



Assessing the Impact of Women, Peace and Security Initiatives in Cambodia and Lao PDR:

A Baseline Study

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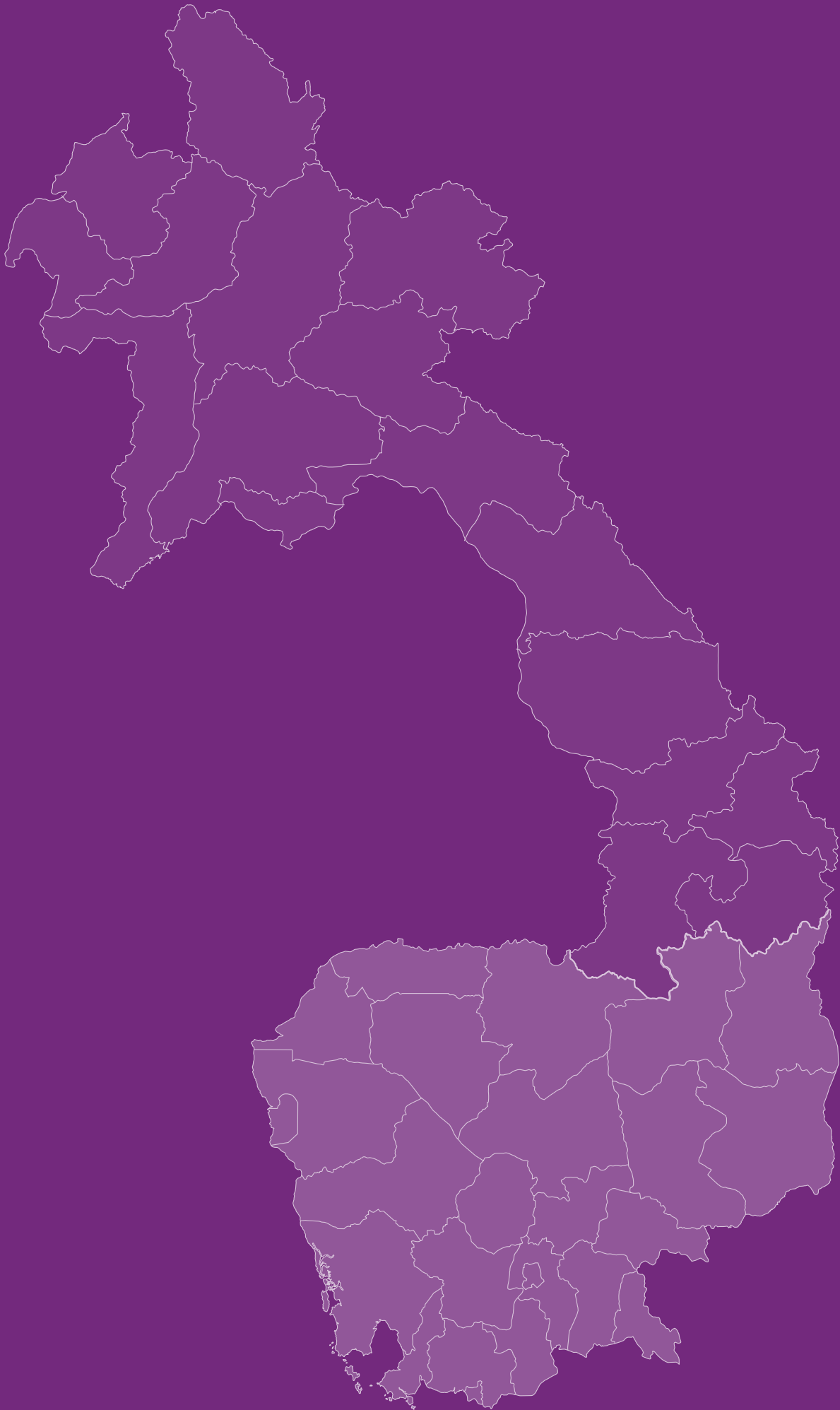
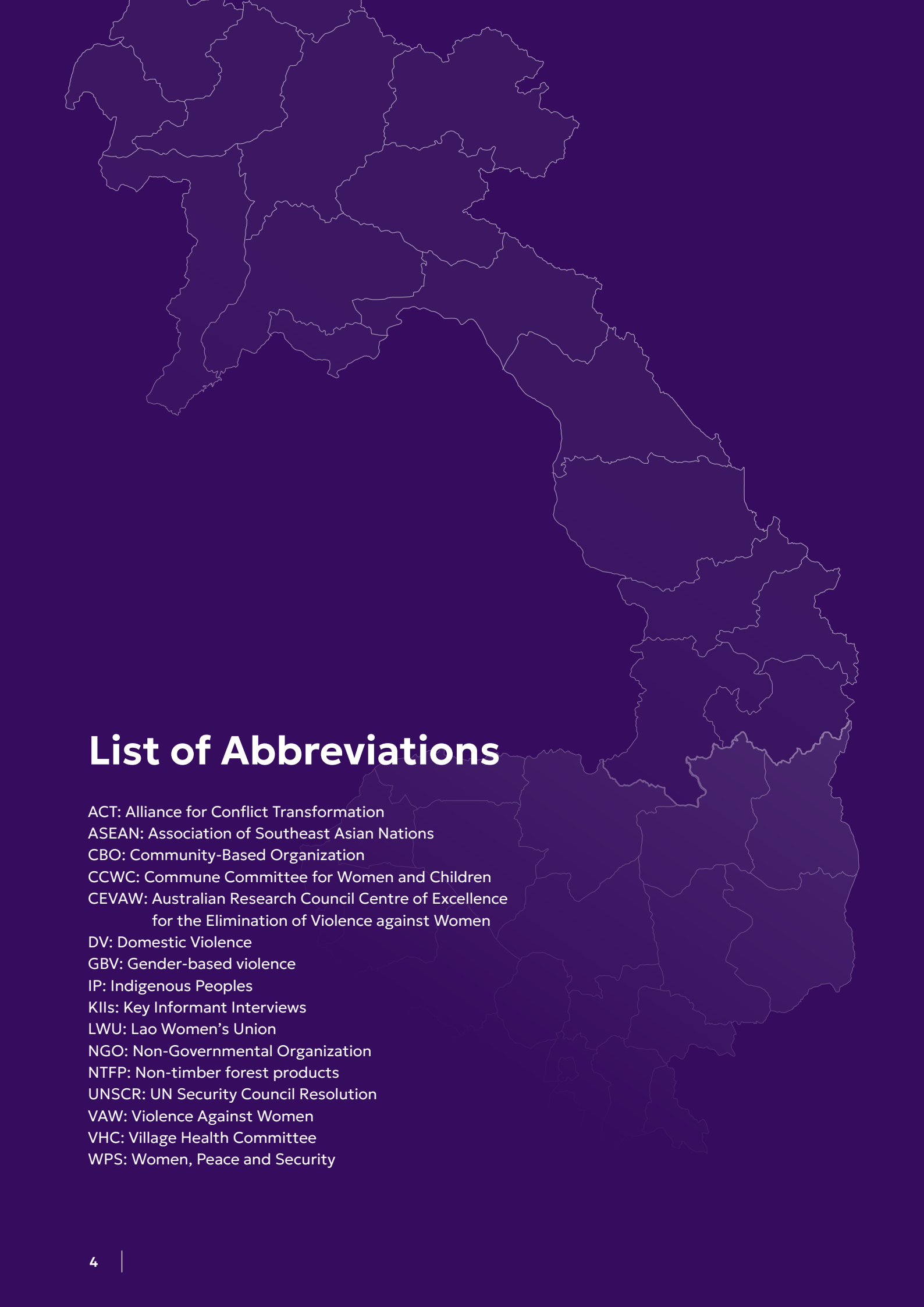


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List of Abbreviations

ACT: Alliance for Conflict Transformation
ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CBO: Community-Based Organization
CCWC: Commune Committee for Women and Children
CEVAW: Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence
for the Elimination of Violence against Women
DV: Domestic Violence
GBV: Gender-based violence
IP: Indigenous Peoples
KIIs: Key Informant Interviews
LWU: Lao Women's Union
NGO: Non-Governmental Organization
NTPF: Non-timber forest products
UNSCR: UN Security Council Resolution
VAW: Violence Against Women
VHC: Village Health Committee
WPS: Women, Peace and Security



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CEVAW Acknowledgment

We would like to thank the AMPLIFY program team who contributed to the development of this research: Sunsanee McDonnell, Carla Silbert, Somleuthay Phalikhanh, Carolyn O'Donnell, and Muhammad Ullah at the regional level; Khamsa Homsombath, Vilaiphone Phongsila, Lattanaphone Sitphasai and Ketxana Phommachak in Lao PDR; and Soklin Uy, Malika Soukhon, and Lyhong Srun in Cambodia. We further acknowledge the partner organizations of AMPLIFY and all the community-based organizations that supported this research process by providing access and guidance.

We extend our sincere gratitude to all interview participants who generously shared their lived experiences of insecurity for this research. We also thank the in-country research teams in Cambodia (Muny Chhit and Navy Sin) and Lao PDR (Lathdavone Lasachak and Souvanny Lorvixay), and all enumerators involved in the data collection process. Their commitment and care were essential to the successful completion of this study.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the AMPLIFY program and/or its funders. Responsibility for any errors remains with the authors.



AMPLIFY: Amplifying Women's Peace Actions in ASEAN

AMPLIFY is a five-year Women, Peace and Security (WPS) initiative that addresses the differential impacts of armed conflicts and human security threats on women in Southeast Asia by advancing their meaningful participation in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. AMPLIFY supports the implementation of ASEAN's Regional Plan of Action on WPS and focuses on Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar through policy development, civil society partnerships, and community-level peacebuilding. This initiative is funded by the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.



Bokeo, Lao PDR. AMPLIFY, October 2025

Executive Summary

In Southeast Asia and within the Greater Mekong insecurity results from both conflict and nontraditional sources, including land dispossession, migration, trafficking, gender-based violence (GBV), drug economies, and climate-related disasters. The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, a normative framework established by UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions, recognizes that men and women experience this insecurity differently, and that women’s meaningful participation in preventing and responding to insecurity is vital to sustainable peace. ASEAN member states have committed to WPS principles through the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on WPS (2022). However, this regional policy framework has yet to be implemented in community-level practice.

In Cambodia and the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), women sustain everyday security through mediation, caregiving, community mobilization, and informal monitoring. However, they remain systematically excluded from the formal institutions where security decisions are made. This flagship research study, conducted alongside The Amplifying Women’s Peace Actions in ASEAN (AMPLIFY) program, provides community-level empirical evidence of how this exclusion operates across four provinces vulnerable to nontraditional security challenges. The report analyses what the marginalization of women in security decision-making means for efforts to establish and sustain more inclusive peace.

This report presents the first phase of a longitudinal study (baseline) conducted in Cambodia and the Lao PDR. It provides both the baseline for the program as well as new empirical evidence on how women and men experience insecurity at the community level. In doing so, it addresses a gap in regional WPS knowledge by examining community-level insecurity in two Greater Mekong countries that have received comparatively limited attention. The study aims to test and refine the AMPLIFY program's theory of change, which states that if women meaningfully engage in WPS actions, including through community-level participation and leadership, this will mitigate the harm of insecurity to women and ultimately lead to greater peace and security for the whole of the community.

FOUR KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS GUIDE THE ANALYSIS:

1. What are the main security challenges, and how are they experienced by men and women differently?
2. To what extent do women have knowledge and information to participate in and/or lead community responses to these security challenges?
3. To what extent are women confident in their ability to contribute to addressing security challenges?
4. What prevents women and men from participating in peace and security initiatives?

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a mixed-methods, feminist ethical research design, integrating a large-N quantitative survey (n = 983 in Cambodia; n = 1,100 in Lao PDR) with semi-structured key informant interviews conducted across purposively selected areas in Bokeo and Savannakhet provinces in Lao PDR and Mondulkiri and Stung Treng provinces in Cambodia.

Combining quantitative analysis of survey data with qualitative analysis of interviews, the research aims to better understand how gender affects the experiences of, and responses to, insecurity in Cambodia and Lao PDR. It investigates how women's and men's existing knowledge and confidence affect their individual and collective capacity to participate in and/or lead local peace and security responses.

The study identifies where AMPLIFY's theory of change is supported in practice, where implementation barriers persist, and where targeted policy or programmatic adjustments are needed. It offers actionable insights for all WPS practitioners and policymakers to strengthen WPS policies and programs and support efforts to increase women's security participation and leadership for the benefit of communities.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The study has four main research findings:

1. Systematic gender gaps affect women's knowledge and confidence to address insecurity. Confidence levels are generally higher than knowledge levels, especially among men:

- There is overall moderate knowledge and confidence among women and men in how to respond to security challenges observed in the surveys conducted in both Cambodia and Lao PDR.
- Men consistently report higher perceived knowledge and confidence than women, with the gap more pronounced in Lao PDR. Men also consistently reported greater confidence in engaging with community and provincial security initiatives compared than women.
- Gaps in women's self-reported knowledge scores are particularly evident in knowing how to prevent security challenges rather than in general awareness of risks.
- Ethnic minority women, women with lower education, older women, and women with low-income or care-based livelihoods reported the lowest knowledge levels.
- Legal and procedural knowledge is concentrated among village leaders, mediation committees, and local government representatives. Many women and youth rely on these intermediaries to navigate laws, reporting mechanisms, and authorities.
- Linguistic barriers to information marginalize Indigenous and ethnic minority women in both countries.
- Survey data show that Cambodian women in areas where WPS programming is taking place report higher levels of knowledge – particularly regarding prevention – than women in areas not receiving WPS programming. This indicates that locally embedded WPS programming may effectively address information and access to decision-making gaps.

2. Gendered security challenges are widespread in Cambodia and Lao PDR, exacerbated by structural economic pressures, traditional gender norms, and unequal power relations:

- Across the study sites, land and livelihood insecurity, drug and alcohol use, violence against women, migration and trafficking, and environmental hazards were the most salient security challenges.
- Women and men experience security threats differently: Women experience restricted mobility and disproportionate care and conflict resolution responsibilities. They absorb much of the impact of community insecurity by caring for family members affected by addiction, mediating household and community conflicts, and managing debt and food insecurity.

Insecurities differentially affect specific groups due to age, ethnicity, livelihood, and geography. For example, in Cambodia, Indigenous women are more likely to experience land dispossession and forced relocation, undermining their livelihoods, cultural continuity, and community cohesion. In Bokeo, Lao PDR, ethnic minority women are subject to cross-border trafficking and forced marriage. In Savannakhet province, ethnic communities experience insecurity linked to labor migration, drug economies, and recurrent flooding.

3. Women are active in everyday security practices, but this does not necessarily translate to formal participation and leadership:

- Women are very active in everyday security practices where they mediate family disputes, mobilize communities, carry out early warning and risk monitoring, and provide care. But their participation often remains confined to supportive or advisory roles. Leadership and enforcement, particularly in “hard” security responses such as patrols, arrests, and engagement with higher authorities, are male-dominated in both Cambodia and Lao PDR.
- Younger women and men frequently articulate more egalitarian attitudes toward gender roles and leadership, but youth—particularly young women—remain structurally excluded from decision-making. This limits the translation of progressive norms into authority and governance structures.

4. Barriers to participation and leadership include unequal access to education and information, linguistic exclusion, heavy unpaid care responsibilities, and gendered power relations within households and community institutions:

- In Lao PDR, trust in village institutions is high, but it does not extend equally to women as decision-makers: Women sustain security through community mobilization without any access to governance authority.
- In Cambodia, women have higher levels of participation in community peace and security responses in locations that have received WPS programming. In those locations, NGO engagement is associated with stronger rights-based discourse and clearer leadership pathways. However, decision-making power over land, migration, drugs, and development remains concentrated in male-dominated institutions across all locations.
- While both countries exhibit a pattern of women’s participation with limited authority, important differences exist. Survey responses in Cambodia show greater overall concern about security threats, and key informant interviews revealed clearer pathways from participation to leadership in contexts of sustained civil society engagement. By contrast, survey responses in Lao PDR indicate lower average knowledge and large knowledge and confidence gender gaps, and that security governance is more tightly embedded in state structures with limited independent civic space.

As an additional line of analysis, gender norm scales on *benevolent sexism*, *misogyny*, and *violence against women* were calculated for Laos and Cambodia. While the correlational analysis with other scores, such as safety or security concern, did not yield significant results in the baseline study, we intend to track and further examine these norms in a second round of data collection.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FINDINGS

Beyond the contribution to testing and refining the AMPLIFY program’s theory of change, the research makes three main contributions to knowledge on Women, Peace and Security in Cambodia and Lao PDR. First, it utilizes the WPS protection and participation framework to analyze nontraditional security challenges in Cambodia and Lao PDR, demonstrating that WPS issues and analysis are critical beyond the armed conflict settings. Second, the research points to mechanisms through which unequal gender norms can undermine conflict prevention, including a self-reproducing cycle in which institutional narratives that frame women as lacking capacity justify their absence from security institutions. Third, our study advances intersectional analysis of WPS issues by demonstrating how gender norms and ethnic marginalization compound each other in distinct ways, affecting which security concerns are recognized and whose authority shapes responses.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY POLICY AND PROGRAMMING

1

Address gendered security challenges:

Programming must address both structural drivers and their gender-differentiated impacts, including through adopting survivor-centered protocols, referral pathways, and documentation processes; developing culturally grounded approaches to land dispossession and environmental insecurity; and strengthening prevention and response measures for emerging and evolving security threats.

2

Invest in efforts to strengthen women's knowledge, confidence, and leadership:

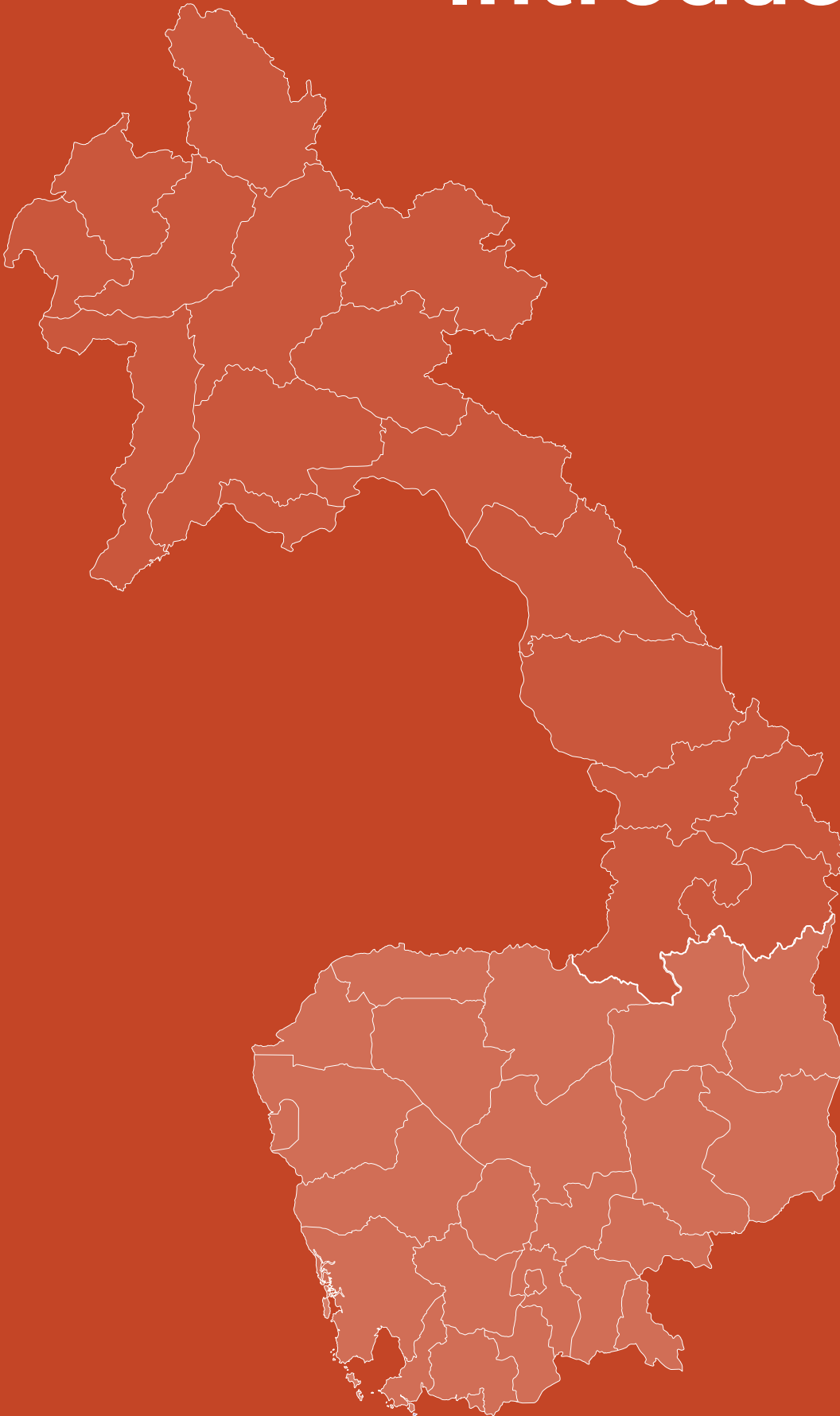
Programming should include establishing collective leadership initiatives and early warning systems designed to encourage women's engagement.

3

Strengthen inclusivity and accountability of governance structures:

Programming should enhance women's participation opportunities through strengthening representation pathways and inclusive practices for engagement, as well as supporting institutional positioning and recognition of mediation mechanisms, including through increased funding.

Introduction





*Women Registering for Volunteer Selection in Laos.
Namjai Community Association, Feb 2026*

Introduction

In Southeast Asia and within the Greater Mekong, insecurity is shaped by nontraditional security challenges, including land dispossession, migration, trafficking, gender-based violence (GBV), drug economies, and climate-related disasters. In Cambodia and Lao PDR, these security threats have gendered implications and are often neglected by security sector actors (The Asia Foundation 2024; Resurrección and Elmhirst 2008). Women are disproportionately affected by GBV, displacement and economic insecurity during crises (AIPR 2025), and bear an increased responsibility of care-related tasks that severely affects community resilience in the face of crises (Caballero-Anthony et al. 2023: 5). Given the gender-differentiated nature of these nontraditional security challenges, strengthening women’s leadership and meaningful participation in peace and security prevention and response is a practical as well as strategic imperative.

This baseline study is conducted alongside AMPLIFY, a five-year initiative designed to reduce the impacts of conflict and insecurity on women and to strengthen their peace and security leadership. At the core of AMPLIFY is a theory of change (TOC) that takes a systems perspective on what shapes a woman’s ability to meaningfully engage in peace and security actions across the entire system (regional-national-civil society-community). The TOC expects that where civil society, national, and regional actors support women, peace and security (WPS) actions and commitments, women’s meaningful engagement and leadership at the community level will improve, ultimately reducing insecurity’s negative impacts on women and their communities and enhancing broader peace and security.

WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY

Women, Peace and Security (WPS) is a global policy framework that recognizes that the meaningful participation of women in peacebuilding and decision-making is essential to achieving peace and preventing conflict. Guided by UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions, the WPS agenda’s four pillars—participation, prevention, protection and relief and recovery—emphasize the need to protect and promote women’s rights in fragile and conflict settings. AMPLIFY takes a WPS+ approach that applies beyond situations of armed conflict, addressing human security threats.

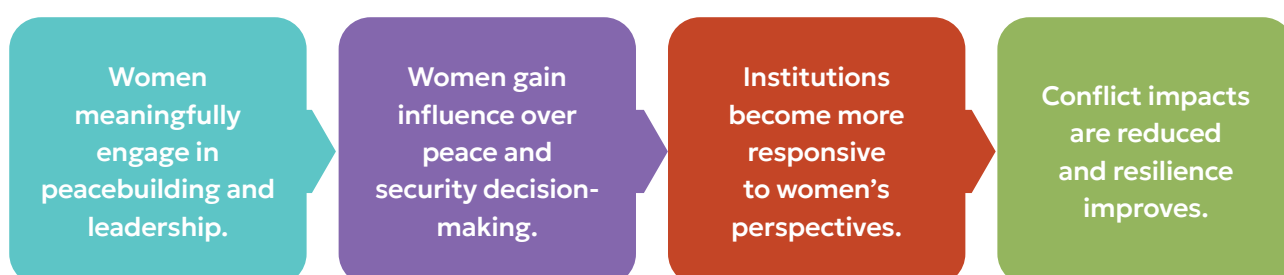


The first phase of this research tests AMPLIFY’s WPS theory of change by examining women’s and men’s baseline knowledge, confidence, and engagement in peace and security at the community level in Cambodia and Lao PDR, where insecurities are most directly experienced, and there are opportunities for participation and leadership to address these insecurities. Adapting a well-established Monash University study, originally designed to assess change in attitudes toward and participation in prevention of violent extremism at the community level, the research considers how women and men understand and respond to a wide range of prevalent community-level security challenges (Johnston et al. 2020). Like these earlier studies, we explored traditional gender norms via benevolent sexism, misogyny, and attitudes toward violence scales in Cambodia and Laos.

This report analyses the phase I research findings that provide a baseline for examining how support for women’s participation, such as AMPLIFY WPS programming, can contribute to reducing security risks and promoting more inclusive and sustainable peace in later rounds of data collection. The research collaborates with Cambodian and Lao PDR researchers, fostering research skill development and a locally led approach that ensures research instruments and methodologies are culturally- and gender-sensitive. Co-design workshops enabled the localization of research protocols, survey instruments, and interview questions to ensure culturally sensitive translation and interpretation, while validation workshops supported reflection on findings and their translation into program learning and adaptation. Such an approach centers lived experience to support contextually grounded findings and aims to strengthen local ownership of the research process.

This baseline research study contributes to the understanding of the insecurities faced by women and underrepresented groups, including people with disabilities, individuals of diverse gender and sexual identities, and ethnic or religious minorities, as well as their self-efficacy in addressing these insecurities in Cambodia and Lao PDR. The findings are intended to inform AMPLIFY’s programming as well as the work of WPS practitioners, policymakers, and civil society by providing empirical evidence of how women experience and respond to insecurity at the community level compared with men and other groups. By analyzing how women’s knowledge and confidence, and therefore their self- and collective efficacy, affect their participation in peace and security actions, the study identifies where AMPLIFY’s theory of change is supported in practice, where implementation barriers persist, and where targeted policy or programmatic adjustments are needed. The research findings contribute to country-specific and regional learning on WPS, particularly in relation to nontraditional security challenges. They offer actionable insights to strengthen WPS policies and initiatives, refine program design, and support evidence-based decision-making aimed at increasing women’s meaningful participation in peace and security for the benefit of communities.

