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Gender in Development Discourses of Civil Society Organisations and Mekong Hydropower Dams

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ABSTRACT: 'Gender in development' discourses are used to justify interventions into, or opposition to, projects and policies; they may also influence perceptions, practices, or key decisions. Four discursive threads are globally prominent: livelihoods and poverty; natural resources and the environment; rights-based; and managerial. Civil society organisations (CSOs) have been vocal in raising awareness about the adverse impacts of large-scale hydropower developments on the environment, on local livelihoods, and on vulnerable groups including women. This discourse analysis first examines how CSOs engaging in hydropower processes in the Mekong Region frame and use gender in development discourses, and then evaluates the potential of these discourses to empower both women and men. Documents authored by CSOs are examined in detail for how gender is represented, as are media reports on CSO activities, interview transcripts, and images. The findings underline how CSOs depend on discursive legitimacy for influence. Their discursive strategies depend on three factors: the organizations' goals with respect to development, gender, and the environment; whether the situation is pre- or post-construction; and, on their relationships with the state, project developers and dam-affected communities. The implications of these strategies for empowerment are often not straightforward; inadvertent and indirect effects, positive and negative, are common. The findings of this study are of practical value to CSOs wishing to be more reflexive in their work and more responsive to how it is talked about, as it shows the ways that language and images may enhance or inadvertently work against efforts to empower women.

KEYWORDS: Civil society organisations, gender in development, discourse, representation, hydropower

INTRODUCTION

'Gender in development' discourses, like their predecessors 'women in development' and 'gender and development', aim to influence how development policies, projects, and practices are perceived, carried out, and evaluated with respect to particular representations of 'gender'. Discourse and power

analyses have helped explain their lack of impact on equality and empowerment (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015), as well as some of their inadvertent effects on gender relations or on the agency of women and men (Cornwall, 2007; Jerneck, 2015). Four discursive threads are historically prominent and potentially relevant to an analysis of large-scale hydropower development: livelihoods and poverty; natural resources and the environment; rights-based; and managerial.

Livelihood and poverty discourses on 'gender in development' focus on issues of income generation, employment, and economic development. The 'feminisation of poverty' discourse, for instance, raised awareness of the predominance of women among the poor, and suggested interventions that in some cases inadvertently multiplied their burdens (Chant, 2008). Interventions based on the 'empowerment through microfinance' discourse vary greatly in effectiveness, and sometimes reinforce inequalities among wealthier and poorer women or lead to greater exploitation of women by men (Yeboah et al., 2015). In both these cases, focusing too narrowly on women meant neglecting the need for active support by men as co-workers and employers. Instrumentalist perspectives supporting the 'participation' of women are explicit in discourses focused on economic growth and profitability (Karavias, 2017) or on the 'business case for equality' (Cullen and Murphy, 2017), with their emphasis on commodification and privatisation of resources (Harris, 2009; Calkin, 2015a). Thus, the 'responsible agricultural investment' discourse equated women's empowerment to economic efficiency in the use of land and labour, encouraging their increased participation in work without addressing gender inequalities in control or access to resources (Collins, 2016; Jerneck, 2015). For these reasons, economically centred livelihood discourses have some immediate limitations as strategic guides for furthering women's empowerment.

Natural resources and environment discourses may depict women as "caretakers of nature" (Cornwall et al., 2007) or "earth mothers" (Leach, 2007), opening up possibilities for allocating women's time to natural resource management tasks without compensation or without due consideration of existing burdens and divisions of labour (Resurrección, 2013). They also assume that all women are virtuous towards the environment and men are not; in practice, there may be little solidarity between women across ethnic or class lines (Joshi, 2014). The 'environmental degradation' discourse portrays women as victims (Leach, 2007) or as highly vulnerable to climate change (Arora-Jonsson, 2011), thus generating sympathy; but this discourse simultaneously undermines their agency in decision making, as it leads to doing things 'for' rather than 'with' or 'by' women (Garvin, 1995). Depicting women as users and managers of natural resources (Radel, 2012), on the other hand, may help secure their access to those resources or may help them receive compensation when these resources are lost because of development projects or natural disasters (Perez et al., 2015; Jost et al., 2016). Discourses in which 'agricultural water management is men's work' – even though women also use water for agricultural purposes (Cleaver and Hamada, 2010; Zwarteveen, 2008) – maintain water as a male resource governed by men (Resurrección et al., 2004). The dominance of masculinity in irrigation management is so strongly normalised that it is not necessary to mention 'men' alongside irrigators, as everybody 'knows' that men were implied (Zwarteveen, 2008). Most water professionals and decision makers in water management and hydropower bureaucracies are men, implying complete patriarchal control over water as a resource (Buechler et al., 2016). This irrigation example illustrates the process of normalisation, in which ideas and actions are made to appear 'normal' and devoid of power relations when they are not (Nygren et al., 2015).

Rights-based 'gender in development' discourses frequently emerge from either the disclosure of shocking incidents of human rights abuses (Tlusty et al., 2015) or longer-term struggles to address gender inequalities in patriarchal societies (Chant, 2008; Arat, 2015). Among the former is the 'girls-as-victims' discourse, highlighting the need for a response to the high incidence of violence in and around schools (Leach and Humphreys, 2007), and other related 'gender-violence' discourses (MacManus, 2015). Among the latter are efforts to ensure legal rights to education – although these may not be fully protected in practice (DeJaeghere and Wiger, 2013) – and social movements related to labour and land

rights. Thus, the 'feminisation of labour' discourse drew attention to the increasing participation of women in a workforce where they are paid less than men, in societies that largely ignore unpaid work at home (Moghadam, 1999); concerns over rights of 'women in developing countries' justified interventions by international organisations to help empower women, leading to recognition of home-based work (Boris, 2014). What at first seems an expansion of opportunities for women to enter the workforce could also become another form of exploitation, if the working conditions are hazardous to health and there are limited channels for women to express their grievances (Theobald, 1996). Women's labour is cheap because their rights are easily violated by profit-driven industries and complacent governments (Ellis, 2017). 'Land rights' discourses that push for non-discrimination – that is, equal rights for women to own and access land – are especially important for rural women but also need to draw attention to other structural factors. A study in India, for instance, found that the choice of arenas in which to press for rights varies with social position. In Nicaragua, the NGO FUMDEC found it essential to first address unequal gender relations in the home before it could address community and political participation (Pena et al., 2008). In Timor-Leste, a human rights based approach appeared to be the most promising way to deal with inequalities in access to land, given the constraints in traditional law (Narciso and Henriques, 2010).

