

Gender on the Tonle Sap: assessing the influence of CI-Cambodia's multi-pronged approach to women's empowerment



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This study was conceived, designed, and implemented by CI-Cambodia’s Tonle Sap team (Chanthorn Srorn, Vann Layhim, Sokrith Heng, Nick Souter) and CI’s Director of Gender & Safeguards (Kame Westerman). Interviews and focus group discussions were led by Sereyroth Lim.

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Summary

Conservation International Cambodia has been working with communities on the Tonle Sap Lake since 2008, advancing a holistic approach to freshwater conservation, fisheries management, and poverty alleviation. A key feature of this work is targeted engagement with women through creation of savings groups, improved fish processing & marketing, and wood saving stoves. The study gathered qualitative evidence from project participants about the impacts that this approach has had on gender norms within individuals, households, and the community. Enumerators visited 7 project sites where CI has engaged since 2008 to conduct individual interviews and sex-disaggregated focus groups with a total of 91 individuals (48 men/43 women).

We analyzed the results within a gender framework that describes a progression towards gender transformation. In the communities where CI has been engaged the longest, we see advances in reported self-efficacy, confidence, and leadership. In those places, there is also the beginnings of gender norm shifts in terms of household responsibilities and women's influential engagement in community and household decision making. These changes are less substantial or clear in the newer sites but provide an indication of what may come with continued concerted effort.

The program has established an innovative method of connecting savings groups¹ and community fishery committees with the objective of better engaging women in community fishery committees and providing needed funds to fishery activities. The savings groups are asked to donate a percentage of their interest profits to the fishery committees, thus giving the savings group members the right to engage in decision-making about how those funds are used. This method appears to have mixed results so far. In sites where savings groups have been successful and therefore contributed significant funding to the committees, this relationship is far stronger than in the newer sites where savings have not yet reached influential levels. Again, those sites that have been more successful provide an indication of what could come in other sites if they too can raise enough capital.

Respondents identified several important issues that influence both gender norm change and conservation goals in the project sites. Gaps in education and healthcare, generations of extreme poverty, and high rates of illiteracy contribute to a complex and challenging context. Focusing only on women's economic empowerment is an important avenue towards normative change, but other factors must also be considered such as women's time poverty and male spouse/leaders' support in taking on household duties. Finally, recognizing that one solution may not fit all situations: what may work well in one community may not work elsewhere due to a host of factors such as geography, community dynamics, micro-economics, access to markets and market demand.

We chose CI's Tonle Sap program as a case study because of its innovative, holistic approach and length of engagement in the older sites. The lessons we gathered can inform continued work with communities on the Tonle Sap Lake and be an example of how to creatively advance gender equality and women's empowerment in community-based conservation contexts.

Background

Home to more than 3 million people, the Tonle Sap floodplain supports one of the world's most productive freshwater fisheries. Many residents of the Tonle Sap floodplain live in floating communities on the lake, and more than 90% directly rely on the seasonally flooded forests for fresh water, agriculture,

¹ Group members pool their profits and offer low-interest loans to each other for business purposes.

fuelwood, and other essential resources. Family or small-scale fishing is practiced in nearly all households around the Tonle Sap and is usually carried out by family members using small gear such as gill nets and bamboo fence traps. Family fishing does not require a license and can take place year-round with most catches consumed at home. Tonle Sap households earn net income of about US\$ 269 per year from selling unprocessed fish and US\$63 per year from processed fish, with annual household incomes of around US\$ 3,694 (Mousset et al. 2016).

CI-Cambodia has worked in the Tonle Sap region since 2008, focused on improving incomes and livelihoods for some of Cambodia’s poorest people through a variety of livelihood-focused initiatives (explained below). Together, these approaches rely on and support each other (see Figure 1) in an effort to improve the environment and people’s lives. CI-Cambodia’s long term partner organization is Akphivath Neary Khmer Organization (ANKO), based in Pursat Province. Anko assists with on-the-ground monitoring and data collection, particularly related to Community Fisheries and Savings Groups. Anko also works closely with the local authority to support women’s participation at fishery management meetings.

- **Community Fishery Committees (CFCs):** A Community Fishery Committee (CFC) is a group of citizens who live in or near the fishing area and voluntarily undertake management of the fishery according to a Management Plan. They are elected by a community vote and have at least 5 members. Responsibilities include implementation of community fishery activities, writing quarterly reports, managing finances, and conducting activities such as patrolling and reforestation. Table 1 shows participation in CFCs in the 7 study sites with an average of 9% women.

Table 1: CFC membership in case study sites

Province	Community	No. of men	No. of women
Pursat	Akol	10	1
	Kampong Prak	10	1
	Srey Chek	12	1
	Anlong Reang	9	2
Kampong Thom	Peam Bang	8	1
	Poy Veuy	7	0
	Doun Sdaeung	6	0
Total		64	6

- **Women’s fish processing (WFP) & marketing.** An important source of income for floating households on Tonle Sap Lake is the sale of fresh fish and processed fish, which is typically smoked or converted into a paste. A comprehensive study of fishing-dependent communities in the Tonle Sap concluded that building capacity at post-harvest levels of the value chain (fish processing capabilities) and marketing to enhance market access could have significant impacts on household income (Mousset et al. 2016). CI has introduced training to women (who do most of the processing) on more hygienic and efficient fish processing methods. After completing the training, the women produce a higher quality product and can charge more for it. CI has helped fish processing groups to engage in business fairs and connect with buyers, as well as provide training on bookkeeping and financial reporting.