AMPLIFY’S THEORY OF CHANGE



WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY IN CAMBODIA AND LAO PDR: REVIEW OF EXISTING RESEARCH

Women in Southeast Asia are frequently the first responders during crises and hold unique local and environmental knowledge that strengthens community preparedness and recovery (Tanyag and True 2019). Yet despite this, they are systematically excluded from decision-making, particularly at sub-national and community levels (Resurrección and Elmhirst 2008). ASEAN's (2024) multi-hazard early warning report found limited systematic engagement with women, people with disabilities, and marginalized communities in risk reduction planning (ASEAN 2024: 27). Evidence shows that increased women's representation in legislatures produces more effective climate policy outcomes (Mavisakalyan and Tarverdi 2019), yet traditional gender norms, unequal resource access and weak institutional support continue to constrain women's influence (The Asia Foundation 2024). In Cambodia, a 2002 sub-decree mandating female representation at the village level has produced largely symbolic participation, often mediated through male relatives or confined to "appropriate" sectors such as health and education (ASEAN 2022).

In Lao PDR, key security challenges include trafficking in persons driven by poverty and labor migration (U.S. State Department 2024; World Vision 2024), exploitation within the sex industry concentrated in Special Economic Zones (The Asia Foundation 2024), unexploded ordnance from the Vietnam War era that disproportionately burdens women through increased care and economic responsibilities (ASEAN, ACW, ACWC 2021), technology-facilitated gender-based violence (UNFPA Laos 2024) and climate-driven displacement and resource scarcity that intensify gendered vulnerabilities in already-marginalized Indigenous communities (Care and WWF Laos 2024). Legal reforms, including the 2014 criminalization of marital rape and the 2015 Anti-Trafficking Law, signal meaningful progress. However, implementation gaps remain, and community-level discourse on gendered violence is not yet fully supported by institutional practice (Pholsena 2010; Rigg 2005).

In Cambodia, postconflict structural inequalities shape ongoing security threats. Trafficking in persons has escalated into a complex crisis involving forced labor, cybercrime, and corruption (U.S. Department of State 2024; World Vision 2024), while the 2008 antitrafficking law's conflation of sex work and trafficking criminalizes sex workers rather than traffickers (Overs 2013; Maher et al. 2015). Climate-driven displacement, illegal logging, and land concessions disproportionately affect Indigenous women dependent on natural resources, disrupting ancestral heritage and severing intergenerational knowledge (Cambodia Indigenous Women's Association et al. 2020; Brickell 2014; Women Peace Makers 2024). Technology-facilitated gender-based violence is also growing amid weak legal protections (The Asia Foundation 2024; UNFPA Cambodia 2024). Despite reforms, including the 2005 criminalization of marital rape, 21% of women report experiencing intimate partner violence, and more than one-third of men report perpetrating it (UNFPA Cambodia 2024). Cultural norms such as the *Chbab Srey*, a traditional code of conduct for women, continue to reinforce women's exclusion from leadership (Jacobsen 2008; Eisenbruch 2018).

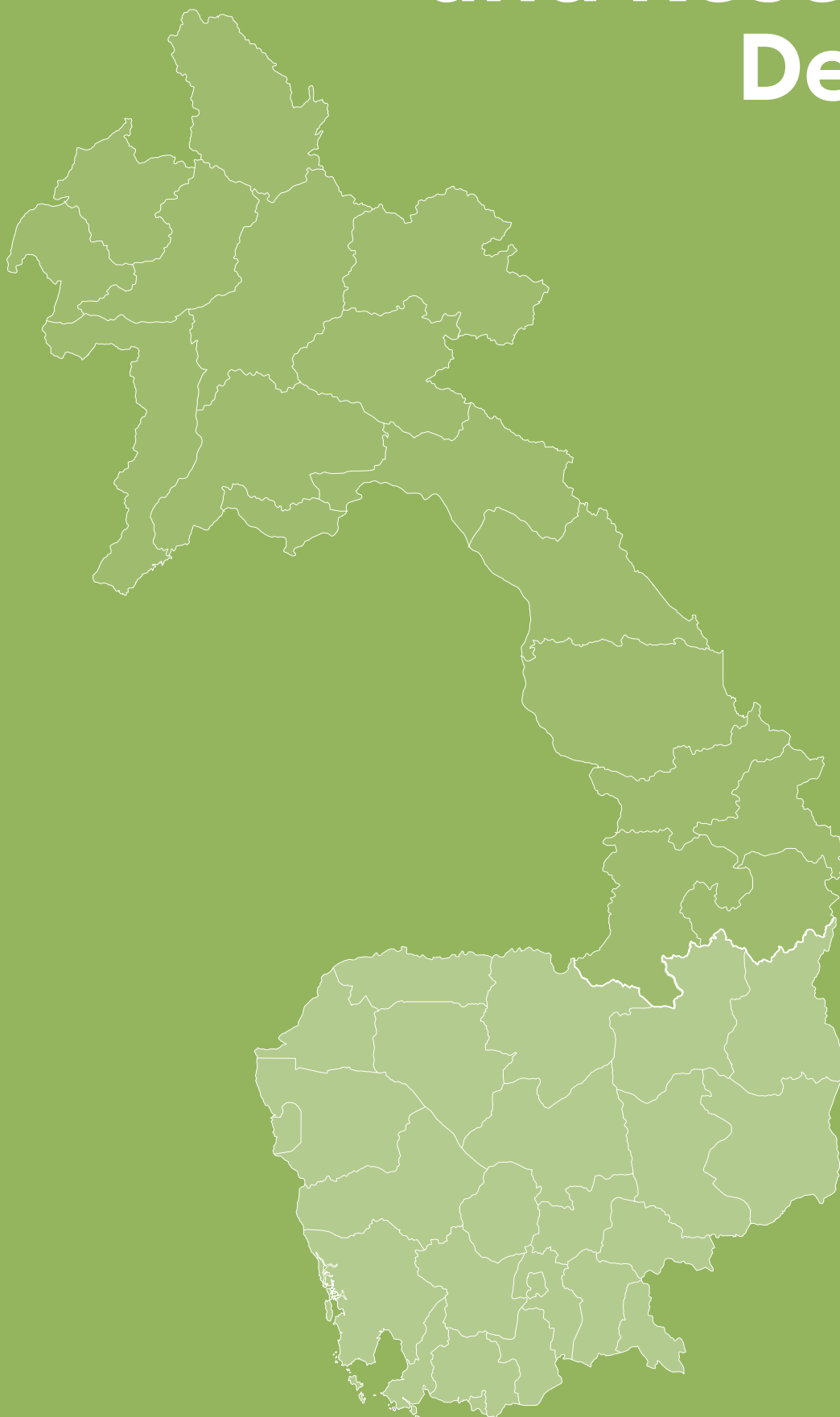


Women Registering for Volunteer Selection in Laos. Namjai Community Association, Feb 2026

Existing peer-reviewed scholarship in Cambodia and Lao PDR rarely addresses the intersection of gender and insecurity or women's roles in peace and security leadership. There are some notable exceptions in both countries, however. Some research has analyzed the impact of land rights/grabbing on gender inequality (Schenk-Sandbergen 2024; Park 2019; Joshi 2022; Hennings 2019). Scholars have also examined entrenched gender power dynamics—including the impact of “big man” politics and powerful individual women, whose careers have advanced in the context of modernization and economic development policies, on women's broader political participation (Faming 2018; Lilja 2013; Brickell 2014). Our research builds on and contributes to the literature on gender and security, and women's leadership by drawing on community-level data to examine how women and men experience and respond to nontraditional security threats and explain gender differences in participation and leadership.



Methodology and Research Design





Methodology and Research Design

The study is guided by four core research questions:



What are the main security challenges and how are they experienced by men and women differently?



To what extent do women have knowledge and information to participate and/ lead community responses to these security challenges?



To what extent are women confident in their ability to contribute to addressing security challenges?



What prevents women and men from participating in peace and security initiatives?

It employed a mixed-method research design conducted in October 2025, combining surveys with semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) to capture both breadth and depth of experiences (see comprehensive methodology in Appendix 2). The research was implemented across purposively selected sites in both Cambodia and Lao PDR chosen for their high vulnerability to insecurity, remoteness, and diverse populations.²

In Cambodia, fieldwork was conducted in the rural northeastern provinces of Stung Treng and Mondulakiri, with a small number of interviews conducted with Amplify project staff in Phnom Penh. Both provinces are characterized by a high degree of ethnic diversity and the presence of Indigenous Peoples (IP) communities. Data was collected in both Amplify program and non-program sites, allowing for robust comparative analysis in Cambodia. In Lao PDR, fieldwork was conducted in the border and corridor provinces of Bokeo in the northwest and Savannakhet in central-southern Lao PDR. Both provinces are shaped by cross-border connectivity and migration and are characterized by significant ethnic diversity and reliance on natural resource-based livelihoods. Data was collected across all AMPLIFY programming sites in Lao PDR. The longitudinal design of the study means that programmatic impact will be assessed through comparison across data collection rounds rather than through programming and non-programming site comparison. The analysis in Lao PDR will therefore compare change over time, examining changes between Phase 1 and Phase 2, following the longitudinal design of the study.

² The research sites selected for this baseline study reflect the programming sites for AMPLIFY as identified by internal scoping studies conducted in 2024. Bokeo and Savannakhet in Lao PDR were identified early on as border areas with high-risk for human trafficking and gender-based violence. In Cambodia, Mondulakiri and Stung Treng, also situated at the border, were identified as provinces with higher incidences of domestic violence and climate vulnerability as well being more highly populated by ethnic minorities, individuals with disabilities, and women in the entertainment sector.

The survey questionnaire was conducted with community members in all sites. It encompassed demographic questions and statements related to misogyny, gender-based violence, security challenges, and responses to them, including natural disasters, land issues, trafficking, and migration. In Cambodia, the survey was conducted with $n = 983$ respondents (67% women and 33% men) across Stung Treng (62.8%) and Mondulkiri (37.2%). In Lao PDR, the survey was conducted with $n = 1,100$ respondents (49.6% women and 50.4% men) across Savannakhet (63.8%) and Bokeo (37.1%). In both countries, the demographic profile reflects a predominantly rural, Indigenous, and ethnically diverse population with limited access to formal education and formal-sector employment opportunities.

The KIIs followed semi-structured interview guides to explore gendered roles and responsibilities in village administration and households; decision-making in security and crisis response (e.g., flood preparedness, early and forced marriage, land disputes, trafficking, migration); and coping strategies and support networks. In both countries, the KII sample was purposively constructed around roles closely tied to local security, mediation, and community leadership. In Cambodia, this included community and religious leaders, civil society organizations, and Amplify program recipients ($n = 31$). In Lao PDR, the sample included village authorities, community leadership, village security units, and Lao Women's Union (LWU) leaders ($n = 53$). Both samples encompassed diverse adult participants with considerations for gender representation as well as sexuality, ethnicity, class, religion, ability, and language, allowing us to gather rich on-the-ground experiential knowledge and reflect those most directly affected by security and livelihood challenges, including women and Indigenous communities.

The KII sample were thematically analyzed utilizing manual coding and the qualitative software package, NVivo, informed by feminist theoretical analysis that foregrounds participant voices to understand gender dynamics of insecurities faced by women and underrepresented groups. Qualitative data were connected to question schedules and key thematic codes. This data was used to interpret as well as triangulate with quantitative analysis of survey responses.

Both country samples were designed to capture a range of community-level perspectives on security and participation. However, the composition of KIIs reflects important differences in institutional context. In Cambodia, the KII sample included a mix of local authorities, community leaders, and civil society actors, including nongovernmental organizations and community-based groups operating with varying degrees of autonomy. In Lao PDR, the KII sample is more firmly anchored within state-linked governance structures. Women's participation is primarily channeled through the Lao Women's Union and other mass organizations, which are part of the state rather than independent civil society. As a result, while women are well represented in the Lao PDR sample, their roles are closely tied to government-affiliated social mobilization and mediation functions, whereas the Cambodia sample captures a broader spectrum of independent advocacy and community facilitation roles. Across both countries, women are more frequently represented in social and community-oriented roles than men. Men, particularly older men, are more prevalent in formal leadership and security positions. Overall, the perspectives of unmarried women, migrants currently abroad, LGBTQI+ people,³ and people with disabilities are only weakly represented or absent.

³ We tried to include people of diverse gender and sexuality in both the survey and KII design but were not successful in the survey and only able to recruit a few people in the Cambodian KII sample.

This study is guided by feminist ethical principles that appreciate the cultural and gender sensitivity of research on insecurity (Ackerly and True 2020). Feminist research ethics center lived experiences of Indigenous and minority women, recognizing that effective, sustainable peacebuilding requires not only formal participation but also the transformation of the structural power relations that perpetuate insecurity. These principles also include the imperative to do no harm, ensure informed consent, and uphold confidentiality and anonymity for all research participants. Given the sensitive nature of topics explored under WPS, additional safeguards were in place to protect the rights and safety of individuals, communities, and researchers involved. The research team was trained in gender-sensitive methods and was attentive to participant well-being throughout the research process.⁴



Conducting an Interview with Villager in Cambodia. AMPLIFY, Oct 2025

⁴ This research project is approved from Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee 46107 (MUHREC).

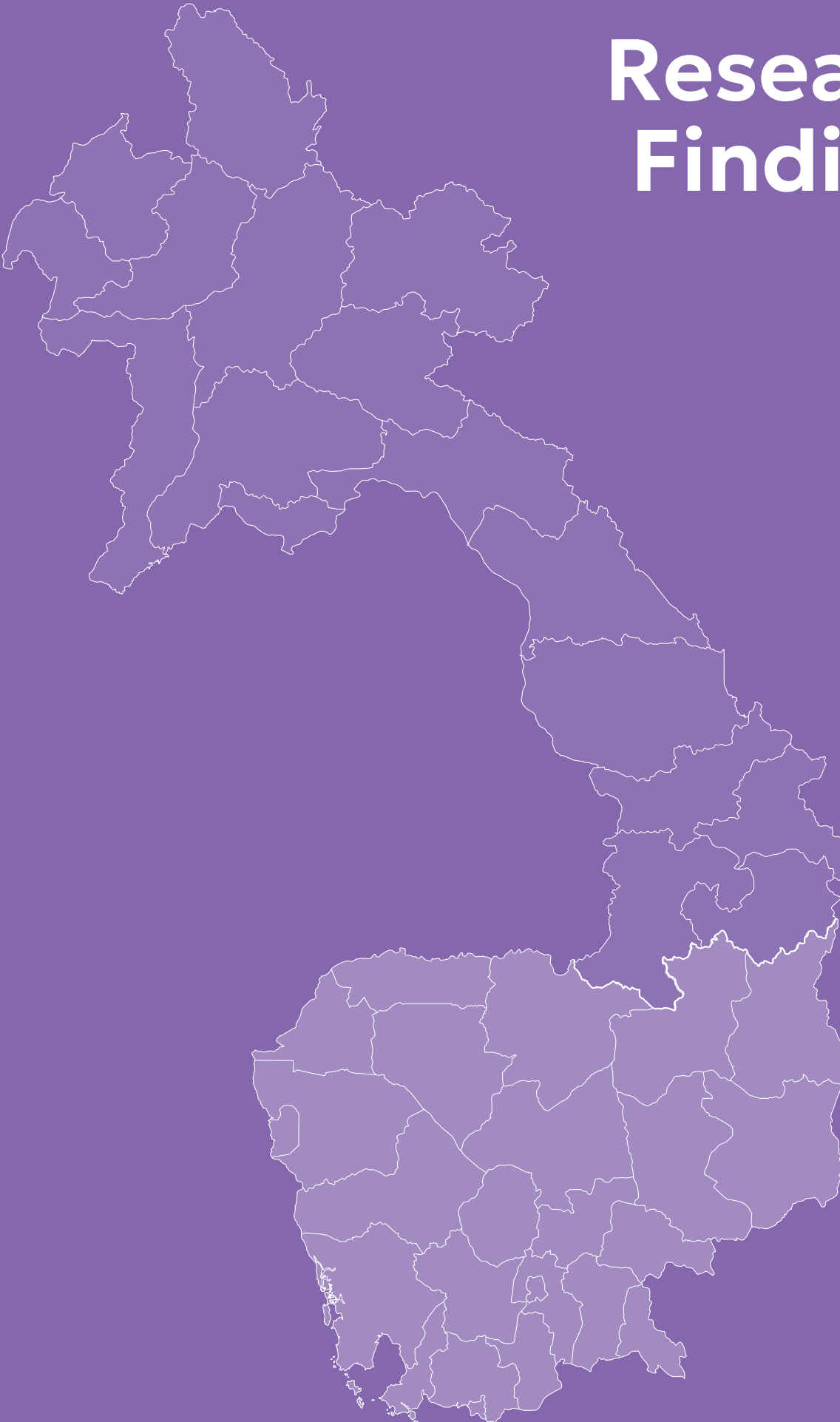
LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Research in dynamic sociopolitical settings is rarely linear and needs to be able to respond to contextual issues that arise in the research process. While this study in Cambodia and Lao PDR followed a carefully planned methodology and adhered to feminist and institutional ethical standards, several limitations should be acknowledged. These include significant logistical challenges, including poor road infrastructure, flooding, long travel distances, and, in some cases, reliance on boat travel, which increased operational risks and costs. Moreover, data collection was conducted by Khmer- and Lao-speaking researchers, ensuring that interviews in the dominant national languages were carried out directly without reliance on external interpreters. However, in some Indigenous and ethnic minority villages, Khmer or Lao was not the primary language, which required interpretation that was often provided by trusted community members or local leaders, which helped enable participation but also introduced potential limitations. The presence of intermediaries may have shaped how questions were understood or how responses were expressed, particularly on sensitive issues such as domestic violence, drug use, or land disputes. Despite efforts to standardize terminology and ensure shared understanding through careful explanation and probing, subtle locally specific concepts of insecurity, cultural meanings, and gendered expressions of insecurity may not have been fully or meaningfully captured across languages.

A further limitation of the research relates to the translation of interview material from Khmer and Lao into English for analysis and reporting. While translations were undertaken by researchers familiar with both the linguistic and cultural context of the data, the process of translation inevitably involves interpretive choices. To mitigate these risks, analysis was discussed with country researchers, drawing on field notes, contextual knowledge, and validation workshops to triangulate interpretation. Participant availability posed a further limitation. Many villagers, particularly men and younger people, were engaged in farming, wage labor, or migration to Thailand or other provinces, making it difficult to schedule interviews during working hours. This contributed to a degree of selection bias toward those present in villages, such as elders, women, or individuals in leadership roles.

In Lao PDR, the Lao Women's Union was closely involved in program delivery and, in some cases, participant identification. This facilitated access and community trust. However, there are methodological limitations to consider regarding participant selection and the extent to which responses may have been shaped by awareness of institutional involvement. In some instances, responses to questions about reporting insecurity appeared to align more closely with established institutional practices than individual experience, underscoring the need for caution when interpreting data related to participation and accountability. Many KIIs were also conducted with village heads, security officials, or LWU leaders. Interviewees, therefore, sometimes spoke from within their institutional roles, which may have influenced how issues and responses were framed. This is particularly relevant when interpreting references to police action, mediation effectiveness, or gender-based violence.

Research Findings



Research Findings

The research findings address the four core research questions. They are presented in the three following sections, with questions two and three combined into one discussion.

GENDERED SECURITY CHALLENGES AND LIVED EXPERIENCES

Our first research question asked, “What are the main security challenges and how are they gendered, that is, experienced by men and women differently?”

The research reveals that experiences of insecurity in Cambodia and Lao PDR are shaped by gender and the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, and Indigeneity. Women and ethnic minority communities bear a disproportionate burden of these security challenges (land and livelihood insecurity, drug and alcohol use, GBV, migration and trafficking, and environmental hazards), but their voice carries the least weight in the formal governance structures where responses to these challenges are determined. Women experience these insecurities differently from men: they carry the primary responsibility for care and conflict resolution in households and communities. As such, they absorb much of the economic and social costs of insecurity and face distinct personal safety risks linked to their gender and ethnicity.

We found that insecurity in Cambodia and Lao PDR is exacerbated by structural economic pressures, traditional gender norms, and unequal power relations. Survey data show that in Cambodia, both women and men are equally concerned about most security issues, such as natural disasters. Women’s top security concern is trafficking, and men’s is cybersecurity. In Lao PDR, men and women report more variation in levels of concerns, but women’s and men’s top security concerns are natural disasters and economic security. Qualitative interviews provided evidence that, regardless of whether men and women identify the same challenges, they experience them in markedly different ways, as discussed further below.

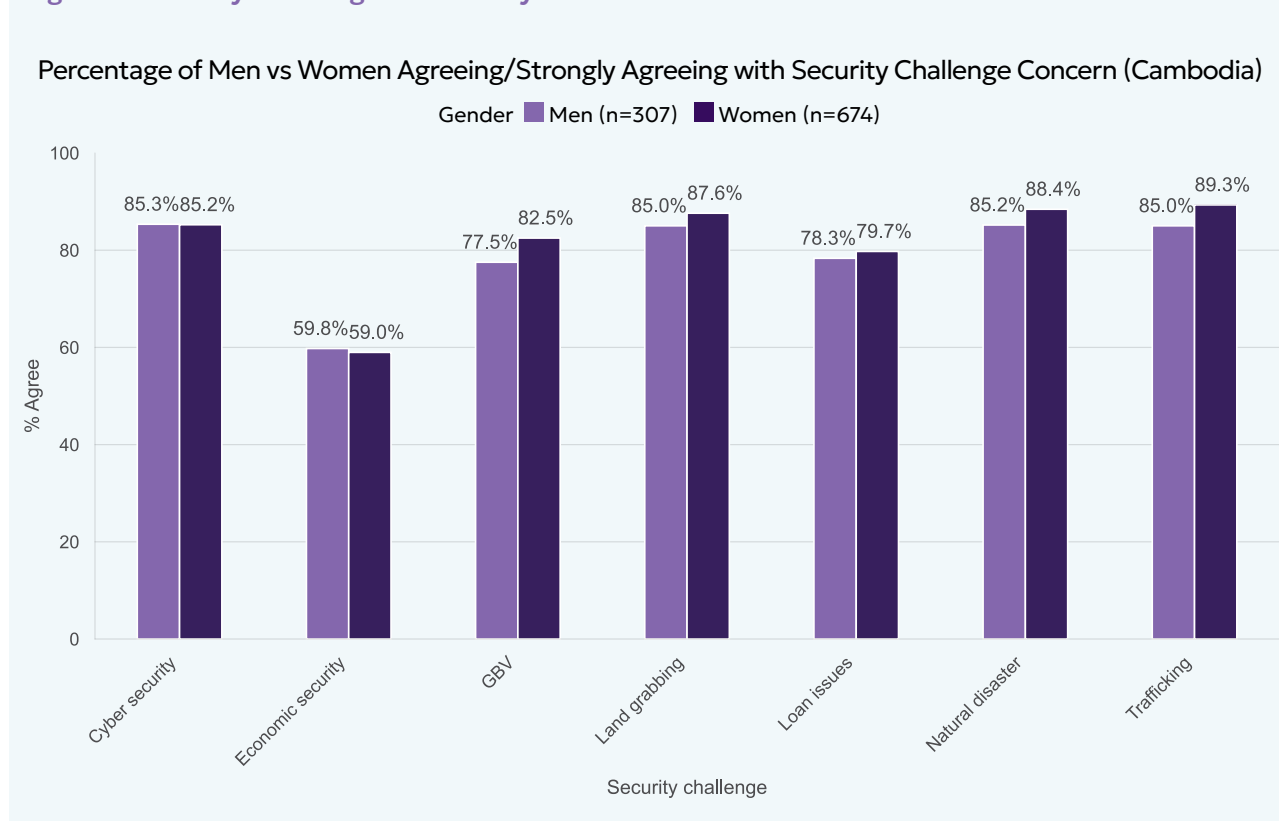
Women experienced restricted mobility and disproportionate care and conflict-resolution responsibilities. They absorb much of the impacts of insecurity: caring for family members affected by addiction, mediating household and community conflicts, managing debt, and food insecurity. Insecurities negatively impacted specific groups due to age, ethnicity, livelihood, and geography. For example, in Cambodia, Indigenous women face heightened risks linked to land dispossession and forced relocation, undermining their livelihoods, cultural continuity, and community cohesion, while in Bokeo, Lao PDR, ethnic minority women confronted risks of cross-border trafficking and forced marriage, and in Savannakhet province, ethnic communities cope with insecurity linked to labor migration, drug economies, and recurrent flooding. The baseline analysis did not establish a relationship between these gender norms and women’s and men’s feelings of safety or their degree and type of security concern. However, we intend to track and further examine gender norms in the second round of data collection.

Cambodia

Security Challenges

The survey asked respondents how concerned they were about different security challenges (Figure 1). For every issue shown (i.e., cyber security, economic security, GBV, land grabbing, loan issues, natural disasters, and trafficking), most men and women reported high agreement (“Agree” and “Strongly Agree” combined). Levels of strong concern are particularly pronounced for land grabbing, natural disasters, and trafficking, where “Strongly Agree” responses alone frequently exceed 50%, especially among women. Gender gaps in Cambodia are generally modest, but women consistently express equal or slightly higher levels of concern than men for GBV, trafficking, and land grabbing, indicating heightened sensitivity to risks that directly affect personal safety and livelihoods.

Figure 1. Security Challenge Concern by Gender in Cambodia



The qualitative data illustrate these results in more detail and show the interconnectedness of these security challenges.

Land and Livelihood

Land and Livelihood insecurity emerged as the most fundamental threat to everyday security crises across both provinces. It was most acutely felt by IP—reflecting land grabbing, economic security, and natural disasters in Figure 1. In IP villages in Mondulkiri and Stung Treng, the loss of ancestral land is repeatedly framed as an existential crisis, one that undermines not only economic survival but also Indigenous identity, cultural continuity, and obligations to ancestors. As one Bunong community leader in Mondulkiri explains:

“Our primary concern is the escalating loss of ancestral forest land. There are persistent attempts by powerful individuals and corporations to encroach upon our territory. If we lose this land, we simultaneously lose our Indigenous identity and risk dishonoring our ancestors (Interview C8, see also C7 and C6).”

This erosion of ancestral land is widely experienced as a form of systemic injustice. IP communities resisting relocation described being pushed into precarious livelihoods; displaced into becoming migrant workers, forced to farm within protected areas under constant threat of sanction, and witnessing their forests increasingly privatized and fenced. Indeed, reduced access to ancestral land and subsequently non-timber forest products has cascading livelihood effects (Interview C9). Research participants report that declining access to forests has “forced many villagers to migrate externally in search of employment”, while those who remain face mounting debt and economic insecurity (Interview C8). Households increasingly rely on loans from banks, moneylenders, or savings groups amid unstable markets and falling agricultural prices and lawsuits over land disputes (Interview C1, see also C2). Several research participants described being compelled to exploit natural resources to service debts, sell land, or migrate for work, strategies that deepen precarity and strain community cohesion (Interview C7).

The increasing challenges faced by IP communities are directly linked to the arrival of foreign companies, as the example from a research participant in Mondulkiri shows:

“When a Chinese company wanted to buy or expand land, some villagers refused to sell because the offered price was too low. Afterward, some villagers received threatening messages from unknown individuals. This caused certain villagers to live in psychological insecurity. For example, my older sister experienced this directly. A stranger, someone who doesn’t live in the village, came and smashed her water tank. After that incident, she and her husband didn’t dare leave the house (Interview C2).”

