

Gender Perspectives in Biodiversity Conservation

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Abstract

Environmental conservation discourse has paid increased attention to the gender perspectives due to the different roles and needs of both men and women when it comes to conservation measures. As far as biological conservation is concerned, this paper argues that both men and women have an important role to play in achieving sustainable development agenda. This is especially so because men and women all have different contributions to make since they are also affected in different ways by deterioration of environmental resources. The main argument is that unless the policymakers and other stakeholders pay increased attention to the place of gender in biodiversity conservation debates, the dream of achieving sustainability in the area will remain elusive. Arguably, participatory approaches in biodiversity conservation should also include gender issues, not as special groups' issues but as mainstream issues.

1. Introduction

The term “gender” is used to refer to the set of social norms, practices and institutions that regulate the relations between women and men (also known as “gender relations”).¹ It has also been defined as a social construct that ascribes different qualities and rights to women and men regardless of individual competence or desires.² In addition, the term ‘gender’ is also used to refer to the socially-constructed expectations about the characteristics, aptitudes and behaviours associated with being a woman or a man, and while gender defines what is feminine and masculine, it shapes the social roles that men and women play and the power relations between them, which can have a profound effect on the use and management of natural resources.³

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¹ United Nations, “The Role of Men and Boys in Achieving Gender Equality,” Women 2000 and Beyond, December 2008, p.4. Available at

<http://www.unwomen.org/~media/headquarters/media/publications/un/en/w2000menandboyseweb.pdf>.

² G. J. Latham, “A study on gender equality as a prerequisite for sustainable development,” *Report to the Environment Advisory Council*, Sweden 2007:2, p. 17. Available at http://www.uft.oekologie.uni-bremen.de/hartmutkoehler_fuer_studierende/MEC/09-MEC-reading/gender%202007%20EAC%20rapport_engelska.pdf.

³ ‘What Is Gender and Biodiversity?’ <<https://www.cbd.int/gender/biodiversity/>> accessed 21 November 2021.

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It is noteworthy that gender does not mean ‘women’ or ‘girls’ – although the word is frequently (mis)used as shorthand for women, women’s empowerment, women’s human rights, or, more broadly, for any initiative that is geared towards girls or women.⁴ Gender inequality has been defined as the differential treatment and outcomes that deny women the full enjoyment of the social, political, economic and cultural rights and development. It is the antithesis of equality of men and women in their human dignity, autonomy and equal protection.⁵ Gender equality is, however, not a ‘women's issue’ but refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men, girls and boys, and should concern and fully engage men as well as women.⁶

While the degradation of natural resources and the loss of biodiversity has an impact on everyone regardless of their status or gender, it has been argued that these changes affect women more due to their closer interactions with natural resources and biological diversity.⁷ For this reason, there is a need for active participation of both men and women in biodiversity conservation. Arguably, the central role of women in the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources has been overlooked in studies on biodiversity, most of which have been done from the perspective of natural science.⁸ The Convention on Biological Diversity, which was signed at the Rio Earth Summit in June 1992, explicitly recognizes in its preamble as it states that "the vital role that women play in the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity" and affirms "the need for the full participation of women at all levels of policy-making and implementation for biological diversity conservation."⁹ Similarly, in addition, the 1992 Earth Summit held in Rio emphasized the central role of women in promoting ecologically sound and sustainable development. Since then, feminists all over the world have embraced the environmental challenge and are among the most ardent activists for protecting the planet and its inhabitants.¹⁰

⁴ UNICEF, “Promoting Gender Equality: An Equity-Focused Approach to Programming,” Operational Guidance Overview, p. 10. Available at http://www.unicef.org/gender/files/Overarching_Layout_Web.pdf.

⁵ Baraza, N., ‘Lost Between Rhetoric and Reality: What Role for the Law and Human Rights in Redressing Gender Inequality?’ *Kenya Law Reform* Vol. II [2008-2010] p 1. Available at <http://www.kenyalaw.org/klr/index.php?id=874>.

⁶ See generally ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights - In six cross-cutting themes’ Available at http://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/60UDHR/Stories_on_Human_Right_PressKit_en.pdf.

⁷ Bechtel JD, ‘Gender, Poverty and the Conservation of Biodiversity’ [2010] A review of issues and opportunities. MacArthur Foundation Conservation White Paper Series, 4.

⁸ Zweifel H, ‘The Gendered Nature of Biodiversity Conservation’ (1997) 9 *NWSA Journal* 107.

