

RESEARCH BRIEF

GENDER, PEACE AND SECURITY IN NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT:

LAND, FOREST AND WATER MANAGEMENT IN THE ASIA PACIFIC



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WITH THE SUPPORT OF:



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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CEDAW	Committee on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women
DPPA	United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs
ESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
NAP	National action plan
NRM	Natural resource management
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council resolution
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WPS	Women, peace and security

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Based on an analysis of 11 countries,¹ this research brief summarizes, explains and furthers the understanding of the linkages between gender, security and natural resource management (NRM) in the Asia-Pacific region by analysing the land, water and forestry sectors. Although countries traditionally view NRM as separate from women, peace and security issues, NRM is a field in which the currents and risks of climate change, conflict, security and gender-based disadvantages concretely intersect. This is particularly evident in a resource-rich context like the Asia-Pacific region. It is therefore important to monitor and better understand how NRM impacts these areas and women's lives and to map the space that women have to participate in and influence decision-making.

The Asia-Pacific region's natural resources, among the richest and most diverse in the world, provide jobs and livelihoods for millions of people. Women and men often use and benefit from natural resources in accordance with their gender roles and economic and social statuses. In many contexts, women are key gatherers and suppliers of natural resources and rely on them for sustenance and livelihoods. However,

their rights and access to natural resources and their profits tend to be tenuous. Although women bear the full impact of environmental degradation, climate change and conflict, they remain largely excluded and their voices and perspectives are missing from NRM decision-making spaces. Further, when natural resources become contested, competed over or otherwise under pressure, women have little space or power to take part in negotiating, deciding or mediating outcomes.

There is significant potential to expand women's engagement from the local and community levels to the highest levels of decision-making, policymaking and legislative review and change. Better and more inclusive NRM with women's full involvement, capitalizing on their knowledge and responsive to their needs, can help keep communities more peaceful and secure. With women taking on active roles in identifying locally rooted solutions, this can ultimately help preempt and mitigate security risks caused by diminished access to resources, competition over natural resources, growing food and livelihood insecurity, displacement and migration.

1.

INTRODUCTION

The Asia-Pacific region's natural resources, among the richest and most diverse in the world, provide jobs and livelihoods for millions of people. Countries in the region tend to be highly dependent on water, fisheries, forests, agricultural lands and healthy soils for sustaining socioeconomic development.² The region, which already suffers from environmental degradation and biodiversity loss, is also highly vulnerable to climate change. Climate change, in turn, exacerbates economic, political, social and environmental pressures to amplify threats to peace and security.

A study by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), UN Women, the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) laid out a framework for understanding how gender, climate and security are inextricably linked.³ A United States Agency for International Development (USAID) study found a strong overlap between countries that are projected to experience high vulnerability to climate change and areas of existing state fragility and gender inequality (most countries in the Asia-Pacific region were found to have moderate to high vulnerability).⁴

While the relationships between climate change, peace and security are complex, there is a general consensus that, at a minimum, climate change exerts an indirect effect on conflict risks and often acts as a security risk multiplier that disproportionately affects less resilient, more vulnerable communities and groups.⁵

BOX 1:

Natural Resource Management – Definition

While there is no globally agreed standard definition of Natural Resource Management, it can either be understood narrowly to refer to the utilization of natural resources such as land, water, air, minerals, forests, fisheries, and wild flora and fauna.⁶ It can also be understood more expansively, for example in the IFAD definition of 'environment and natural resource management' described as 'the use and management of the natural environment, including nature's resources defined as raw materials used for socio-economic and cultural purposes, and ecosystems and biodiversity – together with the goods and services they provide'.⁷ More recently, the term has come to encompass aspects of sustainability, environmental protection and quality of life.⁸

Spanning from the localized, community level to the national and international level, NRM deals with resources that are increasingly under pressure due to climate change or human factors, such as unsustainable use and extraction. In many contexts, women are key gatherers and suppliers of natural resources and directly experience the impacts of environmental and natural resource degradation. However, women are largely excluded from leading or participating in NRM decision-making processes.

The UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific leads knowledge development and coordinates implementation in the areas of governance and WPS, including gender and peacebuilding, women's access to justice, social cohesion and cybersecurity. The office is also implementing *EmPower: Women for Climate-Resilient Societies (Strengthening Human Rights and Gender through Climate Change Action and Disaster Risk Reduction)*, a regional joint programme with UNEP.

United Nations Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 1325 established the WPS Agenda in 2000.⁹ Over 20 years of implementing it in the natural resource-rich context of the Asia-Pacific region has demonstrated that women and their communities often experience a range of intersecting security risks, including conflict, disaster and climate-related risks, which impact women and girls in specific ways.¹⁰



Photo: ©UN Women/Satu Bumi Jaya

The *Women, Natural Resources, Climate and Peace (2016-2020)* global joint programme implemented by UNEP, the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, UNDP and UN Women showed that NRM offers a strong entry point to promote women's empowerment in leadership, decision-making and conflict prevention and resolution, especially at the community level.

