

State of Knowledge:

# Women and Rivers in the Mekong Region





International Rivers protects rivers and defends the rights of communities that depend on them.

We seek a world where healthy rivers and the rights of local river communities are valued and protected. We envision a world where water and energy needs are met without degrading nature or increasing poverty, and where people have the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

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1330 Broadway, 3rd Floor

Oakland CA 94612, USA

Tel: +1 510 848 1155

[www.internationalrivers.org](http://www.internationalrivers.org)

**Authors:** Karen Delfau and Pichamon Yeophantong

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### **About the authors**

Karen Delfau is an independent consultant working in Europe and across the Asia Pacific to support water governance, gender equality and social inclusion, and climate resilience through research, knowledge management, and facilitation.

Dr Pichamon Yeophantong is an Australian Research Council Fellow and Senior Lecturer at the University of New South Wales (Canberra). Her expertise is in China, transboundary rivers and water governance in the Mekong region.

**Design and layout:** Siriporn Pornsiritived

**Copy editor:** Melanie Scaife

**Front cover photo:** A Shan woman in 'Thousand Islands' on the Nam Pang River, a tributary of the Salween in Shan State, Myanmar. Photo: International Rivers

**Back cover photo:** 2019 Women and Rivers Congress. Photo: International Rivers

**Table of Contents photo:** Mekong River. Photo: Jittrapon Kaicom

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# Foreword

International Rivers kicked off our work on Women and Rivers back in late 2017, just as the “Me Too” movement was ramping up. Internally, our programs were being led by strong women. Many of the campaigns we were supporting against destructive dams were also led by inspirational women—local, indigenous, women who experienced marginalization in many ways, but who had also found reason and agency to stand up and be heard.

Indeed, in our 35-year history, International Rivers has proudly partnered with many women at the forefront of struggles against dams—standing up against so-called “development” that is in fact destroying their homes, families and communities. And we’ve seen that local movements and women activists are in turn supported by women leading in academic, research and advocacy spaces, often in solidarity with women at the grassroots. This is happening despite entrenched systems and societal attitudes that operate against them

In 2019, International Rivers and our partners convened the inaugural Women and Rivers Congress in March in Nepal. The event brought together close to 100 women from more than 30 countries to celebrate the fundamental roles women play in defending and stewarding freshwater resources, as well as to spur collective action to challenge the deep-rooted gender inequities that women face in their efforts to safeguard rivers and freshwater ecosystems. Our intent was to generate a women-focused event that allowed for celebration and recognition of leadership, effective strategies, and successes. But we also wanted to look at the systemic barriers that women experience in their lives and their work as a result of patriarchal societies, and to share and learn from their struggles to bring about transformative change.

One of the key themes of the 2019 Women and Rivers Congress was to explore different forms of knowledge produced by, and about, women—given their roles and experience in water management, research, and as stewards and primary users of water. The intent was to deliberately bridge the divide between academic, economic and science-based knowledge and that of local people and civil society partners. Out of the Congress a critical mass of participants agreed that we needed to do further analysis and documentation of these experiences, and that there was value in doing this at more localized scales. Our first effort on this has coalesced into this “*State of Knowledge*” from the Mekong region on how women are involved in river and water management, where they are doing well and why, and also where the persistent barriers are that undermine or block women’s power.

This report is developed with input from many of our partners and allies, and supported by our colleagues from Oxfam. It brings together academic analysis of the knowledge with perceptions from women (in the main) who are ‘on the front line’. Our aim is that this study will be used to shape discussion and dialogue within the movement and beyond, and support the efforts of women, and their supporters, to bring about real and lasting change.

**Michael Simon**  
Executive Director  
International Rivers

In March 2019, nearly one hundred women river defenders from 30 countries participated in the first ever global Women and Rivers Congress.

The congress was held in Nagarkot in Nepal, a village situated at the rim of the Kathmandu Valley with views of the Himalayas—the source of at least ten life-sustaining transboundary rivers in Asia, including the Nu-Salween and the Lancang-Mekong. We were reminded daily of water as a source of life for so many countries downstream, a source of life deeply threatened by climate change and development.

This *State of Knowledge: Women and Rivers in the Mekong Region* is one of the results of the Women and Rivers Congress roadmap for collective action to protect rivers. Women and girls represent over half of the Mekong region's population. The inter-dependencies between women, rivers and water, and the role of women in productive and reproductive work within the family and community, pose the question of whether enough attention is being paid to the inclusion and leadership of women and their game-changing role in water stewardship and river protection.

The water resource management field is often perceived as highly technical and as a male-dominated sector. When it comes to the governance of water resources, at whatever level (local, national, regional, global), we see the same under-representation of women: at the decision-making table, in consultations on large-scale water infrastructure projects and in the way knowledge on water management is documented, valued and shared. Inclusion of relevant stakeholders is the key principle for good governance.

Oxfam asks the question of who is and who is not at the decision-making table when resource allocation is being decided; and who benefits from and bears the costs of those decisions. These questions are important if there is to be equitable access to and control over resources that are essential for current and future generations.

Through the lens of women and men working in the Mekong region, the report discusses key aspects relevant to women's role: power, agency and voice, access and control, culture, norms and practices, legal frameworks and how these factors relate to the transformative journey of women and their leadership in river governance.

We invite you to read the report and be part of the transformative journey and important work of protecting our rivers, our ecosystems and our lives.

**Socheata Sim**  
**Mekong Regional Water Governance Program Manager**  
**Oxfam**



Li fish trap in Siphandone  
(Khone Falls) area, Southern Laos.  
Photo: Pai Deetes, International Rivers







A Karen woman at the International Day of Action for Rivers on the Salween River.  
Photo: Pai Deetes, International Rivers

# Executive Summary

## 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.

## 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 Myitsone 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.

## 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.





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

# 1. Introduction

**“[O]ne woman can influence policy,” observed journalist and environmentalist Wang Yongchen at the first Women and Rivers Congress (March 7–9, 2019) in Nagarkot, Nepal. “[T]he [Nu-Salween] river is flowing freely due to nature; it became more colourful and spiritual because of women” (quoted in Harris 2019). Wang spearheaded a successful grassroots campaign that demanded the cancellation of plans to dam the upper reaches of the Nu-Salween in China. Her work is but one prominent example of the game-changing—yet still underappreciated—impact women can have when they assume leadership roles in river activism and protection.**

Public and political recognition of women’s contributions to water decision-making and river governance still continue to lag behind broader policy commitments to women’s empowerment. This is despite the fact that nearly 30 years have passed since the 1992 Dublin Principles on water and environment recognized the central role that women play to provide, manage, and protect water resources (see UNCED 1992) as well as global progress toward greater gender equality. Women’s involvement in governing processes remains largely hidden, even as acknowledgment of this problem grows. Crucially, the reason for

this, as the report will reveal, stems from how women’s voices and participation are still being made less visible within the region.

As water insecurity is expected to rise across the Asia-Pacific region due to climate change, large-scale infrastructure construction, agricultural expansion, industrial pollution, and growing urban population, the inclusive management of scarce water resources is proving all the more critical to future sustainability. The voices of women playing a key role in safeguarding the region’s rivers, and the livelihoods dependent on them, warrant



particular attention. This is the case not only because women tend to be the primary users of water, but also because patriarchal norms often result in them being disproportionately affected by the negative consequences of (unnaturally) changing water regimes. Greater understanding and appreciation of women’s “transformative capacities” is urgently needed (Nguyen et al. 2019).

To address these gaps, this report provides a state of knowledge of the situation of women in river and water governance across the Mekong region (Cambodia, China, Lao PDR,<sup>1</sup> Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam). In doing so, it explores the status of women, the roles they play—or should play—in managing the region’s key rivers, including the Lancang-Mekong and Nu-Salween, and ways to ensure that they are able to participate effectively in water-related decision-making.

The report follows on from the Nagarkot Women and Rivers Congress,<sup>2</sup> where knowledge co-creation and communication were highlighted as processes that are central to inclusive water management and decision-making. Yet, before shared knowledge can be generated, it is important that recognition and respect are afforded to the different forms of knowledge about river and water governance that exist within the region. This, in turn, speaks to the need to bring together scientific, academic, and policy scholarship with indigenous and community knowledge, as well as the need to draw attention to the diversity of voices—and especially women’s voices—in this realm, so as to offer more holistic input on best practice in the water policy domain. To this end, this report is about women and their centrality to more inclusive river governance in the Mekong region.

**“Working across the region, in Cambodia, Laos and Thailand, I see that women who live in upland ecosystems have a tremendous amount of knowledge—about plants, ecosystems, biodiversity—women are storehouses of knowledge. What is tragic about the development policy industry is that either the knowledge of women is sidelined and made less important, or it’s patronized. Patronized as ‘that’s cute, local knowledge.’ It’s a boutiquey thing—that’s patronizing. Or, it’s bio-pirated; it gets appropriated.”**

– Shalmali Guttal, Thailand, February 12, 2020

## Scope and Objectives

The purpose of this report is to show how women can contribute to better governance, social, and environmental outcomes for the region. In doing so, it flags key points of inequity and inconsistency across countries in the Mekong region, but also references “good practice” cases, as defined by women themselves, where women have assumed an important role in river governance and water decision-making. Drawing on a review of literature on this topic and 25 interviews conducted with key stakeholders, who were asked to reflect on the status and lived experiences of women in the region, the report explores the major trends in, barriers to, and opportunities for women’s involvement in regional institutions and governance processes at the grassroots, national, and transnational levels.

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, Laos.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the Nagarkot Women and Rivers Congress, visit [womenandrivers.com/women-and-rivers-congress/global-warc-2019](https://womenandrivers.com/women-and-rivers-congress/global-warc-2019) and read the Communique at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1djzbrNViE4MKi0IBdvTi3YcJMGtflIC/view>

Three caveats deserve note here, however. First, this report's primary focus is on the role of women in river governance. Although references may be made to the role of women in water, sanitation, and hygiene issues in the region, these will be kept to a minimum as they have already been addressed at length elsewhere (see Grant et al. 2019; UN Water n.d.).

Second, this report does not intend to reiterate or analyze the laws and policies in place within the region that relate to gender, water management or environmental impact assessments (EIAs), as such studies have already been published by other organizations in recent years (see International Union for the Conservation of Nature–IUCN– & Oxfam 2018: 11–16; Resurrección et al. 2018). Rather, this study seeks to expose and explore the gaps and discrepancies between local, national, and international policies and priorities

as they pertain to the “water–gender nexus” and women’s understandings of their rights at the grassroots level. In other words, it asks why such gaps exist, and where the opportunities are to alter the status quo. It also considers what enablers and barriers are in place to support or prevent women from expressing river leadership and/or being involved in water decision-making.

Finally, this report acknowledges the role that men can play, whether intentionally or unintentionally, in supporting and/or undermining women’s agency in river governance and water decision-making. Although the research team recognizes the importance of appreciating men’s roles in relation to those of women, it was a conscious decision made by the research team to prioritize women’s voices and experiences, as men’s voices and experiences are already well-documented.

**A representative of Tay Giang Women’s Union sharing about her community’s situation before and after resettlement due to a hydropower project in Quang Nam Province, Vietnam.**

Photo: Centre for Social Research and Development (CSR)





**“With regards to policy-making and politics in the Mekong region, it’s still being dominated by man. For example, at governance meetings, it is mostly represented by men. Also, in the discussion about livelihood and employment, men are still being considered as breadwinner and the trend to consult men for employment opportunities, meanwhile women are seen as person behind and might not be consulted properly.”**

– Nhu Duong Hai, Laos, February 14, 2020

## Defining Key Concepts

It is important to clarify how this report defines the following terms: “women’s leadership”, “gender equality”, and “good water management”. Despite the wide use of these terms in policy and scholarly literature, it is the case that they elude straightforward definition and are often ascribed varied meanings at different levels of governance. But in order to integrate “gender sensitivity” into this analysis and the broader structures of river governance in the region, there is a clear need for shared understandings of these terms.

