

# BREAKING THROUGH HER CHALLENGES

WOMEN LEADERS PROFILE



# FORWARD



**D**uring the current Worldwide COVID-19 crisis Women's Leadership in all spheres- Political, Economic -, Household and in the Community-has never been more important. Women's unpaid care burden has increased significantly, women have reduced access to maternal and reproductive health, their livelihoods are threatened, and they are exposed to greater risk of experiencing violence in their homes due to lock down conditions.

Throughout the Mekong region countries are undergoing rapid social and economic development with significant implications for the relations between women and men, land and water usage and access to and equal distribution of the benefits from development. While many advances for women have been made including in health and education, there remains significant ongoing disparity between women and men with women highly underrepresented in public decision making and less likely to have a voice.


These challenges make it even more inspiring to read the stories and see the images of the remarkable women who are part of this Women Leaders Profile. These women are uniting previously disenfranchised communities, accelerating positive development outcomes for everyone, and contributing to the achievement of gender equality and the protection of our natural environment. They are shaping local, national, and regional change in innovative ways and are demonstrating collaborative leadership in action-uniting people toward common goals and providing us with role models for inclusive leadership.

Celebrating women and recognizing them as powerful agents for change and identifying the benefits of diversity in leadership are critical to ensuring justice in water governance. When women are meaningfully engaged, decisions are more likely to take diverse views into account. Women are the ones using and managing water day to day- when they have a voice in water governance their communities get better outcomes-including better-functioning water systems, expanded access, and economic and environmental benefits.

The women represented in these profiles challenge our unconscious biases about the role and capability of women and provide a pathway to think in new and deep ways about people and our environment.

As increasing water demand and climate change lead to higher rates of water scarcity and conflict, water governance is becoming an increasingly urgent issue and these women are helping to create a fair and just way forward. When water is fairly governed, we are all more resilient to disasters like COVID-19. Increasing women's leadership locally, nationally and internationally benefits everyone.

**"THE WOMEN REPRESENTED IN THESE PROFILES CHALLENGE OUR UNCONSCIOUS BIASES ABOUT THE ROLE AND CAPABILITY OF WOMEN AND PROVIDE A PATHWAY TO THINK IN NEW AND DEEP WAYS ABOUT PEOPLE AND OUR ENVIRONMENT,"**  
**DONNA MCSKIMMING, REGIONAL PROGRAM MANAGER, OXFAM ASIA**

A woman wearing a traditional conical hat and a dark jacket with a logo, working in a field. The background shows a green field with some trees and a small white structure in the distance.

**"BUT WITH OR WITHOUT SUPPORT  
FROM DONORS, I STILL WOULD LIKE TO  
ENCOURAGE THE YOUNGER GENERATIONS  
TO FIND BETTER AND MORE SUSTAINABLE  
FORMS OF LIVELIHOOD OTHER THAN  
RELYING ON FISHING AND THE RIVER AS  
MAIN SOURCE OF INCOME"**

Atheena Sengmanivanh, 33, Farmer  
and Finance Coordinator for the Farmers Group,  
living in Don Sehong village, Champassak province, LAO PDR



# LIVELIHOOD ALTERNATIVES TO HELP LEVERAGE INCOME GENERATION

For billions around the world, water is a crucial resource for survival, not only for drinking or cooking but for a whole host of other conventional uses. Atheena Sengmanivanh is hoping that the water level of the Mekong River along her community will return to normal, as many villagers rely on it, yet the wait seems hopeless to her and everyone in the village.

Atheena, 33, is from a farming family and is married with two children. They live in Don Sehong village, Champassak province, Lao PDR. Her husband, as head of the family, works for the Don Sehong Hydropower Company to support the family.

Most of the people in her village are farmers, and their main source of income generation relies on the Mekong River for food and as a main route for transportation. However, in recent years the river has changed with the gradually shallower water leading to many issues such as landslide, flood and other disasters, especially for those who live along the riverbank.

Don Sehong Dam is one of the large-scale hydroelectric dams recently commissioned on the Mekong River in the Siphandone area of Champassak province, Lao PDR, less than two kilometres upstream of the Laos-Cambodia border. The dam is over 22 metres high with a capacity to generate 260 MW.

The dam project has created many issues for the communities and people living along the river. The environmental impact has impeded fish migration as it is the only channel within the Khone Falls complex passable to migratory fish in the dry season, and the major migration channel year-round. The dam project has also posed a major threat to the Mekong River's critically endangered population of the Irrawaddy dolphins – the only remaining dolphin population in Lao PDR. Other impacts include the long-term effects of disturbance and stress on animal life, and the demographic consequences of communities affected by floods and other natural disasters.

