



Paving the way for
gender-responsive FLR:
**The importance of forest
landscape restoration for
rural women in Armenia**

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is committed to providing guidance and support to ensure a gender-responsive Forest Landscape Restoration (FLR) approach. IUCN has been paving the way for gender-responsive efforts to ensure efficient, inclusive, and equitable FLR and will continue this work into the future.

This case study is part of a series of global examples highlighting possible entry points for mainstreaming gender in FLR. These case studies are not comprehensive, but instead provide concrete examples of the integral role that gender considerations can and should play in FLR efforts.

INTRODUCTION:

After proclaiming independence in 1991, Armenia plunged into a series of political and economic periods of unrest. Rampant unemployment forced men to migrate mainly to the United States and Russia for seasonal job opportunities, leaving women in rural communities as the sole providers for maintaining livelihoods, adding to their already pressing responsibilities of household care, including water collection, cooking, and food processing and preservation.

Energy sources and supplies proved an additional challenge in the early years of independence, as Armenia had previously obtained a large portion of its fuel from Russia and, post-independence, no longer had access to these exports. Fuelwood became one of the only energy sources for heating, cooking, and lighting. Rural communities in particular are often dependent on forest products for fuelwood and for non-timber forest products for food and sustaining their livelihoods. However, forested lands only make up about 10% of Armenia's total area and are therefore susceptible to overharvesting and depletion.

This puts women in a particularly vulnerable position, as their family's economic livelihoods and survival are often at stake.

In Armenia, the forestry sector and forest restoration policy development and decision making in natural resources management processes have been shaped as a result of women's historical everyday practices—which are also often drivers of deforestation and degradation—and yet women's direct participation in these matters is frequently neglected. Forests in Armenia are state property and the management system is top-down, meaning that decisions are made at the government level and passed down through a hierarchy of power. At local levels, all community members, including women—who can at times make up 70-75% of village population—are kept removed from environmental decision-making and monitoring processes. Forest Landscape Restoration (FLR) efforts should take advantage of the women's unique knowledge through years of managing rural life in forested areas and engage women to ensure protection of Armenia's limited forested areas for the prosperity of rural communities.

FLR is the process of regaining ecological functionality and enhancing human well-being across deforested or degraded forest landscapes. Effective FLR incorporates the number and health of trees in a given area, as well as landscapes, as it often includes entire watersheds and jurisdictions where land uses interact. FLR interventions offer the opportunity to reverse and stabilize forests in Armenia. As a result of the male population migrating from villages to find other work, many women in Armenia bare the brunt of both men and women's responsibilities, and, in the process, have also accumulated comprehensive knowledge related to forestry and natural resource management—thus, more often than not the key players for FLR in these communities are women. This case study highlights the important gender-specific baseline knowledge that is ideal to have prior to FLR implementation and also paves the way for future restoration activities—not only for Armenia, but also for countries with similar governance structures and experiences more broadly.

IMPORTANCE OF FLR IN ARMENIA:

Armenia is situated in the South Caucasus between Asia and Europe, with a population of more than 3 million people—1.8 million of which live outside of the capital in rural communities. Forests play an important role in the life of local communities as well as the tourism sector. In addition, Armenia's landscape is approximately 70% agricultural land, with a little more than 10% of the land forested, meaning that an enormous number of Armenian families must rely on subsistence farming to meet their daily needs. The ministries of Nature Protection and Agriculture are responsible for environment and forests specifically. The state forest agency, "Hayantar", under the Ministry of Agriculture, is responsible for conservation, protection, reproduction, use, registration, stock-taking and inventory, and survey maintenance of forests, improvement of forest productivity and forest soil fertility, as well as sustainable use of forest resources.

Despite Armenia's small proportion of forested land, forests play a role for both livelihoods and ecosystems, especially for those located on steep terrain, as forests protect communities from floods, decrease soil erosion, and enhance soil fertility, all bolstering the resilience of rural communities against increasing threats of climate

change and natural disasters. Aside from these adaptive benefits that are consistent with FLR objectives, communities in Armenia depend on forest resources for their livelihoods and economic prosperity. Social and economic hardships leave many poor and rural households dependent on fuelwood, often collected illegally. Additionally, other forest products—including berries, nuts, and wild fruits—are important culturally in Armenian cuisine and are used for making jams, juices and compotes to be sold, which is a practice taken on almost exclusively by women. However, this dependence, coupled with the extremely limited forest resources, puts pressure on forested lands, making them particularly vulnerable to over-harvesting and depletion.