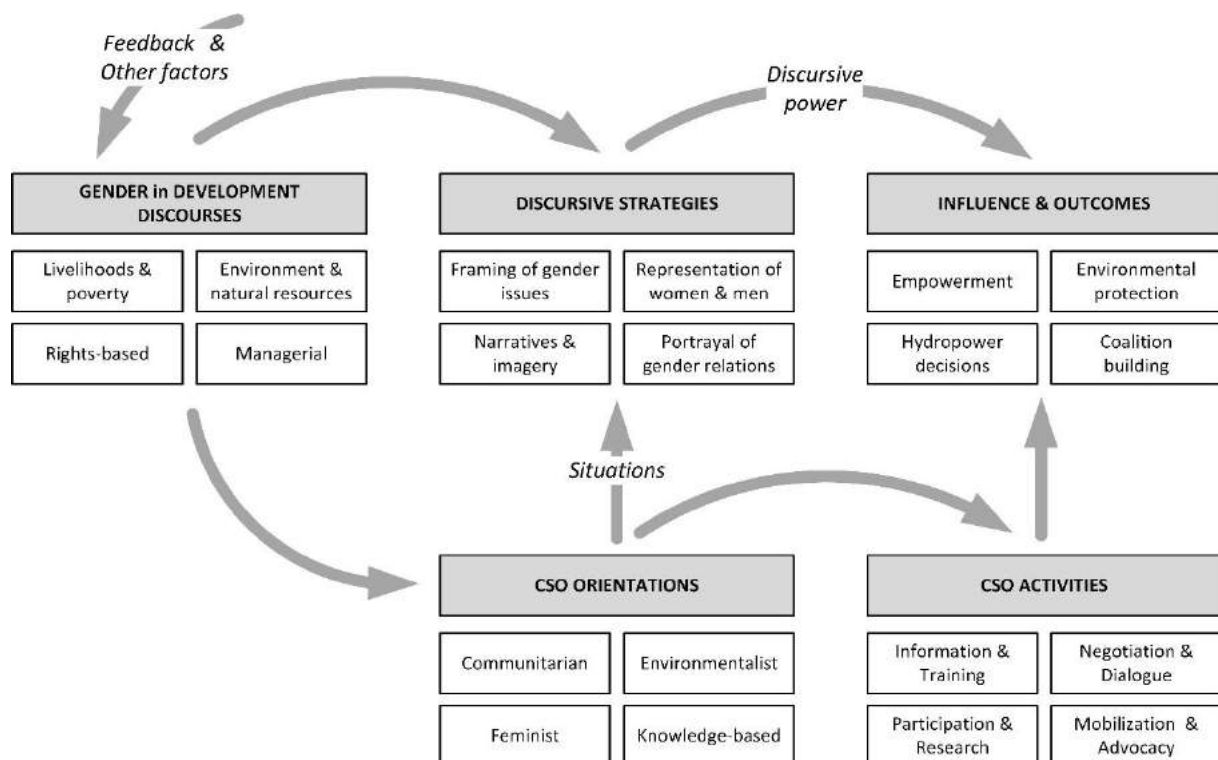
Managerial or bureaucratic discourses on gender in development are in the language of plans, projects, and targets in a depoliticised landscape. In these discourses women are passive targets for communication, rather than being themselves communicators (Wilkins, 1999). Gender experts are co-opted to 'get texts right' while organisational practices limit impact on the ground (Ferguson, 2015; Cornwall, 1997). In China, for example, the 'new rural construction' discourse promised a transformative approach towards peasant women who have been 'left behind', but instead followed an affirmative approach that tinkered with social institutions and 'participation', thus reproducing the rural gender inequalities that were supposed to have been addressed (Jacka, 2013). Women in rural China are doing more off-farm paid work and the time-use gender gap is shrinking, yet women overall are working more than ever (Chang et al., 2011). The 'gender mainstreaming' discourse of international organisations is another prominent example of a managerial discourse that has largely failed to deliver (Moser and Moser, 2005). Implementation of the United Nations' Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action has proven challenging for governments. Thus, in formulating programs in India and Nepal, governments engaged civil society in policy delivery, but maintained a bureaucratic approach to policy framing and issue identification, and ultimately did not challenge male-dominated power structures (Chaney, 2015). Similarly, African states adopted an expert-bureaucracy approach to gender justice, engaging CSOs but limiting the political arenas where government agendas could be challenged (Chaney, 2016). Depoliticisation of gender agendas works to ensure that existing power structures that hinder gender equality go unchallenged.

These above examples show that gender in development discourses – whether centred on livelihoods and poverty, natural resources and the environment, human rights, bureaucratic tools and procedures – represent women and men and their relationships in distinct ways that can have material and non-material consequences (Sultana, 2011; Yaka, 2017). Common simplifications are that gender is binary and that all women (and men) are assumed to have a set of traits or practices that make them suitable for certain roles, the performance of which reinforces those norms (Butler, 2010). Thus, livelihood-economic narratives claim that women have intrinsic qualities useful for making profits (Calkin, 2015b) or in environmental narratives for taking care of nature (Cornwall et al., 2007; Leach, 2007). Gender in development discourses sometimes pay insufficient attention to the diversity among women arising from, for instance, social class, ethnicity or level of education, which influence their positions in various hierarchies (Nightingale, 2011). This neglect of intersectionality perpetuates misleading conclusions on the causes of vulnerability to climate variability (Ajibade et al., 2013; Arora-Jonsson, 2011). At other times, discourses specifically identify women or men of a particular race or class as being victims, and thus subjects for development to work on (Perera-Mubarak, 2013). These

examples also show that impacts are often inadvertent and influences indirect, reflecting the dynamic complexity of gender roles in real life; normative progress in documents and policies may also not be translated into outcomes on the ground (Arat, 2015). CSOs, working alongside the 'development apparatus' of international development agencies (Ferguson, 1994), have contributed to the evolution of the global discourses of 'women/gender in/and development'. The implication is that dominant and newly emerging discourses are worth scrutinising for what they include, whom they exclude, and how they are used, that is to say, for the discursive strategies that are in play (Figure 1).

Drawing on the arguments above, our conceptual model is that 'gender in development' discourses provide text, images, and rhetoric in the form of stories and arguments, which CSOs strategically combine when they exercise discursive power. This paper adopts Kabeer's (1999) conceptualisation of women's empowerment as being about "the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability". We concur with her argument that the ability to exercise choice depends on the interactions among several dimensions; she suggests resources, agency, and achievements, to which we add discursive power. As this analysis will show, the fact that different stakeholders define and use the term empowerment in distinct ways is itself important for representation of women as 'others' (Pini, 2006), and creating space (Lebel et al., 2018) or boundaries (Cornwall and Brock, 2005). The discursive strategies adopted depend on the orientation of the CSO towards gender, development, and the environment. Power is also exercised in CSO actions, but that is not a primary focus of this analysis. It should be underlined that, for simplicity, feedback is not shown in Figure 1; nevertheless, discourses and relationships should be read as dynamic, evolving, and thus with histories (Foucault, 1980).

Figure 1. Conceptual framework guiding the analyses in this paper of how the use of gender in development discourses by CSOs influence the prospects for women's empowerment in hydropower development.



The purpose of this study is to examine how gender is represented in the 'gender in development' discourses of CSOs in the Mekong Region, which is facing many negative social and environmental

impacts arising from the rapid expansion of hydropower (Matthews and Motta, 2015; Grumbine et al., 2012). Recent studies show that vulnerable groups include women and ethnic minorities dependent on river and wetland ecosystems, as having disproportionately suffered from the loss of resources important for sustaining their lives (Baird, 2016; Manorom et al., 2017). Hydropower decision-making structures and positions of influence are overwhelmingly dominated by men (Simon, 2013). This is a critical period for the region, during which CSOs, as a very diverse group of organised interests, could influence key decisions taken by governments, investors, and other stakeholders.

The discursive strategies of international development agencies and national governments with respect to gender in development have received more attention (Kabeer, 2005; Bergeron, 2003; Ferguson, 2015; Auld and Renckens, 2017) than those of CSOs (Alvarez, 1999; DeJaeghere and Wiger, 2013). This is an important gap in the Mekong Region, because CSOs have often been vocal in raising awareness of the adverse impacts of development projects on the environment, and have also been advocating for woman's rights (Lebel et al., 2018), but have less frequently been linking environment and gender agendas (Resurrección and Nguyen, 2015; Laungaramsri, 2017). CSOs rely on discursive power (Molle, 2009), as they typically do not have other sources of legitimacy or resources of coercion (Figure 1). In the non- and partially democratic settings prevalent in the region, CSO discourses may be especially critical to social justice. The discourses around gender in hydropower development in the Mekong Region are only just beginning to gain more prominence and have not yet received much attention from scholars. This study addresses three specific questions:

1. Framing: What are the main themes, narratives, and arguments in the 'gender in development' discourses of CSOs in the Mekong Region?
2. Strategies: What strategies and tactics do CSOs use to represent gender in their 'gender in development' discourses?
3. Empowerment: Are the 'gender in development' discourses of CSOs likely to further gender equality or women's empowerment?

The Mekong Region (defined here as the countries of Lao PDR, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, and Yunnan Province of China) is a highly suitable area in which to explore these questions, for a number of reasons. First, hydropower development has an extensive history and continues to be pursued in each country (Middleton and Garcia, 2012). Second, there is a diversity of cultural settings in which women's status varies substantially between aspirations on paper and practices on the ground (Schuler et al., 2006). Third, there is a range of changing political contexts in which CSOs have different amounts of room to manoeuvre and influence state decisions (Belloni, 2014). Fourth, there is a range of international and domestic CSOs that place varying levels of importance on the issues of environment or gender (Resurrección and Nguyen, 2015); CSOs, in other words, have distinct orientations towards development and environment agendas (Lebel et al., 2018). Taken together, this organisational and contextual diversity provides opportunities for examining the influence on outcomes – particularly on women's empowerment – of a variety of discourses in use by CSOs in different situations (e.g. anti-dam protests, post-resettlement negotiations) and intervention forms (training, dialogue, negotiations, advocacy). To address the three questions above we adopted a 'shallow' survey-type design, whereby we sought to capture the diversity of discourses across many CSOs, rather than doing a 'deep' study of an individual CSO, which would make possible greater understanding of the contextual factors that influence strategies and their evolution over time. This is both a unique strength and a limitation of our study.

METHODS

Identification of CSOs

We conducted web-based searches for civil society organisations which might be engaged in issues related to hydropower development in the Mekong Region, including: participation in consultations, advocacy against projects, representing affected communities in negotiations, engaging in activities at resettlement sites, documenting impacts on downstream communities. Other CSOs were identified through personal networks, examination of participant lists from recent events, and referrals by interviewees. For the purposes of this study, CSOs were defined as not-for-profit and voluntary organisations working at any level (local, national, international) with significant independence from government. They could include: non-governmental organisations, professional associations, public universities, research institutes, and policy think tanks. Mass organisations for women organised by the state and intergovernmental bodies like the Mekong River Commission were not included. Selection and documentation of CSOs was restricted to organisations having some direct or indirect presence on the web, in English, because of language limitations of the authors and in order to simplify comparisons.