As a mother, housewife, and farmer, Atheena is trying to balance her time between the household work and the community to mobilise livelihood alternatives to help generate additional family income. She decided to become more involved in community development work because she could not stand seeing her community facing increasing difficulties and unsustainable income generation due to the impact of the dam development and the change in the river's water level.

Atheena took part in the Farmer's Group, supporting her community as a women's leader. The group was seeking ways to tackle the low water level by advocating and engaging with local authorities. However, they felt that

the way forward provided by the local authorities and the government was not clear, and that it lacked tangible positive outcomes.

They shifted focus from trying to stop the dam project as their team is not knowledgeable on the policies and regulations or laws governing the impact of the dam project, and therefore lacked a strategy to negotiate with the company.

Instead, Atheena has tried to engage in various activities, and attended numerous meetings, workshops and training events to gain more knowledge about agriculture, animal raising, and modelling for agriculture. She also learned about business management and marketing, promoting products commercially, and other related skills. Her self-education has helped her realise that many opportunities that can be created and applied in her village. She then shared these lessons learned with her community.

As a member of the Farmer's Group, Atheena mobilises and encourages her community members to work harder on agriculture rather than relying on and waiting for their government to help address the impact of the dam construction. "Agriculture, such as raising animals, as a livelihood alternative is one of the options for the

villagers," she said.

Gradually, more people started engaging in the initiative. Soon she could see that families in the village – including her own – could generate more income to support their households from these livelihood practices, and also manage to send their children to school.

Even though their lives have improved from this effort, there remain issues and concerns over start-up capital as many villagers are still poor and struggling. She hopes that support from donors and development partners will help provide technical knowledge and fund seed capital to improve their business concepts, for example, raising ducks and profitable enterprises. But setting up a business requires a budget and expertise to ensure that the farm operates smoothly.

"But with or without support from donors, I still would like to encourage the younger generations to find better and more sustainable forms of livelihood other than relying on fishing and the river as the main source of income," she said.



**PERSISTENCE IS THE DRIVING FORCE TO REACH  
YOUR GOAL: WOMAN IN LEADERSHIP ROLE IN THE  
PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SECTORS**

Dam Chanthy, 65, Tumpoun indigenous group,  
Director of Khmer Leu or Highlander Association (HA),  
living in Talao commune, Andong Meas district, Ratanakiri province



## **"NO PAIN, NO GAIN. PERSEVERANCE IS THE DRIVING FORCE TO REACH YOUR DREAM OR GOAL"**

No pain, no gain. "I believe that being honest, committed, transparent and accountable on what we are doing will help us achieve our dreams. In my case, I will never give up my dream of being a community leader even though I have received death threats many times, and I am still working to exert influence for the benefit of my Indigenous People communities," said Ms Chanthy Dam.

Born in 1955 in the Tampuan indigenous group of Talao commune, Andong Meas district, Ratanakiri province, Chanthy was raised in a poor rural family that depended primarily on traditional cultivation such as rice planting and wild vegetables. She is married to Luong Sothea and they have six children together.

Her life has been punctuated by suffering. She learned how to overcome stress and challenges since when she was a child, working as a domestic worker in a rich family, and then the Khmer Rouge regime dominated life in the kingdom. During that time, she was assigned as a medical worker. Later, after the regime was displaced, she was involved in work as a member of a women's association and then worked for various organisations and projects as a translator and as a focal point on gender and health issues.

Her dream to function in a leadership role since she was young led her to establish her own organisation called the Highlander Association (HA) in 2000. The main focus of the organisation is to help Indigenous People (IP) communities and especially women and youth.

More recently, she has been very active in leading communities to claim their rights and has received extensive support from her IP communities, development partners, and the international community. Her major advocacy work includes issues on land grabbing, hydropower dam projects – the effect of the Yali Dam project, the Mekong river and the Sesan river protection – and many more issues on natural resources management and rights of IP communities.

"I remember those times when we were working so hard running educational campaigns for the IP communities in 18 communes to encourage them not to sell their land to outsiders. It was really stressful and hectic with immense land grabbing issues but at least we could manage to reclaim some land for the Veat Kloe and Chhroung communities," said Chanthy.

She is known by her devotion and advocacy work on

behalf of IP communities. She met with leaders of relevant political parties, line ministries and provinces to advocate, lobby and address any confusion and misunderstanding or tension over her organisation's work.