IP leaders emphasize that “some members of our Indigenous community have been deceived during the land registration process” and experienced being treated unfairly by environmental authorities and law enforcement (Interview C9). Others report the sheer lack of support by local authorities and isolation from official administration, forcing IP communities “to rely on our own choices, which often leaves our IP and traditional property rights vulnerable and subject to threats (Interview C12).” These dynamics complicate the state’s protective role, with some actors contributing to insecurity for communities affected by land disputes, rather than mitigating it. Land and livelihood insecurity exemplify a protection failure that affects women and men differently. The insecurities most existential to IP communities are not only unaddressed by formal institutions but, in some cases, actively exacerbated by them, while the women most engaged in resistance and advocacy face heightened personal risk without institutional protection.

Land and livelihood insecurity affect women and men differently. Women frequently remain in villages while men migrate for work, assuming responsibility for managing farms, caring for children and elders, participating in forest patrols, and leading collective land registration and advocacy efforts. Across multiple IP communities, research participants describe women mobilizing villagers, submitting formal requests to commune councils, and taking visible roles in resisting land encroachment, often at significant personal risk. Indeed, advocating for the land and livelihoods

exposes these women to distinct security threats. In Mondulkiri, IP leaders and women activists report being threatened or closely monitored by local authorities in response to land and rights advocacy: [T]here are significant constraints on freedom of expression, acutely affecting women who step forward to advocate for community interests. Though my work carries personal security risks, I am resolutely dedicated to the survival and well-being of my Indigenous people's community (Interview C8, see also C10). Land loss and declining access to forest resources push households into debt, and women bear primary responsibility for managing shrinking household resources and sustaining food security. These pressures intensify their reliance on forests and informal livelihoods while simultaneously constraining their mobility and safety. As such, land dispossession compounds the insecurity for IP women because it erodes the base on which communities depend, exposes those who resist dispossession to risk, and concentrates the heaviest survival burdens on the women who remain while excluding them from the formal processes that determine land outcomes.

“I feel our village, though geographically isolated from the development, is defined by its fierce self-determination. When faced with a mandatory relocation, we made the courageous collective decision to stay, successfully defending our ancestral land and traditional identity. This choice, while challenging, led to a strategic, internal move - shifting from the floodplains to higher ground within our original territory. Out of this struggle, a powerful, unified community solution was born, dedicated to protecting our heritage. Crucially, this era has been marked by a significant and inspiring rise in women's courage and leadership. Despite these triumphs, the deeply ingrained issue of child marriage remains a critical challenge within our Indigenous practices (Interview C11).”

Drug Use

Drug Use was another form of insecurity that was repeatedly mentioned. Across Stung Treng, and to a lesser extent in Mondulkiri, research participants identify drug use among young men as one of the fastest-escalating threats. Youth community leaders and religious figures describe a growing visibility of drug abuse that has persisted or intensified over the last few years despite police outreach (Interview C19, see also C20 and C25). Drug users are seen not only as a moral concern but as a concrete security risk: one research participant noted that the prevalence of drug-related issues among the youth contributes to an “increasingly unsafe living environment (Interview C16, see also C17).”

The increasing drug use has distinct gendered implications for women's mobility. Women and girls report heightened fear, especially when traveling at night. A woman community leader in Stung Treng noted that the presence of drug users forces her to be “constantly vigilant and take precautions, particularly when walking to the farm or to school Interview C20, see also C19, C21, C22 and C23).” Only women between 18 and 25 reported this threat; no other group reported this threat, which might suggest that this group is most vulnerable to this type of insecurity. In Mondulkiri IP communities, a further layer is added: a female Deputy Commune Chief observed: “Nowadays, many people are intoxicated, addicted to drugs, or who watch pornography on social media, making families afraid to let women and girls go into the forest alone as they did in the past (Interview C2).” Specifically, in the past, women and girls could enter the forest to collect vegetables or other products to sell “without fearing for their safety, such as the risk of rape or murder.” This shows

that parents and guardians are concerned about sexual violence, leading to a restriction in girls' and women's mobility and constraining their livelihood access to non-timber forest products (NTFPs). This, in turn, reinforces dependence on men's earnings or on debt and precarious work. Drug use functions not only as a direct harm to those who use it, but as a mechanism that deepens gendered insecurity. Drugs restrict women's and girls' mobility, intensify women's care duties, and exacerbate precarious livelihoods already produced by land loss and environmental stress.

Environmental Hazards

Communities in both provinces reported experiencing more frequent and intense climate-related hazards as a form of insecurity. In Stung Treng, riverside villages face recurrent flooding as a core security issue. A woman community leader reported that in 2025 alone, flooding occurred “more than two times,” damaging houses and causing children to be hospitalized after swimming in contaminated floodwaters (Interview C20). In Mondulkiri, a community forest leader described how extreme weather and loss of productive land have become primary security concerns, forcing villagers into a “constant state of environmental and land-use anxiety” as they inhabit protected areas (Interview C5). Some research participants categorized these conditions as part of a broader humanitarian and environmental crisis, in which land conflicts, GBV, and climate impacts compound one another, negatively affecting livelihoods.

A direct impact of changing environmental conditions and poor infrastructure is that travel itself becomes hazardous, especially for women and girls. Poor road conditions and long distances from resettled villages to schools are described as major barriers to girls' education and safety, requiring them to walk on unsafe roads or in the dark. Commune and village leaders recount cases where pregnant women must cross flooded areas to reach health centers, facing significant risk to give birth (Interview C24). These hazards are not isolated incidents but represent systematic failures that compound during emergencies. The intersection of climate impacts and gender roles creates distinct vulnerabilities. Women, particularly widows and older people, experience greater hardship than other groups because their traditional livelihoods depend on home-based work and proximate access to forest resources (Interview C13, see also C28). As men increasingly migrate for low-wage employment due to climate-stressed agriculture, women assume greater responsibility for household survival while retaining limited decision-making authority on critical resource issues (Interview C5, see also C13). Environmental hazards intensify gendered insecurities since women, especially widows and older people, often bear the greatest negative impact of climate-related disruption on livelihoods, caregiving, and mobility. Men's migration as a result of climate-induced insecurity leaves women as the ones responsible for household survival, but with limited decision-making authority over critical resources. The specific cases documented here of pregnant women crossing flooded areas without safe access to health services and girls unable to reach school safely due to road conditions illustrate how climate impacts create gendered harm.

Cybersecurity

The spread of smartphones and social media has also been reported as a source of insecurity. Increasing online scams trick villagers into sending money, the role of pornography in fueling harassment, and concern that limited digital-security literacy exposes youth—especially young women—to cyber-enabled trafficking in persons and exploitation. These digital threats remain less frequent than physical risks but are recognized as a growing facet of insecurity (Interview C17, C18 and C29). Young women and girls with limited digital literacy are among those most exposed to cyber-enabled trafficking and exploitation. Thus, gendered insecurity has expanded into a new and less visible arena.

Gender-based Violence

Gender-based Violence, including domestic violence (DV), sexual violence, and early marriage, remains a concern in both provinces. Youth and elders in Stung Treng described DV as prevalent, involving women being injured as well as “non-physical forms of abuse ... being predominantly committed by men (Interview C20, see also C24, C22, and C29).” One woman community leader attributed the persistence of these issues to “weak law enforcement by the relevant authorities” (Interview C20). Sexual violence was also reported, and cases intensify fear among community members. In at least one IP village in Mondulkiri, the Deputy Commune Chief recounted a recent “case of child rape in the village” that has generated pervasive anxiety, resulting in practices that constrain girls’ and women’s mobility (Interview C2). Another woman community member from Mondulkiri shared her concerns: “Children are vulnerable to kidnapping and sexual violence by drug users, especially when they take cattle to graze in forests or other secluded areas (Interview C3).”

Project staff also highlight deeply harmful responses recounting that rape can result in forced marriage as a supposed way to ‘harmonize’ relations, and that victim survivors, especially widows and those with disabilities, experience severe stigma and are ridiculed (Interview C31). These practices violate victim survivors’ rights, trap them in abusive relationships, and deter other people from reporting. Importantly, male-dominated institutions often frame such violence as ‘normal conflict’ and encourage reconciliation, thereby constraining effective protection (Interview C16, see also C19). Women community leaders further report being discouraged by police requirements to collect evidence and attend follow-up inquiries in domestic violence cases, creating “a time-consuming burden that discourages initial action (Interview C20) This institutional marginalization and response reflect a broader pattern in which formal security actors define GBV as a private or interpersonal matter requiring reconciliation rather than accountability. Research participants document the consequences for women when police procedures place the responsibility of evidence-gathering on victim survivors. Reconciliation outcomes frequently trap women in abusive relationships, and neglect the stigma attached to those women who seek redress. The cumulative effect, as research participants describe it, is the erosion of trust in formal institutions and the normalization of GBV as an accepted feature of community life.

Early and child marriage is also widely reported in both provinces. Women community leaders in Stung Treng stated that underage marriage remains common and is closely linked to school dropout: “Girls drop out from school and get married (Interview C23, see also C10 and C16).” In IP villages, elders acknowledge that while early marriage is declining, early unions still occur when young couples “love each other” and cultural norms may oblige elders to arrange marriage even where it conflicts with state law (Interview C28). These early marriages have strong gendered consequences. Several research participants describe patterns where underage marriages often involve DV and/or are followed by divorce, leaving women as single mothers in precarious conditions fostering economic dependence (Interview C11, see also C16, C19, C20, C27, and C30). A woman community leader shared that there is “the pervasive threat of early marriage, which often escalates the risk of domestic violence ... I married at 14. I do not want this issue to continue in the village (Interview C18).” Early or child marriage is both a consequence of broader insecurity (particularly land loss and economic precarity) and itself, a generator of further insecurity: Young women are locked into a situation which increases their vulnerability to violence and limits the recourse of institutions to prevent this violence or harm.

GBV against the queer community was reported. This group is vulnerable to stigma and rights violations due to the limited respect and awareness of their rights in the community. One queer woman shared: “I think I feel not completely secured because there is still violence in the community as well other threats, such as violation on rights, including the expressions [of gender/sexual identity] (Interview C29).” This shows that people with diverse gender and sexual identity face greater insecurity since they have to navigate risks tied to gender and sexual identity expression as well as the broader community violence. Community stigma and limited awareness of rights exacerbate their vulnerability to violence. A targeted investigation of LGBTQI+ individuals’ experiences in these communities is needed to understand the full scope of this insecurity.

Cambodia Summary Findings

The Cambodian findings show land and livelihood insecurity, drug use, environmental hazards, and gender-based violence (including early marriage) as explicitly interlocking security challenges. Land loss among Indigenous communities in Mondulkiri and Stung Treng, driven partly by foreign (particularly Chinese) investment, pushes households into debt, forest-resource dependence and migration. This deepens precarity and is linked directly to early and child marriage. Drug use, most prominent in Stung Treng, compounds this precarity further, in Mondulhiri restricting women’s and girls’ access to forests for fear of drug-related violence. Climate hazards, especially flooding, compound insecurity further, disproportionately burdening women, and particularly widows and the elderly, as men migrate for wage labour.

Across both provinces, insecurity is structured by a comparable gender authority gap. Women sustain households and communities through farming, caregiving, forest patrols, and land-registration advocacy, often at direct personal risk, yet remain excluded from the formal processes (concession approval, land registration, resource governance) that determine outcomes. This exclusion extends to the institutional response to GBV, where male-dominated authorities frame domestic and sexual violence as private matters to be resolved through reconciliation and evidentiary burdens placed on victim-survivors by police discourage reporting.

Participants Holding Signs at Workshop in Cambodia. AMPLIFY, Oct 2025



Gender Norms and Authority

Gender norm scales on benevolent sexism, misogyny and violence against women (VAW) were calculated in Cambodia (see Appendix 1 for details) where higher scores on the scales indicate more agreement with sexism, misogyny and support for VAW. Men's scores were slightly higher across all three scales, with the least gender gap on misogynist attitudes (women, 2.53; men 2.56).

Table 1 Gender Norm Scale Cambodia.

Country	All genders	Women	Men	Prefer not to say
Sexism	3.19 (n=983)	3.15 (n=674)	3.28 (n=307)	2.57 (n=2)
Misogyny	2.54 (n=983)	2.53 (n=674)	2.56 (n=307)	1.62 (n=2)
VAW	1.85 (n=983)	1.83 (n=674)	1.91 (n=307)	1.40 (n=2)

In Stung Treng and Mondulakiri, a deeply entrenched gender hierarchy shapes authority, labor, and exposure to insecurity. Men predominantly hold formal decision-making power in village and commune leadership, retaining final authority over land, resources, and security (Interview C1, see also C2, C4, C6, C9, C13, C30 and C31). Conversely, much of the day-to-day work for community maintenance and social organizing is carried out by women. Women act as primary mobilizers, health committee members, domestic violence mediators, and household managers, as this Bunong deputy commune chief summarized: “Women, on the other hand, take the lead in mobilizing community members to attend meetings, join forest patrols, organize festivals, and mediate domestic violence cases such as family conflicts, domestic violence involving intoxicated husbands, threats related to land disputes, intimidation by wealthy and powerful individuals seeking to seize land, exploitation of forest resources, and ongoing disrespect toward the Bunong ethnic group continue to persist to this day (Interview C2).”

Women are especially active in mediating family disputes, and several research participants noted that women can be more effective than men in resolving sensitive family-related issues, because female victim survivors feel less ashamed and more able to “cry and open up” with a woman mediator (Interview C2, see also C11, C18, C21 and C30). A Khmer religious leader in Stung Treng observed that women’s patience and non-violent approach make them well-suited to handling family conflict, even though men retain formal authority (Interview C16). Women also dominate key functional sectors perceived as directly tied to household well-being and conforming with gender norms, such as teachers, nurses, village health committee members, commune councilors, and active members of community forest committees (Interview C18, see also C19, C21, C25, C26, C27 and C29). A Kouy Indigenous leader in Mondulakiri noted that although fewer women hold formal administrative positions, “women play a more dominant role than men in organizing and participating in traditional conservation-related events,” particularly around forest protection and cultural festivals (Interview C9). In Bunong communities in Mondulakiri, church-based women’s groups and savings groups also provide a platform for women to mobilize around livelihoods and mutual support (Interview C7, see also C8, C28, C31). This shows that women’s roles are closely tied to gender conforming roles and responsibilities - preserving culture and mobilizing community.

While men dominate formal positions, women often outnumber men in community forums and meetings, mostly because men are absent for economic reasons. In multiple villages, interviewees “observe that women join community meetings more regularly than men,” because men “go to farm or migration” and are “often away during the day for agricultural work or migrating for work (Interview C15, see also C18, C19, C20, C21, C24, C26, C28, C29).” In some IP villages in Mondulkiri and Stung Treng, women’s everyday participation is also shaped by language and literacy: older Bunong and Kouy women may struggle in Khmer-language forums but have considerable authority in indigenous language discussions, especially in cultural and land-related matters (Interview C3, see also C6, C8, C10, C11 and C28). Moreover, “[t]his linguistic barrier makes it difficult for them to receive and fully comprehend public information, as most services and communications are delivered in Khmer. This difficulty in communication and lack of access to complete information also puts them at an elevated risk of being exploited or cheated by outsiders (Interview C30).”

Younger, Khmer-educated women often translate between state institutions and IP communities, positioning them as informal brokers even when they lack formal office (Interview C18, see also C21, C22 and C25). Yet, this participation does not always translate into formal authority. Women may lead health or savings groups or mobilize people for meetings and patrols but still be under-represented in the village and commune administration that holds final decision-making power (Interview C18, see also C19, C24, C26, C29 and C31). This gap is especially pronounced for less formally educated, or culturally or linguistically marginalized women, who are active in implementation but seldom involved in agenda-setting or decision-making.

This disconnect between formal male authority and women’s responsibility is reinforced by gender norms that stigmatize unmarried women, limit women’s public voice, and penalize men for domestic work being labeled as “gay” or doing “women’s work” (Interview C24). Yet specifically, younger research participants mention that men helping with domestic work are increasingly seen as good role models and viewed positively by community members (Interview C13, see also C15, C21, C25 and C26). While it was generally perceived as a positive development, a women community member called out the double standard on women’s and men’s contributions to household: “Men who participate in domestic tasks, such as housework or childcare, are often disproportionately applauded for behavior that should arguably be considered a standard contribution to family life (Interview C28, see also C14, C18 and C21).” This is because women continue to carry the larger share of the family workload, particularly in households where men spend significant time on income generation, community politics, or socializing (Interview C6, see also C7, C11, C18 and C21). Consequently, over-appreciation reinforces the idea that men’s contribution to housework is an exceptional, praiseworthy act rather than a routine expectation, and thus indirectly sustains the underlying gender hierarchy.

Traditional gender norms are evolving, however. Younger generations in both Indigenous and Khmer communities are articulating more egalitarian views, due to social media and external learning opportunities (including nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (Interview C18, see also C21, C22, C25 and C29). A woman community leader in Stung Treng observed: “I think today’s youth think differently than older generations, particularly regarding family roles. They simply aren’t dividing tasks by gender; instead, they focus on helping each other (Interview C20).” Yet their ability to act on these beliefs is often constrained by factors such as school drop-out, migration, economic precarity, and unequal access to education, specifically for IP girls (Interview C11, see also C12 and C31).

Lao PDR

Security Challenges

The survey asked respondents how concerned they were about security challenges, and responses are more fragmented and moderate compared with Cambodia (Figure 2). Across most security challenges, responses are more evenly distributed for men and women, with a substantially lower percentage of agreeing (“Agree and “Strongly Agree”). This pattern is especially evident for cyber security, loan issues, and land grabbing, where neutrality and disagreement together account for a sizable share of responses. While concern about security challenges is still evident, it is less intense and less consolidated than that in Cambodia. An exception is natural disasters, trafficking, and economic security, where concern is greater overall, and women show notably stronger agreement than men. The qualitative analysis discusses these results further and reveals the interconnectedness of these security challenges.

Figure 2. Security Challenge Concern in Lao PDR

Percentage of Men vs Women Agreeing/Strongly Agreeing with Security Challenge Concern (Laos)



Across Bokeo and Savannakhet, insecurity is shaped by four interlocking dynamics: drug and alcohol use, land and environmental precarity, mobility and trafficking, and gender-based violence. While these challenges affect entire communities, they are experienced in deeply gendered and intersectional ways.

Drug and Alcohol Use

Across Bokeo and Savannakhet, drug and alcohol use, particularly among out-of-school and unemployed young men, emerges as the most urgent and rapidly worsening security threat (Interview L25, see also L38 and L40). Research participants describe a sharp escalation over the past two to three years, with substances including methamphetamine (“yaba”), crystal methamphetamine (“ya ice”), kratom juice, glue, ecstasy (“collagen”), and electronic cigarettes. In Bokeo, a Lahu woman deputy village head captured the breadth of the crisis: “Drugs are currently spreading, primarily among teenagers, children, the elderly, and women (Interview L25).” While affecting the entire community, drug use is consistently gendered in perception and impact. Young men are widely identified as primary users and as key drivers of associated violence, theft, and household instability. A mediation committee member recalls that “drug-related problems, especially among young men, [led] to fights, violence against children and wives, resulting in deaths around four years ago (Interview L15).” Similarly, a Khmu village head recounted: “About two to three years ago, there was a homicide where a husband killed his wife due to jealousy and intoxication to the point of losing his senses (Interview L18).”

Drug use is closely linked to unemployment and economic precarity. Research participants described men aged 25–40 who “lack the ability to earn a living to help their family members,” becoming unemployed and destabilizing households (Interview L34). In Savannakhet, research participants situate this crisis within broader economic transformation, noting that “in the past, there were no drug problems. However, since the factories were established, drugs have started to emerge [in the area] (Interview L46).” Women are disproportionately affected as victim survivors of drug-related domestic violence and as primary caregivers for addicted sons and husbands, absorbing economic loss, social stigma, and care burdens. Fear also reshapes everyday mobility and participation. A chief mediation unit member stated: “If we speak up against people who use drugs, we are afraid they may resent us and physically harm us (Interview L15).” Insecurity extends to men as well. A male youth leader explained: “I don’t feel very safe. This has prevented me from taking up wage labor or working far from home; I have to stay close to my family because I need to watch over our property and garden to prevent thieves from stealing our things (Interview L22).” Although less common, women’s drug use is also acknowledged, including cases where addiction leads to violence, underscoring that the crisis is not exclusively male but remains structurally gendered in impact (Interview L15, see also L8 and L22). Drug and alcohol use affects women in Bokeo and Savannakhet in dual ways: as primary victim survivors of male drug-related violence and as primary caregivers for addicted household members. Women absorb multiple harms resulting from this crisis, including economic loss, social stigma, and an increased care responsibilities. At the same time, their fear of retaliation constrains their ability to speak out or to seek help or redress.

Land insecurity

Land insecurity constitutes a second major axis of insecurity. Disputes over upland and garden plots are frequent due to the absence of land-use certificates and shifting cultivation practices. A Hmong LWU vice president explained: “There are issues with the land, particularly upland fields, because no one has official documents or land-use certificates ... Consequently, disputes arise over the violation of upland and garden plots, land encroachment, and the seizing of land claims (Interview L24, see also L25 and L19).” Concessions to predominantly Chinese investors for banana plantations, rubber, and gold mining further exacerbate insecurity. Impacts include erosion, landslides, and loss of grazing land, often without compensation due to a lack of formal title. As one mediation committee member noted: “The loss of over 80 hectares of land to livestock grazing areas, and economic problems caused by the lack of a market to support agricultural products (Interview L15).”

Environmental degradation and natural disasters compound land pressures. Flooding and landslides are reported to be increasing in Savannakhet and riverine villages in Bokeo (Interview L27, see also L28 and L29). A farmer stated: “Floods have an impact on everyday life: flooding of farms, erosion of banks, deterioration of roads, and inconvenience (Interview L11).” Mining concessions are also linked to environmental damage: “Gold mining concessions by investors have impacted the people’s land, such as causing landslides along the riverbanks that affect garden plots; mediation for these issues has not yet been resolved (Interview L6).” These insecurities are gendered in which men are affected as cultivators and wage earners, while women bear increased responsibility for food management, household repair, and debt negotiation. In Lao PDR, land and environmental insecurity reproduce the same pattern documented in Cambodia: Women bear disproportionate responsibility for managing the household impact of dispossession and ecological degradation, but are excluded from land tenure, concession approval, and environmental governance processes that determine outcomes. Ethnic minority women with limited access to formal legal processes and Lao literacy face the most acute insecurity as a result.

Mobility, Migration and Trafficking

Mobility, Migration, and Trafficking generate distinct provincial patterns of insecurity. In Savannakhet, youth migration to Thailand is described as widespread and increasing, with young people aged 14 to 18 leaving school for work (Interview L34, see also L40). While remittances can support families, migration exposes youth to exploitation and drug use, with addiction sometimes returning to villages alongside theft and conflict. Villages increasingly consist of elderly residents, reshaping care burdens and social cohesion. In Bokeo, cross-border marriage and trafficking of young ethnic minority women to China emerges as a particularly severe and gendered insecurity. Local brokers, sometimes including individuals with authority, identify young women and facilitate arrangements involving bride price (Interview L9, see also L19). A Khmu LWU leader recounts:

“[S]ome parents accepted money from Chinese men and forced their daughters to marry them ... There was also a case of one broker who took women to China; they were married to Chinese men first and then sold in China. The brokers included one Khmu person and one Lao Loum person. There are cases of cross-border trafficking in persons: one woman from the village ... was deceived and sold in China. She later called her parents to rescue her from Boten, but when her parents went, they could not find their daughter and still have no information up to now. There was also a case where a Chinese man married a woman and took her to live with him; since they had no children, he sold her to another Chinese person, who then sold her again. At present, she has disappeared, and there is no information about her whereabouts (Interview L20).

These cases reveal layered harms: coercion, disappearance, GBV, and enduring trauma for the women and their families. Even where women return, families may face stigma and demands for repayment of bride price, disrupting “village harmony” (Interview L14). Trafficking disproportionately affects young ethnic minority women from low-income households with limited education and low literacy, showing how economic precarity intersects with gendered power hierarchies, positioning marriage as a perceived survival strategy while exposing women to violence and loss of autonomy. The cases documented here suggest a significant gap between the formal legal prohibition of trafficking and the institutional capacity or willingness to respond to trafficking when it actually occurs, especially where coercion is mediated through family and community structures rather than stranger abduction.

Gender-based Violence

Gender-Based Violence cuts across all insecurity domains. DV is repeatedly linked to drug use, unemployment, and economic stress. Research participants noted that “DV is occurring as a result of involvement with drugs” (Interview L21) and “there is DV, with many cases of children hitting their parents or husbands hitting their wives; this is due to drug addiction, intoxication, and arguments caused by the struggle to make a living and unemployment” (Interview L19). Severe cases are reported, including “DV and a son killing his father due to drug influence (Interview L23). At the same time, normalization of violence is evident. One woman explained: “DV does exist, but it is not usually very severe. In cases of physical altercations, it is mostly the women hitting the men because they are angry at their husbands for going out drinking and spending money extravagantly (Interview L1).”

Fear reshapes women’s daily lives by restricting mobility. A Lue woman from the LWU stated: “It is not safe. You must be careful [vigilant]. You must prepare self-defense equipment, such as a knife, a machete, and electrical wire (Interview L4).” Another shared: “I am afraid that bad people will come and cause harm to my family. I don’t dare to leave the house at night. When I am with my child, I stay strictly inside the house and make sure to lock the doors securely (Interview L4, see also L17).” A LWU president summarized risk hierarchy: “Women are more at risk ... because they lack the strength to fight back against bad groups of people ... The elderly and children are also at risk of being murdered, physically harmed, or raped (Interview L4).”

Several research participants identify women’s exclusion from authority as a structural driver of insecurity. A Khmu LWU member stated: “Lack of decision-making power places women, especially young women, at higher risk (Interview L20, see also L27).” GBV is therefore not an isolated phenomenon but embedded in drug economies, economic strain, mobility patterns, and gendered governance structures. Moreover, while “women, children, and elderly” are frequently identified as vulnerable, there is limited recognition of risks faced by people with disabilities, LGBTQI+ individuals, and some ethnic minorities. Male-dominated institutions consistently frame GBV as an interpersonal matter to be managed through reconciliation rather than a serious concern warranting prevention and accountability. This is not a gap in access to resources. Rather the institutional definition of what counts as security leads to the exclusion of women’s experiences of insecurity and to the exclusion of women from the formal authority structures.

The Lao PDR findings reveal that drugs, land insecurity, mobility, and GBV are not isolated challenges but mutually reinforcing dimensions of everyday insecurity. Drug economies intersect with unemployment and migration, intensifying domestic violence and theft. Land dispossession, environmental degradation, and flooding affect livelihoods, pushing households toward debt, migration, and, in some cases, cross-border marriage arrangements. Trafficking and forced marriage, particularly in Bokeo, reflect the intersection of economic precarity, ethnic marginalization, and gender inequality.

