

# Forest gender and power a

Law, Criminology



The role of the communities in the management of community forest has gained much popularity in recent years (Kalpana & Bastakoti 2006). This is because many developing countries are pursuing different forms of decentralization to enhance forest management (FAO 1999). The Cameroon government has not been an exception they have enforced the decentralization process in the forestry sector by devaluing power from the center to the local communities. In 1994 the Cameroon forestry law was passed to enhance community forest management amongst other things. According to this law, local communities are given the opportunity to improve and increase their level of participation in the management and conservation of forest through the creation of community forests (Djeumo, 2001; Muton, 2007). The aim of creating community forest in Cameroon has been to give equal opportunity to local communities (including women and men) to benefit from the forest resources, protect the resources and improve on their standards of living. This is not being fully realized because not all community members are being represented. According to Takang (2011), women make up about 51% of the total population of Cameroon, about 80% of them live in the rural areas and 56% of them make up the agricultural labor force of the country and agriculture is the backbone of Cameroon. Although women make up a large proportion of the Cameroon population they are continuously marginalized in many aspects. The 1994 forestry law provided reforms for the participation of communities but fail to include laws on customary barriers against women. This adds to the fact that, national policies have limited the recognition of the role of women in the management and conservation of forest resources (Cudia 2011). Since the

policies ignore the fact that women suffer from inequality within the community. Leaving women at the mercy of traditional norms where the forest is seen as a man's field. Although (Mengang 2008) in the case of Cameroon states that policies have been set up to include women in the participation of community forest in Cameroon, women are still largely vulnerable. These policies are still to consider the vulnerability of women in a society where there is much gender inequality. The limited access of women to the management and conservation of the forest as oppose to men has been caused by the following factors; private property is unequally access and control by social norms and perceptions which have been deeply rooted in the society for a long time. Other factors include institutionally created inequalities which are embodied in the rules and procedures (Agarwal, 2002). These have therefore made the role of women in forest management and other resources to remain invisible especially when it comes to the decision making and implementation phase (Kalpana & Rishi: 2006). This limitation of women participating especially in decision-making and implementation processes at international, national and local levels is restricting the capacity of women to engage in political decisions that can impact their specific needs and vulnerabilities (Denton 2002; Masika 2002). These women are therefore deprived from both physical assets including the forest and its resources and human assets including training, credit and other benefits allocated for the local community (IFAD POVERTY Report 2001). In the light of these issues, this paper seeks to assess the gender balance in the management and conservation of the forest and its resources. It investigates the reforms and actors concerned in enhancing gender

balance in the management of community forest. Understanding and addressing all these is aimed at coming up with recommendations for policy makers to enforce equitable use, control, management and conservation of the forest and its resources for the benefit of women, men and the environment. There has been much debate about community forest management and decentralization in Cameroon in general. In fact, the issue of forest decentralization has been the area most subject to research and field-testing (Diaw & Oyono, 1998). Notwithstanding, less attention has been given to forest, women and power and no in depth research has been done on Forest, Society and Power: A political ecology of the role of women in the management of community forest in the eastern region of Cameroon.

### **Main Objective**

The main focus of this research is to examine the effectiveness of forestry reforms in enhancing the role of women in the management of community forest in the Eastern region of Cameroon.

### **Main question**

To what extent have forestry reforms enhance the role of women in the management of community forest in Cameroon?

### **Specific questions**

What is political ecology? How have reforms on community forest management involved women over the years from pre colonial, colonial till date? How are the different actors in forest management integrating women in the management of community forest in the eastern region of Cameroon? How are women parts of the participatory approach process? What are the

obstacles faced by women to fully participate in the management of forest resources? Is there a way forward to overcome these obstacles?

## **Definition of Key Terms**

### **Forest**

The United Nation Framework Convention on Climate Change has define the forest as " a minimum area of land of 0. 05-1. 0 hectare with tree crown cover (or equivalent stocking level) of more than 10-30 per cent with trees with the potential to reach a minimum height of 2-5 metres at maturity in situ[1]". In this research the word forest will be broaden to incorporate forest, its resources and the use of land around forest areas. This is because the use and management of the forest also involves forest resources and land around the forest area.