As a leader, she has faced countless issues and risks, including being accused of being politically involved in the opposition party, intimidated because of her engagement with IP communities in relation to big land concessions and other economic land concessions, and the threat of closure of her organisation due to new laws and regulations such as the nation's new NGO law.

She has helped many IP youth and women. She was born to be a leader for her IP communities. She believes that sharing is everything; she teaches and shares her knowledge, what she learned from partner organisations with her IP communities, and experience of working with her IP communities with local and national governments and organisations.

To avoid counterproductive decisions and actions, Chanthy always follows government rules and regulations. She said, "I always consult my board of directors and

development partners before engaging the government and before any measure or advocacy action is taken."

The government has specific quotas for women as political leaders at all levels, including serving as female village chiefs, women governors and ministers. With the recognition of the government constitution of diverse cultures and national policies on promotion of women in leadership in both public and private sectors, she hopes that more women will self-improve and engage in development and leadership roles regardless of the challenges.

"While I hope both the government and all the local and international organisations and donors will continue supporting and promoting the practice of women's leadership at workplaces and in duties, I would like to encourage all the women, especially rural and IP communities, to keep learning and helping one another, and dare to voice your concerns so that you will find a place you wish for and belong to. Do not stop your dreams," said Chanthy.



## ADVOCACY FOR A BETTER COMMUNITY – LEADERSHIP DOES NOT ONLY COME FROM ACADEMIC EDUCATION

“You cannot choose life and where you were born. But you can choose what you love to do, for your community, your family, and yourself,” said a young, courageous, and energetic advocate En Chin.

Having a Khmer father and Broa ethnic mother, En Chin, 25, has six siblings. All of them live in Sre Sronok village, Kbal Romean commune, Sesan district, Stung Treng province. Her father is the head of the household, working as a deputy chief of commune. Because of family poverty and the fact that school is so far away from home, she only finished grade four but manages to read and write Khmer.

Even though education in Cambodia has been continuously improving, many Cambodian children – especially those in remote areas – continue to fall behind in school for a number of reasons, including financial problems, school location, and lack of support from their family to continue studying. This is particularly challenging for female children, as some parents believe that it is not important for daughters to get higher education.

Since 2015 after dropped out of school, Chin started doing volunteer work in her community supporting such organisations as 2SPN, Oxfam, ADHOC, and NGO Forum, who help and raise awareness on issues related to commune safety, livelihoods, and other community-based concerns.

“I am chasing my dream without knowing if I will succeed. I am chasing it with my limited knowledge and low level of education, and I am chasing it to help my community,” Chin said.

Chin is strong and enthusiastic in protecting her community; passionate and eager to change the situation and bring a positive impact to her community for better livelihood and environment. She became an

active advocate on the Lower Sesan II Dam construction in Sambo district. Confident and brave, a confrontation with police and the local authorities who came to ban an awareness event she had organised did not deter her from pursuing her passion to work for her community. As a focal person in the community, she continued to help raising awareness of the impact of the development and sharing relevant information that will help strengthen the community’s capacity and understanding.

As some of those affected by the development of dam construction on the Lower Sesan II river, her family had moved their home to another place due to the lack of water and land for farming. Fishing was also impossible after the dam construction took place. This would mean more family expenses – they have to buy more food for survival without supplementing their food from the river.

Chin, along with other community members, filed a complaint for compensation to the district committee for a solution over the dam development affecting their living, culture and natural resources. She subsequently mobilised community members to advocate to the provincial committee demanding action and addressing Community’s complaint.

Chin is frequently warned by family members and relatives about her actions. But she never gives up.

“I am not working for money but for the betterment of my community. No matter how less educated I am, I will try my best to self-improve and eventually I hope there will be some interventions due to our efforts from those developers and the local authorities,” said Chin. “I also hope my community, especially young people and women, will keep learning and advocating for their rights and to protect our lives and natures.”

En Chin, 25, Community Focal Point, Srae Sronuk, Kbal Romeas commune, Sesan district, Stun Treng province

**"YOU CANNOT CHOOSE LIFE  
AND WHERE YOU WERE BORN.  
BUT YOU CAN CHOOSE WHAT  
YOU LOVE TO DO, FOR YOUR  
COMMUNITY, YOUR FAMILY,  
AND YOURSELF"**





Fay Sot, 62, Lao, Community Advisor, Living in Faing Village, Pong Commune, Versia District, Ratanakiri Province

## ACT FOR COMMUNITY - YOUR ACTION INSPIRES OTHERS TO BECOME LEADERS

“Loving the river is like loving yourself,” said Fay Sot, a Lao ethnic minority living in Ratanakiri province.