Much of the language and practice of international development has been focused on “including” women or “gender” in the implementation of development programs, as well as on evaluating data for gender bias and inequalities (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs—UN ECOSOC—2015 cited in Harcourt (a) 2016). This “inclusion approach” is commonly articulated as gender mainstreaming, which is the integration of gender considerations into every stage of the policy, program or project development process, with the ultimate aim being to achieve gender equality (UN ECOSOC 1997). However, as discussed later in the report, efforts to mainstream gender into policy and programs frequently fail to tackle the deeper social, political, and economic roots of gender biases. This is due to the uptake

of gender mainstreaming approaches that focus on technical implementation, as opposed to generating transformative outcomes. If left unchecked, this box-ticking attitude to gender inclusion can get in the way of fundamental goals, such as ensuring gender equity in resource access and the dignity of all peoples, regardless of their gender (Visvanathan et al. 2010; Cornwall & Edwards 2014; Harcourt (b) 2016). It is for these reasons that this report refers instead to gender sensitivity.

## Women’s Leadership

The Mekong River Commission (MRC), which is an intergovernmental body responsible for joint management of the Mekong River, describes women’s leadership in terms of empowering women economically by “increasing equitable economic and social development outcomes” and thereby enhancing their ability to contribute to health and safety, as well as poverty alleviation (Mekong River Commission 2017). In slight contrast, UN Women defines women’s leadership more along gender equality lines as in women’s ability to participate in politics and democratic governance (UN Women n.d.).

As part of the interviews undertaken for this report (see “Methodology” section), all informants were asked what women’s leadership means to them. Some noted, for instance, how the meaning and forms of women’s leadership can depend on the context (Anonymous, Laos, February 7, 2020). In other words, what women’s leadership looks like in a major city will likely look different from grassroots leadership in a rural community. Moreover, while one respondent considered that women’s and men’s leadership should be perceived in the same way (Thome Xaisongkham,<sup>3</sup> Laos, February 5, 2020), another interviewee contended that women have a different leadership style compared to men: for instance, women tend to have “more tolerance” and are “calmer” than men

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<sup>3</sup> A male interviewee.

(who are described as “more aggressive and emotional”), such that women are seen to be more adept at negotiating and resource management (Anonymous, Laos, February 5, 2020).

Commenting on how the state of women’s leadership is assessed in the region, one respondent remarked on how it is often quantified in terms of the number of women in political leadership roles. Yet, numbers alone cannot tell the complete story; instead, one must consider how meaningful women’s participation is, particularly when it comes to decision-making about water policy and infrastructure—that is, whether “their inputs are brought into decision-making” (Phouthamath Sayyabounsou, Laos, February 4, 2020). This reflects a broader issue in the region, where the importance of women’s leadership to river management may well be officially recognized but is not implemented at all levels.

According to Pham Thi Dieu My, Director of the Hue-based Centre for Social Research and Development, women’s leadership is about making “women aware about their rights first and then build[ing their] capacity to look after other people,” and that when it comes to water governance, women “should be a part of water management decision-making.” Yet, she also observed how when it comes to a “typical example of women leadership, we don’t have that in Vietnam” (Vietnam, January 31, 2020). Similarly, another interviewee noted how, in Cambodia, women are visible when it comes to leadership in terms of taking action (e.g. protests or strategic planning), but that in relation to decision-making, women still have to seek approval and decision-making input from men (Nareth, Cambodia, February 10, 2020).

Taking into account how perceptions of women’s leadership across the Mekong region depend on the context at hand. This report defines women’s leadership in terms of women’s agency (i.e. their capacity, skills, and knowledge), access to

resources, and ability to challenge or shift gendered socio-cultural norms—all of which feeds into their capacity to spearhead better and more inclusive river governance.

## **Gender Equality**

Gender equality refers to people having access to the same rights, resources, opportunities, and outcomes irrespective of their gender. Gender equality is a fundamental human right, recognized by international law—see International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) 2014, for a comprehensive summary of related international obligations.

Given the centrality of gender equality to any process of empowering women, this raises the question of how relevant stakeholders understand gender equality in relation to river governance and water decision-making in the region. Some interviewees noted how the level of equality depended on which sphere of activity one referred to: echoing the above reflections on women’s leadership, gender equality at the community level is likely to differ from what is seen at the government level.

Other informants also pointed out how promoting gender equality does not mean engaging only with women—a common misunderstanding held within the region. Activities like participatory training, for example, should involve all genders. As Thome Xaisongkham remarks, women and men “can support each other along the way; we can complement each other...[we] should [also] let women decide in [sic] the country” (Laos, February 5, 2020).

This research thus supports the broader research and policy agenda that seeks to bring gender into water governance strategies in a more nuanced way, and where gender and development come together to inform policy goals (see Antrobus 2004; Cornwall 2007; Richardson & Robinson 2008).



## Good Water Governance

### **“Women in water governance in Laos is a very new idea, a very good idea.”**

– Anonymous, Laos, January 16, 2020

Interviewees were, moreover, asked how they would define “good water governance” in the Mekong region. Compared to women’s leadership, the definition provided by most of the respondents focused on inclusive engagement that gives equal footing to women and men, as well as to indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, the young and the old, and which does no harm to people’s lives and livelihoods. As one interviewee put it, “[good water governance] should be inclusive participation in how the water [is] managed... Everyone uses the water and everyone who is impacted when there is a change should be included in the decision-making” (Anonymous, Laos, January 16, 2020).

This largely aligns with prevailing definitions in the region, as seen from the Inclusion Project, initiated by Oxfam’s Mekong Regional Water Governance Program. Still, as one interviewee acknowledged, in order to create an inclusive space for everyone, it is vital that “we talk not only about the responsibility of governments” in managing rivers well, but also “about our own responsibilities” through dialogue and knowledge exchange (Mi Ah Chai, Myanmar, January 24, 2020).

## Methodology

Research for this report was undertaken between January and February 2020, and involved desktop study as well as in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 25 informants (23 female, 2 male) from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community organizations, international organizations, and academia across the Mekong region. The interviewee pool also included two grassroots community members from Cambodia, who were included to enhance the report’s findings with their insights and lived experiences. All interviewees work on issues related to river governance and/or women’s leadership in water decision-making, and were selected by the project team at International Rivers on the basis of their expertise and level of engagement in this area.

One qualification warrants note here: the views expressed by these key informants are not expected to be necessarily representative of their wider community or society, but are instead drawn on to triangulate the findings of existing literature on this topic, and to ground the report’s major themes and findings in the interviewees’ perspectives and experiences.

Interviewees were provided with ten research themes and questions related to the topic beforehand (see Annex). They were also given the option to remain anonymous. Thirteen interviews were done virtually, whereas twelve were done in person, with interviews lasting between one to two hours. Five of the interviews were conducted in local languages, with the rest being in English.

The findings are analyzed based on Aruna Rao and David Kelleher’s gender analysis framework, which explores two axes, Individual and Institutional/Systemic, and Formal and Informal, as shown in Figure 1. This framework allows the research team to map the interplay between the major barriers, opportunities, and trends within a matrix across all six countries in the Mekong region. This, in turn,

renders any similarities and differences between countries all the more apparent, helping the team to identify policy gaps and priorities for the region's water management strategies.

It deserves note here that this report recognizes how women are bound to have varying experiences and identities that overlap and compound (i.e. the "intersectionality" of women's identities), and that they should not be treated as a monolithic, homogeneous group. While this report has sought to be as inclusive and representative as possible, it is the case that some abstractions (e.g. references to "women" and "men") are necessary. Due to field data limitations, there are invariably gaps in this report as well, which means that issues of intersectionality may not be fully addressed, and the report cannot claim to be representative of all women's voices. Even so, it does open up avenues for further research and dialogue.

## Structure of the Report

This report comprises six sections. Part 1 introduces the research and key concepts and approaches that frame this research. Part 2 discusses the role of women in river management in the Mekong region, drawing on the increasing volume of scholarship on this topic to identify key issues and trends in the region, and then considers the gaps in the literature on gender and river governance in the Mekong region. Part 3 turns to the report's conceptual basis, unraveling the power dynamics as well as leadership models seen in water relationships. Part 4 delves into the findings of the report, as derived from the in-depth desktop review and interviews, providing recommendations in each of the quadrants. Part 5 discusses the implications of these findings for how women can be empowered and become leaders in their own right. Part 6 concludes with some observations and recommendations.

### What Are We Trying To Change?

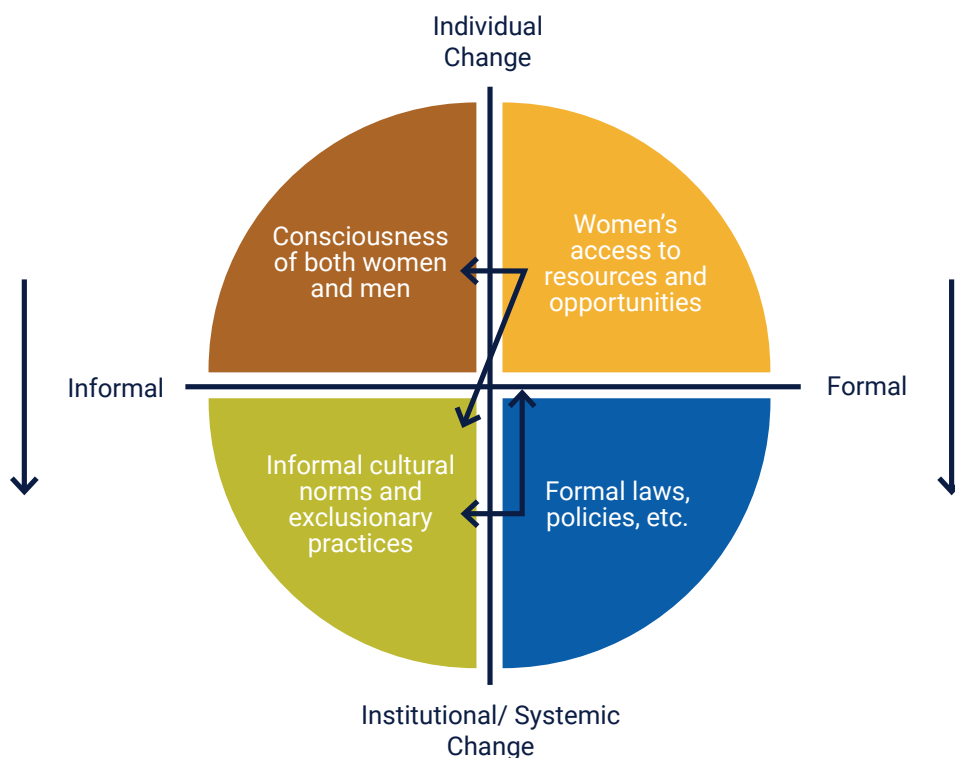


Figure 1. Gender analysis framework for transformative change (adapted from Rao and Kelleher 2005: 60; Hillenbrand et al. 2015).





A Karenni woman panning for gold on the banks of the Salween River in Myanmar.  
Photo: Wichai Juntavaro

## 2. Women and Rivers in the Mekong Region

**The Mekong region includes several large transboundary river basins, including the Lancang–Mekong, Nu–Salween, Red and the Irrawaddy. The largest of these is the Mekong River Basin, which covers 810,000 km<sup>2</sup> (MRC 2019: 7) and is home to over 72 million people (MRC 2019:16 and 172), many of whom depend on the river and related resources for livelihoods and as sources of their socio-cultural identities.**

The Mekong River flows through six countries—Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and China—but despite its transboundary nature, the riparian governments each harbor different, if not always contending, policy agendas for the Mekong, its tributaries, and the ecological resources they sustain (Andaya 2016; Paredes 2016; Smajgl & Ward 2013). Indeed, the size and complexity of the Mekong render the sharing, managing, and developing of its water resources a challenge for both the riparian countries and communities that rely on the river for fisheries, agriculture and energy production. Across the region, infrastructure development, combined with unsustainable fishery and agrarian practices (alongside other stressors), have brought about negative environmental and social impacts.

