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A focus group discussion with Dumagat people in Real, Quezon Province.
Photo: Rafaella Potestades and Amanda Lee Centeno, Bayi Inc.

Women and natural resource management in the Philippines

Rosemarie Joy Quetula, Amanda Lee Centeno and Rafaella Potestades

With contributions from Himaya Tamayo-Gutierrez, Nelissa Maria Rocas, Joan Laura Abes and Bryan Joel Mariano

“A critical step toward achieving sustainable, inclusive and resilient landscape governance is women’s empowerment in natural resource management through inclusive governance models.”

Rosemarie Joy Quetula

Introduction

Filipinos depend significantly on natural resources for their livelihoods and sustenance. However, complex gender relations and dynamics affect the intersecting social identities that restrict women’s access to, control over, leadership in, and decision-making regarding natural resource management (NRM) (Joshi et al., 2021). The inclusion or exclusion of rights to access, control, leadership and decision-making in NRM is political and related to institutionalized gendered social beliefs and expectations (Ravera et al., 2016). Despite ongoing efforts to promote gender equality, patriarchal norms and traditional roles continue to shape the power structures in the NRM sector in the Philippines (Rodriguez, 1990).

In the past few years, Filipino women have made significant strides in various disciplines, actively participating in multiple professions such as academia, health, business, politics and legislation (Orias, 2008). However, they remain constrained from taking on leadership roles due to family and reproductive tasks such as caregiving and household responsibilities (Anonuevo, 2000). In contrast, men dominate paid work and leadership roles (Tabassum and Nayak, 2021).

Bayi Inc., a feminist organization advocating for gender justice and women's full and meaningful participation in women's empowerment, led the study discussed in this article, with support from Forest Foundation Philippines. Bayi Inc. and the Forest Foundation Philippines acknowledges the various factors that limit women's access to and control over natural resources in the country and in the study explored women's roles in NRM, focusing on the lived experiences of Indigenous communities. Through the study they aimed to introduce gender-focused approaches that promote resilient and inclusive nature-based solutions that are deeply rooted in sustainable and equitable landscape governance.



Consultation with the Tayabas City Environment and Natural Resources Office (CENRO). Photo: Rafaela Potestades and Amanda Lee Centeno, Bayi Inc.

Methodology

The study, conducted in May to June of 2023, employed a feminist qualitative approach with mixed methods, integrating quantitative data and open-ended survey questions to capture participants' insights on women's participation in the focal landscapes of Forest Foundation Philippines: Sierra Madre, Palawan, Samar/Leyte, and the Bukidnon/Misamis Oriental and Eastern Mindanao seaboard, including one of Bayi's focal sites, the Mount Banahaw area of the Mounts Banahaw-San Cristobal Protected Landscape. The focal landscapes span multiple legislative boundaries and play a crucial role in providing ecosystem services that support local and regional economies; this made them ideal study sites.

The online survey instruments revolved around the key themes and issues identified in the secondary data collected. Purposive sampling was used to select participants. The survey was disseminated online to 18 partner organizations. Of these, 12 organizations responded: eight (66.7%) were non-government organizations (NGOs), while four (33.3%) were people's organizations (citizen-led groups in the Philippines that promote the public interest).

Insights from the online survey shaped three focus group discussions (FGDs):

- one with representatives from the Tayabas Municipal Environment and Natural Resources Office (MENRO);
- another with 20 women safeguarding the Mount Banahaw area of the Protected Landscape in Tayabas; and
- a third with 11 Dumagat Indigenous women from the Sierra Madre Mountain range in Real (see Box 1).

These discussions examined how social and institutional forces influence women's participation in landscape governance. Bayi Inc. conducted a thematic analysis to identify patterns and insights by coding and categorizing interview notes and survey results. This provided a deeper understanding of women's systematic processes and diverse experiences in natural resource management.