Altogether, information was collected for 70 CSOs working in Lao PDR, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, and Yunnan Province of China (Supplementary Table A1). CSOs were classified based on their mission, goal or aim statements, as having one of four orientations: environmentalist, feminist, communitarian or knowledge-based (Lebel et al., 2018). An environmentalist orientation meant concern with environmental protection, conservation of biodiversity, and improving environmental quality. A feminist orientation meant an emphasis on protecting or expanding women's rights and pursuing gender equality. CSOs with a communitarian orientation placed greater emphasis on community-based management and development, while knowledge-based CSOs engaged in research in order to better understand the issues and inform policy and planning. It should be noted, however, that particular CSOs may use more than one discourse, and that some combinations, like livelihood and rights-based, were fairly common.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted between March and October 2017, with 14 men and 18 women who worked with CSOs based in Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam (Table A1). There was a disproportionately large number of interviewees from Thailand because this is the home base of many international organisations, and domestic organisations are also relatively numerous. The interviews were intended to strengthen understanding of the framings, perceptions, and strategies of CSOs; at the same time, it must be acknowledged that individual views and formal organisational positions on gender can diverge. Interview topics included the goals and main activities of the organisation, with an emphasis on those related to hydropower development, gender-related practices and policies, individual perspectives on the impacts of hydropower development on women and men, how gender influences participation in activities, and obstacles faced by CSOs when they engage with gender issues. The order of these topics varied among interviews, depending on what seemed to be the informant's preference, and to keep the conversation as natural as possible.

Document collection and analysis

Once a candidate CSO was identified, a search (using Google Advanced Search) was done of web pages and documents which cross-referenced the word hydropower with a gender term (gender, woman, women, female, wife, mother, mistress, man, men, male, husband, father). Altogether 303 documents were initially considered, but after screening for duplicates and relevance, 263 were used in the analysis (Table 1). The documents were diverse in their purpose, ranging from campaign or training

materials, through to research analyses and reports to donors. One-third of the documents were newspaper articles or reports by international organisations about CSO activities, and often included quotes from the CSO spokesperson; the rest were self-authored by CSOs.

Table 1. Sources of documents (n=263) and images (n=409) assessed.

Feature	% of documents	% of images
Year of publication		
Pre-2005	6	1
2006-2008	9	15
2009-2011	11	19
2012-2014	28	43
2015-2017	46	22
Location:		
<i>CSO publications</i>		
Cambodia	8	5
China	4	2
Laos	2	5
Myanmar	4	5
Thailand	21	19
Vietnam	6	7
International	23	43
<i>Non-CSO publications</i>		
Newspapers	21	5
International	11	8

A set of 461 photographs and drawings of men or women was also extracted, of which 409 could be clearly associated with a specific CSO, and thus used in the analysis. The images, all of which included people, were extracted from the selected documents and from direct image searches in Google. The authors looked at the images and sorted them into categories. Two authors looked at the images separately to ensure they were sorted correctly.

The qualitative analysis software package NVIVO was used to organise texts, transcripts, and images for content analysis. Text segments that illustrated different attitudes, beliefs, norms, and observations on gender were manually coded. Special emphasis was given to representations of men and women as having particular characteristics or taking on specific roles. Use of discourses in particular text items was based on occurrences of key words as follows: environmental (protection, conservation, resource management, biodiversity, nature, degradation, wildlife); managerial (assessment, planning, information, procedure, statistics); livelihood (employment, income, skill, work, livelihood); and rights-based (justice, fairness, equality, law, inequality, discrimination).

We followed a simple protocol for coding images. The first code described whether any men or women in an image were interacting passively (listening, observing) or actively (speaking, showing, protesting) with others in the image; or could reasonably be assumed to be doing so based on action and setting. Posing for group photographs was not counted as 'interacting' in this analysis. The second code noted the obvious presence in the image of strong positive (happy, joyful, excited) or negative (sad, anxious, angry) emotions of women or men. The third code noted if women or men were fishing or sorting/processing/selling fish; this activity was chosen as it was relatively unambiguous to identify, and because it is a common livelihood activity among dam-affected people in the Mekong Region. The inclusion of images is meaningful, as visual cues can help to reinforce or normalise how a subject is

depicted; while positive depictions of women might help subvert prevalent gender bias, negative depictions help to reinforce them.

The authors of this study are researchers based in academic institutions. Two have been involved in public debates, consultations or assessments on hydropower development, and thus have some personal links with the CSOs interviewed and referenced. All four are committed to reducing gender inequalities inside and outside the workplace.

RESULTS

The findings begin with an analysis of how gender is represented in images. This is followed by an analysis of representation in texts. Based on these two preparatory sections the analysis then looks in detail at the framing, strategic use, and empowerment implications of the four gender in development discourses commonly used by CSOs in the Mekong Region that are engaging with hydropower issues.

Gender representation in images

The way men and women are represented in images differs by CSO orientation. Feminist CSOs – more than other types of CSOs – depict women actively interacting with other men and women; knowledge-based and communitarian CSOs were more likely to show women engaged in passive activities like sitting or looking (for both of these, see Figure 2). Cutting across CSO orientations, there was no evidence of subordination of women by men; the probability of women being shown as passive while men were active (0.545) was not different from the converse, that is, from those images where men were shown as passive while women were active (0.528). Figure 3 shows some of the ways in which women were represented in images. Each of these images will be interpreted alongside analysis of texts in Section 3.3.

Figure 2. Proportion of images showing men and women in passive (listening, observing) or active (speaking, protesting) interaction states with other people, classified by orientation of CSO.

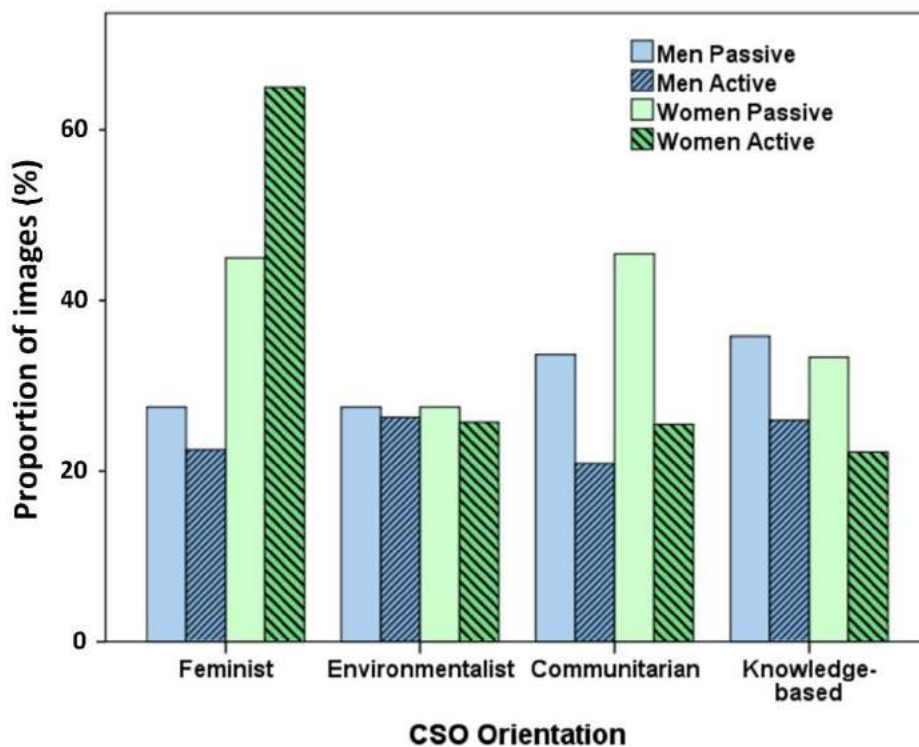


Figure 3. Some of the different ways in which women are depicted in CSO campaigns and documentation material.



A, B, N: Oxfam; C: NGO Forum on Cambodia; D, J: Mekong Community Institute; E: World Wildlife Fund and others; F: Kachin Development Networking Group; G: International Rivers; H, I, M: Living River Siam Association; K: Shan Women’s Action Network; L: Centre for Social Research and Development.

Figure 4. Proportion of images showing men and women in strong positive emotional states (happy, joyful) or negative emotional states (sad, anxious, stressed, angry), classified by orientation of CSO.

