

Centre for
Applied
Social
Sciences



**Proceedings of the
Regional Conference on Gender Issues in
Community-Based Natural Resource Management**

C B N R M

(Cresta Lodge, Harare : 24 – 27 August 1998)

Compiled by

Nontokozo Nabane

September 1998

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Participation of Women in Veld
Resource Utilisation and Management:
A Case Study of Three Villages in Botswana

Rebecca K. Sack

1. Background

The arid region of Central Botswana offers few opportunities for rural people to generate income. Arable agriculture routinely fails in 2 out of every 3 years. Poor soils, unpredictable and scanty rainfall, pests, erosion and damage by livestock all reduce the chances of bringing in a successful harvest. Even in years of good rain, crops yields remain low. The most successful use of this arid bushveld region for income generation to date is the production of cattle. However, this activity causes environmental degradation through over-grazing and is almost exclusively dominated by men.

Wildlife utilisation seems to offer possibilities for income generation. But while some communities in Botswana have managed to exploit and profit from their wildlife resources, south-central Botswana is off of the beaten track for tourists. The Department of Wildlife is only beginning to formulate plans for wildlife utilisation in the remote areas.

Until recently, the potential for income generation through the collection and processing of veld products (or non-timber forest products) has remained under-explored in Botswana. Traditionally, wild foods, medicines, fuel, tannins, resins, construction materials, hides, skins and raw materials for crafts were all collected from the veld on a subsistence basis. These products have potential economic value outside the rural communities. Non-traditional renewable veld resources may also offer opportunities for profit, including gums, dyes, essential oils, florist materials, ornamental plants, insects and horns. The Botswana government valued the existing use of veld resources for subsistence and sale at roughly P 60,000,000 each year.

2. The CBMIF Project

Recognition of the potential of veld products has led to the formulation of a Community-Based Management of Indigenous Forests (CBMIF) pilot project. This CBMIF project is being implemented by Veld Products Research in three rural villages of south-central Botswana: Motokwe, Khekhenye and Tshwaanw. The project aims to improve the living standards of rural communities through sustainable and equitable utilisation of veld resources. Community members recognise the value of their veld resources and also realise that they are being depleted. They have turned to the CBMIF project for guidance on how these resources might be utilised and conserved.

Groups of interested people in the three communities are developing their own strategies involving the conservation, domestication and sustainable harvesting of valuable veld resources. Control of harvest levels in the wild is difficult because of Botswana's communal land policy. 'Ownership by all' means 'ownership by none', making conservation of valuable resources difficult. Therefore, the groups have made plans to utilise plots of land, which have been allocated to them. They will conserve and harvest veld products existing in these plots and will seek to enrich the plots with other domesticated veld products. Permits in communal lands regulate the harvest of a few products, such as the medicinal Grapple Plant. This year, the CBMIF project co-operated closely with the relevant government body and the three communities to test a new approach to Grapple harvesting. Together the parties began an initiative to assess the Grapple population and determine sustainable harvest levels for the product on communal land. Currently, along similar lines the assessment and harvest of thatching grass is underway.

The CBMIF project is working to enhance the abilities of community members to process veld resources and add value to them. Some community members possess detailed knowledge of traditional processing methods, but this is not necessarily passed from the old to the young. An intensive study of traditional production methods was undertaken to preserve and utilise this expertise. Indigenous knowledge will be supplemented by appropriate technology to enable products to be processed in the rural setting and to meet the requirements of the market. In this way, maximum value can be added at village level.

Finally, the project is looking for regional and international markets for the processed products. Some basic items such as thatching grass can be sold nationally. Other products, such as the Grapple root, are already marketed internationally by a sister NGO to VPR. The Kalahari Truffle has found a niche in the European market for exotic cuisine. Further marketing options will be explored in an upcoming regional marketing survey.

3. Participation of Women

The project formulation and implementation is founded on participatory methods. The project began with Participatory Rural Appraisals in each village. These PRA's focused on natural resources and invited community members to articulate their problems and to develop solutions through natural resource utilisation. At every step of the way since then, the Project Team has sought direction from the veld products interest groups in each village.

A major goal of the project is to ensure that women participate in and profit from veld resource management. Women traditionally have the role of harvesting veld products. Men do harvest, but usually only as opportunities arise when they are walking in the veld and come across something to eat on the spot. To date, the greatest response to the project comes from the women: in fact, about 80% of the participating group members are female. In the largest group at Motokwe, almost all group members are female. Women are also taking leadership roles in the veld products interest groups. In all of the groups, three out of four executive committee members are women. This positive response can be attributed to several factors.