Box 1. Mounts Banahaw-San Cristobal Protected Landscape and Sierra Madre Mountain range

The Protected Landscape is a major watershed for the provinces of Laguna and Quezon. It holds significant educational, aesthetic and biodiversity value, as well as cultural and religious importance to the country.

Referred to as the “backbone of Luzon,” the Sierra Madre Mountain Range provides habitat for a wide range of flora and fauna, and is Luzon’s defence against typhoons that come in from the Pacific Ocean. The range is also the site of many critical watersheds. Many years of mining, deforestation, resource exploitation and unsustainable land use have had negative impacts, threatening the inhabitants of the Sierra Madre as well as millions of other Filipinos (Forest Foundation Philippines, 2025).

While the feminist qualitative approach provides valuable insights into women’s participation in NRM, its scope and conclusions must be understood to have certain limitations given that the study’s geographical area may not fully represent the experiences faced by men and women in all their diversities.

Gendered roles and responsibilities in natural resources management

This section explores how gender and power dynamics in the Philippines shape the management and governance of natural resources (James et al., 2021; Peluso, 1991). It highlights the systemic barriers that women face and the opportunities that may provide them with more sustainable, inclusive and equitable governance of natural resource management.

Access, control over, use and ownership of resources

Men and women access natural resources differently, depending on cultural and physical considerations (Björning and Kiørboe, 2005). Such considerations are influenced by income, ethnicity, education, leadership and sociocultural norms. Societal narratives frame women’s contributions to natural resource management as merely supportive, rather than central. The limited involvement of women in decision-making processes (Agarwal, 1992) can be seen in the disparity of land ownership in the country, where men own the majority of land and land title is often registered only in the husband’s name. Women typically share ownership of property with their husbands, although access to ownership and the management or leadership of land may not always be equally distributed between men and women. A 2014 study by WOCAN shows that women only hold around 32% of Certificate Land Ownership Agreements (WOCAN, 2014). That study emphasizes that the reinforcement of gender imbalances in terms of ownership affects women’s ownership, access and agency in participating in NRM.

In addition to these ownership imbalances, women are restricted to supportive, reproductive and nurturing roles that often centre around food production and soil protection nearer to home, such as lowland forests, nurseries and nearby mangroves. Conversely, men engage in resource-intensive and extractive activities such as fishing, hunting and small-scale mining, often in remote areas of the region, specifically upland forests. Wildlife threats and challenging terrain contribute to the perception that forest-related work is inherently “masculine” (Figure 1). As a result, women face restricted access to and use of upland forests, since these areas are framed as a “male-exclusive” domain (MacGregor, 2017).



Figure 1. Spatial access and perceptions of men and women in NRM

Source: Bayi, Inc., Rapid Gender Analysis, 2023

The Bayi study revealed that women’s participation and involvement in community activities and organizations are mediated through their husbands, which reinforces traditional gender roles. Men serve as primary leaders and decision-makers, while women, especially Indigenous women, are seen as caretakers of Indigenous knowledge, who protect their ancestral lands and preserve their culture. Unfortunately, Indigenous knowledge protectors and carers are often confined to secondary or supportive roles in the broader NRM framework, with the contribution of women overlooked by most people (Talidong and Toquero, 2020).

The study found that women often carry out the supportive and nurturing tasks of NRM, and that they access and use resources through subsistence farming, handicrafts and cultural practices. Despite this access and use, however, women still face economic barriers due to their limited opportunity to participate in formal markets and their multiple domestic burdens and responsibilities. This reflects broader societal challenges due to policies that transferred welfare responsibility from the state to individuals, further reinforcing economic barriers and the marginalization of women (Resurreccion and Elmhirst, 2008). In addition, the demands of unpaid domestic labour restrict women from taking part in skill development and limit their ability to acquire and use market-relevant knowledge in formal and informal economic activities.