Summary Findings Lao PDR

Across the two Lao PDR provinces, insecurity is structured by a gender authority gap. Women sustain everyday security through mediation, caregiving, monitoring, and risk management, but are underrepresented in the formal arenas where land concessions, migration governance, enforcement, and economic planning decisions are made. Provincial dynamics differ: Savannakhet’s insecurity is closely tied to youth migration, factory expansion, and recurrent flooding, whereas Bokeo’s is shaped by its position within the Golden Triangle corridor, concession-based land use, and cross-border trafficking. Across the two Lao PDR provinces, insecurity is influenced by differences in access to leadership and decision-making opportunities for women and men.

Gender Norms and Authority

Gender norm scales on *benevolent sexism*, *misogyny*, and *violence against women* were calculated in Laos (see Appendix 1 for details). Women scored higher than men on both misogyny and VAW scales, while men scored slightly higher on benevolent sexism. Typically, when women support rigid gender norms and even norms that seek to undercut women's leadership roles and decision-making to a greater extent than men, this indicates a very conservative community and society (see Johnston et al. (2020) study, where Indonesian and Bangladeshi women supported violence perpetrated against themselves or other women, including for their own protection). Overall, Laotian women score higher on all three scales than Cambodian women, which is consistent with existing gender norm measures across both countries.

Table 3 Gender Norm Scale Lao PDR.

Country	All genders	Women	Men
Sexism	3.72 (n=1110)	3.71 (n=565)	3.73 (n=545)
Misogyny	2.58 (n=1110)	2.72 (n=565)	2.45 (n=545)
VAW	1.80 (n=1110)	1.84 (n=565)	1.75 (n=545)

Across Bokeo and Savannakhet, village security governance is strongly gendered, with men occupying formal authority while women sustain the everyday practices that maintain safety and cohesion. Men dominate positions as village heads, deputies, and public security and are characterized as those who “take the lead in village tasks, decision-making, and problem-solving” and “have more rights to decide than female,” particularly regarding land, security, and engagement with higher authorities (Interview L27, see also L29 and L14). Formal authority is thus coded masculine and linked to visibility, decisiveness, and representation beyond the village.

Women contribute to institutional life in supportive or specialized roles, such as through the Lao Women's Union (LWU), mediation units, or community forestry activities. In Bokeo, a female Hmong village head observed: “Women participate but in limited numbers, mainly through the Lao Women's Union...[These women] do not yet play a role in decision-making and lack confidence in expressing opinions. Participation is frequently conditional: “If the work concerns women specifically, they only participate in work related to the Women's Union” (Interview L27, see also L9). This reinforces the idea that core community decision-making remains men's domain. In rare cases where women take up leadership roles in government as deputy heads or village chiefs, they tend to have a strong impact. For example, with regard to domestic violence, a research participant noted that, “the female village chief is the first to intervene and provide assistance (Interview L17, see also L15).”

Women often lack formal authority in the community, but their labor sustains community security. Women mediate family disputes, respond first to DV, monitor tensions informally, care for households affected by addiction or economic stress, and manage household finances (Interview L23, see also L22, L29 and L32). In many ethnic minority communities, women also undertake significant agricultural labor, with Hmong women described as managing fields and rice farms alongside domestic responsibilities, sometimes with a workload “slightly heavier than men's” (Interview L24). The result is a pronounced double burden in which women contribute to both

production and social reproduction while remaining peripheral in formal decision-making. Gender norms underpin the division of labor and power. Men are praised for being “strong, daring to think, express opinions, make decisions, and lead the family” (Interview L20) and for “taking the lead in village tasks, decision-making, and problem-solving” (Interview L29, see also L27 and L14). A Savannakhet LWU member summarized this succinctly: “Male has more rights to decide than female. Male has a leader and protector roles (Interview L27).” Women, by contrast, are often portrayed as shy, soft-spoken, and reluctant to speak publicly. A male mediation committee member asserted: “[W]omen have little knowledge, intelligence, capability, or courage to think and express themselves (Interview L9).” Even when women attend meetings, their presence does not automatically translate into voice or influence, especially for ethnic minority women with limited Lao language proficiency.

Generational change is visible but uneven. Younger research participants increasingly articulate egalitarian views. A Khmu village head noted that “currently younger people have more progressive thinking; they believe in equal rights and opportunities in life such as decision-making, education, and job seeking, rather than strict traditional gender roles (Interview L14).” Another observed that women are now “more educated than men,” sometimes making “better decisions than men have,” and that men “should accept this and grant them the right to make decisions and jointly plan activities (Interview L18).” Yet these changes generate tension. A Khmu mediation committee member explained: “The husband does not want her to work; the husband does not want her to be bigger or more powerful than him (Interview L1).” A Hmong female village head reflected that many women still grow up believing “they must remain under male authority and that men are the heads of the family (Interview L17).” Even when women speak more assertively, this may provoke conflict: “[W]omen are more courageous, more educated, dare to speak up, dare to express themselves, but there are cases where couples quarrel because women are more vocal about equal rights in the wrong way in the family (Interview L10).”

Variation across districts and communities is significant. In a community in Bokeo, collaborative practices were described:

“Women and men are equal here; there is consultation, and what to do is to make decisions together (Interview L1).”

Bokeo, Lao PDR. AMPLIFY, October 2025



Whereas in a Savannakhet village, one women participant reported stark exclusion:

“Women have less important roles and seldom receive information. Women have no rights in village administration. All decisions are made by men, as well as they won’t inform or invite women to participate in any activities, even though activities request LWU representatives, there is no role and responsibilities for women (Interview L27).”

Overall, the Lao PDR findings reveal a gender authority gap: Women mediate, care, monitor, and mobilize, but men have ultimate decision-making authority over land, migration, drugs, trafficking, and engagement with higher state levels. Gender norms are changing among younger generations. However, traditional expectations of male leadership and female modesty constrain women’s agency, especially among ethnic minority and low-literacy groups. Security decisions are anchored in traditional village leadership, although women’s capacity together and gender equality ideas have the potential to reshape governance.

KNOWLEDGE AND CONFIDENCE TO ADDRESS SECURITY CHALLENGES

Our second and third research questions asked, respectively, to what extent do women have knowledge and information to participate and/or lead community responses to these security challenges? And how confident are they in their ability to contribute to addressing security challenges?

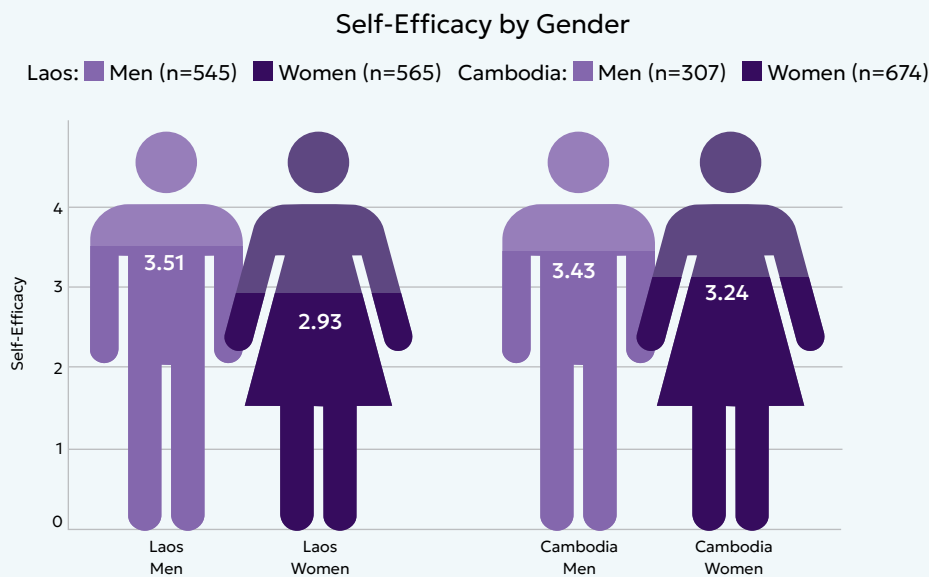
Our analysis reveals a gender gap in security participation: Women hold substantial direct knowledge of everyday insecurity, but they report consistently lower confidence, knowledge, and self-efficacy scores than men across both countries. The gap is most acute when it comes to efforts to prevent insecurity, although women have similar awareness to men of security risks. Rather than a reflection of women’s capacity, qualitative evidence shows that this gap is a product of institutional authority structures that assume security decision-making is a masculine domain and that women’s security labor is supportive rather than authoritative.

The participation of women contributes to reducing security risks and promoting sustainable peace by addressing inequality, acknowledging diversity, and countering exclusion. Nevertheless, women often encounter unique challenges that hinder their participation in crisis prevention. Prevailing gender norms can undermine women’s self-confidence and restrict their opportunities to engage with security responses. To measure how these dynamics manifest at the community level, the survey included three composite variables constructed from relevant Likert-scale items (see Appendix 2):

- Changes in women’s knowledge, access to information, and awareness of insecurities and approaches to addressing these insecurities, including local, national, and regional plans and policy frameworks
- Changes in women’s confidence (individual confidence) in their own ability to prevent conflict and improve security.
- Changes in self-efficacy—that is, the combined effect of having the knowledge and confidence to participate and/or lead community crisis prevention and preparedness initiatives among women in areas vulnerable to insecurity before and after the programming (knowledge + confidence = self-efficacy)

Surveys across both countries show moderate overall levels of knowledge and confidence in responding to security challenges, with systematic gender gaps evident throughout. Men consistently report higher scores than women on all three measures, and the gender gap in knowledge is most pronounced on prevention rather than on general awareness of risks. The combined self-efficacy scores illustrating these gaps are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Self-efficacy by gender scores



Men consistently reported higher perceived knowledge than women, with the gap more pronounced in Lao PDR than in Cambodia. Women’s gap in perceived knowledge is particularly evident in knowing how to *prevent* security challenges rather than in general awareness of risks. Further disaggregated analysis revealed intersectional gendered inequalities: Ethnic minority women, women with lower education, older women, and women with low-income or care-based livelihoods reported the lowest knowledge scores. KIIs helped to explain these patterns. This research found that legal and procedural knowledge is concentrated among village leaders, mediation committees, and Women’s Union representatives. Many women and youth rely on these intermediaries to navigate laws, reporting mechanisms, and authorities. Linguistic barriers to knowledge marginalize Indigenous and ethnic minority women in both countries. Analysis of survey data from programming sites shows higher knowledge scores among Cambodian women in these sites, particularly regarding prevention, indicating that locally embedded WPS programming can effectively address information and access to decision-making gaps.

In both Cambodia and Lao PDR, confidence levels were generally higher than knowledge levels, especially among men. In surveys, men reported greater confidence in engaging with community and provincial security initiatives compared with women, who were more likely to express uncertainty. This pattern reflects a gendered divide in perceived security preparedness and authority. Qualitative research deepens understanding of this gap: Women are highly active in everyday security practices where they mediate family disputes, mobilize communities, early warn and monitor risks, and provide care. Yet women's participation often remains confined to supportive or advisory roles. Leadership and enforcement, particularly in "hard" security responses such as patrols, arrests, and engagement with higher authorities, remains male-dominated across Cambodia and Lao PDR. Generational dynamics further shape access to participation and leadership in response to security challenges. Younger women and men frequently articulate more egalitarian attitudes toward gender roles and leadership, but youth, particularly young women, remain structurally excluded from decision-making. This limits the translation of progressive norms into authority and governance structures.

Cambodia

As shown in Table 1, the gender breakdown of the confidence, knowledge, and self-efficacy scales indicates slightly higher levels for men than women on all scales.⁵ These differences are statistically significant.⁶

Table 3 Cambodia Average Scores for Confidence, Knowledge, and Self-Efficacy by Gender.

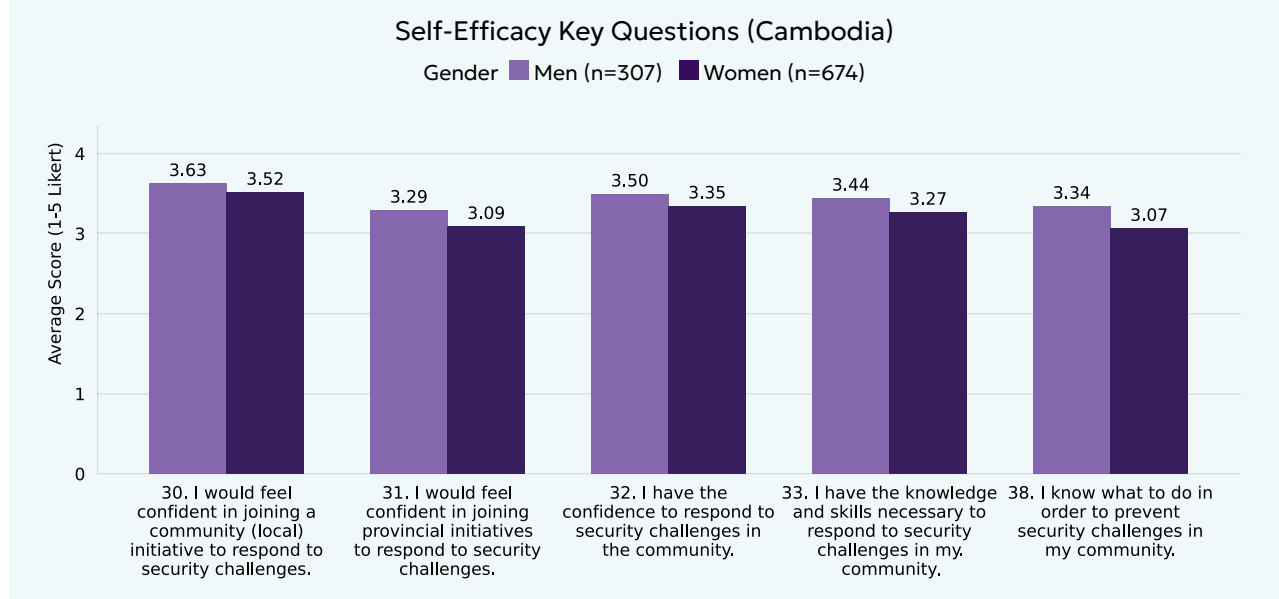
Gender	Confidence	Knowledge	Self-Efficacy
Men	3.47	3.39	3.43
Women	3.32	3.17	3.24

These results suggest that men in the sample perceive themselves as somewhat more confident and knowledgeable in responding to community security challenges compared with women. This indicates that gender may play a role in shaping individuals' self-perceptions of their ability to act in security-related situations. The gender difference is largest in the knowledge-related questions (Q33 and Q38) (compared with confidence), indicating that men report higher average knowledge, specifically for the question of knowing what to do to prevent security challenges, suggesting lower perceived preparedness among women (Figure 4). For confidence-related questions (Q30–Q32), the most pronounced gender gaps are observed in responses to joining provincial initiatives (Q31) and responding to security challenges in the community (Q32), where men were substantially more likely to agree. These patterns suggest that men report higher levels of confidence in engaging with formal or collective responses to security challenges, whereas women more frequently express uncertainty or hesitation.

⁵ Confidence = (Q30 + Q31 + Q32) / 3; Knowledge = (Q33 + Q38) / 2; Self-efficacy = (Confidence + Knowledge) / 2.

⁶ In Cambodia, an independent samples t-test showed a statistically significant difference in self-efficacy between women and men, $t(979) = -3.61$, $p < .001$.

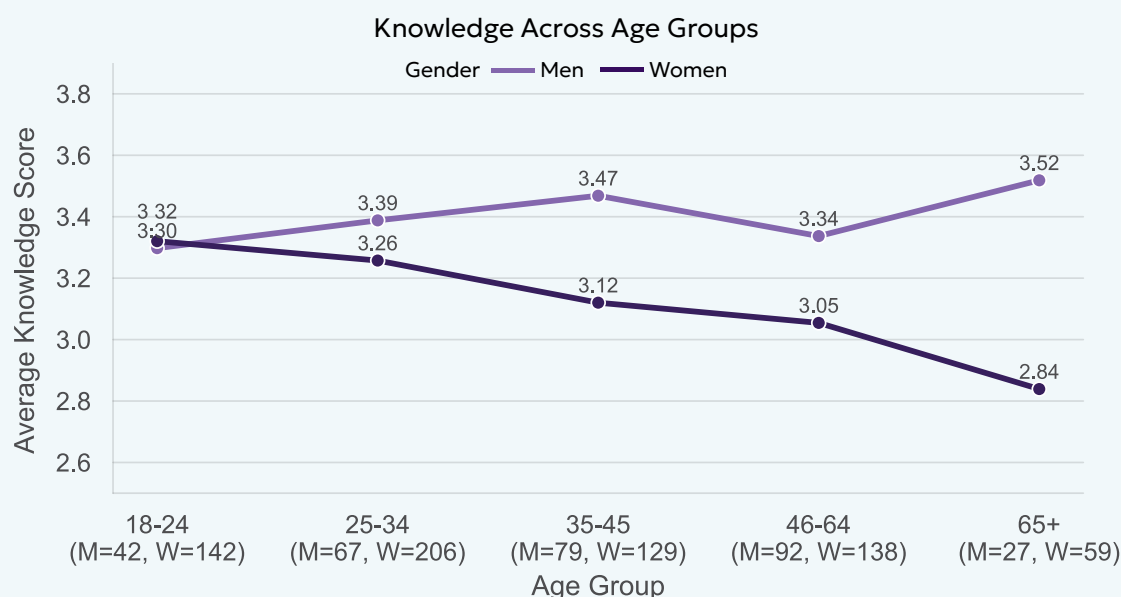
Figure 4: Average Scores by Gender on Self-Efficacy Questions in Cambodia.



Knowledge

Analysis of the composite knowledge scores shows that men report slightly higher knowledge scores than women, though in some disaggregated groups (e.g., younger age 18–24, high school education, students, single, retired) women’s scores are equal to or exceed men’s (Appendix 1 for detailed overview). Province level scores show that Mondulhiri men report higher knowledge (3.49) than women (3.20), like Stung Treng, though the gap is slightly narrower there. Within communes, Saen Monourom stands out: men score very high (3.74), but women score much lower (3.15), reflecting a pronounced gender divide in knowledge at the local level. Some communes, like Thalaborivat, show near parity (3.58 men; 3.54 women), suggesting community-specific factors may reduce gender differences. Moreover, for men, knowledge scores increase almost linearly with age. This suggests that men accumulate knowledge steadily over their lifetimes, possibly through work experience, community leadership roles, or informal learning. For women, the trend is essentially reversed: younger women (18–24) score highest, at 3.32, and scores decline with age, hitting 2.84 in the 65+ group (see Figure 5). This may reflect historical barriers that older women faced in accessing education and training. It could point to the double burden women face during child-rearing years. The knowledge scores also vary by ethnicity, where Indigenous and Khmer ethnic groups have larger gender knowledge gaps than ethnic minorities (similar knowledge levels among men and women from ethnic minority groups).

Figure 5. Knowledge Across Age Groups in Cambodia.



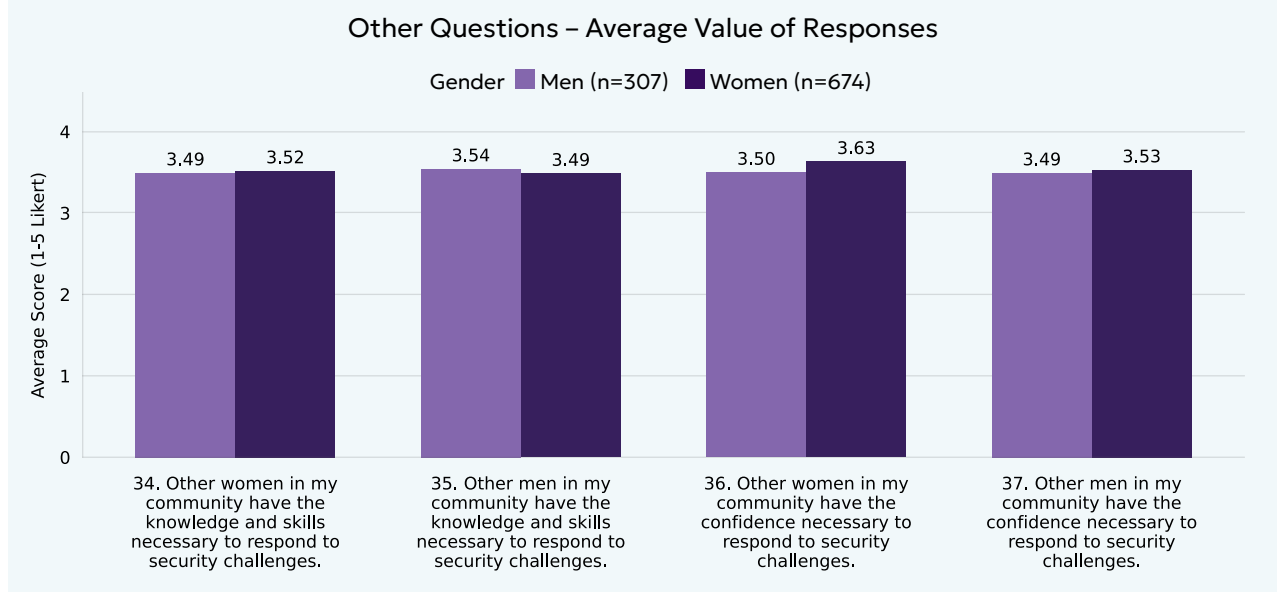
Confidence

Analysis of the composite confidence scores reveals notable patterns across demographic groups (Appendix 1 for detailed overview). Overall, confidence is highest among respondents with higher education and stable occupations (i.e. men and women with bachelor's degrees, government officials). Confidence is lowest among the unemployed (2.83 men, 2.70 women), those with only literacy classes (3.33 men, 3.16 women), and ethnic minorities (3.01 men, 3.10 women). Consequently, education correlates with higher confidence, and in some categories, women show more confidence than men (secondary, bachelor), reflecting the role of formal education in empowerment. Geographically, confidence varies by district and commune, with Thalaborivat is consistently high, and Sesan and Srekor among the lowest. Age patterns are also notable and like knowledge scores: Older men report higher confidence than younger men, whereas younger women tend to be more confident than older women. In terms of family size, men in households >10 are extremely confident (4.12), while women in the same households are lower (3.47) than living with less people in one household. This could be explained by gender roles as men live up to their role as provider might boost their confidence. Women living alone report high confidence (3.78), but there are no male respondents in this category (similar pattern for knowledge scores). Confidence increases with income for men, peaking at above one million riel (3.75). Women show smaller differences across income brackets (3.27–3.41), with less pronounced income effect. Higher income supports men's confidence more strongly than women's, suggesting economic resources may influence perceived agency differently by gender.

Collective Efficacy—Other People's Knowledge and Confidence

The survey asked respondents to self-assess their knowledge and confidence. It also asked how people perceive other people's knowledge and confidence to respond to security challenges in their community. Responses to this question revealed interesting gender dynamics: Women consistently rated other women and other men in their community as having higher knowledge and confidence than themselves, as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Average Scores by Gender on the Perception of Others in Cambodia



As shown in Figure 4, women's self-assessed knowledge (Q33 = 3.27) and confidence (Q32 = 3.35) are relatively modest. Yet, figure 6 indicates that women rate *other* women higher on both knowledge (Q34 = 3.52) and especially on confidence (Q36 = 3.63), and higher than other men (Q35 = 3.49; Q37 = 3.53). This pattern suggests a gendered self-perception gap where women undervalue their own capabilities relative to how they perceive others, especially other women. This data indicates latent collective capacity among women that is not reflected in individual self-assessments. Men, by contrast, show much smaller differences between self-assessments and assessments of others. Men rate their own confidence (Q32 = 3.50) and knowledge (Q33 = 3.44) at levels very similar to how they rate other women (knowledge Q34 = 3.49; confidence Q36 = 3.50) and other men (knowledge Q35 = 3.54; confidence Q37 = 3.49). The narrow difference in men's ratings, generally under 0.10 points, indicates a more consistent alignment between their self-ratings and their perceptions of others' capacities. These findings have implications for future programming that are further discussed in the last section of this report.

Programming and Non-programming Sites

Data was collected in Cambodia in programming and non-programming sites, allowing for robust comparison of programming impact by site and over time. As shown in Figure 7, there is no evidence of statistically significant differences between programming and non-programming sites for confidence, knowledge, or self-efficacy for average scores in the aggregated analysis. However, the gender-disaggregated results indicate otherwise. Differences in average scores for men across programming and non-programming sites are minimal, but women report a significant 0.17-point higher score in knowledge in programming sites relative to non-programming sites ($U = 51,198$, $p = 0.039$), and there is no difference for confidence. The discrepancy in women's knowledge is, again, largely driven by the prevention question (Q38), where women scored an average of 2.86 in non-programming sites versus 3.15 in sites, a difference of 0.29. This finding suggests that the higher overall baseline knowledge in programming sites is primarily due to greater perceived understanding of preventive actions.

Figure 7: Average Confidence, Knowledge and Self-Efficacy Scores by Gender in Programming and Non-Programming Sites in Cambodia



This pattern can be better understood by drawing on KII data that indicates that NGO engagement differs across the programming and non-programming sites. In non-programming sites, research participants reported engagement with NGOs and donor-funded projects, particularly around indigenous land rights, collective forest registration, savings groups, livelihoods, and general community development (Stung Treng Interview C13, C14 and C15; Mondulhiri Interview C6, C7, C8, C9 and C10). By contrast, research participants in programming sites raised explicitly gender and security-focused interventions (e.g., Amplify, WPS activities, Silaka, Women Peace Maker training) that framed security as something that can be prevented and provided women with concrete strategies related to issues such as GBV, early marriage, drugs, and trafficking. The larger gap on the prevention question, therefore, appears to reflect the specific, prevention-oriented content of these programs rather than a simple difference in the presence or absence of NGOs. The different focus of NGO programs also helps to explain why overall differences across programming and non-programming in women’s knowledge are evident but small (0.17) and why confidence is very similar.

The analysis of KII data points to an interesting dynamic in programming communes in Stung Treng, where NGO programs and school-based youth clubs are key spaces for learning about rights, gender, and security, and for expressing community concerns to authorities. Young women community leaders repeatedly credit organizations such as Silaka and WPM and others with changing how they think about gender roles, early marriage, school dropout, and domestic violence, and with giving them the courage to speak at commune meetings (Interview C21, see also C22, C23 and C26). A woman community leader in Stung Treng explained: “I feel now the time is changing. I personally change my way of thinking and behavior because I have opportunity to attend and learn about NGOs such as Silaka (Interview C23).” This quotation shows how programming partners can have a significant impact as platforms for dialogue about security issues. However, these networks are not equally accessible to all. LGBTQI+ youth in at least one programming commune report avoiding social activities due to self-consciousness and barriers to access, leading to exclusion from peer-support structures (Interview C22).



Women Buying and Selling at Market in Cambodia. AMPLIFY, June 2025

Responding to Security Challenges

Women in Cambodia's research sites are active participants in community security governance. However, their participation is channeled through informal networks and care-based roles that carry little formal decision-making authority. Across both provinces, women's engagement in responding to insecurity is more rooted in IP associations and community networks than state structures, with a focus on children and women's issues (Interview C27, see also C30). This section analyses the gap between participation and authority as it operates in practice. Women engage in mediation, community mobilization, preparedness, and advocacy, but formal mandates, final decisions, and public visibility in security matters rest predominantly with male leaders. The result is that women's security contributions are recognized within communities but remain structurally invisible to the governance institutions that allocate resources and make binding decisions.

