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‘Citadel of Women’: strengthening female leadership in rural Cambodia

Thavy Chhoeun, Panha Sok and Clodagh Byrne

This article discusses the work of Banteay Srei, a local Cambodian NGO, in relation to building the capacity of women to participate in leadership as a part of the decentralisation process.¹

I never dreamt I would become a village chief. In this village it is unheard of for women to be in authority. But at an election in 2006, I was voted village chief by my community. I was so shocked but so happy! My husband cannot read and write, but he encouraged me to do this job. I wasn't sure – I thought people would react badly to me. I said to my husband that I might be busy, that I might not have time to do the housework, so my husband took over the care of the house. It meant that the family lost some money because my husband labours on construction sites and sometimes he was unable to work, but I think our new life is better than our old one.

Some men were not happy when Banteay Srei came to this village. They felt like they had less power because women were becoming confident. Some of their wives would spend the whole day writing reports, which meant they had less time for household chores. But my husband was happy for me to do this work. He said he wanted his wife and family to learn to read and write. He said I was a good role model for my daughters. He helps me with the reports I write, and the meetings I run, so he is learning too.

Only a few men have expressed any unhappiness about my work as village chief. Some are envious, some say that I can't do the job, but I am proving them wrong! I think male leaders often don't take much notice of women's issues. And sometimes women that have problems dare not express their issues with men. It is easier to solve the problems in this community now women are involved in leadership. Every day I think that women and men must have equal status in the community. Without both, we cannot develop.

(Ean Poise, Village Chief)

Banteay Srei has been working with poor and vulnerable women in rural Cambodian communities for over 16 years, to seek gender justice and equality, and support poor women to increase their access to resources. It does this by organising women into community groups known as Village Working Groups, and by building the skills, knowledge, and confidence of women leaders in these groups to enable them to work closely with the Commune Councils.

Gender relations between women and men in Cambodia seem to be gradually changing, and power relations shifting. Small changes are most apparent at the village level, with women increasingly engaging in local governance and development issues. Cambodia has among the lowest gender-equality indices in the South East Asia Region (UNDPb 2008). This is due to many factors, including the effects of Cambodia's recent history of internal conflict and political instability, and cultural practices which traditionally grant women a lower status than men. Gender inequalities continue to persist in many aspects of economic and political life, and cultural and social norms still consider men to be superior to women (NGO Forum 2007). Women also face a double burden in managing domestic tasks while also contributing to agriculture and income-generation activities.

The Cambodian government recently adopted a decentralisation policy, which has led to the establishment of local government structures, known as Commune Councils. This has resulted in increased opportunities for women's participation in local governance (Yip 2007). However, significant gender inequities still remain within Cambodia's political structures. Cambodia's Committee to Promote Women in Politics has recently called for affirmative action, to increase the critical mass of female leaders who are motivated to advocate for more gender reforms at the National Assembly (UNDPa 2008).

NGOs – particularly those which actively focus on good governance and women's leadership – have an increasingly important role in promoting women's engagement in leadership at a commune level. Banteay Srei has been adapting its development programmes to ensure it makes the maximum use of the new opportunities presented by decentralisation to support women in leadership. This article outlines Banteay Srei's approach and activities, assesses its achievements to date, and highlights the ongoing challenges to women's engagement in leadership issues within the Cambodian context.

Decentralisation and Commune Councils

In the decentralisation programmes, 1,621 democratically-elected Commune Councils were formed in February 2002, leading to emerging leadership opportunities for women at village and commune level. Commune Councils are local-government structures based on proportional representation – that is, citizens vote from political party lists for a council of between five and 11 members, depending on the population of their commune.² The Councils have both administrative and developmental roles. They are responsible for developing policies and programmes on behalf of the local people, and for funding these with a budget derived from fiscal and non-fiscal taxes, service charges, and national revenues. Councils are also responsible for implementing policies and programmes defined and funded by higher-level authorities, and tasked with preparing and approving five-year commune development plans (CDPs). These

CDPs tend to focus on the development of small-scale economic infrastructure, such as building roads, bridges, and canals. A much smaller proportion of commune budgets are spent on social infrastructures, such as improving access to drinking water and building school facilities, with only a tiny proportion going towards improving services such as health-care facilities, sanitation, and access to markets (Romero and Spyckerelle 2004, 5).

Article 9 of a Government Sub-decree on Decentralisation of Powers, Roles and Duties to communes/sangkat councils was adopted in March 2002. This required every council to appoint a woman councillor to be in charge of women's and children's affairs. If a council does not have a female elected commune councillor, it should appoint a woman from the commune to undertake this task (Asian Development Bank 2008).