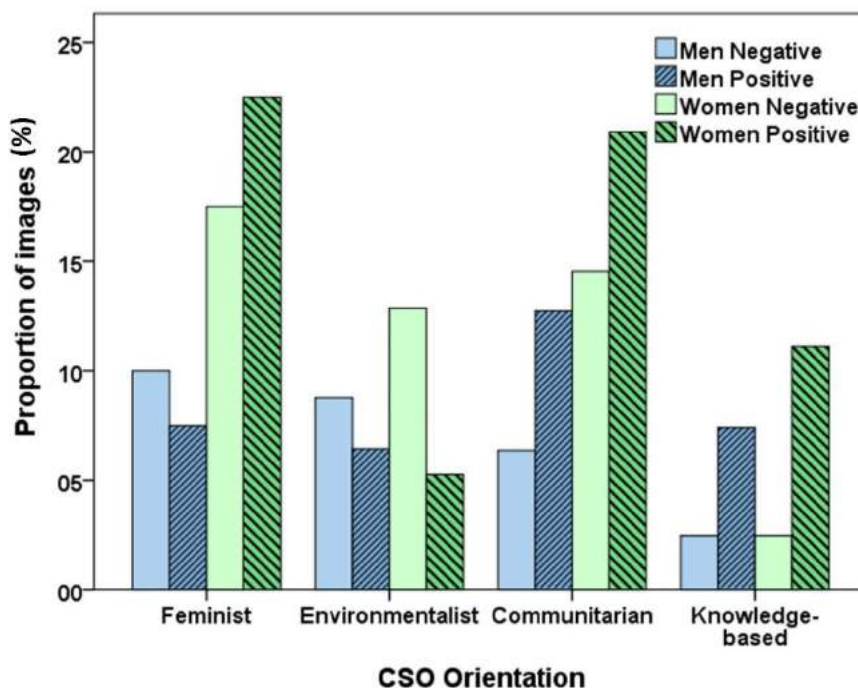
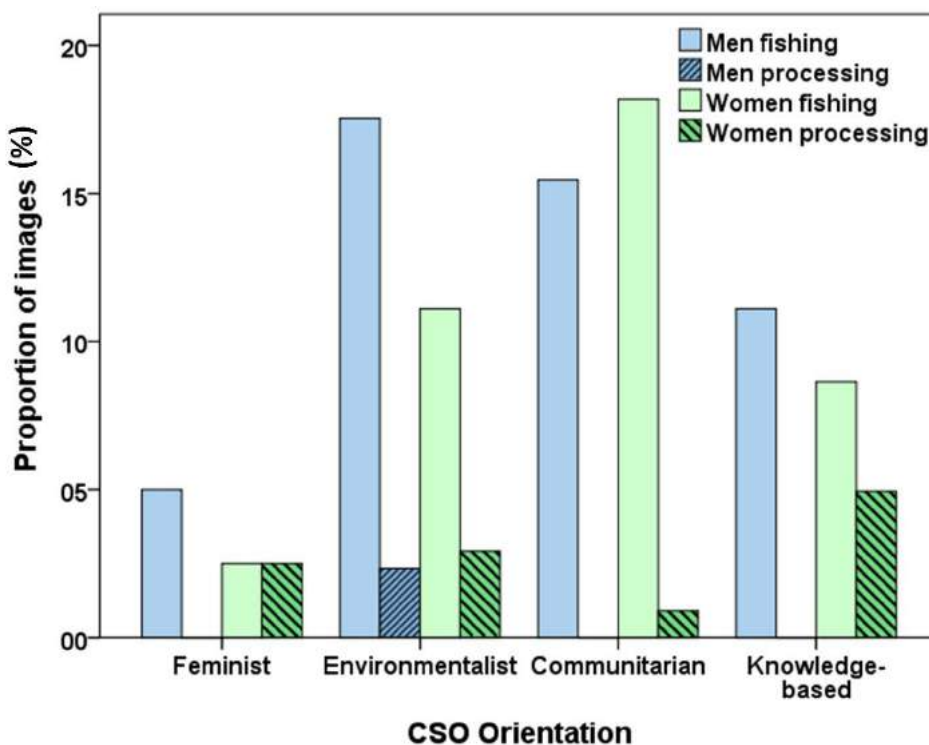


Figure 5. Proportion of images showing men and women fishing or processing (sorting, selling, preparing) fish products, classified by orientation of CSO.



Images used by feminist and communitarian CSOs were more likely to show women expressing stronger emotional states than environmentalist or knowledge-based CSOs (Figure 4). The latter two CSO types often adopt managerial discourses emphasising science and assessment, pushing emotional issues into the background and bringing forward material issues. Emotional appeals are one form of discursive tactic.

Fishing, known to be adversely impacted by large hydropower dams, was one of the most frequently shown outdoor activities. Men were shown fishing more than women in all but communitarian sources, but relatively few men or women were shown fishing in feminist sources (Figure 5). Processing of fish was not common in any source, but when present, involved women more than men.

Representation of women and men in texts

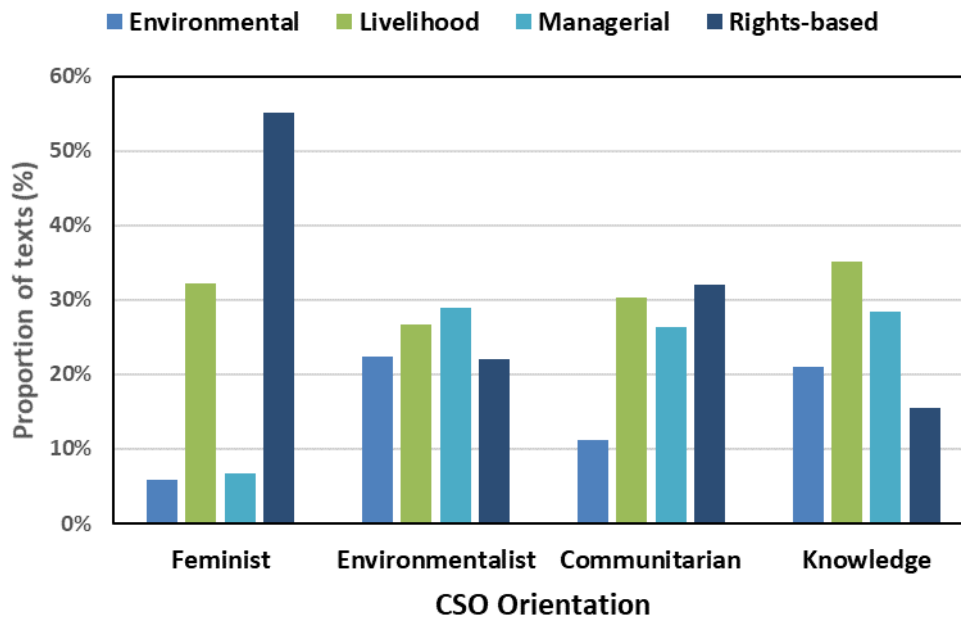
Discursive threads related to the four 'gender in development' discourses described in the literature review were identified in the documents from CSOs in the Mekong Region (Table 2). The thread labels are intended to be read as analytical categories and do not refer to the programs of specific organisations, which may use some of the same terms. The discourses have some elements of narratives, including characters in various roles (e.g. victim, villain) and a plot-like movement from problems to solutions. CSO interventions included activities such as offering training workshops, convening dialogues, advocating and protesting, and doing development work. Looking across discourses (Table 2), an observed shared pattern was that, pre-intervention, women were invisible whereas men were victims or targets, and post-intervention, women were acknowledged, and men had jobs or were informed. Text and image representations followed a similar pre- and post-intervention pattern: after intervention, they contained up-beat text with positive messages, accompanied by images with active people smiling.

Table 2. Examples of common representations of women and men in CSO discourses pre- and post-interventions by CSOs.

Discursive thread	Representation of women		Representation of men	
	Pre-intervention	Post-intervention	Pre-intervention	Post-intervention
Livelihoods and poverty	Invisible food providers	Acknowledged economic agents	Primary food provider	Primary income earner
Natural resources and environment	Ignored natural caretakers	Environmental stewards	Resource user and manager	Labourer
Rights and leadership	Victim or vulnerable; Unaware of rights	Heroes or change agents	Victim or vulnerable; Unaware of rights	Beneficiaries
Managerial	Unaccounted subjects	Assessed and consulted	Household heads to be informed	Informed household heads

As might be expected, CSOs were more likely to use certain discourses depending on their orientations (Figure 6). Thus, rights-based discourses are most common for feminist CSOs, whereas managerial discourses often come from knowledge-based organisations. Livelihood discourses are associated with all CSO types. Some CSOs used more than one type of discourse.

Figure 6. Different types of CSOs make use of different discourses.



