

# Case study



## Breaking barriers: supporting women's leadership in infrastructure

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Partnerships for  
**INFRASTRUCTURE**  
AN AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT INITIATIVE

## Acknowledgement

This publication has been funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Partnerships for Infrastructure (P4I) initiative. P4I partners with Southeast Asia to drive sustainable, inclusive and resilient growth through quality infrastructure. More information about P4I is available at [partnershipsforinfrastructure.org](https://partnershipsforinfrastructure.org).

Partnerships for Infrastructure acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians of Country throughout Australia, and we pay our respects to Elders past and present. P4I also recognises early connections between Southeast Asia and the First Nations peoples of Australia.

## Disclaimer

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## About this case study

Southeast Asia continues to evolve into a vibrant economic hub, and the region's infrastructure sector is poised to unlock new economic opportunities. It is crucial that women are included in this transformation because gender equality drives sustainable growth, innovation and social resilience.

This case study presents the results of 3 initiatives supported by Partnerships for Infrastructure (P4I), each aimed at promoting women's leadership in the energy and transport sectors at the ASEAN level and in Cambodia and Laos. These efforts reinforce Australia's commitment to gender equality in foreign policy, particularly in advancing women's economic empowerment, fostering inclusive trade, and supporting locally led leadership in line with the Australian Government's International Gender Equality Strategy.<sup>1</sup>

**Cover image:** Panel speakers at the first ASEAN-Australia Women's Leadership and Gender Mainstreaming in Infrastructure workshop in Jakarta. Source: P4I

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), *Australia's International Gender Equality Strategy*, DFAT, February 2025.





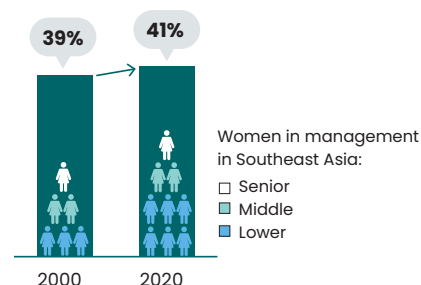
Closing ceremony of the first phase of the Women in Infrastructure Leadership program in Cambodia, where participants from the transport sector reflected on outcomes and lessons learned to carry forward into the second phase of the program. Source: P4I

## Women's leadership unlocks resilient and inclusive infrastructure development

Recent research shows that women remain significantly under-represented in the infrastructure workforce in Southeast Asia,<sup>2</sup> particularly in leadership roles. On average, women make up only 14% of the transport sector workforce in Southeast Asia,<sup>3</sup> and 8% of the energy sector workforce.<sup>4</sup>

While the share of women in management in Southeast Asia has risen by 2 percentage points to 41% points over the 2 decades to 2020, many remain in lower management positions. Representation in middle and senior management is even lower, at just 26%.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, job segregation persists, with women concentrated in administrative and commercial roles rather than in production or specialised technical fields. This under-representation not only limits diverse perspectives in decision-making but also represents a significant economic loss – advancing gender equality in the Asia-Pacific region could add US\$4.5 trillion to the region's GDP by 2025, with infrastructure playing a critical enabling role in that growth.<sup>6</sup>

In Cambodia, this disparity extends across all levels of government. Women hold only 10% of ministerial positions, with no representation in senior ministerial roles. They make up just 15% of secretary of state positions and 16% of undersecretary of state positions.<sup>7</sup> Within the Ministry of Public Works and Transport, female representation declines as seniority – and consequently, influence – increases.



<sup>2</sup> Asian Development Bank (ADB), *Enhancing Gender Equality in Infrastructure Development: Theories of change, indicators, and sector strategies*, ADB, December 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Asian Transport Observatory (ATO), *Asian Transport and the SDGs: Multi-dimensional sustainability challenge*, ATO, 2024, p 7.

<sup>4</sup> M Merdekawati, G Ienanto, C Valentina and H Aurellia, *ASEAN Energy and Gender Report: Development finance*, ASEAN Centre for Energy, 2022, p 2.

