



The Mighty Shea Tree: How Gender Matters for Restoration

Gender differences in the use of the Shea tree (*Vitellaria paradoxa*) shape its management and stewardship. Gendered differences in the division of household labour result in women agriculturalists having **specialized knowledge** of the species related to its culinary and medicinal use and to the local trade of its derivatives: Shea fruits and butter.

Women can thereby classify individual trees into many distinct types or “**farmer varieties**” based on their beneficial properties or characteristics. Men frequently recognize different “farmer varieties” than women and tend to prioritize the tree for different purposes, such as for its provision of shade and ecological functions (improvement of soil fertility).

Ethnicity and culture also influence preferences with respect to tree species. In Burkina Faso, Shea is relied upon by some ethnic groups (such as the Moose and Gurunsi, who are agriculturalists) as a

source of dietary fat, while others (such as Fulbe, who are herders) rely on animal fat and thereby depend more on trees that provide fodder for livestock, like the acacia (*Faidherbia albida*).

As a result, the dominant tree species found in their landscapes reflect culturally-specific preferences and patterns of tree management. **Landscapes are thus influenced by more than just climate, soil and water.** They are influenced by socio-cultural systems and the different interests of community members, who rely on distinct tree species or varieties and who use their gender-specific skills to manage and use these.



Making shea butter
Photo: Bioversity International/B. Vinceti

Forest restoration promises to not only enhance the ecological integrity of degraded and deforested lands but also to benefit the people who rely on those lands for numerous products and ecosystem services.

If we are to restore vast areas of the globe – a goal embodied in the **Bonn Challenge to restore 150 million hectares of degraded and deforested lands by 2020** – we need to bring the knowledge, skills, and interests of different communities and their diverse constituents, both male and female, to bear on the global effort. Only then will it be possible to reestablish resilient ecosystems that yield gender-equitable benefits to present and future generations.

This brief is based on a blog for IUCN's *Gender and Restoration case study story series*: Elias. M. 'The Mighty Shea: How women and men sculpt landscapes – and why this matters for restoration.' 20 August 2014.



The Mighty Shea Tree. Photo: Bioversity International/M. Elias



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