

# Gender equality boost for regenerative tourism: the case of Karenni village Huay Pu Keng (Mae Hong Son, Thailand)

Brigitte Nitsch and Charlotte Vogels

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper displays how “objectifying” forms of tourism can be converted into a more gender-equal regenerative tourism.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The methodology generates shared understandings about the opportunities and challenges of implementing regenerative tourism by stimulating gender equality. The research design is based on qualitative research methods. Using a transformative tourism development process of the Karenni village Huay Pu Keng in Thailand, which is the first and only village that made this transition, the results of a process to stimulate the empowerment of women have been described.

**Findings** – The desk research and conversations reported in the findings of this paper provide important insights in the social impacts in relation to gender equality and women empowerment. The community has become a role model for transformative tourism in relation to gender equality. Findings included that women are more involved in tourism activities, which has created a positive shift towards a gender balance. However, there is still a difference in education and participation between men and women. The study further reveals how tourism contributes to enliven the indigenous traditions and cultures and be a model for future developments in creating life-long meaningful experiences.

**Originality/value** – Insights of the first and only Karenni village that made a transition to community-based tourism demonstrate how the community has been empowered. It improved the gender balance to make strategic decisions towards transforming their futures. Exploring this process is therefore valuable, as it contains knowledge that can be advantageous for other communities and research.

**Keywords** Regenerative tourism, Gender equality, Community-based tourism, Empowerment, Indigenous people, Thailand

**Paper type** Viewpoint

## Introduction

The tourism industry is generally viewed as being of great importance to women empowerment as it provides jobs for both men and women in a rather balanced manner. For example, the tourism sector comprises 54% of women which is in strong contrast with the broader economy which only accounts for 39% (UNWTO, n.d.). Moreover, 50–60% of indigenous tourism businesses are owned/led by women (UNWTO, 2011). Despite these promising statistics, there are multiple cases all over the world where women specifically are gazed upon as “objects” within the tourism industry, rather than tourism empowering them and developing independently. One of the ways to increase gender equality even in those cases is through “regenerative tourism”. This term has been used more and more since the start of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic as the enhanced version of the previous “sustainable tourism”. Regeneration in this case is therefore based on the explanation of Glusac (2020) as “restoring and then regenerating the capability to live in a new relationship in an ongoing way”. This case will explore how this “objectifying” form of tourism can be transformed into regenerative tourism by focussing on the case of the Karenni

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village Huay Pu Keng. This is the only Karenni village that made the transition towards community-based tourism (CBT). It describes the results of a process of how it has been converted from a “show village” into a tourism destination which is based on building capacities of women and men and creating new relationships.

Before CBT, Kayan women, a sub-group of the Karenni, were objectified within the tourism sector due to their distinctive golden coloured neck rings. For decades, they were only seen as a photo opportunity and maybe to buy a souvenir from, which is if the Kayan women were lucky (Trupp, 2011). After initiating a community-based tourism process initiated by the non-governmental organisation, Fair Tourism, training was organised with interested community members, in particular women, and built their capacity to invest in sustainable tourism activities providing additional income. Moreover, the collectivist culture and respect for maintaining the traditional ways of the different tribes in one community will ensure that future development of tourism will remain controlled by the wisdom of its members, men and women (Richards *et al.*, n.d.).

Currently, the positive consequences of this transition on gender equality in Huay Pu Keng are visible. For one, both males and females are recognised to have an equal share not only in the financial benefits but also in the provision and management of the tourism experiences themselves. Both are included in tourism developments which have led to equal opportunities for working in the tourism sector and for building leadership skills. For instance, they have learnt how to receive tourists, how to conduct skill-based workshops and how to support other services such as homestays. This has enhanced the capacity of the men and women to be involved in managerial and operational activities. For example, a villager Myo Khin explained: “The first time that I did the workshops, I felt uncertain, and asked myself: am I doing it right? Now I have more confidence because of experience.” Multiple villagers shared that both men and women feel empowered by communicating their skills and stories to tourists, which has led to intrinsic motivational factors and positive emotions such as pride and happiness as well.

The Karenni women are no longer gazed upon as objects as they are now sharing their lives and experiences with tourists. Mu Bi (46) says: “I want to be involved in tourism because I can see different people. They can learn from us, and we can learn from them”. This two-way street that has been created is more humanising and regenerative. Tourists are now able to gain a deeper and better understanding of the Karenni culture, and the relationship between host and guest has improved as well. Moreover, women have more self-esteem by being empowered to use their skills in weaving, jewellery making, leaf roof making as well as crafting souvenirs from bamboo and wood. To avoid cultural stereotyping and to understand the life of women in different ethnic groups, storytelling about the Kayan, Kayaw, Pakayor, Red Karen (subgroups of the Karenni, originally from Myanmar) and the Shan from Thailand are at the centre of tourism in the village. Thus, equal opportunities for women and men to work in tourism have been created through the CBT process.