<sup>5</sup> UN Women, *Women's Leadership in the ASEAN Region: Data snapshot*, UN Women, 2022, p 3.

<sup>6</sup> L Woetzel, A Madgavkar, K Sneader, O Tonby, D-Y Lin, J Lydon, S Sha, M Krishnan, K Ellingrud and M Gubieski, *The Power of Parity: Advancing women's equality in Asia Pacific*, McKinsey & Company, April 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Figures based on government structure as at July 2023.

## Turning gender equality commitments into action

These figures contrast with the gender equality commitments described in frameworks adopted at both the ASEAN and national levels. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations has long recognised the transformative power of gender equality, formalising its commitment to women's empowerment through landmark initiatives like the Declaration on the Advancement of Women in the ASEAN Region in 1988.<sup>8</sup> More recently, the ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework 2021–2025 has underscored the importance of integrating gender perspectives into all aspects of development, including infrastructure.<sup>9</sup>

At the national level, the Royal Government of Cambodia's most recent socio-economic policy framework, the 2023 Pentagonal Strategy – Phase 1, aims to advance national development by promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, building on the foundations of the previous framework. Additionally, the Ministry of Women's Affairs issues 5-year strategic plans, with the latest, Neary Rattanak VI (2024–2028), demonstrating its commitment to strengthening the enabling environment for gender equality across all sectors, including infrastructure.<sup>10</sup>

## Overcoming gender barriers in STEM

The under-representation of women in the infrastructure workforce reflects systemic barriers to their participation and advancement in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields and senior policy roles – despite intentions set within frameworks and policies promoting gender equality. A recent review by the ASEAN–USAID Inclusive Growth in ASEAN through Innovation, Trade, and E-Commerce (IGNITE) project found that while women in ASEAN are entering STEM fields and achieve near-equal educational attainment to men, this does not always lead to sustained studies or careers, particularly in construction and engineering.<sup>11</sup> Women also remain under-represented in senior policymaking roles, perpetuating a cycle where the lack of proactive inclusion, lack of representation, and sustained political barriers hinder efforts to support their career progression in STEM. In this context, securing institutional buy-in at the highest levels of decision-making is essential to help shape the sector's future.

For women who have overcome gender barriers in STEM education and early-career employment, challenges in career advancement, retention and leadership remain. Bias and discrimination further hinder progress by limiting hiring and promotion opportunities, undermining accomplishments, and restricting access to professional development. Gender bias can also manifest unintentionally through ingrained behaviours shaped by traditions, norms, values, culture and experience.



***Due to societal norms and expectations, women are often discouraged from pursuing roles that require site visits, international exposure, and travel. The absence of senior role models who have overcome such challenges further limits opportunities for early-career professionals.”***

— Kim Y Lim, Chief of Office, Department of International Cooperation, Cambodian Ministry of Public Works and Transport

<sup>8</sup> ASEAN Secretariat, [Third Report on the Advancement of Women in ASEAN](#), ASEAN Secretariat, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> ASEAN Committee on Women (ACW) and ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC), [ASEAN Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework 2021–2025](#), ASEAN Secretariat, September 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Open Development Cambodia (ODC), [‘Women in development’](#), ODC website, 27 September 2023, accessed 22 April 2025.

<sup>11</sup> C Rubin and E Utomo, [Strengthening ASEAN Women's Participation in STEM](#) [policy brief], US Agency for International Development (USAID) and ASEAN Secretariat, December 2022.



## P4I's support for women's leadership in infrastructure development

Through P4I, Australia collaborates with Southeast Asian nations to enhance infrastructure planning and financing, and the integration of inclusive standards on gender equality, disability equity and social inclusion. This approach prioritises active engagement with diverse voices at all levels of policy and decision-making to ensure equitable outcomes. Research highlights that women's leadership plays a pivotal role in fostering wider inclusion and addressing the varied needs of society.<sup>12</sup> P4I's initiatives, which focus on mentorship and leadership training, help address some of the challenges related to career retention and advancement by providing essential support and development opportunities. These efforts have the potential for broader spillover impacts, and are just one part of a larger effort to overcome systemic barriers that limit women's growth opportunities in STEM fields.



