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# PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN COMMUNITY FORESTS

PEOPLE, RULES, AND ORGANIZATIONS SUPPORTING THE PROTECTION OF  
ECOSYSTEM RESOURCES

## SUMMARY

Liberia's Community Rights Law (CRL) recognizes the fundamental importance of inclusive participation for community forest management. However, practical challenges to the broad involvement of women as well as poor men remain. That said, it is important to recognize that "pushing" women to participate in community forest governance, without sufficient attention to mitigating the costs of their participation may have negative, unintended consequences. Participation may add to a woman's burden of responsibilities and time poverty or provoke a backlash against their speaking out at public forums. A central question is: how to promote inclusive participation for strong community forest management, which does not unduly burden women or other marginalized groups.

This policy brief examines the justification for special consideration of social inclusion in community forest governance in Liberia, reviews the experience of promoting women and marginalized people's participation in forest management, and proposes several options to support inclusive engagement in community forestry.

## BACKGROUND

Community forestry can provide avenues for women and landless men to sustainably use, profit from, and control land and forest resources. In this way, community forests can be an invaluable way of reducing vulnerability and improving livelihoods.

Women and landless men, in particular may benefit from community forests that are set up to be available for the three "C's": commerce, conservation, and community. Women and men living near forest relate to the forest in different ways. For example, women rely more heavily than men on NTFPs for subsistence, medicinal plants, and income generation. Therefore, it is important that community forest management actively promote and include women's perspectives and priorities.

There are, however, risks to establishing community forests. Community forestry management plans, if not based on sufficient consultation with marginalized people, can limit access and extraction that may have a disproportionately negative effect on the women or poor men. Without consistent support for the participation of women and marginalized groups, community forestry may unintentionally worsen existing inequalities. For this reason, it is especially important to focus on ways to promote broad participation in communities that are rural, with low literacy, and disenfranchised.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mansuri, G. and Rao, V. 2013. *Localizing Development: Does Participation Work?*, World Bank, Washington, DC

## CRL ON SOCIAL INCLUSION

The Community Rights Law (CRL) envisions a model of community forestry that serves as a medium for civic engagement, empowerment, and equitable distribution of decision-making and benefit sharing. In its Guiding Principles (section 2.2), the CRL states that it shall:

- “Develop the capacities and capabilities of communities to enable them to equitably participate in and equitably benefit from sustainable management of forests
- “Encourage the active participation of all members of society”

In addition, the CRL says that it is a Community Responsibility (section 3.2) to ensure “Full (individual, segmental, collective) membership participation in the management of community forest resources.” Under section 4.2 of the CRL, there is also a provision requiring each Community Forest Management Body to include at least one woman. Aside from the requirement in section 4.2, the CRL is relatively silent on how to achieve the sort of broad participation that it affirms as critical to the success of community forestry in Liberia.

## OBSTACLES TO PARTICIPATION

Although the importance of inclusive participation has been demonstrated and codified in the CRL, it remains an elusive goal and the low participation rate of women in community forestry is often assumed to be an intractable problem. However, an examination of the reasons why people, particularly women or those from marginalized groups, don’t participate in community development or decision-making, can provide insight in to ways in which those obstacles can be removed.

**Time constraints:** Community deliberative processes involve a range of social and opportunity costs (see Box I for a definition); these are not uniform, and vary between individuals living within the same community. Women in Liberia are economically active and make up a majority of informal sector trade and commerce. A heavy burden of work for women is often cited as limiting women’s activity outside the home as the opportunity cost of participation can be very high.

Women are expected to contribute agricultural labor, though most do not own land.<sup>2</sup>

**Workload:** Women in rural Liberia are responsible for the majority of household and farming responsibilities, which are often conducted with the most rudimentary tools. For the poorest women in communities, this is particularly true. As a result, the time and effort that they must place in basic subsistence activities leaves little “extra” time for involvement in meetings, committees, or decision-making bodies.” Despite this, the outcomes of community forest management have important consequences for women. Women, especially poor women, rely on harvesting NTFPs to meet a host of subsistence and income generation needs.

