

From Rhetoric to Reality: Gender-Responsive Biodiversity Planning Under the Kunming-Montreal Framework-Lessons for Thailand's 5th NBSAP

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Abstract

International biodiversity governance has witnessed a remarkable proliferation of gender-equality rhetoric over the past two decades, culminating in Target 23 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KM-GBF)-the first standalone gender target in a multilateral environmental agreement. Yet a persistent gap separates this normative ambition from the reality of national implementation. Only 14 percent of countries include gender equality as a guiding principle in their National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs), and a mere 4 percent recognize women as agents of change rather than passive beneficiaries. This article interrogates this rhetoric-reality divide through a comparative analysis of NBSAP experiences from Brazil, Mexico, Costa Rica, Colombia, India, and Canada, and evaluates the extent to which Thailand's 5th National Biodiversity Action Plan (2023–2027) translates gender commitments into actionable policy. The findings reveal that while Thailand has aligned its Plan with the KM-GBF; The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and acknowledged women's participatory roles, the Plan lacks dedicated gender targets, sex-disaggregated indicators, and institutional mechanisms present in leading countries. Drawing on international lessons, this article proposes a pathway for Thailand to move from rhetorical inclusion to substantive gender-responsive biodiversity governance.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Biodiversity, NBSAP, Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, Gender Mainstreaming

Introduction

A troubling paradox sits at the heart of contemporary biodiversity governance: the language of gender equality has never been stronger in international agreements, yet the lived reality of women-particularly those in rural and indigenous communities who depend

most directly on biological resources-has changed remarkably little (lau et al., 2020). Women constitute a majority of the world’s agricultural laborers and are often the primary managers of household natural resources, yet they remain systematically excluded from decision-making processes governing those very resources (KPMG, 2024). This disconnect between rhetoric and reality demands rigorous scholarly attention.

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) has progressively recognized that effective conservation requires the full and equitable participation of all members of society, with particular attention to women’s empowerment (CBD Secretariat, 2014). This recognition reached its zenith at COP-15 in Montreal, where Parties adopted the KM-GBF with an explicit acknowledgment that “successful implementation of the Framework will depend on ensuring gender equality and empowerment of women and girls” (Women4Biodiversity, 2024b). Target 23 of the Framework mandates that all Parties ensure gender equality through a gender-responsive approach in which women and girls possess equal opportunity and capacity to contribute to the Convention’s three objectives (CBD Secretariat, 2022).

NBSAPs serve as the principal policy instruments for translating these international commitments into national action (IUCN Global Gender Office, 2017). However, a comprehensive analysis of 254 NBSAP reports from 174 countries revealed that only 56 percent even mention women or gender-and the quality of such mentions varies from cursory references to substantive, budgeted action plans (UNDP-GEF, 2024). The question is no longer whether gender equality matters for biodiversity conservation-the evidence is overwhelming that it does (Agarwal, 2009). The question is how to move from rhetorical commitment to institutional reality.

Thailand approved its 5th National Biodiversity Action Plan (2023-2027) through Cabinet resolution on October 29, 2024 and submitted it to the CBD Secretariat on October 31, 2024 (Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning [ONEP], 2025). The Plan was developed within the KM-GBF framework and Thailand’s broader development priorities (UNDP Thailand, 2025). No academic analysis to date has subjected Thailand’s 5th NBSAP to a systematic gender lens using comparative evidence from countries at different stages of gender-responsive biodiversity planning. This article fills that gap by pursuing five interrelated objectives: 1) analyzing the international normative

framework for gender-responsive biodiversity planning; 2) examining lessons from countries with established gender-responsive NBSAPs; 3) assessing Thailand's 5th NBSAP through a gender-analytical lens; 4) comparing approaches across countries; and 5) charting a course from rhetoric to reality for Thailand's biodiversity governance (UNDP, 2024).

The six comparator countries-Brazil, Mexico, Costa Rica, Colombia, India, and Canada-were purposively selected to represent geographic diversity across Latin America, South Asia, and North America; varied income classifications from upper-middle to high-income economies; and, critically, different depths of gender integration in biodiversity governance, ranging from Costa Rica's institutionalized financial mechanisms to India's recent declarative alignment (CBD Women's Caucus, 2024). The analysis is structured along six dimensions that emerged inductively from the comparative literature: (a) whether gender equality serves as an explicit guiding principle; (b) the presence of dedicated gender targets; (c) availability of sex-disaggregated indicators in monitoring frameworks; (d) existence of institutional gender mechanisms within conservation bureaucracies; (e) framing of women as agents of change versus passive stakeholders or beneficiaries; and (f) deployment of gender-responsive financial instruments (IUCN Global Gender Office, 2017). This six-dimension framework constitutes the article's principal analytical contribution, providing a replicable tool for assessing gender-responsiveness across national biodiversity plans in other contexts (GIZ, 2021).

