

Role of Women in the Context of the Implementation of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

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A. Introduction

The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) recognized the negative impact that rapid environmental degradation has, particularly on women in developing countries linked to their general vulnerable situation. The final document of the Conference, Agenda 21, calls for a Global Action toward sustainable and gender equitable development (Chapter 24) and urges Governments throughout the world to develop strategies of changes necessary to eliminate constitutional, legal, and extralegal barriers that hinder women from participating as equal partners in the sustainable development process. A number of support measures are recommended for the various fields related to development and environment, such as agriculture, fresh water resources, biodiversity, fragile ecosystems, and hazardous waste, to mention a few. The support measures include facilities that specifically address women's need for credit, extension, research, training and education, awareness raising and information, and organizational strengthening.

Empowerment of women is a central concept in the recommendations of Agenda 21. Governments are requested to develop an enabling environment to ensure the active participation of women in natural resource management, including participation in the conceptualization and implementation of programmes.

While Agenda 21 constitutes a very solid document calling for urgent activities to be undertaken, the nature of the document is limited to recommendations to be implemented at each country's discretion and/or potential. But Agenda 21 certainly also constitutes a very ambitious document and its implementation so far has not seen the results that many enthusiastic participants at the UNCED expected. Over the last year, several disappointed voices have been heard, especially from the NGO community.

In the context of the preparation and accomplishment of UNCED, a number of conventions addressing specific fields of the development/environment complex have been prepared and adopted by the international community. Once these Conventions enter into force, they will become legally binding documents obliging the Parties, i.e., governments of developed and developing countries, to undertake a number of measures aiming at sustainable human development.

The Conventions on Biodiversity and Climate Change have already entered into force, while the Convention on Desertification is expected to come into force in 1997. It should be noted that the Convention on Desertification was only prepared after the UNCED and the national ratification process have been launched in many countries.

The following will give a brief overview of some of the main principles of the U.N. Convention to Combat Desertification in countries experiencing serious drought and/or desertification, particularly in Africa (CCD) and analyze its potential impact for promoting the role of women in the drylands. Specific references will be made to gender aspects of fuelwood and dryland management.

B. UN Convention on Desertification

More than 900 million people on the Earth live in areas prone to drought and desertification. The livelihood of women in those areas is often a matter of survival strategies, and environmental concerns are meaningful only when placed in the context of poverty eradication.

The UN Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD) is based on recommendations from the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) and calls for active involvement of dryland populations in the conceptualization and implementation of national programmes to mitigate the impact from drought and desertification. The CCD emphasizes the strong relationship between sustainable livelihoods and sustainable environment and, in fact, the CCD calls for poverty eradication as imperative to sustainable natural resource management in the fragile ecosystems of the drylands. Special attention should be given to the integration of traditionally marginalized groups like women in the decision-making processes. The CCD was adopted in June 1994 by governments and open for signatures in October 1994. So far the CCD has been signed by more than 115 countries and ratified by 25. The CCD will enter into force on the 90th day after the date of deposit of the 50th instrument of ratification, acceptance, approval, or accession.

Through the CCD, countries affected by drought and desertification commit themselves to "promote awareness and facilitate the participation of local populations, particularly women and youth, with the support of non-governmental organizations, in policy planning, decision-making, and implementation and review of national action programmes [to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought]" (Art. 5.d, highlight by author).

The CCD addresses all drylands of the world, including arid, semiarid and dry subhumid areas. Although the mandate is global, the partners are requested to give particular attention to affected countries in Africa, in view of the urgency the desertification-poverty complex plays in some countries in Africa. Presently, activities for the implementation of the CCD have been launched in most affected countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

The Parties to the CCD are governments from developed as well as developing countries and affected as well as nonaffected countries. All Parties to the CCD commit themselves to promote its implementation and developed countries vow to support financially and technically the activities for the implementation of the Convention.