Formally, village chiefs, commune councilors, police, and the Commune Committee for Women and Children (CCWC) hold official mandates, and authority usually resides with male leaders. However, trust in the effectiveness of these institutions is uneven, particularly in IP communities affected

by land conflict. Informally, elders, IP committees, religious groups, youth clubs, and women's groups provide everyday security governance, often responding more effectively to the needs of marginalized groups.

Most research participants shared the view that in serious matters, such as land disputes or financial decisions, women defer to male leadership for final decisions, even if they have participated in earlier discussions (Interview C9, see also C11, C13, C14 and C30). Gender norms discourage women from acting independently and may undermine their confidence or perceived authority. One woman community leader explained: "I feel that in my community, the men take a major role in decision-making. That is not because they always want to, but the [wives] have a culture of putting such decisions on [husbands]. This is because sometimes when women make the wrong decision, they get complaints from [husbands] (Interview C23)." In many communities it was reported that women attend meetings "to listen" but do not yet translate internal discussions into public advocacy with authorities, resulting in "poor overall visibility and action" (Interview C30). Thus, although women's participation in addressing insecurity has increased through women-led initiatives, "this progress is hampered by the persistent challenge of male-centric leadership culture (Interview C22)."

In crisis and security contexts, women typically assume responsibility for domestic preparedness, preparing food, organizing children, and gathering safety materials, because they "know where the materials [are] kept (Interview C31, see also C2, C4, C16 and C21)." During floods, for instance, women are responsible for moving children and belongings to safety, while men coordinate with authorities or manage boats and evacuation logistics (Interview C16, see also C18, C24 and C27). In cases of gender-based violence, women's involvement can enhance responsiveness and trust. A Bunong deputy commune chief stated: "When villagers experience family conflicts that require intervention ... I often serve as the mediator. As a woman, I find it easier to mediate or explain things to wives ... When a female mediator speaks with a woman facing problems, the woman may cry and open up ... she may feel too shy or uncomfortable to share her problems with a male mediator (Interview C2)." Women's effectiveness as mediators in GBV cases is therefore not incidental but structural, as it reflects the trust that victim survivors extend to people who share their experience of vulnerability and who operate within relationships of care rather than authority. That this capacity exists and is demonstrated in practice makes the exclusion of women from formal decision-making roles a governance failure rather than a gap in capacity.

Women who engage publicly in security responses face social and political risks. These risks are particularly acute for Indigenous women in Mondulkiri and Stung Treng defending land or farming in protected areas. As one Bunong community activist described:

“I have taken numerous initiatives to support the villagers ... mobilizing the community for Indigenous People's rights protection and Forest Land Registration [and] engaging in church-related work (Interview C8).

In Mondulkiri and Stung Treng, women's security roles are rooted in IP associations and community networks rather than state structures. This situatedness gives women influence in GBV mediation, preparedness, and community mobilization but they do not have a formal mandate in the governance institutions where land, resource, and security decisions are made. Women's contributions are recognized within communities, but formal decision-making authority remains predominantly with male leaders. For women who step into public roles, the risks are concrete as those engaged in land and rights advocacy report being threatened and monitored by local authorities. The gender authority gap here is the product of an institutional structure that absorbs women's contributions without converting them into the formal authority or protection that sustained public engagement requires.

Conducting an Interview with Villager in Cambodia. AMPLIFY, Oct 2025



Lao PDR

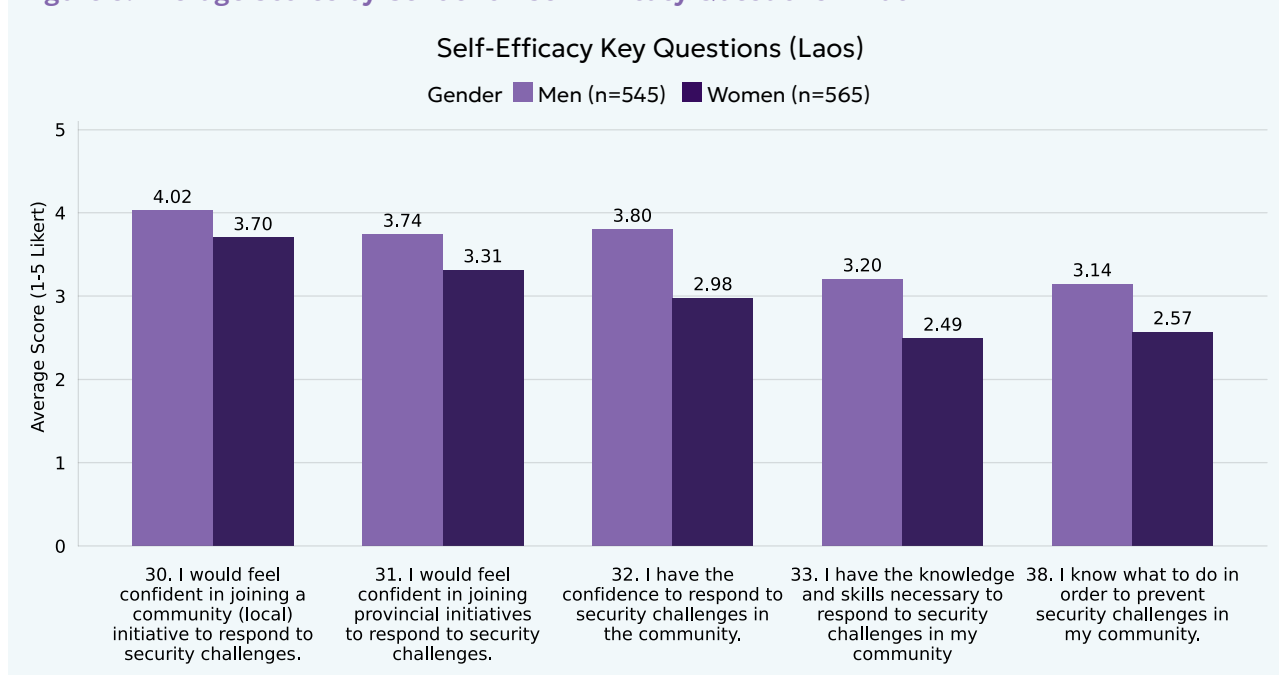
The average scores for confidence, knowledge, and self-efficacy by gender are shown in Table 2. They reveal significant differences between men and women.⁷ Men reported higher average scores in all three constructs, indicating an overall gender confidence and knowledge gap in perceived capacity to engage with and respond to community security challenges (Figure 8).

Table 2: Average Scores for Confidence, Knowledge, and Self-Efficacy by Gender

Gender	Confidence	Knowledge	Self-Efficacy
Men	3.85	3.17	3.51
Women	3.33	2.53	2.93

The largest differences are observed in confidence to respond (Q32: men 3.80, women 2.98) and perceived knowledge and skills to respond to security challenges (Q33: men 3.20, women 2.49). As shown in Figure 8, while both men and women report relatively higher confidence in joining local initiatives (Q30), gender differences remain evident and widen further when moving from local to provincial engagement (Q31). Like Cambodia, knowledge-related items (Q33 and Q38) show the lowest overall scores for women, indicating that gender disparities are not only about women's lower self-confidence to participate, but also about their perceived preparedness and understanding to prevent insecurity within the community.

Figure 8: Average Scores by Gender on Self-Efficacy Questions in Lao PDR



⁷ In Laos, an independent samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in self-efficacy between women and men, $t(1108) = -9.77, p < .001$.

Analysis of the survey question distributions on the Likert scale reveals further gender differences, with the largest categorical response differences occurring at the ends of the scales: “Strongly Disagree” and “Strongly Agree.” Women are far more likely than men to strongly disagree and men to strongly agree. This pattern suggests that gender differences are not merely a matter of degree but reflect qualitatively different self-assessments of competence and preparedness in security matters, which is closely aligned with the qualitative findings. Women’s concentration in “Strongly Disagree” responses points to structural exclusion from training and decision-making processes, rather than a simple lack of interest or engagement. Conversely, men’s clustering at “Strongly Agree” reinforces how confidence is socially produced through access to formal roles and visibility in enforcement within village security structures.

Knowledge

Gender gaps persist, but certain demographic groups (highly educated, single, labor/wage women, and Hmong women) disrupt the pattern (see Appendix 1 for a detailed overview). Local context matters, with some districts and ethnic groups showing notable variation between men and women, suggesting cultural or structural barriers. Like Cambodia, education and occupation appear to be strong in Laos, more so than age or income. Among women, some of the overall highest knowledge scores are observed in higher education groups, with vocational (3.42) and bachelor’s (3.75) almost matching men, while the lowest scores appear in the no formal education, primary, or literacy classes (2.20–2.62), highlighting educational inequities. Single women also report higher knowledge (3.1) than single men (2.86) or married women (2.51). Ethnicity also shows high variation; Hmong women report the highest female knowledge score (3.48), surpassing men in that group (2.52), whereas Lahu women score extremely low (1.56) compared with men (3.19). Qualitative data can explain this knowledge difference in the Hmong community, as the Hmong community sampled for this research had a female village chief—indicating the potential positive impact on other women in the community of having a female leader.

Confidence

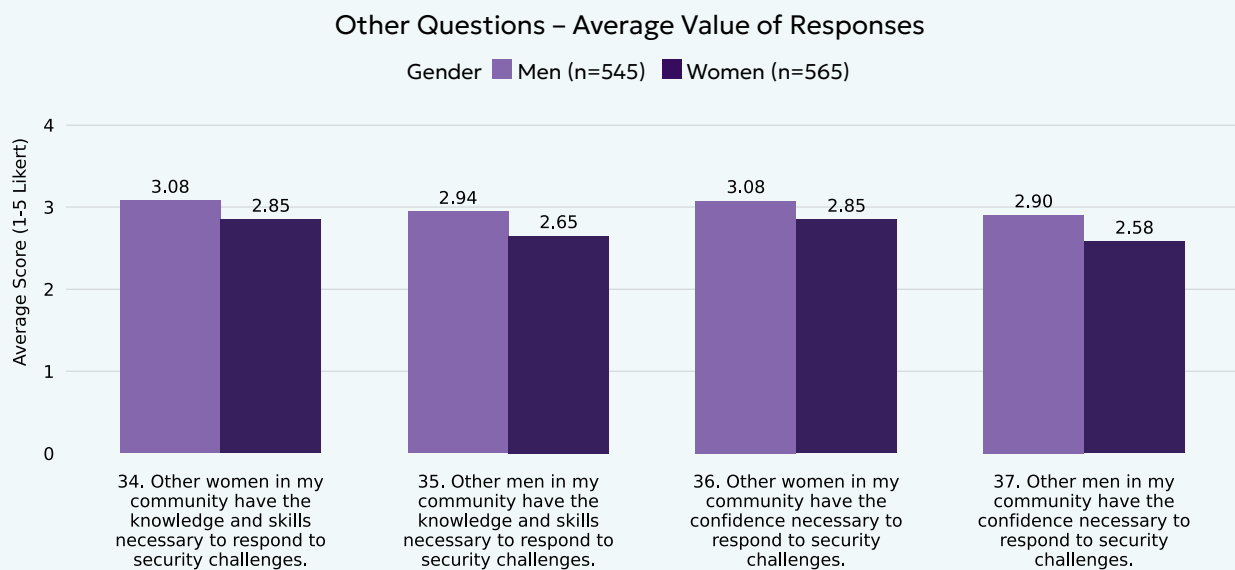
Confidence scores across different demographics also indicate a systematic gender gap that is particularly pronounced in specific districts and socioeconomic groups (see Appendix 1 for a detailed overview). At the provincial level, men in Savannakhet (3.91) and Bokeo (3.75) score substantially higher than women (~3.33 in both provinces), suggesting broadly lower outcomes for women regardless of location. At the district level, men’s scores are considerably high in Phin (4.27), Sepon (4.11), and Phalanxay (4.10). Women’s scores are consistently lower and more variable, with especially low values in Nong (2.62) and Meung (2.71), indicating pockets of acute gender disparity. Across age groups, men again score higher than women, with the highest male scores among those aged 46–64 (4.06). Women’s scores remain comparatively flat across ages (around 3.1–3.5), with the lowest values among younger (18–24) and older (65+) women, suggesting age-related vulnerabilities layered onto gender inequality. Beyond the overall gender gap, several notable exceptions and contrasts emerge. Women report equal or higher confidence than men in a small number of contexts, including among self-employed respondents (3.54 women vs 3.32 men), wage laborers (4.33 women vs 4.10 men), and single respondents (3.70 women vs 3.27 men), suggesting that economic autonomy and social independence may be associated with greater confidence in responding to community security challenges. Confidence is highest for both women and men among those with higher education and formal employment, and women from the Hmong and Khamu ethnic groups. The lowest confidence

scores cluster among certain ethnic minority women (including Lahu and Bru) and women in care work and low-income groups. Together, these patterns suggest that while gendered constraints remain pervasive, confidence is not fixed and appears responsive to education, livelihood type, and social positioning within the community.

Collective Efficacy—Other People’s Knowledge and Confidence

The questions relating to the perception of others’ knowledge and confidence reveal a different pattern in Cambodia than in Lao PDR (Figure 9). In Lao PDR, respondents consistently rate others in their community as having lower confidence and knowledge than themselves. Average scores for self-confidence to respond to security challenges (Q32) range from 2.98 (women) to 3.80 (men), compared with lower assessments of others’ confidence (Q36-37; 2.58 to 3.08). A similar pattern is observed for knowledge, with personal knowledge (Q 33) at 3.20 (men) and 2.49 (women), while perceived knowledge of others remains lower (Q34-35; 2.65 to 3.08). This suggests a generalized perception of limited collective capacity, even where individuals report moderate confidence in their own ability to respond.

Figure 9: Average Scores by Gender for Questions on the Perception of Others in Lao PDR



Further, the distribution reveals that men seem to rate *other women* in the community slightly higher than *other men*, both for confidence and knowledge. Women’s ratings show a similar pattern but are generally lower overall, with larger shares in Strongly Disagree. This pattern complicates deficit-based narratives about women’s capacity by suggesting that both women and men recognize women’s competence in everyday security and prevention, even as women continue to rate themselves more critically. This suggests that while respondents perceive the community’s capacity as limited, there is recognition that women may hold comparatively greater knowledge or skills and confidence than men in addressing security challenges. The divergence between women’s self-assessments and how

others evaluate women points to internalized gender norms of modesty and caution, as well as limited recognition of informal security work as “expertise.” Lower ratings of men’s community-level capacity may also reflect growing awareness that formal authority and physical enforcement do not necessarily translate into effective prevention or resolution of insecurity. These dynamics have important implications for programming.

Responding to Security Challenges

The qualitative data from Bokeo and Savannakhet reveal a layered and gendered architecture of security governance. Village authorities, including village heads, security units, mediation committees, and Lao Women’s Union representatives, occupy the formal security governance. Trust in these village-level institutions is consistently high and grounded in proximity. A deputy head of village in Savannakhet explained, “If there is a problem, it must first be reported to the village authorities, then the village will report to the district and province (Interview L25).” A youth leader in Bokeo similarly emphasized that village actors “live in the village and understand the situation well (Interview L22).” However, knowledge and authority within this structure are stratified. Legal literacy and procedural knowledge are concentrated among leaders and organized bodies, while ordinary villagers, especially women, youth, and ethnic minorities facing Lao-language barriers, rely heavily on intermediaries. A mediation committee member in Bokeo articulated the demand for institutional strengthening: “There is a desire to promote training or provide educational funding for the village committee regarding the resolution of ‘social ills’ ... to better address and resolve internal issues within the village (Interview L19).” Savannakhet research participants echo this call to “improve village authorities’ knowledge on law and legislation [and] improve community’s knowledge and awareness on law (Interview L39, see also L41).” Women leaders explicitly connected legal knowledge to protection from trafficking and domestic violence. A woman deputy village head in Bokeo requested “anti-human trafficking [training] within the village and to raise awareness among families [and] promoting knowledge and solutions to the problem of foreign–foreign married women (Interview L21, see also L9).”

Participation at the village level is widespread. Monthly meetings typically include household heads, youth representatives, LWU members, and security committees. Several research participants report consistent attendance, stating they have “attended every meeting at village level” or “participated at all levels because I was a village committee [member] (Interview L1, see also L2).” Yet participation does not automatically translate into influence. Women are frequently present but often positioned as listeners rather than decision-makers. As one Savannakhet LWU member explained, “women will be only listener, cannot provide any feedback or comments (Interview L27).” Others noted that while women may speak, “the majority still follow men (Interview L35).” At the same time, women who hold formal roles, LWU presidents, deputy village heads, mediation members, are consistently described as articulate and influential. One LWU member described her union president as someone who “has good manners, strong interpersonal skills, performs her duties well, and is confident in expressing opinions to help solve village problems (Interview L24).”

Women’s presence in leadership positions demonstrably shifts participation patterns: “Previously, women’s participation was limited, but currently there is a female deputy village head, which has increased women’s involvement (Interview L19).” This is also reflected in the survey results, where the knowledge score for women in the Hmong community is comparable to the score for men, possibly reflecting the impact of the female village head.⁸

⁸ According to Amplify records, only 3% of village heads are women (8,156 are men and 248 are women).

Women's informal mediation role is particularly visible. The LWU "must be involved every time a problem is resolved," especially in domestic disputes and cross-border marriage cases (Interview C24). Women are frequently the first point of contact for survivors: "When facing personal problems such as being beaten by husbands, they do not fight back but try to escape and seek help from a female village leader (Interview L17)." Women are valued for communicative styles described as "communicate gently and speak carefully based on principles (Interview L15)." However, this influence is largely confined to the village level. Representation sharply declines at district and provincial levels, where men predominantly engage with external organizations and state authorities.⁹ Women demonstrate authority in mediating neighborhood or village conflicts because this authority is seen to fall legitimately within their relational or domestic domain. However, the formal and external dimensions of security governance remain predominantly male.

Security responses involve a stark gendered division of labor. While planning and consultation are framed as collaborative: "Women and men think together, consult, plan, cooperate in implementation, and follow up," frontline enforcement is overwhelmingly male (Interview L20). Men conduct night patrols, apprehend offenders, and physically confront perpetrators. A village police officer: "Men, in personal cases such as chicken theft, take action themselves to catch the thief and respond by confronting or using force (Interview L16)." Women concentrate on monitoring and logistical support. They are widely described as the "eyes and ears" of the community, recording incidents on mobile phones, organizing households during crises, and reporting concerns (Interview L41, see also L16 and L40). Women's surveillance, communication, and care underpin enforcement but do not translate into coercive authority or formal control.

Barriers to women's authority include confidence gaps, knowledge gaps, and gender norms and divisions of labor. Many ordinary women describe themselves as shy, fearing they might say "something that is not correct" (Interview L20). A male research participant explained: "There are few women; they are not confident to speak due to limited political knowledge and shyness (Interview L20)" Organizational affiliation matters: "Most of the people who speak out and contribute ideas are from the Women's Union and the youth group. Ordinary women in the community rarely express their opinions (Interview L26)" Household dynamics also constrain participation. Some husbands "do not allow [them] to work in village activities," citing jealousy or authority concerns (Interview L24). Women face a double burden of agricultural labor, care work, petty trade, and community responsibilities, resulting in "less personal time and increased workload to resolve problems, often lasting late into the night (Interview L17)." However, some women increasingly "dare to think and make decisions and can be heads of households (Interview L23, see also L20)." These shifts are real but remain contingent on individual confidence and organizational affiliation rather than structural change. The barriers documented here - confidence and knowledge gaps, household constraints, and gendered divisions of labor - are not individual failings but institutional conditions that reproduce the participation-without-authority pattern across both provinces.

Across Bokeo and Savannakhet, women participate extensively in community security governance, but their participation is channeled through informal, village-level roles that carry no formal mandate. Women function as the eyes and ears of their communities, monitoring incidents, organizing households during crises, and providing first-response support in domestic disputes, yet this influence does not extend to the district and provincial levels,

⁹ The formal role of LWU's engagement in mediation is getting even smaller as the LWU is no longer a formal member of a Village Mediation Units.

where resources, legal processes, and enforcement are controlled. The gender authority gap documented here is not a product of women's absence but of institutional structures that channel women's contributions into support and monitoring roles while reserving formal decision-making for men.

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP

The fourth research question asked, "What prevents women and men from participating in peace and security initiatives?"

We found that the barriers to participation and leadership are both structural and institutional. As outlined throughout the previous sections, the structural factors preventing participation include unequal access to education and information, linguistic and ethnic discrimination, and gender divisions of labor that expect women to carry out most household tasks. Institutional norms that expect men to be the final authorities and ensure community decision-making lead to a predominantly male space, with few exceptions. These barriers are mutually reinforcing, where structural constraints limit women's capacity to enter institutional spaces, while institutional exclusion entrenches the gendered power relations within households and communities. Deviations from these gendered expectations are sanctioned across formal state administration, community structures, and the household. The combined effect of these structural and institutional barriers results in lower knowledge and confidence of women compared to men in addressing security issues.

A CSO Participant Speaking on ERAW and Legal Aid in Laos. AMPLIFY, Mar-Apr 2026



Cambodia

Across Stung Treng and Monduliri, a deeply entrenched gender hierarchy shapes authority, labor, and barriers to participation. **Institutional norms** lead men to predominantly hold formal decision-making power in village and commune leadership, retaining final authority over land, resources, and security. Women, by contrast, are concentrated in administrative support roles. As a male Bunong community member in Monduliri explained: “In the community, women often serve as secretaries or accountants, responsible for managing budgets, handling incoming and outgoing documents, participating in advocacy efforts and providing feedback (Interview C1)” When asked why women predominantly hold supporting roles, some male interviewees attribute this to difficulty “finding women who like such village leading job[s]” or a perceived lack of women’s interest in formal office - a framing that reflects normalized exclusion rather than genuine absence of interest or capacity (Interview C13, see also C14).

These institutional dynamics are underpinned by **structural barriers** that constrain women’s ability to access and sustain leadership roles. A significant structural barrier is the gender division of labor that makes women responsible for care work in the household and community. Across both provinces, women carry primary responsibility for unpaid domestic work, including cooking, cleaning, washing, caring for children and husbands, and managing the home, alongside substantial income-generating work (Interview C1, see also C2, C3, C4, C11, C12, C18, C19, C20, C21, C26, C27, C28, C30 and C31). A young Bunong man in Monduliri described it plainly: “Women tend to be busier than men with household responsibilities, including cooking, household chores, caring for children and husbands, managing property, farming or chamkar (Interview C1).” Women describe combining housework with farming, collecting non-timber forest products (NTFPs), working for wages, and managing family finances (Interview C2, see also C4, C8, C9, C18, C20, C25 and C27), with IP women often mentioning additional burdens related to forest collection and cultural obligations (Interview C3, see also C6, C7, C8, C10, C11, C12, C28 and C31). Project staff captured this as women’s “double-burden of earning an income outside the home and shouldering the majority of the domestic workload upon their return (Interview C30, see also C31).” This double burden directly constrains women’s capacity to participate in peace and security initiatives, leaving them with limited time, energy, and institutional recognition.

This dynamic is particularly acute for young women in IP communities in Monduliri and Stung Treng, where severe land and livelihood insecurity compounds the responsibility. Families struggle to prioritize girls’ education beyond the primary level (Interview C11, see also C12 and C31), and project staff noted that gender stereotypes still lead many girls to leave school earlier than boys, especially when families cannot afford schooling and prioritize sons (Interview C30). In many cases, even when women earn income or contribute heavily to farming, the final say on significant expenditures, land, or security-related decisions remains with the male head, rooted in long-standing gender norms (Interview C3, see also C4, C15, C20, C23 and C31). This division - women bearing the labor of household security while men retain decision-making authority - is the household-level mirror of the institutional exclusion documented throughout the findings.

This structural disadvantage is compounded for IP women by unequal access to formal education. In some IP settings, research participants also note that structural barriers lead to women having fewer opportunities for formal education, which limits their access to official positions despite strong community engagement (Interview C6, see also C10 and C12). Early school dropout forecloses pathways to the formal knowledge and credentials that would support leadership roles. Social sanctions for departing from gender norms constitute a further structural barrier, operating against both women and men. Unmarried women, especially those beyond what is considered a “normal” marriage age, face intrusive questioning, ridicule, and assumptions that their single status

reflects personal deficiency (Interview C11, see also C12, C15, C18, C19, C20, C25 and C17). A woman community leader in Stung Treng stated: “Unmarried women receive words from other villagers on why not getting married, already getting old. Sometimes they say, ‘finish study already, why not get married?’ (Interview C23).” These pressures steer women toward early marriage and domestic roles, narrowing their participation in public and security life. For men, engaging in domestic work or stepping back from the provider role invites its own stigma: men who stay at home or fail to provide financially may be compared to “domestic animals” and feel “ashamed or depressed” under community judgment (Interview C30). As a woman community leader noted: “When men express a preference for or engage in housework, they are frequently met with derogatory remarks from peers, often questioning their sexual orientation, such as being labeled as ‘gay’ or doing ‘women’s work’ (Interview C24).” These sanctions reinforce rigid role divisions that limit both women’s public participation and men’s engagement in the domestic and caregiving work that might otherwise provide women with more resources to participate in security initiatives.

These structural constraints interact with institutional norms to produce a persistent gap between women’s participation and their formal authority. Much of the day-to-day work for community maintenance and social organizing is feminized. Women act as primary mobilizers, health committee members, domestic violence mediators, and household managers. Yet this functional responsibility does not translate into formal authority and leadership. This disconnect is reinforced by gender norms that stigmatize unmarried women, limit women’s public voice, and penalize men for domestic work. The gap between women’s participation and their authority is particularly pronounced in formal security and decision-making contexts. Several leaders emphasized that women “have equal decision-making power as men and are entitled to participate in both major and minor decisions,” and that shared decision-making “fosters transparency” and prevents conflict (Interview C1, see also C3, C18, C25 and C27). Yet in practice, as a Bunong elder in Mondulkiri noted: “Women and men have equal decision-making rights, but the man is still the one who makes the final decision because women’s thinking is still considered limited (Interview C4).” Even when women sit on specialized committees such as the CCWC, they may be dominated by male commune councilors in domestic violence cases or safety planning: “When women seek solutions from commune councilors, they gain advice that this is normal living with each other always having such conflict. When having a previous problem, the domination existing and expressing that the problem is caused by women not working at home, not cooking (Interview C31).” In IP communities, where trust in state authorities might be lower, and elders play central roles in conflict resolution, women often bring cases first to traditional structures rather than police, which can be protective but may also reinforce male elder control over outcomes (Interview C6, see also C10, C11, C12, C28 and C31).

These norms are not static, with younger generations in both IP and Khmer communities articulating more egalitarian views. Yet their ability to act on these beliefs is often constrained by factors such as school dropout, migration, economic precarity, and unequal access to education, specifically for IP girls. A clear discourse has also emerged among women community leaders and some local officials in Stung Treng that gender-equal decision-making is necessary: “I think the time has come to abandon the traditional decision-making models, which too often prioritized the elderly male generation. Today, guaranteeing equal rights and participation for women and men in every decision is a non-negotiable imperative (Interview C20, see also C18, C21, C25 and C29).”

