Ecofeminism Evolution: Political Openness and Readiness of Gender Evolution in the Case of Mong Ton Dam Project

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyse the gender roles in water management in Wan Sala Village, Mongton Township. This also examines the motivation and discouragement of women in the three-targeted townships along the Thanlwin River basin to be engaged in the campaign against the Mong Ton hydropower project on the Thanlwin River in Shan State, Myanmar. The findings and analysis can be used to assist related institutions and stakeholders in broadening their understanding on gender-based power inequalities in water governance. Given the social, political and geographical context, the methodologies used are non-traditional research approaches which employed previously inexperienced local youth as principal researchers as important part of data analysis and, capacity building and awareness rising are considered equally important as research as research findings, and a hybrid of academic research and fact findings strategy which employs video as a tool. The finding reveals that even though labor division is obvious between men and women, the decision-making processes within the family towards water management are equal. The gaps between the motivation and discouragement of women to be engaged in campaign against the Mong Ton Dam project are depending on information accessibility, their

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knowledge and capability, their previous experiences engagement with outsider, the location of the meeting, were conducted with an equal gender balance.

This study found themselves with sufficient information on the Mong Ton Dam project, encouraging them to have exposure trips to other communities, providing them the space to participate in the campaign against the Mong Ton Dam project, and equip them with proper skills to protect their community and the Thanlwin River Basin.

**Introduction**

“The diverse connections between the bond of women and nature, and the aspiration to replace the injustice of a dominating structure with a more just non-dominating approach to address the environmental problems.” (Mies & Shiva, 1993)

The role of women in the campaign activities to protect the Thanlwin River in Shan State is important in asserting gender equality in water governance. The concept of eco-feminism is an analytical tool that that guides this paper to understand deeper the connections between women and nature, water resources management, the power relationship between men and women, and the labor division in the water governance systems. This paper also discusses the extent to which women are being engaged to take action to resist the negative forces of the proposed Mong Ton hydropower project in Shan State, Myanmar.

The term eco-feminism was pioneered by Francoise D'Eaubonne in 1980 and became a popular term in protests and actions against continued environmental crisis and ecological disaster (Mies & Shiva, 1993). It is a critique of patriarchal structure in the society which is analysed alongside with the degradation of nature – two themes that link to the oppression of women (Mies & Shiva, 1993). To summarize on the understanding of this concept is to see the diverse connections between the bond of women and nature, and the aspiration to replace the injustice
of a dominating structure with a more just and non-dominating approach to address the environmental problems.

The structure of this paper as premised by this introduction (Section 1), is divided into five parts.

Section 2 discusses the methodology of the study; Section 3 focuses the discussion on the conceptual tool to analyse the case study; Section 4 articulates the findings; and, Section 5 offers a conclusion for this paper.

Methodology

This research used appropriate approaches to address the research problem. Due to the non-traditional nature of this research project, some methodologies employed consider the following: 1) it employed previously inexperienced local youth as principal researchers, 2) it used videos as a tool in data analysis, 3) participation in capacity building and awareness raising activities, findings, and 4) it maximized the human, financial, and physical resources of two projects under the Water Land Ecosystem program (MK21 and MK31) (a hybrid of academic research and fact finding project). The reason to include inexperience local youth in the research process was to empower them to become active participants in the data analysis and also for them to get involved in the campaign to protect their water resources. As the youths have limited capacity to write the paper itself, video documentation was used during their research to reveal the findings. Youth involvement was needed not only for collecting the data in the field, but also to see the changes of youths and women through the exchange trips and to compare the case of Mong Pan and Wan Sala youths in terms of their different levels of development and awareness especially on women empowerment. Furthermore, the reason for using this approach in Wan Sala Village was that it is surrounded by militaries, armed groups and border guard force (BGF). It is also a zone for illegal drugs where local people are not well educated and not interested in social and political issues and would rather get involved in their day to day livelihoods. Young people in this area are poorly
informed about development projects such as the Mongton Dam, and are living under the oppression for six decades, making them difficult to participate in any political actions.

