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Gender & Intersectional Aspects in Scientific Research on Forest-Agriculture Frontiers

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Highlights:

- A close analysis of the scientific literature on gender and intersectionality in forest-agriculture frontiers across Central Africa and Southeast Asia provides insights into underlying inequalities and power relations.
- Using a critical discourse analysis approach, the results show distinctive differences in the representation of gender, intersectional aspects and overall perspectives in relation to geographical regions, research objectives and methods used by scholars.
- Critical gender scholarship provides alternative ideas and radical re-framing of development but remain as niche studies.

The Importance of Gender and Intersectionality in Frontier Change

Forest-agriculture frontiers and their transformation in the context of global development are sites where narratives and discourses reflect unbalanced power structures and can result in inequalities and marginalisation. However, narratives are not only reproduced in practice, but also in the fields of policy or science. Research on narratives can help to make visible underlying politics and power relations and to enable understanding of how marginalisation is reproduced.

This study offers specific insights into how gender and intersectional aspects in forest-agriculture frontiers are represented in the scientific literature. This is particularly important as gender has been understood in recent years as an important element of social relations that determines, among other things, processes of ecological change, power relations or access to resources (Elmhirst & Resurreccion, 2012). However, it is not only gender that is important when considering marginalisation, but also other multiple and intersecting social factors such as class, race, age, sexuality or ethnicity. This study therefore applied an intersectional approach, which means that gender and other factors are not considered alone or side by side but as overlapping, interacting and partly reinforcing each other (Kabeer, 2015).

In this respect, this research included two strands of analysis. The first part looks at how gender and intersectional issues are investigated and portrayed by scientific research, identifying prominent narratives and the extent to which marginalised voices are represented. The second part focuses on a brief assessment of whether research on gender has changed over the past decades or whether it has perpetuated the same narratives. The considerations for the second part were based on key literature on gender and development (Cornwall, 2018; Cornwall and Rivas, 2015; Arora-Jonsson, 2011; Vercillo et al., 2021; Kabeer, 2015; Wallace, 2020).

Conceptual Framework, Data and Methods

The study was conducted as an internship within the FairFrontiers project. The approaches used were developed under the supervision of Grace Wong at the Research Institute for Humanity and Nature (RIHN). The main research objective was to identify narratives on gender and intersectional perspectives of marginalisation in forest-agriculture frontiers within scientific research, with a regional focus on countries in Central Africa and Southeast Asia. To achieve this, the conceptual framework of Critical Discourse Analysis by van Dijk (2015) was employed. Critical Discourse Analysis is specifically concerned with analysing social power and understanding and

challenging social inequalities. This was accomplished by creating a suitable corpus of data for qualitative analysis of these themes. All the review steps (Figure 2), including the elaboration of the result, were carried out between March and May 2023. The data corpus consists of only English-language literature from the Web of Science database.

To create a suitable data corpus, a set of keywords was developed and applied (Figure 1). The results of the keyword search were first filtered using the database filters “Citation Topics”, “Web of Science Categories”, and “Languages”, and excluded unrelated scientific fields and non-English papers.

ALL=((gender OR wom?n) AND (indigenous OR intersection* OR age OR migrat* OR class OR ethnicity OR race OR sexuality OR lgbt* OR youth OR elderly OR religio* OR generation*)) AND (local OR rural OR smallhold* OR farmer OR indigenous) AND (forest* OR “forest-agriculture” OR plantation OR frontier OR edge OR agroforest* OR agriculture) AND (development OR sustainab* OR “agrarian change” OR “land use change” OR enclosure OR transition OR reform* OR dispossession OR grab* OR access OR “environmental change” OR deforestation) AND (Southeast Asia OR Africa))

Figure 1: Final Set of Keywords

The remaining results were further sorted by scanning and reading the titles and abstracts, which narrowed them down to 114 potential papers. In the process of further sorting and analysing, all 114 papers were also assigned to different categories and their basic information was collected, following the methodological approaches of Vercillo et al.’s (2021) systematic review of peer-reviewed literature on gender and climate change in Africa. A final corpus of 29 studies (14 for Southeast Asia and 15 for Central Africa) was then selected from the 114 for further qualitative analysis. Three criteria were used in the final selection of articles: (1) the paper clearly addresses a country either in Southeast Asia or Central Africa or the region in general; (2) the text focuses on both gender and intersectional aspects; (3) the paper explores forest-agriculture frontiers either directly or indirectly.