This emerging discourse among women leaders and local officials points to the conditions under which change becomes possible, but individual conviction and evolving attitudes among younger generations are not yet sufficient to displace the structural and institutional conditions that reproduce the participation-without-authority pattern. The gap between the decision-making equality that research participants acknowledge in principle and the male authority that governs in practice is not incidental but structural, reproduced by the interlocking barriers.

Lao PDR

Across Bokeo and Savannakhet, security governance is characterized by gender hierarchy. Leadership positions at village level continue to be predominantly occupied by men in many communities, security units, and mediation bodies and retain final authority over land, security decisions, and engagement with higher-level authorities. A male Khmu village head described this role bluntly: “[We] provide overall leadership for the village, encourage and mobilize the people ... and be responsible for the overall direction of every task in the village that is assigned by the central [party/government] levels (Interview L14).” Women appear in formal positions, as LWU presidents and deputies, some deputy village heads, members of mediation units but their roles are often framed as adjunct to male leadership: “Women are involved through the LWU and work in village mediation units and community forestry activities (Interview L15).” Even women’s physical presence in meetings is channeled into gendered support tasks rather than decision-making: “When there is a meeting, women will help clean the office, prepare tables and chairs, and if there is a social banquet or party, the women are responsible for it (Interview L8, see also L34).” Men, in turn, are associated with physical and security work during such events - arranging structures, guarding, and resolving any conflicts that arise. This gendered division of even meeting labor reflects and reinforces who is understood to hold authority and who is allowed to lead security responses.

These institutional dynamics rest on **structural barriers** that constrain women’s time, resources, and access to leadership pathways. At the household level, women carry a consistent double burden. Women are said to “do household chores, cook, take care of children, and sell small goods for income” and to manage household finances, with large purchases requiring consultation with husbands (Interview L23, see also L22, L29 and L32). The Lahu wife of the Village Police Chief in Bokeo explained: “The husband is the one who generates the family’s income, by tapping rubber and selling it or buying and selling cattle/buffalo (Interview L2).” While women are valued as “keepers of money,” “good at saving,” and “strong family leaders” within the household, this household authority does not translate into formal security governance (Interview L19, see also L21). Internalized gender norms also shape women’s own self-perceptions as a barrier: many women grow up believing “they must remain under male authority and that men are the heads of the family (Interview L17),” limiting their confidence to claim leadership roles even when structural opportunities exist.

Much of the everyday work that sustains safety and community cohesion is feminized. Women mediate family disputes, act as first responders to domestic violence, care for households affected by addiction and economic stress, and informally monitor village security. Yet this central role in maintaining everyday security does not translate into formal authority in village structures. The predominance of male leadership can create a self-reinforcing mechanism that leadership and security roles are primarily men’s responsibilities.

Generational shifts are visible but uneven and generate their own tensions as a barrier to change. Older generations are described as “not having provided rights to women and having imposed many limitations, such as prioritizing sons over daughters in support and opportunities (Interview L18).” Younger research participants increasingly articulate egalitarian views, and women’s rising educational attainment has enabled greater participation in paid work and, in some cases, leadership roles. Several research participants explicitly link women’s education to community development, arguing that “equal roles should be played because women are now more educated than men, make better decisions than men have, [and] have higher abilities than men, which will improve the development of the community (Interview L7).” Others highlight women’s strengths in conflict resolution, noting that women “tend to be more patient, more compromising, and more understanding,” and that their participation would “create more fairness (Interview L29).”

However, such changes often generate tension and resistance from men who feel their traditional roles and authority are being undermined. Several research participants describe men's insecurity in response to women's increasing economic and social visibility, which can translate into direct pressure on women to withdraw from leadership or paid work. As one woman in Bokeo said: "The husband does not want her to work; the husband does not want her to be bigger or more powerful than him (Interview L12)."

The findings show that women and marginalized groups are central actors in maintaining safety and cohesion in communities, yet there is a persistent gap between this extensive participation and the formal power that would make it consequential. Changing attitudes among younger research participants and women's rising educational attainment are real, but these shifts also generate pushback. Where women gain economic or social ground, some men respond by withdrawing permission for them to work or participate in community roles. The barriers are contemporary and actively reproduced in traditional gender norms, in household dynamics, in village meeting rooms, and in the gap between what research participants say should happen and what they describe actually happening.

A Working Woman at Market in Cambodia. AMPLIFY, June 2025



CROSS-NATIONAL COMPARISON

Although the comparison between Cambodia and Lao PDR has some limitations, as noted in the methodology section, there is a consistent pattern across both countries: Women sustain everyday security through mediation, caregiving, community mobilization, and informal monitoring but are underrepresented in the formal arenas where consequential decisions are made. In both countries, men dominate village and commune leadership, retain final authority over land, security, and engagement with higher-level authorities and are disproportionately represented in enforcement and security response. Gender gaps in knowledge and confidence are statistically significant in both contexts, with men consistently reporting higher scores. Intersectional inequalities compound these gaps: ethnic minority women, women with lower education, older women, and women in care-based livelihoods report the lowest knowledge and confidence scores in both countries. GBV, drug and alcohol use, land insecurity, and the constraints these place on women's mobility and participation are shared across both contexts.

However, important differences emerge in the nature, intensity, and drivers of these dynamics. The gender knowledge and confidence gap is larger in Lao PDR than in Cambodia. Average self-efficacy scores show a gap of 0.19 points between men and women in Cambodia, compared with 0.58 points in Lao PDR. Women in Lao PDR are far more likely than men to strongly disagree with statements about their capacity to respond to security challenges, pointing to structural exclusion from training and decision-making rather than a simple lack of interest. In Cambodia, while gaps persist, certain groups—younger women, women with higher education, and women in programming sites—show scores approaching or matching men's, suggesting that targeted intervention can meaningfully reduce the gap.

Civil society engagement is a key differentiating factor between the two countries. In Cambodia, sustained NGO engagement in programming sites has demonstrably strengthened rights-based discourse and women's leadership pathways. Women in programming sites report significantly higher knowledge scores than those in non-programming sites, driven primarily by prevention-oriented content delivered through organizations such as Silaka and Women Peace Makers. Young women community leaders credit this engagement with shifting how they understand gender roles, early marriage, and domestic violence and with giving them the confidence to speak at commune meetings. In Lao PDR, security governance is more tightly embedded in state structures, with the LWU serving as the primary institutional channel for women's participation. While the LWU facilitates access and provides a formal platform, it also tends to confine women's participation to gender-specific and welfare-focused domains, which can shape the pathways through which women participate in peace and security initiatives at their community.

The specific security profiles of the countries also diverge. In Cambodia, land dispossession and the erosion of Indigenous land rights are the most salient and existential threats, particularly for IP communities in Mondulkiri and Stung Treng. The arrival of foreign investment forced relocation and the criminalization of farming in protected areas are experienced as direct threats to cultural continuity, identity, and livelihoods. Women in these communities are actively engaged in land advocacy and resistance, often at significant personal risk. In Lao PDR, while land insecurity is also present - particularly in Bokeo, where concessions to Chinese investors for banana plantations, rubber, and gold mining have caused significant environmental and livelihood damage - the most urgent and rapidly escalating threat identified by research participants is drug and alcohol use, particularly among young men, which drives domestic violence, theft, and household instability across both

provinces. Cross-border trafficking and forced marriage of young ethnic minority women to China, concentrated in Bokeo, represent a severe and distinctly gendered insecurity with no direct equivalent in the Cambodian findings.

Provincial dynamics within each country also differ in important ways. In Cambodia, Monduliri and Stung Treng share broadly similar challenges around IP land rights and GBV, though knowledge gaps are more pronounced in Monduliri. In Lao PDR, Savannakhet's insecurity is closely tied to youth migration to Thailand, factory-driven economic transformation, and recurrent flooding, while Bokeo's is shaped by its position within the Golden Triangle corridor, concession-based land use, and cross-border trafficking. These provincial differences underscore that programmatic responses need to be tailored not only at the country level but at the provincial and community level.

Finally, the mechanisms available for change differ. In Cambodia, progressive norms are being reinforced through NGO programs, school-based youth clubs, and social media, with younger women increasingly claiming rights-based language and leadership roles. In Lao PDR, generational change is visible but more constrained by state structures, household authority dynamics, and the limited independent civic space in which women can organize outside the LWU. Where female leadership does exist in Lao PDR—as in the Hmong community with a female village head—its impact on other women's knowledge and confidence scores is demonstrable, suggesting that representation in formal roles has a measurable downstream effect on collective capacity.

Baseline Data Collection in Laos. Namjai Community Association (NCA), Jan 2026



IMPLICATIONS FOR THE KNOWLEDGE BASE ON WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY

This study contributes to our understanding of the challenges and the opportunities for bringing a Women, Peace and Security perspective to enhance peace and security in Cambodia and Lao PDR. WPS advocates have long argued for the importance of women's meaningful participation, while revealing the structural gap between that normative commitment and community-level lived experiences of insecurity. The findings of this study confirm that women in Cambodia and Lao PDR are far from passive actors: They are frequently the first responders during crises and holders of unique local knowledge that strengthens community preparedness and recovery (see also Tanyag and True 2019). Yet, women remain systematically excluded from formal decision-making, particularly at sub-national and community levels (see also Resurrección and Elmhirst 2008).

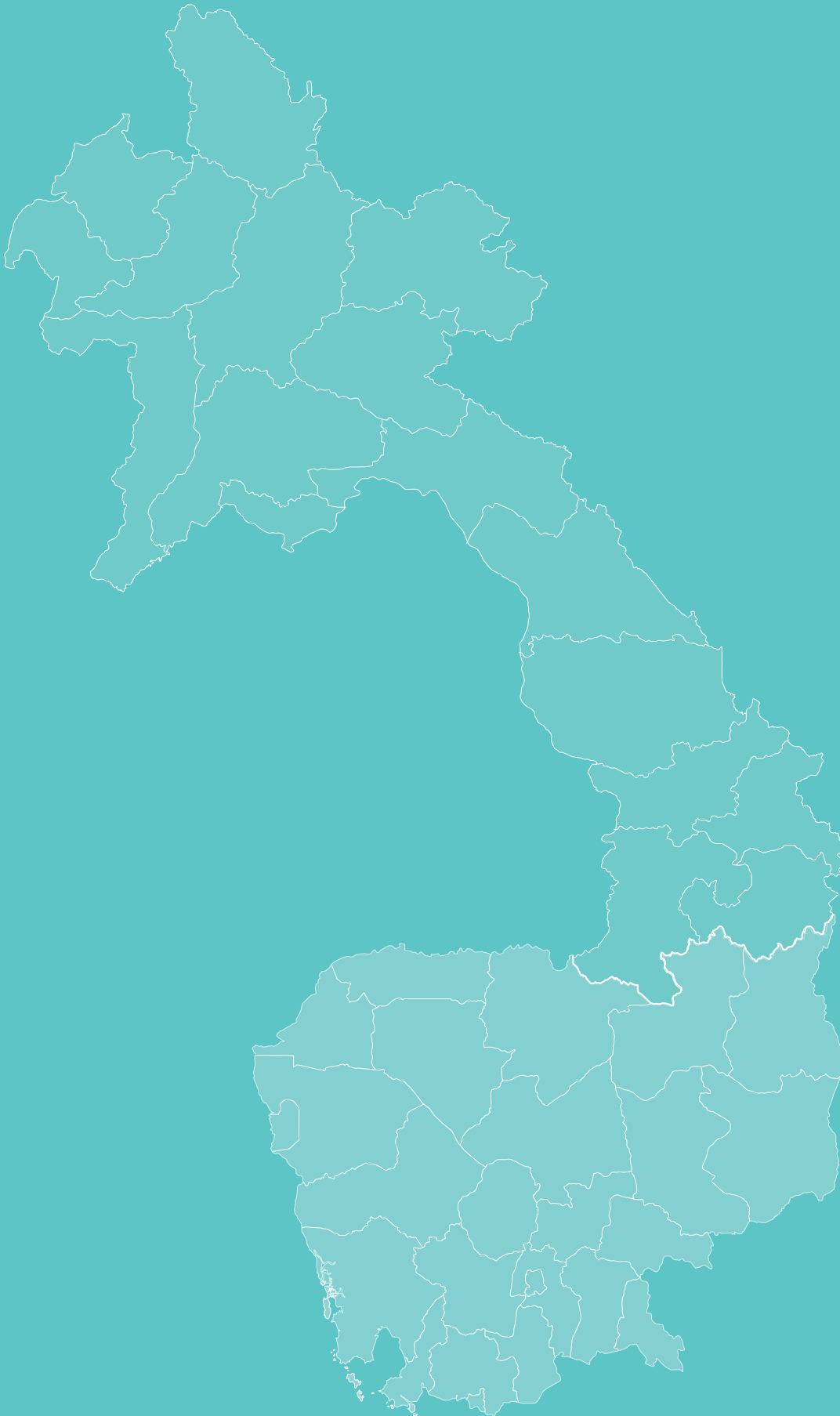
The study extends the WPS knowledge base by providing disaggregated, community-level evidence of how this gendered exclusion operates in practice: through structural norms creating the double burden of care and productive labor, social sanctions against gender norm departure, linguistic and educational barriers, and the institutional norms of concentration of legal and procedural knowledge among a narrow institutional (male) elite. Importantly, the findings show that women's exclusion is not uniform: intersectional factors, including ethnicity, age, education, and geography, shape who bears the greatest costs of participation.

The study demonstrates that the gap between women's security participation and their authority is not simply a problem of numbers or representation but of institutionalized governance and gender norms. In both Cambodia and Lao PDR, women's contributions to everyday security are extensive but largely informal and unrecognized, echoing the broader critique that WPS implementation has prioritized symbolic inclusion over the transformation of power relations (Davies and True 2019). Importantly, the Cambodian programming site data shows how sustained, prevention-oriented civil society engagement can meaningfully shift women's knowledge and perceived capacity to act, particularly on issues of GBV, early marriage, and trafficking.

This finding supports AMPLIFY's theory of change while also pointing to its limits: where civic space is constrained, the institutional channels available to women remain largely state-affiliated, potentially channeling participation into welfare and mediation functions rather than security governance and leadership. Importantly, given women's existing work and the institutional norms that bar them from decision-making and authority, it is rational for them not to have the knowledge or confidence to prevent or respond to nontraditional security threats. Taken together, the findings highlight that closing the WPS implementation gap in these contexts requires not only increasing women's presence in formal structures but addressing the structural conditions - care burdens, educational inequality, linguistic exclusion, and gendered norm enforcement - that determine whether presence can be converted into meaningful authority.



Recommendations



Recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS, GOVERNANCE ACTORS, AND WPS PRACTITIONERS AND PARTNERS



Address Gendered Security Challenges

Security challenges affect women and men in distinct ways, and their effects within communities are often interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Land disputes and dispossession, gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence, environmental hazards, and degradation are common challenges across various contexts. However, in Cambodia, emerging digital risks were identified as an additional challenge, and in Lao PDR, trafficking and deceptive marriage, and migration insecurity were highlighted as specific threats. Responses to these insecurities must address both the structural conditions that exacerbate them as well as gender-differentiated impacts.

Measures to tackle gendered security challenges should:

- Strengthen rights-based responses to gendered security challenges, including GBV, land disputes, and drug-related harms, by adopting **survivor-centered protocols, referral pathways, and documentation processes in Lao and Cambodian as well as relevant ethnic minority languages.**
 - In Cambodia, support commune councils, village actors, and police to **adopt survivor-centered protocols and establish thresholds** for protection to redress the priority of reconciliation over safety.
 - In Lao PDR, **clarify mediation limits and referral thresholds** in cases involving domestic violence and harms linked to alcohol and drug use, and strengthen village-level procedures and referral pathways.
- Develop **culturally-grounded approaches to land dispossession and environmental insecurity**, especially in Indigenous and ethnic minority communities experiencing land grabbing and intimidation.
 - In Cambodia, **structured dialogue forums** bringing together Indigenous elders, women leaders, youth representatives, and local officials can support locally legitimate responses to land disputes, GBV, community insecurity, drug-related harms, and environmental risks.
 - In Lao PDR, strengthen village-level documentation capacities **on land disputes and dispossession**, including by building women's documentation and advocacy skills and supporting safe engagement with authorities.



A Participant Writing at a Workshop in Cambodia. AMPLIFY, Oct 2025

- Respond to the disproportionate impacts of insecurity on widows, single mothers, low-income households, and Indigenous communities through **targeted livelihood crisis response**. This targeted relief should be integrated into community security programming.
- **Strengthen prevention and response measures for emerging and evolving security threats:**
 - **In Cambodia**, strengthen responses to the security risks faced in land defense and rights advocacy, including toward Indigenous communities in Mondulkiri and Stung Treng, through improved legal documentation support, advocacy safety protocols, and referral pathways for women at risk.
 - **In Lao PDR**, strengthen responses to trafficking, deceptive or forced marriage, and migration insecurity, and drug-related harms, particularly in high-risk areas such as Bokeo, through improved coordination, referral systems, increased community awareness, and responses informed by local knowledge of evolving substances.

Responses should remain sensitive to provincial variation, including differing migration, environmental, trafficking, and land concession pressures across contexts.



Participation and Leadership

Survey and qualitative findings show pronounced **gender gaps in knowledge and confidence to participate in peace and security initiatives** across contexts. Women are constrained in their ability to participate and lead within their communities, both at the informal level and in more formalized local mediation mechanisms. This is shaped not only by limited access to information but also by a lack of confidence, perceived authority, and structural and institutional constraints.

Measures to build women's knowledge, confidence, and leadership in peace and security actions should:

- Deliver **legal literacy education** to women and Indigenous women in land registration, resource governance, GBV, and civic rights.
 - In Lao PDR, strengthen legal literacy and mediation capacity within village institutions in response to leaders' requests for clearer legal guidance, and raise awareness of the limits of mediation in cases involving severe domestic violence, trafficking, and land disputes.
- Conduct **early-warning exercises and practical training** for women to build their confidence to prevent harmful security impacts. This may help address the significant gender gap in women's perceived knowledge of how to prevent conflict and security threats.
- Target programming toward **women's collective leadership initiatives and peer support platforms**. Women frequently rate other women as more knowledgeable than themselves, suggesting both a misperception of their own capacity and the potential to deliver increased programming targeted at building and recognizing collective capacity.
- Promote **men and boys' shared responsibility for gender equality** through community programming that addresses shared caregiving, non-violence, and responsible behavior around alcohol and drugs, drawing on positive examples of men who consult wives, share decision-making, and reject violence.
- Integrate **intergenerational approaches across program design** that tailor approaches to different cohorts and respond to younger women's reported higher knowledge and the decline in women's knowledge across older age groups by harnessing and valuing the different knowledge contributions from different groups.
- Identify and implement **mentorship linkages for women within village institutions and leadership exposure opportunities**, such as through women's shadowing of existing leaders, and **twinning with villages that have successful women's leadership** to strengthen women's self-efficacy.
- Support **youth as partners in prevention and response** to security challenges through expanded school and village youth platforms addressing drugs, safe migration, GBV, and online risks.



Strengthen Inclusivity and Accountability of Governance Structures

Women are key actors in ensuring everyday security, but they are underrepresented in high-stakes decision-making. Local governance structures of commune councils in Cambodia and village mechanisms in Lao PDR are important sites of engagement and tangible security governance.

Measures to build inclusivity and accountability in local peace and security governance should:

- Strengthen the **institutional positioning of local mechanisms and actors** through clearer mandates and leadership endorsement of them, predictable operational support, incentives, rewards, and discretionary resources aligned with their frontline prevention and response roles.
 - In Cambodia, this includes strengthening the institutional positioning of commune councils, CCWC, and VHC structures involved in community prevention and response.
 - In Lao PDR, strengthen village-level governance and mediation mechanisms to support women's participation, representation, and engagement in community security decision-making, including by creating complementary pathways for women's leadership that extend beyond existing institutional channels.
- Provide **funding support** for stipends, childcare, and scheduling accommodating women's unpaid care and livelihood responsibilities to enable meaningful participation of women.
- Translate governance, complaint, and safety materials into **Indigenous and ethnic minority languages** (including Bunong and Kouy in Cambodia; Khmu, Hmong, Bru, and Lahu in Lao PDR) in accessible formats for low-literacy users.
- Protect **safe civic engagement** in contexts of land defense and community advocacy where women and Indigenous leaders face intimidation.
- Establish and support **formal platforms to collate women's security documentation** of threats, insecurity, and shifts in community dynamics, recognizing it as indispensable to community safety.
- **Improve representation pathways** to ensure women's participation at village and community levels translates into influence within district and provincial decision-making structures.

KEY OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE AMPLIFY PROGRAM

In addition to the recommendations above for policymakers, governance actors, and WPS partners, this flagship baseline research report informs **recommendations for AMPLIFY's program strategies in Cambodia and Lao PDR**. This builds on existing entry points of the program through partnerships with the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) Cambodia, Lao Women's Union (LWU), and other WPS actors and women's civil society partners.

- Advance the analysis of Women, Peace and Security impacts to strengthen the design and implementation of evidence-informed national policies.** In Cambodia, the leadership of MoWA in the adoption of the first National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security provides an opportunity to ensure that women's participation in peace and security measures is reflected in the NAP. In the Lao PDR, the implementation of the 10th Five-Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan (2026–2030) can deliver increased opportunities for women's meaningful inclusion and access to benefits.
- Improve representation pathways to connect women at the village level to district and provincial decision-making mechanisms.** This includes strengthening women's participation within local governance and mediation structures and creating clearer pathways for community concerns to inform higher-level policy and decision-making.
- Build WPS civil society platforms to enhance individual confidence and collective action.** Women consistently rate other women as more knowledgeable than themselves. Peer-led reflection circles, visible leadership opportunities, and public recognition of women's mediation roles can strengthen self-efficacy.
- Engage with diverse community members as peace actors and allies:** Youth should be supported in school, village, and community contexts to build their prevention skills and peer awareness about security challenges, including migration risks, GBV, drug harms, and online risks. Men should be engaged with across community programming to build gender equitable approaches to leadership and to counter harmful gender social norms that only men experience or can respond to insecurity.
- Ensure programs are targeted to specific districts and responsive to differences among local ethnic groups.** Knowledge and confidence vary significantly across districts and ethnic groups. Programming intensity and delivery format should be geographically differentiated and culturally adapted.

A Vegetable Seller at Market in Cambodia. AMPLIFY, June 2025



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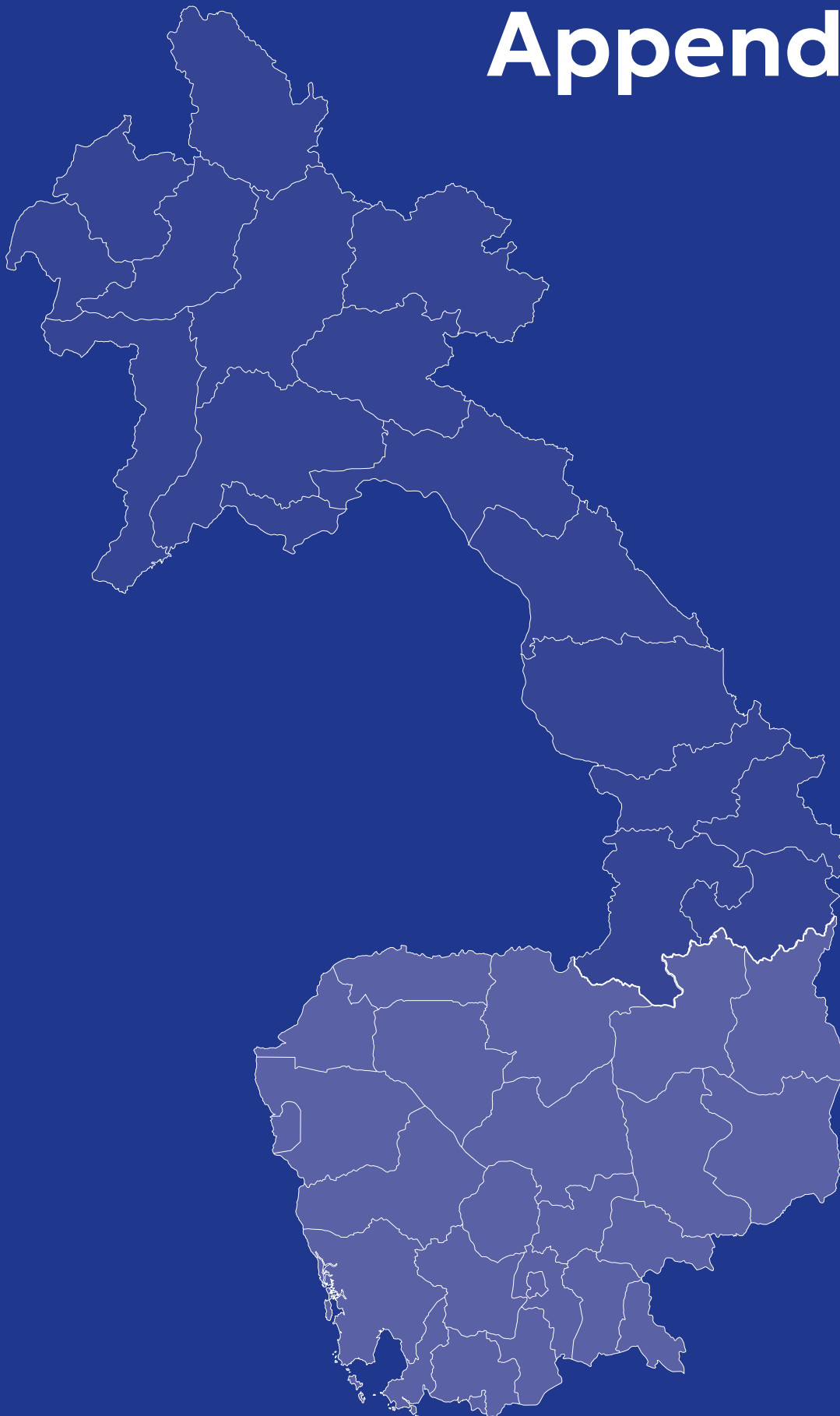
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Appendices



Appendix 1

CONFIDENCE AND KNOWLEDGE SCORES ACROSS DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS

Cambodia

Figure 10: Average Knowledge Scores by Gender Across Multiple Demographic and Geographic Categories in the Study Population

