



Beyond Wildlife Trade: Women's Role in Forest Resource Conservation and Implication on Sustainability in the East Region Cameroon

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Abstract

The East Region of Cameroon hosts abundant forest resources that are essential for livelihood sustenance of the local communities and hence need protection for biodiversity conservation. Women as part of this communities derive their livelihoods by directly exploiting forest resources. However, cultural norms around access to land and associated restrictions to these resources hindered women and youths from exploiting them. This thereby leave them with only the collection of non-timber forest resources. Women living in and around forests in the East Region derive their livelihoods from forests resources. They undertake activities such as subsistence agriculture, marketing of bush meat (game), collecting firewood and non-timber forest products, hunting, and collecting medicinal plant and leaves for medicines. Despite their engagement in forest exploitation, gender norms surrounding the governance of natural resources has significantly excluded of women from decision-making processes around forest and associated natural resource governance. Women's experiences, knowledge as well as aspirations to contribute to sustainable forest management has hardly been taking into consideration by local authorities and NGOs. These authorities needs to support inclusive participatory forest management in the East Region of Cameroon if they are not already doing so.

This paper sought to understand Women's role in forest resource management, conservation and implications for sustainability in the East Region of Cameroon. To do this, we employed both primary and secondary data sources. 400 questionnaires were analyzed together with qualitative data from 10 focus group discussions and 15 key informant interviews conducted in forest communities in Dja, Lomie, Ngoila, Nki, Boumba Bek, Moloundou, Lobeke, Yokadouma, Ndelele, Abong Mbang,

Njom. Council development plans, community forest management plan among others were reviewed. Results revealed that despite the formal recognition of women within forest management structures, their effective and formal participation and their influence in decision making and processes remains limited. Women constitute less than 10% in critical decision-making boards. Some of the women afraid that even when they present their experiences, challenges and made proposals towards sustainable forest governance, these proposals are hardly taken into consideration. Consequently, decision making and resource allocations tend to sideline their experiences, knowledge, challenges, and proposals. Such exclusion and gender bias has had far-reaching consequences, including unsustainable resource exploitation, environmental degradation, and missed opportunities to harness women's invaluable local knowledge for conservation efforts.

Key words: Wildlife Conservation Implication Resource Sustainability Women's

I. Introduction

The notion of community forest management gained recognition in the international scene around the late 1970s in recognition of the need to curb deforestation, the fuel wood crisis, and the resultant negative impacts on livelihoods (Fisher *et al.*, 2007; Nurse and Malla, 2005). Focus within this period was on the restoration of degraded areas (Rights and Resources Initiative, 2008). It was discovered in many areas that rules for the communal management of natural resources already existed, and could be built on by donor-funded initiatives (Shepherd, 1992; Shepherd and Messerschmidt, 1993). The concept shifted in focus toward a sustainable livelihoods framework in the 1990s, a framework emerging from natural resource



managers rather than social scientists, and spreading in forestry and agriculture programs. The concept was followed by a change in the development paradigm emphasizing decentralization and community involvement in decision-making. However, decentralization has yet to be fully integrated in the conservation and natural resource management sectors (Barrow 2004). From an international scene, community forest management eventually evolved to include rationales for improving conservation, increasing biodiversity, and reducing rural poverty (Fisher *et al.* 2005). Forests resources are among the most important natural resources which have played an immense role in shaping human history. Forests have been providing a wide range of environmental and fundamental needs, needed for our survival together with various socioeconomic and cultural benefits or services. According to Chao (2012), around 1.6 billion rural people directly depend on forests for one reason or the other and as per the World's Commission on Forests and Sustainable Development, 350 million of the world's poorest people almost completely depend on forest resources for their subsistence and livelihood (as cited in Chao, 2012).

