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**Unpacking UNDP’s Gender Mainstreaming**

Welcome to the fourth edition of our bi-annual Gender Equality newsletter from UNDP in Asia and the Pacific!

With the upcoming Asia-Pacific Regional Review of the 25th Anniversary of the Beijing Declaration\(^1\) we want to take this opportunity to share stories about how we are leveraging UNDP’s diverse projects to make contribution to the overall gender equality agenda of the region, and vice versa.

\(^1\) [https://www.unescap.org/intergovernmental-meetings/asia-pacific-regional-review-25th-anniversary-beijing-declaration](https://www.unescap.org/intergovernmental-meetings/asia-pacific-regional-review-25th-anniversary-beijing-declaration)
In other words, UNDP mainstreams gender because we want to help achieve a society in which women and men enjoy equal rights, exercise equal control and power, and have an equal voice. The reality is that we still see that women are more discriminated and disadvantaged than men, and that they are more likely to be found in the ‘left behind’ groups. Gender equality is a prerequisite for a sustainable world. We strive to capitalize on every possible opportunity in UNDP’s diverse range of programming for removing structural barriers, transforming harmful and discriminatory social norms, addressing the imbalance in power dynamics, and strengthening capacity of institutions and individuals. We work with empowered women and men who take charge of reshaping their communities to be more gender-equal. We work with the knowledge that gender equality is an integral element of the sustainable and inclusive development, and promoting gender equality is instrumental for achieving our various development objectives.

In this edition, you will find three original articles from UNDP Country Offices of the Asia-Pacific region illustrating UNDP’s wide range of interventions to improve the status of women in society as well as women’s empowerment. Get inspired by women leading recovery and reconstruction processes after natural disasters in Lao PDR, becoming a symbol of economic empowerment in Timor-Leste and making their way to the social innovation industry in Sri Lanka.

You will also find a special feature on UNDP’s decade-long experience in using innovative bottom-up approaches that has generated a wealth of country-level knowledge on how to design and implement on-the-ground solutions to strengthen women’s involvement and integrate a gender equality approach in REDD+ action2 (officially known as “reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries, and the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks”). Together with UNDP Climate and Forests Team, we are excited to present this work and share good practices from different corners of the Asia-Pacific region, including Cambodia, Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka and Viet Nam. Through illustrating how UNDP worked in partnership with governments, civil society, and women on the ground across several different contexts and themes, these articles show how gender-responsive efforts can be effectively integrated into critical aspects of REDD+. They also provide inspiration for how ambitions for integrating gender throughout the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be achieved, and in particular the Goals on climate change (SDG 13) and forests (SDG 15).

We also have the pleasure of featuring an article from the N-Peace Initiative3 introducing Loshari Kunwar, an inspiring human rights defender that works for a more inclusive and sustainable society.

Finally, from UNDP Maldives, Shamha Naseer shares her thoughts on how sports can help improve girls' self-esteem and their leadership skills.

We hope you will enjoy reading our newsletter!

Koh Miyaoi - BRH Regional Gender Advisor & Team Leader

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2 https://www.un-redd.org/
3 http://n-peace.net/
Championing Women’s Inclusion in Forests and Climate Change Action
11 Years of Lessons from UNDP’s Involvement in REDD+

It is hard to overstate the importance of forest ecosystems to human wellbeing and progress. Forests not only serve as an essential carbon reserve that must be maintained to limit global warming, they also provide livelihoods, subsistence and income for more than 1.6 billion of the global poor. Women comprise a vulnerable majority of the forest-dependent poor.

As the pivotal functions of forests are gravely threatened by deforestation and forest degradation through activities which are estimated to cause about one-fourth of total global greenhouse gas emissions annually, women will disproportionately suffer the repercussions of both disappearing forests and climate change.

In response to the links between forest loss and global warming, Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) have developed a climate change mitigation approach known as “REDD+”. Officially defined as “reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries, and the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests
and enhancement of forest carbon stocks”, REDD+ incentivizes developing countries to reduce carbon emissions from deforestation and forest degradation. Key in promoting the sustainability of REDD+ is ensuring that gender-differentiated needs, uses and knowledge of the forest are integrated into policy and programmatic interventions.

Existing gender inequalities on the ground – if left unaddressed – can pose serious challenges to the sustainability of REDD+ in the long term. For example, those who rely most on forests for their livelihoods are among the poorest people on the planet and they are disproportionately indigenous peoples and women. Although these groups hold a wealth of knowledge of and have deep relationships with forest systems, making them perfectly placed to be powerful actors for positive action, they often remain under-valued agents in addressing forest loss.

In an isolated village in Sri Lanka, Sampathhamy, a female community elder discusses the active role of women in forests. “Women in this community are engaged in organic farming, growing local tree species in our own lands and also engaged in processing tree products.” In this corner of the hamlet of Kivulewatta in Ampara District, women’s understanding of forest management is a rich, but an often untapped, resource. “We have the experience and human capacity to lead restoration,” Sampathhamy notes emphatically, “our social network brings local practices and traditional resource management knowledge.”

Women and men’s specific roles, rights and responsibilities, as well as their knowledge of forests, shape their experiences differently.

These gender-differentiated aspects are critical inputs to planned interventions that will enable the long-term success of REDD+ on the ground. However, given social, economic, and cultural inequalities, and legal impediments, women, particularly those from marginalized groups, such as indigenous people, continue to experience exclusion. This severely limits their ability to fully participate in, contribute to, and benefit from REDD+. It is therefore imperative that deliberate and meaningful efforts are taken to ensure REDD+ action is inclusive, fair, and gender-responsive, both in policy and in practice.

Several hundred kilometers from the village in Kivulewatta, Nong Thi Nguyet, a 50-year old woman and village head from the Na Ray village in Bac Kan province, Viet Nam, plays a key role in local REDD+ activities. “I’m the first person they turn to when they can’t resolve disputes amicably,” she says. Nguyet is the sole village headwoman and speaks with the confidence of a born mediator who has won the trust and respect of her fellow villagers – most of whom are from indigenous groups. As the headwoman, she leads the Grassroots Mediation Group, which has an important function in province-level pilots to trial REDD+ grievance redress mechanisms.

These experiences from Sri Lanka and Viet Nam illustrate why the equitable and meaningful inclusion of women is a core concern for REDD+. Witnessing this reality and acknowledging the crucial role of gender, the UNDP Climate and Forests Team places a strong emphasis on fully integrating gender

4 http://bit.ly/1pETDUk
equality and women’s empowerment principles in the support provided on REDD+ across Latin America, Africa and the Asia-Pacific region.

