender blind, or gender neutral. This is done to evaluate the impact of projects, not only on environmental resources, but also on men and women.

### Empowerment framework

Like the Harvard Model, the Empowerment framework also looks at access and control of natural resources, knowledge, information, and decision-making in resource management. It emphasizes the need to conscientize and mobilize both men and women for resource management awareness through public campaigns, workshops, and trainings at the local levels. Such campaigns derive from international conferences and declarations, for example, the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, Global Assembly on Women and the Environment held in Miami in 1991, SADC Declaration on Gender and Development held in Blantyre, 1997, or they can be at national level, for example, the Zimbabwe National Gender Policy of 2004. Empowerment programs start with policies and this paper explores both environmental and gender empowerment policies that seek to redistribute both power and resources. These policies can either be gender specific or they can target both genders.

### **Interface between gender, resource management and the African rural landscape**

Third world development, in general, and development of Africa, in particular, is increasingly concerned with the human ability to influence, control, and improve the natural and social environments, especially the rural African landscape, whether by upgrading the quality and range of services provided to inhabitants or by improving their opportunities for engaging in productive activities (Nwomonoh, in James, 1994; Government of Zimbabwe, 2004). However it has become increasingly obvious that if such an approach is to succeed, it must be designed and implemented in a framework in which both men and women are actively involved (James, 1994; Dankelman, 2002). As Morse and Stocking (1995) observed, if the content of gender analysis emphasizes women, this is in part because what is known about “people” is generally derived from observations of men and about men, assuming that the male is the norm. In other words, women have been sidelined for too long.

In terms of education and economic and political power, women in Africa make up the majority at the bottom of the social ladder, yet they make up 60% to 80% of Agricultural workers (Suliman, 1991; Tichagwa, 1998). According to Momsen (2004), people cannot change the way they use and manage resources without changing their relations with each other. Environmental degradation embodies gender relations and a better understanding of the African rural landscape comes from viewing environmental change through the lens of gender concepts (Morse and Stocking, 1995). Recent studies have highlighted the significance of equity issues in the process of environmental management and degradation. According to Moser (1993), the “poorest of the poor” are women. It is these women who are the most negatively affected by environmental degradation, yet the same women are often blamed for resource depletion. Every day, young, old, and pregnant women make long marches in search of fuel, food, fodder, and water (Dankelman, 2002). Studies have also shown that resource depletion is often related to processes of commodity relations and that poverty drives rural people to exploit the environment (Morse and Stoking, 1995). Poverty reduction is, therefore, a way of ensuring environmental management.

In Tanzania, housewives in rural areas cover an average of forty kilometers per week in search of firewood (Rwechungura, in Suliman, 1991). Unplanned harvesting of forest resources not only leads to shrinking forests, but also

results in the destruction of the habitat within which plants and wildlife thrive. In Mkomazi, Manyara, and Tarangira districts of Tanzania, firewood close to households has become scarce and households have turned to cooking with twigs, leaves, and other crop residues. In extreme cases, animal dung is used and this way, organic matter and other nutrients have been diverted from their function of enriching the soil, leading to even lower productivity (Suliman, 1991). This is because women lack the access to alternative resources. Poverty, thus, makes it difficult for women to care for the environment or practice what Merchant (1995) calls “earth-care”.

The rate of deforestation in Malawi is approaching 4% per annum, while in Mozambique it is proceeding at 100,000 hectares per year (Suliman, 1991). Zimbabwe’s rate of deforestation has been estimated at 2% a year, with a fuel wood deficit in five of the nine provinces including Matabeleland North, Matabeleland South, the Midlands Masvingo, and parts of Mashonaland East (Morse and Stocking, 1995). With the current fast-track land reform and resettlement program, however, the figure is likely to have significantly increased as wildlife and forestry resources were obviously put under pressure as a result of high numbers of people allocated land without any institutional framework for the management of natural resources in place (Marongwe, 2004). Newly resettled farmers have been left to build their houses, granaries, and cattle pens on their own with little monitoring on the impacts of these activities on the environment. The use of wood fuel as the main source for burning farm bricks has also resulted in an increase of deforestation.

