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Empowering Women in Peatland Area in Aceh, Indonesia

By Sustainable Use of Peatland and Haze Mitigation in ASEAN (SUPA/ASEAN REPEAT)

Gender norm in Aceh, Indonesia is constructed and reconstructed by the dialogue of custom, religion, state ideology, the history of conflict and militarisation, and the exploitation of natural resources (Jauhola 2010). Generally, gender relations between husband and wife in Acehnese society, especially in Southeast Aceh, tend to be imbalanced. There is a concept of obedience, to carry out rights and obligations, which is placed more on women than men. The term gender equality is still taboo for most people in Aceh as in its concept it enters into conflict with the Islamic understanding that the status of women should be below that of men. The concept of gender equality is stigmatised as a concept that aims to bring women to an equal status with men to the point where women may become disrespectful towards men/their husbands. Nevertheless, it is not rare to find working women in Aceh, but job opportunities are not easily accessible to them, and the gender wage gap is commonplace. In Blang Luah, for example, most people work as labourers for oil palm plantations and females earn considerably lower than the male counterparts. In addition to income inequality, the allocation of working hours for women is also less than that of men, half day for women (7 – 12 PM) and full day for men (7 AM – 15 PM or later). These are some of the insights taken from the Gender Analysis Study that was carried out by Sustainable Use of Peatland and Haze Mitigation in ASEAN (SUPA/ASEAN REPEAT) project in 2022. The study was carried out in Aceh Barat and Nagan Raya, the pilot site implementation area of the project.

In the implementation of the project, SUPA always strives to achieve an inclusive and participatory program. This includes the participation of women as participants, speakers, and even village facilitators. Nurlaila is one of the village facilitators from Kayee Unoe village. She joined the project as a village facilitator not long after she graduated from University of Syiah Kuala, Aceh.

“I graduated in 2021 and joined SUPA in 2022. At that time, SUPA requested one woman and one man to join as village facilitator for each village. I think it really opens opportunities for women to participate and develop themselves,” said Nurlaila.

One of the trainings that Nurlaila found the most impressive was the recently organized Peatland Management Training. Peatland Management Training was conducted in October 2023 in Kayee Unoe and Pange village in Aceh to the peatland communities. The participants included members from Community Working Group for Protection and Management of Peatland Ecosystem in Nagan Raya (Makarti Jaya, Blang Luah, Kaye Unoe, Pulo Kruet, Sumber Bakti, Lueng Keube Jagat) and Aceh Barat (Beurawang, Kuta Padang, Pange, Keub).

In the training, participants were introduced to the concept of community-based peatland management, including practical work on producing biopesticides and liquid organic fertilizers. They also learned to make compost, using a shredder, and making a compost block.



Nurlaila in one of the trainings she participated



Nurlaila explained about the activities carried out in pilot site to Martin Hansen, Country Director of GIZ Indonesia and ASEAN



Women participants of Peatland Management Training



Top: participants making compost block
Bottom: Kasifah making 'sapu lidi'

"I am very impressed by the compost block. It's very cost effective and easy to be made using simple materials like saw dust, and it's a good way to make use of peatland area," Nurlaila stated. The compost block was used as a planting medium so plants that cannot thrive in peatland areas can be planted in this compost block.

This training was also attended by 20 women (one third of total participants) from the 10 target villages. Kasifah, from Sumber Bakti village, showed how she made 'sapu lidi'—broom made of wooden sticks—from palm tree. "You can also turn the leaves of palm tree into disposable plates," Kasifah said. These are some skills taught to participants in the training, to utilize plants in peatland area and turn them into other products which can bring additional income for the community. "Hopefully, these products can help our communities' livelihoods." Kasifah said with a smile on her face.

As village facilitator, Nurlaila participated in numerous trainings and workshops organized by the project. However, not all women are as lucky. "Most of the trainings I participated in are trainings related to my work as village facilitators, such as introduction and preparatory workshop, finance and reporting training, and community work plan workshop. There are other more technical workshops that were conducted, but our local community chose men to join those workshops," she continued. "For example, the training about trigona bee breeding. People would say that 'it's in the forest, it's dangerous, it's dark, women shouldn't join this.' However, I think it will be beneficial for women to learn about this too because they can gain new knowledge and skills," Nurlaila said. "I hope in the future, more women can join the workshops organized by SUPA. I hope SUPA continues to encourage women to participate and learn new things," she said in a hopeful tone.

In our work in the pilot site, we continue to strive to be inclusive and ensure women's voice representation. For example, SUPA/ASEAN REPEAT imposed a gender quota for the recruitment of Village Facilitators. The use of such quota will hopefully enable a wider range of interests from both men and women to be considered, support young graduate women to get their first employment experience, a more encompassing awareness raising and education about peatland management to the target communities and in some cases enable women from the communities to get in directly involved whenever a more conservative setting refrains from man and women to mix. The use of a quota will also hopefully set a precedent which could be adopted by the Ministry of Environment and Forestry to support gender responsive Sustainable Peatland Management through the national government's community-based peatland conservation and restoration programme implementation. In our workplan, it is recommended that Village Facilitators are trained with a gender lens, so they can identify sex-disaggregated village problems, interests, and priorities.

There are still challenges in promoting gender mainstream in our pilot site, but we believe we can make a difference, one step at a time, like our champions Nurlaila and Kasifah.