



Photo: Wu Zhiyi/World Bank

## Gender and Land Reform

# *The Gender Dimensions of China's Forest Tenure Reform*

*A Policy Note from the East Asia and Pacific Umbrella Facility for Gender Equality*

With urbanization, vast numbers of Chinese men have migrated to cities to work, with the result that some 70 percent of China's agricultural labor force is now female. The immense scope of this change, coupled with an ambitious reform of forest land that began in 2008, called for a systematic examination of how China's rural women gain access to and exploit forest land and associated resources and services. This note is based on that examination.

"Gender Dimensions of Collective Forest Tenure Reform in China" (World Bank 2016) was prepared jointly by the World Bank and the Forest Economic and Development Research Center, a research institute affiliated with China's State Forestry Administration.

The reform of China's collectively owned forest land, begun in 2008, is the largest land-reform undertaking in modern times in terms of area and the number of people affected. Under the reform, forest lands have been contracted to rural households, allowing them more independence in exercising their rights and interests in the land, giving them opportunities to improve family incomes, and creating incentives for them to cultivate, conserve, and manage forests. The expanse of the forest lands subject to household contracting is about 2.76 billion *mu* (approximately 175 million hectares), about 60 percent of the total forest land in China. The lands are home to some 610 million people, many of them poor.

### The Reform in Brief

The reform was designed to unfold in two broad stages. In the first, collectively owned forest lands suitable for contracting were allocated on equal terms to each household in affected villages. Each household was to be issued a certificate for the share it held. By the end of 2014, tenure rights to more than 2.705 billion *mu* of forest lands had been established, accounting for 98 percent of the collectively owned forest lands in China. Certificates for 2.631 billion *mu*, or 95 percent of such lands, had been issued by the authorities to 90,769,400 farming households.

The ongoing second stage represents a deepening of the reform. It deals with subsidies and compensation, financial services (including use of forest tenure as

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collateral and transfers of forest land), forest insurance, technical services and training, farmers' associations and cooperatives, and market services.

The study on which this note is based focuses on the gender dimensions of the second stage of the reform.

China's State Forestry Administration (SFA) began monitoring the reform in 2009 on a trial basis. In 2010, the Forest Economic and Development Research Center (FEDRC) began annual monitoring of collective forest tenure reform. The monitoring program initially covering the five provinces of Liaoning, Fujian, Jiangxi, Yunnan, and Shaanxi. Gansu and Hunan provinces were added in 2011 and 2012, bringing the total to 3,500 households in seven provinces, including areas with substantial populations of ethnic minorities.

However, the monitoring had not covered the gender dimension of the reform, with the result that the gender-disaggregated data required to accurately reflect the full effects of the reform have been lacking. Building on the annual monitoring conducted by FEDRC, the study conducted by the World Bank applied a gender-focused approach to obtain data about the current reform situation, its problems, and their causes. It also included structured interviews with rural women and group meetings with local government agencies, women's federations, and village committees.

The ultimate objective of the study is to achieve better sensitivity to gender in implementation of the forest tenure reform. Specifically, this includes: (i) equality in access to and control of forest lands, as well as access to associated resources and services; (ii) women's participation and equality in decision-making concerning the conservation and utilization of forest resources; and (iii) impacts of the first two aspects on the status and well-being of women.

The World Bank has had more than 30 years of successful cooperation with China in the forestry sector. Women's access to the services and resources that are the focus of the second stage of the reform will be a critical element of the World Bank's continuing reform dialogue with its Chinese partners.

The findings of this joint study are summarized here, followed by policy recommendations.

### Socioeconomic Benefits of the Reform

The reform has brought notable socioeconomic benefits, including greater employment and income for women.

**Increased job opportunities.** Allocation of collective forest lands to rural households has created employment opportunities in planting and tending trees, forest-based farming, and farmers' forestry cooperatives. The reform has fostered employment for women in several ways. First, small and micro-forestry enterprises have boomed and generated jobs for

