

# TOWARDS JUST AND EFFECTIVE CONSERVATION FOR INDIGENOUS MEN AND WOMEN IN THE MT. MANTALINGAHAN PROTECTED LANDSCAPE, PALAWAN PHILIPPINES

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## ABSTRACT

While good community engagement is considered fundamental to successful field-based conservation projects, it is still too often centered on those individuals with high-levels of public decision-making power such as chiefs and male household members, and is not necessarily representative of less-powerful voices whose lives and livelihoods are impacted by conservation initiatives – such as indigenous women. This case study examines the extent to which gender dynamics were identified and programmed for within the first 5 years of the Mt. Mantalingahan Protected Landscape in the Philippines, home to nearly 3,000 indigenous households. We find that gender was not systematically considered during Landscape development or implementation, with most community engagement focused on male indigenous chiefs. Through interviews with local men and women, as well as the decision-making board, we found that there is great interest in addressing this gap and collaboratively developed a set of gender-responsive recommendations for the new management plan. All recommendations have subsequently been approved and incorporated into the 2016-2020 management plan.

**Keywords:** Protected Areas, Indigenous Peoples, islands, gender, biodiversity

## INTRODUCTION

Around the world, gender norms impact men's and women's relationship with natural resources (e.g. Lendelvo et al. 2012, Agarwal 2000). Different responsibilities and uses of resources mean that men and women have different ecological knowledge and unique needs for conservation. For example, women and girls are usually responsible for collecting water for

household use (WHO/UNICEF 2010) and therefore have specific knowledge about water sources and a vested interest in water conservation and quality. Gender norms also shape decision-making and participation, and women are often excluded from these processes for a variety of reasons – including cultural barriers, time deficit, and lack of information (e.g. Mwangi et al.

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Photo 1: *Mantalingahan Mountains located in the province of Palawan where the Mt. Mantalingahan Protected Landscape area is located. Photo Credit: Jeanne Tabangay*

2011, Agarwal 2000). Too often, this results in conservation initiatives that are not necessarily inclusive of women's roles, responsibilities, and their uses of natural resources. Not only can this have implications for project sustainability, it can also result in unintended negative consequences on women's lives and livelihoods. Here, we examine a conservation initiative in the Philippines on the extent to which gender dynamics have been identified and incorporated into design and management.

### *The Mt. Mantalingahan Protected Landscape MMPL*

The Mt. Mantalingahan Protected Landscape (MMPL), located at the southern end of the island province of Palawan in the Philippines, is a key area for biodiversity with at least 861 plant species and 169 vertebrates recorded in the area. Officially designated in 2009, the MMPL covers over 120,000 hectares, protecting watersheds and forests, which are valuable to nearby lowland

agricultural production. In 2013, the MMPL was recognized as one of the country's best protected area by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources and is currently included in the country's tentative list of World Heritage Site nominees.

Within the MMPL there is extremely diverse flora and fauna and a largely forested mountain range responsible for providing various ecosystem services that benefit the local communities with an estimated Total Economic Value (TEV) of US\$ 5.5 billion. These ecosystem services include water, soil conservation, flood control, carbon sequestration, non-timber forest product and the high potential of waterfalls, caves and other touristic attractions.

The landscape is also home to 90% indigenous Palawan communities who live both within the mountainous interior and in the lowlands. According to the 2010 management plan by the Protect Area Management Board (PAMB) in partnership with Conservation International



Photo 2: *Indigenous Peoples of the indigenous Palawan communities.* Photo Credit: Lynn Tang.

and the Global Conservation Fund, nearly 3,000 households are located within the protected area boundaries. Unlike other areas which are challenged by access to natural resources, the indigenous Palawan maintain access to their resources for local livelihood purposes and retain governance control over the area through various policies.

Local livelihoods are directly linked to the ecological health of the landscape, with the farming of rice, cassava and corn within the MMPL accounting for the majority of local incomes, and hunting and gathering of non-timber forest resources such as resin and honey further supporting livelihoods. According to the MMPL management plan, the indigenous population generates an estimated USD\$1 million in revenue each year in environmental goods from the landscape (PAMB 2010). The MMPL is also home to burial grounds and other ceremonial and traditional sites.

