

Cambodia: Civil Society Organization and Community Scoping Study

COUNTRY BRIEF



CSO participants in Mondulkiri, Cambodia. Photo credit: AMPLIFY, June 2025.

AMPLIFY

AMPLIFY is a five-year Women, Peace and Security (WPS) initiative that addresses the differential impacts of conflicts and human security threats on women in Southeast Asia by advancing their meaningful participation in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

The initiative 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. AMPLIFY is funded by the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and implemented by The Asia Foundation.

Women, Peace and Security (WPS) is a global policy framework recognizing 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 conflict, addressing human security threats.

Country Briefs

In 2024, AMPLIFY conducted scoping studies across its three implementing countries, Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar, to better understand the current challenges faced by women at all levels of society.

In Cambodia and Lao PDR, research combined community surveys, key informant interviews, and civil society organization (CSO) needs assessments. In Myanmar, interviews explored the challenges facing women's rights organizations, women human rights defenders, and activists on both sides of the Thailand–Myanmar border.

These studies were further enhanced by informal consultations with stakeholders and by a Political Economy Analysis, **Securing Women's Peace: A Political Economy Analysis of Women, Peace and Security in ASEAN, Cambodia, Lao PDR and the Philippines**, conducted in early 2025.

The country briefs that follow draw on this research to present key findings and insights most relevant for WPS programming. They are intended as a resource for CSOs, policymakers, and donors, and form part of AMPLIFY's ongoing commitment to build and share knowledge on WPS in the region.



Cambodia

- Context of Women, Peace and Security in Cambodia
- Civil Society Organization Capacity-building
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- Environmental Resilience and Security
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CAMBODIA



Context of Women, Peace and Security in Cambodia

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in Cambodia has gained traction in recent years, with the country lauded at the regional level for its leadership in supporting women peacekeepers on international missions and supporting the development of WPS policy at a regional level in ASEAN (Gordon and Kry 2024). Nevertheless, domestic WPS implementation remains a work in progress, and several inhibitors to women's peace and security remain in Cambodia. There continues to be some unfamiliarity with the concept of WPS amongst women's groups and certain government actors, which influences its uptake and implementation at a national level.

Cambodia's historical context has been marked by the brutal regime of the Khmer Rouge, which included widespread human rights abuses, genocide, and occupation. Such a history has influenced the trauma and postconflict reconstruction narrative of peace and security in Cambodia, with implications for WPS. Despite women's important roles in postconflict rebuilding and transitional justice, women's contributions have remained largely unacknowledged.¹

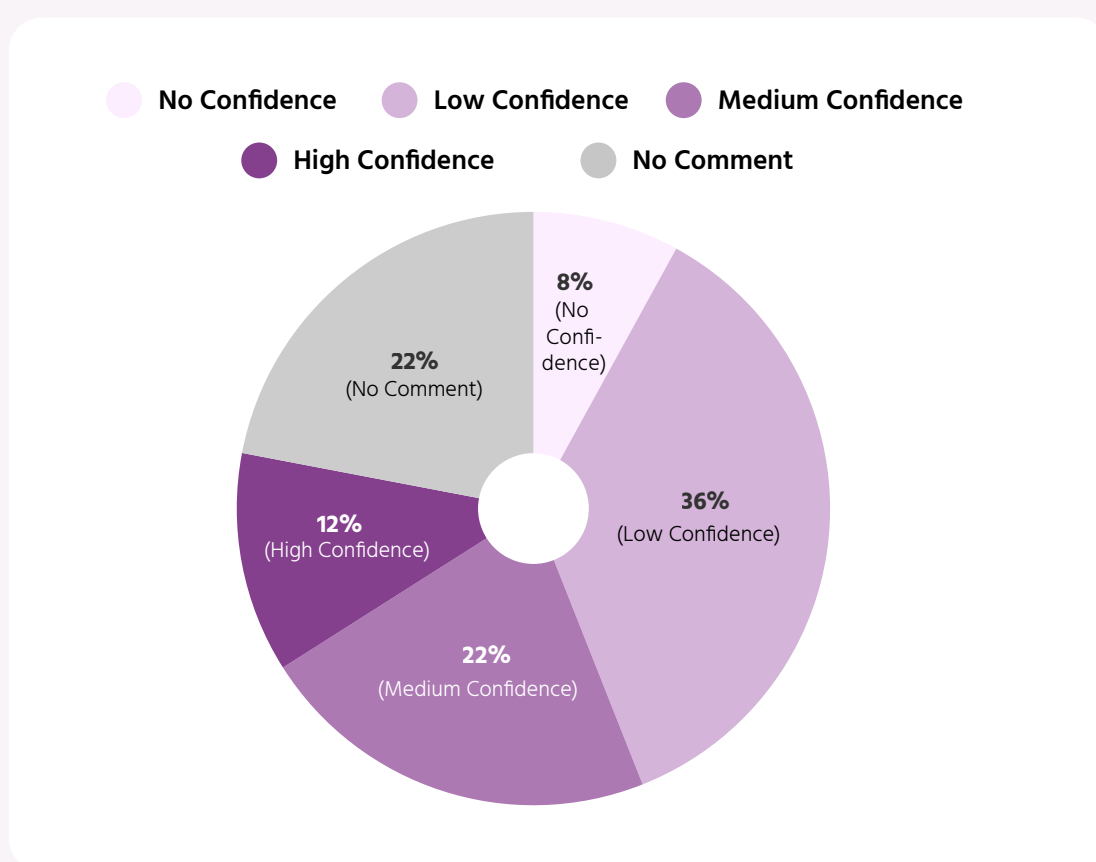
National equality frameworks such as the Neary Rattanak VI Plan and the National Action Plan on Violence Against Women exist, although their enforcement can be strengthened.² Social norms rooted in patriarchal beliefs still constrain women's public roles, including their role in the political sphere and peacekeeping. Cultural expectations and challenges with institutional accountability mean that women remain marginalized in decision-making spaces, even though their contributions to peacebuilding at a local level are impressive and well-documented.

