

Model Forests and Gender



Forests are one of our planet's most valuable resources in the fight against climate change and biodiversity loss. Although tremendous progress has been made towards restoring and conserving the world's forests, these ecosystems remain on the decline. Increasingly, conservation and restoration initiatives are prioritising the voices of local communities when addressing deforestation and land degradation; however, significant barriers remain which hinder the full participation of women. To effectively leverage forests to meet the goals of the Rio Conventions and related global goals, we must address the gender imbalance between those who have decision-making power in forest management and those who are impacted by those decisions. Model Forests present valuable strategies and replicable models which can ensure forests are managed in ways that are gender-responsive, participatory, and rooted in equity.

What is the Issue?

Men and women have historically not been afforded the same opportunities in forest management. Forestry has been a male dominated domain, despite women traditionally being heavily involved in forest-dependent livelihood activities and labour (e.g. gathering of subsistence materials such as food, medicine, fuelwood, fodder). In some forest communities, women generate more than 50% of their income from forests, as compared to 33% for men (FAO, 2016). Globally, an estimated 80 percent of unpaid fuelwood collection is done by women and girls (Buszko-Briggs, 2022). Yet around the world, women remain excluded from decision-making around natural resources and land management, facing systemic legal, social, educational, and economic barriers.

Moreover, women's role in forest management is often relegated to the informal economy. Women are largely responsible for gathering fuelwood, medicinal plants, and non-timber forest products (NTFPs) for family consumption or to create secondary products, but they remain excluded from land tenure systems, formal and large-scale value chains, and access to finance (IUCN, 2011). The resulting inequities are not just detrimental for women and girls: they lead to worse socioeconomic outcomes for the men and children in their communities as well as the forests themselves.

Participatory, equitable gender-responsive approaches are therefore an imperative for effective forest management strategies that address the triple planetary crisis. In other words, forest management plans should proactively identify gaps and biases related to gender and develop strategies to address and overcome these biases.

Why is this Important?

Globally, about one billion women directly rely upon and work with forests (UN Decade Ecosystem Restoration Hub, 2025). Their inclusion in all stages of forest management is vital for both environmental and socioeconomic reasons:

1. Greater gender parity in environmental decision-making is linked to better environmental outcomes. This includes more effective ecosystem conservation and protection, increased climate resilience, higher reduction of CO₂ emissions, and a higher probability of ratifying environmental treaties, all of which are essential for achieving the Paris Agreement, Global Biodiversity Framework, Land Degradation Neutrality, and Sustainable Development goals (Poe et al., 2025).
2. Including women ensures diverse knowledge is integrated into management strategies. Knowledge about forest ecology can be gendered, with women in some regions holding greater traditional knowledge of biodiversity compared to men.
3. Gender-responsive governance can strengthen women's legal rights and decision-making power, improving income and food security, not only for women, but entire families and communities.
4. Women play key social roles within their communities and are often more inclined towards compromise, negotiation, and transparency in conservation decision-making, meaning their voices are essential for the success of community-based approaches to forest management.
5. Women and girls are disproportionately impacted by climate change and forest degradation (UN Women, 2025). They are generally more reliant on, while at the same time more restricted in accessing and managing, natural resources. This paradox heightens the vulnerability of women and girls, acting as a threat multiplier that can lead to reinforcement of harmful gender norms and gender-based violence.

What Can Be Done?

IUCN and the International Model Forest Network (IMFN) are working together to advance gender-responsive approaches globally. Together, IUCN, IMFN, and partners are working towards a vision for sustainable, long-term forest management strategies that combat climate change while conserving biodiversity, providing socioeconomic benefits to local communities, and advancing gender equality.

The International Model Forest Network (IMFN) is a voluntary global community of practice whose members and supporters work toward the sustainable management of forest-based landscapes and natural resources through the Model Forest approach.