Gender-Biodiversity Nexus

Gender considerations in biodiversity conservation rest upon two complementary rationales: the ethical imperative and the instrumental logic. From an ethical standpoint, ensuring gender-equitable participation is a cornerstone for respecting, protecting, and promoting human rights within conservation practice (lau et al., 2020). Instrumentally, explicitly including gender perspectives can strengthen biodiversity outcomes and allow for more effective conservation interventions (Agarwal, 2009).

Agarwal's (2009) seminal research on community forest governance in India and Nepal demonstrated that groups with a high proportion of women in their executive committees showed significantly greater improvements in forest condition than male-dominated groups.

Groups with all-women executive committees in Nepal exhibited better forest regeneration and canopy growth than other groups, despite receiving smaller and more degraded forests. This beneficial impact of women's presence was attributable primarily to women's contributions to improved forest protection and rule compliance (Agarwal, 2009).

Lau et al. (2021) articulated three (3) critical lessons from feminist political ecology for advancing gender equity in biodiversity conservation: attention to power dynamics, intersectionality, and subjectivity. Their analysis cautioned that conservation practice often takes a simplistic view of gender as synonymous with women or as a dualism between women and men, which risks promoting both inequitable processes and ineffective outcomes. A more nuanced engagement with feminist theory could help advance how gender is understood, framed, and integrated into conservation policy (lau et al., 2020).

Women, particularly those from indigenous and local communities, possess unique traditional ecological knowledge that is essential for biodiversity conservation. The CBD Secretariat has explicitly recognized the role of indigenous women in the transmission of traditional knowledge related to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity (CBD Secretariat, 2022). Women's knowledge of plant species, medicinal uses, and sustainable extraction methods constitutes an irreplaceable resource for both conservation and sustainable livelihoods (Alliance of Bioversity International & CIAT, 2024).

Research across multiple contexts has confirmed that when women participate meaningfully in conservation governance, outcomes improve significantly (THRIVE Project, 2025). In India and Nepal, forest conditions such as canopy cover and level of degradation showed greater improvement when forestry executive committees were gender-balanced (Agarwal, 2009). However, gender inequalities continue to limit women's rights to land, access to decision-making, and benefits derived from biodiversity use (CBD Women's Caucus, 2024).

The concept of gender mainstreaming was first formally integrated into the CBD framework at COP-3 in 1996, when Parties agreed on gender-related text in their decisions (Women4Biodiversity, 2024b). At COP-9 in 2008, Decision IX/8 urged Parties to promote gender considerations in developing, implementing, and revising NBSAPs. The first Gender Plan of Action was subsequently developed, providing structured guidance for the Secretariat and Parties alike (CBD Secretariat, 2014).

CBD Technical Series No. 49 sets out a core objective for gender mainstreaming in NBSAPs: biodiversity strategies should be designed so that they do not reinforce gender inequalities, while also enhancing the overall effectiveness and long-term viability of conservation policies (CBD Secretariat, 2014; UNDP-GEF, 2024). These guidelines identified entry points across the NBSAP cycle—from stocktaking and analysis to strategy development, implementation, and monitoring (UNDP-GEF, 2024). Despite this normative architecture, actual uptake by Parties remained far below expectations—illustrating the rhetoric-reality gap that persists at the global level (GIZ, 2021).

The Kunming-Montreal Framework: Rhetorical Breakthrough or Substantive Shift?

Target 22 of the KM-GBF calls for “full, equitable, inclusive, effective and gender-responsive representation and participation in decision-making, and access to justice and information related to biodiversity by indigenous peoples and local communities, respecting their cultures and their rights over lands, territories, resources, and traditional knowledge, as well as by women and girls, children and youth, and persons with disabilities” (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2024).

This target established a clear expectation that all Parties must create institutional conditions for women’s meaningful participation in biodiversity governance at all levels (WEDO, 2022).

Target 23 is unprecedented in its specificity within international environmental law. The target requires Parties to “ensure gender equality in the implementation of the Framework through a gender-responsive approach, where all women and girls have equal opportunity and capacity to contribute to the three (3) objectives of the Convention, including by recognizing their equal rights and access to land and natural resources and their full, equitable, meaningful, and informed participation and leadership at all levels of action, engagement, policy and decision-making related to biodiversity” (CBD Secretariat, 2022).

Whether this unprecedented language translates into transformed national practice—or remains yet another layer of aspirational rhetoric—depends on how Parties operationalize these commitments in their NBSAPs (UNDP-GEF, 2024).

