

North America/ Mexico

Empowering Agenda?

Mexico needs to create an enabling environment for women to participate meaningfully in the protection of its vast biodiversity

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The history of environmental policy in Mexico, in terms of conservation programmes, may be divided into two distinct periods. The first, 1994 to 2000, followed the Rio Conference when a Secretariat for Environmental, Natural Resources and Fisheries (SEMARNAP) was created. The second period, 2000 to 2006, was when the fisheries component was removed and the secretariat dedicated solely to Environmental and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT).

Conservation concerns, aimed at preserving natural and cultural resources as well as encouraging their rational use, were incorporated in the General Law on Ecological Balance introduced in 1988 and in the National Commission for the Use and Knowledge of Biodiversity (CONABIO), established in 1992.

In keeping with the fact that it is one of the ten most diverse countries of the world, Mexico has increased the number of its natural protected areas from 55 in 1999 to 150 in 2006. The General Law on Ecological Balance was modified in 1996 and changes introduced to improve the management of protected areas.

Key decisions related to protection are taken by state institutions such as CONABIO, PRONATURA and the Mexican Fund for Nature Conservation, as well as by non-government organizations and academia. These bodies jointly carry out specialist workshops to identify regions of maximum national biological significance. 156 regions have been identified so far.

How does the vast spectrum of conservation policy in Mexico address the question of women—a section that comprises half the national population? What is the link between women and conservation? What

impact do conservation initiatives have on women? Are women gaining or losing access?

There are three channels through which women in Mexico intervene in conservation initiatives. The first is a bottom-up channel through the link with public policies; that is to say, women as part of rural communities, *campesino* and fisher populations, as salt extractors and as plantation workers are “invited” to participate in conservation initiatives. These initiatives include productive work such as reforestation, agro-forestry, agro-ecology, backyard agriculture, making handicrafts and clothes, ornamental fish cultivation and recycling plastic. The second intervention channel is through academia with many professional women, some associated with NGOs, engaged in basic and applied research funded by governmental and financial institutions. The third channel is through the State with women who hold government offices intervening in decisions related to conservation.

It is the first channel through which the largest numbers of women intervene in conservation efforts. Women function as a reserve pool of labour in conservation projects where the funding mandates a gender focus. Such environmental projects, however, usually lack the “empowerment” agenda that might help women confront patriarchal structures in communities and the State.

Furthermore, where facilitated through economic aid grants, such conservation projects are seen by most women as no more than an extension of their domestic responsibilities; a means of supplementing household earnings. Conservation initiatives are viewed as environmental clean-up work prior to the arrival of tourists to beaches, water bodies, forests and woods. Social security, implemented through “Seasonal Employment Programmes”, often means cleaning the main access roads and beautifying the locale to ensure a pleasant experience for the tourist. A monthly salary is paid to fishermen to sweep roads and to *campesinos* to not deforest the mountains. Such conservation initiatives are, however, unable to address the question of growing resource scarcity and there are no integral schemes for women and men facing a livelihood crisis.



Women from the academic world who are engaged in conservation research are few in number; fewer still (only 2 per cent) are women in government posts in the protected areas directorate. Decision-making continues to be dominated by men. When women occupy key government posts, they are often branded as inefficient.

However, two top positions in Mexico's environmental administration have been successfully led by women. The first secretariat (SEMARNAT) has been headed by a woman who demonstrated high levels of competence in handling a portfolio that mandated sustainable economic development and reduction in the levels of poverty and environmental degradation; this, in the difficult context of accelerated neoliberalism. The other instance is that of the Environmental Secretariat for the Federal District, which is currently being managed most successfully by a woman.

In the last six years, women's contribution to conservation has become greatly visible in the public arena through academic and government institutions. However, huge efforts are needed to involve rural women and to break the system of ethnic, class and religious subordination that prevents women from taking up key posts in the administration of natural resources. Mexico needs to create an enabling environment for educated women to participate meaningfully in the protection of its vast biodiversity.

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