**REDD+ support is concentrated on taking a more proactive and integrated approach in which gender is integrated both as a stand-alone and cross-cutting issue across the following five workstreams:**

- Gender-responsive assessments and analyses to identify entry points and strategies.
- Gender awareness raising and capacity building to lay the foundations in-country to carry out work in a gender-responsive manner.
- Gender-responsive participation to ensure women’s equitable and meaningful inclusion in stakeholder engagement, critical institutions and decision-making processes.
- Gender-responsive planning and monitoring to ensure processes are designed and implemented using approaches that account for gender differences (e.g., through improving women’s forest user and land rights, accounting for their differentiated traditional knowledge and patterns of forest use in forest management regimes, enhancing their ability to engage in decision-making over their forests, etc.) and then monitored to verify that intended gender outcomes are achieved.
- Capturing gender-related learning and results from REDD+ activities support a culture of continuous learning and improvement as well as guidance for scaling up and replicating successes.

*Gender and women’s empowerment form an integral part of UNDP’s technical support to countries developing REDD+.*

This holistic gender approach ultimately seeks to go beyond ‘doing no harm’, and instead achieve a gender-responsive approach of ‘doing better’. The goal is to advance gender equality and women’s empowerment, which will ultimately lead to more sustainable REDD+ processes and outcomes. UNDP has carried out this work both directly with countries and in collaboration with other UN agencies through the UN-REDD Programme.

In order to move from commitments to credible action on the ground, UNDP has worked hand-in-hand with women’s groups, indigenous peoples, communities and other governmental and civil society stakeholders to develop real solutions that enable women in their role as guardians of the forest. From the policy to the grassroots level, the stories of women like Nguyet and Sampathhamy, and many more like them, show us how “successful” sustainable development and REDD+ can look like when women are given an equal place at the table.
Acknowledgements: This knowledge product was coordinated, written and edited from UNDP Climate and Forests Team: Celina (Kin Yii) Yong, Elizabeth Eggerts and Ela Ionescu
In Cambodia, forestry is perceived as a male domain, while broader patriarchal attitudes are an impediment to women’s inclusion across several sectors.

A provincial commune council chief in Cambodia was quite blunt in his assessment, “Forest management is men’s work. Women are too physically weak to patrol and is dangerous for them. They are also not interested and if we try to include them it is more work for us to ensure their safety.”.

Such perspectives are not uncommon.

Women’s marginalisation is evident from forest management at the grassroots level to decision-making bodies at the institutional level. In 2012, the Cambodian government decided to take a bold step to address this situation and agreed to serve as a pilot country in a regional initiative on women’s inclusion in REDD+(1). This was jointly conducted in partnership by UNDP through the UN-REDD Programme⁵,

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⁵https://www.un-redd.org/
USAID Lowering Emissions in Asia's Forests° (LEAF) and Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management⁷ (WOCAN). This innovative collaboration between multilateral, bilateral and NGO partners aimed to identify critical gender gaps and recommend strategic interventions to elevate women’s meaningful and equitable participation in REDD+. UNDP supported country activities through leveraging strong country-level relationships with stakeholders that were interviewed for their valuable perspectives on gender and REDD+.

In order to get a handle on the scale of the problem in Cambodia, the initiative started with a national REDD+ gender analysis⁸ in 2013. When it came to women’s participation in policy setting and institutions, several obstacles were identified. These included amongst others cultural barriers and a lack of awareness; the absence of clear quotas for women’s participation and limited finance and capacity to address gender concerns.

The government took swift action in response to these findings and in 2014 set up an inter-ministerial REDD+ Gender Group to help guide REDD+ efforts across the country. The REDD+ Gender Group was composed of government representatives nominated by the four agencies critical to REDD+ and gender issues (Forestry Administration, Fisheries Administration, Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Women’s Affairs). The objectives were primarily to build awareness on gender and women’s empowerment among members of the national REDD+ bodies and to advise on gender mainstreaming and inclusion in the National REDD+ Strategy and associated implementation guidelines. The REDD+ Gender Group was established with the help of UNDP, who provided several rounds of capacity building to support them in these functions.

The REDD+ Gender Group commenced with specific activities focused on shifting attitudes and perceptions concerning gender roles. This was channelled through awareness-raising and capacity-building workshops targeted at the national REDD+ bodies. Casting its net wider, the REDD+ Gender Group has creatively used public media to build a broader awareness campaign on REDD+ and gender to reach bigger audiences and introduced media tools such as dedicated radio talk show and programmes on national television.

The REDD+ Gender Group has actively examined the intersection of gender equality, women’s empowerment and REDD+, and developed, with technical support from UNDP, a Gender Checklist to assist in the review of the draft National REDD+ Strategy. As a result of this work, the 2017-2026 National REDD+ Strategy (NRS) integrates gender elements into one of its guiding principles and in the guidelines for monitoring and evaluation. In addition to this, the REDD+ Gender Group is recognized formally as part of national REDD+ institutional arrangements.

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⁶https://www.leafasia.org/
⁷http://www.wocan.org/
⁸http://bit.ly/1jt9Ss3
To help support the implementation of the NRS, a National REDD+ Action and Investment Plan was recently drafted in July 2019. In support of the REDD+ Gender Group, a Gender-Focused Review of REDD+ efforts was commissioned in 2018 by UNDP and the national REDD+ Taskforce in partnership with WOCAN to identify entry points for mainstreaming gender within the REDD+ Action and Investment Plan. The resulting recommendations ensured that Cambodia’s REDD+ strategies and policies during implementation are guided by a socially inclusive and gender-responsive approach.

Moreover, the 2018 Gender-Focused Review found that the REDD+ Gender Group has clearly influenced the various government ministries involved in REDD+, a number of which have since adopted gender-responsive plans and activities. It was also noted that awareness and motivation to integrate gender is high among the national and sub-national staff in key government departments. Five years on from its creation, the efforts of the Cambodian government and the REDD+ Gender Group appear to be paying off, with palpable changes in attitude and increased commitment to addressing gender in REDD+.

“I want to engage more community women in forest management work, but I find it difficult to mobilize and convince them to participate. I also want to be trained so that I have the same level of skill as local NGO staff who are good at engaging women.”