⁹ *Ibid*, 107.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

Kenya's *Draft National Forest Policy 2020*'s overall goal is to develop, manage, utilize and sustainably conserve forest resources to cover at least 10% of the total land mass, for equitable sharing of the accrued benefits including the flow of ecosystem services for present and future generations, and one of the cross-cutting issues covered therein is gender and social inclusion.¹¹ It was inspired by the fact that 'the absence of an approved updated National Forest Policy since 1968 and a decade after the promulgation of the Constitution 2010 means that legal requirements brought about by the Constitution with respect to natural resource management such as public participation, community and gender rights, equity in benefit sharing, devolution and the need to achieve 10% forest cover are not anchored in policy'.¹²

Initially, due to the gender-specific nature of women's chores as homemakers, they were seen as a problem, responsible for the destruction of the environment where the millions of women collecting firewood every day to cook for their families was seen as one of the main causes of deforestation and ecological crisis, although this later change to Women and women's groups all over the world becoming actively engaged in grassroots movements defending the environment against destruction in such movements as the late Prof. Wangari Maathai's Green Belt movement in Kenya.¹³

Arguably, considering gender issues in relation to biodiversity involves identifying the influence of gender roles and relations on the use, management and conservation of biodiversity, where gender roles of women and men include different labour responsibilities, priorities, decision-making power, and knowledge, which affect how women and men use and manage biological resources.¹⁴ It has also been opined that biodiversity is closely connected to development, access to resources, income-generating activities, food, and essential household products, and from this perspective, the disciplines of biodiversity and gender overlap, and certainly are intrinsically linked.¹⁵

¹¹ Republic of Kenya, *Draft National Forest Policy 2020*, Chapter Three.

¹² *Ibid*, para. 1.4.2.

¹³ Zweifel H, 'The Gendered Nature of Biodiversity Conservation' (1997) 9 *NWSA Journal* 107, 109.

¹⁴ 'Gender and Biodiversity' <<https://www.cbd.int/gender/>> accessed 21 November 2021.

¹⁵ 'Why Gender Is Important for Biodiversity Conservation' <<https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/why-gender-important-biodiversity-conservation>> accessed 21 November 2021.

This paper seeks to discuss and affirm the place of both men and women in biodiversity conservation as part of their contribution towards realisation of the 2030 Agenda on sustainable development goals.

2. Gender Perspectives in Biodiversity Conservation: The Legal and Policy Framework

Gender is now considered to be a key consideration for equitable and effective biodiversity conservation practice since ethically, ensuring gender-equitable participation is a cornerstone for respecting, protecting, and promoting human rights and for not disadvantaging anyone in the process of conserving biodiversity.¹⁶

At the international law level, *CBD Decision XII/7 2* encourages Parties to give gender due consideration in their national biodiversity strategies and action plans and to integrate gender into the development of national indicators.¹⁷

Under the Constitution of Kenya, Article 10, the national values and principles of governance include—(a) *patriotism, national unity, sharing and devolution of power, the rule of law, democracy and participation of the people; b) human dignity, equity, social justice, inclusiveness, equality, human rights, non-discrimination and protection of the marginalised.*

Under Article 27(1), *every person is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and equal benefit of the law; (2) Equality includes the full and equal enjoyment of all rights and fundamental freedoms; (3) Women and men have the right to equal treatment, including the right to equal opportunities in political, economic, cultural and social spheres.*

Article 59 establishes the Kenya National Human Rights and Equality Commission whose functions include inter alia promoting gender equality and equity generally and to coordinate and facilitate gender mainstreaming in national development. Article 175 (c) provides that one of the principles of principles of devolved government is that no more than two-thirds of the members of representative bodies in each county government should be of the same gender. In the spirit of equality and non-discrimination, gender mainstreaming in the agricultural sector becomes an important aspect of human rights approaches to biodiversity conservation.

¹⁶ Lau JD, 'Three Lessons for Gender Equity in Biodiversity Conservation' (2020) 34 *Conservation Biology* 1589, 1589.

¹⁷ CBD Decision XII/7, para.2.

The *National Gender and Equality Commission Act, 2011*¹⁸ was enacted to establish the National Gender and Equality Commission as a successor to the Kenya National Human Rights and Equality Commission pursuant to Article 59(4) of the Constitution; to provide for the membership, powers and functions of the Commission, and for connected purposes.

Some of the functions of the Commission under the Act include, inter alia, to—promote gender equality and freedom from discrimination in accordance with Article 27 of the Constitution; monitor, facilitate and advise on the integration of the principles of equality and freedom from discrimination in all national and county policies, laws, and administrative regulations in all public and private institutions; act as the principal organ of the State in ensuring compliance with all treaties and conventions ratified by Kenya relating to issues of equality and freedom from discrimination and relating to special interest groups including minorities and marginalised persons, women, persons with disabilities, and children; co-ordinate and facilitate mainstreaming of issues of gender, persons with disability and other marginalised groups in national development and to advise the Government on all aspects thereof; work with other relevant institutions in the development of standards for the implementation of policies for the progressive realization of the economic and social rights specified in Article 43 of the Constitution and other written laws; and co-ordinate and advise on public education programmes for the creation of a culture of respect for the principles of equality and freedom from discrimination.