Adopted alongside the KM-GBF at COP-15, the Gender Plan of Action (2023-2030) provides the operational backbone for achieving Target 23 (CBD Secretariat, 2022). The Plan is organized around three expected outcomes: (1) all people, particularly women and girls, have equal opportunity and capacity to contribute to the Convention's objectives; (2) biodiversity policy decisions address equally the perspectives, interests, needs, and human rights of all people; and (3) enabling conditions are created for gender-responsive implementation of the KM-GBF (WEDO, 2022).

The Gender Plan of Action translates Target 23 into practice through a package of 14 objectives and 30 suggested measures. These span strengthening women's tenure and control over natural resources, addressing gender-based discrimination and violence in biodiversity-related contexts, and building robust systems for collecting and using sex-disaggregated data to guide policy decisions (CBD Secretariat, 2022; Women4 Biodiversity, 2024a). Early findings from the midterm review indicate that approximately 60 percent of Parties have set national targets partially addressing Target 23, though very few fully address all constituent elements (CBD Secretariat, 2024). The indicator methodology for monitoring the Gender Plan of Action was co-developed by Women4Biodiversity and UNEP-WCMC and presented at COP-16 in Cali (Women4 Biodiversity, 2024c).

Moving Beyond Rhetoric: Country Experiences

The IUCN Global Gender Office conducted the most comprehensive analysis to date of gender integration into NBSAPs, examining 254 reports from 174 countries submitted between 1993 and 2016. The analysis found that 143 reports (56 percent) from 107 countries (61 percent) contained at least one gender-related keyword. The most common characterization of women was as stakeholders (37 percent of Parties), followed by beneficiaries (27 percent), vulnerable groups (17 percent), and agents of change (merely 4 percent, representing only seven countries) (IUCN Global Gender Office, 2017).

Only 14 percent of countries included gender equality as a guiding principle in their most recent NBSAPs. Approximately 24 percent included at least one specific activity geared toward women or proactively including gender considerations (IUCN Global Gender Office, 2017). In South-East Europe, NBSAPs remained largely insensitive to the needs of women, especially those in rural areas, with significant progress needed in identifying, assessing, and

addressing gendered needs (GIZ, 2021). These numbers paint a picture of widespread rhetorical inclusion masking a deficit of substantive action.

1. Brazil: From Words to Monitoring

Brazil participated in the CBD pilot project on gender-responsive NBSAPs alongside Mexico and Uganda, implemented in collaboration with the IUCN Global Gender Office with funding from the Government of Japan (CBD Secretariat, 2017). Brazil developed an innovative gender-responsive data tracking tool integrated into the UNDP 6th National Report (6NR) framework (Brazil/CBD, 2020).

Using this tool, Brazil evaluated 731 NBSAP actions spanning all Aichi Biodiversity Targets. Of these, 89 actions (12 percent) were reported as gender-responsive. Among these gender-responsive actions, 6 percent had been concluded, 60 percent were actively under implementation, 21 percent were in planning stages, and 13 percent had not yet started. The majority of actions targeted women as stakeholders (34 percent), followed by beneficiaries (20 percent), agents of change (16 percent), and members of a vulnerable group (8 percent). Brazil's approach also identified opportunities to improve gender mainstreaming in an additional 118 actions (16 percent of total NBSAP actions), signaling that systematic monitoring can catalyze rather than merely record progress (Brazil/CBD, 2020). The establishment of a gender task force under Brazil's PainelBio was recommended to sustain this momentum beyond the pilot phase (CBD Secretariat, 2017).

2. Mexico: Institutional Transformation Through Gender Parity

Mexico has been recognized as a pioneer in linking gender equality with protected area management through its National Commission on Protected Areas (CONANP). In September 2024, the National Council of Protected Natural Areas achieved gender parity for the first time since its creation in 1999—composed of 16 women and 14 men from diverse regions, representing indigenous peoples, youth, and geographic diversity (Conservation International Mexico, 2024).

The council's renewal was driven by explicit criteria of gender parity, indigenous representation, youth inclusion, and geographic balance. Leticia Gutiérrez Lorandi of Conservation International Mexico became the first woman to preside over the advisory body, marking a historic milestone (Conservation International Mexico, 2024). In 2025, women councillors from 92 operating advisory councils convened a national exchange of

experiences, addressing gender-specific challenges in protected area management (Causa Natura Media, 2025). Mexico demonstrates that moving from rhetoric to reality requires not just policy language, but structural reform within conservation institutions themselves (CBD Secretariat, 2017).

