

Good Governance from the Ground Up:
Women's Roles in Post-Conflict Cambodia

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WOMEN WAGING PEACE is a program of Hunt Alternatives Fund that advocates for the full participation of women in formal and informal peace processes around the world.

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PROJECT BACKGROUND

Wars and internal conflicts do not end simply with the signing of peace agreements. To avoid a resurgence of violence, it is necessary to develop and support measures for strengthening the governance, security, justice, and socioeconomic capacities of a state. This is a complex task in any society, but daunting in post-conflict situations. While the international community can provide assistance and valuable resources, the local population, which has no “exit strategy,” has the greatest commitment to building sustainable peace. It is therefore essential to draw on the assets, experiences, and dedication at the local level and among all sectors of society. One sector often overlooked and underestimated is women. In most post-conflict societies women are more than 50 percent of the population and are actively engaged in peace building while addressing the basic survival needs of their families and communities. Yet they are often portrayed as passive victims, and little regard is given to their actual and potential roles in fostering security.

In October 2000, for the first time in its history, the United Nations Security Council acknowledged that women have a key role in promoting international stability by passing Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security. It called on all parties to ensure women’s participation in peace processes, from the prevention of conflict to negotiations and post-war reconstruction. The Women Waging Peace Policy Commission was established to examine peace processes with a particular focus on the contributions of women. ***“Good Governance from the Ground Up: Women’s Roles in Post-conflict Cambodia” traces women’s contributions to governance and peace through local and national politics as well as civil society; examines the significance of gender perspectives to the promotion of good governance; and reflects on mechanisms enhancing women’s participation in the political arena.***

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Key Findings

1. Women in Cambodia have made contributions to good governance by working to: include human rights in the constitution, urge accountability in government, establish government-civil society partnerships, and advance women's political participation.
2. Historically, politics has been characterized by mistrust, but women are breaking new ground and appealing for cross-party cooperation.
3. Countering a culture of violence, women are at the forefront of promoting peaceful resolution of local disputes.
4. Women are establishing new patterns of public consultation: non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have partnered with the Ministry of Women and Veteran's Affairs (MWVA) to develop legislation and programs that address social needs.
5. There is growing public support for women's increased political participation, since they are perceived to be more trustworthy and competent than men.

Recommendations

1. To promote **good governance**, international donors should:
 - strengthen NGO efforts at cross-party cooperation through funding and training;
 - ensure transparency by informing NGOs of agreements reached with government agencies and encouraging cross-sector collaboration on anti-corruption issues;
 - strengthen, financially and technically, NGOs that have anti-corruption programs;
 - support Cambodia's decentralization program and call for coordination between village associations and commune councils;
 - direct their aid to the grassroots, including commune councils; and
 - work with the government to institute "gender budgeting," to develop the national budget based on a system of expenditures responsive to the needs of women and men.
2. To increase **women's participation** in governance, the international community should:
 - encourage the use of a quota system in political structures;
 - create a forum in which donor, government, and NGO representatives devise programs for promoting gender equity and measuring accountability;
 - systematize the reach of the MWVA by creating gender focal points in key ministries;
 - fund capacity building for women candidates; and
 - increase opportunities for girls and women in higher education.
3. To foster a **culture of equality**, international actors should:
 - strengthen legal reforms and civil society efforts to combat gender-based violence;
 - encourage media initiatives that highlight women's contributions to society, emphasize human rights, and present role models for women;
 - fund gender training for men, emphasizing the value of women's work; and
 - target resources at women's groups involved in nonviolent conflict resolution within communities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

In July 2003, Cambodia held parliamentary elections for the third time since the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement of 1991. The elections appeared commendable, with a campaign period not overshadowed by overt violence, 94 percent voter registration, independent observers, and trained polling staff. But the smooth exterior belied a more complex reality.

Cambodia is still a fragile democracy, more than 10 years after its peace agreement. The existing political structure, while liberal in its constitution and technically a multi-party system, is in practice a state ruled by a single party. Heavily steeped in its communist heritage, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) is firmly entrenched at all levels of society and largely intolerant of political opposition. Though the threat of outright war has subsided significantly, the absence of justice and accountability for war criminals means that the prospect of sustainable peace is also distant. Many perpetrators of Cambodia's genocide still govern with impunity, while the political system is frozen and ordinary people live in fear.

Despite these challenges and the cultural and political constraints they face, women are leading many important initiatives that foster good governance and peace building. Primarily through civil society, they are bridging cross-party divides, monitoring human rights, challenging corruption, empowering grassroots constituencies, and strengthening legislation. In a country devastated by 30 years of war and faced with a stagnant political environment, women are addressing many of the most complex and sensitive issues that affect governance. They are at the frontlines of the struggle for nonviolent conflict transformation.

A Brief History

Cambodia gained its independence from France in 1953 under the reign of King Norodom Sihanouk. By 1970 he was overthrown, and the Vietnam War had engulfed the nation. Five years later, the Khmer Rouge swept into power and began its reign of terror. The country's urban population was driven into the countryside to begin a collective agricultural system. Civil servants, teachers, and doctors—in effect, all educated people—were classified as enemies of the Khmer Rouge, and members of the former regime were marked for execution. Between 1975 and 1979,

200,000 people were executed without trial, and a further 1.5 million (of a population totaling 8 million) died of disease, overwork, or starvation.

Like other conflicts, the Cambodian wars affected men and women differently. Many more men than women died in battle in the largely male armies during the civil war years (1970–75). Women combatants on both sides tended to serve in the rear guard as medics, weapons-carriers, or propagandists and thus were less likely to be killed in direct action. Because of their professional roles, men also outnumbered women as victims of widespread political executions in the first weeks and months of the Khmer Rouge coming to power. Similarly, more men than women were targeted during the internal Communist Party purges between 1977 and 1978. Finally, although in traditional Cambodian mores they are considered weak, women outlived men under conditions of starvation, malnutrition, and disease. Women made up between 60 and 64 percent of the adult population in the immediate aftermath of the war.

Peace Talks and the UNTAC Years

Peace talks began in the late 1980s, culminating in the internationally mediated Paris Peace Accords of 1991. The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) was established to oversee implementation of the agreements and elections. Although no women were present at the official talks, a select few were involved as informal mediators, facilitating the exchange of information among parties, which eventually led to formal meetings. The UNTAC years had mixed results, including an exponential growth in prostitution and the spread of HIV/AIDS fueled by the arrival of some 24,000 international peacekeepers. The period was also politically tense. Nonetheless, in its brief time as the nation's governing authority, UNTAC provided space for the growth of democratic values; and Cambodian women seized the opportunity to engage in the nation's reconstruction. With assistance from UN agencies—including the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), United Nations Development Programme, and the UNTAC human rights component and its successor organization, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR)—they established NGOs providing basic services and widening public opportunities

for civil society. In particular, women were involved in two key processes:

1. Drafting the Constitution

External experts brought in by UNTAC assisted Cambodians in drafting a new constitution prior to elections, but women in civil society played a key role in making the process inclusive. Through an ad hoc network, they held public consultations in towns, cities, and provinces; raised awareness with peaceful demonstrations; created alliances with National Assembly members; and regularly offered proposals and draft language. The effect is evident today: Cambodia has a strong liberal, democratic constitution, with provisions for the protection of human rights and freedom from all forms of discrimination.

2. Ensuring Peaceful Elections

As the first post-war elections took shape, political violence escalated; the fear of renewed warfare was palpable. Drawing on its organizational base, the women's network joined Buddhist leaders to galvanize a mass peace movement. For months, thousands of people joined peace walks across the country, calling for elections without bloodshed. The movement significantly reduced the atmosphere of fear in the country. While the campaign period was marked with political murders and attacks, elections proceeded with little violence. When the CPP rejected the results, women rallied again, organizing an event to welcome the National Assembly and effectively endorsing a government of national unity as a means of averting war.

Women's Contributions to Post-Conflict Governance

While there were attempts to enhance women's opportunities in the formal political arena during the UNTAC years, the number of women candidates did not increase greatly. Many women therefore continued their efforts through civil society and community activism. As the majority of the population and the economic backbone of the country (between 1979 and 1991, women's economic participation in the reconstruction of the country overtook that of men), they are tackling many of the fundamental obstacles to good governance today. They are active at all levels of government, from the village (the smallest administrative unit), through the commune and province levels, to national efforts.

