

Gender and Hydropower: Women's Rights in the Development Discourse

Key words

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Policy Pointers

Greater focus on gender equality and education in formal and informal schooling in order to end gender norms and breakdown stereotypes

Undertake gender power analysis in all development projects to develop insights for project design

Inclusion of all gender impacts when preparing Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs)

Reduction of barriers to women's participation in decision-making processes for development projects



The rights of women in the remote areas should be respected (Credit: Sein Lin, 2017)

This policy brief provides recommendations for hydropower developments, focusing particularly on the nexus of gender and hydropower development. In recent years, Myanmar has been moving towards market economy development with a tendency to extract natural resources in order to fuel economic growth. Hydropower is an example of how the government is meeting the demands of economic growth through electricity that benefits some at the expense of others. Gender is just one aspect among many that has been undermined in this process. It is recognized in Myanmar that women are important bearers of culture in society, often with a close relationship with the environment, but they have little recognition in society and have little decision making power when it comes to natural resource management.

Large dam projects and increased militarization are interconnected in this context and are perceived to have taken a negative toll on women. Past experiences have revealed that increased militarization also means an increase in conflicts and sexual and gender-based violence against ethnic minority women. Therefore, policies that ensures a gender perspective associated with hydropower are crucial for future sustainable development. This policy brief is written to complement the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW) policy framework in order to address the key gender issues in the hydropower sector.

Without considering inclusivity and diversity in the development process, it is impossible to accomplish gender equality and protect women's rights in Myanmar.

Under the 2008 Constitution, Myanmar is governed as a Presidential Republic that is now being promoted as a democratic system and has developed a Rule of Law governance system. The Constitution acknowledges the rights of women that includes Article 350, which states that women shall be entitled to the same rights and salaries as those received by men in respect to similar work. Furthermore, Article 351 states that mothers, children and expectant women shall enjoy equal rights as prescribed by law (Myanmar Constitution, 2008).

Myanmar signed and ratified the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1997 (United Nations, 2007). A few years after, on 3 October 2013, the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW) (2013-2022) was launched by the Myanmar Government to localize CEDAW principles in the country, which sets out 12 key activity areas as delineated in the Beijing Platform of Action (The Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement, 2013). The Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement takes the lead in promoting and protecting the rights of women.

It highlights several significant issues including: women's rights, and women's participation in decision-making processes concerning community or national development. NSPAW will be the first law in Myanmar that is envisaged to protect women from all forms of violence, including the provision for female inclusion in the development processes.



Community meeting in Mong Pan Township (Credit: Shan Literature and Culture Association, Mong Pan)

Despite its promising provisions, the law has yet to be adequately regulated as a policy framework in addressing gender issues in hydropower projects.

A number of laws, rules and regulations have been amended, including the Environmental Conservation Law, approved on 30 March 2012 and the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) procedure which was then approved on 29 December 2015. A social impact assessment (SIA) is a component of the EIA, but the procedure does not currently include a gender impact assessment.

Myanmar has ratified CEDAW which recognizes the importance of gender equality, but there is no legislation yet dedicated to protecting women or gender issues linked to large development projects. The national laws and policies specific to natural resources management, investment and EIA's do not consider the gendered impact of hydropower development. In the context of Myanmar, hydropower development is historically linked to human rights abuses: forced relocation, rape, torture and killings due to conflict between armed groups and the central government's military around dam sites. Thus, the gendered impact of conflict, displacement, and gender-based violence needs to be adequately addressed in law. On top of that, gendered impact assessment should be considered in the EIA process.

It is essential to understand the context of gender issues on the ground where the hydropower projects are proposed to be built. The root cause of gender inequity derives from different aspects of society such as social customs and public policy. The social customs and traditional culture in Myanmar has a significant influence on attitudes towards women in leadership roles and in the public policies. Without addressing how social norms influence public policies, and without considering gender inclusion in hydropower projects, it will be a barrier to the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women (NSPAW 2013-2022) in efforts to promote and protect the human rights of women.

This policy brief intends to complement the NSPAW policy framework to address the gender issue in the hydropower sector.

Socially Constructed Gender Issue

Women play an important role in society, which expects them to be the care-takers of the household, to play supportive roles for men, to be family oriented, to be well-behaved both in private and public spheres, and to focus on reproduction. Because of their multiple roles in society, they have limited access to formal and non-formal education. As a result, women hardly participate in socio-political activities and therefore this becomes a barrier to women's rights. The expectations that traditional societies put on women perpetuate the generational subordination of women in communities. As the bearers of these cultural gender norms, most women do not question or challenge these barrier that may affect their quality of life, which should not only be tied to a reproductive role in the home.

