

Exploring gender dimensions of water insecurity and governance in the Lower Mekong Region



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Women's voices are the least heard in decision-making on water issues and they are largely excluded from new opportunities.

Photo (above): A Cambodian woman cleans fish just outside her back door in the waters of the Tonle Sap system in Siem Reap province © SEI ASIA

Sharing, developing and managing water resources for agriculture, energy and fisheries are key challenges for the Lower Mekong Region (LMR) countries¹. People are heavily reliant on rivers for their livelihoods and survival, yet water insecurity is increasing as a result of changing water regimes. Large water infrastructure developments such as hydropower highlight these challenges, showing how many can be disadvantaged through the loss of fishery incomes, the lack of clean water and likelihood of displacement.

Experiences of water insecurity vary depending on identity issues including gender, ethnicity, race, class and age. While women play significant roles in managing water resources, their contributions are often overlooked. Outcomes of water insecurity are rarely distributed equally. Women shoulder responsibilities to secure family wellbeing more often, while coping with everyday needs and adapting to future stresses in contexts of water insecurity. Women's voices are the least heard in decision-making on water issues, and they are largely excluded from new opportunities. Depending on contingent identities, some women may be more disadvantaged than others.

To put gender on the water governance agenda, this brief first identifies how experiences of water insecurity in the LMR are gendered; then scopes out the current trends and policy landscape of water governance in the LMR from a gender equality perspective; and lastly recommends opportunities for future engagement and action in water governance. The brief is based on thorough literature reviews conducted by the Stockholm Environment Institute (IUCN and Oxfam 2018; Perry 2018).

Gendered experiences of water insecurity

- **Water insecurity disadvantages women as they shoulder heavier caring obligations.** Water insecurity increases women's caring burden as they struggle to ensure the well-being of their families under poor water conditions, loss of fisheries and shrinking income. For instance, in northeastern Thailand, interviews revealed that women are fully accountable for securing water, even in times of scarcity, since it is their normal responsibility to procure water and they manage the household budget. Health problems of family members related to poor water quality were found to increase their care work (Anadajani-Sutjahjo et al. 2015). Similar experiences were found during hydropower resettlement schemes in Laos and Vietnam, where women are responsible for their families' adaptations to new settings. In particular, ethnic women struggle to access

¹ Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam



When lake levels fall in the Kompong Khleang region of Cambodia, rice farmers lift water from shallow wells into the paddies © SEI ASIA

new opportunities created by the hydropower dams, as they continue to lack sufficient skills, visibility and capital. This study also found cases where domestic violence increased as a result of threatened masculinities attributed to the escalating livelihood insecurities when families experience displacement and resettlement (Hill et al. 2017).

- **Women's participation may not be totally beneficial at all times.** Currently, women's participation in water governance is assessed only by the number of women present. Gender norms and unequal power relations that are embedded in local institutions, social contexts and practices constrain meaningful engagement and tend to be ignored (Resurrección et al. 2004). In a study from the Mekong Delta, Vietnam, it was found that while women participate in community water governance meetings, they often do not voice their opinions during the meetings and participate less when senior officers were involved. Poor ethnic women disproportionality experience exclusion from community water decision-making, such as meetings introducing new projects for dams and water distribution, especially due to language barriers (Dang 2017). Engaging women in water governance without

clearly assessing the benefits of their participation may, however, increase their burdens. For instance, attempts to mainstream gender in community fisheries management in Tonle Sap, Cambodia, were conducted without addressing women's unequal share of domestic workloads. As a result, women experienced an increase in workloads (Resurrección 2006). Thus, without understanding the barriers, participatory processes may reinforce existing gender inequalities.

- **Water professions are masculine.** Water governance is traditionally a masculine and technical domain of practice and knowledge. Training of water professionals often brackets out social and gender concerns. Overwhelming numbers of men occupy water leadership positions. This is seen in the Thai water sector, for instance, where few women occupy senior positions, and they all have to navigate through masculine cultural norms to keep their positions within the water bureaucracy. The validation of male identities is derived by belonging and working in technical and engineering spheres, consolidating and sustaining dominantly male social networks and circles. Women are thus excluded based on stereotypes of women as anti-technical, irrational and unscientific and belonging to a non-expert sector (Ongasakui et al. 2012). Thus, male water professionals not only possess power, but also use it to exclude women from accessing it.
- **Gender concerns are not highlighted in transboundary water governance arenas.** Many efforts to create gender awareness in water governance have been met with resistance or apathy and indifference. This is especially true at transboundary scales where gender equality issues fade. Women's engagement and gender equality advocacy are conventionally confined to the micro, community or household scales, while economic and technical issues dominate the analytical centre stage at transboundary scales. In transboundary arenas, civil society actors in the LMR defend and represent poor and ethnic peoples as aggregate groups in transboundary struggles, unmindful of these groups' own gender-specific water insecurity issues. To complicate matters, water insecurity is not strong in the agenda of gender and women's organizations. Consequently, holistic solutions are missing as gender, social, technical and environmental mandates and agendas remain separated at various scales and taken up by organizations that do not fully interact (Resurrección and Nguyen 2014).