Further, the compounding problems of climate change, pollution, groundwater contamination, saltwater intrusion in the Mekong Delta, sand mining, and declining fish stocks have only grown in severity. This has put pressure on an already fragile ecosystem and deprived local communities of their livelihoods through forced resettlement and displacement (Resurrección et al. 2018).

Women in riparian communities are disproportionately affected by these social and environmental changes—an observation confirmed by the interviews conducted for this report. Due to their socio-economic status, rural women are especially disadvantaged in this regard compared to men and less poor women: when they lose access to water and other natural



resources, the negative impacts are often multifaceted and multileveled, affecting their families and broader socio-economic standing (WCD 2000; Resurrección et al. 2004; Asthana 2010; Andajani-Sutjahjo et al. 2015; Baird 2016; Pham et al. 2016; Dang 2017; Manorom et al. 2017). Furthermore, women who are widowed, single, elderly, very young, with disability or who belong to an ethnic minority are likely to experience an even greater negative impact.

Hydropower dam construction is especially problematic for women. Dam-induced resettlement creates additional burdens on women, as they take on the responsibility of securing the well-being of their families while navigating life in a new place, often without the sufficient financial compensation necessary to do so successfully. As a consequence, women frequently have to work to build resilience for their families against future stresses, all the while taking on more domestic chores and financial pressures compared with men (Andajani-Sutjahjo et al. 2015; Pham et al. 2016; Hill et al. 2017). Hill et al. (2017), for instance, found that in Laos and Vietnam, dam resettlement resulted in women being unable to travel farther up and down the river (compared to men) to secure fish for their livelihoods, and also that women were less able to secure employment within the more formal sectors (e.g. with a hydropower company). Women would end up relying more on their husbands because of this and would ultimately exert less household bargaining power, as they had fewer opportunities to contribute to household income. This loss of power can also be projected from the household to the community level, reinforcing the embeddedness of (unequal) gender norms at different levels of water governance, as seen from men holding leadership roles in water management and decision-making (ibid).

Until now, “gender mainstreaming” is yet to be fully realized by Mekong water governance policies and decision-making mechanisms. Still, there remain opportunities for women’s empowerment, especially through engagement with civil society organizations (CSOs) and in realms relating to hydropower development (Simon 2013). Informant Chhuon La<sup>4</sup> (Cambodia, January 28, 2020) has suggested that “we must put pressure on the project designer—for example, the government—to make projects designed for women’s participation and engagement.” Oxfam’s *Balancing the Scales* manual provides comprehensive guidance for undertaking gender impact analyses with communities affected by hydropower in order to understand the situation, avoid negative impacts, and design specific mitigation measures. Furthermore, the manual provides guidance for understanding and supporting women’s needs and aspirations through participatory processes involving women (Simon 2013).

Lebel et al.’s (2019) study revealed how the greatest opportunity for women’s empowerment emerged when environmental NGOs engaged with gender-related CSOs to address gender and poverty issues surrounding dam development. Even so, it is less clear how and to what extent such engagement will contribute to shifting social norms and addressing social inequity over the long term. This is the case especially considering how CSOs and other non-state actors will have to navigate the minefield of discourse and power, such that “achieving women’s empowerment will take many other sustained actions to reconfigure the power structures that marginalize women, including the political and economic processes which led to large-scale hydropower development in the first place” (Lebel et al. 2019:17).

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<sup>4</sup> A male interviewee.



**A workshop on gender impact assessment and hydropower in Vientiane, Laos.**

Photo: Oxfam

## Research Gaps

This section considers key research gaps in the literature on gender and water governance in the Mekong region. It identifies five in particular: (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 of these issues and their solutions; and (5) defining the typologies of leadership in river and water governance.

### Measuring Gender Transformation and Social Norms Change

Indicators for measuring the gender transformation and social norms change required for achieving longer-term social justice are yet to be developed (Hillenbrand et al. 2015). This is despite the current volume of research that demonstrates how gender-sensitive approaches can be effective during the project cycle in improving the sustainability of community-managed water and sanitation services (Gross et al. 2000). It is also despite the increasing volume of scholarship that looks at gender equality through the lens of laws and policies, and which uses disaggregated gender data, although such data can, at times,

be gathered through methods that obscure or are not sufficiently sensitive to gender concerns.

Where some approaches are now being proposed to evaluate the influence of social norms and their evolution over time (see Fishbein & Ajzen 2010; Bicchieri 2017), it remains difficult to quantify change and impact when it comes to attitudes and beliefs.

### Political Ecology and Political Economy Considerations

There is a tendency in academic literature to have a laser-sharp focus on a topic and explore it deeply. However, this approach can lead one to lose sight of the bigger picture. Even though water management lends itself to dialogue with other disciplines, as water management is likewise informed by a range of socio-political, economic, and cultural factors, this interdisciplinarity is not always seen in the literature.

Water management is directly linked with food systems, electricity generation, climate change, social and cultural values, laws, policies and rights, and public health concerns—to name but a few related systems. Although it is challenging to always take into account these relevant links when conducting research, some acknowledgement of



the broader issues impacting how water is managed can be helpful in uncovering drivers, opportunities, and barriers to good water governance.

Particularly in the Mekong region, and even more so when discussing power, it is important to take into account other factors: for example, circular migration tendencies within communities and their impacts on local water management practices and decision-making (see Ge et al. 2011); agrarian transitions supported by national policies that effectively strip small landholders of their rights (see Ingalls et al. 2018; Cornford & Matthews 2007); and national and multinational geopolitical agendas and how they influence hydropower development (see Shoemaker & Robichaud 2018).

With respect to migration patterns that develop as a consequence of hydropower development and other livelihood-impacting activities faced by communities, it is interesting to consider the account provided by one interviewee who works on the Ou River in Laos: “When [members of a community] lose their income, many move to work in the city as labour...A lot of women come from different districts and around the Ou River get lied to and end up as sex workers. They go to work in the city and just come back to visit their parents [or] they send money. They have no choice, the only way to survive is to leave and work in the city and send money back to the community—no more fish, no more food to collect in the forest anymore. [It is] very difficult, even impossible, for women to organize and campaign [against] the company to negotiate compensation” (Anonymous, Laos, January 30, 2020).

The complexity of the region’s governance, competing political and economic agendas, geography, and culture makes it difficult to be inclusive of the multitude of power dynamics at play when conducting an analysis. However, some acknowledgement of these “wicked problems” and their relationship with gender and

power in academic work and policy papers could go a long way to supporting integrated solutions for water and river management challenges in the Mekong region.

**“Transnational corporations and the role of the private sector is very powerful—Chinese, Thai, Lao companies. MRC plays a weak role compared to the private sector who can determine where to build a dam. Bilateral agreements about managing water in Mekong and its tributaries play a lead role. Powerful companies accepted by individual governments. Governments achieve national interest rather than protect rights of local people, particularly women.”**

– Kanokwan Monorom, Thailand, February 14, 2020

## **The Necessity of Regional Approaches**

Regional approaches have emerged as a lens for analyzing gender issues in the Mekong region. However, the region is still often divided into two distinct parts: the lower Mekong basin and China. This separation is found both in the literature and in conversations with informants. Yet, Chinese decisions upstream can have a direct impact on downstream communities and ecosystems (see Eyler 2019; Yeophantong 2014; Osborne 2009), and concerns have grown over Chinese hydropower projects in lower Mekong basin countries (see Yeophantong 2016; Harris 2016; Urban et al. 2015). As such, reports and analyses should attempt to include Chinese data and perspectives on gender and water governance whenever possible, as well as engage them in consideration of downstream views.

There is, of course, a body of scholarship that looks at global approaches and policies to gender and best practice in water management and governance (Singh 2008; Harris 2009; Cleaver & Hamada 2010; Grant et al. 2019; Das 2017; Fauconnier et al. 2018; UN Water n.d.). However, while these analyses are

useful for tracking global trends, it is the case that these issues should also be studied simultaneously at the local level to better understand how they play out on the ground. Indeed, issues in the Mekong region are not identical to those in Latin America, for example, and where there are commonalities, they should be unpacked and explored in relation to region-specific factors and conditions.


## **Community Validation and Ownership**

Particularly where NGOs and researchers generate knowledge from studying communities, it is not always clear how the data is given back to the communities. Issues to do with knowledge appropriation are discussed later in this report; yet, it does not appear to be common for researchers to share their findings and engage with communities to identify priorities coming out of their work, or show them how their stories are being used to inspire and engage others.

Some NGOs and individuals (a couple of whom were interviewed for this project) have worked to capture community stories and share them in order to engage those groups in self-reflection and learning. Indeed, Tai Baan (or Sao Baan in Lao) research and other participatory action research approaches have focused on engaging communities to identify research and action priorities through community-led data collection. Tai Baan research literally means “villagers’ research” (Scurrah 2013). As discussed in Section 4 of this report, this approach can lead to both capacity development and women’s empowerment.

**“A lot of women’s stories have been captured but these are kept by the organizations [who captured the stories]—it is lacking to have the communities share their own stories. Ownership is an issue, but they might not even know how to share their stories, this still an issue.”**

– Anonymous, Laos, January 30, 2020



**Water management is directly linked with food systems, electricity generation, climate change, social and cultural values, laws, policies and rights, and public health concerns—to name but a few related systems.**

If these same objectives were to be applied consistently in reports as well as built into project budgets and timelines, this could help to multiply research benefits to communities, allowing them to contribute to the co-production of knowledge, as opposed to rendering them merely as subjects of study.

## **Defining Modes of Water Leadership**

Leadership is a frequent topic of discussion when it comes to river and water governance in the Mekong region. However, there is yet to be a systematic analysis of the different modes of leadership, let alone women’s leadership, that might be found within the region and the (asymmetrical) power dynamics that underlie them. To address this gap in the literature, this report provides a typology of leadership in the next section.



**Mekong Delta, Vietnam.**  
Photo: International Rivers



# 3. Unpacking Power Dynamics, Influence and Leadership Models

**“It’s as basic as men, women, and power.”**

**– Pauline Taylor McKeown, Cambodia, January 17, 2020**

## **Power and Gender Inequality**

Power asymmetry (i.e. the unequal distribution of power among actors) is at the root of gender inequality as well as the uneven distribution of risk. It is particularly evident in the case of water management in the Mekong region, giving rise to situations where certain individuals and groups have the ability to harm others, but where those harmed do not have the option to prevent, stop or reduce the harm from being inflicted.

Power is a form of influence, authority (when legitimate), control or domination (when by force) of an actor over others. Power can be legitimate or illegitimate. It is considered to be legitimate when those exercising it possess the right to do so over others. Where rights are unclear or unknown, the line between legitimate and illegitimate power becomes blurred. Individuals or groups may exercise illegitimate power in or

over a community by sheer force or coercion, reinforcing power asymmetries.

Unpacking and responding to these power dynamics is, therefore, pivotal to helping women and other marginalized actors navigate the complex politics of leadership and decision-making. Understanding how the patriarchal nature of social structures limits women’s power and agency, for instance, can help mothers better educate their children to tackle head-on or sidestep these structures for a more equitable future, as well as spotlight the need for community women to build networks to increase their influence and authority.

The most common expression of power is **“power over”** (i.e. A has the ability to get B to do what B would not otherwise do), in effect creating a dichotomy between the powerful and those powerless. Yet, there are other forms of power as well. For example:



- **“Power to”** (do something) is about being able to act.
- **“Power with”** describes collective action or agency and includes both the psychological and political power that comes from being united. This type of power is often used to describe how those faced with overt or covert domination can act to address their situation.
- **“Power within”** describes the sense of confidence, dignity, and self-esteem that comes from gaining awareness of one’s situation and realising the possibility of doing something about it. Power within speaks to the state of being empowered.