BOX 2:

Human Security – Concept¹¹

Human Security places the individual as the referent object of security and underscores the need to consider the survival, livelihood and dignity of individuals as the fundamental basis for national, regional and international peace and development. It recognizes three freedoms to be fundamental: freedom from fear (safety and physical integrity, including freedom from all forms of violence), freedom from want (basic needs), and freedom to live in dignity (respect for human rights).

This Asia-Pacific regional research brief was informed by an extensive literature review that sought to clarify the nexus between gender, peace and security and renewable NRM,¹² consolidate existing information and identify information gaps to be addressed. Several case studies were also reviewed to identify good practices, common issues and gaps and lessons learned in relation to women's participation in NRM and peacebuilding. Additional primary data were gathered through consultations with 50 United Nations practitioners in the region in the fields of gender, climate and NRM.

To meaningfully integrate concepts of gender, natural resources and peace and security, the research utilized the UNEP Conflict Analysis Framework for Environment and Natural Resources in Conflict,¹³ the UN Women Guidance Note on Gender-Responsive Conflict Analysis¹⁴ and elements of the Saferworld Gender Analysis in Conflict Toolkit.¹⁵ For a more integrated understanding of how a variety of factors can influence people's sense of security (including but not limited to climate, environment, conflict and inequality), this brief uses the concept of human security as explained in Box 2.

2.

CONTEXT

This section explains the current understanding of the nexus between gender, peace, security and NRM. It identifies relevant international normative frameworks and introduces the NRM context in the Asia-Pacific region.

The Nexus: Gender, Peace and Security and NRM

The nexus of gender, peace, security and NRM revolves around the natural resources that are present within a given context. In most parts of the world and the region, these resources are strained by climate change and human pressures, such as deforestation, groundwater salinization, reduction of arable land and other forms of environmental degradation.¹⁶ This can lead to threats to human well-being, economic development, displacement and other issues which in turn aggravate social tensions, undermine political stability and intensify violent conflicts.¹⁷

Some societies are better equipped to adapt to climate change impacts (more ‘resilient’), while others (considered more ‘vulnerable’) may endure the full impacts and lack the ability to recover. States that have strong institutions, diverse economies and high levels of citizen trust in their government are better able to absorb shocks and adapt to climate change pressures. However, in more fragile or conflict-affected contexts, “these shocks can overwhelm existing systems and resources, eroding trust and social cohesion and potentially resulting in, contributing to or intensifying conflict.”¹⁸

This is similarly true within states and communities, as some have more and better resources to adapt than others, depending on socioeconomic status. The Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security highlights that “climate vulnerability is not only a product of the environmental hazards themselves, but also a product of the adaptive capacity of affected individuals and communities. Here, lower adaptive capacity means that women have fewer material and social resources to cope with, absorb, and recover from climate shocks. A constellation of pre-existing gender inequalities [...] contributes to this lower adaptive capacity. [...] These factors translate into higher vulnerability and added burdens for women, who are thus disproportionately impacted by climate

change.”¹⁹ Other groups and identities commonly identified as having less access to adaptive resources include ethnic minorities, indigenous communities, people living with disabilities and people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and sex characteristics.

BOX 3:

NRM, Climate and Security

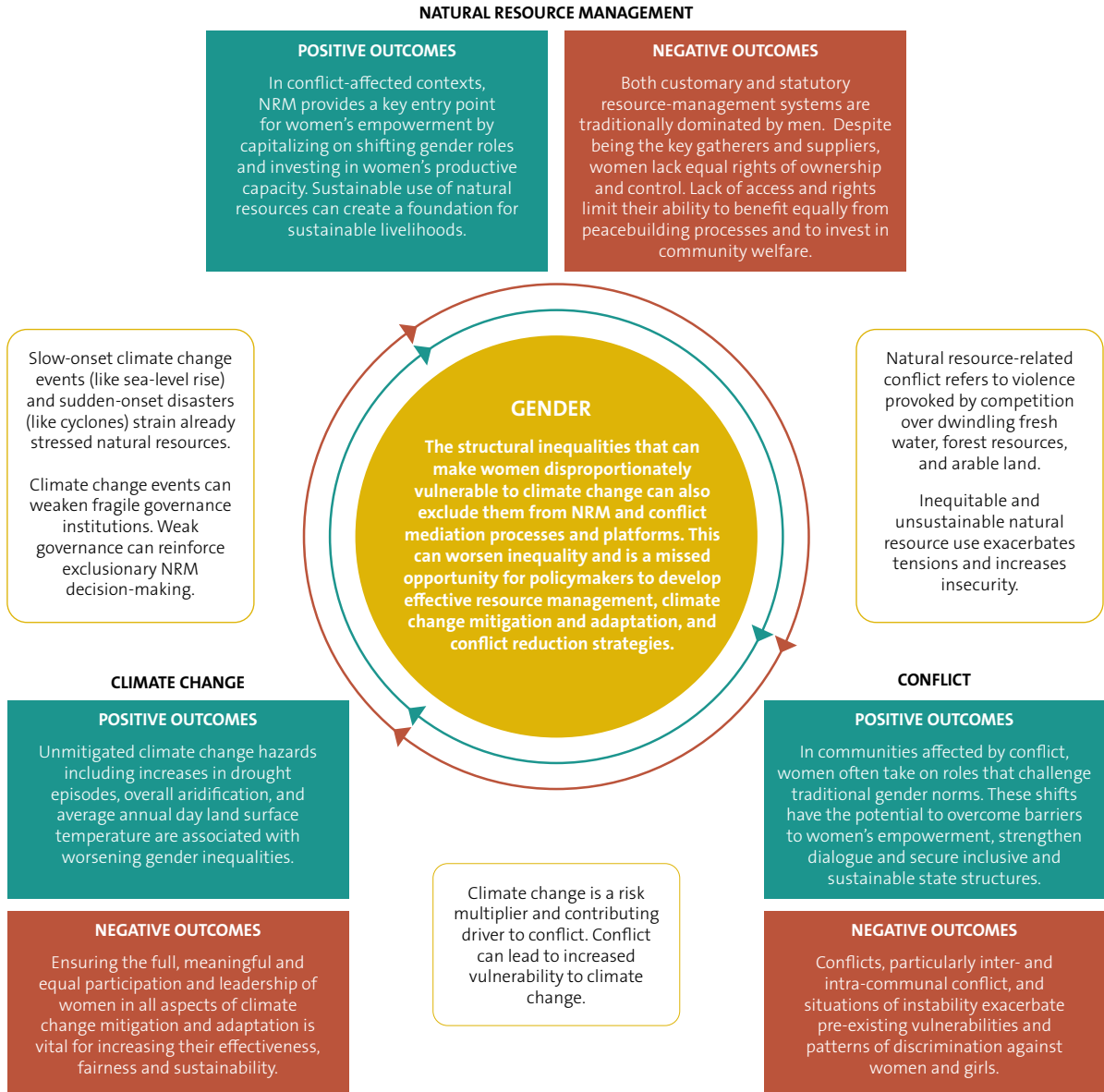
NRM plays a key role in mitigating climate change impacts by promoting sustainable practices and providing opportunities to better manage scarce and threatened resources, which can, in turn, prevent security risks from escalating.

Gender equality and women’s empowerment are relevant both in terms of impact (women are disproportionately impacted by environmental degradation and increased security risks) and the extent to which they are (or are not) empowered to participate in decision-making processes related to NRM or security risk prevention and mitigation.

The same entrenched structural factors and inequalities that lead to women’s disproportionate vulnerability to climate change also tend to exclude them from the decision-making processes meant to address these and related issues. Failing to fully include women in these processes will likely exacerbate existing inequalities and hamper efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change. Further, marginalizing women is a missed opportunity for policymakers to develop effective resource management, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and conflict-reduction strategies.²⁰ There is great potential for women to increase their leadership in sustainable NRM, climate-resilient communities and enhanced peace and stability.

FIGURE 1:

Gender, NRM, Climate Change and Conflict Nexus²¹



Normative Frameworks

Normative frameworks have traditionally treated gender, NRM and WPS as separate thematic areas. The normative framing of the WPS agenda has been quite extensive, especially with the passage of UNSCR 1325 (2000) and its nine subsequent resolutions that recognize the disparate impacts of conflict on women and girls, their different needs and the necessity of better supporting and promoting women’s roles and leadership in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

Normative framing of women in relation to natural resources can be found in the context of women’s rights to access, hold ownership of, and participate in all levels of decision-making on natural resources, particularly land, water, seeds, forestry and fisheries.²² Similarly, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) general resolution 37 on the gender dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change

states, “priority should be accorded to addressing discrimination in relation to the ownership, access, use, disposal, control, governance and inheritance of property, land and natural resources” and that states must “take effective steps to equitably manage shared natural resources, particularly water.”²³

The gendered nature of climate change has also been increasingly recognized. For example, in 2014, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change established the Lima Work Programme on Gender to mainstream gender considerations in its bodies and conferences. In 2015, the Gender Action Plan integrated gender considerations into the Paris Agreement implementation plan (the Gender Action Plan was renewed at a subsequent Conference of Parties in 2019).