- Wood saving stoves.** The practice of open-air fish smoking can lead to serious respiratory illness and unsustainable fuelwood consumption, contributing to deforestation of the lake’s flooded forests. CI introduced wood saving stoves in 2014 that can reduce time² dedicated to wood collection by 50%, reduce time needed to tend the fire, and make accidents from fire less common. Other benefits include a higher quality of smoked fish with higher market value, less smoke, and the option for stove mobility. A participatory comparative demonstration conducted by CI shows the following (table 2):

Table 2: Comparison of wood saving vs. traditional stoves

Specification	Wood Saving Stove	Traditional Stove
Cost per unit (USD)	\$90	~\$50
Life Span (years)	5-6	1-2
Average time to smoke fish	1.48 hours	2.33 hours
Wood used (kg/cycle)	11.5	23
Portability	Portable	Not Portable
Health and Safety aspect	Reduced smoke	Smoke inhalation
Product Quality	Good quality (less fat) Long shelf life	Lower quality (fatty) Short shelf life
Availability & Accessibility	Local market (metal)	Local and self-made (bamboo and zinc)

- Savings groups (SGs).** These are small collectives, composed primarily (though not exclusively) of women, which focus on pooling savings and allowing members to take out small loans for business needs. This allows members to invest in small scale fishing gear, health care, aquaculture, etc. Cambodians hold the world’s highest average amount of microloans, and these community-based savings groups can provide an alternative with lower interest rates. CI provides training on financial management and bookkeeping. In an innovative effort to better integrate and support women’s influence in community fisheries, CI has connected the SGs to the CFCs through the provision of an additional US\$1500. These funds are lent to members and 90% of the interest generated by this additional loan (at 2-3% interest) are donated to the CFCs for agreed-upon activities. This approach is meant to amplify women’s influence and voice in local fishery management as the CFCs are required to work with the SGs to agree on the activities and report on how the money was used.
- Awareness raising about gender and women’s empowerment.** CI has conducted several trainings in both Kampong Thom and Pursat provinces that focus on gender and women’s leadership. These trainings are

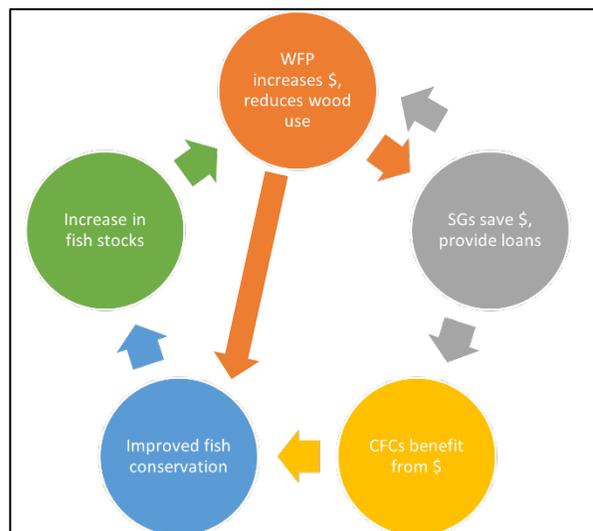


Figure 1: Visual representation of how approaches are connected and mutually supportive.

² According to CI research, firewood is harvested 60% of the time exclusively by men and 40% of the time by women.

designed and delivered to target women and men engaged in the different initiatives (e.g., SGs, WFP, CFCs). In addition, the CI team provides close mentoring and advising to the women’s groups on how to manage their new responsibilities including changes in power dynamics and workplan development.

There is great diversity across the 7 sites in terms of size, distance to port/shore and bigger towns, access to education, cultural diversity, length of CI engagement, and likely many other influencing factors. Table 3 provides a brief overview of each project site.

Table 3: socio-economic context of project sites

<p>Akol (Pursat province) Year of CI engagement: 2008</p>	<p>Akol is a small fishing community of approximately 40 families who live in floating houses. It is located a 30-minute boat ride from the port town of Kampong Luong. They mainly depend on fishing and a few families sell groceries, plant vegetables, and raise fish. There is a small primary school with one class, but no pre-school and no lower secondary school. The nearest health center is at the port. Almost everyone are members of the SG and WFP, except a few elder families who have retired. There are two SGs in this community and both are functioning with \$30,000 accumulated collectively. The WFP products have gained popularity and received purchase orders from wholesalers, with the price more than doubling. CI has focused on capacity building and providing necessary assets, as well as connecting the group to buyers/market access.</p>
<p>Kampong Prak (Pursat province) Year of CI engagement: 2014</p>	<p>Kampong Prak has approximately 70 families who live on floating houses. It takes 15 minutes by boat to travel to the port town of Kampong Luong. Their occupation is fishing, and a few families raise animal and fish. There are two saving groups, but one is not working while the other is facing problems of collecting repayments.</p>
<p>Srey Chek (Pursat province) Year of CI engagement: 2015</p>	<p>Srey Chek is located in the flooded forest and includes approximately 70 families across 5 communities. It is close to Pursat City where it is easy for fishers to sell their fresh catch immediately at a high price. Most families depend on fishing, and some are raising fish. Because of the increased enforcement of illegal fishing within the flooded forest, some fishing families have migrated to work outside as their traditional methods were no longer allowed. There is no school, but a literacy teacher who provides classes to children (but they are frequently absent to help parents). Currently, 22 of the families who live on floating houses are member of the SG, which is led by a man.</p>
<p>Anlong Reang (Pursat province) Year of CI engagement: 2015</p>	<p>Anlong Reang is also located in the flooded forest and includes approximately 85 families, with around half are Khmer and the other half Vietnamese. It is located farther from the port town of Kampong Luong than the other communities in Pursat. The main occupation of this community is fishing, and most members also raise fish. It has a Saving Group with 12 members.</p>