During the preparation of the CCD, the Parties confirmed the need for a new approach to dryland development and innovative approaches were agreed upon. The Parties agreed to place considerable efforts to ensure the active participation of all dryland populations in the implementation of the CCD. National Action Programmes (NAPs) will be the main operational mechanism of the CCD and emphasis is given to the role of dryland populations in the conceptualization and realization of NAPs. The CCD stresses the need for an on-going planning process, rather than a one-time plan, in order to create a sustainable response to the problems of desertification and drought. The methodology of the NAP process, therefore, calls for the creation of permanent institutional structures to ensure continuous participation of all interested actors.

A broad spectrum of dryland development activities are suggested for the implementation of the CCD according to the national contexts. These activities include development and efficient use of various energy sources, institutional and legal frameworks, and promotion of alternative livelihoods (Art. 10). Of special importance for the gender element regarding the Conventions is that, like the Convention on Biodiversity, it "recognizes the vital role that women play in natural resource management, conservation, and sustainable use of biological diversity and affirms the need for their full participation at all levels of policy-making and implementation."

In the CCD, we have once signed, a legally binding instrument obliging Governments to integrate various stakeholders like NGOs and GROs, research and development institutions, and international cooperation agencies as active partners in the national planning and execution of activities for natural resource management in the drylands. The success of the CCD will depend on the roles accorded to each partner. It is crucial that each partner clarifies their specific roles and prepares themselves for the partnership activities.

C. Women's Participation in the Implementation of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification

Over the last decades, there has been growing recognition of the centrality of the role of women in agriculture and household-food security. In many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, women typically are responsible for the production of at least 80% of the household food production. In addition, women are often responsible for collecting fuelwood and water and are conditioned by land degradation in the form of deforestation and declining agricultural productivity. Yet these same females are rarely systematically targeted for training, extension, research, technology, or improved inputs, let alone involved in policy formulation.

Women's responsibilities in the households are furthermore stressed by the increasing number of households headed by them. The UNDP 1995 Human Development Report shows that in the group of countries with low Human Development Index, to which most sub-Saharan countries belong, 17.5% of households were headed by women in 1990 compared to 13.8% in 1980.

Although there have been many attempts to address gender issues in development, substantial activity, development planning efforts still largely fail to fully recognize women's actual and potential contribution to the development process or the effect of the development process on them. Women are key actors in the economic system, yet their often neglect in development plans has left unused a potentially large economic contribution. Women represent the majority of the population, but they are paradoxically concentrated at the bottom rungs in terms of employment, education, income, and status.

While these gender relations are found throughout the world, they tend to be reinforced by austere and impoverished environments, as experienced in developing countries conditioned by large areas of drylands.

In a presentation of ideas for action and research for engendered sustainable development activities, J. Davidson states that "a major conclusion of recent thinking (developed, for example, in the OECD DAC Women-in-Development Group) is that not only must women's crucial role in protecting and restoring the environment be more widely recognized, but they must be enabled to *benefit* directly from that role" (J. Davidson, 1991).

The Parties to the CCD recognize the important role women play, and might play, as natural resource managers and stress the "importance of ensuring the full participation of both men and women [highlight by author] at all levels in programmes to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought." Furthermore, the CCD outlines directly specific activities for women that shall be undertaken in its implementation especially at national and local level:

- Awareness raising (art. 5)
- Participation (art. 5 and 10)
- Training and capacity building (art. 19)
- Education (art. 19)

But the CCD also contains a number of other provisions for which gender-sensitive activities will be important, e.g.:

- **Poverty eradication**
- **Partnership building**
- **Establishment of national desertification funds**
- **Research and development**
- **Alternative livelihoods**
- **Environmental protection and restoration**

In order to respond to the principle of engendering dryland development activities, it will be necessary to develop and apply gender approaches for the implementation of the CCD at all levels, be it overall policy formulation or implementation of small scale field-level projects.