¹ Kiernan, B. 2008. *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge*. Yale University Press; Hughes, C. (2009). "Cambodia in 2008: Consolidation in the Midst of Crisis." *Asian Survey*, 49(1), 206-212.

² Gordon, E. and Suyheang, K. 2024. *Peace, Gender and Care in Cambodia*. Melbourne: Monash University.

In 2024, the AMPLIFY program conducted a scoping study that showed many women migrate for work, seeking better economic opportunities, which can lead to greater financial independence and empowerment.³ However, this often exposes women to vulnerabilities such as exploitation, human trafficking, and increased risk of violence against women—especially in foreign contexts where legal protections may be lacking. Additionally, the majority expressed low to no confidence (44%) in playing a role in WPS, followed by medium confidence (22%), high confidence (12%), and no comment (22%) - among 129 respondents (117 women and 12 men) as illustrated below.

Figure 1: Confidence to Play a Role in WPS



³ The research was conducted during August-September 2024. The produced reports are for internal circulation within The Asia Foundation and are not intended for external distribution.



Civil Society Organization Capacity-building

Sopheha leads a civil society organization in Cambodia working to **promote positive peace and women's participation in security** related spaces. But the operating environment is complex and often precarious.

Establishing and maintaining a CSO in Cambodia involves navigating a convoluted administrative process, complicated by government regulations and laws. Issues surrounding peace are sensitive in Cambodia and for CSOs like Sopheha's, the **challenges are compounded by bureaucratic hurdles** like additional registration requirements and high levels of reporting to different government levels at district, provincial and national level.

Safety for women's rights CSOs remain a source of concern—including cases of harassment and intimidation. As Sopheha explains, **"Our organization and staff have been threatened many times. When we have been worried and reported threats to the police or community authorities, no action was taken. Staff had to manage these situations with risk mitigation strategies."**

Her CSO has implemented a range of measures to reduce exposure to risk, including security awareness training, emergency phone trees, travelling in pairs for fieldwork, engaging local leaders, and maintaining low-visibility offices. These are just some of the realities that CSOs face in doing advocacy work for Women, Peace and Security in Cambodia.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) play an important role in Cambodia's advocacy landscape for peace and security issues that affect women and girls. Organizations work in various spaces related to human trafficking, transitional justice, women's political participation, violence against women, and promoting peace.

However, operating CSOs in Cambodia can present challenges, particularly when engaging with culturally or politically sensitive issues. Some organizations may encounter **heightened scrutiny** and experience a **more complex registration and reporting process**. Along with **concerns about ensuring a safe and enabling environment**, CSOs have, in some cases, been required to adopt safety measures and partner with international organizations to feel safe in conducting their important work.⁴ Despite these risks, CSOs are committed to continuing their advocacy work, including for the WPS agenda.

One area for strengthening and supporting their work is **increasing capacity building** for CSOs in Cambodia. Many CSOs operate under short-term project cycles with insufficient flexibility for staff development. Supporting CSOs in developing familiarity with the WPS agenda and priorities in the Khmer language, helping to coordinate between CSO groups and the government, and supporting the development of peace-building skills will all be important for the future sustainability of WPS in Cambodia.