Livelihood discourses

Framing

In livelihood discourses, women’s livelihoods and contributions to household security are unrecognised and undermined by hydropower development. CSOs intervene to gain recognition for women’s contributions and to protect and restore existing – or build new – alternative livelihoods for women and men (Table 2). Their interventions thus may challenge dominant economic development discourses.

As food providers, women "are the one who collects the aquatic animals in the river to feed the family", and as a consequence, are impacted more than men when a hydropower dam severs their "attachment to the river and its natural resources" (Thai CSO 2). Many women in Lower Sesan, for example, did not initially want to live in the resettlement site because it is far from their community, and it is harder to "make a living from fishing in the river" or from non-timber products (Cambodian CSO 1). Women are also riverbank gardeners, an activity impacted by hydropower construction and operations (RCC, 2008).

Discursive strategies

Livelihood discourses have been widely used to oppose hydropower projects. The Kachin Development Networking Group in Myanmar, for instance, campaigned against the Myitsone project, emphasising local concerns with environmental and social impacts. It also helped link local and international CSOs through widely disseminated reports in English (KDNG, 2007), which, apart from concerns with fishing and forest products, highlighted the importance of tourism and riverbank gardens for women (Figure 3F).

In the campaign for better compensation for lost fisheries from the Pak Mun Dam (conducted by the Thai NGO Assembly of the Poor) women and men both played prominent roles as protesters, negotiators, and leaders. Women were often in the frontlines – a fact not forgotten in CSO reports (Figure 3M). In protest situations, gender discourses may take unexpected strategic turns, for instance when political roles are woven into traditional gender roles: "Mother is a voluntary cleaner. Gives

medicine to your brothers. Mother makes food for the villagers. Mother is a committee member that enters into negotiations with the government" (Living River Siam, 2012). There is discursive power drawn from being a 'mother' and a leader (Figure 3H). In a low-angle shot, taken near the Xayaburi Dam site in Lao PDR, a woman stands tall and confident, looking directly at the photographer with a smile about to break out, while her family looks on (Figure 3G).

In addition to acknowledging provisioning roles, a few CSO discourses articulated the ways in which women are directly engaged in fishing (Thai CSO 3). By doing so they help to dismantle inaccurate livelihood identities that only recognise men as fishers (see Figure 5). Thus, a photograph in an Oxfam report shows a group of women in Laos fishing with scoop nets (Figure 3B). These texts and images are significant discourse elements, because they challenge the male-dominated composition of fisheries management bodies, and indicate the importance of river access and fishing for women, activities which might be disrupted by dams. At the same time, informants cautioned against overgeneralisations about impacts, as there are important differences across cultures. For instance, in the Pak Mun Dam area women fish a lot as a source of income and food security, whereas in Nam Theun 2 or Lower Sesan sites women "mostly catch fish for home consumption, so the impact is quite different" (Thai CSO 1).

Livelihood discourses were also used by CSOs in campaigns to improve resettlement conditions. Thus, CSO livelihood discourses also point out that while women and men are affected by resettlement, impacts are greater on women because of the multiplication of burdens at the new site. "Women are the main supporters of family life. Every woman knows how to handle food. Women have excellent skills in cooking, collecting, and processing fish", such as drying or making oil (Thai CSO 6). In addition to challenges in providing food for the table, women's responsibilities may expand if their partners must migrate elsewhere for employment. CSOs also note that despite the multiple burdens, "women are often not consulted in decision-making in the home or in their village life" (Vietnam CSO 2).

A very important related impact arising from loss of access to productive resources is that women may no longer be able to earn an income, and thus become even more dependent on the cash income of their husbands. Without an income they lose their bargaining power within the household and their decision-making influence in the community.

Women are very unhappy. They have become increasingly 'invisible' in the resettlement areas; they do not dare tell anyone about their issues; there is no forum where they can talk. They feel ashamed: "the men in the resettlement area are the main income contributor in the family, they have the rights to talk". (CSRD, 2013)

Another involuntary shift is when households with subsistence livelihoods suddenly must change to cash-based livelihoods following resettlement:

This can have different impacts on men and women, depending on their traditional involvement in different sorts of community-based livelihoods in the past, that are perhaps no longer available in the new area (...) they need to adapt to new sorts of activities, often cash-based, and growing different sorts of crops. (International CSO 2)

The impacts of hydropower development on men are also substantial, but are infrequently articulated as a coherent gender discourse. The main claim of proponents is that construction creates job opportunities, and that improved roads and so on will make off-site employment options easier to pursue. In reality, adjusting from local, near-family livelihoods to being away from home for longer periods of time has significant social and mental costs on men and women (Weeratunge et al., 2016). The difficulties faced by men in downstream communities whose fisheries-based livelihoods have been disrupted are rarely considered (Baird and Barney, 2017; Manorom et al., 2017).

CSOs of all orientations make significant use of livelihood discourses (Figure 3). Livelihood discourses are used by development-oriented CSOs to emphasise either hydropower development impacts or the need for post-construction livelihood restoration.

Implications for empowerment

The merit of livelihood discourses for women's empowerment is that they encourage greater exploration of women's contributions to work, food security, and income-generation, which, in turn, are often socially accepted entry points to decision-making roles within households and communities. In the process, they encourage projects to at least assess the gender-specific implications for livelihood systems.

A limitation of livelihood discourses is the risk that they normalise a narrow set of conventional skills as being suitable for women, such as wild-food collection or local income-generating activities. This can lead to reinforcing existing norms and roles rather than increasing the choices available to women (and men). In the case of resettled or otherwise dam-affected peoples, earlier livelihood options may no longer be available, making empowerment dependent on the even riskier promise to create viable new livelihoods for women and men.

Environmental discourses

Framings

In the environmental discourses of CSOs women are natural guardians, and the river is a mother whose true nature has not been recognised. CSOs intervene to correct this omission by recognising women as environmental caretakers (Table 2). Discourse variants focus on intrinsic capacities to manage natural resources, and thus often make links to livelihood discourses as well.

Strategies

Such discourses naturalise and essentialise women as resource managers, reducing them to symbolic and allegorical representations of nature, as opposed to being people with material concerns. One activist invoked a popular image when she told us that women look at the Mun River as an "umbilical cord that connects them to their food source" (Thai CSO 3). The earth, nature, and the Mekong River are each at various times personified as female, often as a mother. The Save the Mekong Coalition, for instance, tells the media that the "Don Sahong Project will irreparably damage the Khone Falls and our mother river, the Mekong", and that to build "hydropower projects in the Mekong basin is to sacrifice Mother Nature" (*The Nation*, 2013). Living River Siam records a fisherman from Chiang Kong, who was visiting the site of the planned Don Sahong Dam in 2009, as being impressed at the abundance of fish, but dismayed that "our mother is being killed" (*The Nation*, 2009). These gendered associations with the river are common in CSO discourses on hydropower development and are used in campaigns, as illustrated by the image in Figure 3D showing protesters from the Mekong Community Institute.

Like many other CSOs, the international NGO Pact believes that "women's participation leads to measurably better outcomes in environmental management" (Pact, 2015). The Mekong Community Institute, which focuses much of its work on the Ing tributary of the Mekong in Northern Thailand, argues that

women have a better understanding and perception of the environment than men because of their motherly instincts as well as nature. This special relationship of women with the basin has been ignored in the past and is a reason for the environmental and social problems women face now (MCI, 2017).

Cover images of reports reinforce this duality of women as both stewards of nature and users or managers of natural resources (Figure 3J). Environment and livelihood discourses are thus strategically linked. Others link the environment to rights discourses. An interviewee from the Center for Water Resources Conservation and Development (WARECOD) believed that women and men both need to participate and that, given current practices and legal frameworks on gender equality, this means that their organisation must actively "advocate for the rights of women's participation in natural resource management". The Gender and Development Institute (GDI) in Myanmar also aims to "raise awareness of importance of women's participation in water governance especially protection of water sources and watershed areas" (Giri, 2016).

Some CSO workers see this gendered environmental identity as a consequence of traditional land tenure systems – in many societies in the Mekong Region it is the wife who owns the land. "Women therefore can be the ones fully responsible for maintaining those resources for the next generations" (Thai CSO 7). Women may of course not really want these roles or the constraints that such socialisation places on their livelihood options or mobility. Urban middle-class environmentalist CSOs approach gender in development in an abstract way, distinct from rural, grassroots organisations that focus on protecting the resources they use (Laungaramsri, 2017).