The gender approaches should include considerations regarding:

- **Power structures within and among social groups like families, communities, and local, regional and national authorities**
- **Differences between women's and men's interests**
- **The dynamic of gender roles**
- **Recognition of local knowledge - including that of women**

Women's voices should, therefore, not only be heard but also be decisive, i.e., women should participate actively in the operationalization and implementation of the CCD.

In a recent meeting for the Inter-Governmental Negotiation Committee on Desertification for the Parties to the CCD (Geneva, Feb. 1996), some NGO representatives expressed their concern regarding the composition of the Government delegations to the Conference, as well as to previous Conferences. The concern was mainly based on the observation that many country delegations only consist of men and that the overall representativeness of women in the meeting might be as low as 10%. It has furthermore, been observed that this picture is repeated at national meetings in the context of the implementation of the CCD. It should be noted that a gender approach does not need necessarily to be developed by women. However, from the political arena, it has been observed that a "critical mass" (about 30%) of female participation in parliaments seems to be decisive for the consideration of women's concerns.

As mentioned in the general presentation of the CCD, the principle of participation is fundamental for the CCD and emphasis is given to the importance of mobilizing the population directly concerned with desertification, i.e., the dryland populations of which more than 50% are women.

To ensure active participation and negotiation on equal terms by all partners, including traditionally marginalized groups like women, a sequence of preparatory activities should take place.

Initially, all potential dryland stakeholders should be identified. A grouping of the populations according to factors, such as their perceived problems and needs, resources, interest in the use of dryland resources, and capacity. This grouping should certainly identify groups that can constitute a rational framework for the promotion of the female dryland populations. The grouping will facilitate the design of targeted and, thereby, more efficient awareness-raising campaigns and capacity building. The capacity-building activities should include negotiation skills and organizational management.

Logistical aspects in relation to participation in the NAP process should also be considered in the preparatory activities. Given their multifaceted roles, women's time is precious and participation in planning activities might be impossible if no incentives are offered. These incentives do not necessarily have to be in the form of financial contributions, but could also be in the form of planning meetings according to women's schedules. Another obvious incentive will consist of awareness raising on concrete activities that the CCD may offer and that are relevant for improving the livelihoods of the intended participants according to their own perceptions.

D. The Fuelwood-Women Complex in the Drylands

In most developing countries, women bear the responsibility for fuel provision and use. Fuelwood still constitutes the primary energy source for most households in the Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean.¹ The depletion of the fuelwood resources as a result of the land degradation processes does, therefore, have a special impact on the livelihood of women. Women often constitute a specific target group for projects that have been developed and implemented in most countries facing severe deforestation problems in order to address what has been called the "fuelwood" crisis.

The measures that have been developed to reduce the use of wood for fuel include improved cooking stoves, alternative energies, and fuelwood plantations. The rate of success of all these efforts has been disappointing, but important lessons have been learned, especially regarding the complexity of the problem and the need for holistic and local and participatory approaches (G. Leach and R. Mearns, 1988).

In the context of the complexity of the problem, it should also be mentioned that the gap model² used for demonstrating the world's increasing and inherent fuelwood crisis has been questioned more and more over the last years. As such, the model does not consider the local characteristics of deforestation and fuelwood consumption, e.g., studies from Mali show that in certain areas, the fuelwood used consisted only of collected dead branches and twigs (see, e.g., T. Benjaminsen, 1995).

Another point that has been criticized in the approach to reduce the fuelwood consumption is the focus on household use and limit the gender aspect of the complex firewood and land degradation to labour issues within households, while women's role in the overall land management has not received particular attention. "Projects aimed specifically at women have often been unsuccessful, as they tend to ignore the broader social reasons why women are second to men in these concerns." (G. Leach and R. Mearns, 1988). Furthermore, an emphasis of projects aiming at fuelwood reduction is often given to rural contexts. But the over-consumption does not stem from the satisfaction of rural fuel use but rather from urban needs, and the problem should be seen in relation to the channels of provision of fuelwood for the urban areas and the commercialization aspect is, therefore, a key problematic element (G. Shepherd, 1991).

