

Women's Rights to Natural Resources

A Discussion Paper by New Field Foundation



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As human rights increasingly addresses environmental issues, it is important to ask how societies can contribute to the implementation of the rights of women to access and control natural resources. This paper aims to spark discussion and help formulate best practice. It focuses on women's rights to land and water, food and livelihood security, and natural resource management. It includes recent relevant reports and charts from global institutes and initiatives, as well as civil society organizations.

Overview

The long-term well-being of the planet, its peoples and natural resources is of global concern to governments and civil society. As we face the 21st century challenges of climate change, growing population, and increasing demands on natural resources, it is relevant and strategic to consider the contribution of women in defining and implementing solutions. This discussion paper focuses in particular on rural women, who make up a quarter of the world's population and who are primary stakeholders in the fate of the planet.

Rural women play a significant role in the use and management of land, water, forests, and livestock. Their agency and aspirations for their families and communities are key to effective solutions. Yet they are disproportionately affected by hunger and poverty, conflict and natural disasters, and are constrained by low status, limited education, and a heavy burden of work, with little access to or control over resources. Despite this, rural women across the world are organizing to improve their situation, influence policy and realize their rights.



- Women make up two-thirds of the world's livestock keepers
- Women in the developing world handle an average of 43% of all farming and virtually all household work
- Women in Africa produce and process at least 70% of its food
- The rights of rural women are distinctly recognized in international conventions

Source: FAO 2011, Doss 2011

Productive land that has fertile soil and clean water is becoming increasingly valuable as demand grows globally for food, bio-fuels and fibres. Land as a commodity is being acquired by private interests on an unprecedented scale for the purpose of control and profit in the name of feeding the world. This phenomenon is being monitored by concerned governments and civil society organizations. Many international institutions are introducing new guidelines to prevent acquisition of land that is harmful to local communities, including rural women.

Small-scale producers want to and have the ability to provide for their families, communities and countries, as they have done for centuries, even without external inputs. However, if access to land and water is denied, their situation deteriorates rapidly. The growing commercialization of land and the introduction of high input agriculture is leading to large-scale displacement of local communities, along with loss of biodiversity, seeds and livestock. Rural women are in a particularly difficult position to determine their future because of their minority rights to land and limited role in decision making.

Females make up only a small minority of agricultural holders in the main developing regions.

Share of land belonging to women.