This statement from a district Forestry Administration officer from Kampong Thom province shows the evolution of understanding and openness to learn from other partners. Project implementers and local authorities are encouraging women’s participation in REDD+ project activities, particularly in general meetings and tree planting activities. In sites visited by researchers who conducted the 2018 Gender-Focused Review, they have concluded that on average 60-70% of participants in these activities were women.

Of course, there is still a long way to go for Cambodia to reverse all the negative attitudes that persist, both in institutions and in the confidence of women themselves. “Right now, we feel that we are closely scrutinized and feel insecure to speak and give our opinions. When we speak, we are always corrected by men and told to assess the implications of our statements before speaking”, reflected a woman from Kampong Thom, the same province as the earnest forestry officer.

“If more women are included in both patrolling and forest management committees, and are trained and paid like men, then we are happy to participate and our husbands might allow us too,” she concluded. In order to respond to women’s call for support, efforts are currently being made in Cambodia’s REDD+ work, including through the National REDD+ Action and Investment Plan, to continue to break down gender barriers and help change these pervasive patterns and perceptions of women in forestry. If Cambodia’s REDD+ stakeholders can maintain the same level of introspection and dedication going forwards, there is hope that change will come.

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(1) Officially defined as “reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries, and the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks”, REDD+ incentivizes developing countries to reduce carbon emissions from deforestation and forest degradation.
Women collecting mushroom and wild vegetable in Kampong Thom Province, FCPF Cambodia Programme/UNDP
Madang's rugged and verdantly forested landscape, which holds some of the country's highest peaks, makes it one of Papua New Guinea's (PNG) most striking provinces.

This geographic diversity is mirrored by its indigenous cultures and languages; over 170 of PNG's 800 languages are found in this Province alone. For rural communities, the forests are a cornerstone for local livelihoods and women play a prominent role in the harvesting of forest products.

Despite this, women have very little say in how these forests are governed. Decision-making within the villages of Madang province is typically undertaken by male clan leaders or a village council, but it is often a chief who makes the final decision. In many villages, women are not even able to participate in discussions around land-use. As PNG is a large and varied country, in the island province of East New Britain the story is slightly different. Matrilineal systems of land ownership mean that women are consulted by clan elders. However, even here women are not fully included in important discussions and are hampered by a lack of confidence to join deliberations on par with their male counterparts.

The complexity and variance of social and cultural systems in PNG are considerable, but women are largely marginalized from participating in decisions that impact them. In PNG, 97% of the total land area
is classified as customary and, given existing customary law and cultural barriers, women have very limited rights or abilities to control income and other resources. Even in some matrilineal societies where ownership of land is passed down to the woman, men still commandeer leadership in the management of land. In order to overcome these limitations, deliberate efforts were made by UNDP through the UN-REDD Programme\(^{11}\), to incorporate a gender perspective into the development of PNG’s approach to free, prior and informed consent (FPIC).

FPIC\(^{12}\), a key component of effective stakeholder engagement, is a legal principle enshrined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It provides the right for indigenous peoples, regardless of their gender, to be consulted and to give or withhold their prior consent for actions that may impact their lands, resources or livelihoods. To ensure that consent is given freely without coercion and that communities are accurately informed on all aspects of a decision, clear and culturally specific steps must be taken to consult with communities through their traditional decision-making bodies.

\(^{11}\)https://www.un-redd.org/
\(^{12}\)https://www.uncclearn.org/sites/default/files/inventory/un-redd05.pdf
In the case of PNG, where women are confined to the outskirts of power, there is the sticky question of how they can be included authentically in any FPIC process around REDD+.

With important decisions in the balance, such as how forest areas will be managed and how benefits generated by any REDD+(1) mechanism should be distributed, it is imperative that women are consulted and able to give or withhold their consent to activities that will impact them. It was, therefore, crucial to put gender at the heart of the way FPIC was understood and supported as part of REDD+ efforts. In response to this, gender concerns were integrated into national FPIC guidance for REDD+. This included integrating gender considerations into its operational framework and recognizing both women and men as possible landowners and/or primary users of land and resources. The FPIC guidance provided advice on how to maintain a gender balance in the facilitation teams that will guide FPIC at the local level and to disaggregate stakeholders by gender throughout the FPIC process. The guidance has also emphasized that any grievance mechanisms aimed at handling complaints should be specifically accessible to women.

The varying experiences of women in different provinces surfaced the further challenge of tailoring these national guidelines to local contexts and needs. UNDP oversaw the development of a detailed
stakeholder study of the three REDD+ pilot sites of Madang, East New Britain and West New Britain, which was carried out to guide action on the ground. In order to fully understand women’s perspectives, gender and youth segregated focus workshops were conducted across 6 rural communities in each province. Among others, the study examined gender dynamics, finding that women were largely excluded from roles in decision making. Even in East New Britain, where women had matrilineal land rights and greater involvement in village-level discussions, their views tended to be overlooked and they were often simply informed of final decisions. The study provided a foundation for local strategies for consulting with communities and integrating FPIC protocols into these that would be sensitive to including women. This included promoting the inclusion of village women in decision making as part of land-use planning approaches.

The study revealed the striking difference in women’s perspectives and the way their priorities differed to those of men. The women in all three provinces were particularly concerned about the environment and the negative impacts of logging. The findings demonstrated that raising women’s voices in the REDD+ process through careful attention to their inclusion is not only a moral issue but a practical one as well as it can aid in the protection and conservation of forests. From the arresting volcanic islands that hug the coastline of Madang to the forests that meet the coral reef-rich shores of New Britain, the women of the country must have a say and be included in how their forests are managed. PNG’s thoughtful approach to pushing gender equality to the forefront of the FPIC process and stakeholder engagement actions illuminate how this lofty goal can be achieved.

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In order for REDD+ to be successful, civil society must be involved as direct partners.

REDD+(1) comes with benefits and risks to communities and indigenous peoples, and civil society organizations act as a vital bridge to represent the voices of stakeholders in decisions that directly affect them. Sri Lanka’s vibrant and vocal civil society includes active women’s groups as well as organizations that play an important role in the conservation of forests and the support, they provide to marginalized forest-dependent communities.

In order to create a conduit for their participation in shaping REDD+ processes, a national CSO REDD+ Platform was established in December 2013. The platform is composed of NGOs working at the community, district and national level on forestry and climate change. One of its primary objectives is to enable women to have a voice and representation at the policy level.