Forging Cross-Party Ties: Women Councilors' Network

Governance in Cambodia is characterized by political violence, intimidation, and an absence of cross-party cooperation. Despite this, and in the face of harassment and threats, Cambodian women working through NGOs are at the forefront of building bridges across party lines.

Women for Prosperity (WfP) is one of the most effective organizations in this sector. Led by returnee Pok Nanda, it has pioneered a program that not only encourages and enables women to enter politics, but also bridges cross-party divides at the commune level. Among its network are women council members from all sides, including the three main political parties. WfP focuses on the common challenges facing women in politics regardless of ideology and provides ongoing coaching, thus building their skills over time. In preparation for the 2000 commune council elections, WfP supported 5,527 candidates, offering guidance in public speaking, assisting in speechwriting, answering questions from voters, and combating challenges from male party members unsympathetic to women's participation. With plans to formalize a nationwide network, WfP has not only forged new political ground for women's participation—it has provided an effective model for bridging the impasse that exists at higher levels.

Monitoring Accountability in Governance Structures

Of the civil society organizations that mushroomed during the UNTAC years, a large number, many led by women, monitor government and parliamentary actions. Putting their lives on the line, these women use education and awareness-raising programs (media projects, networks, and advocacy) to speak out against sensitive issues, including human rights abuses, corruption, and violence. For example, the first piece of legislation on corruption was drafted in 1993 with UN support, but the bill was never passed. In recent years, through the Center for Social Development, women have become the leading advocates on the need for such legislation. Directed by Chea Vannath, this center has been leading anti-corruption public forums across the country since 1996, convening vulnerable communities, rural-based NGOs, and government authorities. These social dialogues have been broadcast live by Women's Media Center radio station FM 102, enhancing public awareness and desire for anti-corruption legislation.

Promoting Nonviolence

A culture of violence continues to plague social and political interactions at all levels. While political conflicts do not necessarily impact the lives of ordinary people, there is still a tendency for other disputes—particularly over land, water, fishing, or logging—to escalate. Nonviolent activism has grown in recent years, and women are now the majority of Cambodians with conflict management and peace-building expertise. They are often at the forefront of disagreements between authorities and citizens over local resources. “Women are the backbone of the forestry network,” says Eva Galabru, a human rights and environmental activist.¹ Reflecting on demonstrations against major logging interests in 2002, she notes that “women [came] from the provinces to protest abuses of land rights. One group after another would camp out in front of the National Assembly...as soon as one group got chased out, the next group would come in. They were mostly women.”

Using their accepted identities as mothers, women place themselves at the forefront of public protests and engage their adversaries, even police or army personnel, verbally. Their presence among the protesters significantly diminishes the use of force. Peter Swift of the Southeast Asia Development Program (SADP) explains that, though male soldiers have a shameful history of violating women in private, they are culturally prohibited from doing so in the public arena. He says, “If two to three men talk to soldiers, they beat the hell out of them. But if it is women, they don’t. Soldiers find it very difficult to deal with women; they are used to raping them, not calmly discussing if a woman is standing up to them.”

Civil Society Partnership with Government

A practice of public consultation in politics is now emerging, and women’s NGO networks have actively sought to cooperate with the MWVA on the development of policies and legislation. Umbrella groups such as CAMBOW (with 32 member organizations) and GADNet (Gender and Development Network, with 62 member organizations) worked with MWVA on the development of legislation pertaining to violence, trafficking, and labor. They supported the ministry’s outreach program to ensure that women’s

needs were adequately addressed. “We wanted the definition [of domestic abuse] to include abuse that could be against mistresses, girlfriends, second wives,” says Hor Phally, co-founder of CAMBOW, “because all of these... people in the domicile are potential victims—not just the legal wife.”

Gender and Development (GAD) is an NGO notable for the formation of the Cambodian Men’s Network, which brings together men to combat violence against women. It has also been an important source of public pressure for increasing the numbers of women in government.

Structures and Mechanisms to Increase Women’s Participation

The Cambodian constitution states that men and women are equal before the law and in their participation in the social, cultural, political, and economic life of the country. Cambodia is also a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Yet in the last decade, the government has done little to increase women’s political participation or to alleviate the socioeconomic barriers they face.

The Department of Women’s Affairs was elevated to a full ministry (the MWVA) in 1998, coinciding with the appointment of former NGO leader Mu Sochua. Despite limited resources, this body has promoted government-civil society partnerships, established gender focal points in other ministries, and introduced “gender budgeting” as a means of highlighting the discrepancies between the allocation of resources and the needs of men and women. Gender equity was included as a key segment of the Governance Action Plan in 2001 because of international donor requirements.

The commune council elections in 2002 provided a mechanism for political and administrative democratization to reach deeper into the countryside, where 85 percent of Cambodians live. Though marred by violence and intimidation, there was good voter turnout. Women were elected to 954 councilor positions out of 11,261 (eight percent) in 1,621 councils across the country. Although their numbers are limited, says one women commune councilor, “the women council-

ors will be able to use their new positions ... there will be greater recognition of the specific problems, needs, and interests of women.”

For the first time in Cambodian history, women have the opportunity to represent their communities democratically through political office at the local level. While women represent a small minority of elected commune candidates, their dedication and performance may well yield positive results in the 2006 commune elections, spurring others to become candidates provided there is sufficient political party support. In effect, decentralization could provide potential, thus far unrealized, for women’s participation in governance.

Gender, Governance, and the Power of Perceptions

Public perceptions regarding women in politics are powerful indicators of social change. While Cambodians have a general lack of trust in politicians, an overwhelming number of those interviewed for this study indicated that women politicians are viewed differently from men. The impact of war, women’s civil society activism in the transition years, and their recent efforts at local politics are contributing to the gradual transformation of traditionally accepted gender roles. There is still a prevailing belief in the culture that women are more gentle and submissive than men and should maintain responsibility for household expenditures and childcare. According to these findings, however, there is also a parallel belief emerging at all levels of society: that women are more trustworthy and competent as decision makers in the political sphere; less violent; and inherently adept at solving conflicts verbally, thus decreasing the chance of escalation to bloodshed. The skills attributed to women in the domestic sphere are considered valuable in rebuilding the nation. “There is a desire for women in politics by ordinary people,” says Pok Nanda of WfP. “During a radio call-in show [at] the time of the 2003 National Assembly elections, listeners were asked if they would vote for a woman. Most said they would ... they want to see change and they trust women more to make the changes.”

Conclusion

In Cambodia’s struggle towards peace, women continue to bear great burdens. As the majority population they also represent the poorest, least educated, and politically most under-represented sector. Yet

since 1991, they have repeatedly risen to challenge existing norms. Through their civil society efforts and in local and national governance, women as individuals and in organizations have shown their commitment to transforming Cambodia from a country plagued by violence and autocracy to one that is democratic and peaceful. Their efforts are bearing fruit: public acceptance and recognition of the role and contributions of women in governance is increasing. The donor community is acknowledging that the promotion of gender equity is a critical factor in Cambodia’s transformation. But thus far national commitments have been limited and even international efforts have not been systematic. To transform the stagnant political space, it is essential to strengthen the mechanisms and institutions that support women and to widen the arena for their participation. As long as women are poorly represented in local and national structures, Cambodia will not achieve good governance or sustainable peace.

Endnote

¹ All quotes are taken from interviews conducted by the authors in July and October 2003.

INTRODUCTION

More than 10 years after its peace agreement, Cambodia remains a fragile democracy. The political system, while liberal in its constitution and technically a multi-party system, is in practice a state ruled by a single party. The Cambodian People's Party (CPP) is heavily steeped in its communist heritage, firmly entrenched at all levels of society, and largely intolerant of political opposition. Though the threat of outright war has subsided significantly, the absence of justice and accountability for war criminals means that the prospect of sustainable peace is also distant. Many of the perpetrators of Cambodia's genocide still govern with impunity, while the political system is frozen, and average citizens remain vulnerable.

