

Briefing note

The Senate Women Caucus

Progress of Women in Politics in Cambodia

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September 2016

Parliamentary Institute of Cambodia



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I. Introduction

Goal five - “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”- of the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) recognizes the importance of women’s participation in all decision-making processes.¹ Upgrading women’s status in society as well as having female political representatives will strengthen women’s ability to pursue leadership roles at the management, technical and political levels.

Cambodian women represent 51 percent of the country’s population;² however, although the Cambodian Constitution guarantees them the same political rights as men³, in practice women still struggle to fully participate in political life.⁴ In addition to economic restraints and further discrimination based on their gender, common perceptions that women are not capable enough to undertake roles of political leadership still exist,⁵ ranking Cambodia 91st out of 133 countries in a political empowerment assessment on account of the lack of female representation in the country’s politics.⁶

The objective of this paper is to provide an update on the progress of women’s participation in politics in Cambodia. It first discusses the importance for women to be represented in politics and the impact of women’s political participation. Numbers of women representatives at the local level, national level, and parliamentary level is presented in part III. Progress and challenges that Cambodian women face in their lives in terms of political participation are summarized in the next part, followed by some examples of good practices from other countries.

II. Impact of women’s participation in politics on society

A truly democratic and representative government cannot be established without women’s participation in the political processes.⁷ Women are seen to have a unique and important role to play in politics through expressing and conceptualizing solutions to problems.⁸ Over the last decades there has been growing recognition of the importance of women’s engagement in all aspects of conflict and post-conflict societies, including: access to peace talks, rebuilding war-torn societies, standing for parliament and redefining gender-specific security needs. For Cambodia, it is understood that women’s experiences are different to those of men, and such experiences should be represented in politics. The comparative report from the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP)⁹ indicates that women:

- Have a greater sense about social issues and the well-being and welfare of their communities, and factor these into the decision-making process;
- Promote policies and activities that strengthen communities;
- Encourage stakeholder participation;
- Emphasize the importance and the practice of good communication with the community;
- Have a different approach to the way their local authority is governed;
- Develop a team approach;

- Set different priorities;
- Bring mediation skills, clear goal setting, multitasking and practicality to their work;
- Are dedicated, responsible, and practice what they preach and show a great deal of spirit; and
- Stimulate and encourage other women to be part of development.

Another separate research report¹⁰ summarized the arguments supporting women's political participation as follows:

Figure 1: Summary of Arguments Supporting Women's Political Participation

Traditional	Benefits for Parties	Benefits for Women Politicians	Benefits for Society
Equal rights and opportunities for women and men are universally recognized	Improves a party's public image and standing	Expands the pool of women willing to run for public office	Ensures fair representation of society in elected office
Equal representation of women and men in politics is a prerequisite for democratic elections	Enhances a party's program and policy agenda	Changes the perceptions of society and political stakeholders regarding women's capacity	Impacts the policy agenda
Inclusive parliaments can enhance legitimacy and representativeness	Strengthens a party's electoral and/or campaign strategy	Strengthens confidence of women to influence policy agendas in parties and parliament	Promotes better understanding of gender- equality issues in society
Gender equality is conducive to economic development	Helps combat decline in party membership		