Despite the strong commitment to women’s empowerment, the members face several challenges. While the country has a long history of collaboration with non-governmental and community groups on various aspects of forest management, women-focused groups are notably absent in these processes. There is a lack of forest-focused women’s organizations or federations responsible for advocating for
gender concerns at the policy level. Any existing forest-related women’s groups are limited to community forestry, agriculture and irrigation projects and tend to be location-specific. NGOs focusing on gender issues have a high level of interest in REDD+ but their limited technical knowledge hampers their full engagement. Conversely, NGOs focusing on forest, environment and climate change issues have a genuine interest in promoting women’s engagement in REDD+, however, they have little experience in gender issues.

This reality stands in contrast to the crucial, if under-appreciated, the role that women play in the forest sector.

Women are mainly responsible for collecting forest products for household use and form an active part of the afforestation workforce.

However, their inclusion in forest policy and management remains low. Women face a mix of barriers including cultural norms, lack of representation in relevant institutions, and limited access to land ownership. Historically, rural women have a high level of engagement in Sri Lanka’s forest sector activities on the ground. Unfortunately, this has resulted in the common assumption that women’s engagement in REDD+ will be high without any additional efforts to assure their meaningful inclusion.

Ensuring that gender inclusion is consistently on the REDD+ agenda in civil society spaces was, therefore, a high priority within the country. As a result, from 2013 to 2015 and under the support provided by UNDP through the UN-REDD Programme\(^\text{13}\), a number of in-depth capacity building activities were conducted with civil society partners on gender mainstreaming. There was a strong emphasis on developing the capacity of the national REDD+ CSO Platform and creating entry points for the inclusion of gender in this body. This led to the integration of gender within the National REDD+ Strategy as one of the core objectives of the Platform. The Platform also made gender balance as a standard of its operational model, ensuring women held co-leadership roles with women and youth-focused organizations as members. In addition, two representatives, one female and one male, from the Platform were included as members of the UN-REDD Programme Executive Board.

\(^{13}\)https://www.un-redd.org/
As part of the activities developed to support civil society’s role in gender issues, a study was conducted to identify the perceptions held by the Platform members. This intended to determine the knowledge
and understanding of the importance of gender issues and to get an indication of how gender and forestry were addressed at the policy level. The participating NGOs were asked to assess how well the government responds to links between gender and forests and climate change. The results suggested a relatively low consideration of gender by forest policymakers. In this regard, capacity building has been shown to be a valuable tool for increased and effective participation of women in forest governance. Moreover, institutional mechanisms were implemented to better enable grassroots representation at the policy level.

Project pilots were implemented showcasing how REDD+ is integrated into actions by community groups at the grassroots level, providing real-life examples of women’s inclusion in forest-related initiatives. Partnering with the UNDP-GEF Small Grants Programme\(^ {14}\), the UN-REDD Programme provided funding to eight separate CSO-led efforts\(^ {15}\) to carry out a range of activities, from documenting traditional forest knowledge to community participation in forest monitoring and protection. All these projects modelled gender parity, achieving at least 50% representation of women, with some activities being led and managed by women.

In 2016, UNDP conducted a series of activities aimed at identifying entry points for gender consideration in national REDD+ efforts, including in the CSO REDD+ Platform. This involved a review of women’s experiences in local-level forestry-based activities which revealed several ways that civil society engagement could be expanded to include the voices of women’s groups. Existing women’s federations and other relevant action groups were identified as powerful allies at the local level. Furthermore, provincial-level forums engaging with grassroots activists and state agencies were incorporated by the government into current national REDD+ structures in order to create channels for accessing policy-making conversations. As part of these activities, UNDP delivered capacity building training for the CSO REDD+ Platform on how to integrate gender into forest-related actions.

As a result of the gender-focused activities outlined above, the 2017 National REDD+ Investment Framework and Action Plan\(^ {16}\) for Sri Lanka paid close attention to gender in the context of civil society inclusion, incorporating a number of goals, activities and indicators. Expanding the representation of women’s groups in stakeholder forums and networks at different levels was singled out as a priority in the National REDD+ Action Plan. For example, at the national level, the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs was invited to be a member of the REDD+ Advisory and Coordination Board. At the provincial and district levels, building on existing efforts to strengthen CSO representation, relevant women’s and youth CBOs and CSOs have been identified, invited and supported to take part in the dialogue and collaboration with government partners. Concrete targets were created, with a quota for women to comprise at least 30%\(^ {2}\) of any REDD+ decision-making body, committee or consultation activities. Per the Action Plan, women’s groups were also encouraged and supported to participate in provincial-level REDD+ activities.

\(^{14}\)https://sgp.undp.org/
Sri Lanka’s experience underlines the complexity and intricacies of civil society dynamics around REDD+ implementation. Building bridges, collaboration and mutual understanding between women’s groups and forest-focused NGOs, while providing the space at the policy table for women organizations, can help unleash the powerful role of civil society to support and empower women’s active and equitable participation in REDD+.

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(2) In line with the target endorsed by the UN Economic and Social Council, it is widely held that women, at a minimum, should at least makeup 30% of any decision making body, committee, consultation, workshop, etc. for more information, see United Nations (1995), Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action\(^\text{17}\), Fourth World Conference on Women

As the morning mist rises over the green mountains, Lo Lo May straps a straw-woven basket on her back and heads into the surrounding forest with her sister and the other women of Chu Kan Ho village.

The 33-year-old mother of three belongs to the ethnic Dao minority whose lives are inextricably linked with the magnificent nature that abounds in Lao Cai, a province in the northwest of Viet Nam known for its mountains, rivers, waterfalls and ethnic hill tribes.

The Dao women possess indigenous knowledge of the uses of the forest’s medicinal plants to cure ailments from headaches and fever to pregnancy pains. “My mother took me into the forest as soon as I was able to walk,” says May. “And I will do the same for my daughters. This tradition has been passed on for generations in our community.”

May is emblematic of the close relationship that women and ethnic minorities have with forests in Viet Nam. However, this important co-relation has not always commanded the recognition it deserves and women’s inclusion in REDD+ (1) has, and continues, to face many institutional and cultural barriers.
Even though women outnumber men in the production of agroforestry products, forestry institutions tend to be gender-biased in Viet Nam. Women’s representation in decision-making is limited due to a combination of factors, including cultural norms regarding social behaviour.