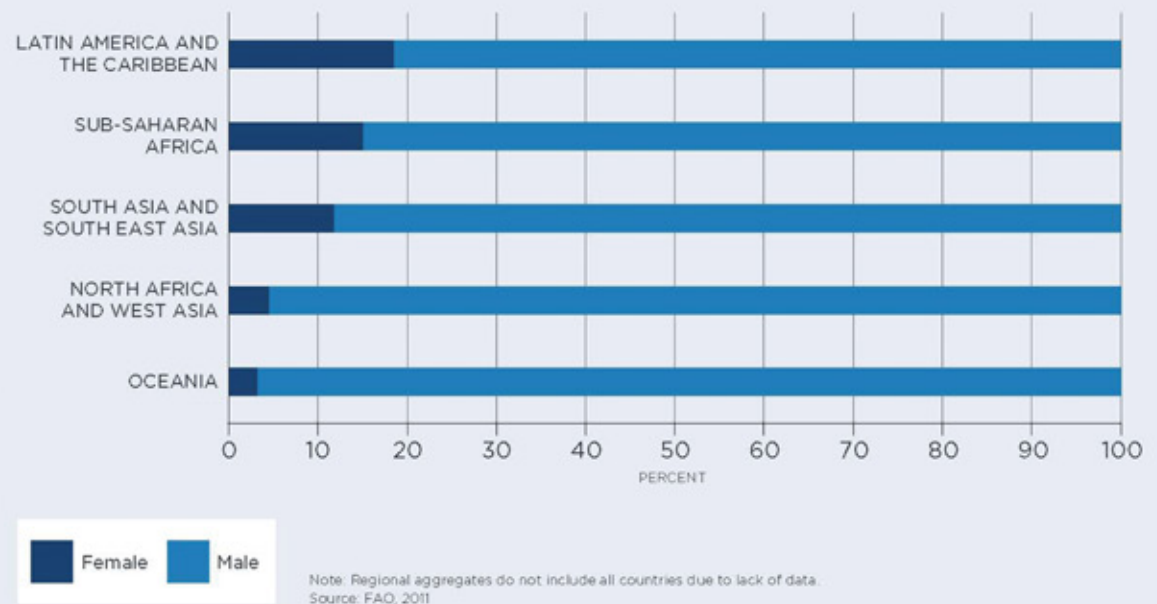


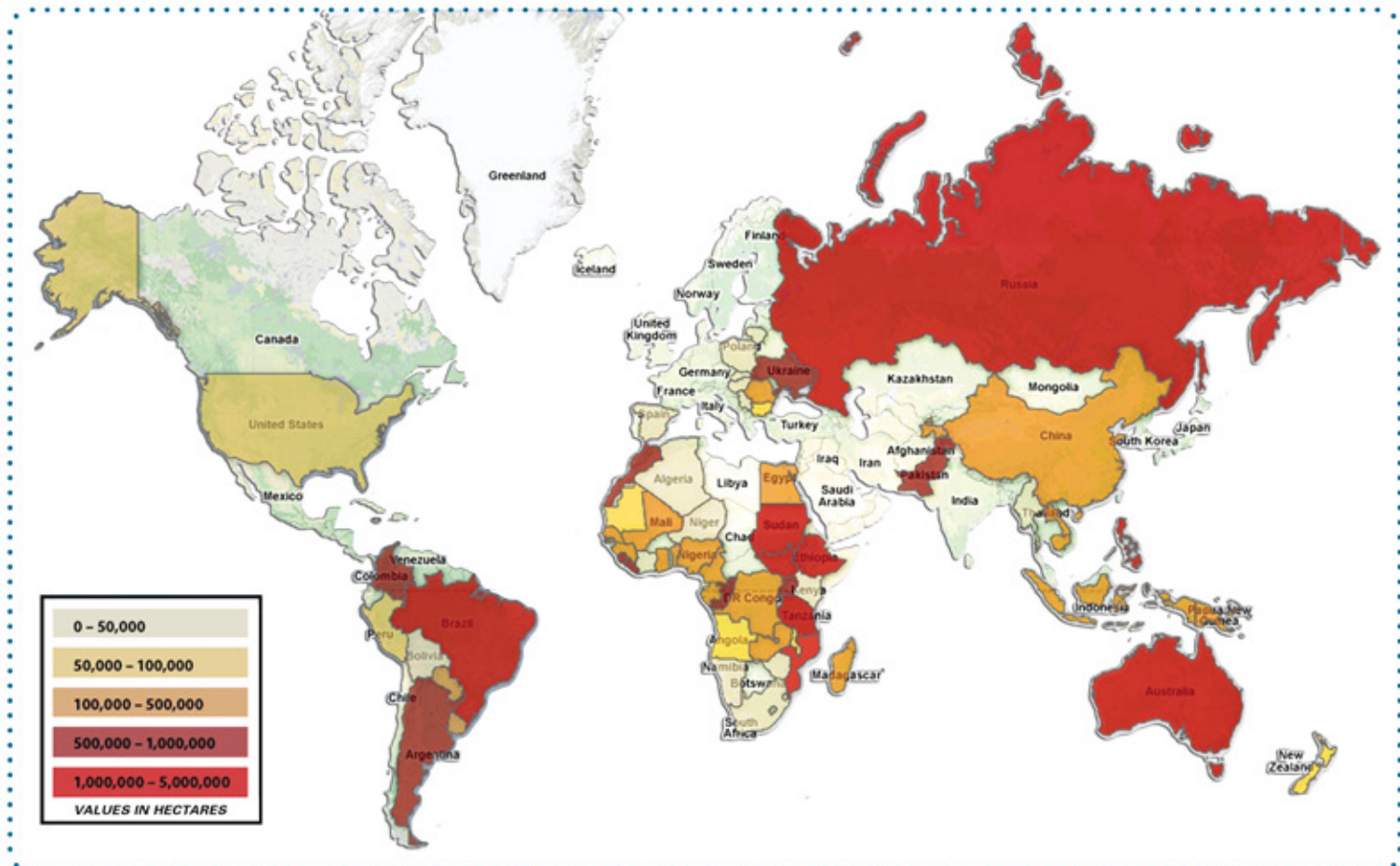
Chart Source: *Girls Grow: A Vital Force in Rural Economies*, The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2011

