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Amazon entrepreneurs: Women's economic empowerment and the potential for more sustainable land use practices

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the effects on rural women's empowerment of participation in collective microenterprises: access and decision-making power for land use, as well as on changes in their resource management practices. We explore a very specific effect of women's empowerment on efforts to implement more sustainable livelihood practices by women participating in collective microenterprise activities. The study used a qualitative research design, carrying out semi-structured interviews with 65 rural women participants of eleven collective microenterprises in the Amazonian states of Pará and Acre, Brazil. The results showed that women's economic empowerment contributed to their strengthened capacity for adaptive governance in the household due to improvements in their awareness of environmental issues and practices used to manage forest resources; and greater access to resources and to decision-making power about land use.

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, women in the Brazilian Amazon region have organized themselves into collective microenterprises that have contributed to their economic empowerment within their households and communities (Mello, 2014). Women's collective microenterprises are part of Amazonian rural inhabitants' historically complex and

evolving strategies to manage forests for their livelihoods (Schmink & Gómez-García, 2014: 1). The goals of these enterprises typically emphasize material improvements for women and their families, but they also aim to enhance women's self-confidence and social visibility, political awareness, and environmental knowledge. The multi-faceted impacts of women's increased empowerment have the potential to improve their knowledge of forest management and the economic benefits of forest use, and contribute to the sustainability of their family livelihood strategies.

Emergence of rural women's microenterprises in the Brazilian Amazon was strongly linked with a combination of socio-economic, environmental, and political changes and with the growth of Brazilian rural women's social organizations since the decade of the 1970s. During the 1970 and 1980s, federal government development policy for the Amazonia region was oriented to increasing mineral and forest exploitation, and development of agricultural and cattle ranching activities, and to increase population in the border region for national security purposes (Schmink & Wood, 1987). As a result, a road network and many smallholder settlements were created, large farms received incentives to bring private capital to the region, land concessions were given for private colonization schemes, and mineral exploration poles were established, notably the Greater Carajás Project. These policies resulted in deforestation and forest degradation, expulsion of rural native peoples to urban areas, land conflicts, and land speculation (Schmink & Wood, 1992), and worsened poverty conditions among people who depended on the forest and its services for their livelihoods (Shanley, Pierce, Laird, & Robinson, 2008)

Forest communities, including indigenous, riverine, colonist rubber tapper and other inhabitants, occupy large expanses of Amazonian

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territory under mixed tenure regimes, including individual farm settlements occupied spontaneously on unclaimed public lands; official colonization projects; communal holdings by indigenous and *quilombola* (slave descendants); and extractive reserves for forest extractivist groups. Historically, Brazilian land use policies, such as tax and subsidy policies favoring cattle and logging, and formal land titling requirements that encourage forest clearing, contributed to insecure property rights and persistent violent conflicts over resources (Schmink & Wood, 1992). Since 1985, forest policy reforms in Brazil have expanded tenure rights for communities in response to both top-down pressures to halt deforestation as well as grass-roots struggles by forest peoples to defend their historical rights, and to protect the forests they depend on for their livelihoods (Almeida, 2011; Larson, Barry, & Dahal, 2010; Schmink & Gómez-García, 2014). The emergence of women's collective microenterprises, was part of this shift in favor of socio-environmental policies, focusing on community forestry and forest product markets as a means to raise the value of non-timber forest products, reduce deforestation, and promote better living standards for forest communities (Anderson & Clay, 2002; Charnley & Poe, 2007; Vargas, 2000). Making forests more economically attractive to local populations, through timber management practices (FAO, 2005) and use of non-timber forest products (Nepstad & Schwartzman, 1992) were considered some of the best ways to raise forest-based incomes for local people (Perez & Byron, 1999) while increasing the value of forests.

The socio-economic effects of these initiatives still need to be better understood in terms of income generation, as well as in terms of ecological impacts. It is difficult to measure the conservation effects of women's collective microenterprises, because of their small scale, and the diversity of drivers influencing the conservation target (R. Mello, 2010). This study focuses on the perceived effects of rural women's empowerment through participation in collective microenterprises on their access and decision-making power regarding family land use, as well as on changes in their resource management practices. We explore a very specific effect of women's empowerment on efforts that emerged to implement more sustainable livelihood practices by women participating in collective microenterprise activities.

