FARMING, MINING AND CARING FOR THE LAND: Why a Critical Feminist Gender Discourse on Rights and Resources is More Important Now than Ever Before

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Farming, Mining and Caring for the Land
Why a Critical Feminist Gender Discourse on Rights and Resources is More Important Now than Ever Before
By Leisa Perch & Nidhi Tandon

There are a number of mixed development signposts for African development in the 21st century. These include intensive resource extraction which has delivered GDP growth and allowed countries to progress out of the low-income and low middle-income bracket. However, human wellbeing has not improved on the same scale (Africa Progress Panel, 2013). Good progress has been made on critical pillars of development while certain key ones remaining stubbornly entrenched, particularly those related to health issues including malnutrition.

Other signposts include a considerable decline in the agricultural contribution to GDP despite its importance to livelihood and income at the local and community level remaining highly significant, especially for women. The promotion of small-scale farming practices has been more effective in reducing poverty than other measures. The forces that jeopardise food production in a variable and changing climate include food prices, production capacity, access to clean water and the compatibility between various economic growth drivers including land use. One key concern is the mining sector which changes land and landscapes and often pollutes over time. Although resulting in less immediate destruction than other factors, such as the remaining landmines on the continent, mining is still a critical slow-onset challenge that must be tackled. In the meantime, mining and agriculture are not comfortable bedfellows.

Based on the above, the authors reflect on women’s experiences in agriculture and the mining sector. Through an exchange of their work experience, the authors’ dialogue mirrors the interface between women’s experiences in the two sectors, demonstrating how the relationship is often causal and intertwined. They make a case for the need for an expanded gender and feminist critique as well as engagement on land-based resource inequities and the value that such an update can bring to the broader conversation on sustainable development in the African sub-Saharan region.

There has been a gradual, if reluctant, acknowledgement of women’s role in small-scale farming and food security. With that acknowledgement has come a set of policy solutions targeting women in their role as farmers, as potential income earners or as heads of households and as individuals responsible for their communities. Quite often these solutions have appeared to be more an extension of mainstream services that, up until now, excluded women rather than services that are specific to their needs. Gender issues are mainstreamed into current practices but an attitude of ‘business as usual’ persists.

The authors make a gender critique of these patterns by exploring farming and mining and their relevance to gender issues in Africa. They consider the requirements for tackling them jointly rather than separately. They conclude with reflections on some areas that require more precise feminist and gender analysis.

Key Questions
Through a conversation on their experiences, they explore three key questions, namely:

• With women and girls often serving as ‘foot soldiers’ for plantation farms,
extraction and mining and all kinds of risky business, what are the implications for sustainable development?

• When the stresses of climate change are added to this struggle, how should women plan for the future and be effective contributors to decision making?

• Does the current toolkit of ‘solutions’ enable women to be actors in their own decisions or do they further compromise them by placing them in greater debt, at greater risk and in positions of weakness and silence?

**Dialogue**

**Tandon:** Earlier this year, I was in Liberia and Northern Mozambique, talking with women and men who rely heavily on the land and on natural resources for their day-to-day living as well as for their long-term security. This includes both farming for food and extraction of resources, from forest products to sand and precious metals.

In previous years, I also visited and spoke with men and women in Malawi, Zambia, Uganda, Ghana and Tanzania. As far as I can see, the outlook for their land and their food security is tenuous. Women especially have to do more and more with less and less in order to maintain basic standards of living and they can easily slip below the poverty line if something goes wrong. One poor harvest tips the scale quickly towards hunger.

At the same time, some of the important home-grown policies targeting women include legal provisions such as the right to vote, the right to own land or increasing their access to micro-finance services. Practical training has also taken place. Still, they do not seem to be doing enough to truly empower women. The evidence on the ground suggests that these ‘solutions’ do not always value or take into account women’s socioeconomic productive roles and priorities.