Practices that significantly increase rural women's secure access to land and water include:

- Documentation and protection of community lands, with specific mechanisms that secure the land rights of women
- Information dissemination and monitoring of women's land use and rights at local and national level
- Support for rural women to organize and advocate for secure access to land and prevent land takeovers

Each country that is shaded represents where land acquisitions have occurred. The different shades of the map show the intensity of the land acquisitions in each country.

To learn more about how much land was acquired and which countries purchased the land, [visit the online interactive map](#) and click on each country for more information.



Map Source:
Circle of Blue, Global Map of "Land
Grabs" By Country and By Sector, 2012

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40 percent of the world's peoples grow at least 70 percent of the world's food. The majority of these are rural women, whose production and processing of food contribute centrally to food and livelihood security.

- 1.5 billion people in the world grow food and other products on 380 million farms
- 800 million people grow food in urban gardens
- 410 million people gather the hidden harvest of our forests and savannas
- 190 million pastoralists produce meat and dairy products
- Over 100 million people produce fish.

Source: *Agricultural Transition: A different logic, More and Better*, 2012

Rural women are highly productive, particularly given that they have limited access to land, credit, information, education and technology. The extent of their contribution to household consumption is being more fully recognized and counted, thus changing the picture of rural women's economic activity. Their contribution to household food is also proving to be nutritionally valuable, with the production of 'garden' fruits and vegetables, as well as caring for animals that provide meat and dairy.

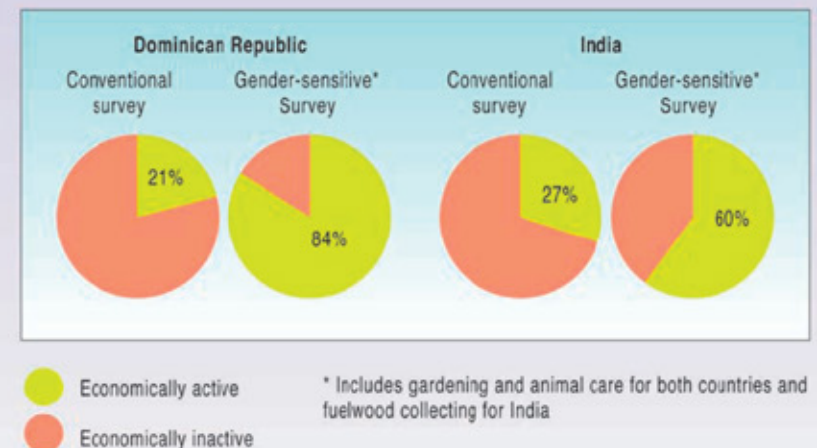
"If rural women had equal access to productive resources, agricultural yields would rise and there would be 100 million to 150 million fewer hungry people." - UN Women, *Commission on the Status of Women* 2012

<http://www.unwomen.org/how-we-work/csw/csw-56>



Counting women's labor

Estimates of the proportion of women who are "economically active" increase dramatically when gardening, animal care and fuelwood collection are recognised as productive work.