We first discuss the background on gendered environmental development in the Brazilian Amazon region, and the effects of environmental changes for rural women in the region. Following this, we present the conceptual framework, research methods and findings on how collective microenterprise participation stimulated women's economic empowerment, and strengthened their capacity to address environmental and social concerns. We discuss specifically how women's empowerment contributes to: improvements in awareness of the environment and of practices used to manage forest resources, and improvement of women's access to and decision-making power regarding family land use.

Background: Effects of Environmental Changes for Rural Women in Brazilian Amazonia

During the 1970s, the Brazilian military government defined an agribusiness model for rural development in the Amazon region; at that time cattle ranching and the private business sector in general were supported with significant financial incentives and infrastructure. This regional trend triggered a strong process of land grabbing, accompanied by rapid deforestation and violent conflicts over access to and ownership of land (Schmink & Wood, 1987).

Environmental degradation decisively affects rural women's lives through the impact on the availability of natural resources. In Amazonia, while women traditionally are responsible for domestic tasks and child-care, they also are involved in productive activities to attend to family needs. Among the many different categories of rural Amazonian peoples, the heterogeneity of gender roles is enormous, making it difficult to generalize (Schmink & Gómez-García, 2014; Simonian, 2001). Women typically are responsible for diversifying the home garden

with fruits, medicinal plants, and small animals, tending home gardens to contribute to the family's food supply, and caring for water supply and quality (Grist, 1999; Mourão, 2003). They may also engage work in family crop fields, manage livestock and agroforestry systems, and collect and process non-timber forest products, although their productive work may not be recognized because of limited market access.

The degradation of forested areas for use in productive activities such as agriculture or pasture may reduce the family's food security and income. These problems create changes in the household: there are cases in which both men and women enter the labor market, leaving the family property to work with ranching or in the city; in other cases, some women assume the role of head of household due to migration by men to work outside of the property. Finally, deforestation and reduction or loss of land contributed to decreased access to raw materials, reduction of biodiversity, and difficulty in accessing land management rights.

Rural women from throughout the Amazon region articulated their concerns about the impacts of agribusiness activity expansion during a meeting in November citing the many environmental, social, economic and political issues listed in Table 1. Women reported many negative impacts, and complained about being excluded from receiving benefits from regional development programs, either because policies prioritized the agribusiness model, leading to land problems and deforestation, or because they prioritized men – providing them training, credit, and infrastructure not generally available to women. These approaches ignored and undermined the importance of women's work in the economy (Elson, 2006, 159; Hall, 2006).

By the end of the 1980s, national and international environmental attention to conservation of the Amazon forest increased along with the work of social movements protesting against the economic development model implemented in the region, based on intensification of deforestation. In this context, rural women began organizing and creating networks to improve their knowledge, information and technologies as

Table 1

Problems and consequences of ongoing Amazonian development strategies as reported by Amazonian rural women.

Dimensions	Problems	Consequences for Rural Women
Environmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Logging Companies • Illegal logging • Destruction of mangrove • Deforestation • Wildfires • Lack of land management • Use of pesticides • Devaluation of popular knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction of raw material supply (vines, medicinal plants.) • Unemployment • Increased cost of raw materials • Loss of biodiversity • Difficult access to raw materials • Threats to rivers and streams
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Devaluation of women's work • Discrimination against the rural working class • Lack of financial resources for alternative projects • Difficulty with the legalization of forest products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women's low self-esteem • Conflict in family relationships • Breakdown of the working class
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of technical assistance especially in agroecology • Decrease in commodity prices • Lack of storage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decrease in family income • Reduced economic possibilities • Decrease in productivity • Disincentive to production of biodiversity products
Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little political education • Low participation in project approval • Lack of infrastructure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty of organization • Lack of basic infrastructure: roads, electrification, and transport.

Source: Gomes, Almeida, and Amaral (2005)

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