⁴ Our research findings noted that some CSO's were concerned about safety while at work. An example provided were threats from individuals who perceived that working on WPS and gender equality would disrupt household and community harmony.



Migration and Human Trafficking

Sokha is a farmer and mother of two young children in a rural area of Cambodia.

Due to changing weather and environmental stressors, farming her land has become increasingly difficult, and her livelihood is no longer sustainable. For these reasons, she has decided to leave her children in her mother's care and cross the border into Thailand to find work.

Without many resources or information about the dangers she could face in her journey, and without her support network or community around her, the transit to Thailand is rife with danger for Sokha.

She encounters unsafe travel conditions in transit, and the **risk of exploitation and violence** from traffickers who scout the transit routes for people lacking safety protections and community, especially women.

Once she arrives in Thailand, she can't speak the language and feels invisible and helpless. People like Sokha are also vulnerable to changes in border security and bilateral relations, which could result in relocation.

Migration and human trafficking are among the most serious threats to women's peace and security in Cambodia. Environmental degradation and extreme weather have been drivers of displacement by altering the farming cycles in many provinces of Cambodia. Without a sustainable source of income through farming their land, many families have no choice but to migrate to make a living.

Migration often involves unsafe transit conditions and a lack of support from the government or the broader community. Social disruption has become a part of daily life in many rural provinces experiencing migration, particularly affecting women. Children are often left behind with elderly relatives.

Without the support of social networks or communities around them, women and girls face increased risks during transit to human trafficking, exploitation, and violence. Often, these women travel with minimal resources and insufficient documentation, and they are unfamiliar with the urban settings when they arrive, meaning they do not have adequate access to care or legal protections.

Indigenous women are profoundly affected by migration in Cambodia, particularly when they are forced to leave their ancestral lands. Migrating often means losing traditional cultural practices and livelihoods, which connect them to their community and land. Indigenous women are particularly vulnerable to trafficking risks, due to a lack of access to essential information and protections compounded by discrimination.



Environmental Resilience and Security

Chanvatey lives in rural Cambodia, where her family has a farm. She is responsible for collecting water for her household. In recent years, increasingly inconsistent rainfall and prolonged dry seasons have made it harder for her family to sustain their livelihood, and water has become more difficult to access.

Unpredictable weather has exacerbated water scarcity, so Chanvatey has to walk longer distances to access safe water for her parents and brothers.

She explains, **“Walking so far is hard and not safe for us.”** The risk of violence on her journey has increased as she spends more time transiting in unfamiliar areas.

Environmental shocks directly impact the security of women and girls in Cambodia. Women are disproportionately affected by extreme weather events such as droughts and floods, as well as increasingly erratic rainfall patterns, all of which continue to disrupt agricultural and farming livelihoods that many women depend on.

Social norms marginalize women from decision-making spaces regarding the environment in Cambodia and disaster response, which compounds their vulnerabilities in times of crisis and leaves them with limited avenues to influence community-level environmental resilience and security.

Weather events and environmental shocks also threaten peace, as communities under pressure grow increasingly tense about resource allocation, particularly concerning water and land use. With increasing water scarcity comes the need for people, especially women and girls, to travel further distances to collect water for their households.



AMPLIFY's Approach

AMPLIFY in Cambodia is positioned to adapt a multi-pronged approach to respond to the interconnected risks of shrinking civic space, trafficking, and environmental insecurity. This approach includes uplifting women's agency, strengthening civil society coordination, and influencing policies at the national and provincial levels. **AMPLIFY Cambodia** is implementing **community-centered, context-driven activities** in Stung Treng and Mondulhiri provinces. These areas have been identified as vulnerable to weather and environmental shocks, security threats to women, and economic migration.

AMPLIFY is working with women leaders, grassroots civil society actors, and government counterparts to localize the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on Women, Peace and Security (RPA-WPS), striving to help Cambodia meet its commitment of developing and implementing its own National Action Plan on WPS. AMPLIFY also supports civil society actors in **connecting with ASEAN-level platforms** to increase the visibility of Cambodian women's peace and security concerns, and to improve **accountability of regional mechanisms**. By strengthening the evidentiary base and developing knowledge resources in the national language, providing technical and financial support for dialogues, strengthening women leaders' and CSOs' capacities, and addressing harmful social norms through campaigns, AMPLIFY is ensuring that women feel confident in their self-efficacy to mitigate the disproportionate impacts of WPS+ issues.

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