Figure 1. Local youth researchers, film-makers and volunteers

The research sites are located in Mong Ton, Mong Pan, and Kun Heng Townships, where potential affected communities living along the Thanlwin River were identified.

Figure 2. The Research Sites
Data collection and analysis

This research used both primary and secondary sources of information through the use of qualitative research methods such as survey questionnaires (with open-ended questions), in-depth interviews, focus group discussions in the Wan Sala Village, and formal interviews with key informants in the three townships, and desk research.

The field research is conducted by interviewing key informants from the three townships, including both women who have either already been engaged in the social movement or those who have not been involved in any movements. Civil society groups supporting communities were also included in the interviews. In Mong Ton Township, 25 people from Wan Sala Village participated in in-depth interviews. The focus group discussions (FGD) on water utilization and gender issues were conducted three times (one was with a women’s group and the other two with both men and women). In Kun Heng Township, 17 villagers from Na Sae and Na Kone Villages which are next to the Nam Pang river bank were selected for the in-depth interviews. In Mong Pan Township, 12 people from Hue Ma Pheng and Kun Keng villages participated in in-depth interviews and three FGDs were conducted in these areas as well (one with female participants only and two with both men and women). The sampling method was based on the criteria that: 1) they are living along the Thanlwin River basin and its tributary, 2) they are local activists who are involved in the campaign against the dam project. The topic covered in the interviews were the water sources, water utilization and management in the communities, gender roles in the communities, and the reason of their involvement/non-involvement in the campaign against the Mong Ton Dam project. To ensure that data from the research and its findings are valid and reliable, the researchers used a range of sources of information from different key informants and did a validation exercise with the villagers themselves. The interviews were conducted in Shan language and were transcribed and translated in English.
Eco-feminism as an analytical tool

The role of women in the campaign activities to protect the Thanlwin River in Shan State is important in asserting gender equality in water governance. The concept of eco-feminism is an analytical tool that is used to guide this paper to understand the deeper connections between women and nature, water resources management, the power relationship between men and women, and the labor division in the water governance systems. This paper also discusses the extent to which women are being engaged to take action to resist the negative forces of the proposed Mong Ton hydropower project in Shan State, Myanmar.

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Shiva and other ecofeminists oppose war and capitalism because they are both seen as patriarchal structures. Therefore, Shiva argued that with the escalation of war there is a consequence of "musclemen" culture, and rape and other violence against women (womenjusticeecology, 2009). The concerns of Shiva reflected the situation in the case of mega development project in Myanmar. The issues of rape and oppression to women seems to be unavoidable when the cooperation's projects appear in the name of development in the conflict area where there is no rule of law and that women hold a traditionally inferior role to men.

Shiva claims that women's liberation cannot be attained without making efforts to advocate for the preservation and liberation of all living things on this planet from the dominant patriarchal and capitalist worldview (Womenjusticeecology,
Her ecofeminist perspective makes no distinction between basic needs (food, clothing, shelter) and higher needs (freedom and knowledge) because she believes that freedom, knowledge and progress are essential for the liberation of both women and the environment (womenjusticeecology, 2009). However, this paper argues that political openness, knowledge and progress are essential for gender evolution and the environment. Gender evolution in this particular context is the development of gender knowledge and the progress of women taking action in social movement. Therefore, women need to empower themselves to have a deep understanding on gender equality and to be able to participate in social movement and get involved in decision making processes.

In the case of the Mong Ton Dam project is on the mainstream of Thanlwin River, women have been living under the oppression of military government where there they have limited freedom of expression, limited right to assembly and participation in the political decision-making for several decades until 2010. However, despite this situation many women have been involved in the consultation meetings across Shan State. These women have expressed their concerns on the negative impacts of the project. Therefore, it is very interesting to explore the motivation and limitations of women who are involved in the social movement and those who are living in a conflict zone laden with a male-dominated culture in order to bring justice for their community and the Thanlwin River. Further, it was observed that majority of women are also left behind in the anti-dam campaign activities being done along the Thanlwin River.