*It's crucial that we have diverse perspectives at the table when planning infrastructure projects. This diversity fosters innovation and makes a tangible difference, not just within our departments or organisations but also in how we contribute to the growth of the sector. By ensuring that diverse voices are heard, we can create more inclusive and sustainable infrastructure solutions that benefit everyone."*

— Elina Islamova, Head of Talent, Metro Trains Melbourne, Victorian Department of Transport and Planning



Thirteen mentees from Cambodia's Ministry of Public Works and Transport travelled to Melbourne to meet their mentors and join a 10-day leadership and mentoring program. Source: P4I

<sup>12</sup> HK Smith, [Impact Assessment of Global Women's Leadership Initiatives: Evaluating long-term success of education and mentorship programs](#), ResearchGate, January 2025.

# P4I's overarching approaches

In partnership with Southeast Asian government agencies, local training partners and Australian mentors, P4I has supported approaches to advancing women's leadership in **4 key areas**:

1



## Networking, knowledge and experience exchange

- Build spaces for dialogue and peer-based learning
- Connect emerging and established women leaders to spark meaningful relationships
- Create new opportunities and drive momentum for gender-inclusive leadership

2



## Capacity building and mentorship

- Develop leadership skills and foster mentorship networks to strengthen women's roles in the energy and transport sectors
- Contribute to the collective knowledge base, including inclusive infrastructure principles and tools
- Foster women's workplace confidence, establish support systems for women (and men as agents of change) and promote women-friendly workplace policies
- Help create a sustainable pipeline of women leaders who can drive meaningful change

3



## Capacity building for the integration of gender equality, disability equity and rights, and social inclusion principles

- Build the technical understanding and institutional commitment to ensure that infrastructure projects address the needs of women and girls, people with disability, and marginalised communities
- Help key actors recognise the economic and developmental benefits of approaches that respond to these equality, equity and inclusion principles
- Help key actors understand that participatory development ensures equality and inclusiveness are effectively integrated into the planning, implementation and governance of infrastructure projects

4






## Advocating for inclusive policy development

- Contribute to diversifying the voices that shape the policy landscape
- Support women and under-represented groups to engage in decision-making spaces

P4I’s specific initiatives to support inclusive and resilient infrastructure development

Co-designed with government partners in the region, P4I’s dedicated Women in Infrastructure program supports greater participation and influence of women in the sector. To date, this work has supported over 150 women across P4I’s sectors of focus – transport and energy – through training and mentoring from senior Australian infrastructure experts. P4I is delivering 3 priority initiatives under its dedicated program:

	 Initiative 1:	 Initiative 2:	 Initiative 3:
	ASEAN–Australia Women’s Leadership and Gender Mainstreaming in Infrastructure workshop	Promoting women’s leadership in Cambodia’s transport sector	Promoting women’s leadership in Laos’s energy sector
Geographical focus	Regional	Cambodia	Laos
Number of participants	90	Training: 61 Mentorship: 26	In progress
Timeline	2024	2024 (Phase 1)	2025 (starting)



ASEAN–Australia Women’s Leadership and Gender Mainstreaming in Infrastructure workshop – a stepping stone for regional collaboration

Approach

In March 2024, P4I co-hosted the ASEAN–Australia Women’s Leadership and Gender Mainstreaming in Infrastructure workshop in Jakarta. Over 90 participants (80% women) from ASEAN sectoral bodies, ASEAN member states and Australia gathered to explore ways to advance women’s leadership in infrastructure development, particularly in the transport and energy sectors.

Impact

The workshop sparked vital discussions on policy, leadership and gender equality, with a focus on building relationships. It underscored the importance of increasing women’s representation in leadership roles, championing men as agents of change, and integrating gender considerations into infrastructure planning. The event also provided opportunities for networking and mentoring, empowering participants to connect and champion gender equality in their organisations and sectors.