Despite these challenges, and in the face of cultural and political constraints, women in Cambodia are leading many key initiatives that promote good governance and peace building. Primarily through civil society, but also in partnership with government structures, women are bridging cross-party divides, monitoring human rights, challenging corruption, empowering grassroots constituencies, and strengthening legislation. In short, in a country devastated by 30 years of war and faced with a stagnant political environment, women are addressing many of the most complex and sensitive issues that affect governance. They are at the frontlines of the struggle for nonviolent conflict transformation.

This report is in two parts. The first provides an historical overview of Cambodia, highlighting women's participation in the public arena through the early 1990s. It examines the long years of conflict in Cambodia, the peace process, and the impact of a decade of foreign assistance. Particular attention is paid to the effect of the war years on women and the roles they played. Part two focuses on current efforts to promote good governance. The study investigates the nexus of good governance and democratization, peace building, and women's roles as participants in these processes, including their access to key decision-making positions in the political arena. Finally, this report considers several components of good governance—civil society, anti-corruption work, nonviolent dispute resolution, the development of human rights legislation, and decentralization—and how women have initiated, participated in, and advanced them.

Rationale

There is a strong rationale for focusing on Cambodia as a case study in women's contributions to post-conflict governance. After thirty years of conflict in Cambodia, including four years of rule by the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime that destroyed one quarter of the population, Cambodia has achieved relative peace. This is due in no small part to a strong civil society, in which women have played a vital role. Furthermore, Cambodia is an example of one of the first massive UN interventions that included operational programs to improve good governance. Now more than 10 years after the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) ended its mission, the impact of the UN and the efforts of Cambodians themselves can be analyzed. The creation of a Ministry of Women and Veteran's Affairs (MWVA), a unique formulation, is also relevant and deserves study. Finally, despite major challenges to their participation, Cambodian women are serving in elected office in larger numbers than before and are the greatest force within civil society on issues of good governance.

Assumptions

This study rests upon several assumptions. Chief among them is the notion that democratic processes and participatory governance are essential for **sustainable** peace. Further, it presupposes that democracy is improved by the inclusion of all voices in society—specifically, those of both women and men.

This study does not assume that women are more peaceful by nature than men or that their mere presence guarantees democratic governance. It argues that, because of their different life experiences, women often bring new perspectives and processes to the task of building peace in the aftermath of war. Empirical evidence suggests that women experience conflict differently from men, both as casualties and caretakers.¹ Because of their experiences in war and their increased responsibilities in the aftermath, women express a strong interest in transforming their societies from conflict to peace and are thus fundamental stakeholders in the peace process. They should therefore be recognized as active agents rather than passive victims in such processes, including post-conflict governance. To exclude their voices is not only undemocratic—it ultimately undermines the peace.

Research Methodology

This study included a literature review on issues of women in democracy and governance in general, and Cambodia in particular, including an analysis of relevant academic literature, reports, and government publications. Primary research was conducted in July and October of 2003. Nearly 60 interviews were conducted in Cambodia by a three-person research team. The consultations were predominantly semi-structured interviews, though several focus groups were conducted in four provinces outside of the capital city (Battambang, Kampong Cham, and Siem Reap).

The respondents were mainly Cambodian women in politics, though particular care was taken to ensure that other voices—those of men and representatives of the international community and civil society organizations—were included. The Cambodian interviewees were roughly equal numbers of those who remained in Cambodia throughout the war and those who had been refugees in third countries. Respondents were either neutral or from one of the three main political parties—the CPP, the royalist party (FUNCINPEC), and the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP). A focus group was conducted in a former Khmer Rouge area as well. The majority of respondents were in their forties and fifties, though several younger and older people were included. Though some Muslims (Cham) were interviewed, Cambodian interviewees were primarily Buddhist. Educational level achieved by most was at least high school, though a few respondents were illiterate and several had attended institutions of higher learning.

Definitions

Peace Processes

Just as scholars have identified the “lifecycle” of conflict,² current thinking in the field identifies a lifecycle of peace. The establishment of peace is not a single event, but rather a process characterized by progress and setbacks, successes and failures. People who live in societies with protracted conflict and observers of peace processes are all too familiar with premature celebration of ceasefires and peace accords that are

later violated. Even if a peace settlement holds, it requires massive logistical, financial, and psychological support if implementation is to be successful.

Perhaps the most realistic approach is to acknowledge that though negotiations are “the best-known stage in a process of peace,” as Anderlini et al. write in *Journeys Through Conflict: Narratives and Lessons*,

[they] represent but one moment. Though essential, they nevertheless do not exhaust all the possibilities of actions or initiatives that such a process may require. For negotiations to take place, prenegotiations are necessary, be they formal or informal. For a political settlement to succeed, implementation of the provisions of an accord in the postnegotiation period is vital. In other words, it could be said that peace processes have three broad phases: preparation, transformation, and consolidation.³

This study focuses on the post-conflict or consolidation phase of

the process in Cambodia, specifically on issues of good governance.

Good Governance

Consolidation of the peace in a post-conflict setting is dependent on many factors, including what is referred to as “good governance.” The establishment of good governance is a lengthy process rather than a singular event. It typically includes efforts at democratization, the introduction of free and fair elections, participatory politics, the creation of an independent civil society, and respect for constitutionalism and the rule of law.⁴

The Post-Conflict Reconstruction project (PCR)⁵ identified “governance and participation” as one of four pillars⁶ of post-conflict reconstruction that move countries out of conflict toward sustainable peace and long-term development.⁷ The PCR framework identifies key components of governance that must be addressed by both indigenous and international actors to assist in the transition from violent conflict to normalization. They include national constituting

Very few women were involved in the pre-negotiations and negotiations in Cambodia. An exception is Dr. Kek Galabru, a French-educated physician whose parents held important positions during the Sihanouk regime.

processes, transitional governance, executive authority, legislative strengthening, local governance, transparency, and anti-corruption, as well as participation in the form of elections, political parties, civil society, and media.⁸

Such frameworks are useful to the multilateral and bilateral development agencies, humanitarian aid agencies, and national actors that promote democratic governance as key to the success of long-term development. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) focuses its interventions on the following components of good governance: legislatures, electoral systems and processes, justice and human rights, access to information, decentralization and local governance, public administration, and civil service reform.⁹ The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) likewise promotes good governance as “a government’s ability to maintain social peace, guarantee law and order, promote or create conditions necessary for economic growth, and ensure a minimum level of social security.” This is characterized by “democracy (e.g., elections, human rights, and representation), [as well as] public accountability, responsiveness, transparency, and efficiency.”¹⁰ In a more recent publication, the World Bank identifies six indicators of good governance that it uses “to help countries identify areas of weakness so that capacity building and assistance strategies are more effective.” Those indicators are voice and accountability, political stability and lack of violence, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption.¹¹ This study draws on such definitions and frameworks to establish women’s contributions to priority areas identified by these organizations.

Gender

The term “gender” refers to the socially constructed—as opposed to biologically determined—identities of men and women. Gender is not the same as “sex,” and gender differences are not the same as sex differences. For instance, the ability of women to bear children is a sex, or biologically determined, difference from men; that women, in many societies, are responsible for food preparation and household chores is a gender, or socially constructed, difference.

Gender roles are assigned to men and women in early socialization. They cut across public and private spheres; are specific to a given culture at a given time; are affected by other forms of differentiation such

as race, ethnicity, and class; and can change in different sociopolitical and economic contexts within a society. World Bank literature notes that in any given society, gender shapes the definitions of acceptable responsibilities and functions for men and women in terms of “social and economic activities, access to resources, and decisionmaking authority.”¹²

In any gender analysis, two basic factors emerge for consideration. The first, gender **mainstreaming**, highlights the implications of policies and programs for both men and women. This means that, in the construction of policies and programs, it is necessary to consider how implementation will impact and affect men and women differently. As defined by UNDP, gender mainstreaming is “taking account of gender concerns in all policy, program, administrative and financial activities, and in organizational procedures, thereby contributing to a profound organizational transformation.”¹³ UNDP further notes that, “if gender mainstreaming is done effectively, the mainstream will be transformed into a process much closer to true democracy.”¹⁴

The second factor relates to gender **balance**. Men and women in decision-making positions can have a differential impact on policy and program development; thus, both men and women must be included in policy formulation. In order to integrate gender considerations comprehensively, mainstreaming and balance are both important.