Dianne Rocheleau and Robin Roth (2007) build on these power dynamics, explaining how power relationships are much more entangled and embedded:

- Power can also be “alongside”;
- Power can come “from beneath”; and
- Power also may be “in spite of”.

To understand and work within these complex power dynamics is critical when it comes to addressing women’s roles in decision-making and leadership in the Mekong region, as well as to crafting effective pathways to empower women in these roles.

**“Power alongside”** is demonstrated when women share knowledge with one another within and between communities, which can take place for a variety of reasons—for example, to improve livelihoods, food security, or build resilience in the face of severe droughts and floods that are becoming more frequent due to a changing climate.

**“If they cannot catch fish anymore, if they cannot have more land to plant vegetables, this is the starting point for women to discuss and start to organize activities to improve and make their lives better, and to get the community together to talk about a solution.”**

– Anonymous, Laos, January 30, 2020

**“Power from beneath”**, in contrast, is seen when women rely on support from their families and community to be able to participate in meetings as decision-makers. By shouldering the triple burden of having to support their family members, participate in meetings so as to raise their voices at the decision-making table, and generate income to ensure their household’s economic well-being, women can become empowered through the emotional support and encouragement that their families and communities provide.

Shalmali Guttal, Executive Director of Focus on the Global South, spoke about how essential this power can be, and also about the complexities of recognizing and supporting women’s roles as they step into positions where they have more power in the current paradigm of patriarchy:

**“I don’t think women in communities, or at the regional or state level, want to prove that they are better than men. Patriarchy and conventional social roles make most women at those levels nervous about showing how good they are. They need to balance harmony at home and harmony in the community with their own sense of worth and their own accomplishment. This work of getting women to be able to come up as decision makers, knowledge leaders, policy leaders has to go hand-in-hand with getting social and household acceptability. This is related to the tasks that they do as producers and providers. They are the home economists and they are the caregivers. The challenge of recognizing and respecting women’s multiple roles and contributions is a complex one and that’s why it needs time and resources.”**

– Thailand, February 12, 2020

Kanokwan Manorom (Thailand, February 12, 2020) echoed this sentiment, observing how “female leaders have the burden of working at home, working as a part of a movement to protect their livelihoods, and also making money to allow their family to survive...Many female leaders have [a] psychological burden and we have to watch out for this and support them.”

“Power from beneath” can also come from being taught, being empowered through learning, and through knowledge and skill transfer. According to one Lao interviewee, “women can be leaders and teachers in the community, the women who are involved are middle age, and to transfer their skills and knowledge to new generation, teaching is one of the roles” (Anonymous, Laos, January 24, 2020).

**“Power in spite of”** patriarchal customs and social norms is commonly seen in the Mekong region. Even though such norms and customs may act as barriers to women’s leadership, women can still navigate these social constructs and harmful mindsets to influence decisions. In Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia, there are prominent examples of women being in the frontline of a protest or confrontation—often against a dam or infrastructure project. In the case of protests against the Myitsone hydropower project in Myanmar, for example, Kachin women were often found at the forefront of the movement, helping to “shield” their fellow male activists from the authorities in both a figurative and literal sense due to their perceived “less aggressive and threatening” nature (Mi Ah Chai, Myanmar, January 24, 2020).

## **Modes of Power and Leadership**

Five dimensions of power that are constantly evolving, if not creating tensions, warrant further consideration here. These are the (1) type of connection; (2) terms of connection; (3) strength of connection; (4) structure of the network; and (5) position of actors within a network (Rocheleau & Roth 2007).

How power is expressed and becomes manifest changes depending on the relationships that people have with one another. Recognizing these network dynamics in view of power relationships is, thus, integral to unpacking the factors underpinning the power asymmetries seen today, and which generate the intersectional issues that come with gender inequality and injustice. From this perspective, power is not a simple, direct or linear dynamic. It is contingent on broader societal factors and processes, such as cultural norms, the relationships in place between individuals and within a community, the policy, rights, and legal frameworks that individuals and communities are governed by, and how much they know about these structural and societal dynamics and how adept they are at navigating them.

**“We are trying to change a structural system where men are in control. Men are the ones who have their voices heard, men are the ones in the powerful positions, even when gender dominates the agenda.”**

– Kaneka Kao, Cambodia, January 17, 2020

Where power exists on a formal and informal spectrum and has subtle, often unmeasurable nuances that affect how decisions are made, leadership and influence are likewise complex. Traditional and formal leadership is commonly seen by individuals or small groups demonstrating their “power over” others through authority, control or domination. Informal leadership approaches, by comparison, are varied and highly contextual, and often encompass the other power relationships outlined above. Informal power and leadership can also arise from a relationship where trust has been built—for example, an individual who works in a community to raise awareness and build consensus on an issue so that they can stand together, gains informal leadership through this process. She may not have a title or be granted any kind of formal authority by the powers that be, but her leadership would rest on the trust, mutual respect, and the attention that the community grants her. It is common for women to have informal authority and for them to take up informal leadership roles, at times exercising greater influence than those with formal authority.

**“Women may achieve powerful positions, but they do not always, even in these positions, have the power of decision-making.”**

– Chhuon La, Cambodia, January 28, 2020

Leadership and influencing maneuvers are always driven by a certain purpose, irrespective of whether this is expressed explicitly. When women and communities band together to exert collective leadership to protect or manage a major river like the Mekong, they do so with the aim of influencing decision-making and policy behavior. Although leadership can serve an individual purpose—whether it be to protect one’s livelihood, to advance one’s position in society, or to realize personal financial gain—it is when communities come together and pursue a common purpose that they increase their power and capacity to exert strong leadership.

Educating the community about the regional challenges and realities; navigating social and cultural norms to ensure critical opinions are heard and acted on in a way that does not derail or challenge accepted customary practices; mobilizing actors to achieve their potential and collectively enable change—all of these approaches are examples of ways that non-formal actors, particularly women and indigenous peoples, influence outcomes and processes. Although women are not always the most visible actors in policy and decision-making roles regarding water governance, both in the Mekong and throughout the world, they are able to exercise influence, exert power, and lead in ways that are highly effective.

Power dynamics play out in all aspects of life. Recognizing them, navigating them, and understanding their deeper causes and effects is a matter of lifelong learning. Understanding and unpacking the theories and language around power, influence, and leadership can lead to an increased understanding of the dynamics at play.



**Table 1: Some leadership types and styles (adapted from Bush et al. (eds.) 2019).**

Types of formal leadership	Types of collaborative leadership	Other leadership types
Structural Systematic Bureaucratic Rational Hierarchical	Transformational Participative Interpersonal Follower	Transactional Model/Moral
<p>Pauline Taylor McKeown (Cambodia, January 17, 2020) illustrates the way that structural power dynamics underpinned by the hierarchy and patriarchy play out in a public forum. She says, “The men in power know they should be doing something about [gender equality], so they let the ladies speak, saying ‘let’s hear from some of the women in the room’ in a very controlling way. If the woman says something they don’t want to hear, it is ignored instead of taken as a challenge.” In this example, men use rational leadership stemming from their hierarchically superior role to undermine women’s participation.</p>	<p>Nang Shining (Myanmar, January 24, 2020) explains how women work with one another and come together to express power through networks, shared causes, and strategically using peaceful approaches to effect transformational change:</p> <p>“There are many women leaders in the Mekong region at different levels. For example, in Thailand and Cambodia, women at the community level are already taking leading roles at frontline of campaigns. This is part of their strategy because I think women always maintain a peaceful manner. In Vietnam, women are taking leadership roles in Vietnam Rivers Network. In Laos, there are more women researchers than men. In Myanmar, women are playing leading roles in the Salween River network.”</p>	<p>Transactional leadership can be seen where bargaining is used to influence a situation or position. Model or moral leadership is exercised by setting an example and inspiring others.</p> <p>The interviewees who work with communities and are able to inspire by educating and informing other women provide an example of the model/moral leadership style. Women who share knowledge and experience by traveling from their home community to another community facing similar challenges also demonstrate this leadership style and approach.</p>





A fish vendor in Mon State,  
estuary of the Salween.  
Photo: Pai Deetes,  
International Rivers



## 4. Analysis of Findings

**Using the aforementioned gender analysis framework, the following four quadrants are discussed within the context of women’s leadership, knowledge creation, and decision-making in the Mekong region: (1) agency and voice; (2) access to and control over resources; (3) cultural and social norms, beliefs, and practices; and (4) the overarching legal, economic, and institutional context.**

These four quadrants are not mutually exclusive, however, as tensions and opportunities arising from one quadrant can impinge on another. Social and cultural norms can influence agency and women’s access and control over resources. Laws and policies can likewise dictate women’s rights which, when made known and enforced at the community level, can have the potential to shift access and control over resources, and eventually impact on social norms as well as women’s agency. These direct and indirect “cause and effect” relationships are shown by the arrows moving across quadrants in Figure 1 (see Section 1: “Methodology”).

Through this analysis, observations are offered from the literature and primary source research conducted for this project. A set of case studies complement the findings and allow for a closer look at some of the dynamics at play, which illustrate the challenges and opportunities faced by women and other actors. Key issues and areas for action coming out of the interviews and from the analysis are then detailed.



## Agency and Voice

Both agency and voice are deeply linked to a woman's self-confidence. Even when women are able to achieve leadership positions, they constantly struggle to assert their authority. Although her position may be officially recognized within the community, the woman who leads must still prove herself capable and, to do so, she must have energy and self-confidence.

**“Instead of women's leadership, I think the current priority should be women's participation; if the participation could be improved dramatically...then some women might be able to be raised to a leading position.”**

– Anonymous, China, January 31, 2020

Women need to inspire and support one another to assume leadership. Three female interviewees recognized how they had demonstrated leadership

and inspired other women by working directly with communities as trainers and facilitators on river management issues (Interviewees, Laos, January 2020; Nareth, Cambodia, February 10, 2020). This self-awareness is a critical leadership attribute.

Learning from women in other communities is also cited several times by interviewees as instrumental to supporting women to fulfil their potential, find their voice, and engage in leadership roles. Phouthamath Sayyabounsou, in particular (Laos, February 4, 2020), highlighted the work of Oxfam, CLICK, and Gender Development Association, which provide technical and capacity development training (for both women and men), and support communities to conduct research themselves. It is through this process that they increase their knowledge and awareness of, as well as capacity to address, the challenges they face. Consider the following case study from Weaving Bonds Across Borders.

**Karen women voicing their concerns on the proposed Salween water diversion project in an interview with Thai media.** Photo: Pai Deetes, International Rivers



A person is seen from behind, crouching in a river and washing laundry. The laundry is piled on a white plastic tub. The person is wearing a dark shirt and shorts. The river is calm, and the background shows a forested hillside under a cloudy sky. The overall scene is dimly lit, suggesting dusk or dawn.

## Case Study 1: Weaving Bonds Across Borders

Weaving Bonds Across Borders is a global network that was established by women from different countries—an Indigenous woman from Colombia, a native American, and an ethnic Shan woman—in 2014. It seeks to empower grassroots women to become more aware of their rights, as well as understand what gender equality is and how it can be used as an advocacy tool.

The purpose of the network is, therefore, to shed light on how, at the grassroots level, women address water and natural resource management in their daily lives, and to bring women from different cultural backgrounds to talk with one another through workshops and training. At the heart of the network is a desire to build trust with communities through education and knowledge-sharing, and capture community knowledge—both formal and informal—that is passed from generation to generation. To this end, the network has provided funding to local women in different parts of the world, including Indonesia, Myanmar, and Vietnam, to conduct community-based research and undertake projects that contribute to their communities' well-being. For instance, in Myanmar, four alumni of the network, who worked on the Moe Byae and Pong Long dams, noticed the lack of local participation in the decision-making process and decided to create a platform for women to raise their voices on such issues and forge stronger networks with like-minded local groups such as Kayan Women's Organization.