It is striking that our search terms found that most of the selected papers in the data corpus referred to either Indonesia or Cameroon, within the regions (see Table 1). In addition, different types of forest-agriculture frontiers

were identified, including plantations, swidden landscapes, agroforestry areas or other areas between agricultural and forest use.

Table 1: Final Data Corpus & Examined Countries

Countries	Number of Publications
Indonesia	9
Cambodia	1
Southeast Asia in general	2
Myanmar	1
Malaysia	1
Cameroon	9
Cameroon, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo (together)	1
Democratic Republic of Congo	4
Gabon	1
In total	29

Green: Central African References; Blue: Southeast Asian References

The final data corpus was then coded using open coding techniques in conjunction with the open-source qualitative coding software Taguette, as well as Citavi and Excel. All codes with their quotation and text segments were collected and sorted into tables, with some passages having multiple codes. After structuring and discussions, 59 final codes emerged from the process. While some of the codes relate to the content of the studies, others are more descriptive of the motivation or perspective of the authors. Some codes were specific only for the Southeast Asian or Central African texts. Overall, all studies were carefully compared, and patterns and narratives from the data corpus were identified and thoroughly discussed.

All methodological steps of the literature study are summarized in Figure 2.

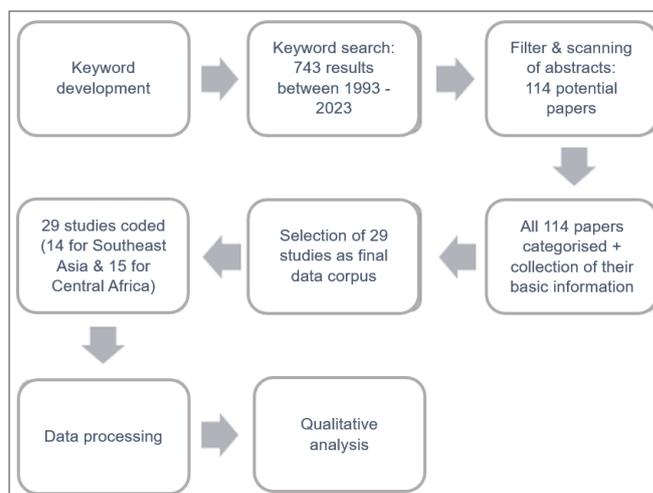


Figure 2: Methodological Steps of the Study

Results and Discussion

In the qualitative analysis, the first step was to directly compare the two focus regions and their narratives. This initial comparative analysis revealed patterns in relation to geographical region, showing that gender, intersectional aspects, and forest-agriculture frontiers are studied and presented differently by scholars working and researching in the respective regions. For example, studies on Southeast Asia more overtly named and addressed forest-agriculture frontiers and examined them in the context of land dispossession and land change in relation to plantation expansion (e.g., Julia & White, 2012), while studies on Central Africa mostly referred to frontier spaces indirectly and tended to situate them in other contexts, such as agricultural development, crop or production enhancement strategies, forest or agricultural management practices and related participation (e.g., Fani et al., 2021).

In the regional comparison, not only did the thematic contexts differ, but also their perspectives. Overall, studies dealing with gender and land dispossession or land-use change tended to explore historical contexts more deeply and be more critical and reformist in their observations than those dealing with crop or production enhancement strategies or agricultural development. The Southeast Asian studies in general had a higher frequency of codes critical of capitalist expansion and development, emphasising different aspects of equity and equalities more explicitly than Central African studies.

Conversely, the majority of Central African studies tended to represent more mainstream development agendas, referring to common narratives such as the link between women, agriculture and food security, or making statements about women and poverty, or (Global South) women as vulnerable or burdened (see Table 2) (Arora-Jonsson, 2011; Elmhirst & Resurreccion, 2012; Gururani, 2002; Kabeer, 2015).

Most Southeast Asian studies not only portrayed women in different contexts, but also as less passive in their social roles, and more confident and capable of action.