This report is careful not to conflate the terms “gender” and “women.” It examines both how gender considerations (mainstreaming and balance) affect governance and how the participation of women has contributed to good governance.

PART ONE: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Angkor period, which lasted from the ninth through the thirteenth centuries, is known as the golden era in Cambodian history, a time when Khmer kings reigned over vast parts of mainland Southeast Asia, including modern-day Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. The magnificent temples of Angkor Wat and Bayon were built, along with thousands of other smaller temples, during that time. The walls of those temples are covered in elaborate and violent battle scenes that depict men riding horses and elephants and female figures, or *apsara*—celestial beings that bridge the worlds of the living and of the gods.

Despite this glorious and proud past, Cambodia became a French protectorate in 1863. A virtual colony even through World War II, Cambodia did not achieve independence until 1954, although the French chose Prince Sihanouk to govern in 1941. From the reign of Sihanouk through 1970, women, with a few notable exceptions, did not have access to higher education or key government positions. The medical, education, administration, and legal systems were all based on French models, and men held the majority of jobs.

Cambodia's treasured neutrality was threatened as the Vietnam War spilled over the border in the 1960s. As the North Vietnamese moved supplies along the Ho Chi Minh trail, American B-52s dropped many tons of bombs on the Cambodian countryside. The war's extension into Cambodia is estimated to have caused hundreds of thousands of deaths, many civilian. After a coup d'état deposed Sihanouk in 1970, the US-backed Lon Nol government ruled Cambodia as a republic from 1970 to 1975. But a five-year civil war erupted between the Khmer Rouge, a communist insurgency movement, and the Khmer Republic, backed by American and South Vietnamese militaries. Prince Sihanouk was the titular head of the Khmer Rouge from his place of exile in Beijing while the real leader, Pol Pot, was known only to very few inside the Khmer Rouge movement.

The Khmer Rouge launched their final offensive on the capital, Phnom Penh, on Khmer New Year (April 17, 1975), and the Khmer Republic surrendered. The country's urban population was driven into the countryside to begin a collective agricultural system inspired in part by Mao's China. Men, women, and

children were forced to live separately and eat communally, and strong traditional social mores were broken. Cambodian society was all but destroyed. Civil servants, teachers, and doctors—in effect, all educated people—were classified as enemies of the Khmer Rouge, and members of the former regime were marked for execution. Between 1975 and 1979, 200,000 people were executed without trial, and a further 1.5 million (of a population totaling 7 million) died of disease, overwork, or starvation.

In December 1978, after a series of battles with the Khmer Rouge, the Vietnamese pushed swiftly across the border and took over Phnom Penh, sending the Khmer Rouge fleeing towards the Thai border. With the Vietnamese came current Prime Minister Hun Sen and several other breakaway members of the Khmer Rouge, who formed the core of the new government, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). Surviving Cambodians were left to piece together their society, although the Vietnamese provided major support, advice, and control.

Along the Thai-Cambodian border, more than one million refugees and displaced persons found themselves in camps. Resistance groups were formed, and the population remained in these camps while nearby a war was fought against the Vietnamese-backed regime. Throughout the 1980s a network of political groups was developed by civilians and the military living in separate camps; linked together as the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), their goal was the overthrow of the PRK. Several factions in the camps later became political parties and signatories to the peace agreements: the Khmer Rouge or Party of Democratic Kampuchea (PDK); royalists supporting Sihanouk (FUNCINPEC); and the republicans of Son Sann, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and the Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party (BLDP).

For 10 years, Cambodians in the interior of the country were isolated by an international embargo, and support was primarily from Eastern bloc countries and a handful of non-governmental organizations (NGOs); thus, reconstruction and development efforts were limited. Within the refugee camps, however, international assistance through the United Nations and hundreds of NGOs provided for basic needs

and supported the creation of civil society structures, many of which became political parties and local NGOs in Cambodia after the peace settlement.

The Peace Process

Peace talks began haltingly in the late 1980s, as all sides and their superpower sponsors began to tire and reach a “mutually hurting stalemate.”¹⁵ After several years of quiet, infrequent, and indirect contact between parties, the internationally mediated Paris Peace Accords were signed in 1991. The four signatories to the accords later became political parties: PRK, PDK, FUNCINPEC, and BLDP. When the agreement was signed in 1991, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) was created and all four Cambodian factions were represented through the Supreme National Council (SNC).¹⁶ In 1992 and 1993, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) repatriated 360,000 Cambodians from refugee camps on the Thai-Cambodian border; most had been there for more than 10 years. Although the quadripartite government lasted from 1991 to 1993, the Khmer Rouge (or PDK) dropped out of the peace agreement and retreated to their well-established jungle hideouts, where they continued the war against the PRK through the mid 1990s. Nonetheless, national elections, boycotted by the Khmer Rouge, were held under United Nations auspices in 1993.

Very few women were involved in the pre-negotiations and negotiations in Cambodia. An exception is Dr. Kek Galabru, a French-educated physician whose parents held important positions during the Sihanouk regime. In the 1980s, she was married to a French diplomat. After she and her husband met Prime Minister Hun Sen in Angola, she facilitated an exchange of letters between King Sihanouk and Prime Minister Hun Sen, which eventually led to the peace negotiations. The wives of the King, Prince Ranariddh, and Hun Sen were also involved in these early contacts. No women sat at the so-called “peace table,” however, and no women were involved in the actual negotiations that took place at regional and international levels.

The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia

The international community has been closely involved in the settlement and post-settlement process in Cambodia. After the settlement in 1991, there was a large UNTAC presence from 1992 to 1993, a smaller UN political mission headed by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Cambodia from 1993 to 1999, and a Special Rapporteur for Human Rights and UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights from 1993 onwards.

UNTAC’s powerful mandate as an interim governing authority wrested sufficient political control from the socialist State of Cambodia to allow multiple voices

and visions to be raised publicly for the first time in decades. Its emphasis on democratic governance also opened new social spaces for women. As Pok Nanda, a leading representative of civil society, explains, “UNTAC played a key role in

1992 to 1993 in providing the security for people to get involved in politics and to fight for civil rights. Without UNTAC we would not have dared to do that peace march on Wat Phnom or to fight for inclusions of equity in the Constitution.”¹⁷

Although there were few explicit references to gender balance and none to mainstreaming in either the peace agreements or the various UNTAC documents, a positive effect of the UNTAC presence was that local Cambodian women were hired in large numbers to staff components of the UN mission. This was especially true in the election division, which hired the largest numbers of staff. In addition, the human rights component taught human rights, specifically women’s rights, across Cambodia and made efforts to be gender sensitive in its training. The information component also represented women equitably in its written materials, as well as on radio and television, to ensure that women’s rights and responsibilities as voters, candidates, and leaders in government and politics were brought to the attention of the electorate. All of this had an impact on mainstream views about the roles and abilities of women.

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One area where female representation was encouraged was in the NGO sector, where foreign and usually Western influence expanded employment opportunities for women. Women have taken up influential leadership roles in the areas of human rights, gender-based violence, peace, and development in the NGO movement. Ung Vanna, a poet, activist, researcher, and officer in the United Nations Interregional Anti-Trafficking Program, recollected:

The possibility for women to become active in NGOs and government happened during UNTAC, I think. It wasn't that UNTAC had special programs for women as such, but they did bring into Cambodia two new concepts: democracy was one, and the other was human rights. And from the introduction of these concepts, there was room for women to be involved because democracy is for all, including women; and also through human rights we began to see special issues relating to women, like domestic violence and trafficking of girls and women, and NGOs work on these issues now. There were no such programs or NGOs before UNTAC did this.

There have been significant critiques of UNTAC's presence, including the exponential growth in prostitution, which catered primarily to international employees, and the subsequent explosion of HIV/AIDS. Yet many respondents felt that the main legacy of UNTAC, apart from ending years of war, was its encouragement of women's participation in civil society. As Chhay Kim Suor recalls from his perspective as a UN-trained human rights assistant,

Even UN Staff in UNTAC did not understand gender very well. What they did was to teach people about human rights and democracy. In fact, what UNTAC did was to show the importance of gender *indirectly* by showing that it was important for women to be active participants in society. Especially in NGOs, that really began to develop after UNTAC, and they did much training and gave opportunities for women to work and contribute to NGO work. At first, women in the public sphere were really only seen within NGOs.