Threats to the landscape—similar to those of many other protected areas—include illegal or

unsustainable extraction of resources, conversion of forest to agricultural land, lack of economic alternatives, and human population growth. The MMPL is managed by a Protected Area Management Board (PAMB), the highest-level policy-making body for the protected area, which is composed of 71 members from national and local government agencies, nongovernment organizations, the private sector, indigenous peoples, youth, women's groups, and the religious sector.

Following designation, the PAMB approved the first MMPL 5-year management plan in early 2010, which was developed through a series of meetings, workshops, and discussions with various stakeholders. The subsequent plan (2016-2020) was under development while we conducted this research.

### *Understanding Stakeholders*

It is widely understood within the conservation community that thorough stakeholder analysis

and engagement are critical to ensuring successful and sustainable conservation outcomes, especially within community conservation initiatives (e.g. Knapp, et al., 2014). However, although well intentioned, stakeholders are often identified on an ad hoc basis and certain groups can easily be missed. For example, despite an apparently robust stakeholder engagement process when developing the management plan, and the diverse make-up of PAMB members, our study found that gender considerations (understanding how men and women use and manage the natural resources) were not taken into account in a systematic way during MMPL designation or management.

Men and women interact with their environment differently based on social norms, roles, and responsibilities. They use different resources, possess unique ecological knowledge, and therefore may have differing concerns and interests regarding resource use and conservation priorities. For example, indigenous Palawan men and women have distinct roles and responsibilities in the family and community dictated by local cultural and social norms. While women's work is centered on domestic functions (household chores, childcare), farming, and handicraft making, men tend to focus on construction or reparation of houses and gathering fuel wood and forest products. Men and boys are also responsible for hunting, giving them unique knowledge of the flora and fauna of the MMPL. Agriculture is a shared task, with men preparing the area for planting and both men and women involved in planting and harvesting. Likewise, community decision-making authority rests squarely with men; tribal leaders in Palawan are exclusively men, a title with power that is passed on through lineage.

In order to move forward the New Social Compact<sup>3</sup> for just and effective conservation,

these gendered differences in natural resource use and management within the local cultural context must be well understood by conservation practitioners and integrated into conservation initiatives. Ensuring equitable participation in conservation decision-making is not only a moral argument (a human right to be able to participate in decisions that affect one's livelihood) but also a 'business' or 'conservation' argument. For example, research has found that conservation decision-making bodies with a high proportion of women show significantly greater improvements in forest condition because of women's contributions to improved forest protection and rule compliance (Agarwal, 2009).

The MMPL presents an interesting case for examining gender integration within natural resource management. Looking retroactively at the MMPL designation process and initial 5-year management of the area can provide insight into how well gender considerations had been identified and addressed in the past. At the same time, the current development of the next 5-year management plan presents a timely opportunity to provide recommendations for improving gender integration going forward.

### *Methodology*

This study was carried out by the lead author, a Filipino woman who has lived and worked in Palawan for over 20 years and speaks Filipino/Tagalog and some Palawan dialect when communicating with local people. She was given technical assistance by the second author, a gender and conservation advisor. The study, including preparation, field visits and data synthesizing, was conducted from July 2014-June 2015. The purpose of the study was to determine how gender considerations had been incorporated

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<sup>3</sup> The New Social Compact for Just and Effective Conservation of Biocultural Diversity seeks to galvanize diverse stakeholders to collectively commit to a new conservation ethic, launching at the IUCN 2014 World Parks Congress in Sydney and continuing beyond.

in the development and implementation of the landscape so far, to understand the societal gender norms related to participation in natural resource governance, and then to provide concrete recommendations to be considered in the new management plan. Findings from the research were presented to the PAMB for consideration in developing the new management plan.

Over several months in late 2014, we reviewed all relevant MMPL development and management documents for reference to the stakeholder engagement processes, looking particularly at the extent to which men and women who lived within the landscape and surrounding areas were consulted and involved. We also conducted focus groups and interviews with key individuals to gather information about:

- How men and women within and near the MMPL use the area's natural resources and how they have been impacted by the establishment and management of the MMPL over the last six years
- Men's and women's involvement in the designation process and within MMPL management decision-making, including both within PAMB and the local communities
- The barriers that local women face in being involved in decision-making

At the community level, we conducted separate focus groups of men and women with people from three different groups: a long-standing indigenous peoples organization comprised of Palawans (Organization of Indigenous Peoples for Action in Palawan), a newly-established environmental organization comprised of both indigenous Palawans and non-indigenous people from the Visayas region (Cooperation in Sitio Kininaman and Manggahan for the Environment),

and unaffiliated men and women from local indigenous Palawan communities. Some of the responses on customary laws, governance and ownership were verified through literature reviews.