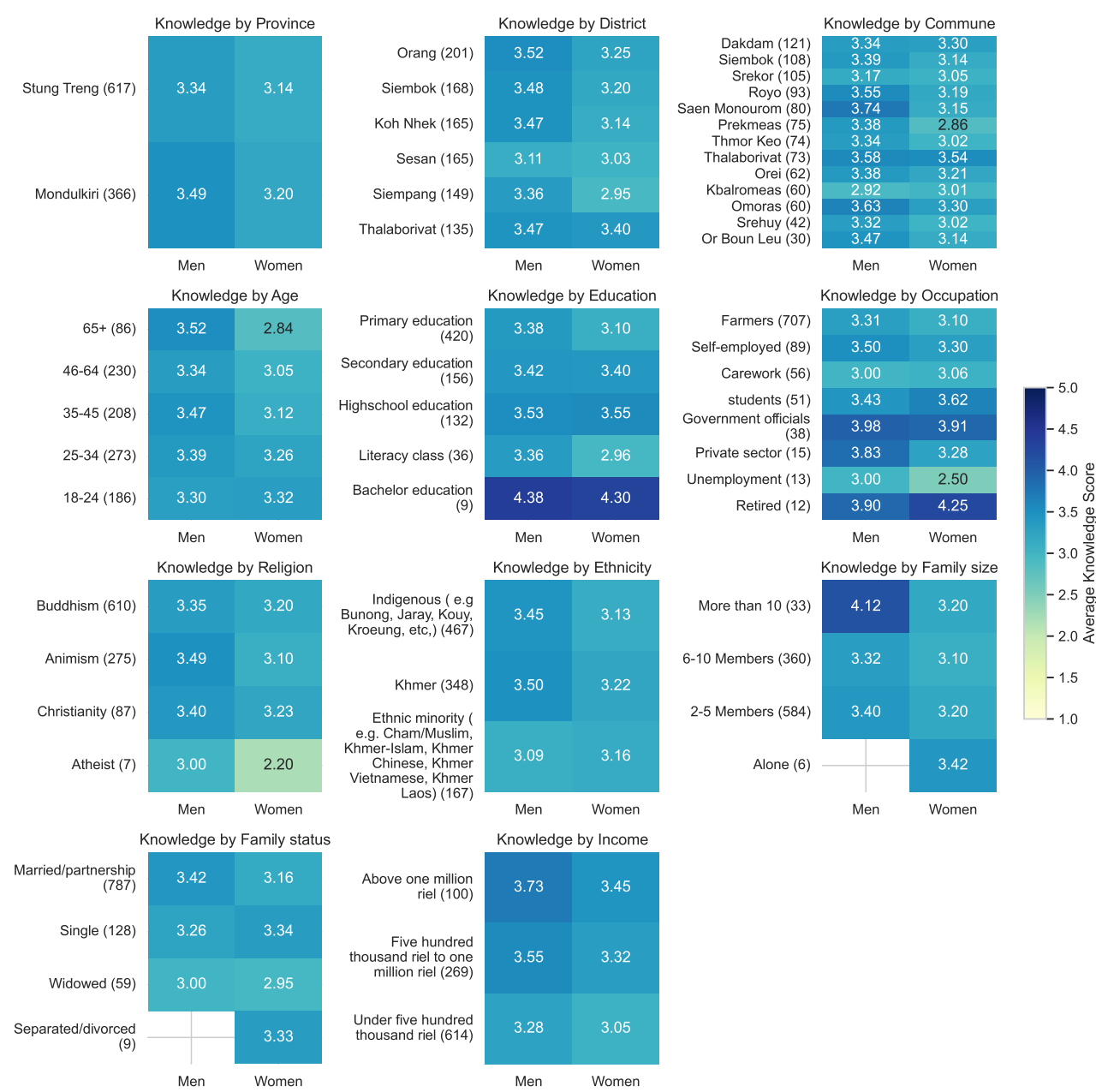
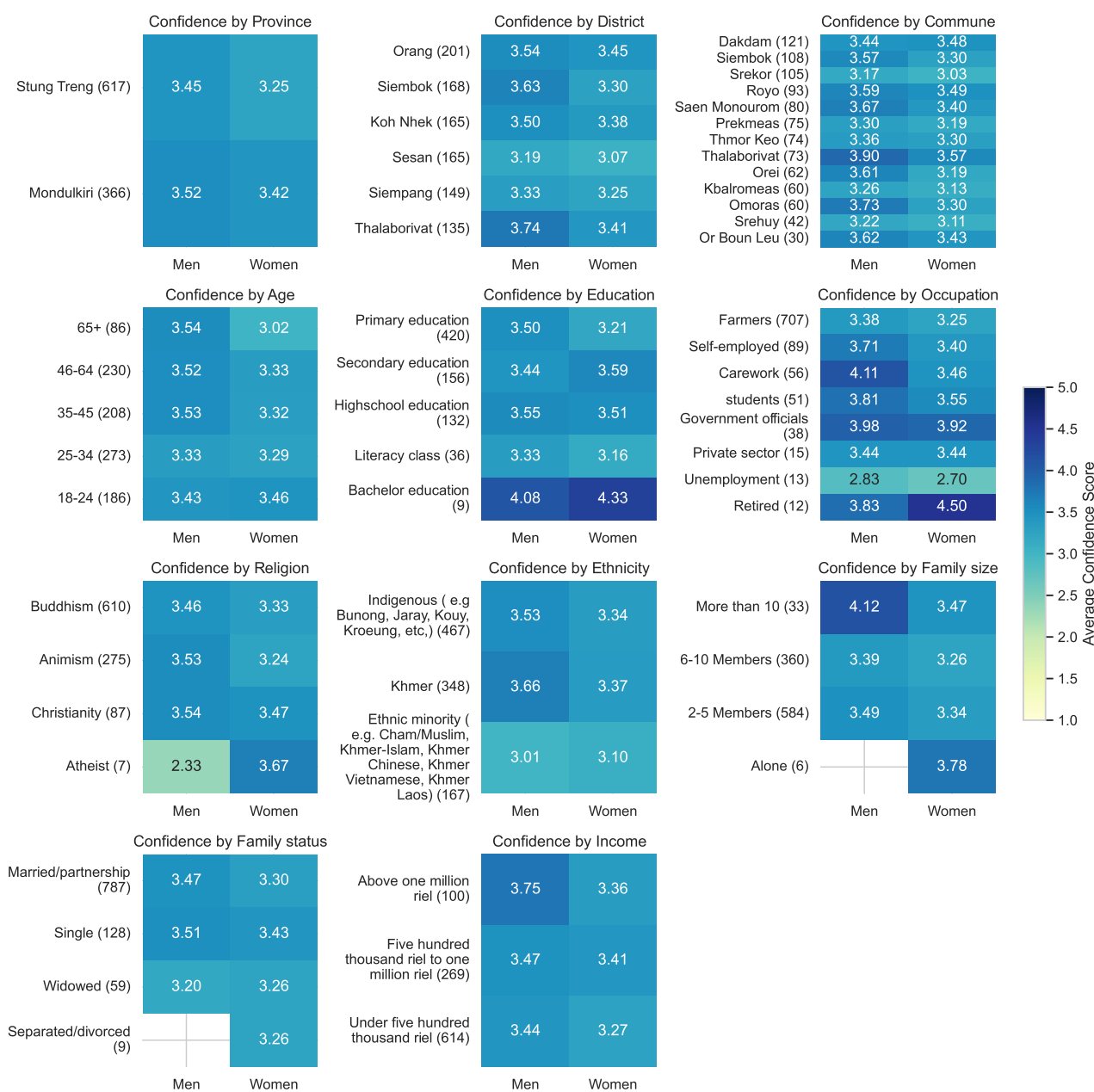


Figure 11: Average Confidence Scores by Gender Across Multiple Demographic and Geographic Categories in the Study Population



Laos

Figure 12: Average Knowledge Scores by Gender Across Multiple Demographic and Geographic Categories in the Study Population

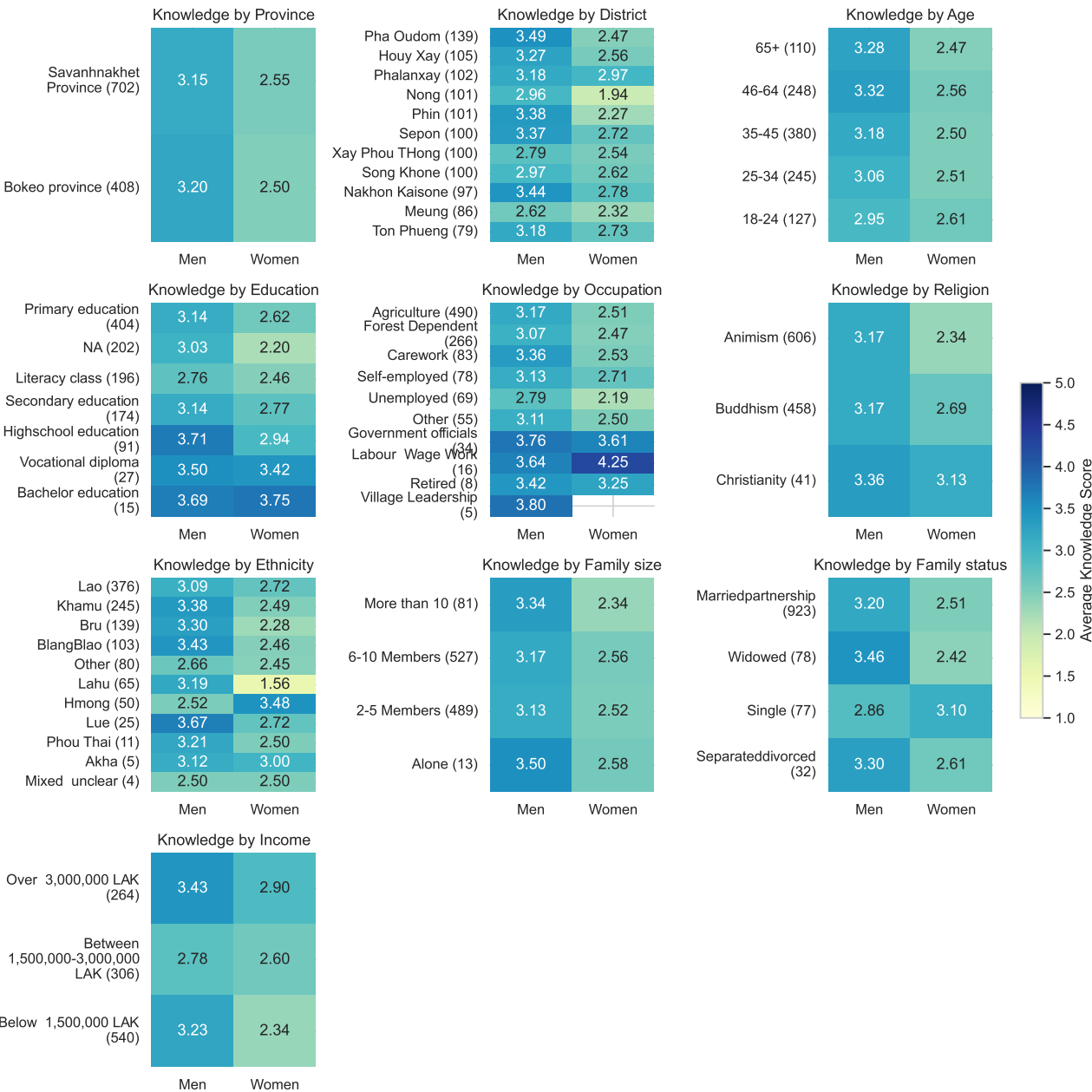
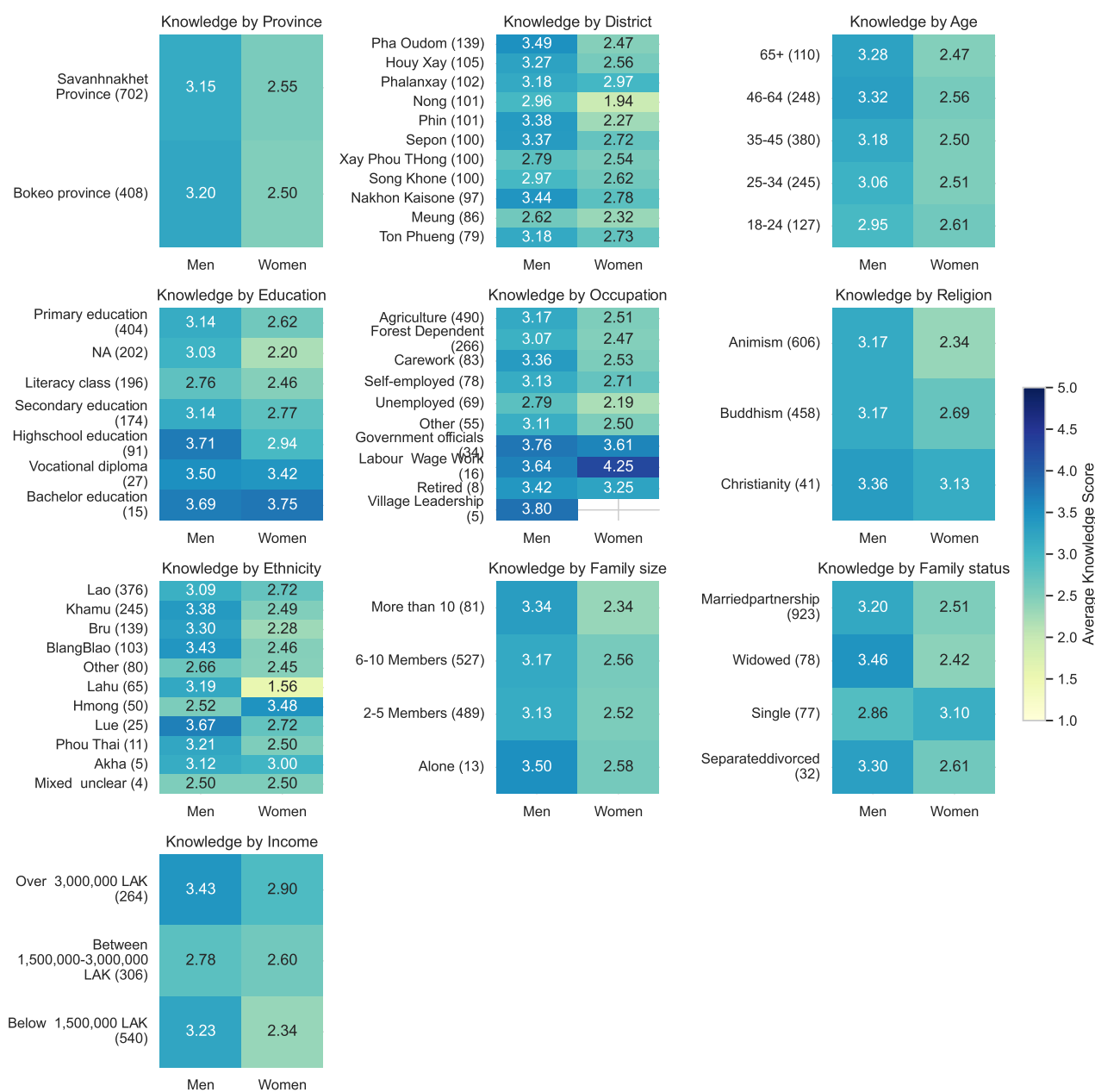


Figure 13: Average Confidence Scores by Gender Across Multiple Demographic and Geographic Categories in the Study Population





16 Days Campaign in Steung Treng, Cambodia

GENDER NORM SCALES

Misogyny

- When women join politics, this can provoke men and undermine men's roles.
- Women often interpret innocent remarks or act as sexual harassment.
- It is generally safer not to trust women to make decisions.
- When I am in a group consisting of equal numbers of men and women and a woman dominates the conversation, I feel uncomfortable.

Benevolent Sexism

- Women tend to have a superior moral sensibility than men.
- Women need a male head to ensure their safety and protection.
- Women should be willing to sacrifice their own well-being (physical, health, wealth) in order to provide for their families.
- The community or village leadership should be largely in the hands of men.
- The religious leadership of a community should be largely in the hands of men.
- Women should be the ones to manage the home and raise children.
- Finances should be controlled by men in the family.

Violence Against Women

- It is justifiable for a man to beat his wife when.
- Argues with him
- Refuses to have sex
- Burns the food
- Goes out without telling him
- When she neglects the children

Table 5 Benevolent Sexism Scores.

Province	Country	Women	Men	Prefer not to say
Mondulkiri	Cambodia	3.04 (n=255)	3.25 (n=110)	2.86 (n=1)
Stung Treng	Cambodia	3.21 (n=419)	3.29 (n=197)	2.29 (n=1)
Bokeo province	Laos	3.65 (n=212)	3.72 (n=196)	NaN
Savannahnakhet Province	Laos	3.75 (n=353)	3.74 (n=349)	NaN

Table 6 Misogyny Scores.

Province	Country	Women	Men	Prefer not to say
Mondulkiri	Cambodia	2.68 (n=255)	2.64 (n=110)	2.0 (n=1)
Stung Treng	Cambodia	2.44 (n=419)	2.51 (n=197)	1.25 (n=1)
Bokeo province	Laos	2.64 (n=212)	2.49 (n=196)	NaN
Savannahnakhet Province	Laos	2.76 (n=353)	2.42 (n=349)	NaN

Table 7 VAW Scores.

Province	Country	Women	Men	Prefer not to say
Mondulkiri	Cambodia	1.94 (n=255)	2.0 (n=110)	1.2 (n=1)
Stung Treng	Cambodia	1.76 (n=419)	1.86 (n=197)	1.6 (n=1)
Bokeo province	Laos	1.67 (n=212)	1.75 (n=196)	NaN
Savannahnakhet Province	Laos	1.94 (n=353)	1.75 (n=349)	NaN

Appendix 2:

Comprehensive Methodology

The baseline study investigates security challenges faced by women and underrepresented groups, including people with disabilities, individuals of diverse gender and sexual identities, and ethnic or religious minorities in Cambodia and Laos, covering cybersecurity, trafficking, migration, disasters, climate change, and management of natural resources.

STUDY AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research aims to understand people's knowledge and confidence in addressing these insecurities.

The study is guided by four core research questions:

- 1 What are the main security challenges and how are they experienced by men and women differently?
- 2 To what extent do women have knowledge and information to participate in and/or lead community responses to these security challenges?
- 3 To what extent are women confident in their ability to contribute to addressing security challenges (participation + leadership)?
- 4 What prevents women and men from participating in peace and security initiatives?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

- 1 Gender-equal sample: Men and women, inclusive of people who identify as gender-diverse and/or trans; and gender-disaggregated data (survey and KII)
- 2 Diverse research participants (age, disability, gender and sexuality, ethnicity/religion)
- 3 Research design: Selection of sites/areas prone to security challenges, such as border areas vulnerable to trafficking, land grabs, etc., most climate- and disaster-affected (drought and floods)
- 4 Variation of program vs. non-programming sites to assess the impact of Amplify programs (in Cambodia only)
- 5 The same communities were surveyed in both baseline and endline phases of the research.

The study employed a mixed-methods design conducted in October 2025, combining surveys with semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) to capture both breadth and depth of experience. The research was implemented across purposively selected sites in both countries chosen for their high exposure to specific security challenges.

Cambodia

Fieldwork was conducted in the rural northeastern provinces of Stung Treng and Monduliri, with a small number of interviews conducted with Amplify project staff in Phnom Penh. Both provinces are characterized by a high degree of ethnic diversity and the presence of Indigenous Peoples communities. They are shaped by their border locations and integration into regional economic corridors linking Cambodia to Laos and Vietnam. Stung Treng functions as a strategic transit province along the Mekong where hydropower development, land concessions, and cross-border trade and migration are located. Monduliri, Cambodia's largest and least densely populated province, is shaped by plantation agriculture, industries, and forest governance, with widespread land and resource disputes affecting IP livelihoods. Across both sites, limited infrastructure, uneven service provision, and reliance on natural resources and migration create distinct experiences of security challenges.

Laos

Fieldwork was conducted in the border and corridor provinces of Bokeo in the northwest and Savannakhet in central-southern Laos. Both provinces are shaped by cross-border connectivity and migration and are characterized by significant ethnic diversity and reliance on natural resource-based livelihoods. Bokeo is one of the smallest provinces in Laos. It occupies a strategic position bordering Thailand and Myanmar and functions as a key logistical and trade hub linked to regional economic corridors connecting Laos to China. Savannakhet, the country's largest and most populous province, serves as an important agricultural, forestry, and mining region and a major cross-border migration corridor to Thailand. Across both sites, security challenges are affected by centralized governance structures and economic dependence on land, forests, and migration.

Data collection took place in environments that fostered open discussion, including commune offices after hours, pagoda compounds, school compounds, and private homes. In both countries, some interviews were conducted in noisy or publicly trafficked spaces (e.g., schoolyards, roadside areas, or shared village rooms), which introduced minor distractions but did not fundamentally disrupt discussion. Interviews and surveys were conducted one-to-one, primarily in Khmer language in Cambodia and Lao language in Laos, with translation into local languages where needed (more information in the Limitations section).

Before interviews and survey questionnaires were conducted, research participants were fully briefed on the purpose, scope, and voluntary nature of the research. This included a plain-language explanation of the study's aims, goals, and use of data. Enumerators provided participants with a verbal summary of the study and shared a written (translated) explanatory statement if requested, outlining the project objectives, participant rights, and contact information for further inquiries. Oral consent was collected from survey respondents in both countries. For KIIs, written consent was preferred in Cambodia, and oral consent was used in Laos.

The effectiveness of data collection, particularly on sensitive issues such as gender-based violence, land disputes, and drug-related concerns, depends on how enumerators establish trust and cultural resonance with research participants. In Cambodia, especially in Indigenous communities, high levels of participation and openness were observed by enumerators when they were already known to the community and shared the same ethnic identity. In contrast, participant engagement in some Lao and recently settled Khmer migrant communities was more guarded, reflecting concerns about scams and fraud. Greater engagement may have been achieved with additional enumerator time and explanation to build rapport and clarify the purpose of the research.

In Laos, participants’ willingness to discuss sensitive topics was often contingent on the enumerator disclosing aspects of their own ethnic or religious background to establish a personal connection and credibility. Issues such as gender-based violence were particularly difficult to discuss openly, given fears of potential damage to personal and family dignity within close-knit village settings. Observed variations in participant demeanor, ranging from cautious or reserved responses to more open and engaged participation, indicated variation in the levels of trust across interviews. Sensitive topics required careful, context-specific navigation by the in-country research team.

Instrument

The quantitative survey encompassed demographic questions and statements related to misogyny, gender-based violence, security challenges, and responses to them, including natural disasters, land issues, trafficking, and migration. The survey provided the baseline assessment of insecurities faced by women and underrepresented groups, as well as their confidence and self-efficacy in addressing these insecurities. Through establishing the baseline, the second phase of the data collection (Endline) allows us to assess the impact of ongoing Amplify programming, especially focusing on women’s self-efficacy in addressing insecurities. The sample represents gender-disaggregated and diverse demographics across age, location, education, income, religion, ethnicity, and people living with disabilities, facilitating statistical analysis and cross-national comparisons.

The survey data were collected through Kobo Toolbox by enumerators with ordinary community members. Survey respondents were asked whether they felt comfortable sharing personal information, which was recorded separately and linked only by a unique code to protect anonymity.

Survey questions relating to perceptions, attitudes, and experiences were measured on five-point Likert scales capturing levels of agreement or disagreement. Three composite variables related to confidence, knowledge, and self-efficacy were constructed from relevant sets of Likert items. Composite indicators were constructed by averaging the numerical values of related items within each thematic domain, resulting in a final confidence score on the original 1-5 scale:

Confidence = (Q30 + Q31 + Q32) / 3,

Where Q30 is “I would feel confident in joining a community (local) initiative to respond to security challenges,” Q31 is “I would feel confident in joining provincial initiatives to respond to security challenges,” and Q32 is “I have the confidence to respond to security challenges in the community.”

$$\text{Knowledge} = (Q33 + Q38) / 2,$$

where Q33 is “I have the knowledge and skills necessary to respond to security challenges in my community,” and Q38 is “I know what to do in order to prevent security challenges in my community.”

Self-efficacy was computed as the average of the composite Confidence and Knowledge scores:

$$\text{Self-efficacy} = (\text{Confidence} + \text{Knowledge}) / 2.$$

A simple arithmetic mean was used for all composites because each item is designed to contribute equally to its underlying construct, and all items are measured on comparable Likert-type scales. This approach provides an interpretable, transparent, and replicable summary of respondents’ confidence, knowledge, and overall self-efficacy.

Questions contributing to each scale were conceptually aligned and statistically tested for internal consistency to ensure they were measuring coherent underlying constructs (Cronbach’s alpha: Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.83$ for confidence and $\alpha = 0.75$ for knowledge). Following scale construction, descriptive statistics were generated for all key variables, disaggregated where relevant by gender and other demographic characteristics. Finally, statistical tests were undertaken to explore associations between the three components of knowledge, confidence, and self-efficacy and differences between demographic groups on these components. Correlational analysis provided insight into the relationship between knowledge and confidence, while independent-samples t-tests were used to examine gender differences in the baseline survey. Taken together, these analyses provide a robust empirical foundation for monitoring change over time, especially in women’s knowledge, confidence, and self-efficacy, and assessing the intended impact of the Amplify program in the Endline study.

Demographic Profile Survey Cambodia

The survey was conducted with $n = 983$ respondents, ($n = 669$ program site, $n = 314$ non-program site) encompassing 67% women and 33% men across Stung Treng (62.8%) and Mondulkiri (37.2%). The demographic profile reflects a predominantly Indigenous, rural, and economically vulnerable population with limited access to formal education and formal-sector employment opportunities. Nearly half of all respondents identified as Indigenous (47.5%). Khmer individuals comprised 35.4% of the sample, with other ethnic minority groups, including Cham, Hmong, and Chinese Khmer, constituting 17.0% of the sample. Religious affiliation follows regional patterns: 62.1% of respondents identified as Buddhist, while 28.0% practiced Animism, a belief system widely observed among Indigenous and remote communities. Smaller proportions identified as Christian (8.9%) or atheist (1.7%). Education levels across the surveyed population were generally low. Over one-third of respondents (42.7%) had completed only primary school, 15.9% had reached secondary school, and 13.4% had completed high school. Literacy-class-only respondents accounted for 3.7%, and fewer than one percent (0.9%) held a bachelor’s degree. These figures highlight persistent structural barriers to education faced by remote and economically marginalized communities. Livelihood patterns were dominated by agricultural activity, with 71.9% of respondents identifying as farmers. An additional 9.1% were self-employed, while only small shares worked in government (3.9%) or in

the private sector (1.5%). A minority identified as unemployed (1.3%) or retired (1.2%). Income levels further underscored economic precarity: 62.5% of respondents reported earning less than 500,000 riel per month, 27.4% earned between 500,000 and 1,000,000 riels, and only 10.2% earned more than 1 million riels. Household structures tended to be large and multi-generational. Just over half of all respondents (59.4%) lived in households of 2–5 members, while 36.6% lived in households of 6–10 members. A small proportion (3.4%) lived in households with more than ten people, and only 0.6% lived alone. The age distribution of the sample showed a strong concentration of working-age adults. The largest age groups were 25–34 years (27.8%) and 45–54 years (23.4%). Younger adults aged 18–24 made up 18.9% of the sample, while older adults aged 65 and above accounted for 8.7%.