In patriarchal societies, like Kenya, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, women are frequently defined in relation to men. In such societies, women are largely excluded from inheriting resources and also from formal social significance (Morse and Stocking, 1995). In Hausaland (Northern Nigeria), women are said to be “strangers” in their marital homes while in Zimbabwe, with regard to taboo governing tree-use, some women are not allowed to burn certain tree species in their marital homes (MacGregor, in Morse and Stocking, 1995). Such cultural restrictions worsen the woman’s plight and results in the overuse of other tree species.

Both men and women should participate actively in environmental debates to merge both scientific and indigenous knowledge on environmental management. Examining the explanations for environmental change by rural local informants in Zimbabwe, MacGregor (in Morse and Stocking, 1995) revealed that women were excluded from some areas of environmental knowledge and debate. Old women, for example, were particularly concerned about the drying out of springs, which they explained by the use of “salty” carrying jars, such as those that had been used on fires. If such unscientific explanations are to be avoided, environmental interventions need to anticipate the varied content of the knowledge held by men and women and also the gender politics of knowledge as suggested by eco feminists.

### **Environmental policy, Gender and Resource management**

According to Nwomonoh (James, 1994), one of the most disappointing features of rural policy in Africa lies in the unhealthy assumption that all policies have to be formulated and written at the State's headquarters or by foreign experts. Nwomonoh adds that many rural women, though illiterate, are not unintelligent, and seeing the environment from their perspective would provide more acceptable solutions to their problems than assumptions that their problems are obvious. In other words, the hierarchical structure of decision-making from national, community down to the rural household level, which is still very much against women, must change to integrate women as well. Educating men to accept women in all stages of decision-making is the starting point, hence the need to incorporate gender policies in the formulation and implementation of environmental policies.

According to Uitto and Uno (in Morse, 1998) women are particularly interested in and capable of protecting the environment, given their "special affinity with nature", especially if they are not seen as isolated environmental actors separate from men with an innate understanding of nature. Examples of women willingness and their capability in both production and resource management around the African continent are plentiful. In Kenya and Burkina Faso, women farmers who had been allocated land of their own by the government proved to be very good land managers and were also more productive than their male counterparts (Ajakpo, 1995). Such a scenario is unlikely in Uganda where, if a woman plant trees on the family land in order to find a new cash-earning product and accessible firewood (for example planting the shea-butter tree), men will see this action as a declaration of land ownership and will uproot the trees (Rukaaka, 1994). The reason for this is patriarchy, which influences both gender blind and gender neutral policies. Gender blind policies are policies which exclude one gender, maintaining unequal gender relations, while gender neutral policies work within the existing gender division of resources and responsibilities. Both policies, therefore, do not transform unequal power relations.

In Kenya, for example, reforestation programs and tree planting schemes, funded by non-governmental agencies to address the fuel wood crisis and often disseminated through government agricultural extension workers or as rural development projects, have failed dismally because of the top-down and gender blind policies. Commenting on this failure, Embu women (Kenyan rural female elders) suggested that the search for ways of dealing with the firewood dilemma should be a joint responsibility of the government, educators, and rural men and women to solve (Chandler & Wane, 2002).

In fact, women are less the cause of environmental degradation than victims of a cycle of events beyond their control (Sontheimer, 1991). Throughout the Sahel, women are playing a major part in desertification control. For example, in Keita region (Niger), women volunteer for work, driven by their strong desire to restore the land and to have the right to land and water. In Cape Verde and Burkina Faso, women participate in anti-desertification schemes on a massive scale, forming a majority of the workforce, working voluntarily, unpaid, and on under-skilled tasks. In Burkina Faso, especially, women are beginning to receive training alongside men, but male resistance is strong, among villagers and project managers alike, who see this as women intrusion into a male domain (Awumbila & Momsen, 1995). At Tessauoq in Niger, more and more women are showing their desire to grow trees that will be useful to them as well as help to protect the environment. This is done under a non-governmental organization, Care International (Moock, 1976). In Mali,

Chad, and Burkina Faso, many projects now contain elements, such as soil and water conservation, on women's group plots.