Interviewees also emphasized the value of making a woman feel at ease and letting her know that her knowledge is valued and respected. Visitors to a community looking to gain a woman's input, knowledge or perspective need to be sensitive to the cultural and power dynamics at play within the community and household. Sometimes a woman is only comfortable sharing her view or speaking her mind when she is alone in the kitchen, and she will only be comfortable speaking with another woman and only in her native language. For many NGOs, academics, and consultants this may be second nature, but it warrants mention when discussing voice and agency. Making a woman feel safe and respected is essential to gaining her input.

In this way, policy and development programs in the public, private and civil society sectors that promote women's voices should continue to expand—but it is pivotal that they also include men in the conversation. Doing so would enable men to gain greater exposure to, and a better appreciation of, women in leadership; it can also help them become more aware of ways to promote women and their work. Here, men will need to open up the decision-making space to women, listen to their voices, but also ensure that they are heard. It is not enough to have women present at a meeting: as the previous quote from Pauline Taylor McKeown points out (in Table 1), women's views need to be genuinely considered, discussed, and deliberated, even when they conflict with prevailing beliefs.

Indeed, according to the literature (Resurrección et al. 2018) and interviews conducted for this report, it is often mentioned how one of the biggest barriers to a woman's ability to raise her voice comes from either a lack of respect for her opinions or her own uneasiness with speaking openly. Participation is what will eventually enable leadership, but only by finding their own voices and getting them heard can women begin on the path to meaningful participation and leadership. Effecting this change will take time, but it is a commitment worth making for women and men alike.

**“In discussions, mostly men talk. Women keep quiet, maybe sharing one or two words for every 1,000 words. The young generation, however, those in their 20s, have a different understanding of men and women—they see things as needing to be fairer, but for people over 50 this is still crazy. It will take another 20 or 30 years for things to change.”**

– Chhuon La, Cambodia, January 28, 2020

## Key Issues and Areas for Action

### Issues

- 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.
- To identify and empower women to step into leadership or decision-making positions, NGOs 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).

### Action Areas

- Participation is the first step on the long road to leadership, and any intervention or attempt to gain knowledge or input from women must be done from a place of respect and in a way that makes a woman feel safe and comfortable.
- Women who want to contribute and raise their voices—even those already in leadership or more powerful roles—need and deserve support from their familial, community, and professional circles.



- Community-led research (e.g. Tai Baan), knowledge co-production, and feminist participatory action research approaches will all help to build women's technical and leadership capacity and must be encouraged from the bottom-up. In particular, feminist participatory action research can help to create new forms of collaborative relationships essential to empower women, amplify their voices, and foster agency.<sup>5</sup>

## Access to and Control over Resources

Two main issues emerge related to the access and control over resources. The first concerns knowledge: that is, how women's knowledge relates to other, more technical knowledge systems. The second relates to women's control and management of rivers at different levels of water governance.

Interviewees repeatedly emphasized the extensive amount of knowledge that women have regarding all areas of water and river management. In most cases, the grassroots, community woman who relies on the Mekong River for her food and livelihood has an understanding of the river that transcends quantitative scientific data. The knowledge and understanding that she has are intrinsically linked to her values as well as her sense of self or identity. The Salween River, for example, is not just a body of water; it is an ethnic identity. Moreover, how knowledge about water is produced and reproduced also informs what is ultimately valued by riparian communities. For women, the value they ascribe to rivers will often transcend purely economic considerations, as it seeps also into their ways of living and the security of their households. This strong relationship and connection with water is common for community members, and in particular women, throughout the Mekong region.

All informants spoke to the depth of knowledge that women, who rely on the local environment for their food and livelihoods, have on rivers, the services they provide, and their resources. Unfortunately, this knowledge does not always fit within the frameworks used to guide decision-making (e.g. national water resource management plans or strategies). Informants also spoke to the disconnect between traditional and indigenous knowledge systems—specifically, how women's and indigenous knowledge tend to be undervalued in that they are not widely seen as sufficiently “empirically sound” for fact-based decision-making.

**“The knowledge that [women] have relates to their sphere of operations, and what they pick up from other women during gatherings—biodiversity, resilience, climate change, resilience during feast or famine, survival, saving for rainy days and times when resources are scarce; how to manage the economy and local ecosystems. This knowledge is not being shared and respected widely. Women share this with each other, their knowledge is captured maybe in anthropological studies but does not necessarily make it into policy making. Women's knowledge is often romanticized as a box in a report, just the way indigenous knowledge is romanticized as a box. The fact is that this is knowledge that will actually save lives and allow people not to be hungry, help people to weather storms and weather droughts, but this knowledge is not respected in that way. I would make a strong recommendation, when we talk about knowledge, we need to unpack those boxes, recognize women's knowledge as crucial, valuable knowledge.”**

– Shalmali Guttal, Thailand, February 12, 2020

<sup>5</sup> The Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (<https://apwld.org>) is one organisation that is leading in this area, whereas Living River Siam (<http://www.livingriversiam.org/en-tbr.htm>) is a valuable resource for Tai Baan research.

Furthermore, “technical”, scientific knowledge on water management is often not associated with women but with men. As a result, women usually have to work harder to prove themselves in technical fields, with women still underrepresented in technical knowledge production.

**“Women leaders are excluded from the discussion because of a lack of technical knowledge. The language needs to be simplified and made accessible and useful for the community—both men and women. Knowledge is power.”**

– Socheata Sim, Cambodia, January 17, 2020

With the exception of the younger generation of women, some of whom have chosen to enter into more technical fields of study, such as hydrology or engineering, informants perceived that women have largely been excluded from accessing and producing technical knowledge. One informant spoke about how she felt men tended to use technical language and favored talking about technical subjects in an attempt to marginalize women’s voices in river and water management-related meetings.

**“We need to enable women with technical knowledge and technical skills.”**

– Anonymous, Laos, January 16, 2020

Several interviewees, however, mentioned how access to technology has helped to level the playing-field by giving those with smartphone access, knowledge that would otherwise be less accessible. This point is especially relevant to the younger generation who seek a better understanding of technical knowledge, compared to older generations who value lived experiences as a source of knowledge. As remarked by Nhu Duong Hai, “[n]owadays young people are exposed more to technology, and women have equal opportunities to learn more about technology and technical issues, not like in the past. Take an example in subject of hydrology, I have met more and more young ladies who studied hydrology and hydropower, they are working hard to gain more experience and contribute their valuable knowledge in this technical field” (Laos, February 14, 2020).

Another opportunity for building knowledge and bridging tacit and technical expertise is the process of knowledge co-production. Co-production of knowledge can happen when people who have different understandings of issues create a consensus on terminology and management approaches. Simply jointly defining “what is water” and “what are wetlands” can open up dialogue and understanding, which in the case of the Khon Taam Association led to the joint development of a management plan with local authorities.



**Young women participants attend a Regional Youth Exchange Storytelling Workshop in Siem Reap.**  
Photo: Savann Oeurm, Oxfam



## Case Study 2: The Khon Taam Association in Thailand

In Thailand, the perception of women as “soft”, “fragile”, and “sensitive” was embraced by women community leaders themselves and used to facilitate effective negotiations with the government. As recounted in the case study below, the Thai women involved were demanding that a social impact assessment (SIA) be conducted for the Hua Na dam—an irrigation project that had already been completed. Seeking to use it as a basis for compensation, they proceeded to undertake the SIA themselves in partnership with NGOs and a local university. A similar women-led case has also been documented in Vietnam (Resurrección et al. 2018).

Consider the following account from Kanokwan Manrom of Ubon Ratchathani University:

“Female characteristics are a part of why women are effective leaders. The female is soft, seen as fragile, sensitive. But these characteristics allow them to stay in the frontline when they negotiate with the government. Through empowerment, they gain skills and experience for how to negotiate and articulate with the government and the private sector. They gain confidence and can speak out and deliver the message clearly about what they want.

“For example, the Khon Taam Association (KTA) (Wetlands People Association) used participatory action research as a tool, asking community males and females to be researchers to collect and re-check data, and their research was very participatory. They developed, with the support of the NGOs and academics, the social impact assessment. They proposed their research back to Royal Irrigation Department, who accepted this report and granted 4 million baht per year back to villages. The villagers used this money to restore their livelihoods and to restore the wetland, and to develop economic activities—green market project is a part of the SIA outcome.

“Both men and women increased their knowledge through the process. They both collected data and provided additional information, they became advisors to the process as well—they could do Tai Baan research. Both males and females participated.

“[Members of the KTA] also seek help from the government and from academic institutions to get trainings on how to process and preserve fish, to develop packages to sell for when they organize green markets a few times a week. They have been very successful, and now the government plans to expand the program to bigger cities. They are very clever, they sell in government areas—they asked the government to provide the space, near city hall.”



The second issue, namely the access and control over resources, relates to women's control and management of rivers and their water resources at various levels of governance. Not only are the identities of grassroots women linked to the rivers they depend on (as seen in the Mekong and Salween examples), women are also the ones who control water use at the household level. Pham Thi Dieu My recounted how she had heard them saying that "women are behind the tap" (Vietnam, January 31, 2020). This saying, however, has two meanings. The role and position of women, on the one hand, are not sufficiently appreciated. Women are behind, not in front. On the other, it is women who have significant roles in water use and river management—particularly in the household. This double standard plays out at the local level and in other domains of governance, where women are the most affected by water in infrastructure and development projects but have little say in how water resources are managed at the national level.

**Exclusion is especially pronounced in indigenous communities, such as in Laos and Myanmar, where ethnic customs may be incredibly diverse and there is no uniform approach to gender.**

## Key Issues and Areas for Action

### Issues

- The way that technical knowledge is produced can often obscure and/or marginalize women's perspectives due to a lack of disaggregated data and lack of input from women themselves.
- Realizing gender equality within the confines of a patriarchal social system cannot happen overnight.

### Action Areas

- It is imperative that women's voices are listened to and heard, as this allows for 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 need, and how they would like to gain new skills and support.
- An improved understanding of water literacy, individual rights, and gender equity in relation to water and natural resource management must start in early education and continue through into adulthood.
- More research training, knowledge exchange, and financial support to promote inclusionary knowledge practices, as well as bridge traditional knowledge and scientific/empirical knowledge systems, are needed to help share different ways of knowing and doing that can be drawn on to improve the management of the region's rivers and their resources.



Women leaders from Padol village in Ratanakiri province, Cambodia, visit their spirit forest on Khorm Island on the Sesan River. Photo: Savann Oeurm, Oxfam

## **Cultural and Social Norms, Beliefs and Practices**

In order for women to effectively assume leadership and make decisions, it is critical that they have support from their households and communities to navigate traditional socio-cultural norms, beliefs and practices.

**“Most difficult part is the general mindset—men leaders are thinking in different ways; when we speak about the women leader it’s about how they are using their position and power to hold it.”**

– Kaneka Keo, Cambodia, January 17, 2020

Patriarchal norms dominate the Mekong countries. Women tend to be, directly or indirectly, excluded from decision-making or capacity development activities by governments and even those organized by international organizations and NGOs (e.g. technical sessions or workshops) due to gender-related norms and barriers. Exclusion is especially pronounced in indigenous communities, such as in Laos and Myanmar, where ethnic customs may be incredibly diverse and there is no uniform approach to gender. In some Lao communities, for example, it is still not socially acceptable for women to eat at the same table as men (Anonymous, Laos, February 7, 2020).

That said, there are water management programs run by organizations like Oxfam that explicitly focus on gender mainstreaming and social inclusion. In these instances, women will usually make up at least half of the participants. But if a workshop opportunity were to open up to a regional government office, for instance, then more often than not a male will be chosen to attend—unless the workshop is on a gender-related topic, in which case women will generally be selected to participate (Interviewees, Laos, February 4–7, 2020). In such circumstances, women might either be actively discouraged from speaking up or there may be fewer opportunities for them to engage with their male counterparts.

