

Interview with Cécile Ndjebet, president of REFACOF

‘Securing women’s rights is essential for forest preservation’

by Meindert Brouwer

‘Women play a crucial role in forest protection and in food production in rural Central Africa. However, women’s needs and interests are often not sufficiently addressed, due to social and institutional norms. That needs to change. Women should be entitled to their own land and participate in decision-making that concerns them. Tenure security for rural women will improve the socio-economic situation in Central Africa.’ This is the firm belief of Cécile Ndjebet (48), president of the African Women’s Network for Community Management of Forests (REFACOF).

During our conversation, Ndjebet describes what she calls the socio-cultural reality in rural Central Africa. She tells about the division of roles between men and women, the existing dominance of men over women and why this should change. She shows that equal rights in rural Central Africa are not only in the interest of women themselves, but also in the interest of communities and society as a whole. Ndjebet presents concrete proposals on how best to achieve and secure women’s rights, especially the need to include the words ‘women’ and ‘men’ in the law.

Ndjebet: ‘It is the men that cut trees, it is the women that know their way in the forest to collect fruits, vegetables, mushrooms and other non-timber forest products.

To women, the forest is like a mother, it nourishes her children and grandchildren. To men, the forest is business and money. Women are more protective, they think more about tomorrow and future generations. Men tend to think of today and maybe of tomorrow.’

AWARE She continues: ‘Women are more aware of the multiple roles forests play, its biodiversity, its insects which pollinate crops, the water it provides for drinking and irrigation purposes. Women are aware of the value of the forest for the well-being of their communities. They know what a healthy forest is like and if conditions in the forest change, they are among the first to notice. Women could contribute highly to keep forests and the environment healthy. However, the knowledge and experience of women is often ignored, because women do not have ownership of forests and lands and do not take part in decision-making in their communities, in which usually only men take the decisions.’

Ndjebet: ‘It is the same in food production in agroforestry and on agricultural lands. Women plant, weed and harvest. If climate change and climate variability reduce the availability of water or harm the growth of crops and reduce harvest quantities, women, because of their experience, can be ingenious to adapt to new circumstances. Women can be a source of knowledge