3. Costa Rica: Financial Instruments as Reality Checks

Costa Rica launched the “+Women +Nature” programme (Más Mujeres más Natura) as a pioneering effort in Latin America to connect gender equality objectives with forest conservation and to channel targeted finance into women-led green enterprises (BIOFIN Costa Rica, 2021, 2022; CHM Costa Rica, 2024). The programme was led by the Ministry of Environment and Energy (MINAE) and UNDP’s Biodiversity Finance Initiative (BIOFIN). Three (3) financial instruments were launched: “Crédito FONAFIFO a tu lado” for promoting rural women’s economic development; “Crédito MUJERES NATURA” for integrating gender perspectives into biodiversity management; and prioritized Payments for Environmental Services (PSA) for women landowners. By 2021, the programme had placed USD 1,405,000 in 120 loans for women-led green enterprises (BIOFIN Costa Rica, 2022). More than 100 women across the country initiated sustainable productive projects with a 10-year horizon in forestry protection, reforestation, agroforestry, and ecotourism (Periódico Mensaje, 2021).

In March 2024, Costa Rican women park rangers filed a petition requesting the activation of a dedicated gender unit within SINAC and the development of an Institutional Gender Equality Policy (IKI-CAC, 2024).

Costa Rica’s experience reveals a crucial insight: financial mechanisms are among the most powerful tools for converting gender rhetoric into tangible reality (BIOFIN Costa Rica, 2022).

4. Colombia: Participatory Scale as Substantive Engagement

Colombia completed its Biodiversity Action Plan (2024-2030) through one of the most participatory processes documented among CBD Parties. More than 16,000 people participated in consultation processes, 23 regional meetings were convened, and 23 biodiversity pacts were signed.

Consultations were conducted with women’s groups alongside local communities, indigenous peoples, Afro-descendant communities, and multiple government ministries.

At COP-16 in Cali, Laura Bermudez and Tatiana Olmedo from Colombia discussed how incorporating women's perspectives has created more inclusive and effective biodiversity policies (CBD Women's Caucus, 2024). Colombia's six national goals include participatory planning and restoration, with gender considerations embedded across the framework (Colombia CHM, 2024).

The sheer scale of Colombia's participatory process challenges the notion that gender-responsive planning is merely aspirational-it can be operationalized with political will and institutional commitment.

5. India: Declarative Alignment with Implementation Potential

India presented its updated NBSAP (2024-2030) at COP-16, aligning all 23 National Biodiversity Targets with the KM-GBF (MOEFCC, 2024). Target 23 of India's NBSAP specifically calls for a gender-responsive approach to ensure gender equality in the implementation of NBSAP, SBSAPs, and LBSAPs, giving all women and girls equal opportunity to participate in biodiversity-related decision-making.

The Indian NBSAP commits to guaranteeing that women, young people, and other vulnerable and excluded segments of society will participate in biodiversity governance, fostering intergenerational equity in planning and execution (Gireesh & Kamath, 2025).

The Ministry of Environment adopted a "whole-of-government" and "whole-of-society" approach (MOEFCC, 2024). However, whether India's formal alignment produces substantive change or remains at the level of rhetoric will depend on implementation monitoring-an area where India can learn from Brazil's tracking methodology (Brazil/CBD, 2020).

6. Canada: Institutional Architecture for Gender-Responsive Aid

Canada's contribution is anchored in a comprehensive legal and institutional framework. At COP-16 in Cali, Global Affairs Canada announced its contribution to the NBSAP Accelerator Partnership's project "Accelerating Systemic Change for Gender Equality and Biodiversity," committing USD 3 million to support seven countries-including Thailand-in developing gender-responsive NBSAPs.

The project facilitates participatory processes in each partner country to develop country-specific solutions at the gender-biodiversity nexus, with country core teams receiving international training on gender equality and systems thinking. Canada's Feminist

International Assistance Policy provides a replicable model for linking development finance with gender-responsive environmental governance (NBSAP Accelerator Partnership, 2025).

Canada’s approach demonstrates that international leadership can serve as a catalyst for converting rhetoric into action across multiple national contexts.

Thailand’s 5th NBSAP: Where Does Reality Stand?

Thailand’s 5th National Biodiversity Action Plan (2023-2027) was formulated by the Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning (ONEP) under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, with support from GEF and UNDP Thailand. The Plan was developed through a participatory process engaging government agencies, academia, the private sector, local community groups, ethnic groups, youth, women, gender diversity groups, and lead agencies for relevant international conventions.

The Plan consists of three (3) strategies and twelve (12) national biodiversity targets. Strategy 1 focuses on conservation, restoration, and threat elimination; Strategy 2 promotes bio-based economy and sustainable use; and Strategy 3 enhances capacity and participation in biodiversity management (UNDP Thailand, 2025). Twelve (12) targets cover spatial planning, protected areas, threatened species, climate resilience, bio-economy, sustainable production, benefit-sharing, policy mainstreaming, finance, data systems, technology, and legal frameworks.