SOURCE: FAO

IAASTD. Design: UNEP/GRID-Arendal, Kerli Berger

Chart Source: *Agriculture at a Crossroads: Synthesis Report*,

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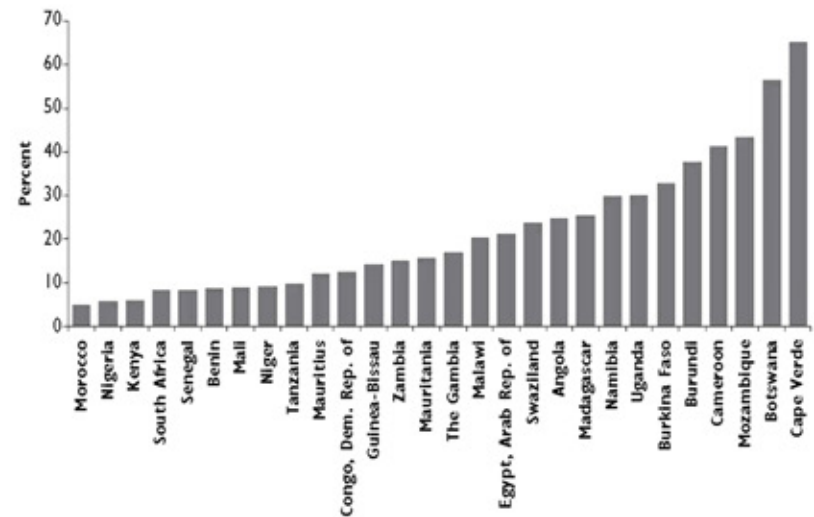
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In Asia, Africa and Latin America, rural women are increasingly organizing themselves into associations, cooperatives and federations to improve their situation and those of their families and communities. Providing healthy food is a primary responsibility of rural women, one that depends on the care of soil, seed, and pollinators.

Keen to improve their knowledge and capacity as food producers, rural women are establishing their own enterprises. They face opportunities and dilemmas in the choices they must make, as they join the world of commercial agriculture. Many are alarmed at the expectation that they must purchase and introduce 'poisons' (their terminology) and non-reproducing seeds to their farming systems.



Figure 5.2 Percentage of Enterprises Owned by Women in Selected African Countries



Sources: Adapted from Bardasi, Blackden, and Guzman 2007 and based on World Bank Enterprise Surveys 2002–06.

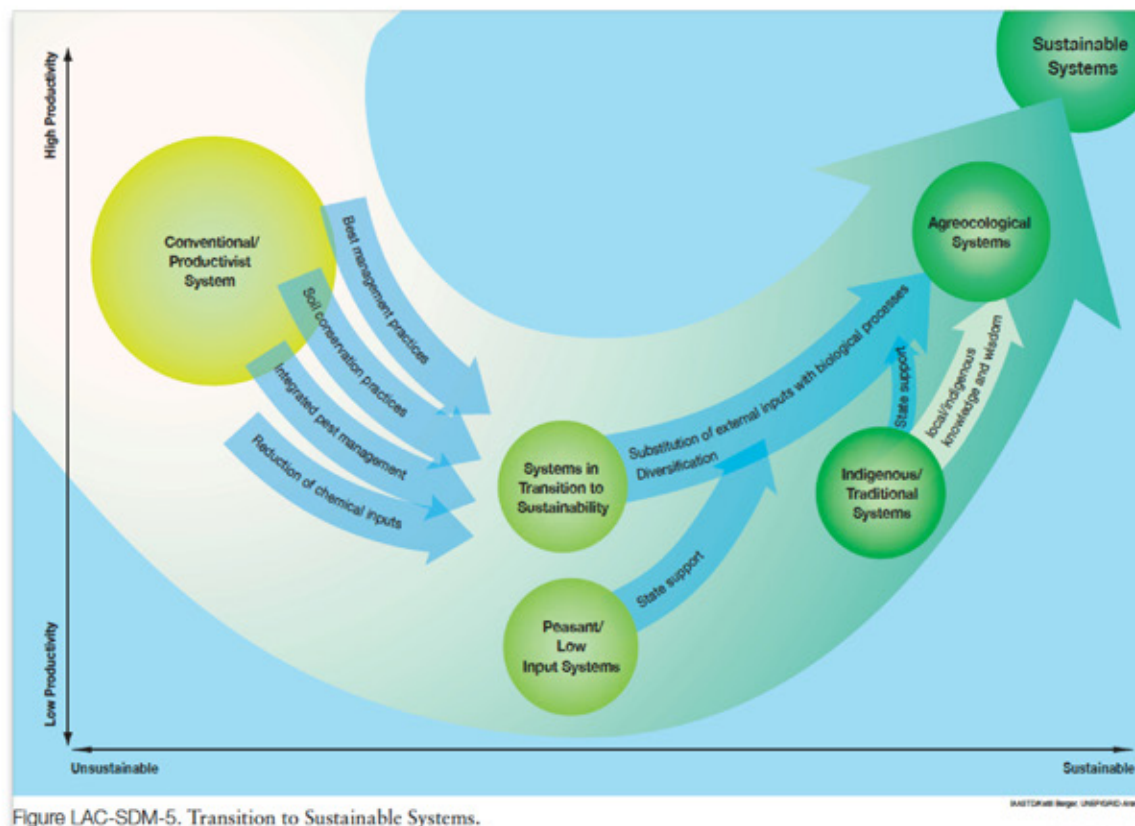
Note: The sample is restricted to individual and family firms and excludes enterprises with fewer than 10 employees and enterprises operating in the service sector.