### **Political Ecology**

It shows how power relationship affects natural resources. That is how power brings in unequal distribution of cost and benefit leading to winners and losers. In the case of women and forest management it looks at how women are included or excluded in the governance and management of forest. That is their participation in institutions and reforms that are based on forest management. The meaning of political ecology is expanded below in the definition provided by Watts (2000)

### **Community Forest**

One of the components of a community is the fact that it is made of people. The ' people' most often are made of women and men who form part of that community. Community forest therefore brings in the relation between men

and women linked to the trees that make up their environment. According to the Cameroon law on forestry " A community forest is a forest forming part of the non-permanent forest estate (DFNP in French, agro-forestry field) with a management agreement between a rural community and the minister in charge of forests" (Cuny 2011: 13). To be assigned a community forest, the community has to go through several legal procedures. As part of these legal procedures, local communities are supposed to come up with a legal entity in order to obtain a community forest. The entities could be through; associations, cooperatives, common initiative groups and economic interest groups (Djeumo 2001).

## **Management**

In the case of community forest in Cameroon, the forestry law points out that, the management of this forest - which should not exceed 5, 000 ha - concerns the rural community, with the technical assistance of the ministry in charge of forests (Cuny 2011). This rural community as we have seen above is made up of men and women with equal opportunities. Management therefore should involve the use of local knowledge of men and women for the benefit of the whole community and to ensure sustainable development. The management of community forest will therefore be seen as involving women and men at all levels. This will mean providing equally opportunities for women and men at the identification, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation levels.

## Literature Review

According to Jacques (2009), political ecology is a confusing term which is really broad and ambiguous. He adds that political ecology will be more understood when we look at it as a field of study. In that light, the field of political ecology has attracted scholars from different fields like geography, forestry, environmental sociology, anthropology, development studies and environmental history. Different scholars have defined political ecology in many different ways depending on their area of interest. The definition and explanation that fits in this research is the one given by Watts (2000) where political ecology is used " to understand the complex relations between nature and society through a careful analysis of what one might call the forms of access and control over resources and their implications for environmental health and sustainable livelihoods " (p. 257). This definition could be used to understand the conflict between women and men in the management of community forest resources influenced by many factors. Watts points out that the community with " its lexical affines, namely tradition, custom, and indigenous - a sort of keyword whose meanings (always unstable and contested) are wrapped up in complex ways with the problems it is used to discuss" These " lexical affines" do affect women in the community since their knowledge, power, authority and governance are being limited. Watts expatiate on this by adding that, " communities have to be understood in terms of hegemonies: not everyone participates or benefits equally in the construction and reproduction of communities, or from the claims made in the name of community interest" (267). This is our point of focus, using the case of women in the Eastern Region of Cameroon, we want

to understand the extent to which reforms have influenced women's participation and benefits in the management of community forest. Reforms in the management of forest in Cameroon have evolved over time. Before colonization local authorities were the owners and controllers of natural resources. This is supported by Mengang (2008) who points out that before colonialism, natural resources were managed by village heads. They had the complete authority to allocate the resources. During colonization " all resources belonged to the state. Anyone requiring use of the resources was required to apply for a permit" (Mengang 2008: 241). Bigombe (1998) argues this by pointing out that in Cameroon, even during the colonial period, local communities were marginalized in the management of forest resources. Therefore, the state of Cameroon has been the sole proprietor and manager of the forest for a long time. And though communities have participated in the management of forest for a very long time, their political rights have been limited and have only been recognized some years back (Djeumo 2001). The rights of women have had no place at all until recently. In the 1980s a serious economic recession hit Cameroon and the country had to turn for aid from the World Bank and IMF. The international institutions prescribed the structural adjustment program which mandated the Cameroon government to carry out a series of reforms. As part of the structural adjustment program, Cameroon had to restructure its political landscape through the introduction of reforms. In the case of forest management, they had to introduce democracy and local population participation in the management of forest and its resources (Ekoko, 2000 & Djeumo 2001). This is because they saw that there is a positive impact on