**Peam Bang
(Kampong Thom
province)**
*Year of CI
engagement: 2020*

Peam Bang is a floating community which has a commune hall, the Police Post, primary school and other government offices based in this area. It is a big community with more than 210 families. Some parts of it are land, while others are flooded so they can plant vegetables only during the dry season. Their main occupation is fishing (fish and bivalve mollusks), as well as aquaculture, animal raising and small businesses. Fish buyers (middlemen) are present in this community. There is a saving group, which has more than 10 members and a WFP group with 17 members. Notably, the members of WFP are different from members of the Saving Group (while in other communities WFP and SG membership are generally the same). In addition to Akol, this is the only other community that CI has helped to link fish processing to markets.

**Pov Veuy
(Kampong Thom
province)**
*Year of CI
engagement: 2020*

Pov Veuy is close to the Stoung district, making business and trade between communities convenient. It is a big community, with almost 200 families whose main occupation is fishing, aquaculture, and small businesses. Families live on the water but plant vegetables during the dry season on land. It has a big primary school with plans to build a lower secondary school. There are middlemen who buy fish and shells to sell to whole sellers in Stoung district. There are 16 members in the saving group, and 9 in the WFP.

**Doun Sdaeung
(Kampong Thom
province)**
*Year of CI
engagement: 2020*

Doun Sdaeung is a big community with more than 200 families. This community has produced drinking water, which is under management of the environmental office and is expected to supply the community next year. Notably, this community has a health center, but staff work only once a month. There are 13 members in the saving group.



and policies attempt to address prevailing gender inequalities must be sensitive to cultural context, clear on project goals, and concise about the way that success is measured.

This case study’s purpose is to document and present qualitative and quantitative outcomes related to gender equality and women’s empowerment as a result of CI-Cambodia’s interventions over the last 16 years. In this case study, we seek to demonstrate how CI’s holistic approach has contributed to individual and systemic change such as enhancing women’s leadership and effective participation in decision-making, increasing access and control of income, and evoking shifts in community-level gender norms, policies, and rules.

Methodology

The Gender at Work Framework³ shapes this case study, which shows the influence and relationships that support change from an individual to a systemic level. This framework is meant to be flexible and adaptable and works well in the community-based natural resource context to demonstrate how change might happen. Working counterclockwise from the top right quadrant, and applying the framework to this case study:

- **Resources:** The tangible and intangible assets and inputs that a woman might gain from a project or program. In this case, training on hygienic fish processing, numeracy and record-keeping, funding to jump-start a savings group, participation in marketing fairs and exchanges, provision of wood saving stoves, etc.
- **Consciousness and capabilities:** Individual changes in knowledge, skills, consciousness or awareness, and commitment to make changes to be more equitable. This may include women gaining more self-confidence, agency and voice, an ability to influence decision-making more effectively. It may also include men’s recognition of their role in supporting these women leaders and giving them the space and support needed to succeed.
- **Informal norms & exclusionary practices:** Changes at the individual levels start to erode systemic negative and discriminatory norms at the household, community, and/or organizational level. Here we might see changes in household duties that alleviate women’s time burdens, a decrease

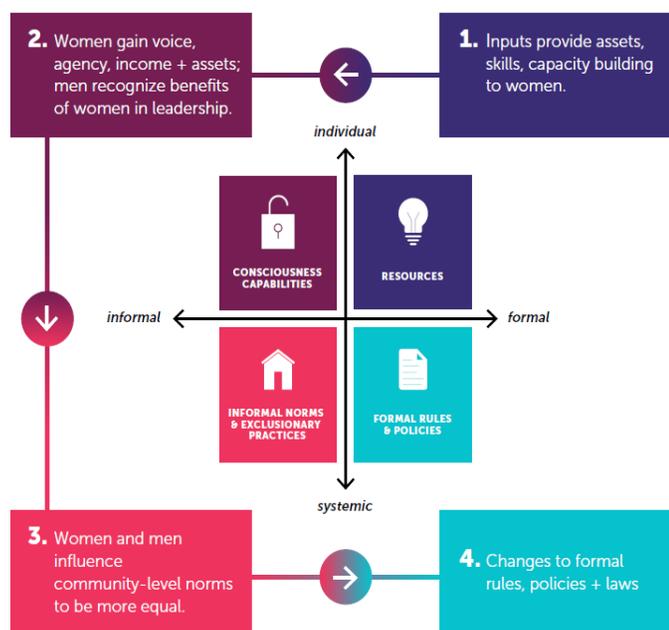


Figure 2: Gender at work framework used to guide this study

³ Gender at Work Framework: <https://genderatwork.org/analytical-framework/>

in gender-based violence, an increase in reported spousal respect, or more women taking on leadership positions in community groups.

- **Formal rules & policies.** Following informal norm change, formal policies, rules, and laws may change to be more inclusive and advance gender equality. Here we might see community fishery bylaws explicitly support equal participation and influence. If advocacy or policy-level change had been a focus of the project, changes at this level may be faster or more pronounced.

The case study uses a qualitative approach, including systematic background research of documents, discussions and input from current CI staff and partners engaged over the years in these efforts, and analysis of first-person information gathered from project participants. Throughout June 2022 a Cambodian consultant team with experience in gender-related assessments conducted a series of interviews and focus groups in the 7 case study communities listed in Table 4.