Chart Source: *Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook*, FAO, World Bank and IFAD, 2009

Practices supporting rural women's food and livelihood security include:

- Strengthening the capacity and agency of rural women's organizations according to their priorities
- Recognizing and counting women's traditional knowledge and activities in local food systems
- Protecting biodiversity
- Advancing rural women's rights and resources to secure food and livelihood security

It will be an exciting and hopeful future when the hundreds of millions of people who are currently engaged in food production and natural resource management, are included in the process of defining the way forward for the planet. In the face of climate change, financial instability, and environmental degradation, their vision, knowledge and agency will make an important contribution to realizing a healthy future, free of hunger and violence. By practicing the principle of 'free prior and informed consent', civil society organizations and government agencies offer the opportunity for primary stakeholders such as rural women to share their views and preferences. As this practice gains momentum in policy and practice, it offers the possibility that sustainable food and livelihood systems will be forged as much by peasant farmers' ideas and knowledge as by advanced technologies.



"Natural ecosystems play an important role in maintaining agricultural productivity, for example through ecosystem services related to soil and water resources and pollination. Food security is a precondition for sustained human development, and neither of these can be met through economic growth alone . . . Policies must support actions that build resilience and empower people, especially women."

- The Future We Want: Biodiversity and Ecosystems - Driving Sustainable Development, UNDP, 2012



Rural Women and Natural Resource Management in the Mano River Union, West Africa

The Mano River Union (MRU) is a border region that transverses Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone in West Africa. It is a culturally distinct area that is the home of Kissi and Mende people living in all three countries. Rich in forest and fertile soil, the MRU has supported farming and other natural resource based activities among closely knit communities for hundreds of years. Its wealth of land, water, forests, and minerals has made people in the MRU vulnerable to external forces seeking to extract these natural resources for considerable profit.

Natural resources in the MRU were a central feature of the recent civil conflicts there. The horrific violence of the 1980's and 1990's resulted in the destruction of local residents' lives and livelihoods. Families who lost homes, means of food production, and peace of mind have slowly rebuilt their lives. Yet their peace and economic security is threatened again due to inequities in the extraction of the MRU's natural resources.

Natural Resource Extraction

For the past 30 years, the MRU nations have agreed to economic cooperation in using these valuable resources. In practice, the agreements have failed to benefit the people whose lives are interwoven with the resources – women in particular – and who are most familiar with their maintenance.

Rural poverty thus remains the status quo in the MRU. This is unlikely to change until local residents share the benefits of local natural resource extraction equitably with external interests. Until resource extraction policies address local equity in licensing the rights and benefits of land, water, forest, and mineral extraction, MRU residents will lose again, especially women and children.