The CBMIF project chose to focus on veld resources because trends show that this sector naturally targets rural women more than other natural resource sectors and provides benefits to them. In addition this sector has previously received little attention in Botswana, and any research on veld products has been carried out by NGOs. In her paper, "Sustainable Development in the Kalahari from a Gender Perspective" Hannie Loermans observes that Botswana government policy on conservation concentrates the most money and manpower on wildlife projects. She implies that gender structure may be responsible for this approach, which places greater importance on a resource traditionally controlled by males and on the foreign currency wildlife can earn. The potential benefits of wildlife projects are more likely to accrue to men. In contrast, veld resources represent a sector mostly controlled by women, with emphasis on food security and improved subsistence, and with greater potential benefits to women.

Fuelwood, wild foods and fodder are an essential contribution to household food security, provided by women. Wild products further serve many domestic purposes and also allow women to engage in home industries that yield a small profit. Worldwide, trees and forests provide poor rural women with nearly half of their income, whereas those women have little access to income-generating opportunities outside their homes.

These trends seem to hold true in Botswana as well. Traditionally in Western Botswana, women were able to make good use of the veld, as a source of collected food, medicine, utensils, fuel and other essential household items. In the PRA at the Bakgalagadi settlement of Tshwaane, men and women agreed that veld product collection is the exclusive sphere of women. In the Bushmen settlement of Khekhenye, though men and women differed slightly in their assessments of the situation, they agreed that mainly women are responsible for collecting veld products. Female-headed and poorer households are probably the most dependent on veld resources. To date, women have utilised veld resources almost exclusively for subsistence purposes, but are enthusiastic about generating income from veld products as well.

While women have the most to gain from a project focusing on veld resources, they also have the most to lose from veld resource degradation. Ecological degradation and the growing scarcity of some veld resources threaten the food security of poor rural women and their dependants. Resource depletion increases women's workloads as they have to travel further to collect from a diminishing supply of resources. For this reason, a focus on resource conservation as well as domestication of veld resources near the settlements can have direct benefits for women.

In programs aimed at increasing women's participation in community resource management, one major obstacle can be the opposition of men. While the veld resource sector seems to naturally target female community members, it does not alienate men. Men have been invited to participate in the project, and some of them have joined the veld product interest groups. However, most men have left the groups to women without feeling excluded, and have encouraged women to take on the leadership roles of the groups. This factor may prove to be beneficial for the sustainability of the project. Men are not likely to resent this project and obstruct the progress of the groups, simply because most of them are not interested in working with veld products.

4. Monitoring Gender Equity

While female participation in the project is very high, the CBMIF project is making an effort to ensure that women are also proportionally active in group decision-making and that benefits are distributed equitably according to effort. The men involved in the interest groups seem to be willing to allow women to take leading roles in the groups, but culturally women may be inclined to defer to the male minority. Also, when veld resources are given cash value men generally start to get more involved. Therefore, there may be a danger that only female group members will invest time and work in the project, while benefits still go to all group members, including an increasing number of men.

A simply monitoring tool was recently designed that will allow groups at a later stage to record participation in meetings and activities and determine appropriate benefits. The tool has several parts, which can be used by the groups themselves. The tool will also allow the project to monitor the involvement of group members according to gender.

The first component involves a chart to register the group members who are present at each activity, including meetings and fieldwork. In another similar form, all group members can be listed. As the group begins to undertake profit-making activities, benefits for each individual can be registered for each activity. The group can then choose to work out the ratio of work to benefits. For example, a person who worked on six occasions and earned a total of P 200 is benefiting far less than a person who worked on three occasions and earned P 400. The group can discuss these sorts of outcomes and strive to work out a more equitable division of labour and benefits.

The CBMIF project team will be interested in analysing these outcomes in terms of gender. In addition, where project team members are present at group meetings, they are keeping track of participation in discussing according to gender. They record the number of people of each gender present and compare the ratio of men to women present at the meeting with the ratio of spoken participation in discussion. They are also monitoring whose ideas or suggestions are adopted by the group.

The project team cannot use this information to directly instruct the groups to behave equitably. However, the information can be used to make group members aware of equity issues. For example, if men are consistently working less and benefiting more from group activities, the project team can make a group aware of this trend. If women tend to remain silent at group meetings, the project team can point this out. The group will then have the responsibility to decide how to respond to this information.

5. Conclusions

This CBMIF pilot project on the utilisation of veld resources will provide valuable information about the feasibility of such projects in the Botswana setting. If successful, it will prove that income generation opportunities are available to rural communities beyond the male-dominated activities of animal husbandry and wildlife.

In addition, it will provide a model for a type of CBNRM project that involves and directly benefits women. Botswana women have traditionally been responsible for the

collection of veld resources. They have substantial knowledge of the resource base already, and can benefit as veld resources are used both for subsistence and increasingly for sale. As veld resources are being degraded, women also have the most incentive to become involved in the management and conservation of these valuable resources. Finally, veld resources target women without alienating men. Community groups can be provided with tools that allow them to monitor issues of gender equity and to ensure that all group members benefit fairly.

The CMBIF project is only in its first year, and must prove itself in long-term. But all indications show that women can be empowered through projects involving the community-based management of veld resources.



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