A total of 37 males and 43 females participated; 85% identified as indigenous Palawans while 15% identified as non-indigenous Visayans (primarily from Iloilo and Cebu). The majority of respondents identified as farmers (total 60%, 34% men/26% women) and housewives (16%, all female), while the rest were resin gatherers (10%, all male), paid laborers or engaged in small enterprise.

At the PAMB level, we gathered information on gender-related aspects and perspectives through 25 key informant interviews (17 men/8 women, 3 of which are indigenous Palawans), focus group discussions and review of available documents (e.g. Designation documents, community consultation transcripts, planning workshop documents, and meeting minutes).

#### *Findings: Designation process & management plan*

Designation of the MMPL took five years to complete (2004-2009) and did not include a structured gender analysis. Project documents indicate that there was little consideration of gender concerns at the community level by those responsible for designation. For example, documents of community consultations, public hearings and planning workshops did not disaggregate responses, participation, or contributions of men and women<sup>4</sup>. Documents instead used the general terms "local community", "stakeholders", or "partners", and there were no documented efforts to engage women in the process. Therefore, the resulting management

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that during designation sex-disaggregated data were collected on MMPL occupants (a requirement by law within the designation process) showing that 51.7% were male, but this is the only instance of sex-disaggregated data.

plan, informed by information collected during designation, did not adequately capture the different needs or concerns of men and women or discuss methods for ensuring equitable decision-making and benefit sharing.

These findings were confirmed during the focus groups and interviews, where the majority of male respondents confirmed that they were the ones who mostly participated in the consultations and workshops during this time. During the initial community consultations and protected area suitability assessment phase of the MMPL, the endorsements of more than 50 of the traditional (male) leaders in the upland villages were obtained. However, it is unclear to what extent these traditional leaders were able to fully represent different community members' interests. Furthermore, when it comes to issues pertaining to land, it was reported that men more actively participate in meetings, and this is why more men attended the consultations during the designation process.

The first MMPL management plan (2010-2015) seeks to protect the natural capital from which ecosystem services will sustainably contribute to human wellbeing; however, language of the plan is generally gender blind – none of the goals, objectives, programs, strategies, activities, or indicators addressed the differing needs or concerns of men and women. For example, documents report that community development projects during this time (e.g. reforestation, training, seminars, workshops, water system construction) reached an estimated 33% of protected area occupants. However, documentation does not provide information on how many men and women participated or received information about these projects, or how the project benefits were distributed or shared.

Project documents refer only to “communities”, “households”, and “families”, and list the “male head of the family” as the representative entity.

### *MMPL governance*

The PAMB, consisting of various levels of government representatives, local and civil society organizations or groups, and private sector, is made up of 80% men and 20% women. This disparity is due, in part, to the fact that elected government officials are frequently men (especially at the barangay or village/district level). Similarly, only men can be traditional leaders so indigenous groups on the PAMB are always represented by men. Despite the gender disparity of the board, respondents reported that actual attendance at meetings by female members is more consistent than that of the male members, with most of the women also actively participating in the discussions, including a local female mayor who often presides over meetings.

Most of the PAMB members interviewed affirmed their awareness of the Philippines' Magna Carta of Women<sup>5</sup>, a comprehensive human rights law that guarantees the civil, political and economic rights of women regarding food security, housing, livelihoods, education, employment, health, nutrition, decision-making and access to information, among others. The law also provides protection of the rights of indigenous women to their indigenous knowledge systems and practices, traditional livelihoods, and other manifestations of their cultures and ways of life. During our focus groups and interviews, the PAMB members unanimously agreed that women's equitable participation is a major gap in current MMPL management programs.

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<sup>5</sup> The Philippines' Republic Act 9710, The Magna Carta of Women, is a comprehensive women's human rights law that seeks to eliminate discrimination through the recognition, protection, fulfillment and promotion of the rights of Filipino women, especially those belonging in the marginalized sectors of the society. It conveys a framework of rights for women based directly on international law.

The recognition that men and women were not equally represented in MMPL governance, and agreement that it is a gap, demonstrates an opportunity for change in the governance structure and associated projects and programs.