The findings of this research will therefore help identify the motivation/s of women who are actively involved in the campaigns against the dam project and the discouragement of women who did not engage in the campaigns. These results can assist related institutions and stakeholders to broaden their understanding on gender relationships, power inequalities related to hydropower development projects, to and address the gender gaps in the water governance system. Finally, this research can create awareness among relevant stakeholders.

emphasizing gender equality in water governance at different levels. Therefore, this research tends to complement the actions being done by organizations and institutions that are specifically working on water related issues, gender equality, sustainable development, and social justice for communities living along the Thanlwin River basin.

Findings

This section will identify the key drivers for women toward their participation/non-participation in the campaigns to protect Thanlwin River issue.

Life in Wan Sala Village

Wan Sala village is located next to the Thanlwin River bank in Mong Ton Township, Eastern Shan State. The village is located downstream 19 miles away from the proposed Mong Ton Dam site. The village has a registered population of 239 people comprising of 46 households. The majority of the population belong to Shan ethnic group and some Burmese people living in the village. The main livelihoods of the villagers include fishing, gardening, trading, collecting non-timber forest products, hunting and seasonal riverbank agriculture. The small-scale fishermen always have to ask permission from Myanmar military camp whenever they go near the dam site. As there is no market in the village, every household is doing small gardening where creeks flow through behind their houses. Villagers can buy dry goods at the small shops in the village. Some families collect non-timber forest seasonally such as bamboo, mushroom, flowers and herbs. Some family also collect lacquer year round and sell it to some brokers. Some families also hunt wildlife in the forests. The village is in a wooded, hilly area and has only a few acres of rice paddy field that is around 3 acres in total.
Figure 3. Overview of Wan Sala Village from the top of the mountain

Water Resources Availability and Utilization

Water is very essential for everyday life of people. Water provides not only for their livelihoods, it also an important means to bond and express their culture and demonstrate relationships in the communities. The availability of water resources in Shan State are variable. The common water resources form the research sites are well, underground water, creek, stream, river, and water from the rain. The Thanlwin River is very special for people living along the river basin as one villager expressed:

“Nam Khone/ Thanlwin River is very special for us. It is very cool and available year round. We can keep it for a night and then next day it becomes clear and clean.”

(Villager 1, WSL, 2015)
Wan Sala Village in Mong Ton Township is surrounded by many creaks including Hue Sala, Hue Sang, Hue Sam Sen, Hue Seng, Hue Pa Lao, Hue Pa Noi and Hoi Pa Laung, and is located along the riverbank of the Thanlwin River. Villagers collect drinking water from Sala Creek in the dry season and from Thanlwin River for all seasons. Livelihoods of people are depending on Thanlwin River for fishing and riverbank gardening. The fish that they catch and food that they harvest from the garden are only for household consumption because there is no market in the small village. “During the dry season, on the rich fertile soil along the Thanlwin River, we plant potatoes and peanuts as riverbank agriculture” (Lone Naw, WSL, 2015). The villages are generating electricity from the small creaks. “We produce our own electricity from Sala creek by adopting the technic from the Thai Company” (Lone Naw, Sala, 2015).

**Gender Roles**

There are three types of utilizing water in every household. It is very obvious to see the different roles of gender in the remote areas. There are reproductive work for household use, productive work for economic purpose, and work within/for the community. The responsibility between women and men can also be seen depending on the utilization of water. According to the interviews and observations, the household chore is seen as the duty of women and getting water for family use is the responsibility of women. Generating income is regarded as the obligation of men, thus getting water for economic purpose is the responsibility of men. Gender role in social activities also can be distinguished based on their physical strength and management ability. While women are taking a role in management matters, men are still the main responsible for manual labor that mainly requires their physical strength. As one villager expressed:

“We, women in the family manage the entire chore including water utilization because men are very busy for collecting food in the forest and earning money for our family. For the farming, taking water from the stream to the farm will be responsible by men and planning the seeds is mainly responsible by women.” (Nang Neaung, WSL, 2015).
Based on the research findings, household chore is an everyday task, unlike pumping water from the stream to the farm which is only done at some occasions. Fishing is done seasonally and carrying water with the use of a vehicle is only done when needed. Taking the position of reproductive work, women use more energy in getting water even for small amounts of water as they do this manually. With men, they are aided with machines and vehicles to collect water that is used for economic purposes. For example, men water tubes to deliver water from the water resources to the farmland.