In principle, Commune Councils should also be designing and implementing projects which are gender-sensitive. But in reality, the extent to which this is currently happening is limited. Commune Councils are constrained by weaknesses in institutional capacity and limited resources (COMFREL 2007b; Asian Development Bank 2006; Romero and Spyckerelle 2004). The Commune Councils lack the skills and resources they require to respond effectively to gender inequality, and to plan projects which address it. In addition, Commune Councils are hierarchical systems, within a male-dominated governance structure (USAID 2006).

However, there is some evidence that Commune Councils, in spite of their weak capacity, have indeed been opening up possibilities for communities to engage in governance issues at a grassroots level, and leading to increased opportunities for women to participate in political processes although significant gender inequities persist (COMFREL 2007b).

The 2007 elections

The 2007 Commune Council elections saw female participation increase substantially. The number of women seeking to lead and represent their communities by running for Commune Council seats increased to more than 21 per cent, up 5 per cent from 2002. Of the 11,353 seats contested, women won 1,662 seats, representing 14.6 per cent of the total seats in Cambodia's Commune Councils, up from 8.8 per cent in 2002 (COMFREL 2007a, UNDP 2007).

These new Commune Council positions are serving as an entry point for women in politics. Analysts have identified a number of factors to explain women's entrance into commune politics. Key among these is the fact that the commune elections constitute a relatively new level in the democratic system of governance, in which male dominance is not already entrenched. Therefore, political spaces are available to women to claim, and there is no need to overturn any existing systems which may prevent this. Second, the level of experience and qualifications necessary for entry into Commune Council

positions is lower than that which is necessary for national positions, making the elections more accessible for women, who generally have lower educational levels in comparison to men – and reducing the competition with men in this regard (Yip 2007).

Thus, if women are elected to the Commune Council, they may be able to move into politics at the district or provincial level. Eventually, women may be able to compete at a national level.

However, there are a number of factors which are still limiting women's participation at commune level and will need to be addressed if the quality and quantity of women's participation in governance is to improve further. The next section discusses the role of Banteay Srei in promoting women's leadership and engagement in governance within rural communities in Cambodia.

Women's leadership at a grassroots level: Banteay Srei

Banteay Srei ('Citadel of Women') is a local NGO, named after a tenth-century Cambodian temple which is dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva. The organisation is currently working in 53 target villages in Battambang and Siem Reap Provinces, with the aim of empowering vulnerable women to improve their social, economic, and political situation by implementing community-development projects, advocacy work, and networking. It is doing this by developing the leadership skills of women within Village Working Groups.

Members of Village Working Groups are trained by Banteay Srei in participatory analysis, project design, and management, to equip them with the skills to identify the development needs within their communities, and to design and implement Village Development Plans to address these needs. In addition to basic services and infrastructure, Village Development Plans incorporate a wider range of development activities and strategies, and committees are established from within the communities to oversee areas such as sustainable agriculture and permaculture, irrigation and water supply, credit schemes, livestock management, rice and cow banks, and marketing initiatives. These are then incorporated into the Village Development Plans.

Banteay Srei initially incorporated women's leadership training into its project activities in 2001, two years before the first Commune Councils came into being. Women's leadership training was originally adopted by Banteay Srei as part of a strategy to make its work more sustainable. At this time, Banteay Srei had started to develop a phase-out plan for its target villages, some of which it had been working in since 1993. In order to completely hand over management of projects to Village Working Groups, Banteay Srei recognised that there was a need to increase the capacity and confidence of the Village Working Groups through skills training, focused on promoting women's leadership in particular. When Banteay Srei initiated its leadership training, there were no female Village Chiefs or female government

representatives in any of the target villages. To date, Banteay Srei has trained over 156 women in leadership and management skills.

An unexpected result of this approach, and an indication of the increasingly high status of women within these communities, can be seen in the results of the Commune Council elections. In the most recent 2007 elections, eleven female Commune Council members were elected from within Banteay Srei's Village Development Group and Development Committee Members, and one was appointed as a voluntary gender focal point within the Commune Council structure. A further 45 Village Leaders were selected, consisting of one Village Chief, 12 Deputy Village Chiefs, and 32 Village Authority Members. It is clear that as government policy begins to reflect greater recognition of a need for female participation in governance, women in Banteay Srei's target villages are well-placed to make the most of leadership opportunities; and their development achievements, leadership skills, and personal confidence are being recognised by their communities.