Although the proportion of remaining forests in Armenia are only a small percentage of the country's land, these forests play a crucial role as they balance both mitigation and economic opportunities, highlighting significant links to FLR. Issues such as socio-economic and environmental costs and benefits; carbon sequestration potential; restoration readiness; and investment opportunities are of considerable importance to these rural communities. In this context, the need to maintain and restore forests is high, and yet the responsibilities for forest management predominantly fall

on the women in these villages.

In rural communities, women take on the general brunt of household work in addition to their traditional role of collecting other non-timber forest products. Information taken from Armenia's Forest Dependency study, shows that in these Armenian villages, women now equally participate in traditionally male-assigned roles—and often in much greater percentages than men in comparison with other villages in the South Caucasus Region—and they also accumulate knowledge that directly inform on previous knowledge gaps relevant to national policy priorities, such as rural development, food security and energy supply. The downside is that, typically, direct harvesting of timber is not women's domain, and when they are forced to participate in this kind of labor, they tend to resort to middlemen services, which can incur extra costs and limit their economic gain.

FUELWOOD IN ARMENIA

As a result of the economic and cultural need for the male population to seek employment elsewhere, Armenian women have carried the burden of making ends meet by tapping into “forest income.” Forest income is the amount of income acquired from forest products used or sold to help meet the needs of each family or community. Generally, forest income is highest in low “cash income” families. With the male population of most villages depleted, the women shoulder the burdens of both men and women and, in the

process, have accumulated comprehensive knowledge that fills the gaps.

One key issue for FLR in Armenia that demonstrates the low “cash income” challenge relates to fuelwood. The Forest Law Enforcement and Governance (FLEG) Program in Armenia was directly responsible for a new law being passed that allowed local people to harvest dead wood in forests legally and at no cost. Overshadowing the remarkable chain of events that led to this new law is the fact that without fuelwood most, if not all, of the inhabitants would not be able to survive.

The fuelwood issue alone highlights three major assessment outputs for FLR: priority restoration areas; priority restoration interventions; and both socio-economic and environmental costs and benefits. In addition, forest income that helps bridge gaps to build resilience, as well as the significance of forest resources to rural communities, especially women, demonstrate the extreme dependency that is continuously at play. The key to helping reverse and stabilize the situation is FLR, and more often than not the key players for FLR in these communities are women.

WHY GENDER MATTERS:

Every day in their roles as farmers, foresters, caretakers, household providers, and more, women use and manage natural resources. Women have unique experiences and knowledge with respect to their environments and offer important perspectives in natural resource governance

and use. Given their responsibility for meeting food and energy needs for the household, changes in land use and depletion of natural resources especially increases burdens on women as it limits access to much-needed resources and services necessary for household activities, but also reduces opportunities

for productive activities and economic empowerment. Not only does women’s equitable participation and representation in FLR uphold commitments to women’s empowerment and gender equality, it also makes for better development, more effective climate change solutions, and stronger sustainability and livelihood outcomes.

PROJECT OVERVIEW:

In 2014, recognizing the need to analyze forest dependency in Armenia to strengthen information that supports restoration efforts, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), supported by the European Commission, initiated a study

to define the value of forested land to rural communities in Armenia so that policy makers can use the results to improve forest governance. The study covered most of the forested regions of Armenia, including the Lori, Tavush and Syunik regions, and incorporated gendered differences in forest use.

The research used several methods, including in-depth interviews, household surveys and focus group discussions. A total of 196 households with different degrees of forest dependence were sampled for the survey. The results of the household survey can be seen in Table 1.



Gender Balance in collection of household forest products in Armenia¹

| Region | Mainly female ² | Mainly male | Both | Others | Total |
|--------|----------------------------|-------------|------|--------|-------|
| Lori | 44%* | 25%** | 19% | 12% | 100% |
| Tavush | 34%* | 51%** | 0% | 15% | 100% |
| Syunik | 42%* | 33%*** | 20% | 5% | 100% |

¹ Universe of study: 65 in the Lori region, 65 in the Tavush region and 66 in the Syunik region

² *-indicates collection of vegetables, wild fruit, berries and mushrooms

** -indicates collection of wood

*** -indicates collection of wood, vegetables, wild fruit, berries and mushrooms



In focus group discussions, community members were asked to qualitatively assess the most important products to their livelihoods. From discussions, 13 different forest products were identified as important to forest communities, indicating that a wide variety of products are economically and traditionally valuable. Products included Cornelian cherries, blackberries and rose berries, or rosehips, which are essential in traditional Armenian cuisine (jams, juices and compotes, as well as dried and used in vodkas and teas). These non-timber resources are not levied by the Armenian government and are therefore a free income source for local populations. Fuelwood was also recognized as an important product in all regions because of its prominent use in heating and cooking for households.