The researchers conducted a series of interviews and focus groups across the communities to collect first-person information using semi-structured interview and focus group questions (see annex for research guide). The research did not require full internal ethical review as the consultants only recorded participants’ community, age, sex, and affiliation with the project (no name or other identifying information). Respondents all agreed to participate before any interview or focus group.

We interviewed a total of 91 people (43 women/48 men) across the project sites. In each of the 7 communities, at least 1-2 women and 1-2 men provided individual interviews and others joined two focus groups - one female focus group and one male focus group (each with at least 4-5 individuals). CI-Cambodia and community leaders helped with participant selection, along with affiliation with project activities, as well as availability of the individuals. A female facilitator conducted interviews and focus groups with women while a male facilitator conducted interviews and focus groups with men. Facilitators wrote up detailed notes (not transcriptions), with relevant quotes, which were translated into English and provided to CI for incorporation into this case study.

Table 4: Location and people interviewed for this study

Province	Community	People interviewed
Pursat	Akol	15 (7 M/8 F)
	Kampong Prak	15 (10 M/5 F)
	Srey Chek	13 (6 M/7 F)
	Anlong Reang	13 (7 M/6 F)
Kampong Thom	Peam Bang	12 (6 M/6 F)
	Pov Veuy	13 (8 M/5 F)
	Doun Sdaeung	10 (4 M/6 F)

This research should not be construed as an evaluation of project performance. Instead, the purpose is exploratory in nature and does not aim to present definitive results of project performance. Rather the findings are based on evidence from individual and collective interviews, document review, and observation, and are therefore highly indicative of general trends that may obscure more complex circumstances that can only be assessed through different research methods.

Results

We analyzed information gathered via interviews and focus groups for recurring themes, aligned with those found in the gender framework described above and which included:

- Tangible skills and capacity development attributed to project activities/efforts
- Evidence of change in women’s leadership/empowerment, including public speaking
- Reported increase in self-confidence and positive changes in role within household or community
- Perceived increase in respect from others
- Increased income and decision-making about household expenses
- Change in household responsibilities
- Influence of the savings group on activities & decision making within community fishery committees
- Specific benefits, success, or breakdowns with respect to primary project initiatives (e.g., savings group, wood saving stoves, fish processing, community fishery)

In analyzing the results, several topics arose frequently that help to set the scene for findings. Across the case study sites, many focus groups and individuals (both males and females) pointed to traditional gender norms that prioritize males over females. Traditional gender norms position men as breadwinners and woman as homemakers and/or child caretakers and result in women facing multiple burdens on their time and energy, as well as limited opportunities, mobility, and agency (USAID 2016). As one woman interviewed explained “gender issues still exist, women still play triple roles (unpaid, economic and community). Parents still teach their daughters to do unpaid work (house chores, taking care of younger siblings and the elders), while their sons go out fishing with their fathers.”

An underlying disparity in formal education is clear, with women’s lower levels of formal education coming to light in most communities as a real barrier to advancement and success in project initiatives. Lower educational attainment, illiteracy, and poor numeracy disproportionately affect women and compound other disadvantages, undermining confidence, and stifling efforts to increase women’s voice and agency. As a women’s focus group explained, “boys are more likely to be sent to study further outside of the community because it is culturally acceptable for boys to travel and live far away from home, while it is not safe for girls.” Across the project sites, lack of educated women to fill leadership roles in the savings groups was identified as a primary barrier. As one woman explained, “this practice [of not prioritizing girls’ education] has caused many problems to women in my community today that we are not as knowledgeable as men.” A male CFC and SG leader explains that, while CI’s efforts to empower women in economic activities is important, the women have very low education so it is quite challenging to make it successful; it is hard for them to play leading roles because they cannot read or write.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is great diversity in the progress and success of project activities across project sites and it is therefore difficult to draw across-the-board conclusions. Instead, the results seem to fall into three buckets: (1) the community of Akol, where CI has engaged for 14 years, which has clearly had the most success to date and seen changes unlike any of the other sites, (2) the other more ‘established’ project sites of Kampong Prak, Srey Chek, and Anlong Reang where CI has engaged for more than 7 years, and (3) the newer project sites of Peam Bang, Pov Veuy, and Doun Sdaeung where CI has only recently started to engage within the last 2 (COVID-19 influenced) years. The following results are therefore often presented in these three buckets as they are distinctly from each other.

In the following sections, we present the results within the context of the case study’s gender framework presented above: Resources, Consciousness & Capabilities, Informal Norms, and Formal Rules & Policies.

Resources

Across the interviews and focus groups, interviewees mentioned each of the program’s initiatives as providing relevant and impactful inputs.

Wood saving stoves

Women in Akol, Srey Chek and Anlong Reang noted the wood saving stoves as helpful in saving time, allowing them to do other tasks such as fishing in nearby communities, preparing fermented fish, caring for fish, vegetable planting, cooking, watching children, and washing clothes. Interestingly, although men in general spend equally as much time harvesting wood, this benefit was not mentioned by men in these communities. The Akol women’s focus group noted that the amount of time to dry the fish is shorter than the traditional method, as well as requiring less money for fuel to fetch the wood. Finally, the women also note the benefit of reduced dangers and incidents of fires. As Table 5 indicates, proportionally more women in Akol have received a stove compared to other communities. None of the respondents in the new sites mentioned benefits related to the wood saving stoves as (aside from Peam Bang) they don’t traditionally smoke fish and the fresh fish market is quite strong.