Fay Sot, 62, is one of the ethnic minority Laotians living in Faing village, Pong commune, Versia district, Ratanakiri province. Divorced since 1990, Fay Sot has eight children from her former husband – the oldest one is 42, and the youngest is 30 who lives with her.

As one of the woman community leaders in her community, Sot has been working with and for the community to protect the Sesan River for more than 10 years. She advocates and shares knowledge, and encourages her community to pursue their needs and claim their rights. “Resources from the river could bring the community a comfortable life. Therefore, we need protect our Sesan river,” she said.

Fay Sot was just a housewife before she first started working in advocacy work. She knew nothing about advocacy, but over time she has made herself stronger and more confident in advocating to protect the Sesan river. She was inspired by seeing how other advocates could

fearlessly express their views and raised their concerns when she joined meetings organised by local organisations. This made her more confident and started her advocacy even though at the first start of her work, she was nervous when talking in public or in several closed-door meetings. Now she is supporting her community in the role of Community Advisor.

Working in community has built her confidence and provided more opportunity to learn about individuals’ rights, she continues encouraging her community to discuss ways to protect the river. Regardless of who they are, where they are from, which ethnicity they belong to, they all share the same river and that could not divide them. Sot, with her strong belief has motivated and encouraged her group members and other community members from different part of the shared river to collaborate, engage and join any advocacy activities to help address the community issues and protect the river and nature in Cambodia. Even though they are struggling to safeguard their rivers, and some of them quitted their work due to numerous of threats from the government and local authorities, they still have people who continue to pursue

their dreams advocating and lobbying the local authorities to address their needs and remaining unsolved issues, especially related to hydropower dam projects in the mainstream Mekong and its tributaries such as in Lower Sesan II river, Sre Pok river, Yeli river, Mekong river, Areng river, etc.

Sot said, “Once the community loses the river, it seems like we lose everything. People would have to move to other places, their culture and traditional would be affected, and agricultural practices would be disturbed and less.”

Sot is always supportive in the community because of her interest and her love for the community, natural resources,

and environment. She is volunteering for activities that help solve her community’s problems and concerns. “It is worth spending my time. I will not stop working unless I cannot walk,” said Sot.

She believes that accuracy is important, and being transparent and accountable for one’s actions is key to success. “Confidence builds knowledge and experience, knowledge builds confidence”. I encourage everyone and all the women, the housewives and all women leaders, to be more confident and work together for our community,” said Sot.

# “LOVING THE RIVER IS LIKE LOVING YOURSELF”

# WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP: A NEW WAY TO SUPPORT FAMILY LIVING THROUGH RAISING LIVESTOCK

Confidence needs practice, and experience fosters courage.

"I started from knowing nothing to being a role model and female leader in raising livestock and ducks in my district," said Kaisone Vilayvong.

Kaisone Vilayvong, 52, her husband and a nephew live in Ban Sehong, Don Khong district, Champassak province. The couple have two children; one is majoring in agriculture in Vientiane, and the other is a teacher at a school in Pakse. Her experience dealing with various issues at public events and through the media exposure for more than 10 years has made her an outstanding spokesperson, and she was selected as a leader of the Women's Union in the village.

She is known to the people at village and district levels as an outspoken and confident influencer. As a female leader, she always stands up to address any issues in the village, and to protect the community and natural resources. Her family, the community, and local authorities have recognised and appreciated all her work and her team's great efforts in developing the community.

"I was recently awarded by the district authority for my

support to help the community raise ducks, and now my methods have been replicated. I am so happy to see people are more interested in raising ducks," said Kaisone.

To expand her knowledge and understanding, she took part in a number of community development training events organised by various initiatives including the Sao Baan Research Project, and CLICK. Most of the learning was about diversifying small-scale businesses and alternatives such as raising livestock, land cultivation, and other agricultural practices.

Rather than depending on fishing in the wake depleted water resources and overfishing, more villagers are now raising ducks and livestock as alternatives. For her part, Kaisone hopes to learn more about the technical aspects of treating and controlling livestock diseases.


Because of active engagement and her outgoing personality, she gets along well with all local authorities; she has the ability to influence and lobby them to promptly help address any misunderstandings and issues concerning the community, such as illegal fishing using electrical-shock equipment, impacts on the river, etc.