An examination of Thailand’s 5th NBSAP reveals explicit references to gender and women distributed across several sections. Target 10 specifically mentions the importance of recognizing traditional knowledge while upholding Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), acknowledging the roles and rights of ethnic groups, local communities, women, youth, and vulnerable groups.

The Plan emphasizes ensuring meaningful participation in decision-making and access to justice by local communities, ethnic groups, women, youth, and vulnerable groups. Under Strategy 2, Targets 5, 9, and 10 address promoting access to resources, equitable benefit-sharing, and FPIC with reference to women and youth. Implementation guidelines include supporting community-based databases developed by women, ethnic groups, and vulnerable groups, as well as activities strengthening awareness of women’s roles in conservation (IMPECT, 2026).

The Plan's alignment with the KM-GBF includes a reference to Target 23, noting the importance of promoting women's and children's rights, linked to SDG 5 (ONEP, 2025). For the Rhetoric-Reality Gap in Thailand's NBSAP, despite these textual references, the 5th NBSAP exhibits critical shortcomings when measured against both international standards and the practices of leading countries.

First, gender equality is not identified as a guiding principle of the Plan (UNDP-GEF, 2024). The Plan's guiding principles emphasize sustainability, participation, integration, resilience, and equity in general terms rather than with gender-specific dimensions (ONEP, 2025). Only 14 percent of countries globally include gender equality as a guiding principle- Thailand is not among them (IUCN Global Gender Office, 2017).

Second, the Plan lacks a dedicated national target corresponding to KM-GBF Target 23 (IMPECT, 2026). References to women are embedded within broader stakeholder lists rather than addressed through standalone strategies, budgeted actions, or specific indicators.

Third, there are no sex-disaggregated indicators within the monitoring framework (UNDP-GEF, 2024). Without such indicators, tracking whether actions benefit women and men equitably-or identifying gender-based disparities during implementation-becomes impossible (UNDP, 2024).

Fourth, Thailand's broader environmental policy landscape remains largely gender-blind at the implementation level. A recent Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Analysis found that policies fail to account for women's unique contributions and vulnerabilities, particularly in rural and indigenous communities (Save the Children, 2025).

Fifth, Thailand's selection as one of seven countries for the NBSAP Accelerator Partnership's gender-biodiversity project signals both opportunity and acknowledged institutional deficit. The need for external capacity-building support suggests that domestic institutional capacity for gender mainstreaming in biodiversity governance remains insufficient (NBSAP Accelerator Partnership, 2025).

Grassroots Realities of Women Who Bridged the Gap, the case of the Boon Rueang Wetland Forest illuminates how Thai women have sometimes closed the rhetoric-reality gap from below. Women from this northern Thai community were instrumental in convincing the government to halt plans transforming a 3,018 rai or 3ngan (483-hectare)

wetland forest into an industrial complex within a Special Economic Zone (RECOFTC, 2024). The community won the UNDP Equator Prize in 2020, recognizing their outstanding conservation achievement (UNDP Thailand, 2020).

These women used social media, coordinated with the Ing River Basin Women's Network, and drew on traditional knowledge to protect their resources (RECOFTC, 2024). Such grassroots successes, however, exist alongside systemic barriers-forest laws presume communities as homogenous entities without addressing differential rights of men and women. At the national level, women constitute only 15.8 percent of parliamentary seats (UNDP Thailand, 2023).

The Boon Rueang case demonstrates that women's capacity for conservation leadership is not the bottleneck-institutional recognition and support is.

Comparative Analysis: A Spectrum from Rhetoric to Reality

Several commonalities emerge from the comparative analysis. All examined countries reference gender or women in their NBSAPs to varying degrees, reflecting global norms established through CBD decisions (IUCN Global Gender Office, 2017). Participatory processes involving women's groups have become standard in NBSAP development across Brazil, Colombia, Thailand, and India (Colombia CHM, 2024; ONEP, 2025). Alignment with KM-GBF Targets 22 and 23 provides a common reference point (CBD Secretariat, 2022). Countries across regions also acknowledge indigenous and local community women as holders of traditional knowledge essential for biodiversity conservation (CBD Secretariat, 2022).