Basically, it could be said that every human being at one point in their lives had to depend on forests resources either directly or indirectly. In this regards, inclusive and sustainable management of forests and associated natural resources is not only crucial for continued harmonious and sustainable livelihoods of all who directly or indirectly depend on forest resources but also for sustainable biodiversity conservation. Women, in particular, are central to the utilization and management of these resources, engaging in a spectrum of activities that range from collecting firewood and non-timber forest products to hunting, and traditional medicinal practices. However, this pivotal role of women in sustainable forest management is significantly hindered by persistent gender disparities, limited access to resources and education, and their exclusion from decision-making processes. More specifically, this paper presents a critical examination of the role of women in forest resource exploitation, dependence and conservation in the East Region of Cameroon, providing insights into their indispensable contributions, challenges they face, and proposing strategies to enhance their involvement in sustainable forest management, thereby fostering more inclusive, equitable, and effective conservation endeavors.

Cameroon is located in the Central African sub-region and stretches into the Congo Basin Tropical Rain Forest which is the second largest in the world after the amazon in America. This tropical rain forest is habitat to many wildlife and rich biodiversity due to its ideal geographical location along with its humid climatic conditions that favors the growth and development of diverse wildlife species. This humid variation in temperatures and rainfall gives East Cameroon a wide range of forest types from the tropical rainforest to subtropical to savanna. Majority of the population of East Cameroon lives in rural areas under precarious conditions. The majority of people in this region especially women depend on gathering Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP) from the huge primary forests that cover the region, agriculture, hunting, gathering and livestock farming for their livelihood. In East Cameroon, the role of men and women are culturally, socially and biologically outlined within certain context and boundaries. The role and responsibilities to take care of the home, provide household water, fuelwood, medicine and food (which is largely gathered from the forest or has to deal with agriculture/fishing in the forest) are often considered to be women's roles, meanwhile men gather to decide how these forests and associated lands are managed, attend meetings, protect the family against invaders, hunting.

Women are the key collector of the forest resources for their daily necessities of household use, own consumption and sales for survival. Most importantly, in the East Region, women who are deprived from accessing community forest resources to sustain their livelihoods have in most cases opened bush meat restaurants along roadsides and constitute a major market-for wildlife trade-hunter (mostly men). This has often led to the tagging of these women as drivers of biodiversity loss and wildlife extension yet majority of them argue that they are into the activity because they have not been able to find their place in community forest management. There is therefore a crucial need to understand what factors or processes push women into these negative livelihood coping mechanisms and what are their differentiated aspirations for a sustainable forest conservation in the Congo Basin. More so, in areas where direct access to forest exploitation is not yet restricted for women, they spend much of their time in the forests and are very familiar with forest change, composition and formation. They possess a great knowledge of indigenous technical knowhow of forest resource management strategies, which can



foster solutions for problems in the natural resource management sectors, most especially community forestry, watershed maintenance and management and agriculture. However, when comparing men and women, women are often disadvantaged and marginalized in various ways like limited access to and control over forest and associated natural resources, management and available socio-economic opportunities, due to social, economic, cultural and institutional motives. Therefore, addressing the role of women and need for inclusion in forestry resource management is the core to sustainable forest management, a sustainable conservation, and rural livelihoods enhancement. For effective implementation of sustainable and inclusive forest management programs in the East Region and Cameroon as a whole, there is need to have an authentic and inclusive participatory approach wherein involving women is crucial in doing community need assessments with a focus on the differentiated exploitation of forest resources. The recognition and inclusion of their different roles is very important to address forest-related problems that will formulate better forest management policies. So far however, women are

often sidelined irrespective of the many efforts to mainstream their involvement in forest management in Cameroon.

Location of study area and Methodology

The East Region occupies the southeastern portion of the Republic of Cameroon. It is bordered to the east by the Central African Republic, to the south by Congo, to the north by the Adamawa Region, and to the west by the Centre and South Regions. With 109,002 km² of territory, it is the largest region in the nation as well as the most sparsely populated. The Region is home to vast and vital forest resources that play a crucial role in both environmental sustainability and the livelihoods of local communities. Historically, the peoples of the East have been settled in Cameroonian territory for longer than any other of the country's many ethnic groups, the first inhabitants being the Baka (or Babinga) pygmies. The East Region has very little industry, its main commerce consisting of logging, timber, and mining. Instead, the bulk of its inhabitants are subsistence farmers. This coupled with the low level of development in the region have led to its being dubbed "the forgotten region".