Implications for empowerment

Evidence from the Mekong Region suggests that environmental discourses empower when they are connected to the experiences of river-based livelihoods and natural resource management, but may not do so when they focus on more distant, middle-class concerns with conservation and environmental protection. The shortcoming of environmental discourses is that by representing women as 'natural' caretakers of the environment, they easily fall into the trap of instrumentalist treatments of gender that multiply women's work burdens. Such discourses are most frequently and strongly articulated by environmental NGOs, but not exclusively so, as some more development-oriented NGOs adopt modest versions of this discourse in order to help argue for improving access or control of natural resources. The degree to which environmentalist discourses contribute to women's empowerment is affected by several factors.

Rights-based discourses

Framing

In rights-based discourses, women's rights are depicted as not well understood by vulnerable and affected people, nor respected by developers. CSOs intervene to improve awareness of rights and to ensure they are respected (Table 2). The Centre for Social Research and Development (CSR/D) in Vietnam argues that the problem in dam-affected communities is "women's very low level of formal education and their ignorance about government processes, Vietnamese laws, the concept of human rights, and, as a result, what options might be available to them to change their poor situation" (CSR/D, 2013). Men, it should be underlined, were also unfamiliar with their rights to negotiate compensation.

Discursive strategies

The preamble of human rights-based discourses thus often represents women as vulnerable or victims. "Within these communities, women suffer the impact of hydropower more than men (...) they are more vulnerable to new social and physical environments when communities are relocated" (Oxfam, 2013). Hydropower dams are seen as creating increased insecurity and risks of sexual assault from the influx of "outside labourers coming in to do construction" (International CSO 2), which may be multiplied by the absence of husbands who are forced to migrate for work as traditional livelihoods are no longer viable. A member of the Mong Pan Youth Association in Myanmar and the regional CSO Weaving Bonds Across

Borders, writes that "large dam projects and increased militarisation are interconnected (...) increased militarisation also means an increase in conflicts and sexual and gender-based violence against ethnic minority women" (Shining, 2017).

The pressures arising from changes in livelihoods and lifestyle, as well as from lack of community cohesion, also "increase the incidence of violence, often at the expense of women" (International CSO 2). Rights to food and health may also be adversely impacted, not just in the resettlement area, but also downstream due to impacts of the dam on fisheries, agriculture, and water quality. Given the multitude of sources of insecurity in this post-settlement situation, it is not surprising that women are portrayed as insecure. Thus, in Figure 3A, we are shown a young vulnerable-looking mother with an infant on her back looking down upon a physically imposing dam construction site.

CSRD explains that the huge burdens on women stemming from a male-dominated hydropower industry reflect the fact that "women's rights and interests are undervalued in the Vietnamese patriarchy culture" (Vietnam CSO 2). Likewise, in Myanmar, as "women hardly participate in sociopolitical activities, this becomes a barrier to women's rights". This has led a CSO representative to conclude that the "Mong Ton Dam project in Shan State (...) is not worth the trade-off of security and rights of girls and women in exchange for electricity in the name of development" (Shining, 2017).

The Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) is confident that training can be effective in raising awareness of rights. From their experience, they believe that this leads to collective action and longer-term benefits to women.

After the training, the people from the CSO come back, go back to their communities, and organize women meetings with only women (...) you see that women, after just one or two meetings, they feel empowered, they feel grateful to learn that, actually, I have human rights as well, and as a woman it's my responsibility to voice them out. (International CSO 1)

CSOs active in raising awareness of women's rights document their activities on websites and reports, often using images of women in a group, enjoying themselves as they draw maps, read to each other or act out role-playing games (Figure 3K), as well as ethnic minority women who are photographed in traditional dress (Figure 3L). These images underline that CSO texts are made for different or multiple purposes, like supporting campaigns or reporting activities to donors. CSOs with a feminist orientation often adopt elements of rights-based discourse (Figure 5) and use images of active women (Figure 2).

An IUCN-SEI-Oxfam workshop concluded that it is important for men and women to have a good understanding of gender in water governance, otherwise "men and women don't have equal rights in water management" (Giri, 2016). An SEI report underlined how land and water rights are "potential entry points for integrating gender with environmental concerns" (Resurrección and Nguyen, 2015).

CSOs working in oppositional mode to dams also draw upon rights discourses, but tend to focus more on the rights violations of development rather than how rights might be strengthened. Large dam projects in Lao PDR are opposed by iMekong because they "harm the environment, forcibly displace communities, impoverish families, and threaten many people's human rights. (...) Real development does not violate human rights".

The report by iMekong contains images of Lao women collecting aquatic organisms and using boats to travel and fish "along the Mekong River as the ultimate source of life and food sources", thus linking rights-based and livelihood discourses. A representative of Oxfam Myanmar commented that government dam projects had disproportionate impacts on women who normally take water from rivers, as "these situations arise because they [women] don't think that they have any rights (...). Men aren't the only ones that have a right to lead. Women are important for decision-making on every level including access to water" (Riley and Dodson, 2016).

In situations where CSOs have had to concede to a hydropower project going ahead, strategies shift. One CSO in Lao PDR sought ways to make sure that the project respected "the rights and interests of

women", and ensured that "equitable benefits accrue to both" men and women (Weeratunge et al., 2016). Benefits such as joint ownership of new land and houses could contribute to more equal gender relations (Simon, 2013). Another CSO in China aimed to ensure that hydropower planning does "not exacerbate gender inequalities" and "avoids violations of women's human rights" (Yee, 2016). These latter aims are relatively unambitious with respect to women's empowerment.

Implications for empowerment

The merit of rights discourses is that they can draw on legal and policy commitments. International CSOs have found rights-based discourses useful in justifying training and awareness-raising interventions; and have then successfully transferred their knowledge and tactics to domestic NGOs. One of the limitations of rights-based discourses is that it places too much emphasis on representing women as victims or vulnerable; thus, while they generate sympathy, they also normalise women's lack of agency, leading to programs 'for' rather than 'with' or 'by' affected women.

Managerial discourses

Framings

In managerial discourses, women's empowerment is hindered by a lack of consultation with women, a lack of gender-disaggregated information, and the absence of gender-sensitive planning. Women who are overlooked pre-intervention, afterwards are counted and their needs assessed (Table 2). Men and women who are initially uninformed, are, post-intervention, informed about projects. In managerial discourses, many CSOs tended to treat gender issues and women's empowerment as problems that can be addressed with frameworks, assessments, tools, and plans.

The basic premise underpinning this is that by ensuring that women and men are equally heard, and their interests and rights are considered, there will be an avoidance or minimisation of negative impacts on women. Meaningful participation in processes and decision-making is key to this. (OXFAM, 2014)

Discursive strategies

International NGOs with experience working with governments and companies often adopt a managerial discourse. In situations where NGOs are looking for entry points within the state apparatus and its procedures, managerial discourses can be useful as they are less threatening to the state.

We have a check list in the EIA [Environmental Impact Assessment] for public participation which also mentions gender, so we can bring our gender in hydropower tool into the EIA guideline on public participation. This way we immediately have very close cooperation with the department responsible for EIA in the ministry of environment. (Cambodian CSO 1)

CSOs often start by looking at numbers. They argue for expanding participation of women in hydropower-related debates so that their voices are more likely to be heard (Lebel et al., 2018). Some also commit to making changes to their own practices. MyVillage, for instance, adopted a policy that at least 40 percent of participants in activities and committees must be women. Of course, it is not only about quotas. According to them, "[g]ender is a mindset, it's not just about counting women and men, in a particular context. It's not just bringing women in, but in the first place actually interrogating what actually causes this disparity, what actually causes this exclusion" (International CSO 1).

Improving public participation of women in decision-making is another common instrument that many CSOs hope will help deal with often poor outcomes for women from hydropower projects. Thus, according to a research fellow with the Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business, large-scale hydropower development should be under the framework of the internationally recognized principle of

Free Prior Informed Consent, and "the government must ensure mainstreaming women's participation in every process, and link up with other programs and activities at state and regional level that develop women's capacity" (Yee, 2017). This conclusion is based on the observation that women "often lack the self-confidence in their own abilities and knowledge to actively participate in village meetings that include decision-making on community affairs such as water resource management" (Yee, 2017).

In the Mekong Region, repression of dissenting voices is common, and direct repression can help explain the cautious tactics of grassroots CSOs to empower men and women in their communities. In Nujiang, "local authorities have used police monitoring and intimidation to ensure that these predominantly ethnic minority and grassroots communities do not speak publicly at all about the project" (Nakaddy, 2016).