¹As examples, it can be mentioned that in 1992 it was estimated that more than 90% of African households depend primarily on fuelwood as an energy resource (UNEP, 1992). Similar percentages have been found in Bolivia (Lieberman et al., 1995)

²The gap model is based on the assumption that the fuelwood consumption is directly linked to tree cutting and that the regeneration rate of the world's forests is lower than the estimated future consumption of wood for energy consumption.

But these commercial aspects of the “fuelwood crisis” do also have an important gender component as rural women in many countries are the primary providers to contractors who commercialize fuelwood in the urban areas. Furthermore, there seems to be an increasing number of women and children marketing fuelwood directly at the markets; often reinforced by the general impoverishment of the rural drylands.

Whether for income-generating interests or for household consumption, a typical “outsider” analysis would show that many dryland women must have an interest in improved accessibility to fuelwood. In an analysis of three social forestry projects in West Bengali, India, C. Nesmith (1991) shows that while the economic benefits from the marketing of the tree products remain with the men, the women villagers recognize some benefits of the plantations as a result of easier access to leaves and dead twigs. As such, it was estimated that the average time for fuelwood collection per household went down from around 29 hours to 14 hours per week. However, C. Nesmith distinguish between these perceived practical and immediate gender needs compared to women's strategic gender needs; in this case, to be expressed in terms of economic independence and stress that the decision of the tree species to be planted in these projects—eucalyptus, which is grown for commercial interests alone—was a direct result of the almost exclusive male-to-male contact between the extension agents and the villagers.

While it might seem obvious that the implementation of the CCD should lead to specific project activities for ensuring efficient fuelwood consumption, actual activities will have to be identified by the stakeholders from the drylands. The development of fuelwood projects will, therefore, depend on the interests from dryland women as well as men and the economic potential for implementing these activities. Further research and development will certainly be necessary, also to prove the cost-benefit relation of various activities integrating the fuelwood problem.

The biodiversity element of fuelwood supply also calls for gender considerations and further development. As such, the role of women in protecting *in situ* agro-biodiversity is specially important. Not only do they depend on it for their subsistence, but by selecting and planting, they also protect and develop new varieties. Women have an inherent knowledge on biodiversity, but as stressed by J. Aloisi de Larderel (1992) “women's knowledge of biodiversity is eroding as rapidly as the forest resources are being depleted.”

In the design of gender-specific activities for natural resource management in the context of the CCD, the partners, be it dryland populations or outside facilitators, should build on the important lessons that have been learned in the recent reflections over gender and environmental projects.

As an example, it can be mentioned that the results from an analysis of 218 projects worldwide selected for their relative effectiveness with regard to promoting the role of women in environment projects (UNEP, 1992) shows the following characteristics:

- Participatory approach for environmental problem identification
- Low budget with maximum level of local contribution of inputs in form of labour, money, and material
- Economic advancement of women to enable them to pursue environmentally beneficial activities
- Women participating actively in the conceptualization and implementation of the projects
- Education and training on a long-term sustainable basis

For energy projects, the analysis shows that successful fuelwood projects follow an integrated approach combining the promotion of improved cooking stoves with the development of fuelwood supply, e.g., from through tree nurseries and community woodlots in integrated agro-forestry projects (Madu Sarin, 1992).

E. Conclusions

The CCD is a strong instrument for the advancement of women in natural-resource management and, as such, also for sustainable human development.

The Convention is the result of substantial work, where all signatories or parties have cooperated to the fullest extent in order to develop innovative actions to the benefit of people as well as the environment.

However, the successful implementation of the Convention will require additional substantial efforts from all Governments, including NGOs, and community-based organizations, UN Agencies and Governments from both affected and nonaffected areas to fulfill what they have already committed themselves to do.