sustainability of resources when local communities are involved in the management and decision making of the forest and its resources. The participatory management approach could help local communities to alleviate poverty, and build their managerial capacity and skills (Nuesiri, 2008). However the reforms, the most recent being the 1994 forestry reforms did not give special consideration on women in community forest management. The fact that women are vulnerable, very poor as opposed to men and whose primary responsibility is to take care of the household especially children (Wentholt et al 1995) were not considered. This has made the women's participation in the management of community forest continues to be restricted by rules, norms, and historical/cultural perceptions (Muton 2007). There are left out in community organization, reforms and committees involved in the management of natural resources such as forest, water, land even when the project is intended to benefit the women (IFAD POVERTY Report 2001). Their voices and opinions are not given a chance. Though women outdo men in terms of their involvement in the use and management of natural resources, they are not given equal opportunity in the sharing of the benefits. This is because they are only considered as the invisible managers of natural resources. (Subba, Babar 2000; Volunteers for Africa 2009). The absence of women in the decision making and management of forest resources can have a negative impact not only on these women but on the project as well. On the part of the women, they are being marginalized as they are not given the opportunity to gain valuable assets. They loss their rights of gaining access to physical assets from the forest and its resources and human assets like credit, training and other

benefits which come as being part of that community. Their need for forest products are undermined in policy making. When policies in community forest management do not take into consideration the distance women take to collect firewood, the distance can increase from as short as a half kilometer to as far as 8 to 9km. This also increases the time spent in travelling from 1-2hours to 4-5hours (IFAD POVERTY Report 2001). All these pose a great problem to the health and socio economic wellbeing of the women. Other research have also pointed out that the inadequate inclusion of women in forest management considered as a man's affair, is a contributing factor to the less successfulness of the participatory management of forest resources (Nforti 2000). He further adds that much has been said and done concerning the involvement of local communities and indigenous peoples in the management of forest resources living out the women who are most vulnerable. Women therefore become victims of environmental policies of protection, management and conservation, since they advocate for the protection of the environment without considering the role of women (Volunteers for Africa 2009). They have not considered the fact that women could be better managers and conservationists since they visit the forest more for fuel wood, fodder collection, cultural practices and others. Mayoux (2008) adds that, the desire of women to share their points of view to increase participation in projects is often seen as problematic. This is because direct and indirect traditional norms have restricted women from participating fully. For example married women are not supposed to speak or argue in the presence their husbands. And very poor women can hardly participate because they lack the necessary resources to be part of the

group. Women's main activity as housewives relegates them to the background when it comes to central positions in forest management programs. These obstacles therefore restrict women from fully participating. Apart from the Cameroon government, other actors have also been involved in women and community forest management. The Reducing Emission from Deforestation and Forest Degradation REDD+ has as its main objective to reduce the green house gases. According to Varghese (2009), REDD+ is also extending its support to enhance biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation. This is because the impacts of climate change are not only on the environment but also on the economic, social, political and cultural wellbeing of the society. More to that the impact is felt differently in countries and within the countries in terms of different income groups, age class, regions, occupation and gender. Climate change therefore affects women and men in different ways and they have different approaches which are vital in contributing to climate change (Gender and Cameroon REDD+ Road map). In the case of Cameroon the REDD+ acknowledges the challenges regarding gender inequalities which has limited the access and control of women to resources. REDD+ is aware that women may not benefit under REDD+ due to the several limitations imposed on them. Therefore, to solve the governance issues the report from Gender and Cameroon's REDD+ states that REDD is making sure that local women are fully participating through women empowerment programs, capacity building and gender sensitivity national strategies. Notwithstanding all these barriers and efforts made by the different actors, there is a way forward for the involvement of women in the management of community forest in Cameroon general and the eastern

region in particular. The reforms on forestry in Cameroon are presently under review and there is hope that gender perspectives will be highly considered this time (Takang 2012). With the knowledge that a great proportion of women in Cameroon rely on the forest or land for their survival, the new policies should give much priority to women. The knowledge of women to access and control these resources as well as fully participating in the management and decision making should be considered. Policy makers, planners and development workers in general should first of all have a better understanding of the relatively and often shift roles of women and men in natural resource management. They should consider the difference in division of labor, access to resources, decision making, traditional knowledge and practices and many others (Subba & Babar 2000). They should also note that the inclusion of women in the management of natural resources, the forest being inclusive, will not only create equity but will enhance efficiency and effectiveness in community participation process (IFAD POVERTY Report 2001).