Understanding gender roles and relation in agriculture along value chains and identifying key factors that contribute to gender gaps in agriculture is considered crucial for the design and formulation of gender inclusive policy and institutional innovations that equalize opportunities for women and men farmers and equally benefit women and men from the agricultural research for development and dissemination of technologies.¹⁹

It is worth pointing out that commentators in the last two decades observed that most sustainable development efforts, including biodiversity initiatives, derived from a gendered vision of segmented sustainability that divides home, habitat and workplace into separate domains, with women at 'home', men in the 'workplace' and protected 'habitats' devoid of humans.²⁰ However,

¹⁸ *National Gender and Equality Commission Act*, No. 15 of 2011, Laws of Kenya.

¹⁹ International Centre of Insect Physiology and Ecology (*icipe*), '*Gender Research and Mainstreaming*,' available at <http://www.icipe.org/research/social-science-and-impact-assessment/gender-research-and-mainstreaming> Accessed on 13 July 2021.

²⁰ Rocheleau DE, 'Gender and Biodiversity: A Feminist Political Ecology Perspective' (1995) 26 IDS bulletin 9, 9.

over the years, there has been a paradigm shift, at least theoretically on the relationship between men and women in relation to biodiversity as well as the general relationship between man's day to day life and the natural habitats, in light of the United Nations 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development (SDGs Agenda). The SDGs Agenda seeks to adopt a holistic approach to sustainability that not only includes both men and women but also recognises the interconnectivity between human life and the natural habitats.²¹ This was informed by the realisation that in many rural communities throughout the world women are responsible for the reproduction of the work force, the production of daily subsistence, and the maintenance of the complex ecosystems and particular species that support agriculture, livestock and forest production, yet, most women are legally landless and not officially part of the work force.²²

The traditional stereotypical role of women in most African homes makes them important players in conservation and use of Plant Genetic Resources (PGR) worldwide where they are often responsible for ensuring household food security and family health, which makes them have greater knowledge and a more diversified perspective than men on PGR because they are responsible for producing or procuring a large number of plant resources and for storing and transforming plants to meet household needs.²³

Notably, the Constitution of Kenya provides that the objects of devolved government are, *inter alia*, to promote democratic and accountable exercise of power; to foster national unity by recognising diversity; to give powers of self-governance to the people and enhance their participation in the exercise of the powers of the State and in making decisions affecting them; to recognise the right of communities to manage their own affairs and to further their development; to protect and promote the interests and rights of minorities and marginalised communities; to promote social and economic development and the provision of proximate, easily accessible services throughout Kenya; to ensure equitable sharing of national and local resources throughout

²¹ See UNGA, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015 [without reference to a Main Committee (A/70/L.1)].

²² Rocheleau DE, 'Gender and Biodiversity: A Feminist Political Ecology Perspective' (1995) 26 IDS bulletin 9, 9; see also Mackenzie AFD, 'Land Tenure and Biodiversity: An Exploration in the Political Ecology of Murang'a District, Kenya' (2005) 62 Human Organization 255; Verma R, "'Without Land You Are Nobody": Critical Dimensions of Women's Access to Land and Relations in Tenure in East Africa' [2007] Unpublished IDRC Scoping Study for East Africa on Women's Access and Rights to Land and Gender Relations in Tenure.

²³ Howard-Borjas P and Cuijpers W, 'Gender Relations in Local Plant Genetic Resource Management and Conservation' [2002] Biotechnology, in encyclopedia for life support systems. EOLSS Publishers, Cambridge.

Kenya; and to facilitate the decentralisation of State organs, their functions and services, from the capital of Kenya.²⁴ In addition, it provides for participation of, *inter alia*, minorities and marginalized groups,²⁵ in governance and all other spheres of life. The foregoing provisions are important especially in relation to the provisions of the *County Governments Act*,²⁶ which also affirm the fact that citizen participation in county governments should be based upon the principles of, *inter alia*, protection and promotion of the interest and rights of minorities, marginalized groups and communities; legal standing to interested or affected persons, organizations, and where pertinent, communities, to appeal from or, review decisions, or redress grievances, with particular emphasis on persons and traditionally marginalized communities, including women, the youth, and disadvantaged communities; reasonable balance in the roles and obligations of county governments and non-state actors in decision-making processes; promotion of public-private partnerships; and recognition and promotion of the reciprocal roles of non-state actors' participation and governmental facilitation and oversight.²⁷

