



State of Knowledge: Women and Rivers in the Mekong Region

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Introduction

This *State of Knowledge: Women and Rivers in the Mekong Region* highlights women's contributions—both actual and potential—to better governance, social, and environmental outcomes for rivers in the Mekong region. The report spotlights women's achievements in water decision-making and river governance, but also the major barriers to their leadership and “visible” participation. It flags key points of inequity across the six countries of the Mekong region, and also references good practice examples, as defined by women themselves, where women have assumed important and influential roles in governing the rivers and water resources on which they and their communities depend.

An indigenous woman on the Sesan River, Ratanakiri province, Cambodia. Photo: Oxfam

Scope

This report draws on a review of literature and 25 interviews with key stakeholders in the region, who were asked to reflect on the status of women. It explores the major trends in, barriers to, and opportunities for women's involvement in the region's institutions and governance processes at the grassroots, national, and transnational levels. Women are the focus, specifically the lived experiences of women actively involved in river governance in the region.

Interviews conducted for this report confirm how women in riparian communities are disproportionately affected by major social and environmental changes. Despite this knowledge, five research gaps in the literature on gender and water governance in the Mekong region remain: (1) measuring gender transformation and social norms change; (2) considering political ecology and political economy linkages; (3) incorporating a regional perspective; (4) feeding scholarship back to communities to enhance local ownership and validation; and (5) defining the typologies of leadership in river governance and water decision-making.

The report explores the varied forms of power and leadership to better understand the ways that they interact at different levels of governance. In the Mekong region, and at the community level especially, it demonstrates how women in riparian communities are deeply connected to the rivers that sustain their livelihoods, and how they can use their unique abilities and collective sense of responsibility to bring about meaningful change.

Findings

Despite global progress toward greater gender equality, actual public and political recognition of women's contributions to water decision-making and river governance still tend to lag behind broader policy commitments to women's empowerment. Yet, the involvement of women in processes to manage and govern water beyond the household, especially when faced with a livelihood-threatening development, has remained largely hidden. Crucially, this report reveals how women's voices and participation are still being made less visible within the region.

Women can influence outcomes and processes through several mechanisms and often via informal channels. For example, they might educate their community about collective challenges and changed realities; navigate gendered social and cultural norms so that critical opinions are heard without necessarily going against accepted customary practices; and rally other stakeholders to achieve their potential and take action.

Although women are not always the most visible actors in the water policy and decision-making domains, they do nonetheless exercise influence, exert power, and lead in ways that are highly effective. In Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia, there are prominent examples of women in the frontline of a protest or confrontation—often against a dam or infrastructure project. In the case of protests against the Myitstone hydropower project in Myanmar, for example, Kachin women were often at the forefront of the movement, helping to “shield” their fellow male activists from the authorities in both a figurative and literal sense.

Similarly, within government and the civil society sector, there are inspiring examples of women taking the lead in prominent departments and organizations, empowering themselves and other women in the process. Here, women-led organizations and networks working on women's rights, such as the Vietnam-based Centre for Social Research and Development, Myanmar-based Weaving Bonds Across Borders, and Focus on the Global South (all of which are represented in this report), serve as constant reminders of the critical role of women in producing much-needed gender-sensitive knowledge on river governance, water policy-making, and development.

The report's findings are analyzed based on Aruna Rao and David Kelleher's gender analysis framework, which explores two axes—Individual and Institutional/Systemic, Formal and Informal—across four quadrants: (1) agency and voice (agency); (2) access to and control over resources (access); (3) cultural and social norms, beliefs, and practices (norms); and (4) the overarching legal, economic, and institutional context (structure). Referring to each of these quadrants, the report identifies key considerations and actions to support the continued development of women's leadership and participation in river governance and decision-making, as illustrated by direct quotes and case studies.