In Nigeria, because women are aware of the utility of trees on the homestead, they take good care to plant and maintain them, while in Sierra Leon it is only the women who have accumulated the traditional knowledge about the foods and other household products that trees can supply (Sontheimer, 1991). A study (Chao, 1999) revealed that women could name 31 products that they gathered or made from a nearby bush, while men named only eight. In Ghana, rural women depend heavily on "free" natural resources, such as nuts, mushrooms, fruits, leaves, and small animals and on raw materials for such cottage industries as those involving dyes, raisins, and fibers. This shows that given the opportunity, women respond to the calls of eco feminism, GAD, GED, and Agenda 21. At the same time, women, as forest exploiters, are also important managers of natural resources (Molnar & Schreider, in Morse, 1998). Protecting the environmental resources they depend on is one way to ensure that their present level of household food security is not further threatened.

### **Gender and property rights in Africa**

In Africa, property rights are gendered. Gender gaps are widespread in access to and control of resources in economic opportunity, power, and political voice. Women and girls bear the largest and most direct costs of these inequalities (World Bank, 2001). In Botswana, Lesotho Namibia, and Swaziland, women are under the permanent guardianship of their husbands and have no independent right to property. While female-headed households form about one-third of all households in Zambia, they (women) are underrepresented among the larger farms, with only a fourth of farms larger than two hectares owned by women (World Bank, 2001). In Kenya, female-headed households own less than half the farming equipment than male-headed ones (World Bank, 2001).

Men and women experience access to land in different ways in most of rural Africa. In primary rights to land, patrilineal inheritance systems operate to exclude daughters, for example, in Aniocha (Nigeria) where village elders (all men) allocate land to men only (James, 1994). When women do have access to land, this is mainly in the form of secondary rights to land, that is, those that are conditional upon a particular relationship, such as marriage (Morse and Stocking, 1995). Such access depends on the marriage remaining viable; divorce or widowhood can terminate it.

In Zimbabwe, like in most African countries, the question of land and gender is closely linked to survival issues as 86% of the country's women live and depend on the land for their livelihoods (Mgugu and Chimonyo, 2004). The Zimbabwe Land Reform Act of 2000 allowed women to be allocated only 20% of all land under resettlement, yet the national population statistics stand at 52% females and 48% males (Government of Zimbabwe, 2004). Zimbabwe's fast-track land reform program (2000-2010) has elements of gender redistributive policies to bridge the gap between men and women in terms of land ownership. In the resettlement areas, women are free to apply for land under Model A1 or A2 schemes (Mgugu and Chimonyo, 2004). However, under Model A1, women face discrimination as they are required by the Communal Land Act (Cap 20:24) to submit their applications through the traditional leadership (which is male-dominated) in compliance with the Traditional Leadership Act, (Cap 29:17). According to this arrangement, land is only given to persons who, according to the customary law of the community, have traditionally and continuously occupied

and used land in the area concerned. Many women, therefore, do not qualify to access and own land in their own right under the Model A1 resettlement scheme, as women in Zimbabwe marry and move into the husband's home.

The significance of this for resource management is that the benefits of land-improving conservation technologies are perceived differently by men and women, and women may, quite rationally, be indifferent to long-term strategies for land improvement since they may feel being used for the benefit of men. It is argued here that women's usufruct ownership should be transformed into real ownership, which will give women power to effect whatever conservation changes they may deem necessary without unnecessary questioning from their male counterparts.

A study of water access during the 1991-1992 drought in Nkayi District, Zimbabwe found that female users of borehole water had to give precedence at water points to (male) cattle watering (Elson and Cleaver, in World Bank, 2001). That is to say, when water supply is under stress, gender divisions of labor put women at the sharp end of water shortage. Interestingly, decision-making of intervention measures meant to improve such resources availability is patriarchal as men control both nature and women.

