

# Breaking ground:

## Empowering Indigenous Women as Guardians of Biodiversity in Laos

The **active and equitable involvement of women, especially from ethnic minorities, in the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity is crucial** as they play pivotal roles as primary land managers, traditional knowledge holders and resource users. Despite the increasing responsibility shouldered by women in managing small-scale agriculture, **they often lack a commensurate influence in political planning and decision-making and face unequal access to necessary resources.** Additionally, the loss of biodiversity places a heavier burden on women and girls, extending the time needed to procure essential resources like water, fuelwood, and medicinal plants. This, in turn, diminishes the time available for income-generating activities and education. The distinct roles and responsibilities that women have within the household, community, and society result in **specialized traditional knowledge concerning biodiversity conservation**, shaped by their specific needs and priorities. As a result, they can offer different perspectives and innovative solutions in addressing biodiversity concerns. This is why, **ensuring meaningful participation of women in decision-making is crucial for the long-term success of measures for conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity.**

Laos sees a low representation of women in public spaces and decision-making positions. Traditional norms and lower levels of education and literacy in the rural areas still limit girls' and women's choices and options. In the one-party state of Laos, civil society participation is very limited, including for women's rights (shrinking space). None of the diverse ethnic groups are officially regarded as Indigenous or traditional peoples which implies no specific recognition of Indigenous Peoples' rights in Laos.

### I. Gender equality

**Here is where our project comes in.** Within the scope of a service package from the GIZ Sector Program Human Rights, the GIZ project "Protection and Sustainable Use of Forest Ecosystems and Biodiversity" (ProFEB) implemented a pilot program to **strengthen women's rights and involvement in protected area management in Laos.** For many years, ProFEB has been promoting an inclusive and equitable co-management system in Hin Nam No National Park, an important area for biodiversity conservation. A process of free prior and informed consent (FPIC) in the context of the Nomination of Hin Nam No National Park as Natural World Heritage Site (together with Vietnam) revealed widespread gender inequalities in the collaborative park management in



terms of voice, decision-making and representation. About 8000 people from various ethnic groups live in 20 villages around the National Park, in one of the poorest districts in Laos. Most villages rely on farming and collecting non-timber forest products for subsistence. Women, in particular, depend heavily on local natural resources for their families' food security, encompassing essentials such as firewood, drinking and washing water, food, medicinal plants, and plant fibers used in everyday items like raffia and basketry.

Consequently, the conservation of biodiversity and forests holds particular significance for women and their communities. **The pilot project offered an opportunity for introducing a bottom-up and women-led approach for equitable protected area management.**

All activities under the pilot project followed a **human-rights based approach, with a special focus on gender equality**:

**Establishment and empowerment of a women's council at the district level** for advising the collaborative park management on gender equality and related topics, led by the district Lao Women's Union. To ensure the participation and mainstreaming of gender equality in natural resource management, the appointed women's council members were from different district sector offices (e.g. labor, public health).

**Result:** Formal establishment of a **district-level women's council** in Boualapha district as well as **women community management committees in 20 villages** as key pillars for ensuring that women and their concerns are considered in the management of Hin Nam No National Park.

The women's council has the following mandate:

- Promote gender equality and women's rights to resources and decision-making processes in meetings related to the co-management of Hin Nam No National Park
- Initiate and lead a participatory development of a gender equality charter and its implementation
- Advise on the development and establishment of a grievance mechanism on all levels
- Organize institutionalized regular exchanges with the women community management committee on village-level in order to be able to appropriately represent their concerns, needs and aspirations on district (and higher) level.



**Trainings on women's leadership and gender equality** with both, **women and men at village level**, were conducted by district representatives under the guidance of the National University of Laos. The strategy of this activity was to ensure the ownership of district authorities and to make use of their local experiences, including knowledge on local languages and traditional customs. The National University was involved as a key partner to build capacity for the district trainers and to support developing the training modules and materials ready to be used in the field.

**Result:** Development of a **training guideline on women's leadership and gender equality in conservation** work with materials that are suitable for local contexts in Laos.

**The participatory development of women-led community action plans (CAPs) for conservation and community-agreed resource use** was led by the Lao Women's Union and the district representatives of Boualapha province in three villages adjacent to the Hin Nam No National Park. The CAPs were developed in a participatory approach with the village women and reflect their specific needs and concerns regarding natural resource management.

**Result:** Three participatory community action plans were approved by the District Governor of Boualapha. The community action plans focus on community-led management of key natural resources as well as setting up a reporting and monitoring mechanism on sustainable use of natural resources.

**Lessons learned and best practices were shared** in workshops at district and province level to showcase the technique and training tools used in building capacity at village level.