While UNTAC as a peace mission failed to ensure women's participation in the negotiations and did not consider gender issues key to political reconciliation

efforts, its presence and hiring practices helped mobilize women's activities and participation in the public sphere.

The culmination of UNTAC's mission in Cambodia was organizing and conducting multi-party national elections in 1993, largely hailed as the first Cambodian elections to meet international standards of democracy. The incumbent governing political party (the CPP) did not accept the electoral results, however. To avert the threat of renewed war, a coalition government was established, enabling the incumbent party effectively to retain its political power in the country.¹⁸ UNTAC departed from Cambodia following completion of the 1993 constitution, which enshrined a democratic political system and respect for human rights. The challenge, however, would be to implement the constitution, and this has yet to be achieved.

Women's Contributions to Good Governance During the UNTAC Years

The Peace Movement

Cambodia suffered a great deal of political instability during the UNTAC period. In response, a peace movement slowly emerged, culminating in several large peace walks. Political violence escalated as the first post-war elections took shape; the fear of renewed warfare was palpable. Drawing on its organizational base, the women's network joined Buddhist leaders to galvanize a mass peace movement. For months, thousands of people joined peace walks across the country, calling for elections without bloodshed. The movement significantly reduced the atmosphere of fear in the country. While the campaign period was marked with more than 100 political murders and hundreds of attacks, the polling proceeded with little violence.

Although the Buddhist spiritual leader of Cambodia, Samdaich Maha Gosananda, physically led the peace marches, the actual organization was done by laypersons, a majority of whom were women. Thida Khus of SILAKA, an NGO that provides training and capacity building, recalls:

When violence happened in 1993 before the election, there was a supportive environment to bring the Dhammayietra to the city, to organize, to administer support. We started with only one computer at my house. It was easier to get permission then because of the presence of UNTAC. The civil administration unit, Gerard

Purcell, helped us. The CPP said no—they were afraid of the opposition. The civilian police and the military component helped with security and gave a stamp of approval. We organized a fundraising event to support this work. Before the elections, people were so afraid that there would be bloodshed. They bought stocks of food supplies. But when we organized the peace march, with three days in Phnom Penh, the people felt overwhelmed and they provide so much help. People took supplies from home to feed the monks.

This peace movement made a significant difference in the atmosphere in Cambodia and probably reduced the amount of violence. Yearly peace walks, called Dhammayietras or walking meditations, have been organized since 1993 and continue to this day. Laypeople and monks walk together for several weeks, usually going into remote areas with land mines, logging, or other conflict-related issues that the peace movement addresses. An influential group of women supported the peace walks from the beginning:

A lot of women were involved in this—Mu Sochua, Koy Veth. Yeay Sambo, an aunt of [Prime Minister] Hun Sen, kept information flowing back to Hun Sen. The men were too scared to get involved. It was all women. Rous Sarou handled the money and the drinks for the monks. Yeay Bo brought the request to the authorities. Dy Ratha approached UNTAC. We had pretty good coordination, and even a press conference. When the time got close, Mu Sochua had to leave. Before the election she initiated a lot; she was a daring person and we organized a lot.¹⁹

In the post-election period, when the ruling CPP rejected the results, women rallied again, organizing an event to welcome the National Assembly and endorsing a government of national unity as a means of averting war. Once again, they played the central role in organizing events that calmed the nation:

Hun Sen refused to recognize the election... We organized a festival and did a ceremony at Wat Lanka to get rid of all the bad spirits around that election. We said let's build a gold and silver boat.

This gave us an excuse to organize the march. We went to the Royal Palace and got the blessing from the King... A few days after the election, when they started threatening each other, [we] organized another ceremony with traditional music, balloons, to send a message of peace. We had truckloads of sand and a traditional flaming dragon. It was the people's idea. By doing these things we calmed things down. ... Women were the ones with a banner that said 'we welcome the National Assembly' ... this was in 1993.²⁰

Later, in 1997, there was factional fighting between FUNCINPEC and the CPP and once more significant violence. This same group of women again organized events, and a group was created: The Campaign to Reduce Violence for Peace.

The movement began to collapse, however, when the nonviolent demonstrators and the monks involved became targets of government harassment, intimidation,

and even physical abuse. Although acknowledging the excitement and success in the early days, many of the organizers blame donors for quashing the movement for fear of political repercussions. Mu Sochua recalls:

At that moment, the movement, the network, and the voice of the people created the organizing. Keeping the community and the people informed created an environment, even under pressure, under stress, that even if you have to lose your life ... you have to continue to do it. In the early 1990s, guns were so cheap, and everybody had guns and we were marching for the first time. ... then it became a regular thing for women to march, and now it has died. That's another thing—you have to continue building. Keep the models—not the same models, but community building. Allow new people to take the place.

This group of women who dared to act in the space opened up by UNTAC made a substantial difference in what was an extremely tense atmosphere. They were able to mobilize the population for peace. Women at the frontlines of these demonstrations showed by their public presence that they were tired of the years of conflict and wanted to build a future for their families. Their activities supported the post-

[Women] played the central role in organizing events that calmed the nation.

war transition and democratic governance as a viable alternative to violence. Although it is difficult to demonstrate conclusively that this movement and the actions of the women prevented violence, anecdotal evidence indicates that the peaceful demonstrations affected the politicians, who finally were able to settle the situation without an escalation of violence.

Drafting the Constitution

During the UNTAC period, a new constitution was created based upon principles from the 1991 Peace Agreement (also known as the Agreement on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodian Conflict). The agreement had included annexes on the mandate for UNTAC as well as discussion of military matters, elections, repatriation of Cambodian refugees and displaced persons, and the principles for a new Cambodian constitution. The only explicit reference to gender in the agreements, located in the section on principles to be included in the constitution, was that it should “assure the protection of human rights ... [and] freedom from racial, ethnic, religious or sexual discrimination.”²¹

UNTAC brought in experts who assisted Cambodians in drafting the constitution. Civil society played a pivotal role in this process, with a series of public meetings and demonstrations and a process whereby their representatives met regularly with selected National Assembly members to present proposals for inclusion in the constitution. Thida Khus, director of SILAKA and an active member of the ad hoc group of peace activists during the UNTAC period, recalled:

We would gather ourselves at the PACT office or at Ponleu Khmer and then discuss what we wanted to see in the constitution and write down our ideas. Then we would meet with members of parliament every day and talk with them about our ideas; and we focused on freedoms, such as freedom of expression or freedom of speech. We wanted democratic freedoms in the constitution, and they listened to us.

Women—including Mu Sochua, who later became minister of women and veteran’s affairs; women-led NGOs; and coalitions such as Khmera, Ponleu Khmer, and Women for Peace—were the driving force behind this civil society movement. Pok Nanda of Women for Prosperity (WfP) notes:

In 1993, Mu Sochua, who was leading the NGO Khemera, and others took the lead on insisting the constitution ... have equity issues in it. We had a peace march to Wat Phnom [famous cultural landmark in Phnom Penh near the headquarters of UNTAC] to make demands for women’s rights.

The women realized that this was a prime opportunity to make a difference by creating a solid foundation for democracy and human rights. Minister Mu Sochua said about that era: “...there are opportunities; you have to strategize. What are the most important moves that are going to take this forward?...And if it is the constitution—the supreme law of the country—you can’t miss the opportunity.” Thida Khus of SILAKA confirms:

The constitution is very liberal. I couldn’t believe it. We organized a group and discussed what we’d like to have—discussed different constitutions and analyzed them, had workshops and forums, and took several to the province and had dialogue. We also demonstrated. Of course we always had our allies inside the National Assembly.

Mu Sochua recalled the groundswell of support that moved the peace marchers forward and into politics and policymaking:

We moved in together with the peace walk with the nuns, and it was really at that moment about peace. But [at first] we didn’t know what peace meant. It was elating, so thrilling, so empowering to come together—to come together under the banner of Maha Ghosananda, the spiritual leader. And then we moved and moved and moved, and we became issue-oriented, because the women started to define peace.