Table 2: Examples of reproduced narratives

Geographical Region & Reference	Code(s)	Cases from the Literature
Central Africa Tabe-Ojong et al. (2021), p. 199	Women as responsible for food (crops/ production) or agriculture;	"This is expected a priori because of more female involvement in the cultivation of such food crops, with women even looked up to as better producers of legumes. Legume production is usually not very energy driven, making it a good activity for women."
Central Africa Veuthey & Gerber (2010), p. 174	Women & poverty/ feminization of poverty;	"Its mission is to mobilize women in order to improve their living conditions — that is, to reduce the strenuousness of women's work and to fight against the feminization of poverty — by organizing the production and commercialization of non-timber forest products (NTFP). Adjowa came to the conclusion that the realization of these objectives comes through the conservation of the livelihood and monetary resources of women, which is, in this case, the forest, and particularly the moabi, given the fact that its oil represents an important source of income for women of the productive regions and that its scarcity increases women's working hours."
Central Africa Brown (2011), p. 171 & 172	Women of Global South as especially vulnerable/burdened;	"Increasing global average air and ocean temperatures will have an effect on those in the global south who are already poor and marginalized. African populations are expected to be more vulnerable because of a higher than the global average degree of change, high levels of dependence on natural resources, and a low degree of adaptive capacity. Vulnerability to climate change is also a function of differences in gender and, while it is a contested concept, many feel that poor, rural women will be most vulnerable due to a dependence on natural resources, gendered divisions of labour, physical mobility and access to decision-making at household and community levels."

In this context, it was interesting that 'agency' was one of the most frequently assigned codes, and it also had different interpretations that support the above statements (see Table 3). In the papers on Central Africa, agency was almost exclusively equated with women's ability to actively participate in either economic or managerial activities or decision-making processes to strengthen their overall economic position. This ability can be achieved, for example, through better participation, infrastructure, knowledge or support (Brown, 2011; Fani et al., 2021; Fonjong & Athanasia, 2007; Guillaume, 2017; MacNeil et al., 2017; Mbile et al., 2019; Stiem and Krause, 2016; Tabe-Ojong et al., 2021; Yobo et al., 2020). In Southeast Asian studies, on the other hand, agency is also associated with active participation, but most studies go beyond this interpretation. Agency is also the expression of self-confidence and autonomy, as well as the ability to act, to change or to resist (e.g., De Vos and Delabre, 2018; Elmhirst et al., 2017; Julia and White, 2012; Lamb et al., 2017; Levien, 2017; Morgen, 2017; Park and White, 2017; Tran, 2023). In addition to offering alternative views and interpretations, Southeast Asian studies also better represented the perspectives of the marginalised.

Table 3: Examples of various interpretations of “agency”

Region & Reference	Code	Cases from the Literature
Central Africa Stiem & Krause (2016), p. 117	Women’s (and marginalized) agency;	“Once women are better educated, men’s acceptance of female participation in forest governance increases considerably, as a statement during a focus group discussion with men in Buya 1 illustrates: “It’s important that women have the capacities, but they need to educate themselves to reinforce these capacities. Then they can also do the same work as men.””
Central Africa Mbile et al. (2019), p. 2900	Women’s (and marginalized) agency;	“The criteria: educational level of individuals, their roles in organizations and financial assets, can constitute potentially restrictive criteria impacting the success of women and girls involved in restoration activities.”
Southeast Asia De Vos & Delabre (2018), p. 225	Women’s (and marginalized) agency;	“Furthermore, if studies and governance processes are restricted to examining women’s participation and voice in ‘front room’ spaces, they neglect women’s agency in alternative spaces, such as demonstrations, in household spaces, or in fields and gardens. We showed how women used both direct and indirect ways of expressing their voices to claim rights, sometimes challenging dominant social norms of how they should behave.”
Southeast Asia Elmhirst et al. (2017), p. 17	Women’s (and marginalized) agency;	“According to our survey findings, in the latter, there is more direct everyday involvement of women in oil palm activities and decision-making in Kampung TKI, and much of this relates to the life histories of women in Kampung TKI, in particular their experience as oil palm labourers in Malaysia, which gives them the knowledge and confidence to input into decision-making.”