Additionally, officials who oversee forest programmes lack understanding of gender issues. This results in simple oversights, such as failing to plan consultations around women’s work and household schedules. There is also a tendency to measure gender inclusion by a simple count of whether women were present in consultations, rather than the quality of their inclusion. Consequently, women are often not fully included, and their perspectives are not adequately reflected in forest management decisions.

Women are also disadvantaged when it comes to forest land ownership and access rights.

Despite laws that provide equal land rights to women and men, several issues—from local attitudes on gender and lineage practices, to access to legal services and inadequate institutions and practices—mean that in effect women hold only 20% of Land Use certificates. This means that, unless forest conservation-related programmes, such as REDD+, specifically target women and integrate gender considerations to address such issues, there will likely be gender inequalities in the way that women and men are involved in and benefit from them.

Acknowledging these challenges, UNDP, under the UN-REDD Programme, actively worked with the Government and local stakeholders to help ensure REDD+ action includes strong gender perspectives. This is important to make sure that women and men, across all stakeholder groups, not only benefit from REDD+ action but are also actively engaged in its implementation as well as decision-making processes.

This support first began with a comprehensive gender analysis of REDD+ in Viet Nam, examining progress and room for improvement from the national to local levels. This revealed that the gender strategies designed to address the lack of women’s participation in REDD+ included (i) capacity building on gender and REDD+ with provincial level staff, (ii) the creation of provincial gender focal points and (iii) a gender-specific overhaul of Lam Dong’s Provincial REDD+ Action Plan. However, the initial Action Plan had largely failed to consider gender equality and women’s empowerment. Few women or women’s rights organizations had been included in its development. Important groups such as the Women’s Union, a major civil society body advancing women’s rights at all levels, were not assigned a clear role or financial resources.

Steps were taken to address these concerns and the revised Provincial REDD+ Action Plan included greater consideration of civil society groups working on gender issues in ethnic minority communities.

This paved the way for more innovative collaborations between the government and women’s groups. For instance, empowered by a special provincial decision, the Lam Dong Forest Protection Department has joined forces with the Women’s Union, developing joint work planning activities to raise awareness and promote women’s inclusion in forest management activities.

At the local level, UNDP has worked actively with the Government to develop markets and partnerships for natural forest-based economic models which support the active participation of women. In Lao Cai province, public-private partnerships are being piloted between the provincial government and ethnic minority communities and businesses focusing on traditional medicines. Most of the population use traditional medicines in Viet Nam and 90% of their active ingredients are sourced from forests21. Nearly 4,000 species of plants in Viet Nam can be used for medicine22. Yet only 5% of these plants are being

commercialized. With domestic revenues estimated at USD $1.5 billion, Viet Nam still imports USD $1.7 billion annually of medicinal plants that could be derived from rich local sources that would channel some of this money to local communities.

Through this initiative, traditional medicines managed and harvested according to indigenous knowledge and practices are being sold by local women to partner companies that provide the market access that the women previously lacked. UNDP worked with the women to complement their ancestral knowledge with training on sustainable harvesting techniques. UNDP also helped to set up cooperatives at the commune-level comprised of the women involved in harvesting activities. These cooperatives oversee the collection of medicinal plants, ensuring environmental sustainability and product quality control, and ensuring that profits are distributed fairly to beneficiary households.

For local Dao women, who are dependent on forests for their income, these partnerships have had a significant positive impact on their livelihoods through increasing their incomes and securing a viable future for both their traditional knowledge and the sustainable use of the forest.

These practices bring wealth to the family level, benefiting men and children in participating households. Lo Lo May has welcomed becoming part of a cooperative, an institution set up through this initiative that has allowed them to negotiate higher prices as a collective where lone sellers would have struggled. While she used to sell her plants for 7,000 Vietnamese dollars/kilo, she now can sell them for up to 12,000 Vietnamese dollars/kilo. She notes, “the company can open up a more stable market for our products. Before becoming members of the cooperative, we didn’t have a very stable market with each household doing business individually. But now, we work together (…) We protect the forest and gather medicinal herbs together which creates sustainable development”.

This work illustrates how the valuable traditional knowledge of women and ethnic minorities can be powerfully leveraged in the stewardship of forests and REDD+ action and for economic development that has the potential to operate at an influential scale. It also shows how a country can promote the equitable inclusion and empowerment of women across the complex landscape of REDD+ and forest governance. Doing so can not only preserve women’s traditional forest knowledge and ensure they benefit from forest programmes, but also promote the sustainable and long-term success of REDD+.
Acknowledgements: This knowledge product was coordinated, written and edited from UNDP Climate and Forests Team: Celina (Kin Yi) Yong, Elizabeth Eggerts and Ela Ionescu

(1) Officially defined as “reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries, and the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks”, REDD+ incentivizes developing countries to reduce carbon emissions from deforestation and forest degradation
Quick, mischievous eyes, a round face and a sweet smile betray the depth of the thoughts of 30-year-young Meuang Sombath.

“My work made me confident, it helped me speak up on behalf of the thousands of women who lost so much in the floods”. Meuang coordinated UNDP’s cash-for-work implementation in the Central Lao province of Khammouane after this region was heavily affected by surging waters in the summer of 2018.

Storms and heavy floods ravaged all 18 provinces of Lao PDR, leaving 400,000 people in need and destroying over 100,000 hectares of paddy fields. Tens of thousands of farmers temporarily lost their livelihoods and the entire country faced the risk of malnutrition. Khammouane was one of the areas that suffered the most.

The UN Country Team received a grant from the United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) in the height of US $3.5 million to assist the Government of Lao PDR in delivering humanitarian assistance23. Four UN agencies, FAO, WHO, WFP and UNDP jointly engaged to provide this support, each

one with a specific role. UNDP’s interventions were made through cash for work programmes to villagers so they could restore and rebuild their livelihoods.

It was Meuang’s role to guarantee that everyone would be included in the decision-making process, especially women that are normally portrayed as the victims of natural disasters, and whose central role in response to disaster is often overlooked. She helped 6,265 flood victims, including almost 2,900 women from 64 villages to make a living when their usual income source, their rice field, was wiped out by the floodwaters. These villagers were first asked what in their opinion needed to be restored most urgently after the waters receded.

“In Lao culture, women don’t usually speak up in rural communities,” Meuang says. “I made a point to encourage them to share their opinion, and, very often, they were surprised that they were being consulted.”