Adapting the leadership strategy to changing events

After the elections, Banteay Srei recognised that because significant numbers of women in their target communities had achieved positions of political leadership, its own leadership programme needed to adapt in order to ensure that women were encouraged to use their positions of leadership to create real change for their communities; that women leaders had the skills and confidence to fulfil their new roles; and that any other factors hindering women fulfilling their roles were identified and addressed.

Linking village plans to commune development plans

Since the Commune Council elections, Banteay Srei has been promoting increased grassroots engagement with local Commune Councils, by encouraging the Village Working Groups and Commune Council members to collaborate on commune-level development activities, with the aim of supporting those in leadership to fulfil their roles by ensuring the needs of their community are being identified and addressed, as well as encouraging transparency and accountability within local government structures.

One point of engagement, and an opportunity for increased collaboration, has been the communities' Village Development Plans. The Village Working Groups consult with Commune Council members during preparation, and then submit to the Commune Council once the plans have been finalised. Banteay Srei has been facilitating this process, by helping to organise meetings in the villages and gather information that the Village Working Groups and community representatives can feed back to commune staff when they gather data from the community in order to plan development initiatives and/or monitor progress in current development initiatives.

Information gathering at the community level is normally completed in September and October. This allows the Commune Council to incorporate issues identified by the communities themselves, through the village development planning process, into Commune Council investment plans, which can in turn lead to a wider array of development activities (such as education and health services) being included within the Commune Council development plans.

Political leadership training and Community Women Leaders' Forums

Women who get elected into political positions often face challenges in office. While many members of Banteay Srei's Village Development Committees have proven to be very skilled leaders within community initiatives, Banteay Srei saw the need to adapt its leadership training to focus on formal political leadership skills, rather than general community leadership. The aim is to support women to fulfil their new leadership roles with confidence, improved skills, and greater solidarity among women. This last point is very important if women's shared concerns are to be addressed by women politicians. Several training courses have been conducted since the elections to strengthen women's political leadership and good governance, facilitation, and goal-setting skills.

While building the capacity of women candidates as leaders is essential to increase the quantity of candidates and elected female leaders, this is insufficient on its own. Banteay Srei recognised that while increasing the women's leadership capacity through skills trainings was essential, there is a corresponding need to increase awareness within male Commune Council and village authority membership of the need and value of female participation. As a result, Banteay Srei has also been targeting specific training about gender inequality and good governance (especially on issues relating to women and children) to male Commune Council members.

To complement the political leadership and awareness trainings, Banteay Srei has also initiated a regular Community Women Leaders' Forum. These meetings are conducted separately in each commune, and gatherings held at six-month intervals. The invited women leaders have achieved positions either as Village Chiefs, Deputy Chiefs, or Commune Council members. Female representatives from NGOs are also invited, in addition to women leaders from communities outside Banteay Srei's working areas. The Women Leaders' Forums are a space in which women leaders can discuss their roles and responsibilities as leaders, share experiences, and discuss challenges which they are facing within their roles.

To date, Banteay Srei's Community Women Leaders' Forums have enabled over 160 women leaders to meet to discuss the achievements and challenges which they have encountered in their leadership roles, and to identify potential solutions. This helps raise awareness of a shared agenda, and to foster a sense of solidarity and mutual support. The insights and lessons which emerge from these forums enable Banteay Srei to adapt its programme activities and strategies to increase the impact of its women's

leadership programme. They are also revealing links between women's leadership and broader changes in gender relations in this particular part of Cambodia. This has implications for wider national trends. Government agencies and civil-society organisations can learn from this experience and potentially increase the pace of change, reducing gender disparities within the Cambodian political context.

In the next section, we examine the lessons about women's leadership and wider changes to gender relations which are emerging from the Community Women Leaders' Forums, in a little more detail.

Lessons from the Community Women Leaders' Forums

This section draws on documented discussions from Community Women Leaders' Forums held between January and April 2008.

Female leadership traits

The women leaders participating in the forums identified a number of traits which they share, which they believe were recognised by their communities during the elections. They see these traits as a reason why people voted for them.

Women leaders felt that they share some qualities with men – they all share recognition of the value of their own work, and are self-assured in the implementation of this work. They generally have self-confidence to approach commune leaders, or higher-ranking colleagues, and raise issues with them. However, they felt they were more ready than men to see their own limitations and seek to develop their capacity to become better leaders. All participants shared a readiness to improve their own capacity, and feel that this is recognised by their community. The women are committed to continually increase their skills and knowledge, either through reading and research, or requesting support from those whom the women feel have a higher capacity than themselves. They are keen to use opportunities for training, initiated by government agencies or NGOs, and eager to share their skills, insights, and experiences with other women leaders.