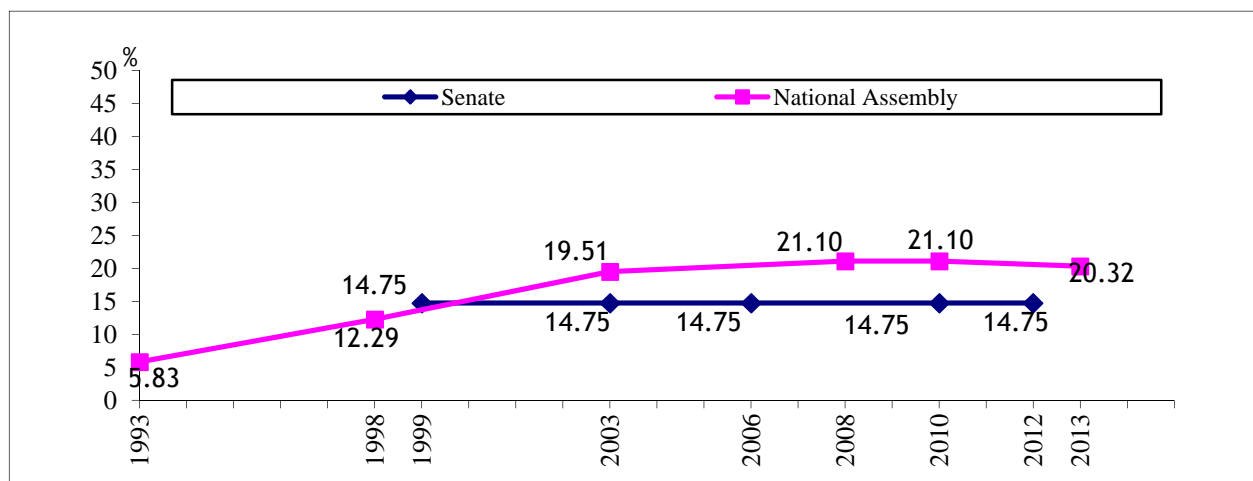
Source: Reproduce of OSCE 2014¹¹

III. The progress of women's participation in politics

Gender inequality remains a crucial issue in Cambodia despite the country's rapid economic, social and political development. While significant progress has been made in reducing gender disparity in many areas, statistics show that women's participation in many fields is still limited. For example, the proportion of women elected as Members of Parliament slightly decreased from 21.10 percent in 2008 to 20.32 percent in 2013, while the percentage of women Senators has

been stable, standing at 14.75 percent from 1999 until 2012.¹² This clearly indicates that even though the RGC has made significant progress in promoting gender equality and advancing the participation of women in decision-making processes and in politics in general, progress is slow. (See Figure1)

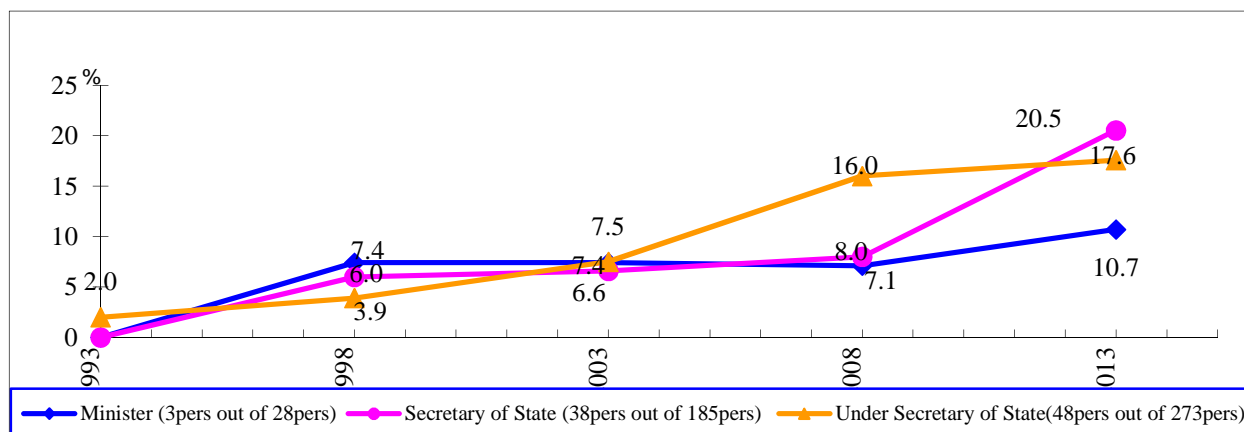
Figure1: Percentage of Women in the National Legislature (1993-2013)