**Childbearing:** Rural woman in Liberia bear an average of 6.2 children. Such high levels of childbirth take a toll on women’s health and also raise their burden of household and childcare work. Poor access to healthcare increases women’s caretaking responsibilities as they tend to sick family members.

**Poor access to energy and water:** In addition to farming, rural Liberian women expend a great deal of time providing energy and water for household consumption. Often, they must travel long distances with

### Box I: The Cost of Participation

The opportunity cost of time is the most often cited cost of participation. The opportunity costs of long, open-ended deliberative processes may be particularly difficult for the poor, who can ill afford to take time away from income generating or subsistence activities. Women, who have multiple demands on their time, experience particularly high opportunity costs stemming from responsibilities for income generation, household tasks, and child and elder care.

The social cost of participating can also be high for women and disadvantaged groups who have traditionally been proscribed from public participation. For women, potential backlash against their participation can be immediate, and may come from family members as well as from the larger community. Development programs that aggressively solicit women’s participation without securing support from men and the community at large for women’s engagement can downplay social costs to women. Promoting women’s participation may, in some cases, inadvertently put women at risk.

<sup>2</sup>[http://www.academia.edu/1859056/Women\\_in\\_Transition\\_A\\_Critical\\_Analysis\\_of\\_Womens\\_Civic\\_and\\_Political\\_Participation\\_in\\_Liberia](http://www.academia.edu/1859056/Women_in_Transition_A_Critical_Analysis_of_Womens_Civic_and_Political_Participation_in_Liberia)

children in tow to procure drinking water and fuelwood. This adds to women's time poverty as they labor to meet family demands for subsistence.

**Education:** Illiteracy and poor levels of education among women are viewed as a major barrier to their capacity for civic engagement, hindering their confidence and capacity for local governance and decision-making.

**Cultural Perceptions of Women's roles:** Liberian women are sometimes not seen as capable of contributing to public discourse. Perhaps more importantly, traditional norms in most rural areas do not support the public participation of women in decision-making forums and are thought to limit women's influence in public spheres. Women do not typically interact with men in mixed group settings, and the social costs of breaking with these traditions may be high. In many cases, women or other marginalized groups may be reluctant to take part in community decision-making because of a perception that their voices will not be heard and their participation will not make a difference.

Rural Liberian women are heavily involved in income generation, from agriculture to petty trade. Estimates are that women make up half of the agricultural labor force and 2/3 of the trade and commerce labor force.<sup>3</sup> Their involvement in livelihood activities is congruent with their gender roles in society. This differs from the involvement of rural Liberian women in local governance, where men are primarily involved in both traditional and legal governance. Participation in livelihood activities for Liberian women could be seen as an extension of their gender roles in society. However, women's involvement in forest governance would be a step outside of their typical roles and potentially expose women to incurring social costs to their participation.

**Quality versus Quantity:** Recently, there has been a push to recognize that simply counting the number of women participating in community management of resources is not enough to determine whether and to what extent women are able to influence decision-making processes. Some argue that the numbers of women participating are not a good indicator of the quality of women's participation and sway over community development. The idea that the "quality" of participation is as important as the "quantity" or numbers of women involved in community forestry is an important one. Research on community governance of natural resources suggests that community decision-making, though it may seem participatory, can be tilted in favor of local elites. However, there are also ways to lessen elite capture.

## **PROSPER EXPERIENCES WITH PARTICIPATION**

Since 2012, the USAID funded-PROSPER program has been working to support and expand community forestry in Liberia as spelled out in the CRL.

Throughout its programming, PROSPER has devoted substantial efforts to ensuring that women benefit and participate from project activities to the fullest extent possible. In particular, PROSPER has devoted considerable attention to boosting women's participation in forest governance. Interventions have ranged from leadership training to quotas for women's participation in forest governance bodies. PROSPER also encourages women to participate in its livelihood activities as a way to improve their livelihood options, and increase their productive time and efficiency.

Despite great efforts by the PROSPER team, women make up less than 1/4 of participants in forest governance activities. In contrast, they make up almost 2/3 of participants in livelihood activities. Many of the constraints associated with participation in forest governance activities, are not at play with regard to livelihoods. More simply stated, the price of involvement in livelihood activities is perceived as more worthy of the associated opportunity cost.