Processing wood in a factory in Anhui, China



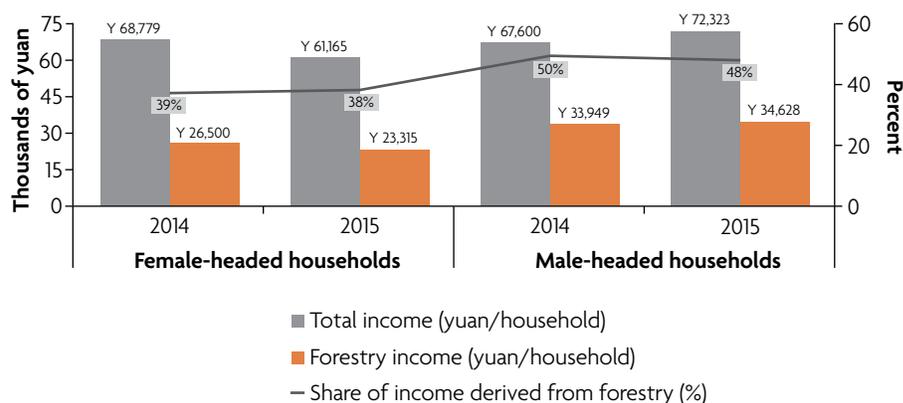
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women. Second, the need to tend the forest has created employment, since households are now responsible for looking after the forest land contracted to them. Third and most fundamentally, with many men having emigrated to cities to work for all or part of the year, women have become the chief source of labor in forestry activities, though their wages are about two-thirds those of men working in industry or in cities. Most women prefer and find jobs near home or in neighboring villages, as they need to consider family care, safety, and travel costs.

**Increased opportunities for entrepreneurship.** The reform has paved the way for women to start businesses, as it opens options for farmers to obtain the loans that are so often necessary in business. It also enables farmers to acquire more forest land through tenure transfer or bidding to sustain or expand their business for better efficiency. The government has encouraged forest farming because the income generated can reduce the need for logging. Successful forest farming requires patience and care, and these are among women's strong points.

**Increased income.** The reform has helped to increase women's income, though the share of forestry income in the total income of female-headed households is more than 10 percentage points lower than in male-headed households (figure 1). The forest-related income of female-headed households is derived principally from forest farming, which is not the case for male-headed households. However, the total household incomes of both groups are similar.

**Figure 1.**  
Total and forestry-related income of male- and female-headed households



**Technology empowerment.** After forest land is contracted to rural households, farmers have an incentive to maximize their returns by learning about the most profitable trees and forest farming practices. Women have an even greater incentive because they start out with less knowledge than men on the subject of forest-related technology. More than 38 percent of the sample households reported having benefited from forestry science and technological services. About 35 percent of the sample villages considered women to have more access to forestry technologies than they did before the reform.

**Improved family and social status for women.** Expanded opportunities to find employment or start a business have greatly strengthened women's ability to contribute to household incomes, giving them more say in household decisions. Enhanced status of women within the household in turn leads to higher status in society.

### Major Gender-Related Problems Associated with the Reform

The study also revealed some serious gender-related problems in connection with the reform.

**Involvement in decision making.** More than half of all decisions on important family issues and forestry activities are made by male heads of household, either in isolation or after discussion with family members. About 40 percent of decisions are made jointly by husband and wife. Only about 5 percent of decisions are made solely by women.

Women's role in decision making at the village level has been similarly indirect and subordinate. During deliberative meetings on forest reform plans, voting is predominantly by men (over 80 percent), although 60–70 percent of the sample households reported consulting other household members beforehand and debriefing them afterwards.

A light moment at a tree nursery in Anhui, China



Photo: Wu Zhiyi/World Bank

**Signature on forest tenure certificate.** At present, only the head of household (usually a man) is officially recognized on the forest tenure certificate. In more than 95 percent of the sample households the man's name alone appears on the certificate, and this is considered the norm. Although female heads of household are more receptive than all heads of household to the idea of women signing the certificate, about one in six households headed by women still choose to put a man's name on their certificate.

Most women in the sample do not fully understand the meaning of the tenure certificate even if most of them have seen it or know of its existence. This could be attributed partly to the fact that their legal status as stakeholders is not clearly defined or reflected on the certificate.

**Effects of changes in civil status.** Although women generally were not disadvantaged in the initial allocation of forest land, those who moved to another village after their marriage, after divorcing, or after being widowed were likely to lose their original share of forest land (either to the village or to other family members) and not receive a new one. Even when a woman's residence registration is transferred to the new village, she may not receive a new allocation for a very long time.

**Forestry mortgage loans.** About 10 percent of the sample households have applied for mortgage loans using their forest tenure rights; of these, only 2 percent, all male-headed, have succeeded. About 90 percent of those who have obtained a loan have used it for forestry activities in accordance with the loan agreement.

**Forestry insurance.** Forestry insurance minimizes economic loss from natural disasters. The survey reveals that about 32 percent of rural households have never heard of forest insurance, although 57 percent would want it. About 36 percent of sample households are enrolled in forest insurance, most of them (93 percent) through a collective (blanket) policy that is paid for almost entirely by the government. Some 20 percent of households have applied for commercial insurance; about half of them actually obtained coverage. Overall, one observes little difference by gender.