Source: MoWA, Key gender statistic in Cambodia, 2015¹³

Furthermore, among nine Deputy Prime Ministers, only one is female and there are no female Senior Ministers.¹⁴ The number of women involved in the decision-making process is also extremely low; among 28 Ministers in the government only three are women. Figure 2, developed by using the Royal Kram 2013, indicates that the number of women in leadership positions increases through incentives and by appointing women in every public institution. The proportion of female Secretaries of State appointees increased from 8.08 percent (16 women out of a total of 198) to 20.54 percent (38 women out of a total of 189) between 2008 and 2013. The proportion of female Under Secretaries of State appointees increased from 16 percent (33 women out of a total of 205) to 17.60 percent (48 women out of a total of 273) between 2008 and 2013.¹⁵

Figure 2: Percentage of Women in Senior Positions In Government (1993-2013)



Source: MoWA, key gender statistics in Cambodia, 2015¹⁶

At the sub-national level, the proportion of women in provincial government remains low, and there have been no woman Governors since 1998. However, some progress has been made at Deputy Governor level, with 17 percent (25 out of 150 positions) of appointments at provincial/capital level going to women. Women hold only 2 percent of District Governor positions (three out of 197) and 25 percent of Deputy District Governor posts (197 out of 788).¹⁷ (See Table 1 in the Annex)

IV. The challenges of women's participation in politics

Women in Cambodia at every socio-political level remain under-represented in Parliament and are generally far removed from the decision-making level at both national and sub-national levels. Despite the progress made in improving women's participation in politics, discrimination still imposes a negative impact on the ability of women to be promoted.¹⁸ Women remain concentrated in those sectors that are traditionally associated with their gender and at lower levels of government. The challenges that women often face in participating in politics are as follows:

- **The Masculine Model of Politics:** Even though women in Cambodia are guaranteed the same political rights as men by the Constitution of Cambodia, in practice women are often discriminated against in the political sphere.¹⁹ Due to the traditional norms of Cambodia, men dominate the political arena, men formulate the rules of the political game, and men define the standards for evaluation.²⁰ Women tend to give priority to societal concerns, such as social security, health care, children's issues, and domestic work. Therefore, these traditional gender roles have had a wide reaching impact on how women politicians are viewed, and the existence of this male dominated model often results in women rejecting politics altogether.
- **Socio-Economic Obstacles:** Socio-economic conditions play a very important role in the recruitment of women to legislatures in Cambodia. The social and economic status of women in society has a direct influence on their participation in political institutions and decision-making. Consequently, cultural norms and gender stereotypes have had significant consequences for the socio-economic status of women in Cambodia.²¹ These concerns are apparent at all stages of a woman's life. Although gender equity in education is improving, gaps remain because men continue to be given priority for education at all income levels.²² For example, the school enrollment rates for girls and boys are 48% and 52% at primary school, 49.7% and 50.3% at lower secondary school, 47.7% and 52.3% at upper secondary school.²³ It shows that it is very similar at all education levels, especially at lower secondary school, but the school drop-out rates for girl generally remain higher than boys (Girls 20.9% in 2013/2014)²⁴ (see figure 3 and 4 in annex). For this reason many Cambodian women, especially those from poorer families, have limited access to higher education which results in unemployment and the

feminization of poverty. Poverty has a strong, negative impact on women's participation in politics when their major concern is survival and they have no choice but to spend much of their time trying to meet the basic needs of their families.²⁵ Furthermore, although some women have full-time jobs outside the home, they still play a role as wives and mothers and thus carry both domestic and professional obligations. This burden represents a further obstacle in respect of women's participation in politics or in society, since they have a lot of responsibility in both their working and domestic lives.²⁶

- **Lack of Confidence and Support from Society and their Family Members:** Most Cambodian families are unlikely to encourage women to participate in politics because of the traditional belief that women are born to be housewives and to work at home.²⁷ For this reason, women lack confidence to take on representation roles in formal political institutions, whether they be parliaments, ministries or political parties. Without confidence and determination women cannot reach the highest levels in the political process. However, if women can achieve equality and have the same opportunities as men, they can fight for their rights. Women are very good campaigners, organizers and support-mobilizers, but fear sometimes prevents them from contesting elections and from participating in political life.²⁸ This is why women need strong support from society and their family members and need a good education in order to participate in politics and decision-making processes.