With the CCD the promotion of women's participation is no longer limited to small aspects of overall development programmes. Rather, according to the CCD, women should be empowered to participate actively at all levels of dryland management.

Based on its principles of integrated and long-term strategies within a coherent partnership with stakeholders from developed as well as developing countries and affected as well as non affected countries, the CCD might constitute an excellent framework for an integrated approach to *Prosopis* development. This might cover development of new products, commercialization and development of new markets, efficient energy use, biodiversity, and promotion of agro-sylvo-pastoral systems.

F. Literature

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Annex 1

The following paper was presented as a background note at a UNDP/UNEP sponsored panel discussion on gender, environment and sustainable human development organized at the International Conference on Women, Beijing, September, 1996. The paper was prepared by UNSO/UNDP and describes major issues related to women's access to land—an issue that is closely linked to land degradation and dryland development.

The note could offer some further insight to the theme of Session 2 of the International Workshop on Prosopis: Role of Prosopis in the Gender/Fuelwood/Land Tenure Complex.

Women's access to land

Introduction

Various case studies on countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America suggest that without proper solutions for existing land access and tenure problems, participation in natural resource management programmes will not be likely. The key issue is that people do not want to invest time, resources and long-term focused activities in order to preserve a resource if they themselves do not benefit from such an investment through secure rights to a given area (UNSO, 1995).

While secure access to land is a common problem for many agricultural producers in Africa, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean, the problem is even more critical for the female producers facing discriminatory laws and practices combined with adverse cultural attitudes. The result is that the rural women often lack either ownership or effective control of land, water and other resources, despite their crucial contribution to agricultural production. The negative environmental impact from the lack of motivation in long term natural resource management which is generated from the land tenure situation has in itself a negative impact on the conditions for the rural women.

Secure access to land access for rural women is a decisive issue for sustainable human development. While few national legislations directly discriminate against women's access to land, few legal measures have been implemented that can be considered as directly promoting such access or rights. Enforcement of non-discriminatory legislation that will nullify existing norms mandating all land automatically be titled to men (whether ownership or user rights) would constitute a major step towards sustainable development. In a number of countries it will be necessary to develop and implement special legal measures to promote women's right to land. Such measures would undoubtedly be extremely cost-effective; they would not require important financial resources, but rather substantial institutional capacity building efforts. The result would be increased sustainable livelihoods for rural women, sustainable agricultural production and thereby sustainable development for the concerned societies.

This paper reviews the overall situation of land tenure systems in a number of countries throughout the world in order to show the gender biased situation.

Land Tenure Systems

Land tenure system is an often used concept with a number of definitions, but generally used to describe the social relations that are formed around natural resources (soil, water, flora and fauna) and which determine who can use what resources and how they should be used. Barraclough (S. Barraclough, 1973) suggests that land tenure is the differential distribution of ownership and usufruct rights to land and water among persons or groups. It should be noted, that access to resources does not necessarily include full benefits of the resource, rather it implies that one is under the control of the owner who ultimately benefits from your input (S. Lastarria-Cornhiel, 1995).

Land tenure systems, including allocation of land, are clearly connected to other societal structures which are interlinked with the social relations (e.g. marriage and inheritance systems, economic systems, and power structures). In some rural areas of the Congo, where ethnic grouping is strongly based on "clans", a member of a clan can use land belonging to his clan anywhere in the country. Although the chief of the clan is generally a man, this privilege applies to women and men alike. Similar clan systems exist in Zaire and Angola.

Gender is one of the most important determinants of social relations and rights within rural households and communities. In association with class, gender establishes a person's opportunities, aspirations, standard of living, access to resources, status in community, and perception of self; all factors linked to the existing land tenure systems and all factors linked to sustainable livelihoods for rural women.