Women’s daily life activities are more strongly bonded with the natural environment than men. According to Mellor (2008), to link with the concept of eco-feminism, it is a connection between women and nature as women is regarded as nurturing earth mothers with a kind of sympathetic awareness of nature that men don’t have.

“For the community development activity like digging canal, all the community members take responsibility together” (Long Naw, WSL, 2015). Women have full authority to make decision within their responsibility in the community festival like preparing food, offering food to the guests, conducting culture affair, preparing decoration for ceremony, among others. Biologically, men are stronger in terms of physical structure such as pumping water, carry heavy materials to the meeting venue, connect electricity to the meeting venue, and arrange the festival venue.

Even though the labor division is obvious between men and women, the decision making process within the family seems to be equal. “Men earn money and women manage the finances in our household. When we want to buy things, we make the decision together” (Nang Neaung, Pa Htoon, and Long Naw, WSL, 2015). Therefore, the power relationship between men and women is equal. However, it is not always the case that women always manage the finances in the family. This also depends on the ability of men and women to carry on this task within the family. This power relationship in the family, therefore, changes.
There is no definite formula for how gender-based power relationship is demonstrated. The gender roles change depending on location, knowledge level, ability and age. The number of people participated in this research was based on their location and working season. In the community activity and meetings, the number of men and women’s participation was not a big deal. In general women take a leadership role in informal meetings, as well as in their household. In contrast, men are more significant and have higher position to lead in the formal meeting. However, the way in which people are inclusively making decision together is a matter to measure the gender equality.

Traditional beliefs and cultural structure are the key factors that shape the gender role in the society. It was observed in the communities that men sit in front while women sit at the back during meetings set in the temple. In this occasion, men lead the discussion and women listen from behind and do not talk much. Whenever the community meeting is conducted in the village, a community center or head village home, men sit at one side and women sit at another side forming a circle. This gives an impression that women and men are seated in the same level. However, the finding also revealed that women do not dare to raise their concerns in the meeting because of the fear of making the wrong decision. Based on the group discussion, one shared that:

“Even though we are in the meeting, we do not take a lead in making decisions. More often, the decision is made equally at home within our family. For example, for the community development fund, we do not decide how much we want to donate during the community meeting; we go back home and we decide together within the family and then do the one that agreed afterwards.” (NHK, MP, 2015)

Choosing the location for community meetings also becomes an issue which can be a barrier for women to stand out or participate. For example, if the meeting is conducted in the temple, the meeting setting is changed and that women’s participation will also be limited.
Overview of the Mong Ton Dam project

Five dams have been proposed to be built on the mainstream Thanlwin River. These are: Kunlong Dam (1400 megawatt), Nong Pha Dam (1000 megawatt), Mong Ton Dam (7110 megawatt) in Shan State; Ywathit Dam in Kayah State (4000 megawatt) and Hat Gyi Dam in Karen State (1360 megawatt). Mong Ton Dam will be the biggest hydropower project on the Thanlwin River and it will also be the biggest one in Southeast Asia with a reservoir the size of Singapore and a dam as high as a five-story building. According to the SMEC3 in its environmental impact assessment (EIA) company fact sheet, the installed capacity is 7000 MW and its key project features are: 241 meters height with a reservoir measuring 641 square kilometers. Forty-five per cent of the electricity will be exported to China and 45% will be sold to Thailand, and 10% will be for the domestic use. The dam developers are China Three Gorges Project Corporation, Sinohydro Corporation4, China Southern Power Grid, Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), and International Group of Entrepreneurs Co.

- As Mong Ton Dam’s reservoir is almost the same size of Singapore (SMEC Fact Sheet, 2015).