**Forestry subsidies and ecological compensation.** About half of respondents are aware of the compensation offered to farmers whose forest land is located in a designated ecological forest, a rate of awareness that is almost double that of other forest-related subsidies. Only 2–8 percent of the sample households have applied for subsidies, with a similarly low percentage actually obtaining them. Female heads of household have less access to the subsidies than their male counterparts.

Linked to this are issues related to the credibility of the current scheme of forestry subsidies, which faces challenges of fairness in the selection of beneficiaries, high administration costs, and excessive discretion. The SFA aims to move to merit-based awards, which would still be selective and thus subject to some of the disadvantages of the current system. By contrast, the straightforward criteria of the ecological compensation scheme (farmers are eligible as long as their forest land is located in a designated ecological forest) make it easy to manage, with much lower administrative costs and less discretion by officials.

**Farmers' organizations.** Among the sample households, 14 percent (evenly distributed by gender) have joined forestry cooperatives. About 58 percent of female household heads expressed a willingness to join a cooperative, higher than the rate for men. Women tend to believe that cooperatives can help them gain better access to information and services. More than 80 percent of respondents of both genders explained that they had not participated in a cooperative because none was operating in their vicinity.

**Forestry technical services.** Among the sample households, the rates of awareness of and access to forestry-related technical services were similar for both genders. Awareness was high (over 90 percent), but access was much lower (about 40 percent). Households have a strong demand (76 percent) for technical services. Demand is evenly distributed by gender, though female household heads show stronger interest in learning.

Hardly any training is designed specifically for women. Most training is conceived for large forest operations, with little attention paid to ordinary farmers and rural women. Moreover, the training topics are usually determined beforehand, and women's opinions and needs are rarely solicited.

**Market information and services.** The study shows that ordinary farmers, men and women alike, have great difficulty obtaining information and services related to trading forest tenure certificates and forest products. The access gap is wider here than for technical service.

## Key Recommendations

This study demonstrates an urgent need to take the gender dimension into consideration in formulating and implementing reform policies. Recommendations emerging from the study are described below. The recommendations fall into the general categories of: (i) improving the household contractual system for forest lands; (ii) enhancing the management of collective forest rights; (iii) improving forestry policies and services; (iv) improving the gender sensitivity of policy making, dissemination and monitoring; and (v) other recommendations for the longer term.

### Improve the household contractual system for forest lands

**Adopt multi-signatory forestry tenure certificates.** Three percent of collective forest land has yet to be allocated, and, in those areas where the reform was first implemented, contracts will soon expire and need to be renewed. It is a good time, therefore, for the forest authorities to make clear in both the forest tenure certificate and the standard contract for forest land that *all family members* have an equal right. A good time to apply the standard contract would be upon renewal of certificates.

**Streamline the allocation of existing collective forest land.** Villages are allowed to retain a small amount of their collective forest land (usually 5 percent, though this is not prescribed by law) as a reserve for new members of the village or other purposes. Some provinces and counties have already experimented with systems that capitalize forestry rights and issue residents shares in commonly owned property. Such initiatives can protect the rights and interests of women whose civil status changes, enabling them to retain their rights if they leave the village or sell their forest land.

If the decision-making and voting processes used in any new allocation of land by villages were to use secret ballots instead of a show of hands, women, in particular, would be freer to express their true preferences. The forest authority and local women's federation could send observers to observe and guide such deliberations and to encourage women's participation.

**Review and supervise village codes and reform plans.** Forestry authorities, in conjunction with local legal authorities, could usefully provide guidance on village codes, reform plans, and other social contracts to ensure that (i) new members of the village, notably women who marry into it, enjoy the same entitlements and rights as other villagers with respect to land allocation and voting; (ii) until married women are allocated land in their new host villages, their original village does not reclaim the land previously allocated to them; (iii) rules, regulations, or practices in village codes that violate the fundamental principle of gender equality and infringe women's legal rights are abolished or modified; and (iv) for new or renewed plans for the allocation of forest land, the local forest authority links the review and amendment of reform plans to villages' logging quotas and other preferential policies, suspending quotas or subsidies until the necessary corrections are made.

### **Enhance the management of collective forest rights**

**Improve the regulatory framework for transfer of forest tenure rights.** The promulgation of rules and regulations on transfers of forest tenure, as well as the development of a standardized contract for transfers of forestry rights (to be signed by all adult members of the household), would be useful steps for the SFA to take. The authorities responsible for transfers of forestry rights could publicize basic information about the transfer transaction to ensure that all members of the household, especially women, have timely access to information.