Table 5: Wood saving stove distribution in study sites

Province	Name of Community	No. of fish processing members	No. households receiving wood saving stoves	Year distributed
Pursat	Kampong Prak	32	7	2013
	Akol	28	17	2013
	Anlong Reang	28	5	2013
	Srey Chek	20	5	2016
Kampong Thom	Peam Bang	28	10	2021
	Total	136	44	



Improved Fish Processing

Income generation is often a driving force in changing gender norms. As a CI staff member explains, through improving techniques and skills in fish processing, which women can then sell and generate income for their family, women's roles in earning money for the household have become increasingly recognized. This helps change the perception of the community that men are singly responsible for bringing in money.

In Akol, with a strong market for hygienically processed fish, this initiative is proving to be lucrative. The community has overcome the challenge of insufficient fish by having all fishers sell their catches to the fish processors instead of outsiders, thus ensuring their community members have sufficient product to process and supply to clients. Not only does this result in a higher price for fish, but also saves the fishers transportation costs as they can sell directly to the processors. Anko notes that a number of women in Akol and Srey Chek now play critical roles in generating income for their families through fish processing whereas before this project men were the only income earners. A savings group leader explains that "a number of women have increasingly seen an importance of their role as income earners for the family" while the men's focus group explains that "with support from the fish processing, women can sell with a higher price and many of them can earn more income for the family." The CI Cambodia team estimates that fish processing activities bring in additional income of at least \$140 per year per member in Akol. This is a significant contribution given research (Mousset et al. 2016) showing that Tonle Sap households earn net income of about US \$63 per year from processed fish.

In the other (both established and new) sites, however, with limited market demand and insufficient number of fish, the fish processing efforts have had limited success. As women in Kampong Prak, Srey Chek and Anlong Reang explained, the techniques are rarely applied as they are time consuming, and either fresh fish or fish processed in the traditional way can still be sold on the local market. In fact, fresh fish prices are currently high due to a crackdown in illegal fishing. “The community can sell the fresh fish with good price when compared to the processed one, which takes time and lots of work” explained a women’s focus group. This same group also explained that the fish for smoking are limited⁴, and it is therefore easier to sell them fresh and earn more than smoking them. Likewise, participants in Pov Veuy did not see the relevance of hygienically processed fish because “most people prefer to sell fresh fish rather than process them.” The big difference seems to be access to clients and a strong market that demands a higher price for hygienically processed fish; without this, the local market is not sufficient to drive prices up.



Linking Savings Groups to Community Fishery Committees

CI’s support to Savings Groups provided important financial skills. Across at least three communities (Akol, Srey Choek and Anglong Reang), women reported having been equipped with “relevant skills like managing savings group book-keeping and preparing financial reporting.” This type of training is especially necessary in places where primary education is insufficient (as in this case study).

CI’s dual goal of setting up a sustainable income source for fishery activities while also encouraging women to more meaningfully engage is made possible through linking the Savings Groups to the Community Fishery Committees. In 2014, CI introduced the idea of adding \$1500 to the Savings Groups’

⁴ Smoked fish are generally catfish and snakehead, aquaculture-raised predatory fish that are susceptible to disease and require feeding.

coffers; the 2-3% interest gained on that ‘top-up’ amount would be donated to the CFCs. Depending on the loan disbursement and repayment, CI estimated donations of around \$360-\$540/year, a significant contribution to the CFC operations. This was initially instituted in 2014 in Akol’s two SGs, in Kompong Prak, and in Anlong Reang; other SGs followed from 2020-2022.

The CFC makes the decision as to what activities are needed and seek funding from the Savings Groups who decide if they want to support it. Activities may include patrolling to detect and eliminate illegal activity, measuring biodiversity, guarding the community conservation area, disseminating information on relevant laws, protection, and restoration, and improving and maintaining infrastructure such as guard houses. Interviewees mentioned the importance of funds for planting and protecting trees in the flooded forests. The CFC is meant to report to the SGs about the activities to which their donation contributed.

The success of linking the Savings Groups to the Community Fishery Committees has had mixed results to date. Anko points to this as one of the most successful initiatives, helping to create a forum where women are empowered to be involved in community activities and where both groups can work in collaboration. This creation of space where women representatives can engage in the development of CFC plans is vital in integrating women’s and children’s needs and concerns into the plans. At the same time, the donation provides critical funding that supports the CFC’s fishery-related activities. Table 7 shows the amount of capital generated within the Savings Groups and the amount donated to CFCs over time.

Table 7. Women’s Saving Groups financial information

Community <i>(Year SG established)</i>	Saving Group	Members	Total capital as of 2022 (\$USD)	Total amount donated to CFC (cumulative, \$USD)
Akol <i>(2013)</i>	Akol Mom	15	\$11,244	\$1,761
	Akol	16	\$13,825	\$1,608
Kampong Prak <i>(2013)</i>	Kampong Prak	9	\$3,236	\$1,560
Srey Chek <i>(2016)</i>	Srey Chek	22	\$7,367	\$494
Anlong Reang <i>(2013)</i>	Anlong Reang	14	\$4,398	\$1,565
Peam Bang <i>(2019)</i>	Peam Bang	12	\$532	\$0
Pov Veuy <i>(2019)</i>	Pov Veuy	16	\$1,097	\$65
Doun Sdaeung <i>(2019)</i>	Doun Sdaeung	14	\$822	\$225

In Akol, where the Savings Groups and Community Fishery Committees have been established and supported since 2013, the relationship is quite strong. The Savings Groups have sufficient funds to meaningfully contribute to the CFC’s work, and with that, the ability to oversee and direct how that funding is used. Interviewees report that SG members participate in preparing the CFC’s annual work plan, attend quarterly meetings, and overall have a better understanding about fishery laws and regulations

and help to report illegal fishing to the CFC. According to the men's focus group, this engagement has helped women to "have strong confidence in talking and speaking in the meetings and providing suggestions to CFC."