**“The barriers [to women’s participation] are social norms, especially in rural communities, and [the fact that] women themselves don’t think they have [a] role in water governance and other environmental issues.”**

– Pham Thi Dieu My, Vietnam, January 31, 2020

Social norms, local customs, and cultural attitudes toward gender roles can seriously impede the effectiveness of a project or advocacy campaign, especially if gender-based violence (GBV) considerations are not acknowledged, integrated or addressed from the beginning. In some cases, women may be excluded from activities implemented by environmental organizations due to existing gender norms and barriers. In others, women may experience GBV as a result of attempting to participate and become “visible” or face the possibility of becoming targets of other forms of harassment. This was specifically mentioned in various interview responses, noting how important it is for community trainers and organizers to take special precautions to ensure that educating or engaging with women does not trigger unintended GBV-related consequences. In one example of how her organization had failed to engage with grassroots women, Nang

Shining recounted how her hometown has a male-dominated culture and how no women turned up to attend meetings about the proposed Mong Ton dam project, despite being invited (Myanmar, January 24, 2020). There is considerable risk, in some communities, for women when they become visible; integrating risk management into engagement strategies is thus imperative to prevent GBV and other forms of harassment.

How women can contribute to perpetuating gender norms also warrants consideration here. Several interviewees observed how when women are invited to attend meetings at the state or Mekong River Commission (MRC) level, they often remain quiet. Others have noted instances where women who find themselves in positions of power and leadership become significant barriers to inclusion themselves. As one interviewee explained, there is a real risk of some women in leadership being co-opted into the current patriarchal system; having fought their way to the top, they may reproduce the barriers that they have encountered for other women, viewing the process as a “rite of passage” or “struggle” that every woman should undertake (Interviewees, Laos and Cambodia, February 7 and 10, 2020).

One Lao interviewee, reflecting on her own field experience, recounted how women in Indigenous Lao communities displayed different participatory characteristics due to distinct gender norms and role expectations. Women in one village were noticeably quieter and less proactive than women in a neighboring village, often sitting toward the back of the meeting room even when they were invited to take part. By contrast, women in the other village were very vocal and often joked “naughtily” with the field research team (Anonymous, Laos, February 7, 2020).



According to one Chinese interviewee, these issues have posed ongoing challenges for Chinese investors who are frequently accused of failing to be inclusive, but who possess limited ability to compel local women to join or speak up at community meetings. Let us consider this point more closely. Chinese investors contend that they would like to engage women's voices in their project and have sought to invite women to attend public hearings with men; yet, the women often do not show up. Aside from having to keep to tight project timelines, and the fact that most consultations usually take between three to six months, investors want to respect local customs and do not want to force women to speak if community rules dictate that they should not do so (Anonymous, China, January 31, 2020).

**“The philosophy of many Chinese is like this: they say we don't want to intervene in your life, if this is your custom, if you feel fine by not participating, if you feel much more comfortable by sitting in the back of the room than in the front of the room, we just let you sit at the back of the room. So, when they have [a] consultation meeting with villagers, men sit in front and women sit at the back, and women usually keep silent. Even when you go to the women and ask, ‘could you tell us your opinion?’ they just smile and don't say anything.”**

– Anonymous, China, January 31, 2020

In this case, Chinese investors argue that they have conducted due diligence with respect to seeking women's participation, but have they really? What would happen if a woman were to sit in the front and speak up? Likely there would be community and possibly family repercussions. If the investor was serious in their intent to gain input from women, they would need to navigate these customs and social norms to create a space that would be safe for women to add their voices. Women would need to feel assured that they were feeling respected through the process and that their opinions mattered and would be taken into account. They would need a process that provided reassurance that they were not violating any cultural norms through their participation. Doing so takes time and resources, both of which are often in short supply when development projects have aggressive timelines and limited resources for conducting consultations and environmental or social impact assessments. However, such an investment in time and resources is necessary to empower women and support them in also empowering themselves.

Following this, other interviewees spoke about the many difficulties involved in raising women's voices in decision-making and planning processes—whether these happen as an EIA, SIA, workshop or public forum. These difficulties can be structural or can stem from a lack of respect or unconscious bias. Even so, while inclusion and gender mainstreaming should be emphasized in a program, project or policy, it is still important that certain cultural values and practices are respected. Neglecting or dismissing these can result in counterproductive outcomes that end up undermining the value of female participants and their efforts. Take, for example, the case study below from Laos.

### **Case Study 3: Using cultural norms for gender equality outcomes in Laos**

In an Indigenous community in northern Laos, a woman who demonstrated leadership potential was invited to join an NGO to visit neighboring communities and learn about water and river management practices in a combined leadership and capacity development program. However, the cultural norms in these communities dictate that any women leaving the village must be accompanied by chaperones (another woman and a man from the village). The NGO recognized this cultural norm and used the opportunity to include both the woman's female companion and male villager to create a dynamic where the woman received support from both individuals, while also raising the capacity and knowledge of all three villagers. On returning to the village, the man was able to clearly explain to other men in his community the value of women's roles and leadership in river and water management. Moreover, because there were three village members present, there was no shame or suspicion associated with concerns about inappropriate behavior or misconduct when women travel alone, or when a man and woman from the same village travel together.



**Nam Ou River, Laos.**

Photo: Pai Deetes, International Rivers

Women's leadership should not increase the burden on women themselves. Although leadership cannot help but lead to more work within one's community, some informants expressed concerns that leadership can and does create an additional burden for women, many of whom already held a number of personal and livelihood-related responsibilities. The added stress of stepping into a leadership position—whether as negotiator, spokesperson or decision-maker—comes with much more work as well as psychological challenges, which could mean less time spent with family.

One interviewee recalled how in the case of the consultation process from the Nam Ou dam cascade, there were only a few women who were able to attend due to conflicting household responsibilities and lack of understanding about the issue—most of the project information from the company was in English (Anonymous, Laos, February 7, 2020).

Here, the challenge is to allow for participation, voice, and influence from women without increasing social pressure on them. This, in turn, relates to practical concerns about how women's participation should be better facilitated during consultations and in policy-making fora (e.g. scheduling meeting times so that they do not clash with women's other responsibilities, allowing women to bring children to meetings). It also touches on the critical importance of women having access to more formal education (see UN Women 2018: 83–85). Indeed, the case of Laos' cholera outbreak in 2007–2008 in Xekong Province is a reminder of this. With ten villages affected by cholera through the use of contaminated water, the outbreak reportedly spotlighted the critical role of women in safeguarding their households and communities from such diseases (they are the ones who collect water from the river for cooking), as well as the need to educate them in proper water sanitation and management (Anonymous, Laos, February 6, 2020).

## **Key Issues and Areas for Action**

### *Issues*

- Efforts to empower women need to be sensitive to cultural and social norms in order to not trigger unintended consequences.
- Efforts to shift patriarchal social norms toward greater gender equity is a long-term endeavor—one that needs time and resources to accomplish well.

### *Action Areas*

- The younger generation needs 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.



## Legal and Political Context

Whether the formal legal and political context is favorable to women's leadership can significantly impact on their decision-making power.

**“We have advanced paper regulations, there are some gaps. When we talk gender, it's not men or women, but in Laos case, women [are] the ones that gets focused on. The good thing here is that every ministry has a gender division/unit because they follow regulations, but of course, the need to do more in terms of promoting the female to be in leadership position.”**

– Anonymous, Laos, February 7, 2020

The international political climate has become more favorable to women's participation in decision-making and to women's leadership. International legal frameworks as well as an increasing number of national ones prohibit gender-based discrimination and violence (ICJ 2017), whereas other frameworks and laws advocate for inclusionary practices in natural resource management, including water (IUCN & Oxfam 2018). However, the pathway for this broader inclusion and anti-discriminatory agenda is too often left to governments. Consequently, a gap remains between the knowledge and informal authority of women in communities and the opportunities for these women to take up the reins of decision-making in any formal capacity.

Much of this is linked to the social norms and barriers discussed earlier. Considerably more still needs to be done to develop coherent policies that go beyond gender mainstreaming as a box-ticking exercise and which proactively incorporate women's roles, priorities, and the gender-specific risks they face. It also remains

critical to reflect the issues already addressed in other reports, collect gender disaggregated data, build women's capacity and awareness of their rights, and mandate gender assessment analyses, SIAs and EIAs for development projects to integrate a consideration of women's roles, priorities and risks (IUCN & Oxfam 2018).

Evidence from the interviews also indicates how gender mainstreaming alone in a project does not always result in greater gender sensitivity or accountability. Speaking about UN-related projects, for example, one interviewee noted how most projects did not seem to focus much on gender due to their design, and that despite certain donors and agencies like the UN Global Environment Facility requiring gender mainstreaming in projects, this tends to be a box-ticking exercise for a project, with implementation still in need of improvement (Anonymous, Laos, February 5, 2020). As previously mentioned, when gender-oriented training is conducted, it is usually only women who are sent to attend, with men's participation reserved for the more technical training. Without providing the necessary support and training to achieve gender-positive, if not transformative, outcomes, such box-ticking can never result in changes to the traditional, gender-blind mindset and associated practices.

Indeed, a closer look at how consultations are completed for hydropower projects further reveals the differences between what EIA and SIA experts count as a successful consultation, and what NGOs understand to be an effective, gender-sensitive consultation process (see International Rivers 2017; Mekong Partnership for the Environment 2017; Resurrección et al. 2018; Simon 2013). The case study below vividly shows how effective and inclusive consultation needs a considerable commitment of time and resources.

## Case Study 4: Consultation experience on the Theun-Hinboun dam

“In Laos, when working on the Theun-Hinboun dam, the special inspection group that came—I met them after they had done these emergency impromptu visits to villages. I asked who they met in the villages, if they talked to women, how sure they were that the information they were getting was accurate. Heads of the delegation were two white men, and they’d get upset. ‘We’re not amateurs, we’ve been doing this for years, we know how to do this, we have our own independent interpreters.’ They helicoptered into the village, and they stayed in every village for two to three hours. The general times they had gone were either nine-thirty or ten in the morning or three to four in the afternoon when most women are either in the fields or foraging. They met much older women, grandmothers, or they met children. They did not meet working-age women. The only working-age women between 17 and about 35 years old that they met were either pregnant or with small children. How can you make a decision on a big dam based on 20 or so women that you have met?” (Extract from interview with Shalmali Guttal, Thailand, February 12, 2020)



Resettlement site, Theun-Hinboun,  
Khammouane province, Laos.

Photo: Phairin Sohsai, International Rivers

Another major barrier identified by interviewees is the fact that women, especially in rural areas, are still not fully aware of their rights and roles. In some cases, this is because of language impediments, lack of education, and limited access to up-to-date information. But in others, there remain deep-seated tensions between formal rules, rights and policies, and local customs and norms. Some instances of these clashes were already provided in the earlier discussion on social norms. But a particularly notable example of this can be seen in China. Although national rhetoric, laws, and policies all speak to the equal rights and roles of women, according to Caizhen (2008: 2), “Chairman Mao advocated equality between men and women, ‘woman holds half of the sky’, ‘woman can do what man can do’, and ‘man and woman are equal in the new era’, with the notion that ‘women and men have equal rights’ also being added to the Constitution.” Yet, rural water management policies have little to no gender component and do not recognize women’s strategic gender needs, with Chinese water management still being male dominated (Caizhen 2008; Ge et al. 2011; Tong et al. 2017). Climate change has accelerated the inequities in that despite the increasingly active role women are taking to manage water during drought conditions, they remain excluded from community-level decision-making about water. It has been asserted that the lack of a gender approach in Chinese policy may serve to undermine efforts to support local resource management and also climate adaptation (Su et al. 2016).