They do not, for example, take into account empowerment as the capacity to protect rights in land-use decision making and priorities that first satisfy local food needs before cash crop production. Nor do they anticipate the impact the intensification of women’s and communal struggles over natural resources and the continued ‘invisibility’ of their societal and productive roles have on how they plan for the future of their rights, their security and their sustenance. They do not seem to respond to the complex reality of how common public issues, such as forests and water rights, intersect with extractives, food security and non-renewable materials. Some of these intersections are shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1 - Intersections of shared resources, extractives, food security and non-renewables in a gender empowerment context – tensions between the formal and informal sectors**

**Perch:** Thanks Nidhi for sharing these initial insights. This suggests that, normatively, we still seem to be struggling with the role of gender in sustainable development and that, while we may have made progress, we may be in danger of stereotyping the relationship. I made the latter point recently in a blog published on our website (Perch, 2014).

My current research involves a level of abstraction from this general problem to issues of climate-smart agriculture (CSA). In partnership with the Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN), we are focusing on five countries in Southern Africa, namely, Lesotho, Mozambique, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe (RIO+ Centre, 2014). The objective is to understand how to apply what we do know about gender and sustainable development and gender and agriculture to CSA.

As part of this, we look at the relevant gender elements needed to make CSA work for everyone and how the current policy framework enables or disables this. In particular, one of the issues we are trying to understand is the ‘implementation deficit’ between understanding the problem and the applicable policy for transformative change. Through a survey we are exploring how stakeholders in these countries see these issues, if they even feel that gender is a concern. Perhaps we too often assume that what we see, others also see.

By the way, we have Mozambique in common in our current work.

**Tandon:** Yes we do! The feminist agenda has tended to focus on land rights, access issues and the empowerment of women, mostly from the basis of individual rights as the main challenge. When I conducted community interviews in Mozambique last year and earlier this year, the tensions between this and community or other collective rights (all the way to the national level) were quite clear.

When asked how they manage when food runs low or is not available, the women (and some men) mentioned a range of roadside retail activities for cash such as selling firewood, game meat and other resources harvested from their natural environment including, of course, excavation and mining. The sales are conducted on an individual seller basis and so they are price-takers with no room for negotiation and no real sense of the true economic value of these resources. Their priori-
As lending organisations such as the World Bank renew and review their environmental and social safeguards, the gender aspects of land acquisition, restrictions on land use, physical and economic displacement and involuntary resettlement need to be integrated in all the safeguards.

Ties are different from most men who are more likely to pursue formal economy opportunities for the promise of income. African women make up 40 to 50 percent of the total artisanal miner population (Hinton, Veiga & Beinhoff, 2003). As in agriculture, women are more active in the artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) sector than in the formal, large-scale and capital-intensive sector. In Liberia, where non-formality in the mining sector is high, women only formally represent 7.59 percent of the workforce (Kaiser, 2011), often at the bottom of the labour hierarchy and predominating in manual processing. Notably, with the Ministry of Lands, Mines and Energy estimating significantly higher percentages of women’s participation in the sector, this data hints at an even higher informalisation of women than their male counterparts (ibid).

At the same time, the ‘highway markets’ in both Liberia and Mozambique present a vibrant local economy that rests very heavily on extracting other natural resources to complement formal mining and agriculture activities. But it is not clear what implications this may have for the natural environment from which these items are mined, whether this is regulated in any way or whether there should even be any controls over these public commons. Similarly, the salt pans are available to people to tap into as needed and to harvest and sell for income. In African countries in particular, as competition for land escalates, I think it is important to build in this complex web of issues how some issues fit and do not fit within the national and global agenda and where conflicts and trade-offs may arise. As lending organisations such as the World Bank renew and review their environmental and social safeguards, the gender aspects of land acquisition, restrictions on land use, physical and economic displacement and involuntary resettlement need to be integrated in all the safeguards.