The general perception of people in Myanmar is that women should stay at home, cook, clean and take care of children. Household chores, such as fetching water, are seen as the duty of women. Generating income is regarded as the obligation of men, thus getting water for economic purposes is the responsibility of men. Based on the research findings undertaken for this policy brief on the Than Lwin River in Shan State, household chores, which are performed by women, are an everyday task, unlike economic-based activities done by men such as pumping water from the stream to the farm, fishing in certain seasons, and carrying water with vehicles. Women use more energy in getting water as they do this manually and oftentimes they travel by foot from water sources far from their homes. Meanwhile, men use machines such as vehicles or other tools to get water for economic purposes. (Shining, 2016).

Considering these social norms, women receive pressure to behave in certain ways with many rules and regulations. For instance, it is believed that women should be decent, polite, shy, quiet, and obedient to all the advice of elder people in the community. From the perspective of religion, women are regarded as second class in society in Myanmar. Women are also often prohibited from entering certain religious compounds. In some communities, women have not been included in community meetings and their voices have been ignored.



Fetching water is the duty of women in remote areas (Sein Lin, 2017)

Due to social and cultural pressures and poor quality education, the feeling of being powerless and a lack of gender policies are important factors that restrict women from meaningful participation in the decision-making processes that play an important role in the development arena.

Policy Implication on Gender Issue

Some public policies also limit the potential of women or do not guarantee that they are fully inclusive of women in society. Some regulations also ignore the value of women. For example, during household registration and on the national identity card, men are put as the head of the household and the working status of women are put as dependents. The Farmland Law (2012) states that land will be registered to the head of the household, who are men. The implications of this law and practice has a direct consequence on women's lives, particularly in the case of resettlement plans by development projects such as large hydropower dams. The implication of the law is that the compensation will be given to the head of household but not to any dependents. Given that situation, women do not have the right to own or manage any financial compensation given by the project developers.

As long as gender roles are not being considered in hydropower projects, women are the ones who will suffer the most from these development activities. Resettlement often means loss of access to resources like clean water, firewood and non-timber forest products, which is regarded as the obligation of women to ensure for the family. Resettlement takes its toll on women's lives as this entails losing their autonomy and access to resources. That is why it is essential to consider gender analysis in the resettlement plans of all hydropower projects in Myanmar.

Critique of Existing Development Options

The proposed Mong Ton Dam has a very high risk in terms of social and environmental impacts to both upstream and downstream areas of the dam sites. It has been designed to be the biggest dam in South East Asia, and its reservoir could flood an area the size of Singapore (Herman, 2015). The social and environmental impacts will be irreversible. Water is essential to the everyday life of the people in this area. Water provides not only for people's livelihood, but also serves to preserve the culture and the bonds of natural relationships and people. In an interview, one person explained: "When we face water scarcity, we cannot offer food, we cannot celebrate festivals, all the cycles will disappear that bond us through community relationships and harmony. If we can no longer use water for agriculture, we will have no income; and as a result, we cannot educate ourselves. When it come to the stage of water depletion, it also leads to conflict" (NHK, Mong Pan, 2016).

The Than Lwin River is very special for people living within the river basin. Some people make their livelihood and income mainly from fishing. For them, if the ecosystem is changed and the fish species become depleted, people will definitely lose their livelihood. Water, air, soil, forest, people and animals are all interconnected. When one is eliminated from the cycle, the whole cycle will be altered. Vulnerable groups such as women and children will suffer the most from these changes.

Referring on the experience to date from large development projects in Myanmar, such as the Myitstone, Hat Gyi, and Mong Ton dams, as well as mining, oil and gas projects, the potentially affected communities and particularly women have not had enough space for meaningful participation and have not received adequate information regarding the relocation and compensation plans of the projects.

One interviewee said: "Though Wan Sala village is the closest village [to the Mong Ton dam], only 19 miles away from dam site, the consultative meetings have not been conducted and the people have not been targeted to participate in the meeting" (Mong Pan interviewee 50, 2015).



The free flowing Than Lwin River (Credit: Sein Lin, 2017)

In the past, increased militarization and conflict have become connected with hydropower projects, with the contestation of land and resource between multiple, militarized ethnic groups causing human rights abuses, specifically near the Mong Ton site (Karen River Watch, 2014). More than 100 cases of sexual and gender-based violence against ethnic minority women by the military have been documented (Women's League of Burma, 2014). If there is no policy back up for gender equality and good governance in development processes, justice for women is not guaranteed and the over-exploitation of natural resource is unavoidable.

