

Oops! Stories of Conservation Fails when gender is not integrated

Gender neutral or gender blind projects that do not seek to understand how men and women use natural resources can have negative effects on human wellbeing and derail conservation objectives. Here, several real-life examples in marine conservation, forestry and agriculture highlight how this can happen.

To conserve the fragile mangrove ecosystem in the Gulf of Fonseca, bordered by Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras, restrictions were placed on fishing in the estuaries, and attempts were made to preserve the forest and limit firewood use. Men in this region fish in the open sea and therefore were not affected. Women, however, support the household through estuary fishing and firewood collection. Valuing household survival over officially mandated restrictions, women continued to fish in the estuary secretly and gather firewood for their own use or to sell.¹

A tree-planting project for fuelwood in Kenya assumed that women would fulfill their traditional role of providing water for seedlings. After the seedlings were distributed, it was discovered that the women were unwilling to do the extra hours of water collecting required by the project because the women were not particularly interested in the trees designated to be planted. The women were indifferent to the project's success and the seedlings ultimately died for lack of water.²

Another community forestry project in Nepal focused on growing hardwood seedlings, as directed by male village leaders who were interested in wood for furniture making and carving. However, by tradition, it is women who plant and water tree seedlings, and the women were not interested in slow-growing trees that would not provide direct income. The project provided 3,000 seedlings that which all subsequently died from lack of care.³

In the Gambia, a project that increased women's incomes through horticulture activities ultimately failed because the husbands felt so threatened by their wives' increased incomes that they drove their cattle through the women's gardens to let them fatten on the fruit and vegetables. ⁴

The Government of Uganda had put in place a policy to promote cash crops, with vanilla bean as the target crop. The Government gave incentives to farmers to plant vanilla, provided agricultural extension workers to train farmers, and gave the farmers the necessary inputs, including seeds, fertilizer, and credit. After a highly successful first year, output dropped considerably over the subsequent years. It turned out that, while men owned the crop and did the initial planting and selling, they were also busy with other market crops. The task of caring for the vanilla fell to women who were already too busy and did not have the training or economic incentive to care for the plants. The women took action and sabotaged the vanilla crop by nipping the flower buds. ⁵

What can we do to make sure that projects acknowledge and respond to men's and women's different needs and help to ensure project sustainability? Check out CI's Gender Integration Guidelines and other resources at: www.conservation.org/gender

¹ USAID Gender Matters (2001): http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNACP513.pdf

² *ibid*

³ <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0010/001003/100310E.pdf> - p. 34

⁴ <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0010/001003/100310E.pdf>, p. 36

⁵ Harcourt, W. Women Reclaiming Sustainable Livelihoods p. 103