

# From Human Security to Woman Security: Enhancing the Role of Women in Addressing Water Shortage Issues in the Lower Mekong River

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## Abstract

This paper will discuss human security in the context of climate change as well as the consequences of the scarcity of natural food resources due to the constructions of hydropower dams in the upstream of the Mekong River. This article will apply human security theory to consider human insecurity especially for women due to a shortage of water resources. However, the theory of human security usually focuses on the views of the state as well as its masculine expressions without the focus on the views of the weaker ones such as the poor farmer groups and women. Therefore, the argument of this study is that (1) the theory of human security should cover and need to clarify the security aspect at the individual level, including security for women. From there, the article presents new aspects to complement this theory. (2) Local political participation of women plays an important role in resolving local water resources and livelihood shortages. The research method of this paper is based on the study of secondary theory and information to make qualitative conclusions about the human

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security factors for women and also their political role in addressing water shortages in the lower Mekong River.

**Keywords:** Human security, Women security, Water shortages, Mekong River.

## 1. Introduction

There are two aspects that are often lacking in discussions about human security namely gender aspects and women's experiences in human insecurity while this concept often emphasizes the aspect of masculinity as well as the roles of the State and the military in ensuring human security (Hudson 2005). This article is divided into three parts. The first part of the paper will discuss the need to add personal experiences, especially of the weaker social groups to reinforce the concept of human security. The second part of the article will discuss the importance of mainstreaming gender into the debate of human security. Part three of the article will discuss human insecurity, especially for women and disadvantaged groups in the context of a shortage of water in the lower Mekong River. Moreover, this part also sets out the need to improve the role of women in water resources management, contributing to solving human security issues in general and women's security in these localities in particular.

This is a narrative review article with selected studies are compared and summarized on the basis of the author's experience, existing theories of human security and women security. Results of the article are based on a qualitative level.

### The development of concept “human security”

The concept of human security is formally put on the world agenda in the 1994 Human Development Report. The main content of this report is to ensure the realization of human rights and practical benefits which are “freedom from want” and “freedom from fear”. These are two key aspects that human security aims at. Specifically this report has defined human security as: *“safety from the constant threats of hunger, disease, crime and repression..., protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the pattern of our daily lives whether in our homes, in our jobs, in our communities or in our environment”* (UNDP, 1994, p.3). It can be seen that the main pillars of human security have been referred to as (1) universality for everyone and everywhere, (2) interdependence of contents in the concept human security, (3) placing people and individuals as the focus for protection. In addition, the key components of human security are (1) personal security to avoid violence and physical risks, (2) environmental security which ensures human access to natural resources such as water, land and air, (3) economic security to ensure a stable and long-term sources of income, (4) security politics to ensure human rights and freedom, (5) health security to ensure good health and to avoid the risks of human diseases, (6) security for the community to protect cultural identities of each ethnic group, region, region, (7) food security to ensure each individual’s food access. Therefore it can be seen that an important contribution of the concept of human security has been to a shift from the focus of national security (with the provision of militaries and weapons) to a human central focus by securing rights and benefits for individuals in the society. Following the definition of UNDP’s human security in 1994, Alkire has added a new dimension to the goal of human security: *“The objective of human security is to safeguard the vital core of all human lives from critical pervasive threats, in a way that is*

*consistent with long-term human fulfillment”* (Alkire, 2003, p. 2). A new contributing point here is human protection against the risks of human insecurity that may occur in the present and in the future.

However, it can be seen that these two definitions of human security are still limited. Specifically, these limitations are (1) they do not provide a rigorous method to assess the status of human security and are not able to assess the effectiveness of the above definitions. (2) Both definitions focus too much on the universality of human beings while forgetting or eliminating the factors that make the differences such as gender, ethnicity, region, educational level, economic conditions among others to highlight the needs of each specific individual, especially the requirements of disadvantaged groups to protect their legitimate rights and interests (Enloe, 1989; Tickner, 1992).

Moreover, even though the definition of human security has been differentiated from the concept of national security, it has not been completely abandoned the state aspect. The traditional definition of human security often focuses on the aspect of national security in which strengthening the military and armed forces are the top targets. The argument is that national security will always dominate because insecurity only occurs when there is war, violence, stress or conflict. Realist scholars often criticize the use of the term human security as a way to shift the focus from national security to personal security to abuse, arbitrarily, lose the focus of concept and make it ambiguous (Fukuyama 1998; MacFarlane & Khong 2006; Walt 1998; Roland Paris 2001).