27 - Meuang feels comfortable working with men, be it villagers, government officials or internationals. Photo: Soukee, Mahaxay district government official. Photo: UNDP Lao PD
Even though women are equally involved in all work, including heavy physical labour, men are often viewed as figures of authority and making public decisions and speaking on women’s behalf. During the cash for work implementation, Lao women in rural areas showed their strength, as both men and women over 18 years of age were offered equal opportunity and equal pay.

Together, they identified damaged roads, bridges and irrigation channels as most urgent repair projects in order to be able to access services and pick up their lives again. In exchange for cash compensation, they started rehabilitating the communal infrastructure themselves. This secured their income while repairing the damages caused by the flood. All in all, villagers, assisted by local authorities,
reconstructed 147 kilometres of roads, one bridge and three water storage facilities, cleared 18 kilometres of irrigation canals and restored 348 hectares of agricultural land.

“I found out that UNDP staff in the capital Vientiane listens to me when I speak with the authority of thousands of people behind me. When several hundred people need drinking water at the same time, there is no time to wait for lengthy administrative processes to take their course. I need to react, and I need to do so quickly. I am just a young woman from a developing country, and I would have never imagined that I could tell much more senior men what they have to do. I took a risk, thinking that I rather get blamed myself than allow my villagers to suffer even more. And it was worth taking that risk because I got the job done.”

Risk-taking seems to come like second nature to Meuang, which is something very unusual for Lao women, and Lao people in general. After all, she is the only one in her flock of siblings who has left home to study in The United States, and now lives and works in the capital of Laos. As the eldest of six sisters, from an ethnic family in a small village, Meuang knows she is a role model for the younger girls in her family. When asked what drives her, Meuang’s voice becomes shaky. “When I was a little girl, I walked 5 kilometres without shoes every day to get to school. One day, I received an award for my good school performance. My father was in the audience during the handover ceremony, and seeing that I was embarrassed to walk up to receive my award barefoot, he gave me his own yellow flip-flops to wear.”

Meuang’s eyes tear up as she says: “Now I can buy myself any shoes I see in the shops in Vientiane. But I would never, ever want to replace my father’s shoes.”.

UNDP in Lao PDR

Story by: Ildiko Hamos-Sohlo, Communications Consultant

Meuang is asking a lady from Namampha village how she spent the money she earned and if she felt safe and comfortable working together with men. Photo: UNDP Lao PDR/Chirasak Phengdouangdeth
30 - Women, like here in Vanghuapha village, will speak up when they are encouraged. Photo: UNDP Lao PDR/Ildiko Hamos

31 - The cash-for-work programme offered equal opportunity with equal pay for decent work to both men and women. Photo: UNDP Lao PDR/Ildiko Hamos

32 - Meuang, hands on at a reconstruction site in Hatxiengdee village. Photo: UNDP Lao PDR/Juho Valta
33 - Meuang hands over construction equipment to villagers. Photo: UNDP Lao PDR/Juho Valta
Coconut oil is good for food, beauty and empowerment - Oé-Cusse

Coconuts are widely available on the charming island of Timor-Leste, one of the world’s youngest nations that has emerged from a history of conflict to a peaceful democracy endeavoring for sustainable development. Coconuts are used for food consumption as a delicious fruit and often as a hydrating beverage. In the last few years, coconut oil has become more and more popular in the country.

Rosita Kenat saw this as a business opportunity in the domestic market of the Oé-Cusse region, an enclave in West Timor, surrounded by Indonesian territory and known as the Special Economic Zone for Social Market Economy (ZEESM). In early 2017, together with five other women, she created Mina Nu’u Lifau, a cooperative group and started working daily on coconut oil production.

For a group of women entrepreneurs, starting and developing a business in Timor-Leste is not an easy task. As a predominantly patriarchal society, the adherence of traditional women’s roles results in women earning less than men or, more likely, being unable to participate in decision-making processes relating to their economic livelihood. Women, especially in rural areas, struggle more than men to

become economically independent. They are often concentrated in low-skilled, low-productivity and low or unpaid jobs with long working hours, poor working conditions and limited social protection.

In the region of Oé-Cusse, only 17.7% of women own a house, while almost 70% of men are sole owners of their homes. Moreover, 82.4% of women are employed in vulnerable employment (farm and non-farm employment) compared to 70.6% of men.

Nevertheless, Rosita and her newly formed business group quickly gained customers. But the hours of hard and intensive manual labor made the production process incredibly slow.

Everything changed for them when Rosita joined a business-camp promoted by the Oé-Cusse Business Incubator (OBI) in September 2017. OBI is a programme developed by UNDP Timor Leste together with the Regional Authority (RAEOA-ZEESMTL). It encourages small industries and promotes local businesses to foster sustainable livelihoods through access to financial services, technical training, and business incubators. OBI also aims to build the economic capacity of the Oé-Cusse region by fostering an enabling environment for business, which is exactly why Rosita thought OBI could help the Mina Nu’u Lifau group to grow and expand its business.

UNDP development-oriented policies are empowering women to rise up, challenge gender stereotypes, and gain economic autonomy. At OBI programme, an obligatory quota is set to guarantee that half of the beneficiaries are women. They are encouraged to develop business ideas, which helps them to engage actively in the competition of OBI entrepreneurs. These ideas are presented in front of a panel of judges that is also composed of at least 50% of women. In addition, the beneficiaries receive capacity building training and empowerment workshops to promote their potential as businesswomen. Since 2017, OBI supported 31 women (and 30 men) to develop their businesses.

Rosita presented her innovative business and her group was selected by OBI to be one of the six female-driven businesses that year.

After joining OBI, Rosita quickly saw the benefits. Through capacity enhancement training and the provision of new equipment, their work became smarter. They were able to achieve better quality products in less time and with less intensive work, which all owed them to improve their lives economically, psychologically and physically.

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27 https://www.tl.undp.org/content/timor_leste/en/home/all-projects/ZEESM.html
“We have this business to improve our livelihoods for our families, to sustain our domestic needs: it pays for school, helps us buy clothes, and we buy rice to eat” shares Rosita.
One of the most impactful changes to the *Mina Nu’u Lifau* group was the arrival of the grinder machine. Before they had to manually grind the coconuts to produce the coconut oil, but now a bright red machine does the hard work. While the ritual of chatting, laughing and smelling the white fruit is still a part of their daily process, they are now more carefree.

“OBI provides training and support, such as equipment. Our work is easier now because we do not rely on manual work.”