She recently lobbied authorities at the district level on issues related to a hydropower dam project, urging them to revise water management regulations to enable community members to use the river just as families have done for generations. Kaisone also works closely with her team members and when there is opportunity, they help raise awareness in their community on possible consequences of community action. She said men and women share tasks. "Nonetheless, I hope there are more women in leadership roles as women are more capable at addressing and finding solutions to issues than men. Especially in my community, women are more able to unlock technical issues," she said. Kaisone also pointed that coordinating and building up relationships between groups with some organisation

partners was also sometimes difficult, since some members did not understand the management process, for example contract terms and conditions, and funding and payment processes. Some members did not return the funds back to the organisation when their businesses or livestock practices were successful.

"I hope everyone is well aware of the rules, and keeps learning from doing to improve their family's living conditions and the community so it will contribute to society and the country as a whole. I also do hope that more women will find their place in leadership roles to bring about positive changes to themselves as well as the community," said Kaisone.

**"NONETHELESS, I HOPE THERE ARE MORE WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP ROLES AS WOMEN ARE MORE CAPABLE AT ADDRESSING AND FINDING SOLUTIONS TO ISSUES THAN MEN. ESPECIALLY IN MY COMMUNITY, WOMEN ARE MORE ABLE TO UNLOCK TECHNICAL ISSUES"**

A woman with dark hair, wearing a blue patterned long-sleeved shirt and a purple bag with a striped pocket, stands outdoors. In the background, there is a dark-colored car and green foliage. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting daylight.

**"IT IS NOT AN EASY JOB. WE NEED TO BE  
CLEAR AND ACT TOGETHER TOWARD  
ISSUES WE WANT TO ADDRESS AND  
ADVOCATE FOR. CONSULTATION WITH  
OUR INDIGENOUS PEOPLE MUST BE  
TAKEN BEFORE ANY DECISION IS  
MADE – CANNOT BE FORCEFUL"**

Kha Sros, 62, Kui ethnic minority, Prey Long activist,  
and leader of Indigenous Women Group of My Village Organization,  
living in Ton Song village, Seam Bok commune, Seam Bok district,  
Stung Treng province



# ADVOCACY FROM THE HEART FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'S RIGHTS AND FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

"It is not an easy job. We need to be clear and act together toward issues we want to address and advocate for. Consultation with our indigenous people must be taken before any decision is made – cannot be forceful," Kha Sros, an energetic Kui human rights advocate from Stung Treng. She believes that commitment and perseverance are necessary to reinforce mobilisation and networking.

Kha Sros is 62, married with six children and live in Ton Song village, Seam Bok commune, Seam Bok district, Stung Treng province. When she began her career, her youngest daughter was just three years old, and her husband was not supportive; he always questioned every information and objected whatever Sros would do and where she would go. But over time, she could proof how honest and committed she is to her husband through her action and her work for the communities.

"It was really challenging when the heart is committed to work for the communities, while the head is always reminded of the family and children at home. But I never gave up even though I have been looked down on as a woman working far away from home and most of the time

in the forest, patrolling with other IP women," she said.

Sros started her first job with Oxfam Australia in 1995. Her work focused on gender equality and women empowerment promoting human rights, and ending domestic violence. In 2002, she started working for the My Village Organisation, and with other indigenous groups to protect indigenous peoples' land rights, forests, rivers and their biodiversity. Later in 2005, she became a Prey Long activist after seeing how her communities were affected from various activities, such as land grabbing, mining exploration, forest destruction. She also leads the Kui art performance group.

Cambodia has 24 ethnic minority groups that comprise an estimated 1.4% of the population. Located in the northern part of Cambodia, thousands of Indigenous Peoples (IPs) including Bunong, Kroeung, Tampuon, Jarai, Suoy, Por, Prov, Kavet, Luon, Krol, Stieng, Mil, Khornh, Chhong, Kachok, and Saoch, rely on natural resources such as forests, mountains, rivers, fishes, and many other non-timber products.

Kui is one of IP groups; many of them live in Stung Treng province where a hydropower dam project has been constructed. This ethnic group is of the IP groups who strictly and still strongly reinforce their cultural and customary practices. Their lives have been profoundly impacted by economic land concessions that have led to deforestation which has depleted natural resources and cultural forest. Traditional and cultural lifestyle have been significantly affected.

76 communities have requested for their communal land registration; however, government could only register 10 communities per year for the next four years. In 2014, together with other local and international organisations, Sros led ethnic communities to call on the government to respond to their requests and concerns over their community forests and to get their community land registered as well as their identity to be recognized faster.