Legal Setting and Traditional Institutions

While most constitutions do not discriminate against women, civil codes in several countries still consider the male as the head of household. But even in societies with unbiased civil laws the traditional institutions still function according to patrilineal social structures, which automatically denies women equal access to property and inheritance rights. These traditional institutions or societal structures define the woman or wife as a "transitory" person; a "stranger" to the husband's family. Her transitory status in the male lineage implies that her rights to the land are also only transitory. Thus in cases of divorce or the death of a husband she loses all right to use the land. In many patrilineal societies, due to women's lack of access to land, they thus are rendered dependent on their men or on casual labour (which offers very low incomes). Sometimes women can be found farming fragmented plots of non-arable land, since all the arable land is automatically given to the men. In a recent study on rural women's legal status in Latin America, FAO concludes that "discriminatory customs tend to replace unbiased and sound laws if these are unaccompanied by appropriate enforcement regulations. [Furthermore], in many countries the authorities responsible for allocating land under the agrarian laws refuse to recognize women as heads of household even when law does." (FAO, 1994). Similar situations can be found in Muslim areas in Africa and Asia where both men and women have legal rights to own and inherit land. Though the spouses tend to keep their properties separate, in the end the amount that is inherited by the women amounts to far less than that of the men.

Special problems arise in de facto unions (cohabitation of a man and a woman without marriage). While it is a widespread practice in a number of rural areas throughout the world, there is still a number of countries that do not offer a legal recognition of de facto unions, leaving the women especially vulnerable in situations of separation or at the death of the partner.

There are only a few unique societies in the world which do not abide by the patrilineal structure and instead follow a matrilineal social structure. One example of such a society is to be found among the ethnic group *Minang Kabau* in West Sumatra, where all inheritance rights go to the women. When a woman marries a man, he moves into the woman's family and obtains usufruct rights to the land, but he may never inherit it. It has been observed that men tend to migrate away from home in search of other forms of labour. Similar matrilineal social structures can be found in Bhutan.

Over the last decades, land reforms have been implemented in a number of countries. It is now widely recognized that effective land reforms are not merely a reform of the civil codes and simple redistribution of the land. Rather, land reforms call for an integrated approach requiring a number of support mechanisms like credit and extension facilities in addition to institutional building activities aiming i.a. to change the traditional customs. Effective support mechanisms have failed in most countries that have experienced land reforms and the gender biased customs for land distribution have not been addressed.

Africa

In almost all African countries more women than men live in the rural areas. Men are migrating to other areas in search of other income sources and subsequently women are left at home and the number of female headed households is on a steady increase in rural areas. But their position in society, due to their gender, denies them to further resources (e.g. training, credits, information, capital) and participation in local management institutions.

Riddell remarks that a remarkably diverse set of land tenure arrangements is to be found in Africa (J. Ridell, 1985), reflecting the extremely diverse cultural setting and to a certain extent also the geographical and climactic variations. Customary land tenure, i.e. tenure patterns that have continued to evolve from institutions established before the colonial period, figures predominantly.

In a recent study Mini (1994) reviews some major categories of African land tenure systems:

- In **freehold tenure systems**, land transactions are basically carried out on a traditional basis, that is, even though tenure in these villages is officially described as freehold, the daily land use and land transactions revert

back to traditional practices. Unmarried women have no right to arable land. Married women have secured and protected rights to arable land as long as they remain married (upon death of husband, their land rights are passed on to eldest son).

- In the **trust and quitrent tenure systems**, issues of inheritance (in cases of separation or death) are left to the traditional law. This usually means that women inherit little or nothing.
- In **communal land tenure systems**, access to land is based on traditional institutions and the authority remains with the men. The head of the village (a man) or the chieftain has the ultimate authority and control over the communal lands. He is the one who makes all the decisions regarding who has the right to cultivate and use what land (S.E. Mini, 1994).

Those systems imply that women have no direct access to arable land by their own right; they attain such access only by virtue of marriage.