Women's heavy burdens or work mean that they must make calculated strategic decisions about how to invest their time. If women forego some responsibilities to participate in livelihood training or other programs to boost their income, the payoff for the opportunity cost of participation is tangible and immediate. In contrast, forest governance may require long, open-ended discussions. Women, if they do participate, do not stand to personally benefit immediately from participation. This is even more the case if there is a perception that their voices will not be registered. The challenge is then to recognize and address those opportunity costs and provide incentives to participate.

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<sup>3</sup>[http://www.academia.edu/1859056/Women\\_in\\_Transition\\_A\\_Critical\\_Analysis\\_of\\_Womens\\_Civic\\_and\\_Political\\_Participation\\_in\\_Liberia](http://www.academia.edu/1859056/Women_in_Transition_A_Critical_Analysis_of_Womens_Civic_and_Political_Participation_in_Liberia)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations below describe actions to mitigate the social and opportunity costs of participation for women in community forest governance. Increasing the numbers of women engaged in forest governance as well as empowering women to improve the quality of their participation remain important goals. Reaching out to community leaders and men in the community to support women's engagement in forest management is a first, basic step; however, other measures can help "stack the deck" in favor of women's participation. The policy options outlined below provide intermediary steps to gradually change gender stereotypes around forest management, make deliberative processes more responsive to women, and streamline the process of participation. They would require the support of central institutions, such as the Forestry Development Authority (FDA), to promote both sustainability and downward accountability. A set of guidelines describing measures that support inclusive forest management would assist FDA and other partners working to set up community forests in Liberia. Such guidelines could include the following recommendations.

**Recommendation 1: Promote alternate entry points for social inclusion and women's participation in community forest management.** Although CFMBs and Community Assemblies are formal decision-making bodies for forest management, there are other avenues to engage women in community forest management to allow for women's gradual, progressive involvement in forest governance. Permitting, bio-monitoring, and forest guard are responsibilities that would allow women to gain experience with forest management and also allow some measure of engagement and influence in the daily management of forests. These activities can be and labor time-intensive; however, if they are structured to overlap with women's existing work in the forest, women may be able to perform these duties without having to invest a great deal of additional time or effort. For example, while women are collecting NTFPs, they could simultaneously be forest guards, checking permits, or surveying as part of bio-monitoring. This may be especially helpful because women and men may be in different parts of the forest, with men venturing deeper into the forest for hunting while women stay closer to the forest perimeter to collect NTFPs. Involving women may help to expand the area of forest that is monitored and protected. In addition, these functions lend themselves to being remunerated. Such remuneration could offset potential opportunity costs to participation.

**Recommendation 2: Support and train local women to be community facilitators.** Although it may be difficult to ensure that the participation of local women is heard and registered in community decision-making, the choice of a local woman as a community facilitator may sway decision-making in favor of women's priorities. Research has shown that the preferences of community facilitators can strongly predict the outcomes of deliberative processes.<sup>4</sup> Supporting and training local women to be community facilitators may promote women's priorities in decision-making outcomes. Women may also be more likely to actively participate in community forest governance if another woman from their community is moderating the discussion. Women community facilitators also send a signal that public deliberative processes are spaces where woman may join and be heard.

**Recommendation 3: Create institutional linkages between the CFMB and formal and informal women's community based organizations (CBOs).** Women's CBOs such as women's susu clubs, social groups, mother's clubs, market women's associations, or farmers cooperatives may be able to reach a large number of women in the community. Disseminating information to these groups on community forest issues, soliciting feedback, and incorporating priorities and concerns of group members may act as a way of "caucusing" women in the community. This "caucusing" could be one way of mitigating women's opportunity costs and time poverty. It may be also be helpful for the woman CFMB member to be in contact with these groups, since having a large constituency will bring community women's voices to the fore while also strengthening her position on the CFMB.

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**People, Rules, and Organizations Supporting the Protection of Ecosystem Resources**

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<sup>4</sup> Mansuri, G. and Rao, V. 2013. *Localizing Development: Does Participation Work?*, World Bank, Washington, DC