Perch: Some early fieldwork that we conducted has been quite insightful in this regard (Perch, 2014). More broadly, some questions emerged which we have already reflected on in an update to our approach. These include how tackling climate change might already be changing and could change gender roles. We have seen this where, due to declining yields in mountain areas, men migrate to do other work resulting in women taking over the entire agricultural cycle in addition to their care roles in and outside the home while trying to maintain a balance between the two (UNFPA, 2009).

In the context of Natural Resource Management (NRM), could this also mean further changes in the use of resources (UNDP, 2012)? A key question in this regard is: Will roles become more elastic, depending on needs, or change permanently? Some interesting early results from pilot research on the Women Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) suggests that while the broad landscape of issues is common across countries, the combinations which define the acute nature of gender inequality can vary in interesting ways (IFPRI, 2012). However, common to the groups in all three pilots (Guatemala, Uganda and Bangladesh) were the following issues: a lack of control over resources, leadership, influence and control over income (ibid). Bina Agrawal (2014) has explored assumptions of heterogeneity between women of different status and income and women’s ability to move from covert to overt resistance and from individual to group-based advocacy of their interests.

Critical to making the above tangible in terms of decision making requires a better understanding of where climate begins and ends as a factor and where other issues apply as well as how to represent those issues when farming is not one’s only occupation (heterogeneity). On the first of these points, we know that the availability of water is conditioned by more than weather and climate. In areas where natural water sources exist which could be tapped for agriculture and food production, there are other activities like mining which influence both quantity and quality of the water (UNEP, 2010). Moreover, farmers are not always only farmers. They often manage risk by maintaining...
Moreover, farmers are not always only farmers. They often manage risk by maintaining more than one source of income – farming and sowing or farming and mining, if not all three. Furthermore, this can sometimes mean that the artisanal miner whose actions are impacting the production of a farmer is one and the same person.

Lastly, we cannot forget the impact of large-scale mining in this debate. Zambia’s Kabwe district is a case in point. The aluminium plant has been in operation since the 1990s and yet, the area is still a highly toxic site (Blacksmith Institute & Green Cross, 2013). In fact, it was among the top ten in 2013 (ibid) meaning that this land is essentially unavailable for productive activities. I imagine similar kinds of big and small issues also emerge from your work?

Tandon: Leisa, this is an important question and one that needs a lot more work, particularly on the African continent where toxic pollutants come not only from mining but with the plantation economy too. Pardon the pun, but the growing extractive sector is undermining more than farming.

In Liberia, I observed an unforgettable scene, something out of ‘Darwin’s Nightmare.’ In a newly discovered remote diamond mining camp (October 2013), my interviews with three female ‘miners’ left me with the distinct impression that they stand to lose no matter what happens. Each woman ‘sponsors’ a team of mining boys. This includes payment, feeding, clothing and caring for the boys or rather youths in their early 20s. One woman sponsors three boys, one sponsors five and another nine. The boys dig in open pit holes dotting the landscape. However, if they are successful in finding a diamond, a third party ‘broker’ usually ends up purchasing the stones because the women do not have sufficient funds to meet the price. It is not clear how the quality of the diamond is assessed.

Perch: What makes CSA attractive to both policy-makers and farmers seems to be the triple wins it offers. And, though it speaks to a number of social outcomes, the gender equality benefits are more implied than explicit. That said, there is a lot of attention on gender and CSA currently and a broad recognition that ‘smart solutions’ must resolve structural inequalities if they are to be sustainable (FAO, 2014). Some of these challenges include moving beyond subsistence to resilience but without losing the value that subsistence can bring to survival as well as tenure versus the capacity to leverage for investment. Can you tell me more, Nidhi, about which factors you think are most important for ensuring that CSA, for example, does not ignore mining as a contributing factor to agricultural problems?