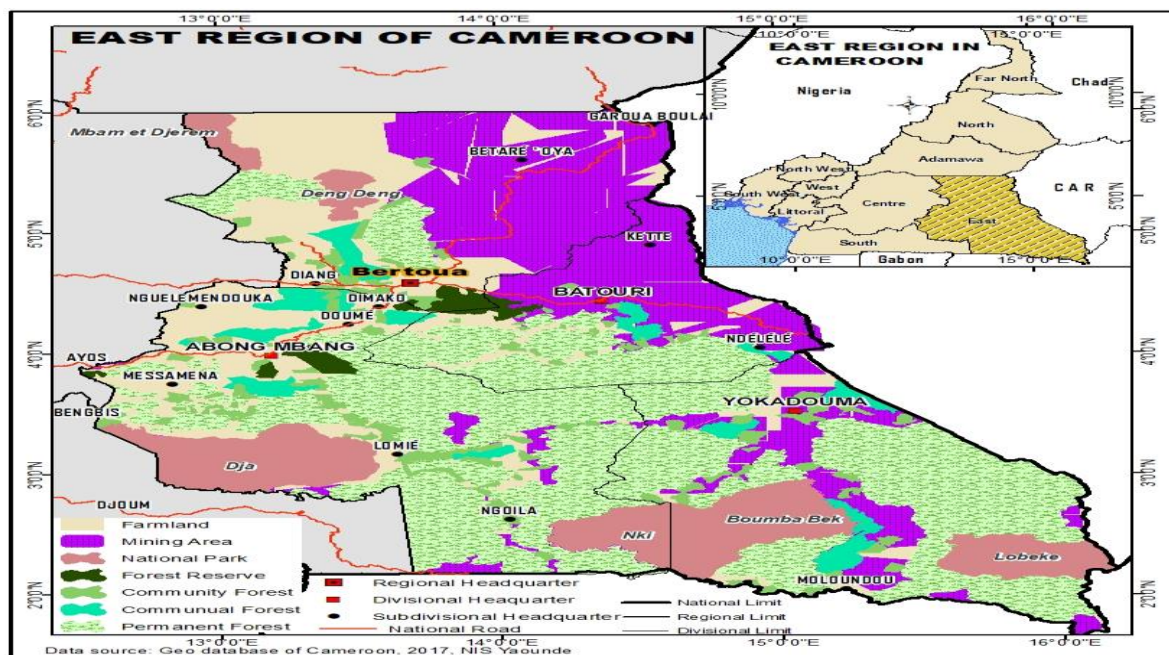


Figure 1: Location of the Study Area

The tool used to collect primary data was the questionnaire administered to 400 women randomly selected from the various divisions that make up the East Region of Cameroon. The random sampling technique was chosen to enable

each respondent in the target population (women) of the selected Sub-divisions in the East Region an equal chance of being represented in the sample; while the stratified sampling technique enabled the researchers to easily distribute the questionnaires



to the stratified divisions since each division was considered a stratum. The questionnaires distributed to the stratified divisions enabled easy data collection and the number of questionnaires in each division (stratum) depended on the total population size of the division. The East Region was stratified according to the Divisions and Subdivisions that make up the Region and the population were chosen at random from each Division. The data were inputted into the SPSS Version 2.0. The results were presented on tables and illustrative quotes to show the correlation between gender baize and natural resource exploitation and sustainability in forest resources in the East region of Cameroon. Secondary data were gotten from Published textbooks journals, published and unpublished articles related to gender studies and natural resource use, access and management referred in this study. Administrative texts on the rights of female gender in Cameroon as well as their empowerment were also consulted and applied in detail to the subject matter. Information on the number of female gender groups operating in the East region was obtained from the Divisional Delegation of Woman Empowerment and the Family