Tickner in 1992 pointed out a specific thinking flaw “masculine hegemony” in the structure of power and world system structure. In it all “Strength, power, autonomy, independence and rationality, all typically associated with men and masculinity, are characteristics we most value in those to whom

we entrust the conduct of our foreign policy and the defense of our national interest” (p. 3). Therefore, human security advocates argue that security definitions focusing on national security will promote inequality at the personal level that people encounter every day. The concept of pure national security ignores women’s experience of security. Cynthia Enloe (1989; 2007) proved that militarism has an inverse relation to the happiness and safety of women and other marginalized groups. This study has demonstrated that when countries and societies become militarized as strengthening defense budgets, opening more military bases, renouncing personal freedom on behalf of national security, then the happiness and safety of the female population will be decreased.

This poses a practical need to form a new theory for personal security: women security. Feminists are at the forefront of being indebted to this trend. They assert that continuing to focus on the concept of security as a complement to state power will lead to greater insights into the power imbalance between men and women. While men continue to be seen as guardians, women are placed in a weaker, vulnerable position and need to be protected (Hudson, 2005; Tickner, 1992).

## **2. Human security as woman security**

Gender aspects should be covered in debates about human security due to decentralization and the experiences of gender in reality are often invisible and overlapping (Wisotzki 2003). Experiences of women’s insecurity are often different from men and therefore need to be addressed in development policies (Lammers 1999).

## 2.1 Human insecurity in the experiences of women

Women experience human insecurity differently from men due to power inequality has exacerbated general human insecurity. Due to being placed in a lower position than men, they are less likely to speak clearly and act according to their security needs. The United Nations Development Report 1994 showed that no society in which women is safe and treated equally as men because personal insecurity follows them from birth to adulthood due to their gender.

Lammers argued that all forms of human insecurity are decided by gender because social structures, practices and symbols in all societies are regulated by gender (Lammers 1999, p.59). According to this author, there are five gender dimensions that have been overlooked in human security debates: (1) violence against women, (2) gender inequality in natural resource management (such as land, water, and forest), (3) gender inequality in power and decision making, (4) women's rights and (5) women as subjects not victims (Lammers 1999, p.59).

## 2.2 Human security from the perspective of feminists

Although the gender aspect of human security as discussed above is important, feminists want to go further to clarify women's views and understand human insecurity from their experience diversity and from a rights-based approach (Hudson 2005). They take the experience of women's insecurity to the forefront to emphasize unequal social relations that are the cause of this situation (Tickner 1992). Unequal social relations and patriarchal systems lead to unequal power relations, cultural violence and structure for women, although this depends on other factors such as race, class, culture and ethnicity (Hudson 2005). Therefore, Tickner similar to many other feminists considers that *"feminist perspectives on security*

*start with the individual or community, rather than the state or the international system. Rejecting universal explanations that, they believe, contain hidden gender biases, since they are so often based on the experiences of men, feminists frequently draw on local interpretation to explain women's relatively deprived position and their insecurity...feminists seek to uncover how gender hierarchies and their intersection with race and class exacerbate women's insecurities" (Tickner, 1999, p.42).*

### **3. Water shortages in lower Mekong River**

The scarcity of fresh water along with inequality in access and allocation of water among users has led to a growing dispute over water resources at both national and local levels (Gehrig and Rogers 2009). Dispute is defined as a situation between two or more stakeholders trying to get a scarce resource available (Wallenstein 2002). When two or more parties require a common source of water for different purposes and priorities, it is identified as a water resource dispute (Gehrig and Rogers 2009).

#### **3.1 The shortage of water and the construction of hydropower dams in the upstream of the Mekong River**

The negative impact of upstream hydroelectric dams has become more severe in the context of global climate change with the presence of extreme weather in recent years that has led to scarcity of water and negative impacts on livelihoods and sustainable development of communities along the lower Mekong River, especially directly impact on river-based farmers such as poor farmers and women (Huong et al, 2018).