Table 1 The Spectrum of Implementation Depth

Dimension	Thailand	Costa Rica	Brazil	Mexico	Colombia	India	Canada
Gender as guiding principle	Not explicit	Yes	Partial	Yes	Yes	Partial	Yes
Dedicated gender targets	No	Yes	Yes (monitoring)	Yes	Partial	Yes	Yes
Sex-disaggregated indicators	Limited	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partial	Planned	Yes
Institutional gender mechanism	None specific	Gender unit in SINAC	PainelBio gender task force	CONANP gender parity	Regional pacts	NBSAP/SBS AP/LBSAP	Feminist assistance policy
Women as agents of change	Limited	Explicit	Explicit	Explicit	Explicit	Partial	Explicit
Financial mechanisms for women	Not specified	FONAFIFO + PSA reforms	Not specified	Not specified	Not specified	Not specified	USD 3M to NBSAP AP

The comparative data reveal that Thailand occupies a position of partial integration-gender language is present but lacks institutional depth (IUCN Global Gender Office, 2017).

Costa Rica stands out for developing dedicated financial instruments that turn rhetorical commitments into economic realities for women in biodiversity conservation (BIOFIN Costa Rica, 2022).

Brazil leads in making the invisible visible through systematic monitoring tools that track whether actions are genuinely gender-responsive (Brazil/CBD, 2020).

Mexico demonstrates that institutional transformation-achieving gender parity in the highest conservation advisory body-is possible when political will meets concrete reform (Conservation International Mexico, 2024).

Colombia excels in the breadth and depth of participatory engagement, with more than 16,000 individuals consulted (Colombia CHM, 2024).

India matches Thailand in formal declarative commitment but differs by including an explicit national target at all governance levels (Gireesh & Kamath, 2025).

Canada contributes through international leadership and institutional architecture for gender-responsive development assistance (NBSAP Accelerator Partnership, 2025).

A crucial distinction emerges in how countries frame women within their NBSAPs. Globally, only 4 percent characterize women as agents of change, while 37 percent treat them merely as stakeholders (IUCN Global Gender Office, 2017). Thailand's 5th NBSAP, while inclusive in its participatory language, has not embraced the transformative framing that characterizes Costa Rica, Colombia, and Mexico (IMPECT, 2026). This distinction between inclusion and transformation marks the line between rhetoric and reality.

Charting a Path from Rhetoric to Reality

Thailand's approach must be understood within its broader socio-political landscape. The Gender Equality Act (B.E. 2558), enacted in 2015, established legal protections against gender-based discrimination and created the Committee on the Determination of Unfair Gender Discrimination. Assessment reports have identified challenges in translating these legal provisions into practice.

Thailand has implemented the Women's Development Action Plan (2023-2027) focused on ensuring women's self-development opportunities, aligned with SDG 5. The Gender Equality Promotion Action Plan (2023-2027) further aims to shift mindsets on gender equality (Thailand National Review, 2024). Yet the integration of these gender-specific instruments into environmental and natural resource governance remains limited (Save the Children, 2025). Bridging this policy silo-connecting gender machinery with biodiversity governance-is essential for moving from rhetoric to reality.

Thailand has an opportunity to transformation. Thailand's participation in the NBSAP Accelerator Partnership's gender-biodiversity project-alongside Antigua and Barbuda, Costa Rica, Comoros, Eswatini, Tajikistan, and Togo-represents a pivotal opportunity.

Country core teams receive international training on gender equality and systems thinking, and partner countries host stakeholder workshops with women's rights groups, indigenous peoples, academia, and research institutions.

The UNDP has identified seven (7) key entry points for mainstreaming gender into NBSAP processes: gender analysis, stakeholder engagement, women's leadership opportunities, gender-responsive budgeting, sex-disaggregated data collection, capacity building, and partnerships with women's organizations. Application of these entry points to Thailand's implementation could address many identified gaps. The UNDP guidance on

integrated actions for NBSAPs and NDCs provides additional actionable entry points for inclusive governance.

Limitations

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. This analysis relies primarily on official NBSAP documents and publicly available policy reports; the extent to which written commitments translate into on-the-ground practice may differ substantially from what textual analysis can capture. The six (6) comparator countries, while purposively selected for diversity, do not represent all regions or governance typologies-the absence of African and Pacific Island cases, in particular, limits the generalizability of findings to those contexts. Furthermore, Thailand’s 5th NBSAP was approved only in October 2024, meaning that implementation data are not yet available; the assessment presented here is therefore a policy-design critique rather than an outcome evaluation. Future research should incorporate field-level data on women’s actual participation and benefit-sharing under NBSAP implementation, ideally through mixed-methods approaches that combine document analysis with interviews and community-level case studies.

Recommendations

Based on the comparative analysis and contextual assessment, seven (7) recommendations are proposed for moving Thailand from rhetorical inclusion to substantive gender-responsive biodiversity governance. Each recommendation is accompanied by an analytical rationale grounded in the empirical evidence examined throughout this article, alongside a candid assessment of the feasibility, potential obstacles, and strategic considerations specific to Thailand’s institutional landscape.

