

Fundación Nicaragüense Pro Desarrollo Comunitario Integral: Commodity Chain Analysis of Forest Products in Nicaragua

In 1996, the Office of Women in Development of the United States Agency for International Development launched a five-year project known as the Women in Development Technical Assistance Project (WIDTECH) to support gender integration in development policies and programs. WIDTECH's experience has underscored why it is important to ensure that women are equal participants in development, and how this can be accomplished. WIDTECH's small grants program provided 27 grants worth nearly \$475,000 to non-governmental and community-based organizations worldwide. The following describes one of these projects, offering insights into the many ways that women are improving their lives and well-being, as well as those of their families, communities, and nations. Please visit www.widtech.org for more information on this and other WIDTECH small grants.

Worldwide, forests are the mainstay of individual, local, and national economies. The potential bounty goes far beyond trees. Non-timber forest resources—from mushrooms to latex to nuts—provide materials for housing, food, medicine, and cash income. Many are used by local crafts producers to make non-timber forest products (NTFPs) in home-based businesses.

In recent years, many international agencies, national governments, and non-governmental agencies have emphasized the importance of NTFPs to rural communities. NTFPs are also increasingly seen as a potential avenue for forest conservation because their production is less damaging to ecosystems and wildlife than is the timber industry. In addition, the specific and strong role that women play in the production of NTFPs has been clearly recognized.

In 2001, Fundación Nicaragüense Pro Desarrollo Comunitario Integral (FUNDECI) (Nicaraguan Foundation for Integrated Community Development) received support from WIDTECH to examine the links between gender and NTFPs in the central Pacific region of Nicaragua. Specifically, the study considered the different roles that women and men play in household economies and NTFP markets; how these different roles influence conservation; the importance of NTFPs to both household income and forest conservation; and

how NTFPs can be managed in an environmentally sustainable manner.

The communities studied are located in the Laguna de Apoyo Nature Reserve (LANR). The study method was based on the concept of “engendering” commodity chains; that is, with gender rather than profits or surplus distribution as the basis for analysis of a specific chain of extraction, production, and marketing. Two products were the focus: straw brooms and coco baskets. Both are produced exclusively in home-based businesses, which primarily employ women.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nearly 80 individuals involved in the production of the two commodities, as well as with numerous local traders/intermediaries and owners of market stalls and stores. Although effort was made to balance the number of male and female respondents, most interviewees were female.

Findings and Results

- Male and female roles differed with regard to the two commodities studied. Men were dominant in the straw broom chain, whereas women largely controlled the coco basket chain.
- Women and men alike are active in both chains, but each group holds exclusive responsibility for particular

activities. Men are the principal extractors, straw cultivators, and broom producers, whereas women are the principal basket producers, household traders, intermediaries, and retail vendors.

Tradition and the Division of Labor

“In Nicaraguan society, there is a tradition of *machismo* and *marianismo*. . . . In these traditions, men and women exist in separate social spheres: women in the private sphere (the home) and men in the public sphere. In the public sphere, men attain access to certain privileges as well as power and control.”

The clear gender-related lines in commodity chains are likely due to a historically strong division of labor between the sexes. Many participants cited tradition and custom as key reasons for the gender differences, together with the view that women and men have distinct attributes (e.g., women are better salespeople, men produce more durable brooms).

—Laura Shillington, FUNDECI project report

- Both men and women are extractors of resources, and thus also stakeholders in conservation. The only resource considered by participants to be exclusively “male” was timber harvesting.
- Because most producers of brooms and baskets are poor, they do not have control of large tracts of land for cultivation, and therefore rely on the LANR for resources.
- Many of the interviewees sell a variety of commodities in addition to brooms and baskets, but reported that the two products generate the bulk of their income.
- The possible restriction of firewood and timber extraction for conservation purposes could result in men (who carry out most of the work in those sectors) becoming more involved in NTFPs. In turn, women’s income could decline.
- Study participants considered the extraction of resources needed for broom making (sticks, vines, palm leaves, and ferns) to be sustainable, as the specific plant and tree species proliferate in the area and can grow quickly if harvested properly.
- A potential conservation problem is that extractors of resources for brooms and baskets cut more paths as they go deeper into the forest.

Conclusions

The study illustrated how even when roles and responsibilities in production are divided along gender lines, these lines often shift. In particular, if access to a given resource changes, households must adjust their focus and modes of production, with subsequent changes in gender-related divisions of labor. Therefore, conservation strategies must include men and women as separate but equal stakeholders.

Particular areas of concern for women include their more limited access to technology, training, and credit; limited decision-making power in many households; and a lack of attention by many involved in forest conservation to women’s knowledge, needs, and perspectives.

The FUNDECI study has demonstrated the complexities of—and therefore the need for further research into—the development and use of NTFPs. Such information will only become more important with time, as growing populations around and in nature reserves continue to rely on forest resources for their livelihoods. Avoiding overharvesting while ensuring an economic base will create continual conservation challenges.

Because few of the protected forest areas in Nicaragua (including the LANR) actually have management plans or regulations related to the extraction of natural resources and the preservation of ecosystems, there is potential for integrating gender-related factors and patterns of production when planning and implementing conservation efforts. In short, the consideration of gender concerns reflects an approach to conservation and development that is both equitable and efficient.

Bibliography

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