II. Results

1) Women's dependence on Forest Resources in the East Region of Cameroon

1.1 Household uses and nutritional purposes.

Women in the East Region of Cameroon, like in many other regions of the country with significant forest resources, depend heavily on these forests for their livelihoods. Of the 1000 households sampled, 96% of the respondents rely on wood from the forests for cooking and heating. Women were responsible for collecting firewood and ensuring its steady supply. Women also identified the forest as the only source of various non-timber forest products, such as fruits, nuts, honey, medicinal plants, and bamboo (Njangsang, Eru, Kola, Bush pepper, Bush mango, Ngongo leaf, wildlife, medicinal plants, fruits, and Mushroom from the forest) for household consumption. About 95% of the women respondents were involved in the collection, processing, and sale of these products, contributing to their household income. 86% of the respondents shared that their engagement in hunting was to supplement their household diet with protein. In the same light fruits and vegetables for household consumption were largely obtained from the forest. As primary caretakers of their families' health,

68.1% of the women depended on medicinal plants from the forest.

1.2 Commercialization and household income.

Results also show that, in the East Region of Cameroon, women are actively engage in the commercialization of a variety of forest products that significantly contribute to their livelihoods. Among the most commercialized forest products by women in this region and include a wide array of fruits, nuts, honey, medicinal plants, and bamboo, (Njangsang, Eru, Kola, Bush pepper, Bush mango, Ngongo leaf, and an assortment of mushrooms). These NTFPs are collected, processed, and sold by women, providing essential sources of income. Additionally, women play a pivotal role in the commercial trade of firewood and charcoal, which are indispensable for cooking and heating. Moreover, medicinal plants sourced from the forest are vital for traditional healing and are also traded. The commercialization of bushmeat, sourced from forest-based activities like hunting, further contributes to women's economic well-being. In effect, over 50% of women respondents were involved at one point in their lives in the marketing of game (bushmeat fresh and dried) to contribute to household income These forest products, along with crafts, beekeeping, and other forest-related endeavors, collectively represent the most commercialized resources in the East Region, underscoring the invaluable role of women in the region's forest-based economy. Taking into consideration both the household as well as commercial exploitation of forests and associated resources, it cannot be overstated that the unsustainable harvesting and deforestation of these forest resources has led to the depletion of some of these resources, impacting the livelihoods of women and their communities. Sustainable forest management and conservation efforts are essential to ensure the protection of biodiversity as well as to support the livelihoods of women in the East Region of Cameroon and around the world.

2. Women's role in forestry resource management in the East Region of Cameroon.

Women's role in forest resource management in the east region is faced with a number of changes raging from customary to administrative challenges which has put women at the disadvantage in management and decision making despite the important role women play in the utilization of these resources.



Table1: Women importance in the management of forest resources

	SA		A		SD		D		N	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Women are included in the management of forest resources in this region	852	85.2	110	11.0			38	3.8		
Women are equally represented in forest resource management	1000	100.0								
Women have rights to land ownership	1000	100.0								
Women have equal rights in the management of forest resources	926	92.6			74	7.4				
Men can better manage forest resources than women	602	60.2			398	39.8				
Women can better manage forest resources than men	640	64.0	20	2.0	340	34.0				
Women should be included in the management of forest resources	1000	100.0								
Women are represented in all community forest in the region	1000	100.0								
Administrative and municipal stakeholders have mainstream gender in NRM	1000	100.0								
Women now manage natural resources thanks to NGO, INGO, and CBO	1000	100.0								

Source: Field Work, 2023

The participation of women in forest resource management in the East Region of Cameroon is crucial for ensuring the sustainability of forests. However, several factors have limited their active engagement in this vital area of conservation such as deep-rooted gender disparities and traditional roles that hinder women's involvement in forest resource management. In the 17 forest communities in the East Region, men are traditionally considered the primary decision-makers and managers of forest resources. 92.6% of women lack ownership rights to land, which restricts their access to and control over these resources. These social and cultural norms limit their ability to engage in sustainable forest management practices, leaving them with minimal influence over resource use and conservation. Another major hindrance identified during this research was that 64.0% of women in the East Region of Cameroon frequently face challenges in accessing essential resources and education necessary for effective forest resource management. It was noted during our field work that, even among women, there is a hierarchy of vulnerability and exclusion in that indigenous Baka women are not usually allowed to seat in meetings with the Bantu women because they are considered to be their 'servants' and are not given the opportunity to participate in any community driven project or initiative. One of the Baka women

expressed their concerns in an except explaining what she called exclusion in the middle of exclusion, and I quote:

"In the plenary, I found myself unable to voice the many things happening behind the scenes. You may have observed that upon our arrival, all the Baka women instinctively gathered on one side, while the Bantu women kept their distance. It's a pattern we've grown accustomed to during such meetings, where the divisions between us become strikingly clear. Unfortunately, mixing with the Bantu women during these gatherings often leads to problems that persist long after you've all departed. The disparities extend to practical matters as well. In meetings where resources or funds are to be distributed, we are often excluded. And should we dare to insist on participating, we face consequences – perhaps they will refuse to sell to us or withhold our hard-earned wages, claiming they were paid upfront. These challenges are a reality that many Baka women face, often in silence. It's time for these disparities and injustices to be acknowledged and addressed." Anonymous 28 April 2023.

Findings also revealed that women's voices are underrepresented in decision-making processes related to forest resource management. They are frequently excluded from community forest management committees and are underrepresented in higher-level policy



discussions. This exclusion leads to missed opportunities for integrating women's knowledge, perspectives, and experiences into forestry policies and programs. Without their active participation, the sustainability of forest conservation efforts is compromised, as women's contributions and unique insights are not fully harnessed. One of the women quoted her experience with stakeholders.

"I am a woman who serves as a member of the forest management committee in Lomie, and the irony of my position lies in the mysterious circumstances surrounding my appointment as the committee's financial secretary. One day, out of the blue, I received a message from the committee's president, summoning me to a meeting. Upon my arrival, to my astonishment, it was the very day the senior divisional office was installing members of the forest management committee for our village. In a sudden twist of fate, I was informed that I had been designated as the financial secretary. From that day onward, I have found myself in a perplexing situation. I have virtually no understanding of the committee's activities, and I often find myself in the disconcerting position of signing documents without any explanation or context. During the disbursement of benefits from logging companies, I receive what is purportedly my share, which amounts to a mere 10,000 XAF, without any knowledge of the total sum or the details of when and how it was allocated. This predicament exemplifies a prevalent issue in our community when it comes to decision-making processes and benefit distribution. My name is Mama Veronique, and my experience underscores the profound challenges we face in achieving transparency, accountability, and equitable participation in forest management." Mama Veronique interview on 20 April 2023.

To promote women's active role in forestry resource management and enhance the sustainability of forest conservation in the East Region of Cameroon, it is imperative to address these barriers by challenging traditional gender norms, providing better access to resources and education, and actively involving women in decision-making processes at all levels. This not only empowers women but also contributes to more effective and holistic forest conservation efforts.

3. Factors influencing women's roles in forest resource management and its effects on conservation.

The East Region of Cameroon, a biodiversity hotspot, holds immense forest

resources crucial for both environmental conservation and local livelihoods. However, the influence of traditional gender norms has historically marginalized women in forest resource management in the East region of Cameroon. Deeply rooted gender roles assign women primarily to domestic responsibilities, relegating their active and full participation in decision-making processes and leadership positions related to forest management. While it is evident that women are included in the structural organization of forest management units, the effectiveness of their participation remains a concern. According to the data collected from our sample population, 95% of respondents indicated that women are recognized and mentioned within the structure of forest management units. In theory, this signifies the acknowledgment of women's roles within the management of forest resources. However, the stark reality reveals that women's input carries little weight when it comes to decision-making processes. The challenge lies in the underrepresentation of women in these critical positions, as our findings indicate that women account for less than 10% of the members of the decision-making boards. This underrepresentation severely hampers their capacity to influence and shape the direction of forest management practices.