Similarly, the nexus of climate change and security is increasingly flagged as a key area of concern. The UN Climate Security Mechanism was developed to work at this nexus with the expertise of and input from various UN agencies.²⁴ However, the explicit linkage of climate change and peace and security has also met with resistance. In December 2021, a UNSCR proposing to systematically integrate climate-related security risks into the UN’s conflict prevention and conflict risk management work was not adopted, with some members questioning whether the Security Council is an appropriate forum to discuss climate.²⁵

At the nexus of climate, security and gender, some initial references have started to appear in official documents, notably the reports of the United Nations Secretary-General on Women, Peace and Security. For example, the 2020 report states, “climate change adaptation and inclusive natural resource governance provide important entry points for strengthening leadership among women in conflict prevention and dispute resolution.”²⁶ The 2021 report highlights that “action to protect natural resources and defend environmental rights is becoming ever more dangerous, and that the increase in violence and threats against women environmental defenders, in particular indigenous women, is alarming.”²⁷ The 2022 report extensively references the impacts of climate change and concerns about violence against female environmental defenders, many of whom, it notes, are indigenous peoples or members of local communities or minority groups. The report also highlights work that has included women in river protection, land commissions and the distribution of rural property titles in peacebuilding contexts.²⁸

A generalized reference can be found in UNSCR 2242 (2015), one of the WPS resolutions, which notes the changing global context of peace and security with climate change as one key trend that warrants attention.²⁹

Notwithstanding these appearances, normative frameworks are not yet well developed in terms of clearly drawing and recognizing the links between gender, climate, security and NRM or identifying the most pressing gaps and recommendations to address them.

At the regional and subregional levels, the Pacific Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2012–2015) acknowledged the potentially destabilizing effects of climate change and poor NRM, especially as they relate to forced migration and displacement (though this was not explicitly translated into the priority actions or focus areas). There has also been significant momentum within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to advance a broad understanding of the WPS agenda that encompasses economic security, pandemics, disaster and climate change management, and addresses the root causes of armed conflicts and violent extremism.

Similarly, climate change issues have started to be included in national action plans (NAPs) on WPS.³⁰ Bangladesh, for example, has included references to climate change in the background section of its NAP on WPS, specifically in relation to how migration and displacement result in increased burdens and insecurity for women and the destabilization of communities. However, the NAP did not tie any specific actions to addressing these areas.³¹ Australia’s NAP on WPS 2021–2031 recognizes climate change as a transboundary security challenge and an increasingly strong driver of fragility and global conflict. Although it calls for women’s leadership and participation in climate policy decision-making, it does not include any explicit targets or actions tied to it.³² In contrast, the Timor-Leste NAP on WPS 2017–2021 not only mentions the importance of women’s access to natural resources (specifically land and clean water) for sustainable livelihoods, which would allow them to contribute to overall peace and stability but it also includes a specific output on this. However, the issue is framed around individual access and livelihoods with an element of disaster preparedness rather than women’s participation or leadership in NRM or an explicit linkage to security concerns.³³

3.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section describes key analysis of the gender dimensions of peace and security and NRM in the Asia-Pacific region as it relates to land, agriculture, forestry, water and fisheries. It also provides a summary analysis and examples of the nexus of NRM, gender, peace and security in countries in the region.

Gender Dimensions of Land, Forest and Water Management in the Asia-Pacific Region

Land and Agriculture

Agriculture continues to be a primary source of nutrition and income in the Asia-Pacific region. At the global level, Asia has the largest area of agricultural land, the largest amount of cropland and contains two-thirds of all land equipped with irrigation.³⁴ Over the past few decades, rapid economic and urban growth have drastically influenced land tenure and land-use dynamics in Asia.

Although the Asia-Pacific region is extremely diverse and issues vary, there are some common key issues to land tenure security: acute negative impacts of climate change, population growth, ineffective land administration and management, colonial-era legal and policy frameworks, the duality of formal and informal governance systems and lack of recognition and recording of customary and other informal rights and norms. Land-use planning in the region can be ineffective, highly political and subject to capacity and governance issues.

Increased demand for resources and the increased commercialization of land have led to increased competition for common property, land and resources, often leading to the dispossession of vulnerable communities. Customary, indigenous and faith-based tenure and principles are vital in parts of the region and influence women's rights to hold, use, inherit and sell property.

In addition to women (the largest marginalized group in the region), vulnerable groups across the region, including ethnic minorities, indigenous communities, people living with disabilities, and people with

diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and sex characteristics, are often the most affected by insecure land access and rights.³⁵

Land access and ownership is an entry point for improving livelihoods, social status and economic empowerment, and it serves as a safety net in times of hardship. Unequal access to and control over assets, including land rights, property and inheritance contribute to women's overall vulnerability to the impacts of crises and shocks.