Evidence from the field obtained for this report complicates the story. For instance, one informant explained how in China, women have more power compared to other Mekong countries, and that there have been shifts in terms of women’s power status as a result of China’s one-child policy, which was in place from 1979 until 2015.

**“In China, local women in rural areas are also weak compared to men, but women do participate, and men and women, both of them, support the family and work hard in the village. In China, we have adopted a policy of one-child, you should be able to speculate that in many families, there are no boys at all. In half of the families, there’s also one girl and she is the hope of the family, and the family resources were invested in this one girl and so at least half of the society hope that this girl should be treated equally as men. And so, in a very strange way, this raised the status of women.”**

– Anonymous, China, January 31, 2020

Achieving policy change with respect to women’s rights (e.g. moving from anti-discrimination to actual gender mainstreaming), as well as policy cohesion between women’s rights, water governance, and environmental protection agendas, is gradually happening, with implementation remaining a major challenge. Even so, we identified some encouraging examples during our interviews, though not solely focused on water. For example, in Laos, the Ministry of Energy and Mines developed a gender vision, with the government also creating priorities for women’s empowerment. These are to be attained through a medium-term strategic plan and gender action plan (2016–2020), which sets targets for encouraging women into leadership positions. Further, the country’s Biodiversity National Action Plan also features a gender component, albeit in the annex.

These examples provide a promising outlook on how gender is being incorporated into national policies and strategies. However, much more work remains. One of the opportunities we identified during this study related to educating leaders on the importance of seeing gender as a cross-cutting



issue and not just a standalone box in need of ticking. Here, we identified how understanding the importance of women's roles and gender equality more broadly needs to be a part of training at senior management and leadership levels to prompt broader organizational, political, and legal transformations.

**“If leaders have a good understanding of gender mainstreaming, their approach and interventions will focus more on qualitative dimension of gender equity. Otherwise, they would look at gender dimension through quantitative lens only.”**

– Nhu Duong Hai, Laos, February 14, 2020

The need to educate leaders and senior management to see gender from a qualitative as well as quantitative perspective reflects the dichotomies that have been addressed in the other three quadrants as well: the acceptability of women's traditional knowledge in contrast to scientific evidence; shifting cultural norms needing to happen from within as well as through educating younger generations; and the necessity of women leaders to constantly justify their position and authority, even when formally recognized as leaders. The complexities and tensions illustrated through these quadrants show the deep and interconnected nature of the challenges that women continue to face.

## Key Issues and Areas for Action

### Issues

- Structural opportunities exist to empower women through education about their rights, roles, and responsibilities. Such education is critical and must continue.
- 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.

### Action Areas

- To prevent structural efforts at enhancing gender equality and equity 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.

Discussing women's involvement in community fisheries at the 2019 Women and Rivers Congress.

Photo: International Rivers



**Dary, a young woman leader  
in community fisheries  
in Kratie province, Cambodia.**  
Photo: Savann Oeurn, Oxfam



# 5. Discussion: How Women Transform into Leaders

**The following discussion represents cross-cutting issues that overlap in all of the quadrants. Based on the interviews conducted and the literature reviewed, a “recipe” seemed to emerge as to what “ingredients” are needed for women to be empowered and assume leadership. No one interviewee or study identified all of the ingredients, though most identified at least three factors through the stories and experiences shared or documented.**

## **“Recipe” for Women’s Leadership**

For women to engage in meaningful leadership in water-related decision-making and governing processes, several conditions need to be present. To meet these conditions, it is important that women are supported by local, national, and global actors in raising their voices and enhancing their overall participation:

- 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.



## Identity

Women who depend on a river and its resources will have an identity that is likewise intertwined with the river. This relationship is not codified and, in certain cases, may not even be formally recognized. It is, nevertheless, an intimate relationship—one that defines a person’s sense of social and cultural belonging and way of living, if not their reason for being. Indeed, it is worth recalling how in many Asian cultures, rivers are popularly personified as “feminine”. In Lao and Thai, the mae in Mekong refers to “mother”, whereas in Myanmar, the Irrawaddy is inextricably linked to centuries of Burmese civilisation—as is also the case for China’s Yellow River, which is known as the birthplace of Chinese civilisation.

**“From women’s perspective, women do not see water for its physical characteristics, but rather as a means or source of livelihood... Men see water quite different, but also similar. They see it from an economic perspective—how it can provide income. They also see how it provides food. They have similar worldviews, and there is a blurred line between men’s and women’s perspective.”**

– Kanokwan Manorom, February 14, 2020

## Necessity

When their livelihoods or identity are threatened—whether due to a hydropower dam, infrastructure project or environmental degradation—women will often be prompted to raise their voice and become more involved in decision-making, if not in leadership. In particular, when a woman’s access to water resources is threatened or altered to her detriment and her family’s livelihood and security, she will seek resolution or compensation to guarantee her family’s well-being or survival. Vivid examples of this are evident across Southeast Asia, where women will frequently take the lead in protesting against the threats faced by their community. The case of women’s

activism against the Lower Sesan II hydropower dam is exemplary in this regard. According to Nareth, women tend to be more attached to and protective of their possessions, which include their families, and as a result, they will be more concerned and willing to sacrifice their security for the sake of their family and/or community (Cambodia, February 10, 2020). There would appear to be a slight tension, of course, between this readiness to sacrifice, confront, and take action, and the aforementioned perception of women within the region as “feminine”, “gentle” and “less threatening” than men. Yet, this tension can be viewed as underscoring the ways in which women are capable of assuming multiple roles and shouldering a range of social expectations.

**“Only women who are affected by projects are interested to be part of campaign and take action. Other women are busy with their households and other things, so they are not really aware of what is going on.”**

– Nang Shining, Myanmar, January 24, 2020.

## Knowledge

Women are often inspired to action through NGOs as well as other women in neighboring communities or those experiencing similar challenges. Here, shared knowledge serves as the basis for awareness-raising and information exchange, which in turn opens up pathways to change (see Case Study 1). Several interviewees across the region observed how women can and do learn from others about methods to lead and effect change. In the words of one Indigenous Khmu interviewee, speaking on the role of women in communities inhabiting the Si Phan Don area in Laos, “women can be leader[s] and teacher[s] in the community...they can be a teacher to the new generation [and allow them] to learn more about [how] the river change[s] and how they want their river to be” (Anonymous, Laos, January 25, 2020).

## Network Support

If a woman does not have the support of her household, she will not be able to take on extra responsibilities, such as attending meetings or strategizing solutions. A positive family environment means support for her external roles, and that other family members may step into her roles at home when she is unavailable. Given how the interviewees could not identify a region-wide water governance network for women, this renders local and familial support networks all the more important to women. Building and sustaining such networks are not easy, however, and cultivating trust within a social group requires long-term engagement. As noted by Nang Shining, “trust-building take[s] too much time, but [it is] very necessary to do so...We have to build trust with the community first...and bring not just young people but also adults who they can really trust” (Myanmar, January 24, 2020).

Similarly, a woman’s professional networks are central to her ability to rise up through the ranks, assume a degree of leadership, and ultimately influence policy. This brings to mind the example of the Lao Department of Water Resources, where informal networks inside and outside the department (the latter through connections with the Lao Women’s Union, for instance) helped to support women professionals working in the water management space. Support came in the form of further professional training opportunities and knowledge exchange (e.g. alerting one another to national laws that protect women’s rights) (Anonymous, Laos, February 7, 2020).

**Participants at the 2019 Women and Water Dialogue in Cambodia convened by Oxfam.** Photo: Oxfam



## Agency

Self-confidence, self-awareness, and well-being are essential to a woman's ability to move into a leadership or decision-making role. The psychological well-being of the woman leader can be difficult to maintain, however, especially when she has to navigate local power dynamics within a patriarchal context. In many Asian cultures, failure is not tolerated, and failing can mark an individual for life. Fear of upsetting the status quo, or doing something that challenges cultural acceptability, can create undue stress and cause a woman to question her self-worth. As one informant reflected (Anonymous, Laos, February 8, 2020), "[if] you [are] female and you [are] young... you [will] need some time to prove yourself, build confidence...Of course I can't build [it] in one day, but...every day I need to get better. It's not that easy."

Even so, shouldering responsibility remains important. Women need to appreciate the unique roles that they can take up to promote better river governance in their region. As Phouthamath Sayyabounsou observes, in Laos, gender can serve as an entry point for discussing more politically sensitive water and dam-related issues with the government and other stakeholders (Laos, February 4, 2020). And as such, it calls for women to seize such windows of opportunity.

In sum, at each step of the way, a woman seeking greater leadership must navigate a range of internal and external obstacles. While it is a challenge to ensure that all these 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. As some of the examples we have discussed show, despite these barriers, 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 common purpose, this serves to legitimize her actions and embolden her and the cause. She becomes unstoppable.

## Obstacles and Opportunities: Two Sides of the Same Coin?

The ensuing discussion reflects on the key obstacles and opportunities, as identified by interviewees and the broader literature, that women might face on their path toward greater leadership.

### • The Problem of "Silent Crackdowns"

When a woman becomes more active and skilled, she might be offered a government or company position. Indeed, it is interesting to note how one respondent has observed more women engaged within the private sector as suming a leadership role by representing hydro power companies and providing input into regional prior consultation processes (e.g. for the Xayaburi, Pak Lay, and Luang Prabang PNCPA<sup>6</sup>) (Phouthamath Sayyabounsou, Laos, February 4, 2020).

From one angle, this can be viewed as the ultimate success, whereupon she might gain more opportunities to participate in decision-making. And yet, this "success"—of being recruited into a government or corporate role—can also be perceived as an attempt to sever the individual's connection with the river and her community, as well as a way to silence her voice through co-optation into the bureaucracy or private sector.

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<sup>6</sup> Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement.



A downstream community member affected by the Yali Falls dam, Nhuy Nangnoy, for one, was offered a position to work with the Cambodian Government but rejected the offer, as she feared that by accepting it, she would be agreeing to silent suppression. She is currently a community empowerment officer with 3S Rivers Protection Network (Cambodia, February 17, 2020).

“When women become strong both in capacity and involvement, the government often tries to offer them a government position. Consequently, those active women stop being active protecting people’s voices, or stop in expression. Ultimately, they suppress other women’s activeness. To me, this is called ‘silent crackdown.’” (Nhuy Nangnoy, Cambodia, February 17, 2020)

### • **Intergenerational Opportunities and Challenges**

Generational gaps in knowledge and attitude are significant throughout the region. From one perspective, there is reason for hope in a new, promising generation that will be able to shift women’s representation in the landscape of water governance toward a more equitable presence. On the other hand, there is generally a mistrust between generations, where older generations do not think that the younger generations have the knowledge or experience to be able to take on leadership roles. Furthermore, older people do not always share traditional knowledge with younger generations. Finally, loss of livelihoods following from development projects is causing fractures in the relationship between many young people born in rural and riparian communities in the Mekong region.

All of these factors culminate in a complex dynamic between generations. Where shifts are slowly happening from within communities as

women are gaining knowledge, self-confidence, and opportunities to share their voices and participate in decision-making, the younger generation represents a rising tide with their own ways of learning and doing, and different ideas about equity. Supporting the rise of new generations and dissipating tensions between the young and old will be essential, particularly to guarantee the transfer of local knowledge related to nature-based livelihoods.

**“We have a huge generation gap. Young women and [older] women [have a] huge gap when it comes to water governance...young women [are becoming] more active in [the] governance [of] natural resources, but [the] older generation still lacks knowledge and understand [ing of] how governance and natural resources relate to them. It is a challenge for young people to go out and participate in [the] current situation because [the] old generation don’t really support them.”**

– Mi Ah Chai, Myanmar, February 24, 2020

## • **Local Women’s Knowledge and Climate Change Adaptation**

Women’s knowledge, as discussed previously, is frequently viewed as “anecdotal” and not “fact-based”. And indeed, there is a constant need to ensure that we do not “essentialize” or simplify women’s knowledge or their roles in society. Still, there is good reason for why women’s knowledge, as well as indigenous and other localized forms of knowledge, should be harnessed to support climate adaptation strategies on the ground.