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3 SMEC Holdings Limited (Snowy Mountain Engineering Corporation) is an Australian-based firm that provides consulting services on major infrastructure projects around the world.
4 Sinohydro is a Chinese state-owned hydropower engineering and construction company.
• Mong Ton Dam’s reservoir is almost the same size of Singapore (SMEC Fact Sheet, 2015).

• Mong Ton Dam is located 19 kilometers from Wan Sala Village, Mong Ton Township. It was previously known as the Tasang Dam and it has been begun in 2007 with the key Thai MDX Company. The MDX Company constructed one small hydropower on the Sala creek, in the Wan Sala Village that intended to feed the energy needs of the work site during the construction of the Tasang Dam (Mong Ton dam) project. The small Tasang hydro power station, office, and building are still in the Wan Sala village but there are no Thai workers present in the village except some local staff maintaining the structure and the power station.

Figure 5. MDX Thai company's building in the Wan Sala village
Potential Impacts of the dam

Referring to the statements from civil society organisations (CSOs) submitted to the SMEC in September 2015, a dam the size of Mong Ton would impact thousands of people, both those flooded by the reservoir and those downstream whose livelihoods would be gravely affected by disruption of water flow, sediment loads and loss of fisheries. A Shan lady, parliamentary member, Nang KhinHtar Yee said:

“Because of the Mong Ton Dam project, the natural beauty of one thousand islands will be flooded under the water forever. Not to mention other place, only in Kun Heng Township, the population around 50,000 will have to relocate to other places. It is only highlight on one small spot of affected area.” (date of speech or interview)

Further, the building of this dam would increase militarization and likelihood of armed conflict, not to mention deforestation, pollution and host of social ills like drugs and diseases brought by workers from China and elsewhere in Myanmar. Thus, the dam is likely to cause more conflict in the brown zone.

Lessons learnt from Tasang Dam project in the 1996s is that more than 300,000 people had been forced to relocate and lots of human rights abuses were reported during the preliminary study of the project. More often than not, dam projects do not count the environmental and social cost in its real cost. In reality, dam building is costing more than estimated and recovering from the impact of the dam often takes longer than expected. In reality, considering the fluctuation rate in the economy, dam is not a cheap energy for people as dam developers advocate for.

In terms of socio-political impact, dam projects lay on a very sensitive area with history of military intimidation and conflict. As a consequence of dam building, the military camps will be increased which inevitably have a tendency to create more conflicts around the dam sites. Downstream of the Mong Ton Dam project, each side of Thanlwin River is occupied by Burmese military outposts. Lahu Border Guard Force (BGF) are also based close to the proposed Mong
Ton dam site. Shan-armed group also occupy the upstream and downstream areas along the Thanlwin River in Shan State. In 2009, the Shan armed group RCSS/SSA arrested Chinese engineering groups who came to do the feasibility study of Mong Ton dam project but were later on released. According to U Khun Tun Oo, senior member of Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD):

"Extract the natural resources from ethnic groups but they do not get benefit at all from the development project instead carry a burden of social and environmental cost. According to the fundamental human rights, if the dam goes ahead without the consent of local people it is going to effect the national ceasefire agreement and peace reconciliation in Myanmar."

Given that the dams are in the conflict zone, all the proposed dams on the Thanlwin River including Mong Ton Dam are not economically feasible.

As the potential impacts are so huge, it is essential to have a meaningful public participation in the primary state of EIA and social impact assessment (SIA) processes. With regard to the proposed Mong Ton Dam project in Eastern Shan State, SMEC has been hired to conduct the EIA and SIA studies. SMEC attempted to hold consultation meetings in many places across Shan State. It was the first time ever in the history of Shan State that consultation meetings were held with regard to a mega development project.