Gender inequalities both within and outside the household exclude women from NRM. This lack of decision-making power leads to further gender inequalities and under-representation in political, economic and social arenas.³⁶

Forestry

It is estimated that nearly 200 million people across the Asia-Pacific region depend on forests for subsistence needs such as medicine, food and fuel.³⁷ Across the region, differences in knowledge about forest resources and their uses vary between women and men and shape the way they access, harvest and use forestry resources (trees, non-wood forest products and other by-products). However, in many places in the region, rural women lack direct control over trees or forest land. Conversely, men usually have control and authority over high-value tree products. Over the past few decades, communities and people who depend on forests, particularly women, have faced emerging

challenges due to the impacts of climate change and the increasing encroachment and commercialization of forest areas. This has affected not only food security and livelihoods but also women's income-generating opportunities, work burdens and safety.³⁸

Additionally, when forest resources grow scarce or disappear altogether, competition and conflict become more likely. Managing increasingly complex conflicts becomes a challenge that can be mitigated through inclusive community participation and effective forest policies that involve forest-dependent communities and groups, including those whose voices tend to be marginalized (particularly women).³⁹

With forestry playing a key role in sustaining peace and development, forest-dependent communities must be fully involved in decision-making processes while recognizing that concerns around forests often extend beyond economic interests to social, cultural and environmental concerns.

Water and Fisheries

Water is a key resource for households, agriculture and power generation. With growing competition for water from different users and sectors, it is becoming increasingly difficult for vulnerable communities and individuals, especially women, to access it.

Water management includes developing and promoting different techniques for irrigation, rainwater harvesting, flood control and watershed management. Within agricultural production, many planners and decision makers do not perceive women as farmers and do not adequately recognize their agricultural work.⁴⁰ Further, despite the key roles that women play in their communities, women are often excluded from decision-making processes on water management systems and water allocation projects and initiatives.

The Asia-Pacific region is heavily dependent on fisheries for food and income. Coral reefs are also of critical importance; they are estimated to support the

livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people in the region.⁴¹ In fisheries, women's roles are often underestimated, and sector analyses and planning often fail to capture women's activities.⁴² However, although offshore fishing is usually male-dominated, women tend to manage coastal artisanal fishing and shellfish harvesting ('gleaning'). Recognizing and incorporating the experiences and knowledge of women and men will lead to better practices and enhanced problem and conflict identification and resolution.⁴³

Natural Resource Management

In each context, a number of ministries may have jurisdiction over the way natural resources are managed. This can include various natural resource ministries (forestry, agriculture, environment, climate change) and, potentially, ministries of justice for legal reforms. In the Asia-Pacific region, women make up only around 7 per cent of ministers of environment, agriculture and related offices.⁴⁴

Women's under-representation could be seen at the 2021 twenty-sixth session of the United Nations climate change Conference of the Parties (COP26); an analysis of registration lists found that most delegations (both globally and from the region) were predominantly men (Bangladesh, 81 per cent; India, 83 per cent; Indonesia, 75 per cent; and Viet Nam, 72 per cent).⁴⁵

At the subnational level, responsibility for and management of natural resources tend to be complex and divided across levels of government. For example, in Nepal, powers and functions are divided across three levels of government: federal, provincial and local, with a National Natural Resources and Fiscal Commission established to manage and oversee all three.

Although in some contexts, such as India and Nepal, women are better represented in local government, on the whole, women continue to be vastly under-represented in local governance and decision-making across the region as well.

Situation Analysis: Asia and the Pacific

The following analysis is based on a review of the gender, peace and security nexus in NRM in 11 countries in three subregions of the Asia-Pacific: region South Asia (Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka), Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Myanmar, Philippines, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam) and the Pacific (Papua New

Guinea and the Solomon Islands). Table 1 provides a quantified overview of the severity of issues relating to gender, peace, security and climate in these contexts (with Bangladesh, Myanmar and Pakistan in particular scoring as high risk across these areas).

TABLE 1:
Overview of Index Scores Related to Gender, Peace, Security and Climate (select countries in the Asia-Pacific Region)⁴⁶

Country	WPS Ranking ⁴⁷	INFORM Score ⁴⁸	Triple Nexus Score ⁴⁹	Long-Term Climate Risk Index Ranking ⁵⁰	ND-Gain Country Index Ranking ⁵¹
BANGLADESH	152	5.7	1.80	7	164
INDONESIA	100	4.6	1.07	72	103
MYANMAR	134	6.3	1.90	2	162
NEPAL	95	5.0	1.10	10	129
PAKISTAN	167	5.9	1.99	8	151
PAPUA NEW GUINEA	145	5.9	1.54	99	156
PHILIPPINES	61	5.3	1.27	4	115
SOLOMON ISLANDS	N/A	4.5	1.4	71	124
SRI LANKA	105	3.6	1.23	23	104
TIMOR-LESTE	100	n/a	1.28	174	112
VIETNAM	107	3.7	1.08	13	99

Reliance on Natural Resources

The Asia-Pacific region has a wealth of natural resources that provide livelihoods for millions of people; countries in the region are highly dependent on natural resources to sustain their socioeconomic development.⁵² For example, Table 2 shows the significant reliance on agriculture overall in three countries in the region, as well as the especially high percentage of women employed in agriculture. Across the region, women are highly dependent on renewable natural resources and play primary roles in daily tending (agriculture and subsistence farming), collecting (water and forest resources) and other activities, such as fishing.