Figure 14: Bar Plots Showing the Distribution of Survey Respondents across Key Demographic Groups in Cambodia

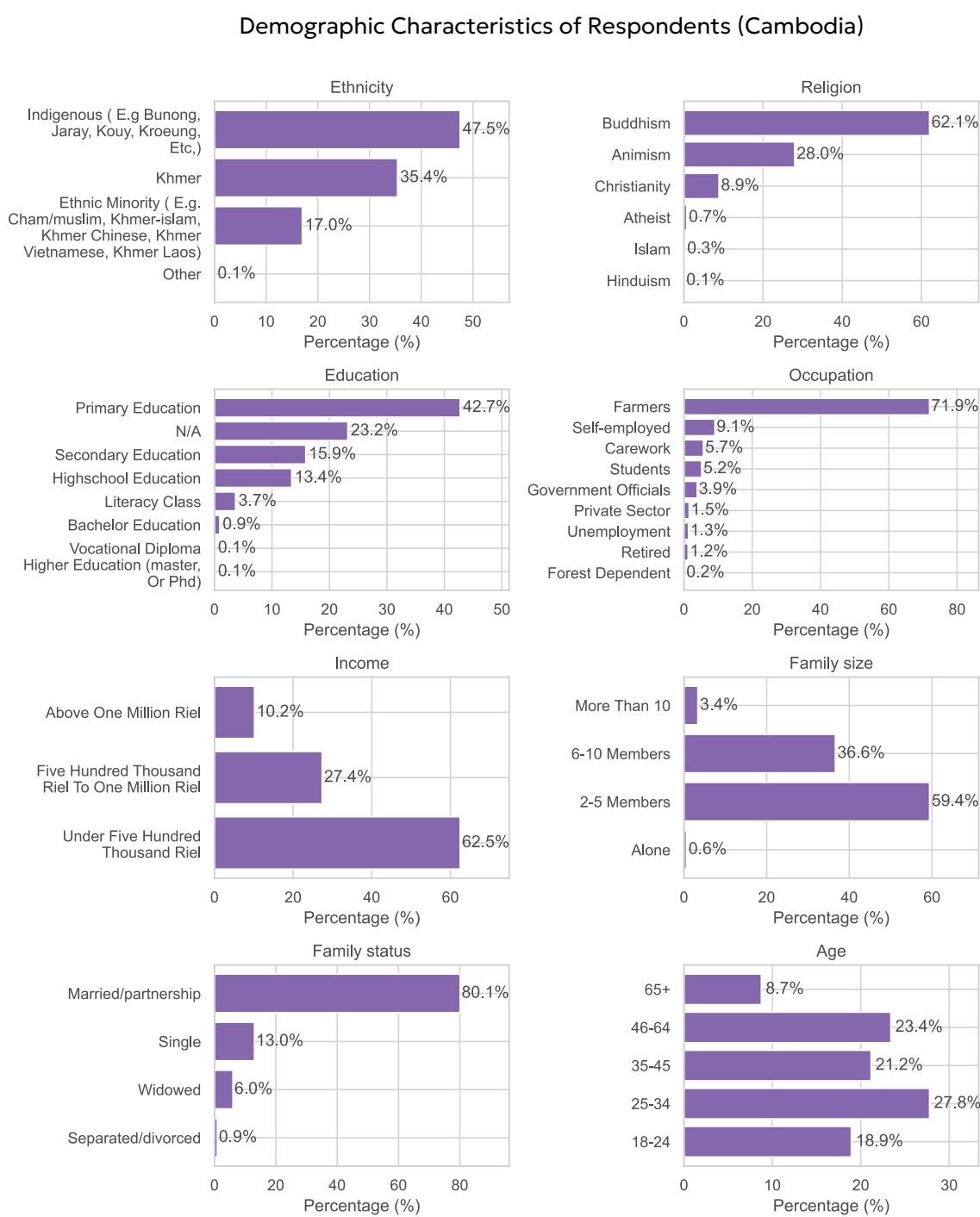


Table 8 Data Collection Sites Cambodia.

District	Site	Count
Koh Nhek	Non-program site	165
Orang	Program site	201
Sesan	Program site	165
Siembok	Program site	168
Siempang	Non-program site	149
Thalaborivat	Program site	135

Table 9 Composition by Ethnic Group.

Ethnicity	Program site	Non-program site
Ethnic minority (e.g. Cham/Muslim, Khmer-Islam, Khmer Chinese, Khmer Vietnamese, Khmer Laos)	14.9%	21.3%
Indigenous (e.g. Bunong, Jaray, Kouy, Kroeung, etc.,)	46.3%	50.0%
Khmer	38.6%	28.7%
Other	0.1%	0.0%

Table 10 Composition by Religion.

Religion	Program site	Non-program site
Animism	25.1%	34.1%
Atheist	0.4%	1.3%
Buddhism	67.0%	51.6%
Christianity	7.0%	12.7%
Hinduism	0.1%	0.0%
Islam	0.3%	0.3%

Table 11 Composition by Education

Education	Program site	Non-program site
Bachelor education	1.6%	0.0%
Higher education (master, or PhD)	0.0%	0.5%
Highschool education	20.3%	10.1%
Literacy class	4.6%	5.3%
Primary education	52.2%	64.7%
Secondary education	21.4%	18.8%
Vocational diploma	0.0%	0.5%

Table 12 Composition by Occupation.

Occupation	Program site	Non-program site
Care work	5.4%	6.4%
Farmers	68.6%	79.0%
Forest Dependent	0.3%	0.0%
Government officials	4.3%	2.9%
Private sector	1.9%	0.6%
Retired	1.5%	0.6%
Self-employed	10.0%	7.0%
Unemployment	1.2%	1.6%
Students	6.7%	1.9%

Table 13 Composition by Income.

Income	Program site	Non-program site
Above one million riels	11.2%	8.0%
Five hundred thousand to one million riels	28.1%	25.8%
Under five hundred thousand riels	60.7%	66.2%

Table 14 Family Size.

Family size	Program site	Non-program site
More than 10	4.0%	1.9%
6-10 Members	33.8%	42.7%
2-5 Members	61.4%	55.1%
Alone	0.7%	0.3%

Table 15 Family Status.

Family status	Program site	Non-program site
Married/partnership	77.3%	86.0%
Separated/divorced	1.0%	0.6%
Single	15.7%	7.3%
Widowed	6.0%	6.1%

Table 16 Composition by Age.

Age	Program site	Non-program site
65+	8.2%	9.9%
46-64	23.2%	23.9%
35-45	19.7%	24.2%
25-34	26.8%	29.9%
18-24	22.1%	12.1%

Demographic Profile Survey Lao PDR

The survey was conducted with n=1,100 respondents in Laos (Savannakhet (63.8%) and Bokeo (37.1%) with (49.6% women and 50.4% men) The demographic profile reflects a predominantly Indigenous and ethnically diverse population with substantial representation from Lao (34.2%), Khamu (22.3%), Bru (12.6%), Blang/Blao (9.4%), and Hmong (4.5%) (and 17.9% other ethnicities). Religious affiliation is divided largely between Animist/Spirit practices and Buddhism. Animist belief systems, which are prevalent among Indigenous groups, accounted for 55.1% of responses, while 41.6% identified as Buddhist. Christianity represented a small minority at 3.7%. Educational attainment remains low across the surveyed population: primary education (36.7%), no formal classification (18.4%), literacy-class (17.8%), secondary school (15.8%), high school graduates (8.3%), 2.5% completed vocational diplomas, and just 1.4% held bachelor's degrees, underscoring persistent structural and geographic barriers to education. Livelihoods are dominated by agriculture, with 42.8% identifying farming as their main occupation. Forest-dependent livelihoods accounted for 25.9%, followed by care work (7.5%), self-employment (7.1%), and unemployment (6.3%). Government officials, labor wage workers, and retired respondents made up very small segments of the population. Insights into household income reflect widespread economic vulnerability. Almost half of the respondents (49.1%) reported earnings below 1.5 million LAK per month. A further 27.8% earned between 1.5 million and 3 million LAK, while 24.0% reported incomes above 3 million LAK. A majority lived in households of 6–10 members (47.9%), followed by 2–5 members (44.5%). Only 7.4% lived in households with more than 10 members, and just 1.2% lived alone, reflecting strong extended-family arrangements and community support systems. The surveyed population spans a wide age range but is primarily composed of working-age adults. The youngest group, aged 18–24, represented 11.5% of respondents, followed by 25–34-year-olds at 22.3%. Adults aged 35–45 formed the largest group at 34.5%, while 46–64-year-olds comprised 22.5%. Older adults aged 65+ represented 10.0% of the population.

A Group of CSO Working Together in Laos. AMPLIFY, Nov 2025



Figure 15: Bar Plots Showing the Distribution of Survey Respondents Across Key Demographic Groups in Laos

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (Laos)

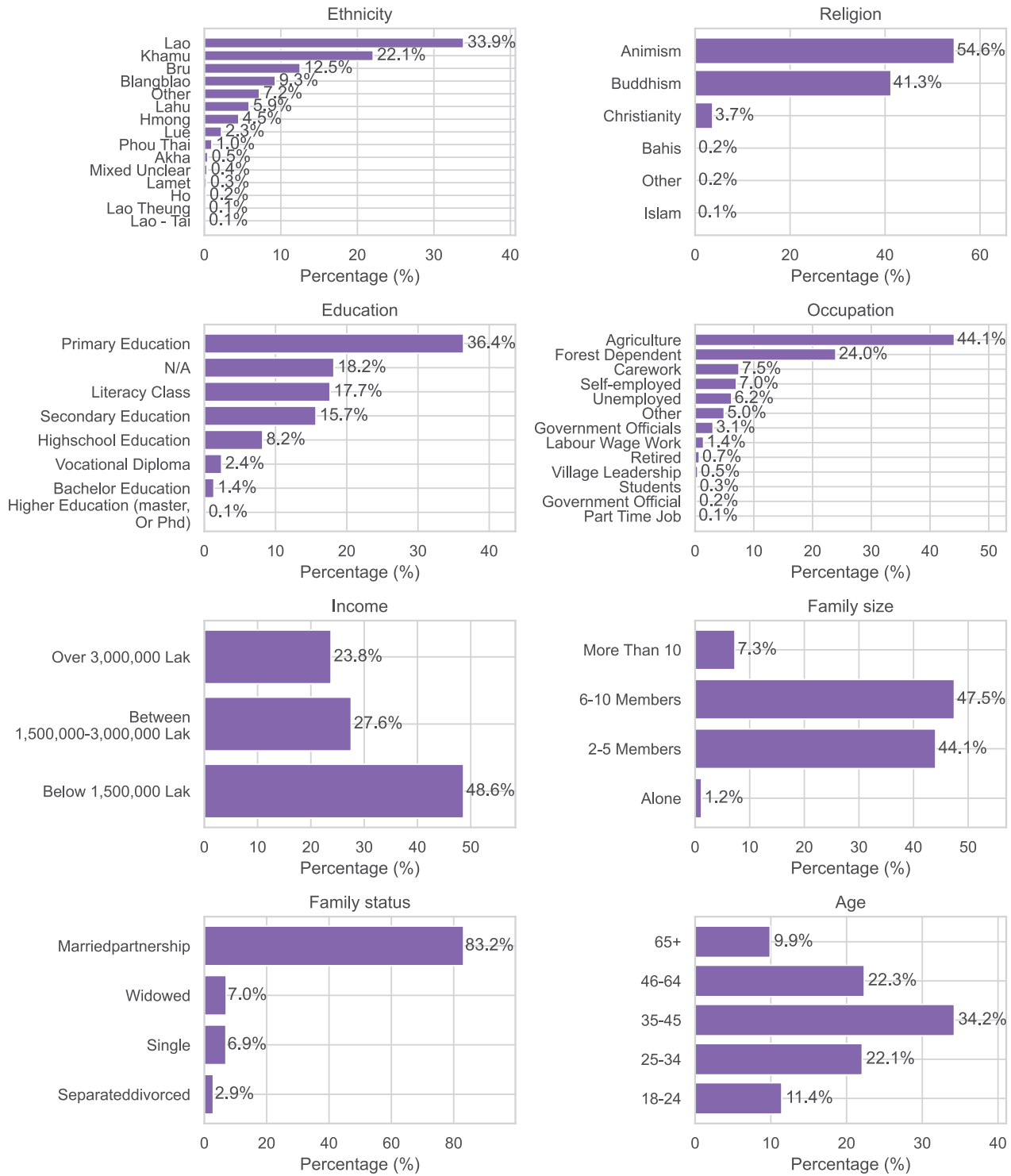


Table 17 Data Collection Sites.

District	Site	Count
Nakhon Kaisone	Programming	97
Ton Phueng	Programming	79
Nong	Programming	101
Pha Oudom	Programming	139
Phalanxay	Programming	102
Phin	Programming	101
Song Khone	Programming	100
Houy Xay	Programming	105
Sepon	Programming	100
Meung	Programming	86
Xay Phou Thong	Programming	100

Key Informant Interviews (KII)

KIIs followed semi-structured guides (see Appendix 1) to explore gendered roles and responsibilities in village administration and households; decision making in security and crisis response (e.g., flood preparedness, early and forced marriage, land disputes, trafficking, migration); and coping strategies and support networks. In both countries, the KII sample was purposively constructed around roles closely tied to local security, mediation, and community leadership. In Cambodia, this included community and religious leaders, civil society organizations, and Amplify program recipients. In Laos, the sample included village authorities, community leadership, village security units, and Lao Women’s Union (LWU) leaders. Both samples encompassed diverse adult participants across Cambodia and Laos, with considerations for gender representation as well as sexuality, ethnicity, class, religion, ability, and language, allowing us to gather rich on-the-ground experiential knowledge and reflect those most directly affected by security and livelihood challenges, including women and marginalized and indigenous communities.

The KIIs were analyzed qualitatively in NVivo, applying feminist research methods—foregrounding participant voices to understand gender dynamics of insecurities faced by women and underrepresented groups. This included the use of grounded theory and manual thematic coding, analyzing how certain data points relate to question schedules and key thematic codes, as well as triangulation with survey data to contextualize findings.

Table 18 KII Sample Demographic Cambodia.

	n	Percentage
Province		
Stung Treng	18	58%
Mondulkiri	10	32%
Phnom Penh (Project Staff)	3	10%
Gender		
Female	17	55%
Male	14	45%
Age Group		
18–25	9	29%
26–45	13	42%
46–70	9	29%
Ethnicity		
Khmer	18	58%
Bunong	9	29%
Kouy	3	10%
Lao	1	3%

Table 19 KII Roles Cambodia.

Role	Specific Role Examples	n
Community Leader	Indigenous Leader, Community Leader, Elder, Youth	7
Religious Leader	Buddhist, Christian Religious Leader	2
Young Women Leader	Amplify	8
Village Chief	Commune Elected	1
Local Government	Deputy Commune Chief	1
Community Organization (Forest/Land/Fishery)	Community Member, Deputy, Leader	7
Commune Committee for Women and Children		1
Community Facilitator	Indigenous Community Facilitator	1
Civil Society Organization/Project Staff	Amplify Project Staff	3
TOTAL		31

Table 20 KII Demographic Lao PDR.

	n	Percentage
Province		
Bokeo	25	47%
Savannakhet	28	53%
Gender		
Female	28	53%
Male	25	47%
Age Group		
18–25	1	2%
26–45	24	45%
46–70	28	53%
Ethnicity		
Khmu	10	19%
Lahu	7	13%
Lue	3	6%
Hmong	3	6%
Bru	12	23%
Lao	18	34%

Table 21 KII Roles Lao PDR.

Role	Specific Role Examples	n
Village Leadership	Village Head, Deputy Village Head	14
Village Security	Village Security Unit, Village Police Chief, Police	10
Women’s Union	Village Women’s Union President, Vice President, Member	20
Mediation Committee	Mediation Committee Member, Chief of Mediation Unit	6
Village Committee / Unity Front	Village Committee Member, Village Unity Front	2
Community Leader	Youth/Village Community Leader	2
TOTAL		53

While both country samples were designed to capture a range of community-level perspectives on security and participation, the composition of KIIs reflects important differences in institutional context. In Cambodia, the KII sample included a mix of local authorities, community leaders, and civil society actors, including nongovernmental organizations and community-based groups operating with varying degrees of autonomy. In contrast, the Laos KII sample is more firmly anchored within state-linked governance structures. Women's participation is primarily facilitated through the Lao Women's Union and other established social and governance structures. As a result, while women are well represented in the Laos sample, their roles are closely tied to government-affiliated social mobilization and mediation functions, whereas the Cambodia sample captures a broader spectrum of independent advocacy and community facilitation roles. Across both countries, women are more frequently represented in social and community-oriented roles than men. Men—particularly older men—are more prevalent in formal leadership and security positions. There is a clear gendered as well as generational pattern of authority. In Laos, the KII sample included relatively few young research participants, reflecting both the out-migration of youth for work and the concentration of recognized authority among older community members. Overall, the voices of unmarried women, migrants currently abroad, LGBT+ people, and people with disabilities are only weakly represented or absent.

Ethical Considerations

This study is guided by feminist ethical principles that appreciate the cultural and gender sensitivity of research on insecurity (Ackerly and True 2020). Feminist research ethics center lived experiences of Indigenous and minority women, recognizing that effective, sustainable peacebuilding requires not only formal participation but also the transformation of the structural power relations that perpetuate insecurity. These principles also include the imperative to *do no harm*, ensure informed consent, and uphold confidentiality and anonymity (if preferred) for all research participants. Given the sensitive nature of topics explored under WPS, additional safeguards were in place to protect the dignity, rights, and safety of individuals, communities, and researchers involved. The research team was trained in gender-sensitive methods and was attentive to participant well-being throughout the research process. This research project is approved by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee 46107 (MUHREC) (see Appendix 3).

Care was taken when working with Indigenous, ethnic, and religious minorities, people with disabilities, and/or diverse gender and sexual identities, who may face heightened risks or social marginalization. Enumerators were trained to engage respectfully and to avoid reinforcing stigma, while also recognizing when it is unsafe or inappropriate to proceed with certain lines of questioning. Researchers were instructed to maintain respectful, non-coercive relationships with participants, grounded in professionalism and mutual respect. No incentives were offered that might compromise voluntary participation. Interviewers made it clear that participating (or declining to do so) did not have any impact on participants.

Limitations

Research in dynamic sociopolitical settings is rarely linear and needs to be able to respond to contextual issues that arise. While this WPS study in Cambodia and Laos followed a carefully planned methodology and adhered to feminist and institutional ethical standards, several limitations—ranging from logistical constraints to sociocultural dynamics—should be acknowledged.

Logistical and environmental constraints

Fieldwork encountered significant logistical challenges, including poor road infrastructure, long travel distances, and, in some cases, reliance on boat travel, which increased operational risks and costs. Seasonal environmental conditions further constrained access. Flooding and landslides damaged roads and agricultural land and, during peak flood periods, rendered some villages temporarily inaccessible, necessitating delays or rescheduling of KIs. In both countries, some villages were located near Special Economic Zones (SEZs) or industrial sites, requiring coordination around factory schedules, work shifts, or flood timing, which occasionally limited interview availability.

Enumerator Capacity and Research Protocol Implementation

Despite extensive training, enumerators varied in their ability to apply sensitive interviewing techniques consistently, particularly when engaging with marginalized populations or discussing topics such as gender-based violence, drug use, or land disputes. In some locations, the presence or proximity of local authorities during interviews may have constrained openness, especially in politically sensitive environments. Enumerators occasionally adapted question phrasing or avoided probing sensitive topics due to concerns about participant discomfort or perceived risk, which may have resulted in uneven depth across interviews. In Cambodia, a substantial proportion of KIs were conducted by male interviewers, which may have influenced how women discussed sensitive issues.

Language and Interpretation

Data collection was conducted by Khmer- and Lao-speaking researchers, ensuring that interviews in the dominant national languages were carried out directly without reliance on external interpreters. This supported rapport, consistency, and sensitivity when discussing complex or potentially distressing topics. However, in some Indigenous and ethnic minority villages, Khmer or Lao was not the primary language used in daily life. In these cases, interpretation was required to facilitate communication. Interpretation was often provided by trusted community members or local leaders, which helped enable participation but also introduced potential limitations. The presence of intermediaries may have shaped how questions were understood or how responses were expressed, particularly on sensitive issues such as domestic violence, drug use, or land disputes. In some instances, interviewees asked relatives or village leaders to assist with interpretation mid-interview, which may have constrained disclosure. Despite efforts to standardize terminology and ensure shared understanding through careful explanation and probing, subtle locally specific concepts of insecurity, cultural meanings, and gendered expressions of insecurity may not have been fully captured across languages.

Translation into English and Analytical Interpretation

A further limitation relates to the translation of interview material from Khmer and Lao into English for analysis and reporting. While translations were undertaken by researchers familiar with both the linguistic and cultural context of the data, the process of translation inevitably involves interpretive choices. Emotional tone, emphasis, and narrative nuance may have been softened or rendered more matter-of-fact in English. As a result, some accounts require cautious interpretation, recognizing that meaning may not be fully conveyed through translated KII transcripts. To mitigate these risks, analysis was discussed with country researchers, drawing on field notes, contextual knowledge, and validation workshops to triangulate interpretation.

Trust, disclosure, and sociocultural dynamics

Willingness to discuss sensitive topics was closely linked to trust and sociocultural dynamics. In Cambodia, particularly in Indigenous communities, higher levels of openness were observed when facilitators were known to the community and shared the same ethnic identity. In contrast, some Lao and recently settled Khmer migrant communities exhibited greater caution, reflecting concerns about scams or external actors, and required more extensive explanation of the research purpose. In Laos, participants' willingness to share sensitive information was often contingent on the enumerator disclosing aspects of their own ethnic or religious background to establish credibility and rapport. Fear of gossip or reputational harm within tightly knit villages limited openness on issues such as domestic violence.

Sampling and comparability across countries

Differences in sampling strategies limit direct comparability between Cambodia and Laos. In Cambodia, data were collected in both program and non-program sites, allowing for more robust comparative analysis. In Laos, government restrictions prevented data collection in non-program sites. To address this limitation, future rounds of data collection aim to re-engage at least 60 percent of survey respondents to enable longitudinal analysis of change over time in both countries.

Participant availability and selection bias

Participant availability posed a further limitation. Many villagers, particularly men and younger people, were engaged in farming, wage labor, or migration to Thailand or other provinces, making it difficult to schedule interviews during working hours. This contributed to a degree of selection bias toward those present in villages, such as elders, women, or individuals in leadership roles. In addition, in Cambodia, instances of male villagers actively avoiding engagement with the research team due to fear or unfamiliarity further contributed to a lower proportion of male survey respondents.

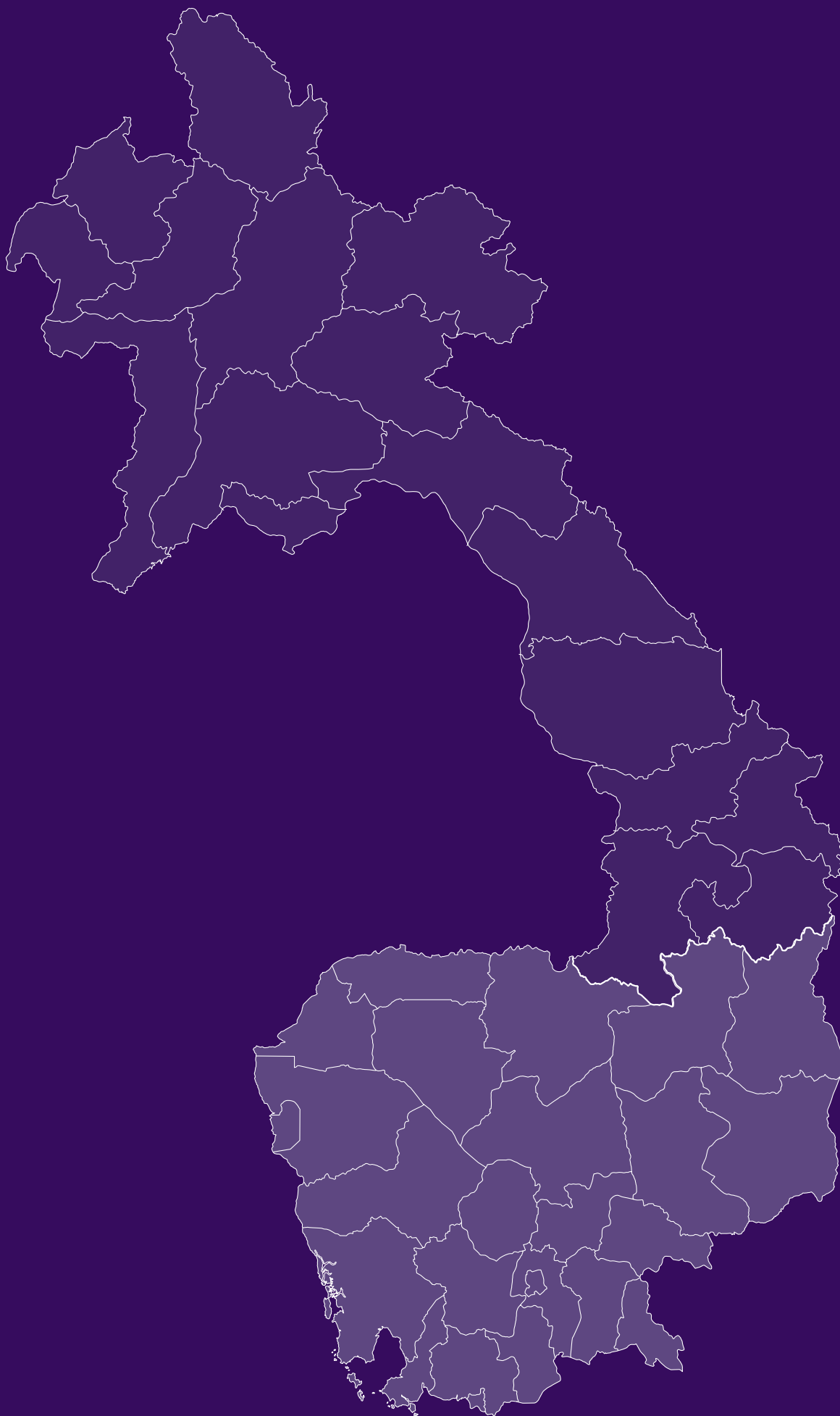
Governance Context

In Laos, the Lao Women's Union was closely involved in program delivery and, in some cases, participant identification. This facilitated access and community trust. However, it also raises methodological considerations regarding participant selection and the extent to which responses may have been shaped by awareness of institutional involvement. In some instances, responses to questions about reporting insecurity appeared to align more closely with established institutional practices than individual experience, underscoring the need for caution when interpreting data related to participation and accountability. Many KIIs were also conducted with village heads, security officials, or LWU leaders. Interviewees, therefore, sometimes spoke from within their institutional roles, which may have influenced how issues and responses were framed. This is particularly relevant when interpreting references to police action, mediation effectiveness, or gender-based violence.

Despite these limitations, the research provides rich insight into gendered and intersectional everyday experiences of security in Cambodia and Laos. The findings illuminate how these experiences of gender-based violence, land loss, migration, and flooding are shaped by the intersection of group identities and inequalities and how these factors influence security within different community contexts.

A Group of Participants Writing at Workshop in Cambodia. AMPLIFY, Oct 2025







Assessing the Impact of Women, Peace and Security Initiatives in Cambodia and Lao PDR:

A Baseline Study

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