Table 1. Gender in National Water Governance

	Key Water Policies and Policies on Environmental Impact Assessments	Efforts to Mainstream Gender	Gender Policies	Links to Water Issues
Cambodia	National Water Resources Policy (2004) and Law on Water Resources Management (2007)	None	National Strategic Development Plan on Women’s Economic Empowerment.	None
	Rural Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene Strategy (2010-2025)	✓		
	Draft Environment Code and Law on Environmental Protection and Natural Resource Management (1996)	None		
Laos	Water Resources Law (2017)		Law on Women’s Development and	None
	National Water Resources Strategy toward 2025 and Action Plan (2016-2020)	✓	Protection, Vision 2030 and 10-Year National Strategy on Gender Equality (2016–2025) and Vision 2030 on Women Development, 10-year Women’s Development Strategy (2016–2025).	
	Decree of Environmental Impact Assessment (2010)	None		
Myanmar	Draft National Water Resource Policy (2017/2018)	None	National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (2013–2022)	None
	Draft public participation in Environmental Impact Assessment guidelines (2017/2018)	✓		
Thailand	12-year Master Plan on Water Resource Management (in development)	None	Gender Equality Act (2015), gender components in National Economic and Social Development Plans.	None
	Guidelines for Public Participation in Environmental Impact Assessment Processes (2008)	None		
Vietnam	Law on Water Resources (2012)	None	Gender Equality Law (2006), The National Strategy on Gender Equality 2011-2020.	None

Siloes in water governance: gender and water policies remain separate

In recent years, gender mainstreaming in governance institutions has generally advanced, but persistent challenges remain. Overall, national and regional institutions on gender and water resources in the Mekong countries have their own specific and separate technical concerns, which limits their involvement in gender-responsive integrated water management. Thus, few water policies incorporate gender equality issues at national level in LMR countries, as shown in Table 1. When gender mainstreaming efforts in water institutions are considered, they are often not effectively implemented due to lack of capacities and overall low priority assigned to gender equality. While gender policies appear to be firmly in place in all LMR countries (Table 1), they do not link with water policies in any significant or coherent manner. Instead they focus more on women’s social welfare, employment and political participation. Thus, outcomes have largely only acknowledged the issue and fail to understand how gender inequality is embedded in the systems and may be reinforced by water governance at various scales.

Ensuring water security for all

Overall, the current policy climate in the LMR is conducive to realizing gender equality goals at national and regional levels, despite persistent gender-related disadvantages in transboundary water contexts. Yet, many gender mainstreaming efforts thus far have served to de-politicize engagements, largely targeting programming and planning, without much transformative potential. Policy makers, researchers, NGOs and businesses could use the following approaches to strengthen integration of gender issues in water governance.

- **Acknowledge women’s transformative capacities.** Women play a significant, yet often overlooked role in managing water resources. Much of the discourse on women and water center around disadvantage. Yet, women can act as powerful agents of change. Women

leaders and stakeholders with knowledge on gender analysis should be involved in decision-making processes such as environmental and social impact assessments. The participation of women leaders and people with skills such as gender gap analysis and women safeguard's policies in the consultation process will lead to ownership by local communities for the developmental project and better outcomes on gender related outcomes.

- **Prioritize gender mainstreaming in water governance curriculum and research activities.** Gender issues should be integrated as an interdisciplinary subject in all water governance research and curriculums, such as Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) and Sustainable Hydropower Development (SHD). A regional network of research institutes and fellowship programs should be created to work jointly on gender and water governance issues to create an enabling environment for more female students. This will support the development of common understanding and regional actions to bridge the existing gender gaps in the LMR.
- **Move beyond tokenistic gender mainstreaming.** Gender mainstreaming in the water, energy and environmental sectors generally continues to be tokenistic and siloed, mostly counting women's participation. Future efforts should aim to fundamentally transform deep-seated gender unequal practices, behaviours and discourses in the water governance context. This includes supporting capacity building of personnel and the creation of gender targets, indicators and budgets. The governments, civil society and the private sector should work together and develop action plans for the implementation of these commitments to ensure gender mainstreaming in water governance policies and the development plans in the LMR.
- **Ensure engagement of institutions with a gender mandate in the decision-making process.** Environment, water and gender stand-alone ministerial bodies, regional organizations and networks should create complementary policies and agendas, backed up by partnerships for engaging with both environment and gender issues. Women's Affairs Ministries, Women's Unions and Civil Society Organizations working on gender and women's leadership development issues should be engaged at all stages in the planning and implementation of water resource development projects. This will ensure gender issues are included and existing gender equality commitments are not overlooked. The active involvement of women representatives will ensure accountability and contribute to capacity building among all stakeholders.



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