Sharing, developing and managing water resources for agricultural and fishery production and energy are the main challenges of the Lower Mekong countries as residents in these regions depend heavily on the river



for cheap and readily available sources of livelihood and food for families to survive. However, the reality shows that the shortage of water resources is increasing due to the impact of hydroelectric dams upstream of the Mekong that change the flow, creating challenges in livelihoods and clean water for local people.

The experience of women's water insecurity will be different from that of men in that the shortage of water supplies increases the burden of family and economic care on women due to the former subsistence household livelihoods such as fisheries are often the men's job. When this job of men was no longer enough to feed the family, women have to worry more and work harder (Huong 2018, Tinh 2018). In resettlement programs due to hydroelectric dams in Laos and Vietnam, responsible women adapt to new homes for their families. In particular, ethnic women face difficulties in accessing new opportunities created by hydropower dams due to the lack of necessary skills. These studies also show that domestic violence increases due to unemployment and unstable livelihoods of men in the family (Hill, 2017).

### **3.2 Strengthening women's role in water resource management**

The Global Water Partnership Association (GWP) believes that women play an important role in the supply and protection of water resources, however, this role has not been reflected in institutional arrangements in water resource management (GWP, 2010). In addition, the problem of social inequity in water resources management as well as power relations in partnerships between countries, leading to a lack of participation of people and resource-based communities water including women.



To solve this problem, principles and agreements have been created to strengthen gender roles in water resource management. At the international level, the Dublin Principles recognizes the central role women play in the supply and management of water resources and is the basis for the implementation of integrated water resource management with women's participation (GWP, 2010). The Dublin Principles also requires national policies to proactively address women's specific needs while also equipping them with skills, knowledge and empowerment in participation, policy consultations and decision makings at all stages of the water resource program (GWP, 2010). In addition, the United Nations Task Force on Gender and Water (2003-2009) focused on mainstreaming gender and clean water into the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Now those goals have been changed into sustainable development goals (SDG) with the 6th content on water and sanitation also emphasizing gender equality.

From these principles and agreements, some initial progress has been made in promoting women's participation in major local management organizations. This leads to the experience and aspirations of women who are difficult to create influence at the national agenda. In addition, these programs are more representative of women with their active role and meaningful participation in improving women's rights in decision making. However, these programs have not fully addressed the persistent disadvantages of women and their experiences in the Mekong River cross-border, especially the effects of hydropower of the upstream on the natural food sources (fishes, vegetables, crops) along the river bank and therefore impact on the food and livelihoods of indigenous people.

According to customary laws, cross-border water management organizations have introduced a number of principles related to gender and water, for example Principle 20 of the Rio Declaration (UNEP, 1992). Women

have an important role in managing and protecting the environment. Therefore, their full participation is essential to achieving sustainable development (UNEP, 1992). The plan to implement Johannesburg's 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development has earmarked Section 25 (a) to include a government agreement to support capacity building for infrastructure development for improving sanitation and water, ensuring that infrastructure and services meet the needs of the poor and take into account gender sensitivity.

At the regional level, within the ASEAN regional vision to 2025 and sustainable development goals, objective 5 and 6 emphasize on the central role of gender equality and strengthening women's leadership in achieving these international agreements. Governments, civil society and private enterprises need to coordinate and devise action plans to implement gender mainstreaming commitments in water resources management policies and regional development plans in the Mekong River. The Mekong River Commission, as a regional water governance institute, needs to be encouraged to take into account of gender sensitivity to create a more conducive environment for women and men to contribute to the purpose of shared water management in the region. This can be done through the establishment of mechanisms that allow active participation of stakeholders including women.

These documents confirm the strategic objectives to enhance the active participation of women in water resources management in all stages, namely (1) mainstreaming gender perspectives in policies, programs on water management, (2) strengthening mechanisms of monitoring and evaluating the impact of those policies and programs on women.

#### 4. Conclusion

Empowering women through promoting gender equality is important for women's security and protecting their legitimate rights. Women can play an important role at all levels from the community, the local to the region to come up with effective water management policies by their own experience. Although gender norms make participation and active participation particularly challenging for women, it underscores the importance of exploring ways to better facilitate women's participation in these community structures. Participation alone is not enough to strengthen women's voices to resolve human insecurity due to a shortage of water in the community and in the lower Mekong River. But it also requires active participation of this group and other vulnerable groups to provide a more appropriate mechanism to improve the aspect of human security and women's security.

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