**Establish grievance redress mechanisms for rural women.** County governments should consider establishing dispute-resolution groups focused on women's rights, including forestry-related rights, and appoint liaisons to those groups comprising representatives of the county women's federation, prosecutors, courts, and other relevant bureaus and agencies. Local women's federations and other nongovernmental organizations are also encouraged to set up liaisons with local forestry authorities to monitor cases where women's forestry rights are compromised or infringed and to help settle related lawsuits by providing legal aid.

### **Improve forestry policies and services**

**Improve policies on forestry mortgage loans.** SFA, the People's Bank of China (China's central bank), and the Banking Supervision Committee have an opportunity to collaborate to improve rules and regulations pertaining to mortgage loans, notably by requiring applicants to provide written evidence that all stakeholders in the household support the mortgage application.

The asset appraisal mechanism for mortgaged assets could be streamlined, particularly with regard to small loans (<¥ 300,000). Terms for loans could usefully be extended to match the productive cycles of forestry activities.

A farmer works in his chestnut orchard



Photo: Wu Zhiyi/World Bank

A mechanism could be explored to tie forestry mortgage loans with loan subsidies for women—for example, to subsidize the interest rate to between 3 and 5 percent so that loans are both attractive and manageable for the rural population.

**Improve the micro-credit program for women.** Governmental budgeting departments at all levels might consider increasing the budget allocated to the anti-poverty micro-credit program for women managed by the All-China Women's Federation to make it possible to fund more than one credit per village per year and thereby improve rural women's chances of obtaining subsidized or discounted credit. The term of small credits for women might be extended to at least three years to take into account the characteristics of forestry activities.

**Optimize forest insurance policies.** If subsidized forest insurance were expanded to cover more collective forests in rural areas it would better protect rural households against risk. The type of forestry assets eligible for insurance could be expanded to include forest farming activities that are well-suited to women's circumstances.

**Reform policies for forestry subsidies.** Existing subsidies could be restructured from individual forestry activity to public goods and service. This would enable the current selective approach to awarding subsidies to be changed to a blanket approach. Funds previously spent to administer and oversee complicated subsidies could be used to extend the coverage of ecological compensation, micro-credit for women, and subsidized forest insurance.

**Foster forestry cooperatives and women's participation.** Bringing farmers together through the development of cooperatives would increase their ability to obtain financing on favorable terms. Forestry and financial authorities could then collaborate to assess the creditworthiness of cooperatives and villages instead of that of individual farmers. Ways to raise women's participation in forestry cooperatives should be explored—for example, by increasing the proportion of women among cooperative directors.

**Expand technical and market services.** Funding for technical services at the local level could be increased to ensure that technical extension stations possess adequate technical capacity and resources to provide guidance in tenure management and related technical areas.

Training could be planned in consultation with women's federations to ensure that training sessions meet real needs. Whenever possible, training should be delivered by local experts. Outsourcing of public services could be explored in pursuit of better efficiency and greater expertise. Sound evaluation systems are needed to assess the effectiveness of various training programs, linking government funding to how well programs do in imparting to rural women the skills they need for forestry activities.

### **Improve the gender sensitivity of policy making, dissemination, and monitoring**

To raise awareness of the gender dimension of the forest reform among those who make and implement forestry policy, the SFA and the All-China Women's Federation should consider organizing workshops, training sessions, and seminars; conducting joint research; and pursuing other cooperative efforts.

Major national forestry policies could usefully be reviewed from the gender perspective before being promulgated or amended. Such reviews could be organized by the SFA using a roster of experts consisting of legal and gender scholars, leaders of women's organizations, and representatives of forestry authorities. Women's federations at all levels and other organizations devoted to the protection of women's rights would logically be included as key stakeholders. Survey methods could be improved to ensure that the views and concerns of women are not overshadowed by those of the male head of household.

### **Other suggestions for the longer term**

The study ultimately points to the need to improve rural women's education and capacity and, to a lesser degree, to overcome their fear of prejudice and domestic violence—all of which require a concerted, long-term effort within and beyond the forestry sector. The nine-year compulsory education for rural girls could be enforced by tying government support for rural schools to the number of students they graduate. Increasing the allowance for students in rural boarding schools would cut down the dropout rate, especially for girls.

A stage in the production process



Photo: Wu Zhiyi/World Bank

Continuing education is needed for rural women, especially those who remain illiterate. Such education could be promoted through funding for nongovernmental organizations and volunteers who offer night school for women.

Following the passage of a national law against domestic violence that took effect in March 2016, local women's federations should join hands with police, prosecutors, the courts, and the offices responsible for registering marriages and divorces to combat domestic violence.

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