

# Women's role in conserving biodiversity is neglected worldwide. Here's how India can change that

A country as diverse as India is a grand source of examples of traditional knowledge and gendered knowledge in particular.



Women become repositories of biodiversity knowledge by working in their farms and with their animals over decades. These oral knowledge systems are getting short shrift in the modern systems. | S. Gopikrishna Warriar/Mongabay.

Jul 02, 2018 · 08:30 pm

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Despite international conventions emphasising the importance of gender in achieving conservation objectives, research suggests that the recognition is superficial and particularly, in the case of the Third World development discourse, women's knowledge systems are dismissed as "naive" and the cultural context of their knowledge production and sharing often ignored.

A part of the reason for the insufficient recognition can be attributed to the poor documentation and research related to indigenous and traditional knowledge that is communicated via oral traditions, folklore and parables. It is also a result of the notion that the dynamics of women and biodiversity are highly localised phenomenon unaffected by markets or globalisation.

Another crucial aspect to this discourse relates to the recognition of women's role with respect to biodiversity. The role, as seen by most policy frameworks, is that of

a passive user and therefore, the emphasis of the texts is more on improving the access to biodiversity. There is minimal or no importance given to the idea of improving the role of women to that of active participants in the form of decision and policy makers.

## **International conventions**

The Preamble of the international Convention on Biological Diversity states: “Recognising also the vital role that women play in the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and affirming the need for the full participation of women at all levels of policy-making and implementation for biological diversity conservation.”

However, in the entire text of Convention on Biological Diversity, the only two instances where the word “women” appears is in the Preamble above and the word “gender” is not used even once. The phrase “indigenous and local communities” is used four times without acknowledging the cultural differences that exist because of gender.

It is only in subsequent conferences over the past years that the recognition of the role of women has been made. For instance, we find the following from Decision V 16 on Article 8(j) which was the outcome of the United Nation’s Conference of Parties 5 (or COP 5).

“Recognising the vital role that women play in the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, and emphasizing that greater attention should be given to strengthening this role and the participation of women of indigenous and local communities in the programme of work ...” the COP decision requests all stakeholders including the national governments “to fully incorporate women and women’s organisations in the activities.”

A more recent assessment of national plans developed by member countries under the Convention on Biological Diversity reveals that while 67% of reports include at least one reference to “women” or “gender”, 33% do not mention either. The report once again reiterated the theme of women being seen as mostly beneficiaries, with only 28% of reports characterising women as stakeholders and a lesser 19% characterising them as managers of resources. Finally, less than one percent of reports, that is one national report only, refer to women as “agents of change”.



There is poor recognition of women as managers of biodiversity. Photo Credit: S. Gopikrishna Warriar

## Gendered knowledge in agriculture

It is widely accepted that the on-ground reality of practices such as agriculture, forestry and forest management reflects a gendered knowledge. This is a reality worldwide and more so in the developing countries where there is a marked distinction in the knowledge domains of men and women based on their traditional roles in the community and this distinction is, more often than not, reflected through cultural forms of communication as opposed to the codified methods demanded by science.

A country as diverse as India is a grand source of examples of traditional knowledge and gendered knowledge in particular. Women are involved closely in agricultural practices and this is reflected in gender-specific knowledge especially pertaining to seed selection, processing, storage, as also tasks that involve a deeper understanding of the system such as transplanting paddy. The knowledge though extends far beyond agriculture into forestry, conservation, sacred groves and medicinal plants to name a few. For instance, women in the coastal regions of Andhra Pradesh use the colour change in the plant *Sesuvium portulacastrum* as an **indicator of water salinity**.

The emergence of specific problems for women has either been as a result of sweeping changes in the social, political, economic or ecological structures that have failed to take the impact on women into account or it has been a result of reinforcement of existing inequalities leading to more pronounced and acute disadvantages. These are illustrated using three examples.