However, the local people living along the Thanlwin River basin are poorly informed about the Mong Ton Dam project, and many do not have access to information related to the project as well as the impacts of the dam. During consultative meetings in Taunggyi, Kun Heng, and Lang Khur, SMEC did not provide enough information about the potential social and environmental impacts of the dam, flooding zone, and relocation plan. SMEC was alleged as carrying out the studies in a manner that was not transparent and inclusive in inviting the potential affected communities in the consultation meetings held.
Social movement around the proposed Mong Ton Dam project

Due to the limited public participation and the lack of transparency in the SMEC’s EIA and SIA processes, over 200 CSOs and 23,717 individuals signed a statement on the Mong Ton Dam project and was addressed to SMEC. This was sent on August 25, 2015 when SMEC has started to refuse concerned communities and groups in participating in the EIA and SIA processes (Press release by Action for Shan State Rivers, 2015).

Prior to the press release, SMEC organized consultation meeting in Taunggyi on March 10, 2015. Many CSOs across Shan State joined the meeting and raised their concerns on the Mong Ton Dam project. According to a Mong Pan Youth Association member who witnessed the meeting in Taunggyi:

“SMEC Company chose to invite the villagers that give them a favor and who have been living far away from the dam site and will not get impacts from the dam project at all. They also did not reveal about to whom the benefit would go to. In fact, it is very clear that 90% of electricity is for export to neighboring countries, but they keep saying Myanmar needs electricity. I would claim that SMEC is contradicting its role in the project.” (Interview with MPYA member)

Figure 6. Consultation meeting conducted by SMEC in Taunggyi
On April 6, 2015, SMEC organized a public meeting in Mong Ton Township. The residents in Mong Ton, and the surrounded villages Pong Pa Kyin, Na Kong Mu and Wan Sala villages protested against the dam project by raising their concerns during the meeting.

On April 30, 2015, a public meeting in Kung Heng Township organized by SMEC was cancelled due to the protest action staged by over 300 local people from Kar Li, Kun Hing, KengLom, Keng Kham, NongKheo, WiengPui, Ho Pang, HsaiKhao, Wan Lao, Kung Pao, HsaiKhaoJarn, Wo Long, Na Pao, Wan Part, Nam Lan, Hsai Moan and Na Lin Lieng (Shan Human Right Foundation, 2015).

SMEC attempted to host many consultation meetings across Shan State. However, up to this day, SMEC and dam developers have not been to Wan Sala Village for information sharing and consultation meeting. “Though Wan Sala village is the closest village and is only 19 miles away from the dam site, the consultative meetings have not been conducted and the people have not been targeted to participate in the meeting” (Sam PaoHom, MP, 2015).

Political Spaces and the Gender Roles in Democratic Transition Period in Myanmar

Political openness is the key factor that allows women to actively participate in the political issue and community development. Through the years and until 2010, all the social activities and cultural affairs are under the control of the central government. Therefore, during the military rule, women engagement in the political issue was so rare due to security concerns.

Looking from 2011 onwards, there are some changes in Myanmar in terms of political and social reforms that involve law amendments, educational reforms, civil society movement participation, and gender evolution. Many political parties are blooming across the nation and the whole range of citizens (men, women, religious leaders, youth) are more actively engaged in the political issue. Women’s participation and engagement in the civil society movement is largely
observed since 2011. Despite living under an oppressive state whereby women are defending their lives against the Mong Ton Dam project, the evolution of gender perspectives has also been in progress with the changes. Those changes are based on the geographical location, education background, institution and the existence of leaders in the communities. While gender evolution in Wan Sala Village is left behind, women in other townships such as Mong Pan and Kun Heng Townships are progressing, especially in the democratic transition period in Myanmar.

As observed, women in Kun Heng Township especially those who are living in the town center and who are actively involved in the political party have developed their leadership roles in social, political, cultural engagement in the community. Women have become more participative than men in trainings, events, and campaign activities. This is also reflection from a great leading role model of Nang Wa Nu, a parliamentary member, the representative of Shan National Development Party. Women have since then following her footsteps in engaging political issues and working for community development. As one villager said:

“Regarding small-scale water management, women take a lead on this because as far as I know men are indecisive to make decisions. Since Nang Wa Nu took a leadership role, we are also very active and the role of women has become stronger than before.” (Nang Kham Kong, KH, 2016)

Nang Wan Nu had been elected to be the representative of the Shan National Democratic Party (SNDP) to participate in the Parliament. Since she became the MP member, she has been attracting many women in the community to become members of SNDP. Women members are then empowered to engage in the political issue, social issue and environmental issue more and more. Under her leadership, SMEC Company cancelled the consultation meeting to be conducted in Kun Heng. Later on, many CSOs including Nang Wa Nu party collected signatures to stop the conduct of the EIA due to the limited public participation
and the lack of transparency of the process. This signature campaign prompted SMEC so halt the EIA on Mong Ton Dam. The mega project has then revised its design to follow a cascading plan. It was one of the successful stories of women take part/lead campaign on the mega development project.