A Workshop on Land Tenure Systems in West Africa held in 1994 (funded by OECD) showed that women's land rights are uncertain, insecure and most importantly, unequal. Women slightly outnumber the men and their agricultural and rural economic contribution is often disproportionately high, yet they form the marginalized majority. Even though women play such an active role in the productive work and have a decisive role in the education and reproduction of the culture, they are continually confronted with inequalities in their access to natural resources (in comparison to men).

The most common way for women to obtain access to land is through the allocation of a plot of land which belongs to their husband's family. Those allocated fields are usually smaller and of lower quality. They only have usufruct rights over this plot of land. Should the husband die, the land is given back to his family, and the woman is left with nothing. In the case of divorce, the land automatically stays with the husband (G. Hesseling, 1994).

Asia

It has not been possible for present paper to identify studies giving a general overview of gender related issues to land tenure systems in Asia. The following will review the subject in the two biggest nations on the Asian Continent.

China has a long tradition of male control over resources and decision making although substantive improvements have been noted since 1949, when one of the major goals of China's social and economic policies was to achieve equal rights for both sexes.

In the 1970's the People's Republic of China began a reform process, bringing the system of rural communes to a halt. The communes were divided up, and management of and income from land were given to the farm households in a smaller production system under what is called the *Household Responsibility System*.

While women certainly have gained improved livelihoods with the general positive trends in the rural economy it should be noted that inheritance of the farm households still goes from father to sons or other male relations. Occasionally widows hold land on behalf of their infant son, though often to entrust it to a male relative.

In **India** one needs to realize that although the caste system has legally been abolished, it still remains ingrained in the minds of the people, especially in rural areas. The caste system is not only class discriminatory but also highly gender biased. Furthermore, the legal system is still reflecting the prevalent religions.

The first step the British administration took was in land reform, which allowed individuals (read individual men) to transfer their interests in land and subsequently diminish the power of landholders and ensure the security of private property. The British did not destroy the traditional structure of Indian society; instead the old mentality of hierarchy just remodelled itself to fit the British administration. Over all the British system had the effect of concentrating land into the hands of few upper castes.

Under the land reform of the 1970s, land was redistributed to landless and small farmers in the name of the heads of the households, namely the men.

With Independence, Indian women got constitutional rights and privileges of ordinary citizens. Some civil laws have targeted the rights of women as the Hindu Succession Act from 1956 which gave female children equal rights to inherit the paternal property.

Latin America and the Caribbean

In spite of a number of agrarian reforms implemented in the Latin American and Caribbean region over the last decades, the majority of the land is still concentrated in the hands of very few owners of the so called latifundios (large estates). This also means that the majority of rural households (more than 2/3 of the total number of rural households) do only dispose of limited land, or minifundios (small farms).

Most of the agricultural laws establish land allocation based on a points or priority system, giving the priority to the men of families. Throughout Latin America, with the exception of Cuba and Nicaragua, agrarian reforms do not recognize women's interests as their direct objectives. Furthermore, agrarian reform takes no account of the fact that women can become heads of households when the men migrate. Rural households headed by women are rapidly increasing mainly as a result of male economic migration. According to Galan between 40% & 50% of the households in the Caribbean are headed by women, in Central American between 15% & 33%, and in South America between 16% & 25% (B. Galan, 1995).

Civil Codes of several Latin American countries still consider the man as the head of household, and even when civil codes recognize women as heads of households the prevalent application of traditional customs and negligence of civil codes prevent rural women to equal land access (FAO, 1994).

FAO has done extensive research on legal status of rural women in Latin America and concludes: "The most usual way for the rural women in almost all Latin-American countries to gain access to land is through succession or through the allocations made under some countries' Agrarian Reform Laws. Although statistical evidence as to the magnitude of this problem for landless rural women is unavailable, some recent studies maintain that there are sufficient grounds to show that rural women are systematically denied access to land and direct control over other means of production" (FAO, 1994).