(1) Establish gender equality as an explicit guiding principle in NBSAP implementation guidelines and future revisions. The current framing of “equity” in Thailand’s 5th NBSAP is too broad to serve as an actionable policy anchor-it dilutes gender-specific concerns into a general aspiration that can be satisfied without any tangible change in gendered power dynamics. Only 14 percent of countries globally have elevated gender equality to a guiding principle in their NBSAPs, yet those that have done so-including Costa Rica and Canada-demonstrate markedly deeper integration across subsequent targets and

actions. It is argued here that a guiding principle is not merely symbolic; it functions as a normative lens through which every target, budget line, and monitoring indicator must be evaluated. Without this lens, gender considerations will continue to be treated as an afterthought appended to stakeholder lists rather than as a structural imperative embedded in the Plan's DNA. The political feasibility of this recommendation is high, given that Thailand already possesses the Gender Equality Act (B.E. 2558) and the Women's Development Action Plan-what is lacking is not legal foundation but institutional will to connect existing gender machinery with biodiversity governance.

(2) Develop standalone national targets aligned with KM-GBF Target 23, with measurable indicators. The absence of a dedicated national target for gender equality in Thailand's NBSAP is arguably the most critical structural deficiency identified in this analysis. When gender is buried within composite targets alongside youth, ethnic groups, and vulnerable populations, it becomes impossible to track progress, allocate accountability, or identify where interventions are failing. India's approach-establishing explicit gender targets at national, state, and local levels-offers a particularly relevant model because, like Thailand, India operates within a multi-layered governance structure where central policy mandates must be translated into provincial and community-level action. However, there is a risk that standalone targets become performative checkboxes if they lack enforcement mechanisms. The recommendation therefore extends beyond target-setting to encompass three specific measurable indicators: (a) the percentage of women in biodiversity decision-making bodies at national and subnational levels, (b) the proportion of NBSAP actions classified as gender-responsive using Brazil's tracking methodology, and (c) the share of biodiversity finance explicitly allocated to gender-specific activities. These indicators would provide the empirical backbone for accountability that Thailand's current framework conspicuously lacks.

(3) Institutionalize sex-disaggregated data collection within the NBSAP monitoring framework. This recommendation strikes at a fundamental epistemological problem: what is not counted does not count. Thailand's NBSAP monitoring framework currently operates in a gender-blind statistical environment where it is impossible to determine whether conservation actions benefit women and men equitably, whether women's participation rates are improving or declining, or whether financial mechanisms reach women-headed

households. Brazil’s integration of a gender-responsive tracking tool into its 6th National Report demonstrated that systematic data collection does not merely measure progress-it catalyzes it, by making invisible disparities visible to policymakers and the public. The indicator methodology co-developed by Women4Biodiversity and UNEP-WCMC at COP-16 provides a ready-made, internationally validated instrument that Thailand could adopt without developing parallel systems from scratch. A critical caveat, however, is that data collection alone is insufficient. Thailand must invest in the analytical capacity to interpret sex-disaggregated data and translate findings into policy adjustments-otherwise, the data will accumulate in databases without influencing decisions.

(4) Create institutional gender mechanisms within ONEP and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment. The comparative analysis reveals a striking pattern: countries that have moved furthest from rhetoric to reality share one common feature-a dedicated institutional mechanism responsible for gender mainstreaming within the conservation bureaucracy. Costa Rica established a gender unit within SINAC; Mexico achieved gender parity in CONANP’s advisory council; Brazil created a gender task force under PainelBio (CHM Costa Rica, 2024; Conservation International Mexico, 2024). Thailand has none of these. This institutional vacuum means that gender mainstreaming depends entirely on the personal commitment of individual officials rather than on systemic organizational mandates. The recommendation is not for a token “gender focal point”-a practice that has been widely criticized for creating the illusion of institutional commitment without the authority or resources to effect change. Rather, what is needed is a properly resourced gender unit with a mandate to review all NBSAP actions for gender-responsiveness, authority to recommend budget reallocations, and direct reporting access to senior leadership. Given Thailand’s centralized bureaucratic culture, such a unit would need clear political backing from the Minister of Natural Resources and Environment to be effective.