Further analysis showed that the patterns described above are strongly related to the objectives and theoretical approaches of the respective studies and, despite regional patterns, cannot be generalised within a regional context per se. Overall, the objectives for studying gender in forest-agriculture frontiers of the data corpus can be broadly categorized as below (see Table 4).

'Category 1' scholars have made the greatest effort to examine gendered experiences and perspectives in the context of change, and their studies have included perspectives of the marginalised. In addition, there was a strong correlation between 'Category 1' studies and studies that took critical theoretical approaches, with more radical pursuits of reframing development narratives (Julia and White, 2012 - Feminist Political Ecology approach or Park, 2021 - Feminist (agrarian) Political Economy & Feminist Political Ecology approach). Overall, the analysis confirmed that the presentation of gender, intersectional or marginalised perspectives depends on both the objective and the approach, which can either reinforce or disrupt existing perspectives on gender and marginalisation in relation to changes in frontier spaces.

Table 4: Categorized objectives of study with examples of used approaches/ frameworks

Category	Aim of Study	Examples of used Approaches/ Frameworks/ Goals
1	Exploring gendered experiences, impacts, dynamics & responses to (land) change	(Reflexive) Ethnographic Approach; Feminist Political Ecology; Sustainable Livelihoods Framework & Intersectional Lens; Political Ecology; Feminist (Agrarian) Political Economy & Feminist Political Ecology; Comparative (Political Ecology) Analysis/ Approach; Feminist Ecological Economics & Extraction Conflict Analysis; Agrarian Political Economy Perspective; Actor-centred power lens & thematic and content analysis; Examining livelihood implications & Theoretical perspectives on neoliberalism, rights and access;
2	(Enhancing) participation in decision-making processes, management & policies	Observational Study & Land Use Role-Playing Games; Agarwal’s Participation Framework; Feminist Political Ecology; Qualitative approaches to assessment of Women’s participation; Examining dynamics and power relations within local organizations; Assessment of women-led restoration activities; Gender as framework to examine roles, relations, and power patterns, based on Agarwal’s participation framework;
3	Assessing/ enhancing performance & positions, Supporting economic development	Tobit Censored Regression Model; Commodity Value Chain Framework; Examine livelihood strategies; Economic empowerment of women; Cross-section data analysis;

Green: Central African References; Blue: Southeast Asian References

The regional patterns emerge because most of the Southeast Asian studies in the data corpus (13 out of 14 papers) examined gender and intersectional aspects according to the first category of aims and adopted exclusively critical approaches, while Central African studies predominated in the second and third categories and related approaches (see Table 4). Only four Central African studies pursued more reformative approaches. In this sense, the Southeast Asian studies appear highly contrasted to the Central African studies and their presentation of gender and intersectional aspects.

The analysis also highlighted a few observations common to all studies of the data corpus. Practically no study sees gender as naturally given and static, but rather recognised the intertwined and dynamic relations between gender, gender roles, marginalisation processes and inequalities. Most studies also recognised intersectionality, or the interweaving of gender with other aspects. Age, ethnicity, and class were the most prominent intersections. However, gender and intersectional issues did not go beyond the binary, and gendered perspectives in most papers either addressed

women or women and men. Only one study introduced a queer theoretical approach (Tran, 2023). This is also the only study to mention LGBTQIA+ perspectives in the context of forest frontiers. This lack of representation points to the persistence of hegemonic ideas about gender, development, and the development sector in general.

What do the results imply?

Overall, the study shows that there are distinctive differences in scientific representations of gender, intersectionality, and marginalisation in relation to scholarship in geographic regions. In this regard, one can question whether the results suggest any changes in perceptions and research on gender in the development context in recent decades.

Over the past three decades, feminist scholars and development institutions have held opposing views on gender and intersectional issues, which are constantly being publicly negotiated and expressed in narratives that shape everything from practice to policy and academia. While feminist and more radical positions aim to dismantle existing and patriarchal structures, others tend to embed issues and support existing hegemonies (Cornwall, 2018).

In this regard, agency and empowerment and their interpretations are good examples of understanding changes and actors negotiating gendered processes in the development sector (see Table 3 and related abstracts).