V. Good practices

Political parties are among the most important institutions for promoting and nurturing such participation. How women participate in political parties – or how political parties encourage and nurture women's involvement - is a key determinant of women's prospects for political empowerment.

Below is a summary of good practices developed by political parties to enhance women's participation in other countries.²⁹

- Mexico and Australia: Supporting women's representation through quotas and state funds for training
- Spain: Working in partnership with men to transform the political environment for women
- Timor-Leste: Creating incentives to advance the recruitment of women candidates
- Thailand: Training in campaigning and leadership skills to encourage women to run for local elections, and supporting nation-wide efforts to implement CEDAW Committee recommendations on the use of temporary special measures.³⁰

VI. Conclusion

Even though progress has been made in recent years to promote the status of women in Cambodia, especially in politics, it seems to be slow and still faces many challenges such as the Masculine Model of Politics, Socio-Economic Obstacles, and Lack of Confidence and Support from women's family members. Men still dominate the majority of governing institutions, which is the result of gender inequality in society. Women hold only a limited number of leadership and decision-making positions in political parties, and instead tend to predominate in positions and activities supporting political parties at the grassroots level or supporting male party leadership. Achieving good governance will require the active participation and commitment of all segments of society, including men and women, enhanced information sharing, accountability, transparency, equality, inclusiveness, and the rule of law.

In conclusion, including the perspectives of women and their participation in politics are prerequisites for democratic development and would contribute to good governance. Women play an important role in politics through their ability to express and conceptualize solutions to problems. Therefore, it remains imperative that women must lead the process to organize and mobilize their networks, learn to communicate their interests with their male counterparts, and push for mechanisms to enhance their representation roles.

Annex

Table 1: Women Representatives at Province and District level (2014)

Provincial Governors		Provincial Deputy Governors		District Governors		District Deputy Governors	
Total	Women	Total	Women	Total	Women	Total	Women
25	0 (0%)	150	25 (17%)	197	3 (2%)	788	197 (25%)

Source: Ministry of Public Function (as of 31 December, 2014)

Table 2: Women in Commune Councils (2002-2012)

Mandate and Year	Member of Commune Councils		Commune Chief		First Deputy Chief		Second Deputy Chief	
	Total	Women	Total	Women	Total	Women	Total	Women
2002	11,216	1,056 (9.4%)	1,621	42 (2.6%)	1,621	72 (4.4%)	1,621	86 (5.3%)
2007	11,353	1,717 (15.1%)	1,621	67 (4.1%)	1,621	151 (9.3%)	1,621	131 (8.0%)
2012	11,459	2,038 (17.8%)	1,633	95 (5.8%)	1,633	189 (11.6%)	1,633	151 (9.2%)

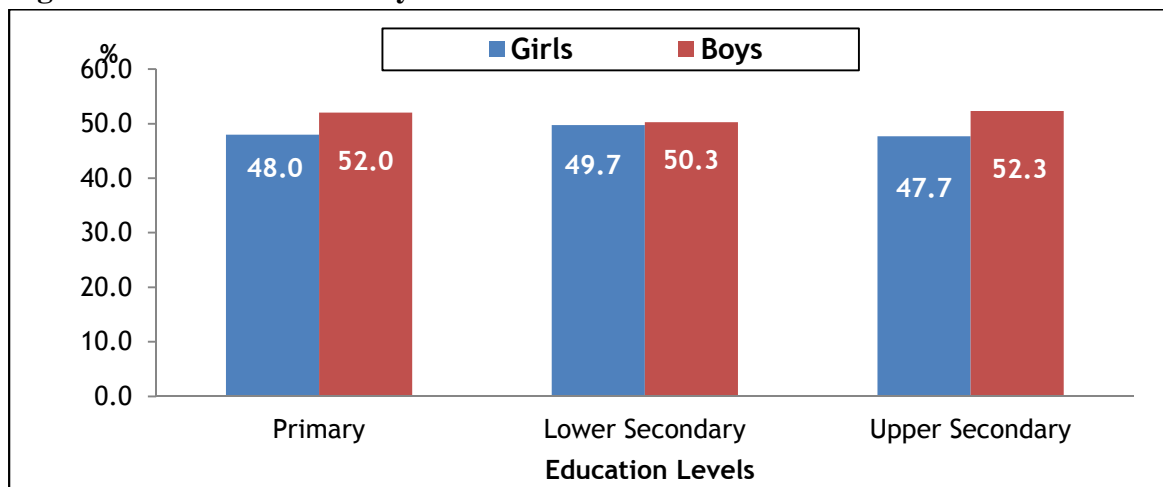
Source: National Election Committee-2012 (NEC)