## VIEWS ON SOCIETAL GENDER NORMS

Results from our focus groups showed that 73% of male respondents believe that men and women are generally treated equally in society. Respondents elaborated that both men and women have equal rights in making decisions at home, in accessing information, and in fulfilling community roles like attending meetings to voice one's views. Furthermore, they reported, roles and labor in the household are shared between men and women, and husbands say that they listen to and are supportive of the decisions or actions of their wives. Respect, politeness, mutual help and equality in sharing and exchange are rooted in Palawan customary laws and must be observed and demonstrated by both men and women.

Of female respondents, 56% agreed that men and women are treated equally in society; however respondents also noted that women have more responsibilities at home and that the men dominate in all aspects of discussions and decision-making at the household and community levels. Some respondents reported that they are seen as inferior because of their limitations in communicating and interacting with others and are therefore left at home with the household chores and children. Recognizing these barriers is crucial to formulating activities or actions that reduce or eliminate them.

Of the female respondents, 33% say the level of women's engagement and leadership in their community is very significant, while 44% say it is moderate and 23% say it is minimal. Male respondents had relatively similar views, with 27% reporting significant engagement and leadership, 38% moderate and 35% minimal.

## BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

Focus group discussions revealed that one of the main barriers to equal participation is women's lack of confidence in public speaking – particularly in remote areas with limited interactions. It was observed during this research that women are generally timid and hesitant to engage in conversation with strangers and some will simply hide, although this was not necessarily readily admitted. Not surprisingly, women's participation is observed to be higher if the facilitator or leader of an event is also a woman. However, with increasing exposure, certain Palawan female leaders have emerged and have gone on to lead organizations and work within government at different levels.

Other barriers to participation identified during our focus groups and interviews are outlined in the table and demonstrate the similarities and differences in men's and women's barriers. Identification of these significant barriers to participation is the first step in understanding why participation is not equitable and highlights areas where MMPL governance can focus efforts to reduce or mitigate barriers (Table 1).

### *Participation in MMPL activities*

Despite these barriers, our focus groups and interviews highlighted that at the project level, there is perceived equal opportunity to be involved. All (100%) of male respondents felt that there are equal opportunities for men and women to participate in the project decisions and benefits, while 96% of women agreed.

Female respondents from OIPAP (27% of female respondents) reported that they feel that even though they are not directly involved in foot patrols and biodiversity monitoring in the MMPL, women are helping to protect MMPL in other ways – through information dissemination, participation in planning workshops, preparation of food supplies, and taking care of children and other domestic concerns while the husband is performing his duty as forest guard.

**Table 1: Reported Barriers to Participation**

	Men	Women
Lack of time to devote to non-income generating activities	95%	81%
Illness of family members	26%	56%
Confidence in public speaking (among women)	3%	44%
Distant location (travel to/from meetings)	10%	28%
Being pregnant and/or having young children	--	9%
Disagreement between husband and wife	3%	5%

## DISCUSSION

The MMPL Management Plan (2016-2020) current 5-year consultation process and engagement of the local community show on the ground execution of the New Social Compact. Generally, there are major gaps, inconsistencies and inadequacies in gender awareness and responsiveness within the current MMPL management plan. Despite good intentions of stakeholder engagement, and some level of awareness among management staff and partners, gender equity was inadvertently taken for granted along the process and not specifically highlighted. This “blindness” resulted in a lack of specific activities or actions to reduce inequalities, and a lack of baseline information, metrics, and targets by which gender integration and equity could be tracked. Gender was missed, in part, because project staff tended to be more concerned about completing the required consultations and workshops to comply with the government requirements for protected area establishment, project deliverables and donor timeline. In addition, a lack of government requirements or oversight regarding gender integration into protected area management contributed to this gap. The current Management Plan provides an opportunity for the MMPL to further the new conservation ethic to incorporate gender consideration and equitable practices for both men and women. With the newfound recognition by PAMB members that women’s equitable participation is a major gap in current MMPL management programs, the revised management

programs can be reoriented to further include and benefit women.

This case highlights two key reasons why gender is often missing in natural resource management initiatives. First, a lack of specificity about men and women as separate entities within the stakeholder engagement process leads to lumping people together into “community members” or “households” and assumptions that local leaders are truly representative. This happens all too often in conservation social science data gathering; the standard approach of administering questionnaire surveys to heads of household assumes that the respondent is fully knowledgeable and forthcoming about the practices of all household members. Second, time constraints, often dictated by donors, often do not allow for good consultation processes where critical information about resources users can be gathered. This leads to reliance on quick consultations with local leaders or heads of household surveys, who may not be representative of every community member.