Tandon: Food security is by far the strongest, clearest and most visible link to women’s relations with natural resources. It is the core...
of their domain, I would say. Their energy and water uses are key components in this activity. But rural women are caught in a double-bind. Land is both an asset and a form of social security for them and their families. When women are not able to sustain their families through home-based production due to the loss of land entitlements, they look to all available avenues to bring in income. Women are the foot soldiers. Their low educational status, poor access to skills training, finance and technology limits them to the lowest paid jobs so that the monetary value of their earnings will rarely match what they have lost in terms of natural resources. Given their lack of choice, they will pursue all possible sources of income including the extractive industry, which often involves rudimentary equipment, precarious and abusive labour conditions and exploitation from labour traffickers and buyers. It follows then that CSA will need to take an integrative approach to the sustainable management of living natural resources and the adoption of practices that integrate conservation with production right across the board.

Recent studies (Siakor, 2012; Balachandran, Herb, Timirzi & O’Reilly, 2012) warn that agro-investments in Liberia have not met the expectations of all communities and that some have in fact lost access to land and food resources as well as dignity in the process. The long-term implications of such losses have been recently documented and the particular impacts for rural women are being acknowledged by the international community (Oxfam, 2013; Kachingwe, 2012). ‘NRM and agriculture knowledge, technology and public services are of key importance to support NR-based livelihoods, particularly in the face of environmental, climatic and market changes that require new solutions and adaptation’ (Prato & Longo, 2012). Rights-based processes can provide for women’s equal participation with men in decisions around resource use and extraction.

In that sense, I argue that natural resource access is both a civil rights and a public service concern.

Perch: Very useful. Thinking about how we seek more of these responses and how we tie these into policy and an enabling environment for just policy, we sometimes seem too quick to make this a ‘numbers’ problem. From your preceding comments, what seems more useful is having a range of tools and resources that women, as well as men, can access when they need to and as often as they need to.

How do we get beyond gender as numbers? While this is useful from the participation point of view and for critical mass, as Bina Agrawal (2014) points out, there is much more that needs to be addressed including truly being able to understand the needs and respond (Crole-Rees, 2014). Even household farms are complex micro-systems.

And sometimes this may mean not being able to have a unique identifier for each need but more adaptive and flexible response mecha-
ultimately, farm knowledge and practice will need to be a combination of old and new, revered and untested, random and intentional methods from the elementary to the sophisticated.
can be rightfully used and replaced when they mean the difference between thriving and subsistence.

**Joint Conclusion**

For feminist research, and for our work going forward, there seems to be a clear and urgent need to explain how and in what ways it should change. There is also a need to encourage feminist research where it is beneficial and sustainable and identify the necessary combination of people, policies and institutions (good practices) that we have seen at work and why they have and have not been successful. Table 2 gives a brief overview of our knowledge on the current understandings of key gender and environment issues, based on their current areas of research. Criteria used here reflects those used in the IUCN Gender and Environment Index and indicates the broad categories where we feel more action is needed. We ourselves will continue to work towards this change.

Table 2. Current Understandings on Key Issues of Gender and the Environment

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<th>Agriculture Sector</th>
<th>Mining Sector</th>
<th>Conclusions</th>
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<td>Medium to Well Understood</td>
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<td>Gender-based Education and Assets</td>
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**Nidhi Tandon** is an agrarian economist and independent consultant with the Networked Intelligence for Development and has consulted extensively for the UN, international finance institutions and the NPO sector.

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**Notes**

1. The opinions expressed here are those solely of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of UNDP, the UN or its member states.
2. Here we refer to tasks such as crushing, sieving, washing and panning as well as amalgam decomposition in the case of gold mining.
3. This study, undertaken by IPRI with Oxford Human Poverty Initiative, examines empowerment through the lens of five key factors: production, resources, income, leadership and time and across the gender landscape. We have discussed some of these.
4. Also see how the Women’s World Banking Gender Performance Indicators and the Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management (WOCAN) W+ Standard (formerly the Women’s Carbon Standard) are organised. The International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) has also developed Community Indicator Systems which enables communities to identify the economic, environmental, cultural, social and other priorities and issues that matter most to them and to select the indicators that will measure change in their priorities over time. Clearly there will need to be deliberate steps to ensure that women participate in these processes of engagement and that gender equality and women’s empowerment measures are integrated into such community systems.
References