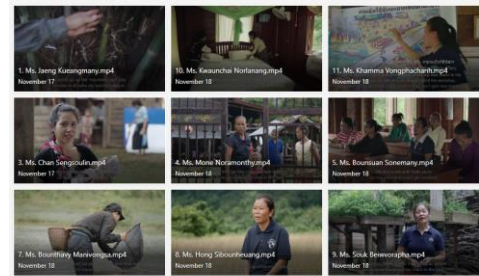
**Result:** A video documentation (10 minutes-video and 10 short videos) on the development of the women-led community action plans



## II. Gender as a quality feature of our work

This pilot project directly engaged with district government offices (e.g. Lao Women's Union) to lead the activities. Focusing on creating ownership and sustainable capacity building measures, this pilot supported trainings of district government officers to become trainers for leading the capacity building activities and the development of the CAPs on village level (Training of Trainers approach). This turned out to be very effective because the district trainers know the communities, the local context and local languages which made the coordination and communication faster and more target group oriented. Being in the lead and responsible for the activities on village level, the district trainers were highly motivated during the entire project. In addition, key stakeholders in conservation and outreach campaigns are usually from the forestry and environment sector and national park offices. This pilot project, on the other hand, was based on an **intersectoral approach** and engaged different governmental offices which was very enriching for discussions during the trainings and also for **promoting gender as a cross-cutting topic**. The sector project human rights will use this pilot as a concrete example in its **advice to BMZ and GIZ** of how implementing the **quality marker of human rights, gender equality and inclusion** can look like in practice.

Please find the link to the videos of this project [here](#)



## III. Implementing feminist core principles

Despite the restrictive context in Laos, the pilot demonstrated how rights-based conservation can be successfully designed and meaningful participation be promoted and institutionalized, starting at village and district level.

### Feminist Development Policy in practice:

#### Rights

- Strengthened **Indigenous women's rights of use and participation in protected area management**
- **Promoting women participation was the outcome of a Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) process** conducted in the context of international nature conservation obligations (**UNESCO natural world heritage nomination, gender requirements of IUCN Green List**), thus a negotiated decision between State and affected Indigenous communities based on international standards

#### Resource

- Women's rights and self-advocacy community **organizations of Indigenous Peoples** were empowered by **direct funding**

#### Representation

- **Capacities of women strengthened** to participate meaningfully in decision-making on natural resources management
- **Institutionalized representation** through women's council and community action plans

#### IV. Cooperation

Fostering gender equality requires cooperation and commitments of individuals, communities, institutions, and government. This project worked with partners from several sectors and political levels: The National University of Laos, the Lao Women's Union from Khammouane Province and Boualapha District, district sector officers (labor, public health, home affairs, education and sports, military) and heads as well as women and men from villages in Boualapha district. The aim of this cross-sectoral approach was to create an inclusive and supportive environment that empowers women (and men) to engage in activities that promote a more equitable and just society.



It was the first time for ProFEB to actively engage with the Lao Women's Union. This cooperation showed that directly working with a specialized organization on women rights helped to mainstream gender equality in the sector of natural resource management. Due to this experience the Lao Women's Union will continue to be a partner of ProFEB and has become a reference also for partners in the environment sector. In addition, the cooperation between academia and public offices has been strengthened through jointly developing the training modules and outreach materials. Both sides perceived the project as a fruitful exchange and valuable for "learning from each other".

#### Challenges which were encountered during the project implementation:

- 💡 Having many partners from different sectors and political levels involved requires good coordination and communication amongst each other. In the beginning of the project, the implementation partners from academia as well as public offices mainly remained within their respective domains and didn't actively pursue communication with each other. After organizing joint meetings (supported by ProFEB), a common understanding on objectives, outcomes and working methods could be reached and a valuable and respectful exchange established.
- 💡 In the beginning, women's participation was relatively low in the trainings on village level. This was the case as each household sent only one representative which were mainly men. Women were expected to accomplish their housework first before taking part in the meeting. So, they had limitations to attend the training which then again limited their opportunities to participate and speak out for themselves. This challenge was solved by organizing trainings specifically for women (and issuing the invitation accordingly). In addition, men were informed ahead about it so that they managed to take care of housework while their wives attended the meetings.

#### Success factors:

- ✓ Having **district trainers/facilitators** engaged, some of these challenges could be already taken into account in the planning phase of the village activities to ensure equal participation from men and women as well as acknowledgment from men regarding the participation of their wives. As some of the trainers could speak **local languages**, the communication with the villagers and resolution of challenges could be eased.
- ✓ A good approach was to **involve both, men and women**, in the trainings on gender equality and women's empowerment, in order to keep the men involved and also inform them about the importance of gender equality and role of women in biodiversity conservation work. This reduces doubts and creates recognition for the participation of women in the activities. Especially **involving male village headman and informing them appropriately in advance** could lead to them becoming advocates for the activities and reaching out to married and single men about the benefits of gender equality for the entire village.