

## Briefing note

Women Caucus of the Senate

“Effectiveness, leadership and management  
based on gender equity”



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## Introduction

The Commune/Sangkat elections which started in 2002 marked a significant step forward in Cambodia's democratic decentralization process. This rearrangement of the reform not only creates space for more political representation, but also addresses gender equality in local politics. However, reforms continue to face significant challenges especially in gender articulation, and entrenched gendered power structures<sup>1</sup>.

### *Importance of women in politics*<sup>2</sup>:

- Showing that women can participate effectively on politics;
- Politics covers fields and issues that are faced by women in everyday life;
- It allows women to participate in decision making and leadership roles; and
- Women's participation in politics can bring about positive changes for society as a whole.

Having female representation at the political level, will not only benefit women themselves, it can create a more equitable society where the interests of families, children and women are represented<sup>3</sup>. However, in most parts of the world, women's equality is undermined by historical imbalances in decision-making power and access to resources, rights, and entitlements for women<sup>4</sup>.

### I. Current situation of female councilors in Cambodia

How women work in the community varied considerably throughout the country. Generally speaking, female political representatives are seen as an opportunity for upgrading women's general conditions rather than this being done by men. Unfortunately, while women do express an interest and willingness in participating in local politics<sup>5</sup>, there are social and economic barriers that hinder them from being fully involved in this arena which can lead to their lack of rights and the power to fully participate in political life<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Kim & Ojendal', *A Gendered Analysis Of Decentralization Reform in Cambodia*', CDRI, Phnom Penh, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> OXFAM, *Women leading change: Experiences Promoting Women Empowerment, Leadership, and Gender Justice*, Oxfam Novib, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> OXFAM, *Women leading change: Experiences Promoting Women Empowerment, Leadership, and Gender Justice*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> UNFPA, "Promoting Gender Equality". Accessed 11<sup>th</sup> April 2014 through <http://www.unfpa.org/gender/empowerment3.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Margherita, M. & Hong, S., *Promoting Political Participation of Indigenous Women in Cambodia*, Heinrich Böll Foundation, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 2009. Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> April 2014 through [http://kh.boell.org/downloads/HBF\\_Indigenous\\_Report\\_-\\_English\\_Final.pdf](http://kh.boell.org/downloads/HBF_Indigenous_Report_-_English_Final.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Margherita, M. & Hong, S., *Promoting Political Participation of Indigenous Women in Cambodia*, 18.

### I.1. Number of women councilors compared to men in Cambodia and to other countries in the region

Currently, women account for 12% of councilors at the sub - national level, with some communes having no female representation to date. At the provincial level, only 37 out of 374 councilor's positions are held by women, and at the district level just 306 women out of 2,880 are women. Out of 16,000 commune councilors, only 18% are female (Figure 1)<sup>7</sup>.

In the Asia-Pacific region, we can see that in some national governments women have reached the top level of leadership, but there is still a long way to go to improve women's representation in decision-making roles at lower levels of government. For example, by 2010, women's representation in the highest tier of sub-national government, in provincial and regional assemblies<sup>8</sup> was only 37% in India, 30% in Afghanistan, 29.4% in New Zealand, 27.8 % in Australia and 23.8% in Viet Nam (Figure 2). At lower levels, the figure is even less: in Afghanistan 15%, Philippines 19.8% and New Zealand 16%<sup>9</sup> (Figure 3).

To promote women's participation at the sub - national decision-making level, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has taken action to appoint a woman deputy governor for each province. As shown in Figure 4 below, in the 2012 third commune elections, of the total of 11,459 councilors elected, 2,038 (17.7%) were women. This is an increase of 3% from the 2007 elections, in which 15.1% (1,663 of 11,353) were women, and it is a significant increase of 8.3% from the first elections in 2002, in which only 9.4% of commune councilors elected were women (954 out of 11,261)<sup>10</sup>.

Figure 1: Percentage of Women in Provincial, District and Commune People's Councils during Terms 1999-2004, 2004-2011 and 2011-2016

	1994-2004	2004-2011	2011-2016
Provincial level	22.33%	23.80%	25.70%
District level	20.12%	22.94%	24.62%
Commune level	16.10%	19.53%	27.71%

(Source: Jean Munro, 2012, *Women's representation in leadership in Vietnam*. UNDP)

<sup>7</sup> Jean Munro, *Women's representation in leadership in Vietnam*, UNDP, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> UNDP, *Women in Local government in Asia Pacific Status Report*, 2010,

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> National Election Committee (NEC), Updated 2012. Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Figure 2: Comparison of National vs. sub-national Women's Political Representation as of October 2010

Country	National Women's Representation (%)	Total Sub-national Women's Representation (%)
Afghanistan	27.3	30
Australia	27.3	28.10
India	10.8	37
New Zealand	33.6	29.40
Vietnam	25.8	22.14