Climate change is a cross-cutting issue that opens up opportunities for speaking more about community and human security, as well as the gender implications of climate mitigation and adaptation. Talking about climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies also allows for the formation of non-traditional partnerships. This was seen in the Khon Taam Association example (Case Study 2), where the Thai Government, KTA, and academic institutions joined forces to develop climate-resilient livelihoods by using the resources, knowledge, and ingenuity of the partners involved.

Women’s, indigenous, and local knowledge can prove central to a community’s survival. Although they might not always fit perfectly within scientific paradigms of evidence-based research, there is a tremendous opportunity for these bodies of knowledge to be codified, shared, and integrated into water governance as part of a bottom-up process. The process of incorporating different forms of knowing into academic research is still in its early days, having begun with indigenous knowledge (Ens et al. 2012; Giles et al. 2016; von der Porten et al. 2016). Harnessing women’s knowledge and other knowledge systems in a way that is respectful can provide new ways to value rivers in the Mekong region as more than economic resources. This work is already under way and could benefit from joining forces with other actors within and beyond the region to inform and transform river governance from the grassroots.

**“It is a big mistake that we are not working with women enough to develop adaptation solutions. There is a lot of policy talk about building resilience, but communities have resilience strategies that they have built through autonomous adaption. But what’s happening with the way development is going is that their resilience, their capacity for autonomous adaptation, is being chipped away. Where are the adaptation strategies that are being developed with communities? ...There needs to be a concerted effort to push governmental and intergovernmental agendas to develop these strategies with grassroots communities. They have the analysis and they are at the frontlines of climate change impacts.”**

– Shalmali Guttal, Thailand, February 12, 2020

**Executive Director of Green ID, and 2018 Goldman Prize recipient, Ms Nguy Thi Khanh, opening a regional forum on renewable energy in the Mekong region.**

Photo: Oxfam





A woman collecting kai (river weed)  
in the Mekong at Chiang Kong district,  
Chiang Rai province.  
Photo: Phairin Sohsai,  
International Rivers





## 6. Conclusions

**“We have made progress in the Mekong but if we take our eye off the ball (of women’s roles), it will slip quickly.”**

**– Pauline Taylor McKeown, Cambodia, January 17, 2020**

This report builds on existing scholarship and new primary data from interviews to understand the role of women in river governance in the Mekong region, and the mechanisms through which women’s voices become part of the decision-making process. To this end, this report offers insights into well-known as well as hidden challenges and opportunities when it comes to women’s leadership and managing the region’s major rivers. In so doing, it invites the reader to reflect on the potential pathways to women’s greater participation and leadership in this important realm.

Issues of harmful social norms and attitudes, as well as the patriarchal political system that persist across the institutions and water governing mechanisms of the Mekong region, underpin the findings. The challenge here is two-fold: to increase leadership we need to increase women’s

participation. At the same time, we need to recognize the multi-layered nature of the burdens that women face (e.g. having to manage their households and contribute to their community) and not add to these burdens. What is needed is the creation of a community space that cultivates women’s leadership and decision-making through collective action and responsibility.

At the organizational level, this report’s findings suggest that women are more actively involved when gender is on the agenda, but also that meetings and workshops on gender and water governance present a unique opportunity to engage both male and female leaders. These observations, in turn, reinforce how appraisals of gender sensitivity and women’s empowerment need to shift from a quantitative to qualitative understanding of impact.

Because government agencies and women's organizations like the Vientiane-based Gender Development Association are often tasked with responding to a suite of other important issues (e.g. land titles or GBV), they may possess limited capacity to focus or work on women's water rights. This underscores how engagement needs to be strategic, recognizing how these organizations may be dealing with gender-related challenges that are perceived to be more immediate and pressing (Interviewees, Laos, February 3-7, 2020). This is not to say that women's organizations or government agencies should not be included—they must be—but rather, they need to be approached in a pragmatic manner. Here, forging partnerships and using entry points, such as food security or climate-resilient livelihood options, can allow for more meaningful conversations and engagement. Before scarce resources and time are invested, water rights groups and their potential partners need to first understand and set out the mutual benefits to be gained from collaboration.

Opportunities for women's involvement, engagement, and leadership in the region's water governance also need to be incorporated at the earliest stages of any intervention. Engaging women's groups and CSOs to understand their priorities and identify synergies at strategic touchpoints during the project plan and design phases is one way to do this.

Strengthening women's capacity to understand and engage with technical discussions starts at the earliest stages of communication. Tools such as Tai Baan research and participatory action research approaches have allowed women to participate more in evidence-based research and—together with other "invisible" community members—set the research agenda, collect data, and subsequently find their voices to influence decision-making and water policies.

The aforementioned "recipe" serves to highlight the ingredients that can contribute to women's leadership at the local level, but also provides insights into why women's voices remain limited to this level. In particular, accounts of "silent crackdowns" speak to real concerns about how women's power can be diluted through co-optation into bureaucratic structures.

As a concluding point, it is important that one does not over-generalize the findings of this report. Country differences need to be respected, and even within countries, the fact that no two communities are identical must be kept in mind. By the same token, all women are different: as one interviewee aptly pointed out, "women are not a homogenous group" (Diana Suhardiman, Laos, February 7, 2020). Yet, despite differences, it remains the case that "each woman represents a whole struggle and a whole lifetime of having worked for something" (Manju Vasudevan, quoted in Deetes 2019).

# Glossary of Terms and Concepts

**Discrimination:** Any unfair treatment or arbitrary distinction based on a person's race, sex, religion, nationality, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, disability, age, language, social origin or other status. Discrimination may be an isolated event affecting one person or a group of persons similarly situated, or may manifest itself through harassment or abuse of authority (UN 2008).

**Gender:** The different roles and responsibilities taken up by women and men. These are learned from early in life and throughout life from those around us; they are not "natural". They vary between cultures and localities, and they change over time.

**Gender and sex:** Sex refers to the biological differences between men and women. Gender refers to the roles, responsibilities, and relationships taken up by women and men and the social differences that are imposed on men and women within societies and between societies.

**Gender-based violence (GBV):** Any act that is perpetrated against a person's will on the basis of gender norms and power asymmetries. Such acts can range from sexual harassment to more violent and coercive forms such as rape (adapted from UNHCR n.d.).

**Gender blind:** Failure to consider the differences between men's and women's needs, benefits, and access to resources, power, and social status.

**Gender equality:** Equal rights, status, opportunities, and outcomes for both men and women.

**Gender equity:** Gender equity is achieving fair treatment for women and men. Strategies and special measures will often be needed to compensate for women's historical and social disadvantage. Positive discrimination may be needed to help women access equal opportunity. In achieving equity, equality is made possible.

**Gender mainstreaming:** A process of ensuring that all work, in the way it is done, contributes to women achieving an equal share of resources and power. Everything the company or organization does, including policy-making, setting agendas, planning, human resource management, program management, information management and resource allocation, must be informed by gender analysis.

**Gender neutral:** Relating to people or communities and not specifically to men or to women. Can risk overlooking important differences.

**Gender relations:** These are the social relations between women and men and are concerned with the distribution of power between the sexes. They define the way in which responsibilities and social expectations are allocated, and the way in which each is given a value. Gender relations vary according to time and place, and between different groups of people. That is, they vary according to other social relations such as class, race, ethnicity, disability, age, and culture (adapted from Office of Women and University of Adelaide 2005).

**Gender transformative:** Where gender is treated as central to promoting equality and achieving positive development outcomes. It takes on the task of transforming unequal gender relations to promote shared power, control of resources, decision-making and support for women's empowerment.



**Harassment:** Any improper and unwelcome conduct that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation to another person. Harassment may take the form of words, gestures or actions which tend to annoy, alarm, abuse, demean, intimidate, belittle, humiliate or embarrass another or which create an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment. Harassment normally implies a series of incidents. Disagreement on work performance or on other work-related issues is normally not considered harassment and is not dealt with under the provisions of this policy but in the context of performance management (UN 2008).

**Intersectionality:** Where gender is assessed alongside other factors that affect power relations and vulnerability, including class, race, religion, ethnicity or disability. This is especially useful when looking at issues of identity and power in understanding how change will be felt by marginalized or disenfranchised peoples.

**Sexual harassment:** Any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favour, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature, or any other behaviour of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation to another, when such conduct interferes with work, is made a condition of employment or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment. While typically involving a pattern of behaviour, it can take the form of a single incident. Sexual harassment may occur between persons of the opposite or same sex. Both males and females can be either the victims or the offenders (UN 2008).

**Women's empowerment:** A "bottom-up" process of transforming relations of power between women and men. It is achieved by individuals or groups of people, particularly women, through becoming aware of women's lower status and power, or imposed barriers and limited opportunities, and building their capacity or facilitating avenues to challenge and change this.

**Women's leadership:** Women demonstrating agency (i.e. their capacity, skills, and knowledge), having access to resources, and also the ability to challenge or shift gendered socio-cultural norms—all of which feed into their capacity to spearhead better and more inclusive governance arrangements for improved outcomes.

**Women's rights:** The 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights outlines the human rights of all men and women. However, tradition, prejudice, social, economic, and political interests have combined to exclude women from many of these rights. Thus, the human rights of women need to be considered separately and given special attention.

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Adapted from Simon 2013: 68, unless otherwise indicated.

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# **Annex:**

## **Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

### **1. Background**

Can you please share some information about yourself, starting with your full name, your current role, and a bit about your background and what has led to your work in the Mekong region?

### **2. Associations**

This interview is to better understand women's involvement in Mekong water governance, management, and decision-making. What jumps to mind when you think about women and the Mekong? What do you immediately think about? On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate the level of women's leadership in water management?

### **3. Women's groups and organizations**

How do you see women organizing in regards to water governance and rivers? Can you share any examples of the groups that you are aware of, and are they doing well?

### **4. Opportunities and barriers**

Do you see women as being involved in water and river decision-making? And if so, how are they involved (or not involved)? From your perspective, what are the main opportunities for women's involvement in water and river decision-making? What, from your perspective, creates and/or sustains these opportunities?

In contrast to the opportunities, what do you see as being the barriers or main challenges? What, from your perspective, creates and/or sustains these barriers?

Are there, from your perspective, social norms, as well as economic norms and political/legal constraints, that help or hinder involvement (e.g. land and resource ownership and transfer, land title, communal tenure, community institutions).

### **5. Successes and failures**

How would you define "women's leadership" in water governance? Can you share with me any success stories you see as significant, and examples of women's leadership or involvement in decision-making? What were the factors contributing to these successes or these instances of leadership and involvement? Can you share any stories of failures, particularly failures that provide the opportunity for learning?



## **6. Women and climate change**

Do you see women in your professional and personal context responding to climate change, and if so how?

(If relevant) Do you know of any women or women's groups that are working on Sustainable Development Goals, environmental and social impact assessments or other frameworks or tools related to water and river livelihoods? If so, how?

## **7. Women and knowledge**

How is knowledge captured and shared, and what is the role of women in these processes? What has this knowledge been about, and how has it been used?

In your work, have you seen cases/success stories of women in research and the creation of knowledge? Can you share any stories about process?

## **8. Women in water management**

How would you define "good water management"? Do you see women's voices and perspectives reflected in current water management practices and processes? From your perspective, what are the main challenges women have faced in water management, in the Mekong and beyond? How have they coped with these challenges?

## **9. Any other stories, reflections or suggestions**

Do you have any other stories, reflections or suggestions that you would like to share as a part of this interview, or anything else you would like to share? Are there any resources that you would like to direct us to as we investigate these issues?

## **10. Questions for us**

Do you have any questions you would like to ask me about this work?