Despite political openness, the changes did not reach to the grounds. Wan Sala Village is a so-called “brown zone” is under military occupation and where tourist is restricted to visit because of the ongoing conflict between armed groups and the military. Women in Wan Sala do not take a leading role in the campaign against the Mong Ton dam project even though Wan Sala is the closest village to Mong Ton Dam site. They are not interested in the social and political movement as they have been living under the oppression of a military government for decades, with no freedom of expression, no right to assemble and no freedom to celebrate their cultural events. The village is surrounded by Southern military base, Eastern military base and La Hu Border Force Guard. These military bases have been reported as places where abuse of power occurs. Except for emergency cases, local people avoid crossing these areas.

Because of the political situation attached to the military bases, women in Wan Sala Village lack opportunities to interact with the outside world because of its remote location, limited access to communication devices such as phones, no access to the Internet, and the extremely difficult and expensive transportation costs to roam around the area. During the raining season, commuters find it very difficult to travel as vehicles have to endure slippery and muddy roads (Figure 7). Sometimes, people have to wait one or two days for the roads to dry up. Because of this challenge, villagers reported receiving almost no information on the proposed dam projects on the Thanlwin River. With the many restrictions and limitations, it is indeed difficult for the villagers especially the women to imagine how to form a group and work as a team to protect the Thanlwin river and their livelihoods.
Traditional values on gender role that are more biased to men play as a barrier for women to take part in the political activities. Especially in the remote areas, women are largely regarded as bearer of culture in the society and are expected to be care-takers, to play supportive roles for men, to be family-oriented, to be well-behaved, and to focus on their reproduction roles. These expectations are barriers to advocate for women rights in communities. Taking a position of the bearer of culture, most women are not questioning traditional gender norms which have been affecting their well-being and have been carried over to the new generations.

Individual woman’s background can also be the key factor in defining one’s attribute of being either a leader or a follower. Some parents are very supportive and trust their daughter to travel alone as long as she gets to acquire new knowledge and works for the good sake. On the other hand, some women are not fully dependent on their family. As they have their own income, they have the freedom to travel and engage with outside communities. On the other hand, women who have no parents are much stronger in terms of physical, mental, and spiritual capacities. In this case, women engage more actively for community development to get accepted in the community. They are also more independent and more decisive as they have to raise and manage their life by themselves since they were young.
Based on the findings, some women are very caring about the social and environmental issues since these issues are the bonds of their life. Women living in the remote areas where their livelihoods are, mainly depend on the natural resources. Water is being regarded as their life, their culture and their history as what this woman villager expressed:

“Throughout a year, we use water from Nam Pan (stream) for our economic purpose and household use. Making traditional Shan paper is our main income and it needs a lot of water. We use water from the Nam Pan for basic needs such as drinking water, washing clothes, taking a bath. We use both Nam Pang and Nan Lueng for agriculture such as in growing rice, soybean, corn and sesame. We will lost our livelihood if the dam is built because of Mong Ton dam, I heard that it also will flood Kun Heng town and Nam Pan area.” (Nang Lu, KH, 2015).

