



## Gender Policy and Women’s Political Empowerment in Cambodia

The term ‘**gender political empowerment**’ refers to efforts to ensure equality between women and men in politics and decision making. In the Cambodian context, gender political empowerment refers to strengthening, promoting, and protecting women’s participation in politics through providing equal opportunities and ensuring the equitable representation of men and women as elected officials.

In addition to the imbalance between individual rights and freedoms and state power, Cambodia faces a cultural imbalance between men and women. Most Cambodian politicians are men and there are fewer opportunities for women in the political arena. Part of this problem is a result of the conservative traditional norms within Khmer culture that place a lower value on women than men in all sectors of society. Moreover, poverty, illiteracy, discrimination, lack of encouragement and opportunity, and the absence of a specific policy on promoting and providing opportunities to women, are obstacles for women who want to participate in politics and social affairs.

Cambodia has yet to achieve equality of gender political empowerment, especially in regards to elected officials. Even though 53% of eligible voters are women, women representatives make up only 22% of the fourth mandate (2008-2013) and women commune councillors only 16.8% of the second mandate (2007-2012). According to UNDP’s Human Development Index 2009, Cambodia has one of the lowest ratings of gender empowerment in Asia; a gender development index of 0.588 and gender empowerment index of 0.427. This ranks Cambodia at 91<sup>st</sup>, with the worst ranked at 109<sup>th</sup>.

Progress in reform and gender mainstreaming has been weak. The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) is making efforts to address the imbalance and has appointed 24 women as Deputy Governors in all (24) municipalities and provinces. In the total 185 districts or *Khan* - there are 169 women appointed as vice-chief of district/*Khan* and 388(12%) women have been elected (by commune councillors and members of the national assembly) at sub-national level to member of either municipality, province, *Krong/city*, *Srok/Khan/* or district council. There are only 453 (3%) women of village chief.

This figure shows that Cambodia still faces challenges in meeting the Cambodia Millennium Development Goal (CMDG) which states that by 2015 women hold 30% of positions at National Level and 25% at Commune Level. This challenge arises as a result of a lack of commitment on the part of political decision makers at the national level in establishing an adequate legal framework/or plan of action for promoting gender political empowerment and participation.

Vision : A democratic society that democratization in particular democratic elections are promoted and qualified to bring benefits to people.

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In addition to the above challenges a separate survey by COMFREL found that women volunteers participated in political party activities at a level only 14% lower (11%) than that of men (25%) (The survey of *'Participation and Democratic Governance'* conducted in November 2009). During the last elections women registered and voted at a higher rate than men while facing the same obstacles. In the 2008 elections approximately 220 000 women voters turned out but because of difficulties in finding their names on the register they were not able to vote on the Election Day (based on a COMFREL survey report of Voter List and Registration in 2009). Disabled women faced even more obstacles. According to a 2010 survey carried out by COMFREL, The Cambodian Disable People Organization (CDPO) and Handicap International Federation (HI) on **'The Political Participation of Women with Disabilities in Cambodia'** women with disabilities had a lower rate of participation in the process of voter registration and voting. Comparisons were made between disabled women and able-bodied women during registration in 2010 in 3 provinces and municipalities (Phnom Penh municipality, Kampong Cham province, and Kampong Speu province). Results showed that 51.3% of disabled women went to register to vote as opposed to 76.7% of able-bodied women. Disabled women participated in 2008 National Election at a rate of 58.8%, compared to able bodied women at 94.4%. These results show that the government, the National Election Committee (NEC) and civil society need to do more to ensure that this marginalized group is not excluded from the right to vote.

The promotion of women's political empowerment is encouraged by all political parties including the ruling party (Cambodian People's Party : CPP). A COMFREL study at the end of 2010 found that the main political parties, their national representatives and commune councillors all wanted a gender policy to encourage women and men to participate in political affairs equally - some parties pointed out that granting gender political power (especially to women) is stated in the internal regulations of their political program. The ruling Cambodia People's Party representatives claimed that the policy and strategy of the RGC for promoting women or gender is a result of their party policy and strategy. However, neither the ruling CPP party nor opposition parties have a written gender policy or action plan.

Gender quotas would provide the necessary encouragement to the government to create a policy or legal framework for promoting women's political empowerment. Alternatively, the political parties could be encouraged to create their own internal policies and action plans. Political parties are the main decision makers in whether they strengthen women's political empowerment or not. Because the electoral system in Cambodia is a party list or proportional system, people vote for one party. Wining candidates are taken from party list. In Cambodia the party leaders are decision making whether insert the candidates (man or women) into the party list for elections.

There are efforts by the RGC to encourage informal quotas for government positions and they encourage verbal introductions or recommendations of individuals to fill high ranking posts. The prime minister, during a forum on promoting women's participation in leadership at sub-national level, asked all government institutions to appoint women to vice chairwomen or deputy chief positions. He also appealed to political parties to place women on their party lists for the upcoming Commune and National Assembly Elections. While COMFREL welcomes the Prime Minister's efforts it must be noted that a verbal recommendation is not the same as a concrete written policy.