Indigenous women also tend to rely on natural resources in higher proportions. For example, in Viet Nam, 76 per cent of employed women belonging to ethnic minority groups work in agriculture and forestry, which is more than twice the national average.⁵³ Women, particularly indigenous women, are also known to take on leading roles as environmental rights defenders across the region (regional statistics are not currently available).

TABLE 2:
Agriculture Sector Employment in Nepal, Pakistan and Papua New Guinea⁵⁴

	Percentage of all employed people who work in the agriculture sector ⁵⁵	Percentage of employed women who work in the agriculture sector	Percentage of employed men who work in the agriculture sector
NEPAL	64	74	52
PAKISTAN	37	65	30
PAPUA NEW GUINEA	56	60	52

Beyond economic and livelihood factors, research indicates that people’s cultural and spiritual identities, histories and tribal affiliations are often strongly linked to the land they live on and the available natural resources.⁵⁶

Pressure on Natural Resources (Climate and Exploitation)

Natural resource use in the Asia-Pacific region is currently unsustainable. As of 2016, 29 of 48 countries in the Asia-Pacific region qualified as water insecure in dimensions of household, economy, urban use, environment and resilience to water-related disasters.⁵⁷

The region contains three-quarters of the world’s coral reefs, which are under serious threat; some have already been lost, especially in South and South-East Asia.⁵⁸ Mangrove forests are declining slowly but steadily at 0.18 per cent per year in South-East Asia and 10 per cent over 25 years in Oceania. These declines are attributable to both direct human activity and indirect human activity through climate change.⁵⁹ Southeast Asia experienced a 13 per cent reduction in forest cover over the same time period (though other parts of the region were able to regain forest cover due to restoration efforts and targeted policies).⁶⁰

Research also shows that the region is highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change impacts and is already facing significant security risks and challenges, many of which will continue to grow in severity.⁶¹ Known security risks include diminished access to resources, increased competition over natural resources, food and livelihood insecurity and large-scale migration.

Climate change and unsustainable NRM regularly combine to synergistically increase the risks of

disaster-prone situations. In Bangladesh, for example, deforestation caused by population influx combined with increasing extreme weather events has heightened the risks of landslides and flooding.⁶² The resulting displacement, loss of livelihoods, competition over remaining resources and other negative impacts lead to significant security risks, including the risk of violent conflict.

NRM, Security and Conflict

Widespread and close reliance on natural resources means that pressure and competition over those resources can quickly lead to a deteriorating situation and multiple levels of insecurity at the individual, household, community and societal levels. This can lead to loss of livelihoods, displacement, (violent) conflict and political weakening, affecting overall human security (see Box 2). In addition to traditional concepts of security, especially when the resources are contested or competed over, NRM impacts can be broadly understood to include aspects of livelihoods, survival and dignity.

Apart from numerous localized tensions and competition over natural resources, 23 significant conflicts linked to resources have been documented in the region since the 1950s; nearly half have occurred in Indonesia, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea and the Philippines.⁶³ More recently, there has been a notable recent increase in resource-based conflicts in the region.⁶⁴

Political instability and conflict can also put pressure on natural resources, for example in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, where population influx largely caused by neighbouring conflict resulted in accelerated deforestation of the area and pressure on the Teknaf⁶⁵ water table.⁶⁶

Tenure, Inequality and Conflict

The region-wide “plurality of customary and statutory tenures with associated legal, institutional and policy frameworks on land, forestry and agriculture sectors, often not interconnected in a comprehensive system”⁶⁷ also affects NRM and the potential for tension, conflict and inequity.

Colonial histories have had a considerable impact on many countries in the region, often resulting in uneven and inequitable distribution of and access to resources. For example, in Timor-Leste, there are four categories of competing and overlapping land claims: customary tenure, Portuguese titles, Indonesian titles and Temporary Use Agreements (distributed during the transitional period to independence between 1999 and 2002). Whereas customary tenure tends to establish community-based rights and access, non-customary tenure systems often emphasize ownership over community access and exclusion over inclusion. Although a new land law approved in Timor-Leste in 2017 recognizes community land rights and enshrines women’s equal rights to land, discrimination persists, and women still commonly lack access to and control over land.⁶⁸

While some systems may be perceived as more inclusive than others, in practice, customary and even matrilineal systems tend to perpetuate social stratification norms and have evolved to prioritize male voices. Therefore, reviewing and reforming tenure systems and their associated institutional and policy frameworks has the potential to reduce conflict and increase gender equality.