Female leaders felt that they are more likely to accept voluntary work and respond to requests from communities on a voluntary basis without charging service fees, compared with their male counterparts, and more likely to be transparent and accountable within their roles.

The women leaders also perceived differences in their decision-making styles, in comparison to their male counterparts. In their view, men are generally confident in their own decision-making and are generally happy to make decisions without seeking advice. Women usually feel the need to consult with their communities and other peers in order to seek advice and reach consensus, especially before making larger decisions. As a result, women leaders reasoned, women also tend to design and implement development projects which are more responsive to the needs of their communities

and inclusive of female constituents. This view is borne out by the fact that with input from women leaders, village development plans and commune plans tend not to focus solely on infrastructural projects, and to include a broader array of development initiatives, which include more emphasis on health and educational issues, and address sensitive issues such as gender-based violence.

Identifying women's rights and challenges to attaining them

The Community Women Leaders' Forums have been revealing a high degree of consciousness among the leaders of their rights as women. Leaders believe that women have an equal right to work within local government structures, and there is consensus that women can do the same types of work to the same standard as men. In relation to women's role in public life, women leaders identified the importance of women being given the opportunity to talk and share ideas in meetings, reasoning that with more communication and confidence from women, constructive relationships between male and female leaders can be built. They reasoned that both in politics and in other places of work, it is important that men give the chance to women to join external meetings. This forum has also provided an opportunity for women to identify challenges and potential obstacles to their attainment of these rights outlined below.

Barriers to election of women leaders

1. Social norms and traditionally accepted gender roles

One of the main constraints to election candidacy identified at the forums by women leaders has been the social norms and widespread perceptions of women's roles within their families and communities. These can prevent women from actively building their leadership skills and running for elections. It is generally expected that once married, women will stay at home and tend to their families. Female participation in politics and assuming leadership roles within their communities can affect relations between men and women at home. As a result, many women had found that it is difficult to get their husband's support if they are to stand for election; or if they do, they worry that their communities may feel they are neglecting their household duties.

These cultural norms also affect women's mobility. 'Women are short-legged people' is a saying which was cited by the commune chief working with one of the female commune councillor participants at a Community Women Leaders' Forum, reflecting the expectation that women don't stray far from their homes for both security and family reasons. This can limit their attendance at trainings or leaving their villages for campaign events.

2. Economic barriers

Commune Council salaries are relatively low. This can be a barrier to women putting themselves forward for candidacy during Commune Council elections, because if they are elected, taking up positions within these structures means that they will not have time to engage in agricultural or alternative livelihood activities, which may yield greater income. As a result, the economic situation of the family needs to be relatively comfortable, to allow for engagement in political duties, limiting leadership opportunities for women from families with lower income levels. There is therefore a risk that the concerns of women living in poverty are only partly represented by women in these bodies, who come from a very different background and experience.

3. Commune Council administrative structures and candidate lists

Commune Councils are 'top-down' institutions, and this has been identified as an obstacle to election success by Banteay Srei's female leaders. As women become strong leaders within a community, the values they represent are not always compatible with the party lines. This can affect their position on the candidate list for the party. Candidates' positions on a party list are allocated based on the results of a popularity poll among party members in the community. Women still tend to be placed lower on the party lists. This makes it less likely that they will be selected as councillors following the election. The forum also highlighted cases where women were placed higher up on candidate lists before elections, and then assigned to lower positions on the list following the election results.

4. Education levels

Although the level of experience and qualifications necessary for entry into Commune Council positions is lower than that which is necessary for participation in national political life, women leaders are still identifying lower education levels and higher levels of illiteracy of women in comparison to men as a significant barrier to women being elected. Low levels of education can prevent a woman from being elected for a number of reasons. Lack of educational qualifications may lead to communities doubting the ability of a woman to lead, and can affect the position that women are placed in on the candidates' list. This also can affect the role assigned to the women within the Commune, should their election bid be successful.

Challenges for women's participation once elected

Even when elected, many factors limit the extent and quality of their participation.

1. Work burdens and family duties

Once elected, family work burdens present a very practical barrier to female leaders' effectiveness. Although many women participating in the forum expressed that they

were able to achieve positions of leadership because their husbands were supportive, once elected there can still be conflict due to the potentially challenging and changing roles and power relations within leaders' marriages, or the time women leaders must spend on duties other than duties within the home. The women feel that once elected, expectations that they should fulfil their household duties and participate in economic activities, as well as taking up political duties, leads to extremely high workloads and pressurised working conditions.