These gendered divisions extend to leadership and decision-making (IUCN, 2020). Despite their active participation in NRM and conservation, women are still excluded from formal leadership positions due to deeply rooted sociocultural norms, economic constraints, and their disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic labour. These barriers reinforce the practice of men being primary decision-makers while relegating women to supportive roles, restricting their ability to shape policies and governance structures. Fleshed out in this study are women's leadership challenges, highlighting the structural obstacles that they face and proposing pathways

toward more inclusive and equitable participation in environmental governance.

Barriers to leadership and decision-making

While there is a positive trend of women assuming leadership positions in NRM, their representation remains limited, and their perspectives are not equally valued in decision-making processes. Half of the survey participants felt that women are still not granted equal decision-making power in accessing, controlling and managing natural resources despite their active participation in NRM activities. This highlights the existing structural barriers that women face, brought about by sociocultural norms and the burden of unpaid domestic responsibilities. While the women who participated in the survey serve as community leaders and are actively engaged in NRM, leadership positions are still predominantly held by men. In addition, traditional leadership perceptions, which emphasize masculine traits such as authority and strength, also continue to hinder women's participation.

This imbalance exacerbates economic challenges for women as their unpaid contributions to conservation activities and projects increase without corresponding financial recognition and incentives or corresponding leadership opportunities. Women are generally beneficiaries of NRM, rather than being empowered as



A focus group discussion with the local women from Tayabas, Quezon. Photo: Rafaella Potestades and Amanda Lee Centeno, Bayi Inc.

decision-makers and agents of change; this reinforces the systemic barriers that continue to limit women's agency.

Systemic undervaluation of unpaid domestic labour further restricts women's participation in NRM. The FGDs revealed that societal expectations, coupled with husbands' tendency to undervalue and underestimate domestic responsibilities, add to women's physical and mental burdens. In addition to managing household chores, caregiving and informal jobs like selling and sewing, women also juggle NRM responsibilities. Many survey participants shared that their husbands tend to dismiss their work at home with statements like, "You are practically doing nothing every day," just because they stay home and do not engage in formal employment. This undervaluation fails to consider the time that women spend in balancing household duties, paid/unpaid work, and community involvement, including public service and volunteer activities, and limits their initiative and ability to engage in or take on leadership roles.

Filipino women face an added layer of vulnerability, as they are disproportionately at risk of intimidation, gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual assault, further hindering their access to, control and use of, and participation, leadership and decision-making in NRM (Orias, 2008). According to Global Witness (2023), the Philippines remains one of the most dangerous countries for women environmental defenders; women remain highly

vulnerable to militarization, harassment and threats as they work to protect their ancestral lands.

These barriers and inherent risks, including women's precarious working conditions, remain a pressing concern and hinder women from actively participating in NRM. Deep-seated power imbalances heighten women's vulnerability in environmental defence, and the weak enforcement of women's rights further exacerbates these challenges, exposing them to more harm and limiting their opportunities for full and meaningful participation in NRM. Domestic labour and economic constraints also hinder their engagement in leadership, as most NRM initiatives are voluntary and unpaid. Addressing these challenges requires targeted efforts to reduce women's unpaid labour burdens and create sustainable economic opportunities that support their active engagement in NRM.

Pakilepaan: an alternative governance model

To address these systemic barriers to women's full and meaningful participation in NRM, the Indigenous women of Quezon follow an alternative leadership model that is centred on community values and inclusive decision-making: *pakilepaan*. *Pakilepaan* is a Dumagat process of sharing, discussing and reflecting that fosters unity through the creation of safe spaces where elders, leaders and community members can discuss and deliberate on matters affecting their lives. *Pakilepaan* not only provides



A focus group discussion with the local women in Tayabas, Quezon. Photo: Rafaella Potestades and Amanda Lee Centeno, Bayi Inc.

a process to discuss various matters related to NRM and conservation, but also allows women and youth to talk about the other topics that affect their lives. Hence, this model is instrumental in ensuring inclusion. Power structures and systemic issues can be talked over through diplomatic and engaging storytelling and discussion, providing women with opportunities to raise awareness and suggest means of alleviating barriers to leadership and decision-making. The process recognizes women's voices in NRM leadership and decision-making.