In the months that followed, P4I acted on the learnings from this workshop by pursuing deeper engagement at the national level, especially in Cambodia’s transport sector and Laos’s energy sector.



## Promoting women's leadership in Cambodia's transport sector – advancing gender equality in the Ministry of Public Works and Transport

### Approach

Building on the regional momentum from the ASEAN–Australia Women's Leadership and Gender Mainstreaming in Infrastructure workshop, Cambodia's Ministry of Public Works and Transport (MPWT) and P4I launched a targeted capacity-building program in partnership with the Techo Sen Institute of Public Works and Transport (TSI) – mandated to provide needs-based training to MPWT staff – and the University of Melbourne, selected for its established Women in Transport Leadership Knowledge Network model.<sup>13</sup>

The program was designed in a way that simultaneously served individuals and broader institutional advancement. It offered a dual approach:

- an 8-week training program that supported 61 participants (69% women) from MPWT in developing their leadership and decision-making skills
- a mentorship scheme pairing 13 mentees with senior women executives (mentors) in Australia – mentees and mentors were nominated via a co-developed selection process involving MPWT, TSI and the University of Melbourne.

The training aimed to strengthen MPWT's institutional environment for promoting women's leadership, while the mentorship scheme focused on building the capacity of individual mentees. Preparatory webinars on inclusive leadership and intercultural competency helped mentees develop strategies to work effectively in diverse environments and influence change within their teams. With their enhanced skills and ongoing mentor support, mentees were tasked with developing post-mentorship re-entry action plans – either individually or in groups – to advance women's leadership and integrate gender equality, disability equity and social inclusion principles within their respective departments.

### Impact

The overall impact of the dual capacity-building program is already visible within MPWT. Mentees reported significant improvements in leadership, communication and decision-making skills, with many actively applying these learnings in their daily work.

Beyond the mentoring program, mentees have used their enhanced skills to progress in their careers. For example, H.E. Mrs Sopheavatey Sorn, one of the mentees, achieved a promotion from Deputy Director General to Director General of the General Department of Logistics within MPWT, with the program serving as one of the contributing factors. Another mentee, Ms Sina Roeurn, successfully applied for a secondment opportunity at the Queensland Department of Transport and Main Roads in Australia. During the secondment, she will gain hands-on experience in Australian bridge and road design practices, which she and the rest of the team can later adapt to local conditions.



***The capacity-building program has had a significant impact on both my professional growth and personal confidence. Professionally, it has enhanced my leadership, communication and decision-making skills, allowing me to take on more responsibilities in my role at MPWT. I now feel more confident engaging with senior colleagues and contributing to discussions in our work."***

– Sina Roeurn, Deputy Chief Officer of Road Maintenance Department, MPWT

<sup>13</sup> University of Melbourne, [Women in Transport Leadership Knowledge Network](#) [website], n.d., accessed 24 April 2025.



At the program's closing event on 30 May 2024, H.E. Mrs Sodany Koy, Permanent Secretary of State of MPWT, and H.E. Mrs Meanvy Min, Secretary of State of MPWT, expressed appreciation for the program's success and reaffirmed the ministry's commitment to advancing gender equality, signalling long-term institutional support for leadership development. This commitment is reflected in the existing Gender Working Group (GWG) within the Department of Land Transport, which is now undergoing revitalisation thanks to P4I's initiative. Mrs Chansokol Men, Director of the Department of Land Transport and Head of the GWG, shared her enthusiasm for discussing the training and mentorship elements with GWG members while exploring opportunities to scale the initiative at the general department level for greater impact.



P4I's dedicated Women in Infrastructure program supports greater participation and influence of women in the sector. Source: iStock

To ensure long-term impact of the training program, a teacher's manual and participant handbook were developed in Khmer and English. These resources support sustainability within MPWT and enable TSI to integrate the program into its undergraduate curriculums. The program also benefited the mentors, offering them deeper insights into Cambodia's infrastructure challenges through a gender lens. TSI and the University of Melbourne are now discussing a formal partnership to better integrate gender equality, disability equity and social inclusion principles into their transport curriculums.