The first relates to one of the landmark movements in India, the Green Revolution, which sought to address food security through the increased use of external inputs and the introduction of hybrid varieties, among other measures. The programme was perceived as a massive success as it increased the yields manifold and was a step towards self-sufficiency.

Among the many social impacts of the revolution is the “feminisation of agriculture” leading to an increased demand of female labour caused by displacement of male labour. In certain regions of Tamil Nadu for instance, this has led to a decrease in the role of women in the post-harvest processing and forced them to take up agriculture labour.



The role of women in agriculture changed after the Green Revolution. Photo Credit: S. Gopikrishna Warriar/Mongabay

The second example is in the region of Tamil Nadu where customary law does not permit women to go fishing in the sea or in inland fisheries. This is reflected even in the language as the term “meenavar”, meaning fishermen in Tamil, specifically refers to men and there is no female equivalent. Traditionally, women were responsible for making and maintaining fishing nets and for the collection of seafood from mangrove areas. However, with the introduction of improved nets and fishing trawlers, the need for these roles has vanished. Similarly, the trading dynamics have

also changed since they were earlier responsible for making the cured and dried fish which too has now been lost owing to the introduction of solar driers.

Travelling to the north for the final example, we arrive at the eastern parts of the Himalayas. Traditionally, these regions practised shifting agriculture (known by various names in various parts of India such as *jhum* or *podu*). This meant that there was no gender-based division of labour and therefore, women had a higher social status than in other places. With the adoption of the practice of settled agriculture, there was division of labour and with it, the inequalities emerged.

Settled agriculture also implies the emergence of private ownership of land which has led to the denial of access for women to natural resources. A study found the exclusion of women from all the decision making processes at the local level with only 11 percent of the women having attended the meetings of the village eco-development committee.

## **Gender and the implementation of the Biodiversity Act**

Given the fact that the Convention on Biological Diversity is a broad framework of an agreement which respects the sovereign nature of the signatories, India has responded with a legal enactment called the Biodiversity Act 2002 and Rules 2004. Much like the parent agreement, the Act calls for the recognition of women's role in biodiversity conservation in its preamble, but fails to provide any clear direction on how this is sought to be achieved in the implementation of the act.

The Biodiversity Act is operationalised through a three-tier system that is in conformity with India's federal nature of governance. The national authority is expected to base its decisions based on the inputs and recommendations made by the biodiversity management committee (BMC) – a unit that is constituted at the level of the panchayat.

Since the Biodiversity Act is not to the exclusion of other legal enactments of the country, the existing provisions of earmarking one-third representation to women in any body constituted by the State is also applicable to the Biodiversity Act. The National Biodiversity Action Plan of 2004 which was drafted by involving over 3000 groups, dedicated a section on women's role in conserving biodiversity of agrarian landscapes.

Despite such widespread recognition that women have transmitted knowledge of conservation of biodiversity from generation to generation, women's participation in natural resource management and decision-making remains limited.

A key reason why this could be is because despite the legal backing given by the Biodiversity Rules and Act, the customary practices are still discriminatory and

against allowing women complete access to grassroots decision making. It is therefore clear that while the recognition in itself is limited, both as a symbol and in terms of understanding, the progress in inclusion is further curtailed by the fact that there are no concrete steps being taken to overcome the barriers placed by customary law.



Elected representatives from panchayats discuss environmental issues at a training workshop in Kerala. Photo Credit: Kerala Institute for Local Administration

It is evident that the recognition of gendered knowledge and the role played by women in biodiversity conservation and the related issues is poor. The limited recognition that exists must also go beyond merely identifying women as a generic entity and instead look at diversity as a driving force. This means that the recognition must be driven by a keen and nuanced understanding of the ground realities and the distinctions brought by factors such as race and ethnicity in addition to socio-political and economic factors.

More importantly, the efforts must not end with recognition alone but must also provide concrete steps to integrate women into the planning and decision making processes. It is now time to start addressing the strategic needs if progress has to be made in achieving “gender equality” as a goal.