Key Issues and Areas for Action

The key action areas based on the analysis are as follows:

Agency

- Women may not always feel safe or comfortable to speak openly and share their perspectives for several reasons. They may lack self-confidence; feel they are not respected or listened to; struggle to comprehend technical or inaccessible language; or be constrained by gendered social and cultural norms, or power asymmetries within the room. Women who want to contribute and raise their voices—even those already in leadership or more powerful roles—need support and encouragement from their familial, community, and professional circles.
- To identify and empower women to step into leadership or decision-making positions, non-governmental organizations and civil society networks must enhance women's knowledge and self-confidence through training, field exchange visits, and participatory action research activities (e.g. Tai Baan). Community-led research, knowledge co-production, and feminist participatory action research approaches will all help to build women's technical and leadership capacity.

Access

- Women's and indigenous knowledge do not always integrate seamlessly into what is seen as scientific research or empirical knowledge. They can also be undervalued or even delegitimized through laws and policies that render illegal traditional ways of knowing and doing. Dialogue and more research is thus needed to support the production of inclusionary knowledge within both the policy and academic spheres.
- It is vital that women's voices are listened to and heard to enable a better understanding of their needs and the mechanisms required to help them achieve those needs. Projects must ask women directly what kind of support they need, what skills they would like to develop, what government assistance they require, and how they would like to gain new skills and support.

Norms

- A better understanding of water literacy, individual rights, and gender equity related to natural resources must start in early education and continue through into adulthood. Working to engender greater equity within the confines of a patriarchal social system is a long-term endeavor—one that needs time and resources to do so effectively. At the same time, younger generations need to be educated and engaged on equity in river and water resources management, as they possess the potential to shift social and cultural norms over time.
- It is important to explore and innovate the mechanisms and platforms by which women lead and make their voices heard without increasing the burden or stress on them. Women have to shoulder multiple duties: for example, maintaining the well-being of their family; upholding harmony in their community; and generating household income. Leadership responsibilities, such as attending and participating in meetings, can add to these burdens, particularly when they clash with other responsibilities. Further, the psychological stress of speaking out on contentious issues can add to the weight of these obligations.

Structure

- Structural efforts to push policies, programs, and institutions toward gender equity should continue. However, these approaches (e.g. gender analysis, gender mainstreaming) alone will not guarantee equitable participation in decision-making. To prevent them from becoming mere box-ticking exercises, it is important that gender sensitivity is built into all stages of program or project design, development, and implementation to ensure that the necessary resources are allocated to relevant stakeholders and, in so doing, amplify inclusivity.
- Targeted efforts need to be made to educate political leaders at all levels on the significance of gender and women's rights as cross-cutting issues.

**A Karen woman
at the International Day
of Action for Rivers
on the Salween River.**

Photo: International Rivers



Recipe for Women's Leadership

This report puts forward a “recipe” that underscores the key factors contributing to a woman’s assumption of a leadership role:

- 1) Identity: strong personal and collective attachment to a river and its resources;
- 2) Necessity: strong threat or risk perception (e.g. from large-scale irrigation or hydropower development);
- 3) Knowledge: creation and sharing of knowledge that is accessible to women, and/or which is used to support women and their communities to develop the capacity to raise their voices;
- 4) Network support: existence of formal and/or informal networks to support women in their leadership roles;
- 5) Agency: ability to navigate insecurities and self-doubt and maintain good psychological health through household, wider community and/or organizational support.

It also reveals how major governance challenges, such as the problem of “silent crackdown”—where women risk being co-opted by their employers once they accept certain government or corporate positions—and intergenerational differences may yet present unique opportunities that could be seized to further embolden women’s voices and enhance their capacity to lead. As such, while it is a challenge to ensure that all five ingredients are in place before women can lead and go against patriarchal norms in order to have her voice heard, it does give cause for hope.

Conclusions

Many women are taking creative and innovative steps to raise their voices, influence, and lead. This attests to the power that women have, and which they should collectively harness for better river governance in their region.

When a woman steps into a leadership role, knowing there is a united network of women behind her driven by a shared purpose, this serves to legitimize her actions and embolden her and her cause. She becomes unstoppable.

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