2. Women being assigned low-status roles

A key challenge emerging from the forum has been that although the quantity of women being elected into leadership positions is increasing, female Commune Council members are rarely appointed as head of the Commune Council. Most female Commune Councillors participating in the forum are usually assigned as the gender officer within the Commune Council, and in circumstances where no female has been elected to the Commune, female volunteers are often appointed to fulfil this role. Female councillors are much less likely to be assigned important and financially rewarding members roles within the Commune Council structure, and more likely to take on additional voluntary work.³ They are less likely to be assigned tasks which involve processing fees, and more likely to be assigned tasks where there are no opportunities for supplementary income to be earned. They are frequently assigned menial tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and preparing tea for their male counterparts.

3. Fewer opportunities for external training

Related to the above, female councillors participating in the forum also stated that they are less likely to be given opportunities for external training sessions with government agencies or NGOs than their male counterparts. These training sessions often offer a stipend for food and transport costs, as an incentive to attend. After identifying this as a problem during a forum meeting, some of the women raised this within their Commune Councils, and successfully negotiated with the Head of the Commune to be allowed to attend more trainings.

4. Confidence in the leadership role and decision-making

Although confident in their development skills, women leaders at the forums report that they often feel less confident than their male counterparts about making decisions on their own, or challenging decisions which they did not agree with. However, they felt that they are much more likely to reach decisions which reflect the needs of the whole community – and in particular, women and children – and they assert that their decision-making process is more participatory and transparent. They identified a continued need for confidence building and capacity support for their leadership style, in addition to promoting the values of female and grassroots participation among male commune council and village authority members so that they can continue to enhance

participation both within the Commune Council and between the Commune Council and constituent communities.

5. Disillusionment with the political process

Finally, another challenge identified by women is the conflict between their own principles and values and that of the party. Once elected to the Commune Council, female councillors (as well as male councillors) are under pressure to adhere to party stances or policies which may restrict them from acting on their own judgment or responding to needs at a grassroots level. Although many women participants at some point in their career to date have felt disillusioned with the reality of what they can achieve within their roles compared with their ideals, they still feel hopeful that they can be agents for change. Only one elected commune councillor from Banteay Srei's communities has resigned for this reason to date.

Conclusion

If significant quantities of women were given the opportunity to participate in government at commune, district, provincial, and national level, this could create fundamental changes in what is still a hierarchical and male-dominated governance system, and in the policy which emerges from these institutions. Women's leadership in Cambodia has the potential to have a major impact on the current situation of poverty and gender inequality, but only if female representation reaches a critical mass at all levels of government. However, it is clear that in spite of ambitious targets set by government, women's representation in governance remains relatively weak. The numbers of women being elected, and the quality of their participation once elected, are still limited by the social, economic, and political challenges identified above.

Given the relatively low numbers of women in positions of leadership, networking between women leaders is vital as this enables them to share experience, offer support and motivation, and communicate best practice and challenges. Banteay Srei expects that the outcomes of their Women's Leadership Trainings and Community Women Leaders' Forum will be seen in the village and commune planning process in late 2008. Their expectation based on work so far is for a more comprehensive and confident presentation of village needs, particularly ensuring that the voices of poor people and women are clearly heard. The next step for the Community Women Leaders' Forum is to move beyond a space for sharing experiences and identifying challenges and opportunities, to a forum where the women themselves can develop concrete strategies to make use of opportunities and address challenges to promote greater change. It is important that challenges currently experienced by women leaders can be followed up strategically by NGOs and women leaders themselves through dialogue with government agencies,

and advocacy strategies targeted at a commune level through to a national level in order to create space for higher quantity and quality of women's engagement in leadership and governance.

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Notes

- 1 Banteay Srei came into being in 2000 after an Australian NGO, IWDA, had worked in the community.
- 2 The elected Commune Council members serve five-year terms. The first-placed candidate of the party with most votes assumes the position of commune chief, and the first-placed candidate of the next most successful party assumes the position of deputy chief. Communes are, in turn, sub-divided into villages or Phum, the smallest units of administrative structure, which are responsible for administrative duties at a village level and report to the Commune Council. The administrative head of the Phum is the Village Chief, who is usually assisted by a deputy. Both of these are elected positions.
- 3 A Commune Council Chief's salary is 100,000 riel (about \$25) a month, a Deputy Council Chief 1& 2 salary is 80,000 riel (about \$20) a month, and Commune Council members 70,000 riel (about \$17) a month.

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