Women’s Insecure Position in Natural Resources

Women have a particularly high level of reliance on natural resources and play key roles in protecting, gathering and tending to resources across the Asia-Pacific region. However, this work is often accompanied by high levels of insecurity. Research has found region-wide challenges when it comes to women’s access and rights to natural resources, low levels of decision-making around managing resources, little access to stable livelihoods or profits due to women’s concentration in domestic and small-scale activities and high risks associated with environmental defenders’ work.

Those who depend on renewable natural resources for their livelihoods are often among the poorest, and women’s roles in particular remain concentrated in small-scale subsistence and poorly paid (or entirely unpaid) responsibilities. In comparison, men are more likely to have access and control over resources such as water and land, as well as markets, financial services, equipment and skills training. Men also tend to dominate more lucrative activities, such as cash crop production, logging and commercial fisheries. For example, in Myanmar, it was found that socially acceptable roles in forest management for men included decision-making roles, official roles within the forest department and logging. In contrast, women were confined to lighter roles such as collecting fruit, replanting trees and attending conservation awareness-raising events.⁶⁹ In the water sectors in Nepal and Pakistan, it has been observed that water management and irrigation technology are seen as highly technical male domains, while women’s roles in providing, managing and safeguarding water get overlooked.⁷⁰ In Papua New Guinea, men tend to fish for income generation, while women tend to fish for family subsistence.⁷¹ Similarly, in Indonesia and the Philippines, women who work in fishing are usually not administratively recognized as fishery workers; therefore, they are politically unorganized and do not participate in public dialogues or decision-making processes, which also makes them less economically productive and poorer than the men in their communities.⁷²

In terms of rights and access, the picture remains starkly unbalanced. In Sri Lanka, for example, only 16 per cent of all privately owned land belongs to women. Lack of land ownership, in turn, limits women’s ability to obtain other assets, services and benefits related to NRM, including government-provided irrigation water.⁷³ In Pakistan, 96 per cent of rural women aged 15 to 49 do not own any land, and only 2 per cent of women are sole owners of land.⁷⁴ In all contexts researched, land inheritance and registration privilege men, whether by customary or statutory law or simply due to unwritten norms and practices. This results in women experiencing higher levels of insecurity when it comes to natural resource control and access and less influence over NRM decision-making.

There are some notable examples in the region of progressive policies aimed at achieving gender balance. For example, in Nepal, agricultural and forestry policies have been launched that specifically aim for inclusive and gender-balanced farmland ownership and forest management. However, implementing and monitoring such policies remain key weaknesses.⁷⁵

Similarly, women tend to be absent or under-represented in NRM decision-making processes. In Indonesia, the Food and Agriculture Organization notes that women are rarely designated as household heads and, consequently, cannot represent their families in community dialogues.⁷⁶ In Papua New Guinea, forest management largely excludes women from participating in decision-making structures.⁷⁷ When customary land is leased for plantation, logging or mining, women do not usually participate in the negotiations and do not directly share in royalties or compensation.⁷⁸ In Pakistan and Timor-Leste, village elders, chiefs or tribal leaders often serve as conflict managers and play a significant role in managing irrigation water, land and other natural resources; few — if any — are women.

BOX 4:

Diverse Values and Valuation of Nature

Much of our knowledge on women's position in NRM is currently based on predominating values that emphasize short term and individual ownership and material gains. However, there are increasing calls to start using frameworks that recognize a more balanced range of values that include values consistent with sustainability, quality of life and living in harmony with nature. This approach could create new opportunities for women, especially indigenous women, to have their diverse knowledge and values recognized and included in national and global policy frameworks.⁷⁹

Women's representation in local governance also remains below average (as low as 4 per cent in Timor-Leste), with notable exceptions in India and Nepal (44 and 41 per cent).⁸⁰

Additionally, intersectionalities of indigeneity, ethnicity, gender identity, disability, class status and age are integral to whether individuals and communities have a voice in NRM structures and decisions.

Women who lead environmental and natural resource protection efforts tend to face gender-based threats

and violence in efforts to silence them. The former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights noted a growing trend in the Asia-Pacific region of offline and online misogynistic attacks against women environmental defenders.⁸¹ Overall, the region continues to record the highest number of annual attacks against human rights defenders, with the majority of attacks targeting land and environmental rights defenders.⁸² A 2021 report documented 79 unlawful deaths of human rights defenders in the region, finding that the riskiest sectors for human rights defenders to engage in were environment, extractive, land and women's and indigenous people's rights (and human rights more generally).⁸³ Similarly, a 2021 CEDAW periodic report for Indonesia noted that women human rights defenders, particularly those advocating for land rights and environmental protections, were often subjected to intimidation, harassment and threats.⁸⁴

In conclusion, while women across the Asia-Pacific region are likely to suffer direct consequences from unsustainable natural resource use (issues that are exacerbated by climate change), they are unlikely to have much influence to mitigate, adapt and promote more sustainable NRM policies that bolster stability and security. With continued pressure on natural resources, environmental degradation and climate change factors, the region faces significant risks of instability and eroding human security. To fully meet these challenges, women's voices, experiences and needs have to be brought fully into all relevant dialogues.