Notably, United Nations *Agenda 21* requires that Governments at the appropriate level, with the support of the relevant international and regional organizations, should, *inter alia*, promote a multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral approach in training and the dissemination of knowledge to local people on a wide range of issues which include various resources management.²⁸ Further, *Agenda 21* states that Coastal States should promote and facilitate the organization of education and training in integrated coastal and marine management and sustainable development for scientists, technologists, managers (including community-based managers) and users, leaders, indigenous peoples, fisherfolk, *women* and youth, among others.

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Notably, dependence on their natural environments means that when biological resources are depleted, women and men can end up being vulnerable in different ways, although women are often more vulnerable than men partly because women's roles can often be "invisible" compared

²⁴ Art. 174, Constitution of Kenya 2010.

²⁵ *Ibid*, Art. 56.

²⁶ *County Governments Act*, No. 17 of 2012, Laws of Kenya.

²⁷ *Ibid*, S. 87.

²⁸ Clause 13.22.

to that of men and so policies, programmes and related initiatives may not fully take into account the differences in how women and men use and contribute to biological resources.²⁹

It has been recommended that some of the specific actions which need to be undertaken to create an enabling environment for biodiversity benefits and improved well-being to be enjoyed by all people, women and men, boys and girls, include: Mainstream gender consideration into all national and local biodiversity policies, programmes, budgeting and monitoring mechanisms; Make awareness-raising and capacity building components mandatory for conservation interventions to inform men and women, including indigenous, local and rural women of their roles, rights and benefits in relation to the intervention; Develop and provide training and capacity building on gender issues and mainstreaming in the context of biodiversity conservation and sustainable use, to policy-makers and those involved in planning and undertaking biodiversity-related projects and programmes; Facilitate evidence-based policies by developing gender-sensitive monitoring and reporting frameworks and promoting gender analysis, including in the National Reports of Parties to the CBD; and Dedicate or increase the allocation of financial resources and strengthen expertise to advance the collection and use of data disaggregated by sex, age, ethnicity, disability and other relevant factors, to inform the development and implementation of gender-responsive biodiversity policies and programmes; Identify opportunities to access climate finance to address relevant gender objectives, and ensure new and innovative biodiversity-related financing mechanisms include avenues for access by marginalized and small-scale actors, particularly women and women's organizations; Identify synergies and reinforce efforts to implement the gender-specific targets and/or mandates of the sustainable development goals and the Rio Conventions, including through collaboration with organizations leading the work on these initiatives, and the identification of approaches to mainstream biodiversity and apply common indicators for monitoring and assessing progress and gaps.³⁰

Some commentators have suggested that in order to advance gender equality and women's empowerment in the implementation of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework, there is need

²⁹ Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, *Addressing Gender Issues and Actions in Biodiversity Objectives*, 2020, at p. 3 < https://www.cbd.int/gender/doc/cbd-towards2020-gender_integration-en.pdf > accessed 21 November 2021.

³⁰ UN-Women, "Towards a gender-responsive post-2020 global biodiversity framework: Imperatives and Key Components," *A submission by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) as an input to the development of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework*, 1 May 2019, 8.

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to ensure: equal opportunities for leadership, decision-making and effective engagement at all levels of decision-making in matters related to the three objectives of the Convention; equal access, ownership and control over biological resources; and equal access to benefits from biodiversity conservation and sustainable use, and from the utilization of genetic resources.³¹

Gender roles affect economic, political, social and ecological opportunities and constraints faced by both men and women. Recognizing women's roles as primary land and resource managers is central to the success of biodiversity policy.³² Because of the inherent connectedness between poverty, biodiversity use, and gender and the mutually self-reinforcing nature of these links, addressing rural poverty and environmental degradation requires a holistic, multidisciplinary approach and an understanding of gender in order to achieve successful sustained results.³³

There is need for governments to establish policies to incorporate gender and other special perspectives into all policies, laws, procedures, programmes and practices relating to ecosystem services, and to identify gaps in the protection of persons and groups of concern, in line with Aichi Biodiversity Target 14 which requires States to ensure that 'by 2020, ecosystems that provide essential services, including services related to water, and contribute to health, livelihoods and well-being, are restored and safeguarded, taking into account the needs of women, indigenous and local communities, and the poor and vulnerable.'³⁴ The need for equal and active participation of women in sustainable use and conservation of biodiversity is pegged on the fact that they play critical roles as primary land managers and resource users, and they face disproportionate impacts both from biodiversity loss and gender-blind conservation measures.³⁵ Governments should thus continually towards promoting equity and equality in biodiversity conservation efforts.

