Gender and Indigenous Knowledge: Experience from Southwest China

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This paper explores the linkages between gender and indigenous knowledge. It provides an overview of the theoretical literature, including earlier material which records indigenous knowledge for sustainable development, and draws attention to the power dynamics of the process. It reviews the opinions of WED (women, environment, and development) which assume close linkages between women and nature, and ignore the gender power relationships in the conservation of the environment. WED is criticized by many feminists, but still dominates in the theories and practice of environmental development. This paper considers different framings of gendered indigenous knowledge, including those relating to men’s and women’s different areas of knowledge, and their different technical opinions relating to their social and political status. The paper further explores the relations between gender power dynamics and indigenous knowledge through the experience of an NGO in Yunnan; this showed that they concentrate mostly on a gender role approach aimed at finding the difference in forest utilization between men and women. Less attention is paid to gender power relations in the knowledge expression and transmission process, such as: Who has the authority to express and represent local knowledge? Who has opportunities to speak out in the decision-making process? Whose criteria are used to generate knowledge? And how are new experimental techniques negotiated between men and women? This paper finds that further research is necessary on how gender operates in relation to indigenous knowledge in Southwest China.