Impact on Rural Women

The World Bank, in a 2010 report (No. 53738) on mineral extraction in the MRU, noted that women's concerns about mining policy, and their power to influence it, are secondary to men, unless women organize in groups. The same dynamic would hold true for water, timber, and land.



Natural Resource Management: Case Study

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Policies for governing natural resource extraction in the MRU need therefore to recognize the voice and rights of rural women in determining who is able to benefit from the sale of extracted resources by:

- Prioritizing local licensing of resources
- Encouraging rural women to organize
- Granting women's organizations access to licensing their local natural resources

Provisions such as these in the MRU natural resource extraction landscape will ensure that women's interests are represented.

Map Source – Mano River Union focus area, New Field Foundation, 2012





Rio +20 Declaration, 2012

§45. We underscore that women have a vital role to play in achieving sustainable development. We recognize the leadership role of women and we resolve to promote gender equality and women's empowerment and to ensure their full and effective participation in sustainable development policies, programmes and decision-making at all levels.

§52. We recognize that farmers, including small-scale farmers and fishers, pastoralists and foresters, can make important contributions to sustainable development through production activities that are environmentally sound, enhance food security and the livelihood of the poor, and invigorate production and sustained economic growth.

§111. We reaffirm the necessity to promote, enhance and support more sustainable agriculture, including crops, livestock, forestry, fisheries and aquaculture, that improves food security, eradicates hunger and is economically viable, while conserving land, water, plant and animal genetic resources, biodiversity and ecosystems and enhancing resilience to climate change and natural disasters. We also recognize the need to maintain natural ecological processes that support food production systems.

§238. We resolve to unlock women's potential as drivers of sustainable development, including through the repeal of discriminatory laws and removal of formal barriers, ensuring equal access to justice and legal support, the reform of institutions to ensure competence and capacity for gender mainstreaming and the development and adoption of innovative and special approaches, to address informal, harmful practices that act as barriers to gender equality. In this regard, we commit to creating an enabling environment for improving the situation of women and girls everywhere, particularly in rural areas and local communities and among indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities.

Access to Land

Action Aid, *Lay of the Land – Improving land governance to stop land grabs*, 2012

Action Aid, *Women's Land Rights Project in Guatemala, India and Sierra Leone: Empowering poor and excluded women and fighting against poverty and hunger through enhanced access to and control over land – Consolidated Baseline Report*, 2012

Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), *Contemporary Processes of Large-Scale Land Acquisition by Investors: Case Studies from Sub-Saharan Africa*, 2011

GRAIN, www.farmlandgrab.org

International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) Briefing Paper, *Land Tenure Security and Poverty Reduction, Briefing Paper*, 2012

Namati and International Development Law Organization: *Protecting Community Lands and Resources: Evidence from Liberia, Mozambique and Uganda*, 2012

Food and Livelihood Security

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, *Girls Grow: A Vital Force in Rural Economies, A Girls Count Report on Adolescent Girls*, 2011

Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), *The State of Food and Agriculture 2012*, 2012

International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), *Women, Food Security and Agriculture in a Global Marketplace*, 2008

International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), *Rural Poverty Report 2011*, 2011

The World Bank, *Gender eAtlas* (online database visualization tool)

Sustainable Systems

Groundswell International, *Strengthening Endogenous Development in Africa: A Methodological Guide, by Peter Gubbles*, 2010

International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science, and Technology for Development (IAASTD), *Agriculture at a Crossroads: Synthesis Report*, 2009

The More and Better Network, *Agricultural Transition: a different logic*, 2012

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Natural Resource Management

IIED, *High level policy dialogue between the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) and small scale farmers on the priorities and governance of agricultural research for development in West Africa*, 2012

IFAD Briefing Paper, *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment*, 2012

United National Development Programme (UNDP), *The Future We Want: Biodiversity and Ecosystems – Driving Sustainable Development*, 2012

Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), *Gender Equality and the Convention on Biological Diversity: A compilation of Decision Text*, 2012

World Bank, Module 10: Gender and Natural Resources Management, *From the Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook*, 2009

Charts

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