Conclusion

Evidence from Africa, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean, shows that securing women's access to land as well as support measures like credit and extension services is crucial, if one aims to promote their sustainable livelihood. The study of women's access to land needs to be looked at with greater urgency, since little has been published about it. A lot of information is to be found on land tenure systems (per se), but the mention of gender in relation to land tenure has still to be pursued. Most studies of land tenure systems mostly neglect to mention how it affects the livelihood of women, although some institutions lately have focused specifically on this very issue (e.g. FAO and the Land Tenure Center at the University of Wisconsin in USA). In studying the various land tenure systems and attempting to comprehend them, it is necessary to refer to the traditional customs and kinship structures, since they have been and still tend to be the barriers to women's equal access to resources.

To promote the possibilities of rural women to become efficient natural resource managers, it will be necessary to institutionalize a number of support mechanisms that deliberately provide women with facilities like credit, information, marketing, extension and appropriate technology. It will also be necessary to promote the representation of women in local management institutions.

It might be interesting to recall paragraph 62 of the *Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies, from the Women Conference in 1985*: "Agrarian reform measures have not always ensured women's rights, even in countries where women predominate in the agricultural labour force. Reforms should guarantee women's constitutional and legal rights, in terms of access to land and other means of production, and should ensure that women will control the products of their labour and income; as well as benefits from agricultural inputs, research, training, credits, and other infrastructure facilities". **We still need those reforms.**

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Annex 2

Specific provisions in the CCD regarding women (highlights by author)

Introduction

The Parties to this Convention,

Stressing the important role played by **WOMEN** in regions affected by desertification and/or drought, particularly in rural areas of developing countries, and the importance of ensuring the full participation of both men and **WOMEN** at all levels in programmes to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought,

Article 5

Obligations of affected country Parties

In addition to their obligations pursuant to article 4, affected country Parties undertake to:

- (d) promote awareness and facilitate the participation of local populations, particularly **WOMEN** and youth, with the support of non- governmental organizations, in efforts to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought; and

Article 10

National action programmes

- 2. National action programmes shall specify the respective roles of government, local communities and land users and the resources available and needed. They shall, inter alia:
 - (f) provide for effective participation at the local, national and regional levels of non-governmental organizations and local populations, both **WOMEN** and men, particularly resource users, including farmers and pastoralists and their representative organizations, in policy planning, decision-making, and implementation and review of national action programmes; and

Section 3: Supporting measures

Article 19

Capacity building, education and public awareness

- 1. The Parties recognize the significance of capacity building -- that is to say, institution building, training and development of relevant local and national capacities -- in efforts to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought. They shall promote, as appropriate, capacity-building:
 - (a) through the full participation at all levels of local people, particularly at the local level, especially **WOMEN** and youth, with the cooperation of non-governmental and local organizations;
- 3. The Parties shall cooperate with each other and through competent intergovernmental organizations, as well as with non-governmental organizations, in undertaking and supporting public awareness and educational programmes in both affected and, where relevant, unaffected country Parties to promote understanding of the causes and effects of desertification and drought and of the importance of meeting the objective of this Convention. To that end, they shall:
 - (e) assess educational needs in affected areas, elaborate appropriate school curricula and expand, as needed, educational and adult literacy programmes and opportunities for all, in particular for girls and **WOMEN**, on the identification, conservation and sustainable use and management of the natural resources of affected areas; and

ANNEX I

REGIONAL IMPLEMENTATION ANNEX FOR AFRICA

Article 8

Content of national action programmes

- 2. National action programmes shall, as appropriate, include the following general features:

- (c) the increase in participation of local populations and communities, including **WOMEN**, farmers and pastoralists, and delegation to them of more responsibility for management.

ANNEX II

REGIONAL IMPLEMENTATION ANNEX FOR ASIA

no specific mention

ANNEX III

REGIONAL IMPLEMENTATION ANNEX FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

no specific mention

ANNEX IV

REGIONAL IMPLEMENTATION ANNEX FOR THE NORTHERN MEDITERRANEAN

no specific mention