Likewise in Tachilek, Myanmar, project developers cancelled public consultations and just met with government officials to avoid having to deal with community protests against the Mong Ton Dam (SSEO, 2015). CSOs are also trying to find other ways, apart from lobbying, to influence how private sector actors do their work. In these situations, discourses may need to be modified in other ways to attract attention and potentially influence private actors. Oxfam explains their Gender Impact Assessment (GIA) tool as follows:

This manual is written to promote stronger consideration of gender in hydropower development. The aim is that this manual will assist hydropower company staff in their day-to-day jobs for assessing impacts and managing risk in hydropower development. In doing so, it should inform decision-making and implementation of hydropower dam projects – so that impacts, rights and opportunities are considered equally for women and men. (Simon, 2013)

In 2015, for example, the Lao Women's Union and Oxfam conducted initial studies in villages affected by the Nam Lik 1-2 and the Theun Hinboun hydropower projects. "The aim was to gather information as a baseline. We also aimed to build our partners' skills to conduct a gender analysis, identify impacts, and learn together about how to use and adapt the tools in the GIA Manual" (Hill et al., 2017). Depending on the findings of the GIA, civil society organisations recognise that they may need to change roles from facilitation to being advocates "for the rights and strategic and practical needs of women and men" (Hill et al., 2017). Managerial and rights-based discourses were thus combined by CSO proponents of the GIA process, which helped legitimise their engagement with hydropower developers, in addition to increasing capacity within the Lao government for gender analysis and assessment.

Implications for empowerment

For CSOs, the merit of the managerial discourses is that they are likely to be more acceptable to bureaucracies and firms, and thus more influential or at least open the door for other messages on, for instance, the value of consulting women – not just male household heads – and the need to consider the ways in which impacts, burdens, and benefits may not be distributed equally among women and men.

By rendering gender as a technical problem, managerial discourses tend to eliminate the need to consider the role of power structures in creating gender inequalities. Several CSOs with established gender-sensitive policies and programs felt that donor money was 'inducing' gender work. The implication is that the motivation for CSOs to include gender more explicitly in their organisations' policies and activities with respect to hydropower is, in part,

because of funding requirement from the donors. Many NGOs are still working on what that means, how to do it meaningfully, and I think similarly as with companies, probably ticking boxes, rather than thinking at all strategically about the work that the NGO is involved in. (International CSO 2)

DISCUSSION

CSOs engaged with hydropower development in the Mekong Region, by talking about gender and dam-affected people in certain ways, help normalise ideas about the roles of women and men. When CSOs recognise women as fishers, food providers, and income earners, for instance, they help improve their bargaining power within the household and their authority in the community. This is particularly important for women in resettlements and downstream communities, whose river-related livelihoods are disrupted by dam construction and operations (Baird and Quastel, 2015). When CSOs challenge existing social norms, like women taking on roles of protest leaders or negotiators, they disrupt a socialisation process that otherwise leaves women expecting to be second-class citizens with caretaking roles, confined to the home and to the livelihood activities in their immediate vicinity.

When a CSO campaign posits rivers as mothers or women as mothers of the river, they are playing to public perceptions of environmental identities. A decade ago Leach (2007) tentatively concluded that "the discourse of women as natural environmental carers had its day, but that day has passed". In the Mekong Region, the ecofeminist myth persists, in part, because CSOs have found that such representations still carry weight in local media. This specific discourse is problematic in that it excludes the possibility of men caring for the environment or assumes that all women do so (Leach, 1992). The work of Earle and Bazilli (2013) in South Africa suggests that the discourses around "the hydraulic mission" remain masculinised and that, as a result, transboundary water management is not gender-sensitive. In the Mekong Region, while rivers are feminised as mothers, their actual management for irrigation or hydropower is not.

The four stylised discourses distinguished in this study (Table 1) – themselves simplifications – serve to illustrate how representations of women and men are a product of social factors and power relations, and how these can have intended and inadvertent consequences for empowerment. In livelihood security discourses, for example, it is common to praise women's heroic efforts to hold households together in times of adversity, as also observed after a cyclone disaster in the Philippines (Tanyag, 2018). This argument is then used to lessen the responsibilities of the state. On the one hand, this recognition may be an entry point for efforts to expand agency in the household and community; on the other hand, it can be a justification for strengthening existing roles in the family through additional income-generating or food-provisioning livelihood activities. Similarly, in environmental discourses, women are unrecognised but highly skilled natural resource managers whose burdens multiply, while the contributions of men to environmental management are often ignored. In rights-based discourses, women are frequently depicted as unfairly vulnerable to the impacts of development projects. Making these impacts visible is important to having them addressed by those responsible, however an overemphasis on women-as-victim may undermine agency even as it generates empathy. By contrast, in managerial discourses, CSOs work with other stakeholders to make planning more gender-sensitive and, in doing so, tend to defuse political questions around control and access of resources, that is, "rendering [them] technical" (Li, 2010).

Empowerment is rarely a linear, straightforward process, and it is not easy to directly detect the influence of CSO discourses on this progress towards empowerment. Nevertheless, this study identified significant instances of discursive power being exercised successfully. For instance, the Government of Laos responded positively to calls for an expansion of gender analysis and assessment in its decision process for hydropower projects. In Vietnam, CSOs adopting a rights-based discourse expanded access to legal resources by dam-affected villagers. In Thailand, CSOs combined environmental and women's livelihood discourses to alter management operations of a dam. In Cambodia, threats to fishing and riverbank gardening livelihoods of women that had been ignored, were now recognised and taken into account in development plans. As discussed above, there were also many instances where discursive strategies, especially those which simplified gender or rendered it technical, created obstacles to empowerment.

The representations of gender in the 'gender in development' discourses of CSOs are, in part, an outcome of and reaction to, the patriarchal culture in the Mekong Region. One aspect of this is that gender in development is often understood by CSOs to be about working with women on issues important to them, rather than more directly tackling gender relations, social norms or men's attitudes. In some ways this has produced a situation where men still control what space is made available to women by CSO interventions (Lebel et al., 2018).

The way CSOs position themselves between the state and the communities concerned with the negative impacts of a project, has implications for how gender in development discourses are deployed. As a 'defender' of the community, CSOs choose to depict women and men in the community as victims, but in other cases they are portrayed as determined, heroic opponents of the project. As a 'bridge' between developers and residents, CSOs may train and support women and men from the community as negotiators or may take it upon themselves to represent the community (Pillay, 2003). The difficulty for CSOs who take on bridge roles is to maintain some level of independence, and not become servant-consultants of the state (Alvarez, 1999). Small grassroots community organisations are most likely to act as defenders and to articulate livelihood discourses, whereas big international NGOs take on bridge roles and adopt rights-based or managerial discourses. As a 'substitute' doing work that the state should do, but does not, CSOs may consult women, they may assess gender-specific impacts and needs or they may mobilise women's labour to mitigate negative impacts. Substitute roles are more likely to be handled by larger domestic NGOs. The transparency with which such roles are undertaken is critical. In the Lower Sesan 2 Hydropower Project in northeastern Cambodia, non-governmental organisations, supposedly in their role as a bridge, worked with the state to seek better compensation, while villagers themselves opposed the project outright and were more interested in advocating for project cancellation than the negotiations which the NGOs pursued on their 'behalf' (Baird, 2016).

These observations underline how the discursive strategies of CSOs are context specific and contingent. In dealing with conservative social norms and skewed power relations, CSOs may resort to a strategy of introducing gender by 'stealth', whereby the aim is to exploit entry points in existing practices and procedures to empower women without labelling it as such, for instance as CSR did in building skills in the community to negotiate with officials on land rights issues (Singer et al., 2014). In moving from pre- to post-construction phases of a dam, CSOs motivated to oppose a hydropower project because of concerns about environmental impacts, may find they have to hand over the task to others more conversant with livelihood discourses, in order to support recovery and replacement projects or emphasise rights to help affected people negotiate better compensation and sharing of benefits from electricity production. The fact that many CSOs are in coalition or network arrangements with other organisations (e.g. Save the Mekong, River Coalition Cambodia) makes strategic 'hand-offs' plausible. It is not clear, however, to what extent such practices are pursued.

The findings of this study are a significant contribution to the understanding of emerging gender in development discourses in the case of hydropower. They show, for example, that CSOs are able, up to a point, to mix and match discourses to increase chances of influence, and to maintain their relevance and fundability (Eichert, 2014; DeJaeghere and Wiger, 2013). NGOs are organised in 'food-chains' in which there may be several links between donors and local organisations that actually implement trainings and other activities, often using village volunteers (Watkins et al., 2012). The similarities of global discourses to discursive threads in the Mekong Region hydropower development debate show that discourses 'travel' among academia, intergovernmental bodies, national governments, and CSOs; the culture and livelihood specifics also suggest 'translation' (Mukhtarov, 2014) of key concepts to fit existing beliefs and norms (Narayanaswamy, 2016). Historically, CSOs in the Mekong Region concerned with environment have largely ignored gender, while those focused on women's empowerment have not emphasised the environment (Resurrección and Nguyen, 2015; Laungaramsri, 2017). Experiences in the Mekong Region also fit with perspectives on gender that are multifaceted and dynamic; in real life,

gender is complex and interacts strongly with other social categories (Cornwall et al., 2007; Nightingale, 2011; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

This study examined the discourses of many organisations, but none in much depth. It gives a sense of the range of discursive strategies of CSOs in different situations pre-construction and post-settlement. It allowed some comparisons that studying a single organisation would not allow, for instance, an examination of the influence of overall orientation on discursive strategies. In-depth anthropological studies of CSOs, however, would provide a much more nuanced understanding of motivations, as well as of how individual leaders, power relations, and other social factors like organisational cultures or norms matter. Attention to history, and the travel or translation of gender in development discourses across intergovernmental bodies and national governments, would give a much more complete picture of their influence, as well as a better understanding of CSO strategies. Further work on these areas is encouraged.