The women's focus group in Akol reported that this engagement has improved the performance of the CFC's work and helped them to be more responsible with the money and activities. Likewise, this engagement has provided women the opportunity to help with CFC activities such as tree planting, building dams and barrier nets for fish conservation, and community outreach activities. "After CI supported the SGs to donate interest to support CFC work, we are keeping engaged by having regular meetings with CFC to get an update on what CFC and their members are doing to fish conservation." However, interviewees report that the SG's influence and engagement more broadly in CFC's activities is still limited, with the SG's engagement restricted to only that specific donation.

Likewise, in Anlong Reang where CI supports the CFC via the SG, the relationship is strong. Both men and women interviewees stated that the SG decides how their interest should be used by the CFC, and that "if the CFC doesn't have a clear plan or does not fulfill their roles, the donations will not be released." This relationship has helped women in SGs to pay more attention to what CFC is doing and they have been involved in monitoring the effectiveness of the patrol and fishpond conservation. The SG is involved in CFC planning and provides inputs and suggestions to improve CFC work on fish conservation and enhancing patrols. A male CFC member points to the benefits of this, that it makes CFC have "more accountability and transparency."

In the other more established communities of Kampong Prak and Srey Chek, these successes are not as pronounced. While the purpose of enabling women to have more voice and opportunity in the CFC seems to be clear, the actual relationship is tenuous. Because the SG has the right to refuse a donation if there is insufficient explanation of proposed activities, this has reportedly caused some conflict in Kampong Prak. An additional problem in Kampong Prak appears to be that the SG is not being repaid on time or fully and thus interest accrual is slow; when the CFC then requests funds, it is insufficient to cover the patrol activities. In Srey Chek, where top-up funds were only received in early 2020 and follow-up was stymied by the COVID-19 pandemic, the SG is led by a man and women respondents explained that they are not engaged at all with the CFC.

In the newer project sites, this approach does not yet appear to be working effectively. With the SGs and CFCs only recently developed and initiated during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (which severely restricted engagement) this is understandable. Interviewees report that basic information about the donations and purpose of linking the two groups is still largely unclear. CFC members noted that they need more training on how to request funds from the SGs, while a SG leader said that she knows they are supposed to release interest to CFC but nothing more about the purpose or process. Women across the three communities shared that they have very little, if any, influence on the CFCs and no oversight into how donated funds are used. As a woman SG leader in Peam Bang explained "there is no mechanism in which we can discuss and raise concerns related to CFC work... [the men] behave like we don't have knowledge and experience the same as them."

Consciousness & Capabilities

Progressing along the gender framework presented above, a change in consciousness and capabilities start to emerge. As women are exposed to new ideas, provided assets, and gain new skills, we would

hope to see more self-confidence, agency, and voice. And at the same time, we would also hope to see men begin to recognize these changes as positive and give women the space and support needed to succeed. As Anko explained, women's "confidence in public and capacity to mobilize resources to support their communities have progressively increased."

The interviews and focus groups specifically asked about changes at the individual level that can be attributed to participation in the project activities, and similar to other results, there was great variety across project sites. In Akol, both women and men reported positive changes in women's confidence to lead groups and speak in meetings. The women's focus group stated that "with the skills we have gained, we feel proud of ourselves that we have engaged in economic activities." As the leader of the Savings Group highlighted, women have increasingly seen an importance of their role as income earners for the family. A woman explained that she "gained more confidence to talk in meetings, workshops and in the public, while [before] I was so quiet and shy to say anything to outsiders." This leadership has also been recognized and increasingly respected by their male counterparts, who report "remarkable changes" and recognize the benefits of better livelihoods with increased income. And while some interviewees noted that not everybody is supportive, "most men in the community now value the leadership of women."

Interestingly in Kampong Prak, while women were silent on any increase in their agency, the men's focus group and individuals highlighted changes they have observed. Primarily, they note that women's participation and confidence in expressing opinions has increased. Women are more active in raising concerns about illegal fishing and reporting fishing offenses. This is echoed to some extent in Anglong Reang where two individual men reported seeing changes in women's understanding of their rights and their confidence in talking at meetings.

Respondents in the other communities (SreyChek, Peam Bang, Pov Veuy, and Doun Sdaeung) did not share observations of this type of change, despite being asked directly.

Informal norms & exclusionary practices

Building on women's increased self-confidence and support from men, we would then expect to see changes in informal norms and exclusionary practices. These changes might be slight, small steppingstones in the right direction, but still notable. As CI staff members explained, there are increasing examples of male role models, especially among CFC members, to not use violence, to support their spouse in participation in community activities and capacity development, and to take on household chores while their spouse is busy with fish processing. Another noted that as women generate their own income through fish processing, they start to have more voice in making key decisions at home jointly with their spouse.