As recognized in the Convention on Biological Diversity, there are “important differences in how women and men use, manage, and conserve biological resources.” Program planning integrates the understanding of gender-based differences and their implications for natural resources management and biodiversity conservation into conservation programs and policies. By giving women a clear role in biodiversity decision-making, the social acceptability and sustainability of Protected Area conservation and management

efforts can be enhanced. Involving women is often the most effective avenue for generating behavioral change (Lim, 2010).

Susana Siar highlighted the dangerous implications of solely considering male testimonies of natural resources in her study of small-scale fishing villages in Palawan. Similarly to this study Siar found that men and women differ in their knowledge of resources and practices. These differences in resource use and knowledge are important for biodiversity conservation and resource management and underscore the need for “a gender based analysis of how spaces and resources are used, valued and struggled over in specific cultures” (Siar, 2003). The PAMB progress towards a process more aligned with the New Social Compact reveals a shift in sentiment from ignorance to recognition that in theory should result in the type of social progress, equity, and healthy ecosystem that the New Social Compact strives for. But that final determination is reliant on the assumption of ongoing improvements to the consultation process and management plan in Palawan. Furthermore, it must be considered that in a protected area with such a high percentage of indigenous populations the rapid success in conservation and biodiversity in the MMPL is more so a result of indigenous stewardship, sustainable practices by the population and traditional knowledge, than any management plan. While a focus on gender dynamics may result in even better results, it is important to note that such huge strides in conservation and resource management may not be so easy to duplicate.

### *Informing future management*

This exercise has highlighted to the men and women in MMPL (both community members and PAMB members) that gender is an important consideration in conservation work, and has largely paved the way for gender integration into the new management plan. The process of

updating the management plan in 2015 was based on a thorough analysis of accomplishments and issues in the past five years and the emerging opportunities for improving management programs in the next five years.

The series of consultation workshops is a primary tool within the updating process, and gender has already factored into this process. In the identification of invitees, particular attention was given towards achieving fair representation of men and women, and attendance sheets were designed to collect numbers of male and female participants. Within the first four workshops held in 2015, 56% of participants were men and 44% women, an encouraging indication of growing interest in equitable engagement. The workshop participants unanimously agreed that the language of the old management plan had not fairly articulated gender concerns.

Outcomes from this research exercise were presented in early 2015 to PAMB during the management plan review and 2016-2020-management plan updating exercise. Suggestions included changes to specific language within the management plan, inclusion of specific gender-sensitive indicators, as well as suggestions for how activities and projects should be implemented.

After a series of consultations, workshops and write shops from February to August 2015, the 2016-2020-management plan for MMPL was approved by the PAMB on November 26, 2015. Having taken many of the authors’ recommendations, the new management plan is much more gender-inclusive than the previous. Including the following improvements:

- The management plan’s updated vision uses more explicit gender language - “A protected landscape managed by responsible and empowered men and women living in a healthy and sustainable environment”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The old vision is: “A protected landscape managed by a responsible and united citizens with high level of awareness and sustainable livelihoods, and has regard for others and faith in God”

- The identified interventions are responsive to the different roles and responsibilities of indigenous men and women
- A set of specific gender-sensitive indicators is in place to guide the MMPL managers in determining how conservation work affects men and women; and how the opportunities, benefits and costs of conservation interventions are distributed.

## CONCLUSION

The New Social Compact seeks to address barriers to achieving just and effective conservation. As this case study demonstrates, conservation initiatives too often overlook or insufficiently address the fundamental rights of women to participate in, and benefit from, conservation projects, programs, and policies. While the conservation community has come a long way in recognizing the need to respect the rights of local and indigenous groups and the importance of sound community engagement in conservation initiatives, gender norms within conservation are still not well understood, recognized, or integrated, and we can no longer assume that gaining local leadership buy-in is sufficient and inclusive of all those impacted.

As this case study also demonstrates, it is never too late to reflect, adapt, and make changes that move us towards just and effective conservation. Gender is not a stand-alone or “add-on” to conservation initiatives, and we must equip conservation professionals with the tools and knowledge to ensure that all resource users are able to exercise their rights and engage in decision-making and management of the resources on which they depend.

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