The findings of this study suggest some practical questions for CSOs, starting with motivation.

First, CSOs face multiple pressures and have different goals and capabilities with respect to gender. Donors' expectations may lead to 'ticking the boxes' (Collins, 2018), and may help explain why, when it comes to empowerment, achievements on paper often do not match progress on the ground (Cornwall, 1997). In supporting women's leadership, for example, there may be a disjuncture between the objectives and activities in the community of a gender-sensitive funded project and 'normal' workplace or professional practices (Lebel et al., 2018; Narayanaswamy, 2016). CSOs should ask: *Why are we paying attention to gender in our work?*

Second, gender as a category or as a process is not stable, nor is it a sufficient base for strategic efforts to empower dam-affected peoples. The often large differences in choices that poor and wealthier women have, and the additional obstacles faced by ethnic minorities, should not be ignored (Nightingale, 2011; Weeratunge et al., 2016; Manorom et al., 2017). Strategies should be based on understanding the causes of inequality (Resurrección, 2013; Cornwall et al., 2007; Butler, 2010). CSOs should ask: *Are we assuming innate and fixed gender differences?*

Third, to deal with the multiple state and private actors who are involved at different scales in hydropower development, CSOs need to be prepared to counter or use different discursive strategies, some of which they are familiar and others which may demand new skills (DeJaeghere and Wiger, 2013). Simplifying how gender is represented might seem strategic in garnering support, but such simplifications can also distort the understanding of the obstacles to empowerment. CSOs should ask: *How is our ideological orientation influencing our discursive strategies?*

Fourth, taking on roles on behalf of other stakeholders, women and men, requires that issues of transparency and integrity be examined from an ethical perspective, and clarified to others (Pillay, 2003). Carrying out consultancy work for project developers, private or public, can greatly constrain or even bias what issues may be studied, and which analyses can be shared, including assumptions about gender roles. As CSOs work to hold other stakeholders accountable (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015), they need to also turn the representation lens on themselves. CSOs should ask: *What is our position with respect to affected communities, project developers, and state organisations?*

Fifth, given the frequency of inadvertent effects (Chant, 2008), and the complexity of gender and its interaction with other social categories (Nightingale, 2011), CSOs could adopt more reflexive practices, in which they assess the consequences of their own research and discursive strategies on outcomes such as empowerment (Martin, 2006). CSOs should ask: *What have we learnt about the effects of our work?*

In conclusion, the 'gender in development' discourses of CSOs engaged in Mekong Region hydropower development can be loosely grouped into those concerned with rights, livelihoods, environment, and management. These discourses, often in reaction to neglect by project developers, represent women as being initially vulnerable or invisible, but whom, through the interventions of

CSOs, may become active and visible agents. The discursive strategies of CSOs vary with their organisational orientations towards development, gender, and the environment, as well as with their positions with respect to the state and dam-affected communities. The influence of these strategies on empowerment is rarely direct or straightforward. Nevertheless, there are many shared questions that CSOs can ask of their own work if they want to be more effective at empowering women.

APPENDIX

Table A1. Selected CSOs. Asterisk (*) indicates CSO representative was interviewed.

CSO	Location (scope)	Type	Nos. Documents Referring	Nos. Images
3S Rivers Protection Network (3SPN)	Cambodia	Environmentalism	19	2
Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD)*	Thailand (International)	Feminist	8	5
Assembly of the Poor	Thailand	Communitarian	15	0
Burma Rivers Network	Myanmar	Environmentalism	2	0
Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI)*	Cambodia	Knowledge-based	6	0
Centre for Promotion of Integrated Water Resources Management (CIWAREM)*	Vietnam	Environmentalism	4	0
Center for Social Development Studies (CSDS)	Thailand (International)	Knowledge-based	7	4
Centre for Social Research and Development (CSR)*	Vietnam	Communitarian	19	6
Chiang Khong Mekong School on Local Knowledge *	Thailand	Communitarian	3	0
CLICK Laos *	Laos	Communitarian	1	0
Community Resource Centre *	Thailand	Communitarian	1	0
Conservation International	International	Environmentalism	6	0
Culture and Environment Preservation Association *	Cambodia	Communitarian	2	1
Earthrights International *	Thailand (International)	Environmentalism	12	0
EcoDev *	Myanmar	Knowledge-based	2	0
Fisheries Action Coalition Team*	Cambodia	Communitarian	13	2
Focus on the Global South	International	Communitarian	4	0
Forum Syd	Cambodia	Communitarian	4	3
Gender and Development for Cambodia	Cambodia	Feminist	3	6

Gender and Development Institute	Myanmar	Feminist	5	0
Gender Equality Network	Myanmar	Feminist	2	8
Gender in Aquaculture and Fisheries	International	Feminist	1	1
Global Association for People and the Environment*	Laos	Environmentalism	3	23
Global Witness	International	Environmentalism	4	0
Greater Mekong Resource Center	Thailand	Environmentalism	2	1
Green Innovation and Development Centre (GreenId)*	Vietnam	Environmentalism	11	1
Green Watershed	China	Environmentalism	5	3
Indigenous Women's Network of Thailand (IWNT)	Thailand	Feminist	2	3
iMekong*	Thailand	Communitarian	5	16
International Rivers Network*	International	Environmentalism	19	10
IUCN* (Mekong)	Thailand (International)	Environmentalism	35	16
IWMI	Laos (International)	Knowledge-based	18	0
Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN)	Myanmar	Environmentalism	2	3
Karen Rivers Watch	Myanmar	Environmentalism	3	0
Living River Siam (SEARIN)	Thailand	Environmentalism	13	24
Mekong Community Institute*	Thailand	Communitarian	3	3
Mekong Eye	International	Environmentalism	1	7
Mekong Fish Network	International	Environmentalism	0	12
Mekong Sub-region Social Research Centre (MSSRC)	Thailand	Knowledge-based	4	2
Mekong Watch	International	Environmentalism	9	17
M-POWER	Thailand (International)	Knowledge-based	13	17
Myanmar Environment Institute (MEI)	Myanmar	Environmentalism	8	0
MyMekong	Thailand	Environmentalism	4	4
MyVillage (MVi)*	Cambodia	Communitarian	5	3
National University of Laos (NUOL)*	Laos	Knowledge-based	13	0
NGO Forum*	Cambodia	Communitarian	37	26
Northeastern Rural Development Organization (NRD)*	Cambodia	Communitarian	2	3
Open Development Cambodia	Cambodia	Communitarian	2	0

Oxfam (Mekong Region)*	International	Communitarian	66	22
Pact (Mekong Partnership)	International	Environmentalist	7	6
PanNature*	Vietnam	Environmentalist	8	11
The Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD)	Thailand	Knowledge-based	7	0
Rivers Coalition in Cambodia (RCC)	Cambodia	Communitarian	19	3
Save the Mekong Coalition	International	Environmentalist	11	0
Sustainable Development Foundation (SDF)	Thailand	Environmentalist	1	0
Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI)*	Thailand (International)	Knowledge-based	13	1
Shan Sapawa Environmental Organization	Myanmar	Environmentalist	7	0
Shan Women's Action Network	Myanmar	Feminist	15	10
The Sustainable Mekong Research Network (SUMERNET)	Thailand (International)	Knowledge-based	11	4
Thai Mekong People's Network in Eight Provinces*	Thailand	Environmentalist	3	0
TERRA – Towards Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance/Foundation for Ecological Recovery *	Thailand	Environmentalist	23	3
Village Focus International (VFI)	Laos	Communitarian	1	2
WARECOD – Center for Water Resources Conservation and Development*	Vietnam	Environmentalist	15	5
Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE)	Laos (International)	Knowledge-based	6	8
WOCAN Mekong	International	Feminist	4	1
World Agroforestry Centre*	China (International)	Knowledge-based	3	0
World Fish	Cambodia (International)	Knowledge-based	10	2
WWF (Mekong)	International	Environmentalist	34	7

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