The CBT coordinator of the village, Aye Muang (32), explains the history: “Before, men were very traditional. Men would not touch a newborn baby or do laundry, because it gave bad luck. Fortunately, this is in the past. It’s changed now because of education and external influences. I do sense that women in our village are less confident than men. Although we invite women to join, our village committee only comprises men. At the monthly meetings, there are always more men than women present.” Myo Khin (31) continues: “Only 10% of men do not help with the children. The reason for this is that society is changing. Before women were only working in the house. Now many of them also study. Men understand this now”. What improves gender equality in offering tourism activities is that there is a rotation between the providers: every time a different local artisan does the workshop.

Visiting the Kayan community includes authentic and meaningful experiences like sharing cultural expressions and the skills of women and men. In this way, CBT creates local job opportunities for young women and men and creates a sense of belonging; to take care of their living environment and the preservation of resources (Fair Tourism, 2021). As Kaw la (57) says, “he wants to be involved, in order to show the skills of his community to tourists” or the words of Muko and

MuLaong (19) who state that they are involved in tourism because “they want to help the community”. Tourism is recognised as valuable for the community, the fact that it has financial benefits for the households. Aye Muang (32): “We can have a more luxurious life because of the extra income”. Majar (67) states: “In Myanmar, I did not see any tourists. So I like it that there are tourists here. Now we have an income”.

In this case of an indigenous community, CBT has empowered the formerly oppressed women and led to increased personal leadership of women. With reference to Sustainable Development Goal number 5, it implies that “empowered women and girls must not only have equal capabilities (such as education and health) and equal access to resources and opportunities (such as land and employment), but they must also have the agency to use these rights, capabilities, resources and opportunities to make strategic choices and decisions” (UNICEF, 2017, p. 1). Nevertheless, there are only a limited number of scientific studies that have investigated the role and distribution of tasks between women and men in tourism development (International Finance Corporation, 2017). Besides, tourism requires a multidisciplinary approach as its commercial activities in indigenous and multi-cultural communities may create changes to the traditional social structures (Lovelock and Lovelock, 2013).

To ensure inclusive and regenerative tourism, a gender balance in the distribution of tasks, education, income and leadership is fundamental (Andrews *et al.*, 2021). This is included in the CBT process and can therefore be regarded as a participatory tool for long-term societal development and regeneration. Empowering women in a tourism destination like Huay Pu Keng, CBT can be utilised as a model for the development of gender equality in the destination management of small villages (Nitsch and Louwman-Vogels, 2020). Research by Dunn (2007) has shown that CBT has the potential to promote women’s empowerment in the tourism industry of Thailand. Women’s participation in CBT improves their self-esteem and status within the community. It is based on the increased participation of women in decision-making processes and even taking over leadership positions (Richards *et al.*, n.d.).

## CBT in Huay Pu Keng

The results of the qualitative research including desk research and in-depth interviews reveal that Huay Pu Keng, a Karenni village, has become a role model for inclusive tourism development by using CBT. This is a form of tourism, where the community is the leading owner and manager, so the community can receive all the benefits (Asker *et al.*, 2010). Besides this, CBT is considered a process towards regenerative travel since it encompasses trustworthy and authentic experiences that positively impact both the environment and the local community (Walia, 2021). At the same time, it creates an authentic connection between tourists and locals, while community development, welfare and social equality are stimulated (Craig, 2007) (see Plate 1).

## Discussion gender equality

To relate gender equality to regenerative tourism includes some limitations. It would be beneficial to research other cases so that a comparative study can be conducted to understand the positive impacts of gender equality concerning regenerative community-based tourism development. For example, whether the case is situated in a male or female-dominated society might affect the balance in income distribution, job opportunities and leadership. In this case, to observe the life of the Karenni women, which already has been a core business, is valuable to research how inclusivity and gender balance influence community social structures that benefit regenerative tourism. More research is necessary to understand the role of women who not only receive an income but are empowered to take leadership positions in this process. Besides the complexity of translating a local language into English, women are often not confident to speak openly. This can cause misunderstandings and lead to socially desirable answers. Non-governmental organisations play an important role when advocating and including gender equality in their development activities as it is based on trust and direct, local support.



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## Conclusion

As the example of Huay Pu Keng shows, gender equality is a major societal indicator for inclusive tourism development. CBT, a process that includes democratic and participatory decision-making about future developments, can therefore lead the way towards regenerative tourism. CBT gives women and men a choice and a voice. We need all voices to ensure a regenerative approach to reach the SDG's in 2030 and a sustainable future for all.

All interviewees agreed to use their first name, gender and age for this article.

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