(5) Develop gender-responsive financial mechanisms for biodiversity conservation. Of all the lessons drawn from international experience, Costa Rica’s financial innovations are arguably the most transformative and the most directly replicable in the Thai context. The Más Mujeres más Natura programme demonstrated that relatively modest financial instruments-preferential credit lines, additional evaluation points for women landowners in Payments for Environmental Services, targeted green enterprise loans-can produce outsized

impacts by addressing the economic barriers that prevent women from participating in conservation. Thailand's existing Payments for Ecosystem Services mechanisms and community forest trust funds could be reformed along similar lines without requiring new legislative frameworks. The critical insight from Costa Rica's experience is that financial mechanisms function as reality tests for rhetorical commitments: if a government claims to prioritize gender equality in biodiversity governance but allocates zero targeted finance to women-led conservation, the claim rings hollow. Thailand's BIOFIN process, currently underway with UNDP support, presents an immediate entry point for integrating gender-responsive criteria into biodiversity finance architecture.

(6) Recognize and support women as agents of change rather than merely stakeholders or beneficiaries. This recommendation addresses what is perhaps the deepest conceptual barrier to genuine gender mainstreaming in Thailand's biodiversity governance. The IUCN analysis found that only 4 percent of countries globally—seven nations—characterize women as agents of change in their NBSAPs. Thailand's 5th NBSAP, while mentioning women in participatory contexts, frames them predominantly as one among many stakeholder groups to be consulted—a passive, receptive role that fundamentally misrepresents the evidence. The Boon Rueang Wetland Forest case demonstrates unequivocally that Thai women already act as agents of change—they organized communities, mobilized social media campaigns, coordinated regional women's networks, and ultimately reversed a government decision to destroy a 483-hectare wetland ecosystem. What the policy framework fails to do is recognize, legitimize, and support this agency at the institutional level. The distinction between “stakeholder” and “agent of change” is not semantic—it carries profound implications for how resources are allocated, whose knowledge is valued, and who holds decision-making power. Shifting this framing in the NBSAP would require not only revised language but also structural reforms: appointing women to leadership positions in conservation agencies, creating women-led conservation grant programs, and integrating women's traditional ecological knowledge into formal biodiversity assessment processes.

(7) Strengthen partnerships with women's organizations, civil society, and research institutions. The final recommendation addresses the enabling ecosystem necessary for all preceding recommendations to succeed. Institutional reforms within government are

necessary but insufficient if they occur in isolation from the organizations that possess both the grassroots legitimacy and the technical expertise to hold government accountable. The CBD Women's Caucus has argued persuasively that placing women's participation and leadership at the center of a whole-of-society approach is essential for scaling up gender-responsive implementation from local to global levels. In Thailand's context, this means ONEP should formalize partnerships with organizations such as RECOFTC, the Ing River Basin Women's Network, and university-based gender research centers that can provide independent monitoring, capacity building, and policy advocacy. A particular opportunity exists in leveraging Thailand's strong university system-Chulalongkorn, Mahidol, Chiang Mai, and Kasetsart universities all have environmental and gender studies programs that could serve as knowledge hubs for gender-responsive biodiversity research. The risk of not building these partnerships is that gender mainstreaming becomes an internally managed bureaucratic exercise rather than a transformative societal project. International experience consistently shows that countries with the strongest gender outcomes in environmental governance are those where civil society plays a robust, independent role in both policy design and accountability.

Conclusion

The international architecture for gender-responsive biodiversity governance has never been more robust-Target 23 of the KM-GBF and the Gender Plan of Action (2023-2030) represent the most comprehensive normative framework to date. Yet the distance from normative rhetoric to lived reality remains vast across most countries, including Thailand. The comparative analysis of Brazil, Mexico, Costa Rica, Colombia, India, Canada, and Thailand reveals not a binary between success and failure, but a spectrum of implementation depth-from Costa Rica's financial transformation to Thailand's nascent textual inclusion.

Thailand's 5th National Biodiversity Action Plan takes the right first step: it mentions women, acknowledges participatory rights, and references Target 23. But first steps are not enough. The absence of gender equality as a guiding principle, the lack of dedicated targets and indicators, and the persistent gap between policy language and implementation reality demand urgent attention.

The evidence from this comparative analysis points to a clear conclusion: gender-responsive biodiversity planning is not an optional add-on or a matter of political correctness-it is a prerequisite for effective conservation. Forest conditions improve when management committees are gender-balanced. Women's indigenous knowledge enhances conservation results. Gender-blind policies risk perpetuating both ecological degradation and social inequality.

Thailand possesses the foundational elements for transformation-a vibrant civil society, proven women-led conservation achievements, participation in the NBSAP Accelerator Partnership, and alignment with the KM-GBF. The Boon Rueang women did not wait for policy permission to act; they moved from rhetoric to reality on their own terms. The challenge now is for Thailand's biodiversity institutions to match the courage and commitment that its women have already demonstrated at the grassroots. The distance from rhetoric to reality is not a matter of capacity; it is a matter of choice.

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