The year of 2019 has been good for business. The group started partnering with local stores to sell their product in the Oé-Cusse region, making it easier to reach new costumers. They also attended an OBI workshop to learn to expand their line of products, which made them develop a line of carefully crafted and aromatic coconut soaps. The coconut soaps became an instant success, boosting the *Mina Nu’u Lifau* group to seek new opportunities and grow their business.

In only two years Rosita and the *Mina Nu’u Lifau* group became a strong symbol of the economic empowerment in the Oé-Cusse region. Not only are they earning a higher income but are also influencing the local market and creating new economic pathways for the region.

In a place marked by conflict not so long ago, it is beautiful to see empowered women creating their own opportunities together, while laughing surrounded by the smell of coconuts.

*Story by: Laurelle Neugebauer, Communications Specialist, UNDP Timor-Leste & Lucia Rodriguez Obregon, Communications Intern, UNDP Timor-Leste*
Hacking the Gender Gap in Sri Lanka

From Silicon Valley to innovation hubs in China, from the ICT sector in India to tech startups in Sweden, it is not unusual to note that there is a gender gap in the workforce. In a sector generally tagged as a boys’ club, young women face many barriers to be a part of and pursue careers as innovative entrepreneurs.

So, how do we change this? See the work that is being done at UNDP Sri Lanka.

“Being a part of HackaDev was a lifechanging moment for us all,” recalls Shanmitha Shanmugan from Hatton, a small town in Sri Lanka, as she speaks of her experience as one of the selected teams from HackaDev 201828.

28https://hackadev.lk/#/
Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires young people – both women and men – to be at the centre of the development of a country. Thus, in 2015, understanding the power of youth, UNDP Sri Lanka together with the telecom company Dialog\(^{29}\) developed “HackaDev”, a flagship initiative piloted as a social innovation hackathon, where the ‘hacking’ was on development issues. In 2017, it scaled up to a national programme when it partnered with the Sri Lanka government, gaining wider reach and greater investment. It has now become a platform where young people are given the space and support to develop their innovative ideas to tackle social issues in Sri Lanka.

Asia is a leading actor in the rise of the digital revolution. Sri Lanka, for example, is home to many Information and Communications Technology (ICT) giants. Many young Sri Lankans are actively engaged in this sector. However, women remain underrepresented\(^{30}\) as they encounter gender-based barriers in the form of bias and prejudice before and after entering this male-dominated industry. In HackaDev, the gender gap was also apparent among the participants in its first few editions.

Thus, the HackaDev team had an idea to start addressing this issue. In 2018, it became mandatory for each team to have at least one female member. While some partners were skeptical of this new regulation, the results turned out to be better than expected! Women’s representation increased to 36% in 2018 compared to the average of 10% that was prevalent in the previous years. For the first time, there was an all-women’s team participating in HackaDev’s social innovation camps.

In the 2019 edition, women’s participation rate increased once again. With over 2,350 youths engaged from across Sri Lanka, around 43% of attendees were young women, participating either in mixed-gender groups or all-women’s teams. In the west coast city of Negombo, for the first time, the programme had a room with more women participants than men.

\(^{29}\)https://www.dialog.lk/
Another element that helped improve the gender balance among participants was when HackaDev moved away from ‘Hackathon’ - which is strictly centered around ICT - and became a multi-staged innovation platform. This shift attracted more students and young professionals from diverse fields that have stronger participation of women, such as medicine, social sciences, and management. As a consequence, the profile of HackaDev participants saw a substantial increase of women. Moreover, the change helped to open up digital innovation spaces, usually predominantly occupied by men, to more young women.

In the majority of instances, more young women are taking on leadership roles in their teams, becoming the person responsible to present their ideas in auditions and on the ongoing social innovation camps. A female participant from the 2019 Idea Auditions in the Eastern Province said, “ideas and solutions that were hidden within me as a young woman have now been brought to light thanks to HackaDev.”

Tharmavel Lakshana, 23-year-old, shared her thoughts on how she felt like being the only female member of her team. “I don’t feel any different to the rest of my team members. They treat me equally and with respect. The rest of the boys saw the unique characteristics that I would bring to the team and asked me to sign up. So far it’s been a great experience.”. Lakshana was a participant of the 2nd Social Innovation Camp 2019. Being a young woman from the Tamil community she shared how the reaction of her friends and family was when she announced her participation.
“The interaction with boys is very limited in our community, so when they heard that I was joining a team with 4 other boys, my friends discouraged me. But still I persisted, and my parents have been very supportive because they saw the value of the HackaDev programme for me.”

In a sector where women’s participation is lagging behind in the workforce, HackaDev is providing support for young women to push boundaries and break stereotypes as the next generation of leaders, thinkers and creators. One such trailblazer is the 24-year-old Nivarthana Sandeepani, a student at the University of Sabaragamuwa. After being a participant of HackaDev 2018, she kickstarted mini-workshops on social innovation and created a blogging platform to regularly share articles and blogs on the same theme with an online community.

And it all started with a small requirement from UNDP to oblige all participating teams to have at least one female member. Now in its 4th year, the programme is in a constant process of learning and evolving to ensure gender equality and diversity. While encouraging diversity, in 2019, teams with young people with disabilities and/or ethnic diversity were also given preference within the selection process.
As a famous saying goes, “it’s not about ideas. It’s about making ideas happen.” This is exactly what HackaDev has been actively doing with youth in Sri Lanka from day one and will continue to strive to Leave No Youth Behind.

Story by: Communications Team, UNDP Sri Lanka
“When I started to write about Nepali women’s lack of rights to their own bodies and their land, people called me a ‘bad girl’,” says Lokshari.

“Now those same people ask me to teach their daughters to be like me.”

Standing on stage to collect her N-Peace Award\(^3\), Lokshari Kunwar is one of 18 winners of UNDP’s flagship prize-giving initiative, fighting for women’s voices to be heard during and after conflict. The room is noticeably moved by her impassioned recount of her journey towards becoming a human rights defender.

\(^3\) [http://www.n-peace.net/](http://www.n-peace.net/)
Lokshari is one of few women journalists reporting on cases of armed conflict, gender-based violence, and human rights violations in Kailali district. In this area in the far west of Nepal, unequal land distribution is considered a driving factor behind the decade long conflict. As poor people’s livelihoods depend largely on land resources, the inequality in land ownership and accessibility can become a significant cause of tensions between marginalized groups and landowners. Women, in particular, have been disproportionately affected. Only around twenty per cent of women have some form of legal ownership rights over land in Nepal,32 and instances of gender-based violence are high, despite (and arguably due to) a lack of formal reports.