Cambodia's political parties can also learn from the experience of countries where parties have implemented a gender policy or action plan to address inequality. Experiences from the Norwegian Labour Party, which has its own action plan related to 'Gender Equality', reveals the willingness of the party to establish a fifty-fifty gender representation in political positions. The Norwegian Labour Party action plan focuses on women's political empowerment and recommends the establishment of a women's network or movement within the party, as well as conducting training programs for improving gender equality awareness, in addition to national conferences, seminars, and forums relating to women's empowerment issues.

In Cambodia, there have been efforts by both the ruling CPP party and opposition parties to increase their number of women members and elected officers as well as conducting training to strengthen capacity of politicians and women activists.

COMFREL conducted training workshops for women on '**women's political empowerment in decision making**' or '**Women can do it**'. During the workshops COMFREL found that some local female leaders and activists for opposition parties had defected to the ruling party. The reasons for these defections included that they felt that they may be sanctioned for opposing the ruling party, that their own party did not value them or that they were strongly influenced by the attractive compensation offered by the ruling party.

Many questions were raised; in particular do women in political power contribute to better local level development, especially in regards to issues related to women and children? Do these women in power have any difficulties performing their duties? Do women resign their posts more often?

A COMFREL survey in 2010 of 10 districts and 10 communes of 73 communes in the 5 provinces of Kampong Thom, Kampong Cham, Kampong Chhnang, Takeo and Preah Vihear showed that women's role is especially important in facilitating and solving women and children issues; especially domestic violence.

The Commune/*Sangkat* administrative law encourages commune councils to set up a Committee for Women and Children's Affairs and other committees that reinforce women's works. These committees usually have one female focal person for women and children's affairs who acts to prevent domestic violence deal specifically with \and children issues. The survey also revealed that the commune councils that have both male and female councillors were more effective in dealing with women and children's issues than in the commune councils that had only male councillors.

The research also found that 18.2% of female councillors felt they were discriminated against and in some cases actively criticized by their male counterparts who maintained the prejudice that women do not work effectively. The survey also revealed that 2% of female commune councillors do get appointed the duties from their chiefs although these duties are stipulated in the Commune Councils Administration statutes. In the survey areas COMFREL also found out that one of eleven female commune\councillors said that at least one female commune councillor resigned due to illness. Although few elected women resigned it is worrying that when elected females resign they are usually

replaced man. There is a challenge on procedure which can maintain number of elected females who resigned.

90% of councillors interviewed believed that the number of female commune councillors is very important in improving social action because women have created networks and work structures, including health, reproductive, domestic violence. Communes which have female councillors work more efficiently in these areas as it is easier for the commune population to discuss issues with a woman allowing gender sensitive issues to be solved quickly. 40% answered in development must have both men and women, if it has only one site, it is difficult to work, and women know difficulties' women.

All female councillors in COMFREL target areas want to have a gender policy for commune councillors to help reinforce equality between females and males including rights and opportunities in decision-making including planning and budgeting. The policy should also include gender sensitivity in the work place.

The results of a National Seminar on '**Women Political Empowerment and Gender Policy for Political Parties and Commune/Sangkat Councils**' organized by COMFREL in cooperation with the Committee to Promote Women in Politics (CPWP) and the Gender and Development in Cambodia (GAD/C) in September 2010 showed that the five political parties and The department of local administration (DOLA) and NGOs accepted and supported the creation of an 'action plan or gender policy for political parties and commune/ sangkat councils' to raise gender equality and encourage and empower women participating in all sectors. Based on a survey of 'Participation and Democratic Governance' conducted by COMFREL in November 2009, 87% of citizens (most of them are eligible voters) also supported a law reserving seats for women as commune councillors or parliamentarians

COMFREL's studies clearly illustrate that the willing and direct support of leaders of government and political parties is crucial in reinforcing equal participation between men and women in politics and elections. A law, policy or official procedure to implement a quota system to ensure equality of representation, for both males and females, is even more important in order to sustain and increase equal opportunities and participation for women in politics and social works.

**Mission** : COMFREL mission is to help to create an informed and favourable climate 1)- *for free and fair elections* through lobbying and advocacy for a suitable legal framework, education to inform voters of their rights and monitoring activities that both discourage irregularities and provide comprehensive monitoring data to enable an objective, non-partisan assessment of the election process, and 2)- *for meaningfulness of post elections* through education and public forums to encourage citizens to participate in politics and decision-making, advocacy/lobby for electoral reforms that increase accountability of elected officials and provide comprehensive monitoring data to enable an objective, non-partisan assessment of the fulfilment of political platform and performance of elected officials.