A Model Forest is a fully working landscape of forests, farms, and protected areas that combines the social, environmental, and economic means of local communities with long-term sustainability to conserve forest landscapes. These community-managed landscapes are unique in their ability to incubate new gender-responsive approaches to climate change, biodiversity, and degradation challenges. Through the development of gender strategies and plans, gender-responsive governance frameworks, and inclusive entrepreneurship programs and value chains, Model Forests demonstrate how to successfully integrate equity into forest management for the benefit of entire landscapes.

Model Forests have successfully adopted gender-responsive approaches in the following ways:

- Implementing inclusive policies and governance strategies that advance women's roles in forest conservation and sustainable resource management.
- Boosting the security of women's land tenure rights while promoting access to finance and education, thereby supporting women's enterprises and developing inclusive value chains
- Designing and providing educational training programmes for women that accommodates other community and family responsibilities.
- Monitoring and evaluating gender responsive restoration and conservation strategies to understand their outcomes and scalability across Model Forests.
- Collecting gender disaggregated data across Model Forest activities in order to analyse trends in women's participation and remedy gender gaps.
- Creation of safe spaces and knowledge exchange platforms for women to share their experiences, from successes to remaining barriers.

As countries, communities, civil society, and the private sector work to address gender inequality in natural resource management, it is essential to carry forward these lessons from Model Forests, translating them across contexts and scales. Through mainstreaming of gender-responsive approaches, forest management and governance can be strengthened globally, leading to better outcomes for people, biodiversity, ecosystems, and climate.

Case Study: Bolivia's Chiquitano Model Forest

The Chiquitano Model Forest in Bolivia first joined the IMFN in 2005. Since its inclusion, the forest has transformed from a space facing a wide variety of threats, including illegal logging, forest fires, and unsustainable agricultural activities, into the largest and best-preserved tropical dry forest in the Americas. Much of this Model Forest's success can be attributed to the management of the land, which places emphasis on including diverse stakeholders throughout the community.

One of the strategies developed in the Chiquitano Model Forest is their [Gender Equity and Equality Strategy](#). This framework aims to strengthen the Model Forest's governance model and directly address the linkages between gender equity and development issues such as poverty, climate change, conservation, food security, peace processes, and gender-based violence. The strategy advocates using inclusive language, promoting women's empowerment and equal representation in decision making processes, and making space for the voices of traditionally disadvantaged groups.



Resources

Buszko-Briggs M (2022). [International Women's Day: Empowering women in forest communities is key to achieving climate goals and SDGs](#). *ThinkLandscape*.

FAO (2016) [Gender in Forestry](#). *FAO*.

IUCN (2021). [Forests and Gender](#). *IUCN*.

IUCN (2024). [Model Forests Around the World: Bolivia](#). *IUCN*.

Poe, K., Pokhrel, P., Kumar, C., Simpson, M. (2025). [A gender-forward forest landscape restoration \(FLR\) incubation and acceleration protocol for use in community managed forest landscapes](#). *IUCN*.

Torrez Ruiz, Y. (2018). [Gender equity and equality strategy of the Ibero-American Model Forest network](#). *Ibero-American Model Forest Network*.

UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2025). [International Women's Day: Empowering Women in Forest Communities is Key to Achieving Climate Goals and SDGs](#). *United Nations*.

UN Women (2025). [How gender inequality and climate change are interconnected](#). *United Nations*.

To learn more about IUCN and Model Forests:

[International Model Forest Network](#)

[IUCN Forest Programme](#)

[Chiquitano Model Forest](#)

[Chiquitano Model Forest Video: IUCN and IMFN—The Chiquitano Model Forest in Bolivia](#)

Photo Credit:

International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Baisha village

This publication has been produced with financial support from the Government of Canada's Global Forest Leadership Program and through the International Model Forest Network (IMFN) Secretariat's IMFN Climate initiative which supports efforts to scale up forest and landscape restoration, enable inclusive landscape governance, and equip the next generation of forest leaders to address the twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss.

Authors: Katherine Poe and Audrey Platt