In Akol, we can start to see movement towards some of these changes. As one woman explained, "women showed their increase in confidence, and they feel like they're having more power and influence in decision-making in the family as well as talking in the public." The women's focus group highlights that they feel they "have more voice in negotiating with [their] spouse; feeling they are listened to more than in the past and making joint decisions such as taking loans and investment." A woman engaged in the SG and fish processing commented that since joining the project activities and generating income for her family, she feels she has more voice and power to say 'yes' or 'no' to household decisions. These changes are echoed positively by the men interviewed, who talked about the need to listen to each other "as women are also the main income earners in the family through their fish processing."

This trend is less clear in other communities, with mixed responses. The changes at this level can be quite varied across families, households, couples, and individuals as their perceptions and attitudes change, so this inconsistency is to be expected. Furthermore, this type of shift takes time so only small changes may be occurring, such as differences in work roles but not yet leading to meaningful changes in household decision-making. For example, responses (mostly from men) in Kampong Prak, Srey Chek, Anlong Reang highlight that men are taking on more housework, childcare, and fish processing if their wives are busy, yet women respondents largely report that the project interventions have not resulted in any significant changes in household decision-making. With the exception of two respondents in Doun Sdaeung who mentioned that men may help wives with fish processing, a majority of respondents in the newer communities were silent on changes in household responsibilities.

An important indication of shifting gender norms is changes in gender-based violence, especially in a place like this where it is common⁵. This was a common topic in interviews across the project sites (particularly related to domestic or intimate partner violence) despite no prompting from the interviewer. Anko notes that women have increased their understanding about their rights, and both women and men have increased awareness on the prevention of domestic violence and relevant laws. Several respondents pointed to both CI's awareness raising on gender as well as another organization's specific focus on gender-based violence (RFCD⁶) for driving this change. In every Akol interview and focus group, respondents noted the marked decrease in violence. The women's focus group reported that this year there were no domestic violence cases in the community, while a man interviewed recounted his own personal decision to stop resorting to violence against his spouse and pivot toward supporting her in capacity development and participation in community activities.

In the other established communities, the change is less universal but there are still some positive trends. While the women's focus group in Kampong Prak stated that "domestic violence is ongoing every day", other respondents (another woman and several men) all reported that it has decreased "as women have better understanding about their rights and relevant laws and interventions from local authorities." In the newer communities, most respondents reported that domestic violence continues and is perceived as acceptable, while the male focus group in Doun Sdaeung said it was decreasing due to education.

Formal rules & policies

As informal norms shift, formal rules and policies will eventually be updated to support more parity and equality. This is arguably the change that takes the longest but is the one that embeds equality into the institutions, practices, policies, and laws. As an example, we might see a CFC commit to earmarking a certain number of seats to women, or process changes at community meetings that support women to actively engage in decision making or holding meaningful leadership positions.

While this case study has been able to indicate some progression towards some gender equality, changes in formal rules remain elusive. Despite women's economic success, increase in self-confidence and recognition from others, increased influence and respect at the household level and decreased violence, the women's focus group in Akol explains that women "still have little voice in our community fishery." A CI staff member agreed, saying that although there are some changes for women's capacity

⁵ The [National Survey on Women's Health and Life Experience in Cambodia](#) reports that 21-24% of women in rural Cambodia have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence in their lifetime.

⁶ Rural Friend Community for Development

and leadership in SG management and CFCs, most women members still lack confidence and don't have much voice in community meetings in comparison to men, and that major decisions are still made by men at home and in the community. None of the interviews or focus groups suggested that CFCs might be considering changes to rules or policies to codify roles or leadership positions for women.

Conclusion

Certainly, it is important to recognize there are often many other actors and influences (government, other NGOs, media, global events, etc.) that impact the social dynamics and gender norms in a community. Conservation International is but one of those actors, and any contribution of change that is gleaned from these interviews and focus groups should be understood as such. As an example, in Akol, several respondents mentioned the non-profit Rural Friend Community for Development (RFCD) as playing an important role promoting gender equality and reducing domestic violence. Their efforts have clearly had an impact on household dynamics.

Upon reflection of the program against the gender framework presented above, the project sites clearly lie at different places on the framework's progression. It is likely not a coincidence that the community in which CI has been engaged the longest (Akol) is also the most successful; likewise, the other more established project sites are comparatively farther along the framework's progression than the newer sites. Figure 3 provides an imperfect, and highly generalized depiction of where each case study site sits within the framework. As a CI staff member explains, the major changes regarding women's leadership and economic empowerment really come from those communities where CI has been engaged for several years. This underscores the importance of sustained engagement. With continued tailored inputs and engagement, it is quite possible that the other communities will continue to advance towards the successes that Akol has observed.

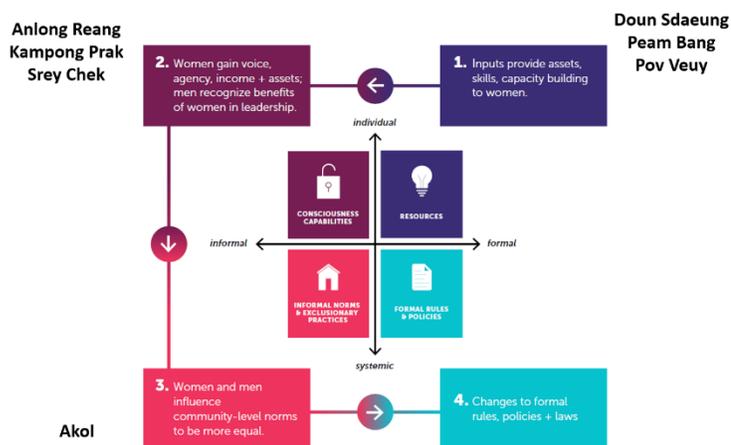


Figure 3: Estimate of where each project site lies along the

Several specific observations come directly from the interview respondents and the consultants who gathered data:

- Underlying social gaps present a challenging context in which to operate.** There are always many competing needs, all of them equally important and interlinked. In these interviews, issues of access to good education and healthcare, struggles related to young pregnancy and marriage, poverty, and gender-based violence all surfaced. For example, many interviews highlighted women's low levels of education, and particularly illiteracy, as a key barrier to success of the savings groups and fish processing. Our work should acknowledge these important issues which may diminish, or even block, the achievements of our conservation efforts. These large, complex

social issues cannot be siloed from conservation efforts as they underpin social cohesion and capacity, and any strategy that seeks to integrate them all will require coordination among various organizations.

- **A focus on economic empowerment is important but is only one piece of the puzzle.** While women’s economic empowerment is central to gender equality, poverty eradication, and inclusive economic growth, it alone will likely not have the desired effect. One of the women’s focus groups explained that the economic empowerment activities are not enough for securing the gains in gender equality: “even if women have engaged in more income activities, if their male counterparts do not recognize women’s contributions, the domestic violence cases will continue.” Concerns about adding an additional burden to women’s workload is also a key consideration, especially when it is not accompanied by shifts in household responsibilities. The same women’s focus group also explained that if women engage in income activities, but their male counterparts do not recognize women’s contribution, women will play triple roles: household/child & elder care, community engagement, and economic activities. In another project site, interviewees expressed the need to address more than just economic issues, that issues around education, violence, and inequality are equally important.
- **Interventions must be tailored to what will work best.** Even in the relatively small geographical context of the Tonle Sap, there is clearly great variety in access to markets, availability of land and assets, cohesion within the community, and other variables. For example, fish processing which works so well in Akol just simply is not suitable in other communities (at least at this time) due to high market demand for fresh fish. Interviewees mentioned vegetable growing and water hyacinth processing as possible income generating options, although like fish processing, these will only work in certain places. These other initiatives will require similar business/entrepreneurship skills and linkages to provincial and national markets or cooperatives, similar to what has happened with smoked fish.
- **Engagement with men and male leaders is critical.** Working with women alone will not address many of the cultural and normative barriers that impede gender equality; men play an equally important role as spouses, family members, and leaders who can either uphold discriminatory and unequal norms or act to end them. Offering activities like household joint financial planning may be a good way to support collective decision-making about income and expenses.

Finally, it is also important to bear in mind that the focus of CI Cambodia’s work in the Tonle Sap is freshwater and fishery conservation with the goals of restoring ecosystem health, building climate resilience, and improving lives. Gender transformation was not a specific goal or focus of the program, however the gender-related efforts described in this study are comparatively more comprehensive, systematic, and sustained than in most other CI programs⁷. This program, and this case study, provide important lessons and innovative, good practices that may be adapted across other conservation initiatives.

⁷ An observation by CI’s Senior Gender Advisor.



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Appendix 1: Research guides

Research guides were translated and administered in Khmer.

Individual questionnaire & focus groups (male)

1. What is your role or affiliation with the program?
2. Approximately how many years have you engaged with project activities?
3. Can you describe any positive and/or negative changes you have seen with respect to gender norms and women's leadership that can be attributed to this project? (*Interviewer prompt for changes at different levels if needed - individual level, household level, community level*)
 - a. Do you feel that women's leadership and ability to effectively participate in decision-making is improved because of this program? How?
4. In your opinion, what specific project activities have been the most influential in making those changes? Why?
5. How have women's influence and engagement in the Community Fishery Committees changed?

If they're engaged in a CFC that receives funds from a savings group:

6. Can you describe how the savings group donations to the CFC have influenced women's ability to engage meaningfully in fisheries management?
7. Do you have any suggestions for how the program could be even more supportive of women's leadership and gender equality?

Individual questionnaire & focus groups (female)

1. What is your role or affiliation with the program?
2. Approximately how many years have you engaged with project activities?
3. Can you describe any positive and/or negative changes you have seen with respect to gender norms and women's leadership in that can be attributed to this project? (*Interviewer prompt for changes at different levels if needed - individual level, household level, community level*)
 - a. Do you feel that your leadership and ability to effectively participate in decision-making is improved because of this program? How?
 - b. What can you do now (because of the project support) that you couldn't do before? In other words, what has your involvement in this project helped you to do?
4. In your opinion, what specific project activities have been the most influential in making those changes? Why?
5. How have women's influence and engagement in the Community Fishery Committees changed?

If they're engaged in a savings group that donates funds to a CFC:

- Can you describe how the savings group donations to the CFC have influenced women's ability to engage meaningfully in fisheries management?

If they have a wood saving stoves:

- What are you able to do now with the time that you save?

If they are profiting from improved fish processing & marketing:

- How has increased income changed your life and lifestyle?
6. Do you have any suggestions for how the program could be even more supportive of women's leadership and gender equality?

Interviews with staff from supporting organizations: Conservation International & ANKO

1. What changes have you observed or been made aware of with respect to gender and women's empowerment in the project site (attributable to CI's work)?
2. What specific activities or interventions do you think have been the most impactful or influential in making those changes? Why?
3. Are there any unintended negative consequences of these activities that you're aware of?
 - a. if yes, do you have any suggestions for how to mitigate and respond?
4. What suggestions do you have for further advancing gender equality & women's empowerment in this project context?