

CHAPTER 10

GENDER AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS IN SWIDDEN AND HOMEGARDENS IN LATIN AMERICA

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Abstract. Structure, composition, and functions of homegardens are said to be closely related to the social structure of households, but this issue is not often researched. An analysis of the literature on swidden and homegardens in Latin America shows that such interrelationships become transparent when examining the gender division of labor, gendered access to garden resources including land, trees, and other plants, and gendered control over subsistence and cash crops and income derived from them. Social status related to gardening, gendered knowledge distribution and transmission, and social dynamics leading to change in gardening and gardens are also important parameters in this matrix. A review of 39 Latin American case studies dealing with swidden or homegardens revealed that women are by far the prominent garden managers across its sub-regions. Aside from the multiple material benefits provided by gardens, other drivers that tend to ensure that women will strive to maintain them include their emotional and spiritual values and the positive social status that productive and beautiful gardens confer. Homegardening is a 'respectable' way for women to contribute to subsistence production and manifest specialized knowledge and skills without competing with men. However, commercialization may be undermining both women's control and the benefits they derive from homegardening as well as the complex structure and function of homegardens.

1. INTRODUCTION

Past research on homegardens shows that the composition, structure, and functions of gardens are interrelated with their economic, social, and cultural functions (see for example Wiersum, 2006). However, the social dimensions of homegardens have only rarely been researched in-depth. Social factors influencing swidden and homegardens

have not been discussed in any depth in the agroforestry literature in Latin America. It is particularly by examining gender relations within swidden and homegardens that the complex interrelationships between social structures and gardens as land use systems become transparent. Examining gender relationships is also of great importance since, across most of Latin America, swidden and homegardening are largely women's domains, and homegardens may help to mitigate the inequalities between the sexes that are evident across the region.

This chapter is based on a review of the literature on swidden and homegardens in Latin America (that which is published in English as well as the little available to the author in Spanish) that reported sex-disaggregated information. Eight cases were found that focus on homegardens within Mayan production systems in Mesoamerica, whereas 12 cases refer to non-Mayan indigenous or mestizo (mixed Indian-Spanish descent) populations in the same region. In South America, 14 cases were found that deal with Amazonian Amerindian populations and swidden gardens, whereas only five cases were found that focus on homegardens among non-Amerindian South American populations, four of which are also in the Amazon basin. While swidden gardens and homegardens are distinct land use systems, they are both agroforestry systems that are rich in species diversity, possessing "sophisticated spatial structures and dynamics" and manifesting sustained yields (Michon, 1983). Further, while there has been very little study of homegardens among Amazonian Amerindians (for reasons for this see Heckler, 2001), there is a rich literature on swidden gardening.

It must be recognized that a thorough comparative effort would require a substantially richer bibliographical underpinning. Further, the information provided in the 39 case studies that are reviewed here is very uneven and hence often difficult to compare. Thus, in analyzing this literature, the emphasis is on setting out certain similarities and identifying some of the potential explanatory factors in order to illustrate the nature and complexity of homegardens as social systems and of gender relations in swidden and homegardening, and to begin to relate these to the structure, composition, and functions of these gardens as agroecological systems. Finally, it is acknowledged that the 39 case studies analyzed herein do not cover the full spectrum of gardens across the sub-regions, or its ethnic, racial, and indigenous groups, and therefore the results can only be generalized within the limits of the study.

2. THE GENDER DIVISION OF LABOR IN GARDENING IN LATIN AMERICA

The gender division of labor not only provides many insights into how households organize homegarden production; it also highlights how contributions and responsibilities of individuals differ according to their positions within the household, which is very important for understanding the incentives, opportunities, and constraints that they confront when managing homegardens and how such individual factors influence homegarden structure, composition and functions. Many studies across the world seek to analyze the household division of labor in homegardens by sex and age, principally with the aim of understanding how