### **Methods of Data Collections and Analysis**

This research will be a descriptive research with the use of the qualitative research method to give an in-depth study on political ecology of the role of women in the management of community forest in the eastern region of Cameroon. To collect data and information, both the primary and secondary sources will be used. The secondary research on existing documents and reports will help in understanding the field of political ecology in general. The nature of forest, women and power in other parts of the world will also be considered. It will also facilitate getting the historical perspective on the

evolution of reforms on the role of women in community management in Cameroon. Then the level of the involvement of other actors like the government and NGOs through reports and documents will also be considered. In a nutshell, an overview of the problem under investigation will be gotten through the secondary data and this will lay a foundation for primary investigation through field observations, and group discussions. The case study approach will be use to collect primary data and information. Using the qualitative field research method, primary data and information will be gotten through interviews, participant observation and field notes. Interviews and group meetings will be tape recorded, transcribed and analyzed to develop the theme of the research. One of the main methods of collecting data in a qualitative research is the use of in-depth or semi structured interviews (Ritchie et al 2003). Also considering that the fact that we are dealing with a gender related theme, and in-depth face-to-face interview has become the model " feminist method" (Kelly et al. 1994: 34). Women will be free to give their perception and express their emotions about the issue freely. The flexible nature of interview will also be used to get information from different actors on the role of women in the management of community forest. Another reason for using interviews and not questionnaires is that a greater proportion of women in the rural areas of Cameroon are illiterates. Therefore it will be easy to get quality information from them through interviews. Interviews will also give the opportunity to the researcher to probe in order to gain an in-depth understanding of certain issues. Participant observation on the other hand will enhance the researcher partake and get involved in all the activities of community forest

management in the area under study during field work. The researcher will therefore observe and participate from a member's perspective (Flick 2002). The community is studied in its original settings without any reservations from the researcher. The researcher uses his eyes to also see what the others see and experience. The researcher is given the opportunity to share in the daily affairs of the community as regards forest management. This will mean fully understanding and accessing the different gender roles in the household, power play and women involvement, women's participation in community forest meetings and the different activities regarding forest, gender and power. With these the researcher will be able to understand the obstacles and way forward on the political ecology of the role of women in the management of community forest. Field notes will be used as part of the interview and participant observation. This will be used by the researcher to remember and produce a adequate meaning to information collected through interview and observation. Field notes will help to discover emerging themes which could be important in data analysis. Field notes portray the physical setting, the non-verbal communication in the interaction and others (Morse & Field, 1995).

## **Sample**

With sampling, you select cases or group of cases which will ensure the inclusion of relevant features or characteristics through which the central theme can be explored and understood (Flick 2002, Ritchie et al 2003). The sample in this research will be on two areas of community forest within the Bantu and Baka ethnic groups. The reason for choosing these different groups is because though they live side by side, they have different cultures

and perception as to the management of community forest. So the role of women in the management of community forest in these two areas might be different. The Bantu are a farming community while the Baka are a hunter gatherer community. These cases will be subdivided into groups with the purpose of getting different views on the particular phenomenon under study. This will include; families, local women groups, community forest groups, NGOs and the local government.

## **Families**

The focus of this research is on women and their role in the management of the community forest. Understanding the role of the women as household builders will be relevant to understand their place in community forest management.

## **Local women groups**

The focus of most local women's groups is to empower women and fight against poverty in local communities. Within women's groups, things that they cannot discuss in the presence of their husbands or other male counterparts are most comfortably discussed amongst fellow women.

## **Community forest groups**

The representation and participation of women in this group will be evaluated to give answers to the research questions. Also it will be important to understand the extent to which women are integrated in the governance of the community forest.

## **NGOs**

There are many international and national NGOs that are involved with gender issues and the management of forest in Cameroon. These NGOs are there to advocate for local communities to be involved in the management of forest. Some also give priority to women due to the fact that they know how women are being marginalized in many aspects.

## **Local Government officials**

The 1994 forestry law saw the devolution of power from the center to the periphery. The local government officials in the forestry sector were given the role of enforcing community forest management. They are therefore the head of the community forest at the grassroot level. Therefore they have the responsibility of making sure that both women and men are fully involved in the management of community forest.