The underrepresentation of women in decision-making structures has led to a lack of diversity in perspectives and knowledge, hindering comprehensive and effective resource management. The unequal access to forest resources has resulted in unsustainable exploitation, as unregulated harvesting practices have caused environmental degradation. Reduced accountability in resource management has led to issues such as illegal logging or wildlife poaching going unchecked, further impacting the region's ecosystems. Missed opportunities arise from women's limited participation, as they possess valuable local knowledge vital for conservation efforts. The environmental consequences of these influences, coupled with the perpetuation of social and economic inequities, underscore the urgency of addressing gender disparities in forest resource management. To promote sustainable forest resource conservation and management in the East Region, it is imperative to address the systemic issues that limit women's roles. Initiatives aimed at challenging traditional gender norms, providing education and capacity-building opportunities, and ensuring equal representation in decision-making processes will empower women to become active and influential participants in forest resource



management. By harnessing the full potential of all community members, including women, the region will bolster its environmental conservation efforts while simultaneously fostering social and economic equity in these critical endeavors.

4. Recommendations on how to enhance the role of women in forest resource management in East Cameroon.

The East Region of Cameroon, a region teeming with diverse ecosystems and valuable forest resources, need urgent interventions to ensure sustainable management and conservation of its natural wealth. In this context, women play a pivotal but often underappreciated role. One of the objectives of this research was to propose strategic measures that can empower and elevate the role of women in East Cameroon's forest resource management, fostering more inclusive, equitable, and effective conservation efforts. By addressing gender disparities and empowering women, we can collectively work towards the sustainable preservation of this invaluable natural heritage. In our view, the following measures could be useful.

1. **Capacity Building and Education:** The research suggests that a significant step toward enhancing women's roles in forest resource management is to provide access to capacity building and education. Training programs could be designed to equip women with the necessary knowledge and skills for sustainable forest management practices. This includes education on modern techniques, technological tools, and financial literacy to overcome economic barriers. By addressing the educational gap and providing training opportunities, women will become more effective stewards of forest resources, contributing to conservation and sustainable utilization.

2. **Empowerment and Representation:** The research underscores the importance of empowering women and ensuring their active participation in decision-making processes related to forest resource management. This will be achieved through policies and initiatives that promote gender equality and women's representation in community forest management committees. Ensuring women's voices are heard and valued in discussions about forest resource utilization and conservation is essential for inclusive and sustainable practices.

3. **Economic Opportunities:** Enhancing the role of women in forest resource management also involves creating economic opportunities that recognize and support their contributions. Initiatives should focus on improving market access for women involved in small-scale trade of

forest products, including non-timber forest products (NTFPs). Facilitating value addition and market linkages will boost the economic benefits derived from forest resources. By providing opportunities for women to economically benefit from their participation, they are more likely to be actively engaged in sustainable forest management practices.

4) Establishing monitoring and local accountability committees made up of women to monitor the effective implementation of gender transformative and responsive approaches in sustainable forest management at the level of community forests but also at the level of other classified forests.

In a nutshell, proposing ways to enhance the role of women in forest resource management in East Cameroon involves a multi-faceted approach. Capacity building, empowerment, and economic opportunities are key elements in promoting women's active participation and influence in forest conservation. By addressing these aspects, it is possible to create a more inclusive and gender-responsive approach to forest resource management that contributes to the sustainability of the region's invaluable forests.

III. Conclusion

To enhance the role of women in forest resource management in the East Region of Cameroon and bolster the regions environmental conservation endeavors, a multifaceted approach is imperative. This approach must encompass capacity building and education to equip women with the skills and knowledge needed for sustainable forest management. Empowerment and active representation in decision-making processes should be promoted, fostering gender equality and inclusivity. Additionally, economic opportunities, including market access and value addition for non-timber forest products, must be created to recognize and support the economic contributions of women. By addressing these aspects, we can empower women to become effective stewards of the East Region's invaluable forests and collectively work towards their sustainable preservation. In doing so, we ensure a more equitable and holistic approach to forest resource management, contributing to the well-being of both the environment and the communities that depend on it



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