(Source: *Women in local government in Asia Pacific Status Report 2010, UNDP*)

Figure 3: Data for Women Elected Representatives in Rural Councils as of October 2010

Country	Women Elected Representatives			Women Chairs		
	Total elected representatives, included chairperson (#)	Of Which Total Elected Women(#)	Women elected representative (%)	Total chairs/- Heads of Council (#)	Of women chairs/Heads of council(#)	Women Chairs/- Heads of Councils (%)
Afghanistan: Provincial	420	125	30	34	5	15
New Zealand: Regional, City and district councils	999	294	29,4	85	14	16
Philippines	NA	NA	NA	81	16	19,8

(Source: *Women in local government in Asia Pacific Status Report 2010, UNDP*)

Figure 4: Commune/Sangkat Election in Cambodia

Mandate and Year	Member of CCs		Commune Chief		First Deputy Chief		Second Deputy Chief	
	Total	Women	Total	Women	Total	Women	Total	Women
2002	11,216	1,056(9.4%)	1621	42(2.6%)	1621	72(4.4%)	1621	86(5.3%)
2007	11,353	1,717(15.1%)	1621	67(4.1%)	1621	151(9.3%)	1621	131(8%)
2012	11459	2038(17.7%)	1633	96(5.8%)	1633	189(11.6%)	1633	151(9.2%)

(Source: *NEC Updated, 2012*)

## I.2. Women councilors' leadership and management

Women's presence in positions of leadership is rare. Often, although women are selected to become involved in local politics, their position is very low, usually acting in a support role rather than a full decision-making role<sup>11</sup>.

Overall, the key factors that are required to allow women to fully articulate their opinions and participate politically at the local level are:

- Access to the financial resources and decision-making powers stipulated in the law;
- Support and trust from their parties, which is made easier when they have a long association with the party;
- A sufficient level of education and experience, and improvement in their capacity in leadership, financial management, etc.
- Self-confidence; and
- Popularity, good standing and trust from the community<sup>12</sup>.

As suggested by organizations in Cambodia and Sri Lanka, a number of characteristics are required to enable women to become good leaders. These include:

- sound knowledge;
- the ability to be unbiased and represent her community's and other people's interests, not merely her own;
- the ability to make sound decisions;
- strong communication skills;
- able to solve problems;
- flexible, confident with a positive attitude;
- neutral, respectful and brave;
- be able to convince and motivate others;
- engender respected for her actions;
- be able to address issues in an open forum;
- be able to negotiate;
- be willing to take risks;
- be able to engage men and women; and
- be accepted in a leadership role by her community<sup>13</sup>

## II. Supportive policies

Recognizing that the involvement of both women and men is vital to sound development, the Royal Government of Cambodia has been working to boost women's status in the country as a whole. Through the 2001 Law on Administrative Management of the Commune/Sangkat, the RGC established the commune level as the key level for democratic development. This law included a provision for a woman councillor to take charge of women's and children's affairs. The commune/sangkat council is also able to select a woman to be village chief or deputy chief. The strategic framework for D&D in 2005 represented the second phase of the D&D reform, carried through with the 2008 Organic Law which

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<sup>11</sup> Interview Result with NCDD advisor Ms. Henny Anderson and Ms. Mary Sok, 14<sup>th</sup> December

<sup>12</sup> Kim and Ojendal, 10.

<sup>13</sup> OXFAM, 11.

allowed for indirectly elected councils at district/*khan* and provincial/municipal levels. The strategic framework recognizes the importance of gender considerations when it states “the reform will introduce systems and procedures and ensure that people, especially women, vulnerable groups and indigenous minorities can participate in decision-making at Capital/Provincial and Municipal/ District/ Khan and Commune/Sangkat levels”<sup>14</sup>. A number of articles in the 2008 Organic Law deal with gender issues and clearly articulate the principle of gender equality and women’s rights and empowerment. The law provides the basis for the promotion of women’s roles, participation and representation in politics and decision-making at the Capital/ Province/Municipal/District/Khan and Commune/Sangkat levels<sup>15</sup>.

In addition, the RGC has established a 10 year timeframe under the National Program for Sub-National Democratic Development (SNDD) 2010-2019 in order to enhance women’s role in sub-national level and promoting gender equality, stating that SNDD could only be effective and sustainable when the gender equality issue is adequately addressed. Both the national program and its first 3-year Implementation Plan (IP3) have their own gender strategies with the overall goal to achieve a gender-responsive local government as well as local development that promotes gender equality and women’s empowerment in all aspects of the SNDD process<sup>16</sup>.

Although women are nominally guaranteed equal rights with men in the Cambodian constitution, the ability to claim these rights is still subject to prevailing social ideals and attitudes about power and gender relations<sup>17</sup>.