Table 3: Women in Provincial-Municipal; District-Khan Councils (2009/2014)

Mandate and Year	Members of Capital/Provincial Councils		Members of Municipal, District and Khan Councils	
	Total	Women	Total	Women
2009	374	37 (9.89%)	2,861	363 (12.69%)
2014	393	52 (13.23%)	2,931	406 (13.85%)

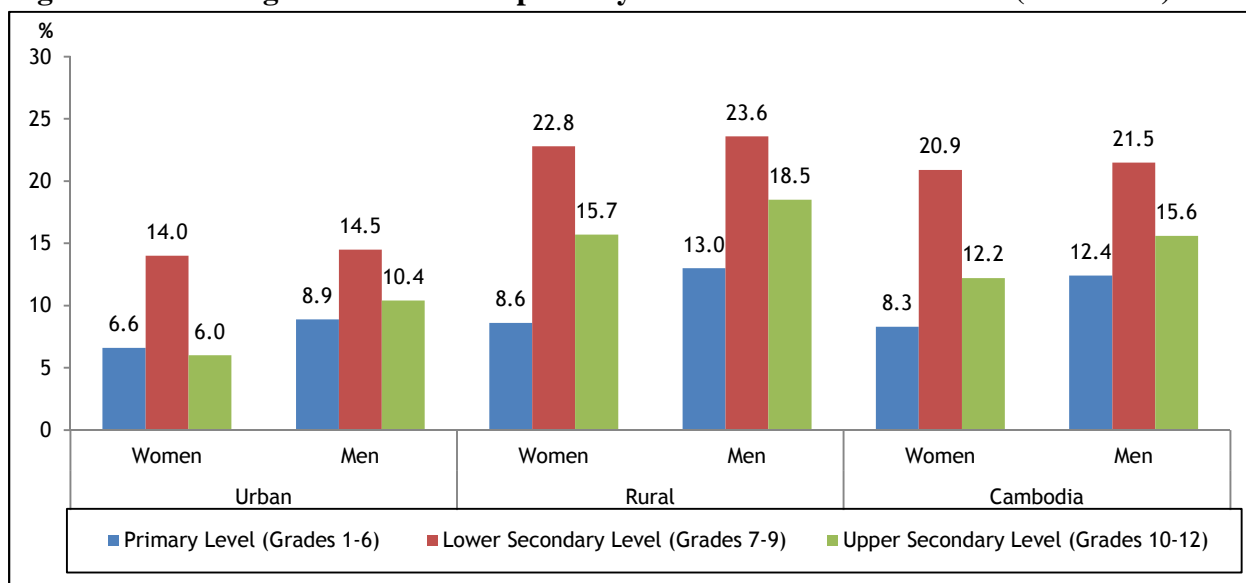
Source: Ministry of Interior 2014 (MOI)

Figure 4: Enrollment Rate by Sex and Levels of Education



Source: Education Statistics and Indicators 2013/2014, MoEYS

Figure 5: Percentage of Students Dropouts by Sex and Level of Education(2013/2014)



Source: Education Statistics and Indicators 2013/2014, MoEYS

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