With strong senior leadership support, institutional integration of the training components and a growing network of empowered professionals, the initiative is not only shaping individual careers, but also laying the foundation for systemic change in Cambodia's transport sector.



## Promoting women's leadership in Laos's energy sector – a roadmap for gender-inclusive energy planning

### Approach

Building on lessons learned from the transport initiative in Cambodia, P4I, together with the Ministry of Energy and Mines (MEM) in Laos, is now supporting women and men to develop inclusive leadership strategies to influence the country's energy future toward a more equal and inclusive energy transition.

For instance, the program will include a leadership course that prepares MEM staff for effective governance, with a focus on gender-sensitive decision-making. Additionally, P4I and MEM are partnering with the World Bank's Public-Private Infrastructure Advisory Facility to equip MEM staff with strategies to better embed social inclusion in energy projects. This partnership ensures that MEM benefits from a comprehensive coverage of international best practices in inclusive infrastructure, with a focus on the energy sector, enhancing the ministry's capacity-building curriculum and workshops.

# Building momentum for women's leadership in infrastructure development

P4I's initiatives are generating momentum in addressing gender disparity, unlocking new opportunities and benefits in Southeast Asia's infrastructure sector. The national initiatives in Cambodia and Laos are successfully building on the ASEAN–Australia Women's Leadership and Gender Mainstreaming in Infrastructure workshop, illustrating P4I's commitment to achieving meaningful and sustainable impact. The workshop fostered regional collaboration and partnerships, while the subsequent women's leadership program in Cambodia's transport sector empowered professionals, expanded an international mentorship network started by the University of Melbourne, and contributed to the foundation of lasting institutional change within MPWT.

P4I anticipates similar benefits to flow from the ongoing women's leadership program in Laos's energy sector and remains focused on building capacity and embedding gender-responsive policies within local infrastructure planning across Southeast Asia.

To ensure successful implementation and sustainability, P4I and its partners – including Australian government and non-government partners – have employed a multimodal approach to target different audiences and address specific needs. This strategy recognises that effectiveness depends on tailoring initiatives to the diverse governments and contexts in Southeast Asia. For example, high-level advocacy – such as elevating gender equality, disability equity and social inclusion agendas in policymaking – helps prioritise gender, disability and social inclusion considerations in infrastructure development. Meanwhile, mentoring helps mentees exercise their leadership skills by guiding them to develop and implement individual action plans, enabling them to drive change and champion women's leadership in their respective sectors.

In a clear sign of momentum, P4I's initiative to promote women's leadership in the governance of the Cambodian transport sector is transitioning to a second phase. This next phase, delivered in partnership with Australian government agencies and MPWT, builds on the success of the initial phase – particularly the mentees' re-entry action plans, which aim to promote women's leadership and gender equality, disability equity and social inclusion within MPWT departments. These plans will be implemented during Phase 2 with continued mentor support, alongside a range of initiatives at both the individual and institutional level.

While gender disparity in infrastructure development remains a complex and multifaceted challenge, P4I's approach has been to enhance and strengthen women's decision-making power, leading to more-inclusive programs and outcomes now and into the future. Growing gender equality in leadership positions is encouraging, and P4I remains committed to advancing this transformative work for long-term, systemic change.



Austrroads representatives are briefed on road standards by an all-women team from MPWT, kickstarting collaboration on updating Cambodia's road design standards. Source: P4I

## Partnerships for Infrastructure

Partnerships for Infrastructure (P4I) is one of Australia's flagship infrastructure development initiatives in Southeast Asia. P4I partners with Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Vietnam and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to attract quality investment, address infrastructure gaps, and drive inclusion and climate-resilient development.

P4I does this by providing infrastructure advisory services, facilitating technical knowledge exchanges, building partners' technical capacity, and supporting government-to-government and other partnerships between Australian and Southeast Asian organisations.

Delivered through a single team, P4I is led by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in collaboration with Ernst & Young, Adam Smith International, The Asia Foundation and Ninti One.



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