### III. Key problems and challenges

Presently, women form approximately 18% of political representation in commune/sangkat councils as compared to 9% in 2002. These women face huge obstacles, and it soon became clear that a strategy was needed to support their work and to promote their position at the commune level<sup>18</sup>.

Despite many laws and policies that promote gender equality, implementation and enforcement has been slow. In general, gender policy and legislation is not yet fully understood and promotion of gender issues on-the-ground is not in accordance with the legislation and policy in place<sup>19</sup>.

The influence of tradition and stereotypes of women and cultural norms in Cambodia has also greatly influenced women’s participation in political life. In Cambodia, power and politics has been strongly associated with male characteristics, and this has tended to marginalised women. Women are seen as primarily involving themselves in household tasks, not in social or political work, let alone striving for the top or decision making level<sup>20</sup>.

It is important that husbands and male relatives are actively involved in the process of promoting gender relations to ensure that female leaders are more fully appreciated by their male counterparts or

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<sup>14</sup> National Program for Sub-National Democratic Development (NP-SNDD) 2010-2019.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Interview’s result with NCDD advisor Ms. Henny Anderson and Mary Sok, 14<sup>th</sup> December 2012

<sup>17</sup> Siobhan G., Pon, D. & Sok, K. , *Gender and Development in Cambodia: An Overview*, Working Paper 10, CDRI, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 1999.

<sup>18</sup> OXFAM, 26.

<sup>19</sup> Kim and Ojendal (2012)

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

commune councils or within their political party. Female leaders not only lack sufficient support from men, but also occasionally from other women too<sup>21</sup>.

Where literacy and capacity are lacking, these represent critical factors that explain the imbalance of gender relations in Cambodia. It not only affects the daily work of women, but also the confidence they need to perform their work, particularly once the decision making stage comes.

Women in provincial areas are often denied access to the type of resources that they require in order to play a full role in political life. Women need economic security to perform their work in the community; and there is a need for the commune/*sangkat* fund or funding from the central government to provide support for women at the community level<sup>22</sup>.

#### IV. International experiences

This section examines the key experiences in four countries (Cambodia, Indonesia, Philippine, and Sri Lanka). It features their experiences in designing and implementing programs to promote women, their issues and challenges, and their effectiveness in promoting women's empowerment and leadership.

- Cultural and traditional barriers to women's empowerment and leadership: Mostly, Asian women are often responsible for running a household and caring for the children and the family as a whole but they do not usually have the tools, such as decision making powers and or access to or control over resources, to actually carry out this responsibility. Disadvantages for women often begin at an early age starting with their inability to access basic education<sup>23</sup>.
- Promoting women in leadership: Women who have access to resources, knowledge and decision making skills have a major positive impact on their families and communities and even beyond. Progressive development can only take place if women have a place in the political fabric of a country and the resources to make a difference to their own and their families' lives. Society needs representation of women at the political level, and not only for the benefit of women. It creates a more equitable society where the interests of families, children and women are represented. Women who have access to learning, social capital and business capital are better equipped to participate in decision making processes and to lobby for women's interests in a political arena<sup>24</sup>.
- Promoting women's leadership means working with women and men: It needs to be recognized that the empowerment of women does not come at the expense of men. Rather, it benefits both men and women as it promotes family strengthening and the overall well being of society. In the past, resentment and anger from women have led to a great deal of resistance from men to gender equality and its goals. Therefore, men need to be approached in a way that leaves room for open discussion. Having open discussions with community leaders that address issues that emphasize the positive aspects of cultural values is a good way to proceed. The discussions can focus on the positive, emphasizing the cultural and religious values that support gender justice<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Prak and Schuette , Gender and Women Politics in Cambodia, Heinrich Boll Stiftung, Cambodia, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Kim and Ojendal (2012)

<sup>23</sup> OXFAM (2011), p. 6-12.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

## Conclusion

Although women in Cambodia are guaranteed the same political rights as men by the Constitution, in practice, women are often discriminated against in the political sphere. Common perceptions that women are not capable enough to undertake roles of political leadership, in addition to economic restraints and further discrimination based on their gender that they encounter, puts them at a disadvantage with regards to political participation and representation.

Advancement of women in leadership roles and improvement of gender justice requires a long term commitment<sup>26</sup>. It needs to promote changing attitudes, beliefs, and behavior. Change will only happen if a critical mass of people wants it to happen. In one sense, promoting women's status in society is like a jigsaw puzzle – we need all the pieces to fit together in order to have a complete picture. The first piece lies in educating women to obtain reasonable knowledge of their roles and potential. The second piece of the puzzle is establishing the political will to empower women and follow up on the implementation of gender legislation. Another crucial part is support from men; they need to change their attitudes toward female partners, both at home and in the workplace, in order to work towards promoting a more substantial political role for women. Last, women must also have confidence in themselves to improve their level and their voice in society.

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<sup>26</sup> OXFAM, 26.