Those behind the coalition building and lobbying for democratic freedoms in the constitution acknowledge the importance of receiving moral and technical support from the international community. Cambodians, particularly women, managed to bring together a disparate group of people who spoke out on their views for the nation’s future—something unprecedented in Cambodian history.

Gendered Legacy of the War(s)

By 1979, in the immediate aftermath of the war, women made up between 60 and 64 percent of the

adult population. By 2001, of a population totaling 13.5 million, 52 percent was female. The gendered dimensions of Cambodia's demographic imbalance are a product of the war years and the devastating carnage. Many more men than women died in battle in the largely male armies during the civil war years (1970-75). Women combatants on both sides tended to serve in the rear areas as medics, weapons-carriers, or propagandists and thus were less likely to be killed in combat. Men outnumbered women as victims of widespread political executions in the first weeks and months after the murderous Khmer Rouge regime came to power in 1975 because of their professional roles in the male-dominated military, police, and government.²² During internal Communist Party purges between 1977 and 1978, more men than women were targeted because party leadership and membership were predominately male at upper levels. Finally, although traditionally in Cambodia they are considered weak, women outlived men under conditions of starvation, malnutrition, and disease.²³

The war years also caused large population movements both internally and externally. Most of the refugees that fled to third countries have not returned permanently, though a few key exceptions stand out among both politicians and NGO personnel. Different challenges existed for women who stayed in Cambodia versus those who returned from the Thai border or third countries, and perceptions of "the other" were often barriers to cooperation. Tensions, including some jealousy, admiration, and mistrust, also exist between the groups. Among those who stayed and have contributed much to gender issues are Ros Sopheap of Gender and Development (GAD), Hor Phally of the Project Against Domestic Violence (PADV), and Ung Vanna of the United Nations Interregional Anti-Trafficking Program. Another leader, Oung Chanthol of the Cambodian Women's Crisis Center (CWCC), was a refugee in the Thai border camps and returned to Cambodia without having resettled in a third country. Notable female returnees who have assumed vital roles in rebuilding society include Mu Sochua, the minister of women and veteran's affairs; Chea Vannath, president of the Center for Social Development; Pok Nanda of WFP; Kek Galabru of League Cambodgien Droits de L'Homme (LICADHO); and Thida Khus of SILAKA. The diaspora-local dichotomy is viewed from two perspectives: those who think that the returnees look down on their more provincial and less

educated sisters who stayed in Cambodia, and those who believe that the returnees' exposure to democratic values and respect for an individual's human dignity has enabled them to bypass social hierarchies in order to reach out to women at the grassroots level.

Gender, Economy, and Poverty

In 2001, Cambodia had a population of 13.5 million, 52 percent of which was women.¹ Approximately 80 percent of the population lives in rural areas, and 65 percent of the rural work force is women. Women head 25 percent of families. The poverty rate is 36 percent, with 10 percent in urban and 40 percent in rural areas.

Ministry of Education statistics related to female education indicate that while 89 percent of boys and 83 percent of girls enroll in primary school, the dropout rate is higher and increases at each grade level for girls. There is only 17 percent female enrollment at the tertiary level, with almost none of the girls coming from rural areas. Adult literacy is 67.3 percent, though the rate for rural women is only 54.3 percent. In the 15 to 24 age range, the literacy rate is 81.9 percent for men and 71.1 percent for women.

Women are responsible for agricultural production, household management, and childcare—a triple burden. In addition to their largely unpaid farm work, women typically take on extra work to earn cash income for their families. Most street vendors selling prepared foods are women. They dominate the open-air fresh produce and meat markets and are often the suppliers of agricultural produce to the markets. They also dominate the handicrafts industry, typically working out of their homes to make woven mats, brooms, and cotton or silk *kramas* or *sampots* with assistance from the young and elderly female relatives. In urban areas, the garment industry provides the main form of paid employment for women. This feminization of labor is a growing concern, as 80 percent of the garment workers are young women who live and work under typical “sweatshop” conditions, with little income and no benefits or job security.²

Women, Land, and Debt

Prior to the outbreak of war, men and women had equal access to land through inheritance and acquisition through cultivation, as well as having recognized rights to ownership. The post-war period is characterized by inequalities between men and women. Female-headed households have smaller plots of land than households headed by men; they are not able to enlarge their land holdings through production and are more vulnerable to market forces, debt, and landlessness. This vulnerability is in part due to:

1. Lower literacy levels: Women tend to have little or no knowledge about land titles, plot sizes, tenure requirements, or new land laws. During family disputes, especially when divorcing, they have limited knowledge of their legal rights.³
2. Social responsibilities: Women are socialized to look after parents in their old age. As a result they are more likely than men to spend savings, sell assets, or get into debt to provide healthcare for the elderly.⁴
3. Traditions: There is still a social stigma attached to women engaging directly and equally with men in matters requiring access to local authorities and legal matters. While inherited plots of land are under the parents' names, often it is the men and not the women who keep the certificates of entitlement.

¹ All figures come from the following sources unless otherwise noted: *Cambodia Country Gender Assessment*, a collaboration between the Royal Government of Cambodia and the Asian Development, United Nations Development Fund for Women, United Nations Development Programme, and the World Bank, September 2003; Kingdom of Cambodia. *National Poverty Reduction Strategy, 2003–2005*. Phnom, Penh: Cambodia and the Center for Social Development, 2003; United Nations Development Programme. *Human Development Report 2003*. New York: UNDP, 2003.

² Womyn's Agenda For Change. *Labels to Wear Out: A Social Study of Women Workers in the Cambodian Garment Industry*. Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Womyn's Agenda for Change, Oxfam/Hong Kong, 2002.

³ The gender gap in legal knowledge is prompting advocacy programs such as Women's Expansion of Legal Awareness (WELA), created by Gender and Development—an indigenous NGO that is one of the most proactive in working collaboratively with local authorities and ordinary citizens on the need for gender sensitivity in local administration. See also So, Sovannarith, Real Sopheap, Uch Utey, Sy Rathmony, Brett Ballard, and Sarthi Acharya, eds. *Social Assessment of Land in Cambodia: A Field Study*. Working Paper No. 20. Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Cambodian Development Resource Institute, 2001.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Aftermath: Challenges to the Rule of Law Impunity and Corruption

The many years of conflict have exacerbated if not created many problems in Cambodia. Society is heavily militarized, with guns and other weapons in homes, in vehicles, and on persons, with few gun control laws and weak enforcement. A culture of violence exists, giving rise to a large domestic violence problem, mob violence against alleged thieves, acid attacks (often by women against second wives), drug trafficking, money laundering, and political killings. HIV/AIDS and trafficking of persons, particularly of women and children, are rampant. Systems are weak, particularly in the areas of education, health, and the judiciary. Impunity and corruption are pervasive, and democracy is in its infancy. Civil society is doing much to combat this legacy of war, and women and women's groups are at the forefront.

One of the most striking findings of this research was the high level of mistrust, impunity, and corruption reported by all respondents. The lack of rule of law was seen as a primary obstacle to good governance, and the issue came up in a number of different contexts. Many respondents noted the links between the high level of violence in society, including domestic violence, and impunity in general:

We know that violence happens and we know that we have laws, but why does violence continue and continue? And why does the person who committed violence still have power? We know that people who have power play with their power and play with violence to protect their power. The law has loopholes ... [it allows] violence to still play an active role. We would like to protect ourselves, but there is still so much intimidation. If we are still dominated by men who prepare law, how can we find justice in the law itself?²⁴

Examples of impunity arose in most discussions; it was often cited as a fundamental social problem that must be improved to achieve better governance:

I noticed that even the government itself does not respect the law well. For example, at Kompong Som seaport, the police arrested the drug sellers, but meanwhile the custom officers asked for the drug sellers to be out of jail. It is the Prime Minister himself who made this intervention.²⁵

Interviewees spoke of the need for comprehensive laws to reduce corruption, impunity, and other human rights abuses and for a justice system with fair enforcement. Som Kim Suor, member of the National Assembly (CPP), notes:

If there are officials who have made mistakes they should be punished.... If there were punishments for those who break the law, then this would be a good model for the population and its leaders for good governance. The public should know about officials who break the law and be made aware of what their punishments are. This is the way to show the public about responsible action and transparency of the government.