³¹ UN-Women, "Integrating a gender perspective in the post-2020 global biodiversity framework," *Issues Brief* – January 2021.

³² Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, "Gender and Biodiversity," www.cbd.int/gender.

³³ Bechtel JD, 'Gender, Poverty and the Conservation of Biodiversity' [2010] A review of issues and opportunities. MacArthur Foundation Conservation White Paper Series.

³⁴ United Nations Environment Programme, *Law and National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans*, 2018, Nairobi, Kenya, at 53.

³⁵ 'The Role, Influence and Impact of Women in Biodiversity Conservation' (*International Institute for Environment and Development*, 9 October 2018) <<https://www.iied.org/role-influence-impact-women-biodiversity-conservation>> accessed 15 September 2021.

4. Conclusion

It has been observed that ensuring that women and men are equally engaged in biodiversity decision-making is not just a matter of equality, it is critical for ensuring biodiversity conservation and sustainable use efforts are successful over the long term.³⁶ It is no longer a secret that the recognition, reinforcement, and improvement of both men and women's position, knowledge, and capabilities with respect to the sustainable management of biological diversity are key factors in the success of the conservation and use of natural resources, as well as in the empowerment of women.³⁷ There is a need for efforts towards biodiversity conservation to ensure active and meaningful inclusion of all people, both men and women, as access to these resources affects men and women in different ways. As acknowledged in COP 26, held in Glasgow, Scotland in November 2021, while environmental degradation has serious consequences for all human beings, it affects, in particular, the most vulnerable sectors of society, mainly women, whose health is most fragile during pregnancy and motherhood.³⁸ Disregarding gender issues in conservation efforts may increase the loss of biodiversity, due to mismanagement and unsustainable use, [and] the loss of important traditional knowledge, skills and experiences.³⁹ As a result, participants at the UN climate change conference COP26 called for greater representation of women's voices in climate change policies.⁴⁰ Indigenous women, who are seen as conveyors of traditional knowledge to the new generations, have an extremely important role in combating climate change.⁴¹ It has also been observed that disregarding gender can aggravate poverty and inequality.⁴² Notably, The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the goals therein to end hunger and poverty, depend

³⁶ United Nations, *Enabling A Gender-Responsive Process for The Development of The Post2020 Biodiversity Framework: Supplementary Background and Tools*, CBD/COP/14/INF/15, 1 November 2018, Conference of The Parties to The Convention On Biological Diversity, Fourteenth meeting, Item 17 of the provisional agenda*, Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, 17-29 November 2018, < <https://www.cbd.int/doc/c/5ab6/13f3/3cff0c5b52c856db19b279ec/cop-14-inf-15-en.pdf>> Accessed 21 November 2021.

³⁷ Zweifel H, 'The Gendered Nature of Biodiversity Conservation' [1997] *Nwsa Journal* 107, 119.

³⁸ 'Women Bear the Brunt of the Climate Crisis, COP26 Highlights' (UN News, 9 November 2021) <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/11/1105322>> accessed 21 November 2021.

³⁹ 'Why Gender Is Important for Biodiversity Conservation' <<https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/why-gender-important-biodiversity-conservation>> accessed 21 November 2021.

⁴⁰ 'COP26 Focuses on Gender Issues | NHK WORLD-JAPAN News' (NHK WORLD) <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20211110_06/> accessed 21 November 2021.

⁴¹ 'Women Bear the Brunt of the Climate Crisis, COP26 Highlights' (UN News, 9 November 2021) <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/11/1105322>> accessed 21 November 2021.

⁴² *Ibid.*

on biodiversity and natural capital.⁴³ During COP 26, it was observed that persistent discriminatory social and cultural norms, such as unequal access to land, water, and other resources, as well as their lack of participation in decisions regarding planning and management of nature, often lead to ignorance of the tremendous contributions women can make.⁴⁴ It is thus the high time that all stakeholders not only acknowledge but also do what is reasonably possible to ensure that the role of both men and women in biodiversity conservation takes a centre stage for the sake of achieving sustainable development agenda.

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⁴³ ‘COP15 on Biodiversity Is Our Chance to Get to a World We Want’ (UNEP, 12 October 2021) <<http://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/speech/cop15-biodiversity-our-chance-get-world-we-want>> accessed 21 November 2021.

⁴⁴ ‘Women Bear the Brunt of the Climate Crisis, COP26 Highlights’ (UN News, 9 November 2021) <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/11/1105322>> accessed 21 November 2021.

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