The evolution of women’s active participation in political actions is well connected with the environment. Another villager shared about her motivations in joining the activities:

“Since I know about the Mong Ton Dam project, I started to join the campaign activities. In the signature campaign activity, I took a lead in collecting signatures of local communities opposing the project. I also know that the dam has both positive and negative impacts. The negative impact is enormous: flooding, pose difficulties to agriculture, and the beauty of our nature (one thousand islands) and Nam Pan (stream) will soon disappear. I can’t bear to see our heritage and our nature fade away from my eye. That why, I oppose the project.” (Nang Seng Aye, KH, 2016)

One obvious thing we have seen is that the existence of institutions and organizations also paved the way for women to take part in the social issues regarding the Mong Ton Dam project. Because of the institutional support, women have become fully informed about the issue and they have become decisive and more determined in protecting Thanlwin River. However, gender politics which is influenced by the patriarchy is still present in the communities. Most of men leaders in Mong Pan are dismissing the potential contributions to
and role of young women in the society. As one villager said: “Young lady are very shy, they do not dare to speak in front of people. When they get the microphone, they will cry” (your interview code, date of interview). Many youths became members of Mong Pan Youth Association since the group provides informal English speaking training as well as human rights and environmental trainings in the communities. After a few months, the organization brought the community leaders to see the youth speak in public with confidence, and they were so impressed to see the changes of the youth. Thus, the findings of this research reveal that youth’s behavior have significantly changed after participating in various activities of the youth organization.

After one year of the founding of Weaving Bonds Across Borders5 and the operation of Mong Pan Youth Association along the Thanlwin River basin in Shan State, it has been observed that many youth people, women and local people have been engaging in the campaign against the Mong Ton Dam project. The two organizations raise awareness on the current development projects on the mainstream Thanlwin River; empower youths and women through engaging them in evidence-based activities such as research, data collection, exposure trips to Thailand, and video documentation as an important tool for advocacy.

Figure 8. Advocacy exchange trip with Thai communities

5 Weaving Bonds Across Borders is a global network that connects and empowers young leaders and communities working for peace and justice in marginalized communities.
Mong Pan Youth Association and the local communities organized International River Day event in Wan Sala Village on 13-14 March 2016, in collaboration with the Thanlwin River Citizens from Kayah State, Mon State, Kayin State, and Save the Salween Network. The campaign activity aimed to promote the value of the river and to raise awareness on the impacts of the dam on the Thanlwin River Basin. This event which was attended by 150 local people was a clear demonstration of the value of community and issue-based awareness-raising and empowerment in mobilizing communities to act upon issues that are important to them.

Figure 9. International River Day on 14 March 2015 in Wan Sala Village

Conclusion

Despite the strong bond of women’s daily life activities to the natural environment, women have little recognition in the society as well as little decision making power in water and natural resources management. Women are usually the ones who suffer the most from impacts of development projects because of the lack of awareness and the absence of women’s meaningful participation in the decision-making processes. While, the rights of both women and men seem to be equal in terms of household management, findings of this paper point that women are still in the marginalized sector in the communities due to socio-economic and political barriers to women’s empowerment.
case of women in three villages in the Shan State, however, have improved their political status in the communities through participating in empowering activities led by civil society organizations and youth groups in Myanmar. Some regulations within the governance system also ignored the value of women. For e.g.: in the household registration and identity card, the status of men is put as the head of household and the working status of women is put as dependent. Those implications are one way or another has consequences affect to women life. For e.g.: in the case of resettlement plan by development project, the compensation will be given to the head of household but not the dependent. Given that situation, women do not have the rights to control the finance matter given by the project developers. Thus, Gender analysis should be considered in hydropower project because resettlement often means loss of access to resources like farmland, clean water, firewood and non-timber forest which is regarded as the obligation of women to responsible for. Resettlement is always a mean to loss of women’s autonomy and resources, it is very essential to consider gender analysis in the resettlement plan of hydropower project.

The hydropower development is historically linked to human rights abuses: forced relocation, rape, torture, killing due to conflict between armed groups and military around dam sites. Thus, the gendered impact of conflict, displacement, and sexual based violence need to be adequately addressed in law. On top of that, gendered impact assessment should be considered in the EIA process.

In addition, capacity development for women such as trainings on human rights and environmental protection, conflict resolution skills would be an effective way to raise the awareness of women’s individual rights and also to enhance their leadership skills as critical sector in the campaign against the dam projects on the Thanlwin River.
References

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