Although most of those interviewed for this study were pessimistic about breaking the cycle of violence, some were able to see light ahead. Mu Sochua looks to the future:

Yes, women are victims, but if our programs and lawyers [treat] them *only* as victims we will never get them out of the problem. [We need] to come out of the psychology, the syndrome, the cycle of victimization ... In our society that is so shaped by violence, how can one learn to speak the language of peace?

Patronage Politics

Attempts at reform are continually frustrated by the entrenched systems of hierarchy and patronage—another obstacle to implementing laws and ending impunity. The concept of power sharing is counterintuitive to most politicians and government officials. Every decision and every relationship is viewed in terms of party membership; parties operate on the basis of a patronage system, with constituents beholden to political parties because of largesse. Reports by Human Rights Watch and UNHCR about the 2003 general elections documented the widespread conflation of state and ruling party whereby the disbursement of government funds was used in campaigning to provide voters with new roads, village wells, and food aid, among other things. Such “generosity” was used as a tool of bribery or intimidation by the ruling party to gain votes.²⁶

Partisan politics suffuses all activities in Cambodia. In fact, several respondents noted that in order to have good governance, the armed forces must be neutral. Son Chhay, member of the National Assembly (SRP), says:

It is not easy to make the armed forces neutral because CPP is worried [that] as long as they are not controlling the army—[because] their political party has survived [thus far] through violence—they will not be allowed to live peacefully. If they lose control over the army they can't stay on top.

Freedom of expression and association was also raised as a problem in Cambodian society today; the dominance of a single political party breeds fear.

We need to eliminate fear amongst the people. For example, Pol Pot created old people and new people to divide the country, so they could control it ... The [current] State of Cambodia did the same, up until the current day. If you belong to the opposition, you are easily exposed to the intimidation and abuse. So people feel very frightened to express [themselves] freely or to associate with a political party. They will feel that if they are not the CPP they will be the enemy of the state.²⁷

Many respondents linked current social problems to the long years of war, in particular to the Khmer Rouge years. Measures to achieve good governance must take such factors into consideration:

We need to have committed leaders who have political will, good vision, and good hearts. By good-heartedness I mean the leaders should demonstrate nonviolence, tolerance, and forgiveness. Forgiveness is relevant because since the time of the Khmer Rouge, every family has lost at least one family member. The killings from this time have produced post-traumatic stress syndrome through much of society. Violence is still the way that people solve conflict. [In a survey] at the village and commune [sub-district] level about types of disputes, we found that land emerged as the single biggest issue. Most of the cases brought to court involve land. This demonstrates that people still have much anger inside. Post-traumatic stress disorder is an illness that needs to be taken care of, and because I am

trained in the West in mental health I recognize this as something that can be treated. But in Cambodia we do not have the psychological support to treat this as an illness.²⁸

Current Status of the Peace

Cambodia is still in the consolidation phase of an uneasy or “negative” peace—not open war, but not a true, or “positive,” peace.²⁹ As a result of Khmer Rouge withdrawal from the UN-brokered settlement in 1992, the country remained divided and in a limited war situation until 1996, when Khmer Rouge defections began. The majority of Khmer Rouge forces had defected by 1998, just after Pol Pot's death, and three minor Khmer Rouge leaders have been arrested to date. Top Khmer Rouge leaders live in Pailin and Phnom Penh, and their whereabouts are well-known. For several years, the government and UN remained in a stalemate in negotiations over a mixed tribunal for Khmer Rouge leaders, although an agreement finally was signed in June 2003. While the Khmer Rouge threat of war has subsided, an underlying tension remains. Cambodians worry that the problem of impunity will not be solved until a tribunal meeting international standards is established and closely monitored by neutral observers.

The peace is fragile and could be easily broken by political parties in contention for power or by government authorities who do not respect the rights of citizens to speak openly, to organize political opposition, and to promote democracy.

PART TWO: THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN PROMOTING GOOD GOVERNANCE

Good governance, as defined by respected international institutions in the field, is contingent upon the *equal* participation of all citizens in the exercise of the state's powers and responsibilities and in its management of political, social, and economic affairs. Equity cannot be achieved without the participation of women.³⁰ Gender equity is invariably linked to indicators of good governance—including participatory politics, whereby women and men are given opportunities to voice their views and concerns in policy formation and decision making through institutions and means such as elected office, civic councils, NGOs, the media, and voting.

The years of conflict and warfare had a significant impact on gender relations in Cambodia. Women were always active producers in local and national economies as farmers, marketers, petty traders, gold and currency converters, and artisans. Though their activity is rarely acknowledged in popular culture, women were pivotally placed within local markets and earned critical reserves of cash for their families. Their contributions increased during the war years. Between 1979 and 1991, women's economic participation in the reconstruction of the country overtook that of men, with 90 percent of females over 15 years of age working, compared to 84 percent of men.

From a political standpoint, too, the experiences of women prior to the peace agreements and during the UNTAC years have been important. As in the past, Cambodia remains a largely hierarchical society, where sexual difference is one element of power relations.³¹ Gender identity fits within a complex ranking system of social status markers that include age, wealth, education, rural-urban background, access to powerful patronage networks, social reputation, ethnicity, concepts of beauty, and religious merits. Women are generally in subservient positions relative to men even when they are equals in age and have similar social class and educational backgrounds. In government and within the Buddhist order—sources of

the country's political and moral authority—women are denied equal access because they are presumed to be the “weaker sex.” They are also excluded from the powerful, male-dominated patronage networks that regulate entry into the public domain of politics, religion, private sector and financial institutions, military, government, and even media. Thus, women's activities in the realm of politics historically have been confined to building the patronage networks for their husbands, playing behind-the-scenes roles, and occupying positions subservient to patriarchal power holders. The spouses of Cambodia's post-independence leaders have cultivated a partnership role and identity for themselves, with emphasis on charity, public health, and social welfare.³²

Gender equity is invariably linked to indicators of good governance—including participatory politics, whereby women and men are given opportunities to voice their views and concerns in policy formation and decision making.

But the dynamics have changed in the last decade. Even though Cambodian women and girls continue to face unequal access to education, health care, and economic and political opportunities and continue to struggle against prostitution, trafficking, forced marriage,

domestic violence, and rape, they are beginning to demand greater protection under the law and greater participation in political affairs. Those in the Khmer Rouge were exposed to gender equality both within the framework of Marxist ideology and through their life experiences. For educated urban women, the UNTAC years left a deep imprint. The desire to engage in the nation's political life and to transform society has also been fueled by women who returned from Western countries to their homeland in the 1990s. As women join political life, public perceptions are changing regarding the roles and responsibilities of politicians, and the notion of women in politics is gaining acceptance.

Women's Contributions to Good Governance for Sustainable Peace

“Good governance” is a relatively new term, introduced by the international community rather than as a result of Cambodia's own political evolution. Som Kim Sour, National Assembly member from the

CPP, explains, “This term is something very new in Cambodia and we are just beginning to understand its meaning. Like the term gender, this was something we just heard about when we went to [the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in] Beijing and we brought this term and some understanding of it back to Cambodia.” Despite its novelty, good governance and its importance for sustainable peace and gender equity are well understood by Cambodians.

Throughout this research, interviewees consistently referred to the following concerns as central to good governance: separating government services from party affiliations and establishing rule of law; identifying ethical leaders who work for the nation rather than personal aggrandizement; improving transparency in government activities; developing anti-corruption measures; increasing grassroots participation in decision making; increasing women’s participation in all sectors; and reforming the administrative and civil service sectors. Related issues frequently cited by interviewees include the need to improve the security situation, decrease militaristic aspects of society, and promote dialogue and trust.

Lessons learned from conflict-affected societies worldwide demonstrate that the involvement of civil society in post-conflict peace building and development—particularly with regard to governance issues—is crucial to long-term stability. An active civilian population not only ensures ownership of a democratization process among citizens who have to live with its consequences but also demands greater accountability, thus promoting good governance. Women constitute the majority of civil society leaders in conflict-affected regions and often demonstrate significant vision in this sector.