Integrating *pakilepaan* in the existing governance structures of NRM could help communities move away from the hierarchical leadership models that continue to marginalize women in NRM, and could allow communities to embrace collective and inclusive leadership and decision-making that values diverse perspectives. Furthermore, prioritizing *pakilepaan* within NRM could help to redistribute leadership responsibilities, allowing women to take on decision-making roles.

Creating spaces where women can freely express concerns, contribute to solutions, and participate in communal discussions empowers them as key actors in environmental conservation (WWF, 2022). Strengthening Indigenous practices within leadership frameworks can also challenge prevailing gender norms and facilitate greater recognition of women's unpaid labour contributions.

The limited representation of women in decision-making — compounded by socio-cultural norms and the multiple roles they are expected to fulfil — reinforces unequal power dynamics and heightens gender-based risks. Overcoming these systemic barriers is essential to ensuring women's safety, leadership and full participation in NRM. By adopting *pakilepaan* as a guiding framework for inclusive decision-making, communities can dismantle gender inequalities and build leadership models that are rooted in shared responsibility, mutual respect and collective well-being.

Conclusion and recommendations

This article highlights the persistent gender biases that shape leadership roles in natural resource management

in the Philippines, often marginalizing women and limiting their participation in decision-making. Indigenous women in Real, Quezon, demonstrate that alternative governance models — rooted in inclusivity, collaboration and sustainability — can successfully challenge these stereotypes and create more equitable and effective NRM practices. The concept of *pakilepaan*, which emphasizes dialogue and participatory decision-making, illustrates how safe spaces and inclusive dialogues can serve as a transformative model for achieving environmental justice and sustainable resource management.

Addressing the structural barriers that women face and enhancing their leadership opportunities in natural resource management require a multi-stakeholder approach. Key strategies for fostering inclusive governance and empowering women in NRM include comprehensive research to document gender-specific ecosystem analyses. Such analyses identify and address the distinct challenges that women encounter in various ecological contexts, and help to shape capacity development programmes that strengthen their technical, leadership and advocacy skills.

By prioritizing women's empowerment and capacity building, legal frameworks that consider gender can be reinforced to promote equitable land ownership and ensure women's meaningful participation in governance bodies. This, in turn, can drive the development and enforcement of gender-responsive policies and legal structures.

Furthermore, transformative leadership can be fostered by adopting inclusive governance models, such as *pakilepaan*, to recognize and elevate women's roles in NRM. Participatory leadership approaches that dismantle traditional power structures create a more inclusive and equitable decision-making context for NRM.

By implementing these measures, stakeholders — including government agencies, civil society, the private sector, and Indigenous communities — can collaborate to break down systemic barriers and build a more just, sustainable and resilient natural resource management system that benefits both people and the environment.

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Author affiliations

- Rosemarie Joy Quetula**, Project Officer, SILG Program, Forest Foundation Philippines (rjquetula@forestfoundation.ph)
- Amanda Lee Centeno**, former co-researcher, Bayi, Inc., Quezon City, Philippines (arcenteno@up.edu.ph)
- Rafaella Potestades**, co-researcher and co-Executive Director, Bayi, Inc., Quezon City, Philippines (aellapotestades@gmail.com)
- Himaya Tamayo-Gutierrez**, co-Executive Director, Bayi, Inc., Quezon City, Philippines (execdirector@angatbayi.com)
- Nelissa Maria Rocas**, Program Manager, SILG Program, Forest Foundation Philippines (nmrocas@forestfoundation.ph)
- Joan Laura Abes**, Program Manager, TFCA 2, Forest Foundation Philippines (jlabes@forestfoundation.ph)
- Bryan Joel Mariano**, former knowledge management specialist, Forest Foundation Philippines (bsmariano@up.edu.ph)