Myanmar's policies and laws are progressing but are still inadequate to protect the security of women, to balance the power relationship between men and women, and ensure the protection of the Than Lwin River in the name of development. Therefore, the author would like to suggest the following policies to be put in place and to be implemented effectively on the ground.

Recommendations

As education is a powerful tool to end the perpetuation of gender norms and to break down stereotypes, gender education policy should be undertaken in formal and informal schools.

- ☐ Ensure all genders are mainstreamed in the development of education policy. Learning materials should not reinforce stereotypical gender norms but address both male and female as equals in dignity and opportunities to explore their potential in their everyday lives.

- ❑ Give teachers sufficient time, alternative teaching materials and enough resources to shift stereotypical gender norms.
- ❑ Allocate a specific budget and provide instructions to tackle gender issues in the education sector.

Gender power relation analysis should be conducted in all types of development activities.

- ❑ Ensure gender power analysis is conducted at the early stage of preparing the master plan of any development project. This way, the policy makers and project developers will have a better understanding of the areas where practical action and policy development is needed to increase the participation of women and the inclusion of gendered perspectives.

Implement practical solutions in order to reduce barriers to women's participation in decision-making processes.

- ❑ Before a consultation meeting is conducted, women should be fully informed about the impacts of hydropower projects and they should be provided with enough time to review and discuss the issues. The meeting venue should be a secure place where women can express their concerns freely.
- ❑ Information related to the project should be disclosed in an effective manner. For example, information should be translated to relevant languages in an understandable way in order to allow women from different ethnic groups to fully understand.
- ❑ Public meetings should ensure that at least thirty per cent of the attendees are women. They should not only be mere attendees, but rather should be assigned roles in the decision-making processes.

Environmental Impact Assessment processes should include gendered impact assessment for all development projects in Myanmar.

- ❑ Gender analysis in resettlement plans of hydropower projects should be inclusively and intensively conducted.

Alternative Plans for Energy Demand in Myanmar

To be able to meet the growing demand of energy needs in Myanmar, improvements to the existing power plants, their transmission lines and operating systems should be made. Due to a lack of maintenance and the use of outdated technology, the current output capacity is very low. Myanmar has a lot of potential to produce electricity from its water sources. Instead of building large hydropower dam projects, it is feasible to build small hydropower projects to meet the energy needs of local communities.

The centralization system is not efficient because more than fifty per cent of energy is lost from the central grid to sub-transmission lines and then to the pole before reaching households and industries. Furthermore, building grid and transmission lines also cost more than dam projects itself. Rather than going through the central grid, it is recommended to send energy from the power station to a small-scale transmission line as a form of decentralization system in each State and Division. Therefore, Myanmar needs to advance its technology skills, plan and operate site management, and explore the possibility of centralizing system for energy efficiency.

Conclusion

In many cases women have not been represented in community meetings and their voices have been ignored. Due to social and culture pressure, limited access to education, the feeling of being powerless and the lack of gender policies, women have been restricted from meaningful participation in decision-making processes and playing an important role in the development arena. Even though women's daily life activities are strongly linked to the natural environment, they have little recognition in society and have little decision making power within water and natural resources management.

It is a common perspective amongst women that: "For domestic chores and water management, women have more responsibility than men and they are working harder than men." Not only domestic chores but they also carry another workload. Men just work on the physically heavy workload. Biologically and physically, women are weak but are very smart and when it comes to making decisions, their role is very important" (Mong Pan Interviewee 46, 2015).

Large hydropower development projects are not a solution to Myanmar's own energy needs when they are principally designed to export electricity to neighboring countries such as China and Thailand, as is the case of the Mong Ton Dam project in Shan State. For such projects, it is not worth the trade-off of security and rights of girls and women in exchange for electricity in the name of development.

Women will be the one who suffer the most from development projects without meaningful participation in the decision processes. The rights of men and women appear to be equal when we look at them from the surface level, but based on the findings, there are many facts that are not visible. Many women do not realize that their rights have been structurally violated within the existing system. Some regulations within the governance system also ignore the value of women. Thus, gender analysis should be considered in hydropower project because resettlement often means loss of access to resources like farmland, clean water, firewood and non-timber forest which is regarded as the obligation and responsibility of women.¹

¹ For more information on the subjects discussed in this brief, please visit the *Mekong, Salween and Red Rivers: Sharing Knowledge and Perspectives Across Borders* international conference proceedings at <http://www.csdcs-chula.org/publications/2017/5/24/conference-proceeding-mekong-salween-red>.

Knowledge Products

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