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4.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Better and more inclusive NRM with women's full involvement, capitalizing on their knowledge and responsive to their needs can help keep communities more peaceful and secure. With women taking on active roles in identifying locally rooted solutions, this can ultimately help preempt and mitigate security risks caused by diminished access to resources, competition over natural resources, growing food and livelihood insecurity, and even displacement and large-scale migration.

Relationships to land, water, and forestry resources are extremely diverse across the region, within countries and between communities. Significant parts of NRM take place at the community level, and participatory approaches to understanding and managing natural resources area still rarely implemented. Based on case studies from across the region, strategies to improve NRM that promote symbiosis between traditional forms of governance with egalitarian and inclusive approaches that incorporate women's and minority communities' leadership showed the best results.

There is significant scope for increasing women's participation and leadership in NRM-related platforms and decision-making spaces at the local level. Especially where women and indigenous women are the majority of those tending to and depending on the forests, land and water, this should be reflected in their representation in decision-making processes and structures.

Building and expanding from the local level upward, women's engagement can also be significantly strengthened at higher levels of decision-making structures and institutions, including in advocacy

for legislative change. While not a panacea, increasing the number of women in key positions is an important part of the wider recommended efforts at the national level. Comprehensive reviews of regulatory, legislative and institutional frameworks governing natural resources and NRM could add great value by ensuring clarity, resolving issues that commonly causing conflict and insecurity, and proposing amendments to ensure greater inclusivity. While in all contexts studied, land inheritance and registration privilege men, in some cases legal reform is required while in others the existing laws and policies require strengthened implementation along with normative changes.

NRM reform or improvement efforts can influence and change existing social dynamics and systems. It can therefore have significant unintended consequences that can be mitigated by a do-no-harm approach and extensive local conflict analysis.

Table 3 contains a list of more detailed recommendations.

TABLE 3:
Recommendations

Entry Point	Recommendations
LOCAL PARTICIPATION & LEADERSHIP	<p>Strengthen women’s participation in local spaces and platforms where NRM-related decisions are made – to be identified and tailored to each context, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community dialogues • Local land, forest or irrigation user groups • NRM committees • Community-based and customary land and resource grievance and dispute resolution mechanisms • Platforms led by village elders, chiefs or tribal leaders • Official local governance bodies and structures • Negotiations on rights, access, allocation, royalties or compensation from natural resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • among communities • between communities and government • between communities and private sector entities <p>Increase women’s visibility and participation in technical and engineering positions in NRM.</p>
NATIONAL PARTICIPATION & LEADERSHIP	<p>Concerted advocacy and efforts to increase the number of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women in parliament; • Women ministers of environment, agriculture and related; • Women delegates as part of negotiations and platforms like the United Nations climate change Conference of the Parties . <p>Identify mechanisms to incorporate women’s local NRM knowledge and experiences into national forums.</p> <p>Ensure that good practices identified by women locally on strengthening social cohesion through equitable and inclusive NRM feed into national environment/agricultural policies and reports by national environment/natural resource committees.</p>
LEGISLATIVE & POLICY REVIEW	<p>Mainstream inclusive NRM into conflict prevention and peace & security policies, including NAPs WPS.</p> <p>Promote contextualized solutions for inclusive land rights and access that promote equal distribution and prevent potential conflict:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal reform ensuring women’s equal right to inherit; • Legal reform clarifying and streamlining land rights; • Policy review and amendments to ensure policies promote equal and inclusive access to land/land rights, including equal registration practices; • More effective implementation of existing equal laws and policies. <p>Connect women’s land rights to improved water access and rights.</p> <p>Adoption of inclusive forest management policies and/or effective implementation of existing inclusive forest management policies.</p> <p>Using climate change as an entry point for inclusive NRM through government climate change adaptation frameworks.</p>

KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT	Building knowledge and understanding of the dynamics of NRM issues and peace and security with a strong gender angle for individual countries with little research thus far or a need for more concrete recommendations and solutions (e.g. Myanmar, Papua New Guinea)
RELIEF & RECOVERY ECONOMIC & LIVELIHOOD SECURITY	<p>Increase access to financing and productive assets for women who depend on natural resources to increase livelihood security and economic inclusion.</p> <p>Increase women's benefit and engagement in a broader range of high-value natural resource use.</p> <p>Better recognition and formalizing of women's informal roles, e.g. within the fisheries sector.</p>
PROTECTION	Better support for and protection of women environmental human rights defenders.



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ENDNOTES

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