It is against this background that the degree to which environmental impacts are sex segregated helps to indicate the appropriate target group for development intervention and relevant forms of project or program implementation, which is, whether it should be gender targeted or gender integrated.

Gender differentials in terms of access to resources may, however, be reconstructed in circumstances where women groups have lobbied successfully for changing land laws or where credit becomes widely available to women. Zimbabwean women, for example, have established greater independence and increasingly renegotiate the terms of their conjugal contract in their favor, with positive consequences for both natural and household resource management (Jackson, 1995). For example, under the current land reform program, women are being allocated land in their own right (World Bank, 2001)

In Rwanda, after the 1994 war and genocide, women who were widowed and young orphaned girls could not inherit their husbands or their fathers' property. However, women's associations, such as the Forum for Women Members of Parliament in Rwanda, the Pro-Women Collective, and the Association for the Defense of Women's and Children's Rights (HAGURUKA) successfully fought to have a law passed on the matrimonial system and inheritance rights based on the principles of equality of both sexes. Formal recognition of equal access to resources provides the first legal framework for the protection of the rights of married women and orphaned girls, however about 60% of the households are in the eyes of the law considered common-law unions and therefore informal. Rwandan law recognizes only monogamous marriages celebrated before a civil status officer. This is despite the fact that women living in common-law marriages and single women constitute a significant part of the population, but their rights are not protected by the law. Besides, it is not uncommon to see female heads of households being allocated land that is infertile or is located far away from where they live (Gervais, 2004). Such gender marginalization not only has an impact on women, but also on the livelihood of their families.



## **CONCLUSION**

It can be concluded that we cannot understand either the causes or the varying consequences of environmental degradation in the African rural landscape without recognition that people in the rural landscape are differentiated in ways that significantly alter the costs and benefits of environmental change both for men and women. Resource management, in most African countries, is a must if we, Africans, are to cure the environmental ills of our continent and in this endeavor, both men and women must play a part without any gender bias. After all, the costs of environmental degradation cut more broadly across society, ultimately affecting everyone. Promoting gender equality is, thus, an important part of a development strategy that seeks to enable all people, regardless of gender, to escape poverty, and improve their living standards. It is, thus, gratifying that some countries, like Chad, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe have some projects which actively involve rural women, right from the planning stage up to the implementation stage, with a view to addressing the resource management issue in the rural landscape on which the majority of the African population depends.

Women have the potential to make a large contribution to the solution of environmental crisis due to their role in management of primary resources. Increasing women's power and sustainability are ecologically tied. Practical relationship between women and the physical environment must be made visible. There is need to set up gender aware policies to mainstream gender in natural resources management. Gender aware policies can be redistributive or gender targeted (specific). Redistributive gender aware policies are transformatory and they recognize that women are development actors, just like men. Gender redistributive policies, for example, the Zimbabwe National Gender Policy of 2004 (Government of Zimbabwe, 2004) change existing distribution of power and resources to create a more balanced relationship between men and women, while gender specific policies target a disadvantaged gender, for example, Southern Africa Development Community (SADC)'s quota system in politics, which targets women as a disadvantaged group and calls for a third of women in crucial decision-making positions. The policies should be in line with environmental management policies. The policies and projects should be designed with strong gender sensitive participatory approaches. Women's positions can be improved by more control over resources, redistribution of roles, and change of gender relations. Women's status in customary law needs to be legally enhanced. Women also need to be empowered on their rights to break patriarchal and cultural barriers that relate to use and ownership of resources. Gender empowerment enables both men and women to accept each other as development partners. Gender analysis models, like the Harvard Model, need to be applied at household and community level the roles of men and women, their needs, resources used, time, and labor invested and how these impact each gender. Planning, implementation, and monitoring of intervention projects should be gender responsive, that is, taking action to correct gender biases through gender aware policies. To ensure this, there should be campaigns that raise the awareness of gender issues among all stakeholders, including communities at grassroots level, civil servants, and community leaders right up to the national level. There should also be representation of women in resource management boards and administrative structures. Environmental policies should, therefore, interface with gender policies for sustainable development to be achieved.

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