"We Indigenous People are tired of waiting but we could do anything much than trying to advocate the government and hoping that they would soon and officially provide us

land certificates and identities. We do not want our culture, forests, and land disappear," she said.

Her life as Prey Lang activist became more challenging at the time especially when she fell seriously ill in 2014 as she could manage to do much work. However, she is still working hard and keeps teaching and sharing with other women and youth on her work experience, knowledge on advocacy, and how to protect their communities and livelihoods from destructive developments such as mineral exploration, land concession, illegal fishing, forest clearance, etc.

Once when she and her team were trying to stop illegal fishing, they were threatened with gun shots; everyone was frightened, but she refused to stop working. "Forest and water are our lives. We therefore have to ensure that at least there remains some good forest for our next generations and everyone. I dare to die to protect my communities," said Sros, hoping the next generations will continue the good work, safeguard rights and the people, and conserve the region's rich natural resources.

# OVERCOMING CHALLENGES IN LEADERSHIP MANAGEMENT THROUGH WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND GENDER EQUALITY

"It's not easy for me to keep up with the work. Sometimes I also hesitate to continue doing my work, but I feel responsible for my community, especially the needs of the women," explained Manivanh on when she felt demotivated to keep up with her work and struggled to overcome challenges and develop solutions to help her community.

Manivanh, 52, is married with two children. They live in Viengchalern village, Saysettha district, Vientiane, Lao PDR. As a Laotian living in a patriarchal society, she is fortunate to have the full support of her family to be able to keep herself in development work and continue fulfilling her role as Director of the Gender Development Association (GDA). GDA is a local organisation founded in 1991 with a key focus on promoting gender equality and women empowerment through the rule of law and good governance. The organisation works closely with key organisation partners to help women and men, especially rural women, children, youth, people with disabilities, and ethnic groups.

Her professional experience includes working for Oxfam Australia and various organisations and entities since 1991, later becoming the director of the GDA in 2016. Her key expertise is in programme management, coordinating and building the capacity of stakeholders in key areas such as gender in agriculture, natural resource management and hydropower; women's participation in politics, to name a few.

Education in rural areas is limited. Not every woman and child are able to go school. Almost all of her life is spent

working on integrating gender mainstreaming, and bringing positive changes to Laotian society and for the people. However, every day she finds it increasingly challenging to ensure that everything is aligned and according to plan.

"Planning is one thing, and implementing and ensuring that the plan is achieved is another matter. Within our community, men are dominant; women hardly have a voice at higher levels and their decisions are rarely accepted. However, community development cannot be successfully achieved and cannot be satisfactory without women's participation otherwise it will not be sustainable," said Manivanh.

To Manivanh, women should have a place in the village planning process, to provide comments and suggestions. Concerns and requests of women need to be integrated into the village plan before the plan is finalised and executed for better and successful implementation and development. She added, "Women also have ideas and desires to ensure the plan meets their needs. Therefore, engaging women in village activities and development plans will effectively and efficiently help address issues and enhance development in and for the communities."

There are 50 ethnic groups in Laos, and it is important that their needs are acknowledged, and their cultures, identities, livelihoods and natural resources are well maintained and protected to preserve sustainable living.

Manivanh Sayavong, 52, Laotian, Director of Gender Development Association, living in Viengchalern village, Saysettha district, Vientiane, Lao PDR

As a female leader, Manivanh struggled to perform her role. Her organisation works at the subnational level, from village to district and provincial levels. Most of the time, work or requests made by women are not accepted. To overcome these issues, all women, including her, must spend considerable time to understand every issue and self-prepare for any discussion. They have to read documents on relevant government's websites to create a deeper understanding of the issues and to develop planning solutions. "Collaboration and training provided by the government are a rare opportunity for people like us and especially those who are working for non-profit associations and non-governmental organisations," she said.

Manivanh would like her colleagues, staff, and especially women and youth to learn from her. She has been working hard for years to share her knowledge and experience with them through various events, meetings, workshops and training sessions.

Looking back, she feels proud of her achievements – what she has done for her people and the communities. To keep herself motivated to overcome obstacles and address challenges, she always keeps learning, stays disciplined, and remains connected with all her networks.

"A work-life balance is also a very important factor that every worker has to accomplish, to ensure that they stay fit and healthy. I am glad and so fortunate to have a warm and supportive family

who always stands by to cheer me up and help me in the times I need it most," said Manivanh, pointing out that "all family members, especially husbands and wives, need to work together toward issue-solution mapping – ensuring that any issue should be smoothly discussed or consulted before any decision is made."