This is reflected in our discussion of the literature: while feminist and more critical approaches pursue agency and empowerment in terms of autonomy, self-determination and choice, implementing development institutions often frame agency and empowerment as a potential for supporting capitalist ideas and established power structures (Cornwall, 2018). In the latter case, a common development strategy would be to, for example, increase the number of women in decision-making, but this does not automatically mean independent and equal action for the marginalised. While differentiated positions on agency are also evident in the data corpus, qualitative analysis of individual text extracts and linked narratives have shown that even in studies with less radical approaches, agency has come to mean more than simply increasing women's participation in processes and institutions. In

many studies, the importance of marginalised groups' own capacity to act, as well as social power dynamics are recognised (Brown, 2011). Sources agree that more provocative ideas and influences from feminist approaches are slowly entering the development mainstream but continue to clash with the power-hegemonic structures and views of international development strategies, which can remove or weaken the transformative character (Wallace, 2020).

Our analysis demonstrated how certain themes and narratives continue to be reproduced in less reformist study approaches, such as women and their association with or responsibility for agriculture and food security, the link of women with poverty, or the portrayal of women (particularly from the Global South) as particularly vulnerable or burdened (see Table 2 and related abstracts) (Arora-Jonsson, 2011; Elmhirst and Resurreccion, 2012; Gururani, 2002; Kabeer, 2015). These narratives continue to be used by power-exerting institutions to legitimise women and marginalised people as 'good' actors for development investments and interventions (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015). Thus, the representation of gender and intersectionality in research can be both a means for enhancing the perspectives of the marginalised, and also as a tool of driving classic economic development agendas.

Perspectives on gender and intersectional issues are complex and dynamic, and policy agendas on gender and development are also evolving, especially since the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations in 2015. The SDG 5 on gender equality can be seen as an improvement on the previous Millennium Development Goals, as it gives gender its own importance and seeks to address the root causes of inequality for women and girls, with clear targets. Apart from fundamental principles, the SDGs have adapted feminist critiques and perspectives, such as the recognition of the burden of women's unpaid reproductive and care work, the accountability of public authorities, or the concept of genuine inclusion. The latter is reflected, for example, in Goal 5.5: "Women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities at all levels of decision-making". (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Federal Statistical Office, 2023; Kabeer, 2015; Wallace 2020).

Despite this progress and potential, processes of

negotiation on gender and development continue as gender perspectives, for example, still do not go beyond binary understandings and consider discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. In addition, most development agendas continue to pursue a growth-oriented, neo-liberal economy. Thus, the feminist perspectives do not create radical departures from established development agendas but rather, are embedded or subsumed within existing processes (Esquivel, 2016; Wallace, 2020).

Conclusions

This review has shown that, alongside studies that fit into the existing power structures of international development cooperation, there are alternative and reformative research on gender and intersectional aspects in forest-agriculture frontiers. They follow, among other things, feminist impulses to break down hierarchies and empower marginalised people. In contrast to papers reflecting traditional development agendas, these critical papers are often qualitative and case-specific in nature, and while they challenge established narratives, they do not necessarily provide clear proposals for policy action. Moreover, these papers represent a niche scholarship of critical and feminist theoretical approaches, and are limited to certain geographies (such as, from the findings in this study, Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia). Nevertheless, this group of critical studies clearly highlights the importance of making visible exercised power and marginalised perspectives within forest-agriculture frontiers.

This review has also shown how global development policy reflects its interests and narratives in scientific research on gender, intersectional aspects, and forest-agriculture frontiers, allowing these ideas to be further reproduced and legitimised in public discourse. In this respect, this study builds on previous studies such as Wong et al. (2022), which has suggested a link between global political interests and science. Findings from this review encourage further exploration and research on the relationships and processes between science and development, especially related to gendered and intersectional power relations. This could be supported, for example, by a larger and longer-term review analysis to include other focus regions and grey development literature in addition to scientific papers, and to maintain

an open and rigorous qualitative approach to examine these complex issues. Last but not least, we strongly encourage a critical analysis and questioning of gender and intersectionality issues, including their binaries, in both research and the development sector.

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About FairFrontiers:

FairFrontiers is a research project examining transformations of tropical forest-agriculture frontiers, applying inter- and transdisciplinary approaches to ask: whose interests drive the transformations of forest-agriculture frontiers, who benefits and who is made precarious? What are possible policy options that can deliver ecologically sustainable and socially equitable outcomes?

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