With this year’s International Women’s Day33 theme focusing on innovation, it is important to remember that this buzzword does not just mean pushing for advancements in technology and science. Innovation also involves trying to approach things from different angles, understanding alternative perspectives, and disrupting “business-as-usual” attitudes. By considering innovative approaches, we might be able to arrive at inclusive, sustainable development - faster.

In high-pressured, conflict situations, peace is still largely considered a top-level, political or military process, spearheaded by men who in patriarchal societies are more likely to be leaders. This way of negotiating peace agreements falls somewhat short of addressing the broader, nuanced issues faced by people affected by conflict at the grassroots level of society.

Women offer that different perspective

In cases like Somalia, for example, men elders reportedly focused on political power and settlement, while women focused on economic development, education, justice, and reconciliation — all critical elements of a sustained peace. Women are more likely to take a holistic approach and advocate for marginalized groups: the disabled, elderly, and those from different religious, cultural, or social backgrounds, as well as fellow women.

Lokshari’s career spanning 15 years has seen much success. She used the money that had been reserved for her dowry to set up the newspaper Morning Bell, and her work has been recognized by the Nepali Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens, and the Press Council Nepal.

But support from the community did not emerge at the beginning. For her activism and for the reports she published, she once lost all her front teeth after a particularly violent attack. One major challenge is that women are often not perceived to have the skills, knowledge, or social status needed to bring about change in post-conflict environments. Through speaking out, they also challenge entrenched gender norms, often at great personal risk.

In a recent survey, 66.7 per cent of respondents reported that they had been increasingly invited to take part in peace processes after winning an N-Peace Award. By shining a spotlight on the achievements of particularly inspirational champions like Lokshari, initiatives such as N-Peace do much to help change the current narrative on women as peacebuilders. Through advocacy and capacity-building training, N-Peace strengthens their ability to continue fighting for what they believe in, and — importantly — encourages opportunities for them to advance women’s leadership.

Today, Lokshari has become a role model for other women in her community

34 https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/05/why-women-should-have-a-greater-role-in-peacebuilding/
“It makes me feel that all the struggles were worth it. This Award gives me a lot of positive energy,” she says.

Among other winners honored for their achievements are Dr Cynthia Maung, a maternal healthcare doctor working with refugees on the Thai-Myanmar border, Mary Akrami who is negotiating for issues affecting women to be addressed by Afghanistan’s High Peace Council, and Mahira Miyanji who is working to establish free education for women and girls in Lyari, Pakistan. Civil society organizations supporting the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Asia are also celebrated. To find answers for accelerating more inclusive and sustainable peace in societies, it is women like these who we should increasingly be turning to.

*NPeace Initiative*

*Story by: Mailee Osten-Tan, Communications Specialist, UNDP Bangkok Regional Hub*

*Originally published here.*

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35[https://maetaoclinic.org/](https://maetaoclinic.org/)
37[http://n-peace.net/](http://n-peace.net/)
A Goal For Gender Equality

On a sunny day, I watched in admiration as young children skateboarded across the ramp near the harbor side of a small island in Baa Atoll.

What was most surprising to me was the fact that it was young girls skating with such confidence and poise. I couldn’t imagine skateboarding with my friends when we were little, growing up girls we were always told from a very young age not to run too fast, climb trees or be too outspoken. This was definitely a rare sight.

I have travelled to many islands in the past couple of years, all of them unique in its beauty and the people that reside in each one. However, one thing that always caught my attention was the gender stereotyping in sports. It is very common to see women playing volleyball while men play football. In fact, my first job with UNDP Maldives included advocating for equal opportunities in sports. We worked with the women’s national football team to coach and organize friendly matches in the islands and talk about their journeys with parents and students. I was so inspired by many of their stories. All the obstacles they had to overcome just to be able to realize one dream, play football.
This experience showed me first-hand how powerful this sport could be in breaking gender stereotypes and building gender champions. It can give girls the confidence to challenge gender inequality at home including unequal household and care responsibilities and pursue careers that break the gender stereotype.

In the Maldives among youth aged between 18-35 years, the percentage of young women (39%) who are not in education, employment or training is much higher than young men (17%)\(^{39}\). Many parents are reluctant to send their daughters outside the island alone to pursue education or employment and these gendered expectations not only influence women’s career aspirations but also men’s perception of the role of women in society from a very young age.

To change this, we needed an ‘out of the box’ solution.

UNDP Maldives in collaboration with World Bank decided to roll out the sports sessions again but with a ‘twist’ this time. With the tag line “Vaane,” roughly translated to “You Can,” we offered a combination of sports and life skill sessions to provide girls with the confidence to break down barriers at home and at school. The sessions focused on leadership and problem solving, career guidance and basic financial skills for girls and sessions on gender norms for parents.

Every day after school, girls of island HDh. Nolhivarifaru went out to the football ground, which had until then solely been used by boys, to be coached by members of the Women’s National Football Team. Parents were naturally reluctant to send their girls to play football but they became more open to the idea after watching the girls play. Boys that initially teased the girls, now wanted to be an ally and coach the girls to play better. On the final day, a friendly match was organized where parents, community members and fellow students came to support the teams. Boys acted as assistants to the referees. As the crowd cheered, the girls led the way in breaking the gender stereotypes both on and off the field in their island and for many islands across the country.
I was happy to hear about how the training had impacted the classroom dynamics. Teachers told us that girls were more confident in the classrooms and boys now were more open to working together with girls on different tasks. Parents reported a better understanding of gender norms and its impact on their daughters. Girls even said they wanted to have a career even if their husbands earned a good income. In just five days we were able to redraw their career aspiration and expectations, I kept on imagining what we could achieve if we could make this part of the school extracurricular activities. I believe girls would raise their hands up in class more, question gender inequality at home and see they are just as smart and capable as everyone else.

We are continuing the pilot[^40] in more islands across the country. The game is on, we are changing the rules even as we play. The odds are on our side and our goal is to win, to win big for gender equality.

Words: Shamha Naseer, Governance Analyst, UNDP Maldives

[^40]: https://www.mv.undp.org/content/maldives/en/home/presscenter/articles/2019/Vaane.html
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Empowered lives.
Resilient nations.