Manivanh would like to encourage all the women to work and support each other to not only overcome poverty but also advocate for their rights as well as develop their capacities to take on more leadership roles and positions at all levels of government and organisation sectors.

She plans to leave her work in the next two years and hopes they will be able to find a committed and passionate successor who can take up her position. "I am ready to take a break and to transfer all knowledge and experience to the successor," she said.

"For everyone, there should be a time to self-reflect on what we have done, what we have succeeded thus far, and what we could learn from these accomplishments, and how much more effort we need to put in place to continue fulfilling and attaining such achievements," said Manivanh, adding that, "I would also like to request all men to stop violence against women and help them grow for a healthier family and society. In addition to this, all women need to speak out and get support when they need it."



**"WOMEN ALSO HAVE IDEAS AND DESIRES TO ENSURE THE PLAN MEETS THEIR NEEDS. THEREFORE, ENGAGING WOMEN IN VILLAGE ACTIVITIES AND DEVELOPMENT PLANS WILL EFFECTIVELY AND EFFICIENTLY HELP ADDRESS ISSUES AND ENHANCE DEVELOPMENT IN AND FOR THE COMMUNITIES"**

# LIFE AS AN ACTIVIST WHO IS WORKING TO STOP RIVER DAM PROJECT



Nen Chanvutha, 35, Tumpuon, Project Officer of The 3S Rivers Protection Network (3SPN), Patang Commune, Lumphat District, Ratanakiri Province

“Education is knowledge. Knowledge is power and empowerment. Empowerment is courage,” says Nen Chanvutha, a Tumpuon female ethnic who believes that once every one is educated, people can make better decisions.

Chanvutha, also known as Sokit, 35, lives in Pruoy village, Tapang commune, Lumpat district, Ratanakiri province. As the sixth child, she grew up in a small wooden house with eight other siblings in a farmer family along the Sesan River. Even though their parents were not rich, they worked very hard to send all their children to school. Sokit managed to finish grade nine.

All of her siblings got married; she got married in 2016. Unlike her other siblings who are serving as public workers, Sokit loves being involved with community development and advocacy work. Her life as the activist began after she has noticed how natural resources and rivers in her communities have been gradually devastated by various actions.

Being an activist for almost 13 years, Sokit is known to the communities as “the lady of river lover” or “the lady of dam advocator”. She is one of the female ethnic civil society workers who is motivated by her passion and knowledge gained from learning about community rights based and advocacy approaches, gender and women in leadership, livelihoods, and relevant policies and regulations governing natural resources management related to impacts of hydro dam construction.

Sokit joined the 3SPN in 2007, and was promoted to as a Project Officer in 2018. She helps build her communities’

capacity and share the knowledge gained from different awareness events. She joined numerous public forums, press conferences and embassy meetings to lobby companies and the government on various community. One of the prominent advocacy issues was on Lower Sesan II Dam located near the confluence of the Sesan and Srepok rivers in Stung Treng province, Cambodia.

Thousands of people who are living along the Sesan River are ethnic minorities such as Tumpuon, Kuoy, and Pounorng. Many of them were forced to leave their communities to make way for the Lower Sesan II Dam project. It threatens the lives, livelihoods and cultures of the communities, the river systems and its rich natural resources, biodiversity, fisheries, animals, and forests. In recent past years, the Lower Sesan II Dam project has caused flooding, water pollution, and elimination of fish species in adjacent villages and forests were cleared. The communities did not dare confront companies associated with this Dam project due to lack of knowledge, support, and confidence.

At an early stage of the Lower Sesan II Dam project, the local authority would ban outsiders who came to conduct training events or even visit villages in the area. “The community was frightened by new faces coming in the village. The local authority accused almost every civil society advocate working to protect the Sesan River as members of the opposition party,” said Sokit.

Sokit always makes herself available when communities need support, often riding 80 kilometers or more alone on quiet and uphill roads on her old motorbike to just meet

and work with her villagers to address any issue that would cause trouble to the communities. Though she could be targeted anytime, she would not stop working when she learnt that what she has done would help her river and her communities. “My life is for my communities,” she said.

Life as an activist was challenging, with of risk of death or prison if she was not careful of her precarious situation. Several years ago, local authorities threatened to put her in jail and kill her while she was trying to raise awareness to the Sesan community on advocacy issues relating to dam and livelihoods. Although it is threatening, she still loves what she is doing.