The role of gender in forest product extraction has not been a central focus in Armenian forestry policy, planning and implementation measures.



However, with information gathered from IUCN's Forest Dependency studies, it is now more evident that female-headed households are generally poorer and more likely to have a greater share of income from forests. Further, research showed the economic benefit received from forests, the type of social groups that depend and benefit from them most, and the factors that determine the welfare, or limit the sustainability, of these rural communities. The overall conclusion from this research is that life in rural villages is inextricably linked to forest resources and villages depend on maintaining or improving the functionality of the forests that provide for them—especially women, given their cultural and historical roles and responsibilities.

The FLR process, which aims to regain ecological integrity and enhance human well being in deforested or degraded forest landscapes, is a vital piece in ensuring the sustainability of



both these rural communities and the ecosystems they depend upon. The results from the study provide critical lessons learned including that many of the villages surveyed are teetering on the edge of survival, where any sort of reduction in the benefits provided by forests could be catastrophic to individual households or even to an entire village. Of greater concern is the fact that the degree of resilience these communities have or are capable of exhibiting is not fully understood or documented. Yet, ecological integrity is a direct function of the condition of the surrounding forest, and the community well-being and resilience is directly linked to maintaining or restoring forested lands. Thus, it is clear that rural communities in Armenia, and women within these communities in particular, are inextricably linked and extremely dependent on how well forests are maintained, restored, and protected.



CHALLENGES:

There are many challenges facing women living in rural, forested communities in Armenia. As indicated from the studies of forest dependency, the women in these villages are inherently among the poorest in the region, meaning that they rely more heavily on forest income. This also leads to the conclusion that these women need to spend more time in the forest taking on not only their traditional roles of food collection, but more frequently the typically traditional male activities, as well –and yet, they will gain fewer benefits from these multiplied efforts.

While rural communities' dependency on forests is evident, living in a constant state of uncertainty with regards to solutions for securing a

village's survival presents a serious challenge for rural communities. It is clear that there is a critical need to ensure that forests are maintained, restored, or increased in area in order to bolster villagers' resilience and adaptive capacity. Implementing FLR would greatly benefit forest-dependent women in Armenia because the process would identify a plan and steps that could be implemented to bring about positive changes.

And yet, challenges for implementing FLR in Armenia are significant, including:

- There is low institutional capacity for linking gender and environmental issues and for maintaining gender balance at central and local governmental levels due to the fact that

only a vague perception of the environmental, economic and social benefits of linking gender and environmental issues exists among governmental and civil society structures;

- Policies that mandate a gender-sensitive approach to environmental governance are sparse, specifically in forest policy and programming;
- Donors' support for women's inclusion in education and monitoring programs regarding FLR is non-existent; and
- Community environmental issues and programming lack institutional or individual mechanisms for women's participation at the village-level, leading to low interest and motivation by women to be involved.

CONCLUSION:

The study on forest dependency in Armenia shows that forest income makes up a more substantial share of household income if the household is poorer—that is, those composed of disadvantaged social groups, mainly retired elderly populations, and women-headed households. Forest products are important for subsistence and cash income, and therefore vital to livelihoods. Forests provide a relatively affordable or free resource base, and fuelwood is a vital source of energy utilized by many rural households for heating and cooking.

In order to progress towards a more resilient future, the following recommendations should be considered:

- Demonstrate outcomes and impacts of FLR projects when women are involved in decision-making at the community-level, especially in relation to resource use and access
 - Implement empirical studies on willingness and readiness of women from forest-dependent communities to participate in monitoring and decision-making in order to better understand difficulties women face in forest areas of Armenia—specifically in Lori, Tavush, and Syunik provinces
 - Organize discussions on the Forest Dependency study findings with regional monitoring groups and with women's organizations
- from vulnerable forest communities, as well as on how to promote and advance gender equality work
 - Raise awareness among state authorities of the ministry of Nature Protection and Hayantar, regional environmental NGOs, and donors cooperating with Armenia about the effective solutions FLR provides, particularly when gender-responsive action is implemented at various management levels
 - Establish financial schemes such as loans or credit opportunities with greater benefits (e.g., long-term, or low or 0% interest rates) that banks can provide to support women-led small businesses

The importance of gender-responsive FLR is evident, as women have much to contribute and benefit from when they participate in forest landscape restoration. However, further work needs to be done in order to define a clear way forward and to establish best practices for mainstreaming gender in FLR. IUCN invites policy makers and practitioners to share their knowledge with the broader community to enhance gender equality and effective FLR strategies.

For more information or to join this effort and share your learning, please contact the IUCN Global Gender Office.

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