Though her communities could not prevent the company and the government from building this Dam project, she was happy and proud of her communities when she sees that more people in her communities are aware of their rights and dare to stand up for their communities and to minimize the impacts. “They always come together and

as one to discuss and address any issues that may harm to their communities,” she said.

Sokit said she has become who she is today is because of her passion and commitment, and all the knowledge she learned from her colleagues, other activists, organization partners and donors. She is more independent and stronger, not only in leadership, management and decision making at workplace but also in her personal life. She hopes that donors will continue helping the communities protect the rivers and address impact of the project.

“With further support, more people - especially women like me - will be empowered, confident, and capable in assisting the communities in how to address issues that may happen,” she said. “I encourage all women to learn when opportunities are given, and you should not be demotivated by being looked down as women engaging in a such work as it will help our communities and protect our natural resources for the future generations.”

**“EDUCATION IS KNOWLEDGE.  
KNOWLEDGE IS POWER AND EMPOWERMENT.  
EMPOWERMENT IS COURAGE”**

# THERE IS NO "LIMITATION" THAT WE, AS WOMEN CAN ACHIEVE

Pham Thi Dieu My – a 40 ages –live in Hue city, Thua Thien Hue, Vietnam. Pham Thi Dieu My is the Director of the Centre for Social Research and Development (CSRSD) in Hue, Vietnam. She was awarded an Australian Scholarship to complete a Master's Degree in Natural Hazards and Disasters at Australia National University. Got her scholarship to study at ANU was a life-changing experience for My. Not only did she adapt to life in a new country with a new language, her entire approach to research shifted.

"The diversified study fields expanded my horizons and this really helps with my current work. We deal with several issues that require a holistic approach and critical analysis of different natural and social perspectives to provide effective interventions." Said, My.

My has strong background in research methodology including survey design, data collection and analysis in the field of in environmental management and using different tool toward comprehensive gender analysis. She is highly committed to working for environmental and social change, empowerment, community development.

Where she lives and growth up is one of the key factors that encourage My to pursue her study on natural hazard and climate change and developed herself to be female leader who specialist in research sturdy. "I live in one of the most vulnerable regions to climate change, where economic development is heavily affected by natural hazard impacts. I believe that natural disaster mitigation and risk management carried out by researchers, practitioners and communities will help mitigate the impact of climate change and contribute to the economic development of Vietnam." said, My.

In 18 years of working experience, My has been working with communities on natural resource management. She found that communities who live and protect the resources have limited voice and less access compare to the most influent groups in the society. Water resources access is

an example. In her current project she witnesses that vulnerable people do not know they have equal rights to access and responsible to protect water sources. However, only those who has more power such as companies and elite group who control major part of resources and decision making. In such challenging environment, My believes that there would be greater improvement if communities aware of their rights and are able to claim their rights. Eventhought that will require a long-term process but still slowly we could see the positive changes overtime through our support. Thus, inequality still exist, but now communities become more confident and have better understanding about their rights, benefit, and responsibilities. Affected people by hydropower projects are the good example for these changes. Many of them now claim the land, send request to hydropower companies for releasing water for irrigation and domestic use.

Vietnam is strongly influenced by patriarchy, therefore there are several cultural and social norms and attitudes that violate women rights. Women are difficult to have voice and good position in families, communities and society. In many projects that she has worked on, gender is a cross-cutting issue. In projects implemented by CSRSD, women are encouraged to participate in social activities, recognize their roles in climate change resilience, water management and economic empowerment and so on. We are able to see the changes from our women groups: more enthusiastic to participate in activities, better awareness on their rights, raise their voice and take lead in economic activities.

My understand the challenge and difficulty as be a woman and sitting in role as leader, "I myself and other woman-led organization have difficulties due to our gender" said, My. "I feel like I am growing up and become more matured when working with our communities and interacting with all stakeholders in different issues. I have gained more motivation and passion to continue development works in my country, region and international level".

**"I FEEL LIKE I AM GROWING UP AND BECOME MORE MATURED WHEN WORKING WITH OUR COMMUNITIES AND INTERACTING WITH ALL STAKEHOLDERS IN DIFFERENT ISSUES. I HAVE GAINED MORE MOTIVATION AND PASSION TO CONTINUE DEVELOPMENT WORKS IN MY COUNTRY, REGION AND INTERNATIONAL LEVEL"**



Pham Thi Dieu My, 40, Director of the Centre for Social Research and Development (CSRSD), live in Hue city, Thua Thien Hue, Vietnam.

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