An assessment of governance in Cambodia reveals that civil society plays a vital role, through project implementation (e.g., education, awareness raising, networks, interventions such as legal representation, and media) and its monitoring or “watchdog” role.

Though many NGOs were donor-driven or died out when their funding did, others are led by dedicated activists who have put their lives and livelihoods on the line to improve society. As noted above, many of these leaders have been women, in contrast to the relatively few numbers of women in politics. In fact, as elsewhere in the world, it is precisely because they are excluded from the formal political process that women make their most significant contributions to governance through civil society.

In the political space opened by UNTAC, civil society activity flourished. The minister of women and veteran’s affairs, Mu Sochua,³³ is a US-trained social worker who in the 1980s worked at refugee camps on the Thai-Cambodian border. She started the first strong, independent women’s NGO, Khmera, and

was involved in early coalitions calling for increased participation in the development of the constitution and other peace-building activities.

Within the civil society sector, where women have the most prominent roles, there are interesting linkages with government. Pok Nanda is an example of a woman who began

her activism in politics but switched to civil society. She worked in the United States in social services and returned to Cambodia as a political candidate in the 1993 UN-sponsored elections. When she lost the election, she formed an NGO, Women for Prosperity (WfP), to train women and facilitate their entrance into politics (see page 21).

Several women have moved in the opposite direction—from civil society to government service. These include Mu Sochua, who became the minister of women’s affairs in 1998, and Koy Veth, who moved from the Khmer Women’s Voice Center to the National Election Commission. In both cases, the experience and strategies brought from one sector to the other made their work more effective. Assessing the efficacy of their advocacy work, NGO members have suggested that some should try to enter government. Activist Chanthol Oung from the CWCC says, “We have discussed that more women

Even though Cambodian women and girls continue to face unequal access to education, health care, and economic and political opportunities ... they are beginning to demand greater protection under the law and greater participation in political affairs.

from NGOs should go into government, but many fear their NGOs will no longer be seen as neutral.” The fear of being branded partisan is very real, as members of political parties are frequent victims of intimidation and sometimes even targeted for death. Moreover, there is deep distrust between the government and some NGOs, especially human rights groups, so activists prefer to remain in civil society. On the other hand, those that have entered politics are conscious of the responsibilities they have to promote change. Says Mu Sochua,

The Cambodian people are basically beautiful people, and full of dignity and respect. It is the war that destroyed it ... That's why I can't get out of [the government] ... I can't sit at home ... do I go back to an NGO? No, I want [the] power to change, the power to go to the head of the police and say, 'Sir! You are responsible!'

Despite the socioeconomic and political constraints they continue to face, women are contributing to specific components of good governance prioritized by both Cambodians and the international community, as outlined below. They are active in maintaining a vibrant civil society that is:

1. tackling corruption;
2. engaging in nonviolent dispute resolution at the community level;
3. promoting human rights and advocating for legislation on violence against women; and
4. promoting cross-party connections and empowering women at the grassroots.

1. Tackling Corruption

The majority of respondents brought up corruption as a fundamental obstacle to good governance. Local and international actors regard Cambodia's lack of anti-corruption legislation—in spite of repeated efforts by civil society, some National Assembly members, and the United Nations—a major stumbling block to improving governance. Though National Assembly members Son Chhay and Pok Than, then of the Center for Social Development (CSD), drafted the first piece of legislation on corruption in 1993 with UN advisers, the bill has yet to pass.

In recent years, women working through the CSD have become the foremost advocates on the need for such legislation. Directed by Chea Vannath, this center has been leading anti-corruption public forums across the country since 1996, convening vulnerable communities, rural NGOs, and government authorities. These social dialogues have been broadcast live by Women's Media Center radio station FM 102, enhancing public awareness and desire for anti-corruption legislation.

To work on corruption, it is important to be absolutely incorruptible, accountable, and transparent oneself, according to Cambodian interviewees:

The various things that can serve towards transparency and democracy—to speak and discuss together, to put everything on the table. Transparency: yes, this is transparent management. Yes, if anything arises, we all discuss everything together, every issue that comes up. For everything

we buy, if we have to buy something for 100 dollars, we have a committee and we have to get quotes. To work on corruption, I think we must all try ourselves to be clear and transparent.³⁴

Many interviewees posited that women in politics are less corrupt than men. This speaks to a critical gender difference and the perception is a motivation behind changing attitudes about the acceptability of women's participation in politics and government.

For example, Khoeum Phalla, first deputy commune council of Svay Dangkum in Siem Reap, explained as follows:

Women think about what children need. For example, they think about meal times, whether they have eaten or not, how much, and was it sufficient. A man does not think about these things because they are provided food by their wives. They never have to think about feeding others like women do. Also, women do not cheat as much as men during food distributions... And finally, women get more feedback from the community than men do because people are not so threatened or intimidated by women. We can go to their homes and sit and talk with them, and they tell us what is in their hearts. But men do not do this.

Many interviewees posited that women in politics are less corrupt than men.

2. Engaging in Nonviolent Dispute Resolution at the Community Level

A culture of violence continues to plague social and political interactions at all levels of Cambodian society. While political conflicts do not necessarily impact the lives of ordinary people, there is still a tendency for other disputes—particularly over natural resources—to escalate. Many of these conflicts are rooted in the national political landscape, as the majority of those abusing the rights of others over land and logging in particular (but also water and fishing rights) are those with connections to power. Logging, especially, is linked to politicians at the highest levels of government, primarily from the ruling party. Selling land concessions in Cambodia's remote forests has brought enormous profits to a few groups and individuals. Security forces are the primary violators of land rights. In all of these cases, those with power are also those (almost always men) with the weapons.

Often using their accepted identities as mothers, many women place themselves on the frontlines of public protests and engage their adversaries, even police or army personnel, verbally. Their presence among protesters greatly diminishes the use of force. Peter Swift of the Southeast Asia Development Program (SADP) explains that, though male soldiers have a shameful history of violating women in private, they are culturally prohibited from doing so in the public arena. He says, "If two to three men talk to soldiers, they beat the hell out of them. But if it is women, they don't. Soldiers find it very difficult to deal with women; they are used to raping them, not calmly discussing if a woman is standing up to them."

Many interviewees spoke of the important role women have played in the marches for peace, as well as in recent conflicts between authorities and rural families over local resources; women often dare to stand in front and negotiate while the men stand behind or are absent altogether. Thida Khus of SILAKA recalls:

Wat Sampo Meas is the first temple where there was a base. A few monks from all the temples came. We saw the police and military who took

their mothers to join in, but not themselves because they were so afraid—they would stand behind and just send their mothers. The women felt less restrained, because if more men joined there could have been more violence.

One hypothesis about women's success is that they are perceived as less powerful and thus less threatening, so they can engage in this social change work more easily. Some say women may attract less violence than men. Peter Swift of SADP suggests that "[Eva Galabru] is a great example [of women attracting less violence than men]. She has gotten away with a lot of things. She'd have been gone—yes, dead—a long time ago if she were a man." Another hypothesis is that women

care more about their families and their communities and thus are willing to put themselves at risk for their rights. Whatever the motivations or explanations, it is clear that women in Cambodia are leading advocates of nonviolent dispute resolution and in this way are challenging the culture of violence, the

legacy of the war years, and the barriers to good governance and the peaceful negotiation of differences.

Nonviolent activism has grown in recent years, and women are now the majority of Cambodians with conflict management and peace-building expertise. They are often at the forefront of addressing disagreements between authorities and citizens over local resources. "Women are the backbone of the forestry network," says Eva Galabru, a human rights and environmental activist. Reflecting on demonstrations against major logging interests in 2002, she notes that "women [came] from the provinces to protest abuses of land rights. One group after another would camp out in front of the National Assembly...as soon as one group got chased out, the next group would come in. They were mostly women."

Eva Galabru was the director of the human rights organization LICADHO for several years but has since joined the environmental watchdog NGO Global Witness. This NGO took on many sensitive cases involving powerful, rich logging companies with strong political ties and had some success in

Often using their accepted identities as mothers, many women place themselves on the frontlines of public protests and engage their adversaries, even police or army personnel, verbally. Their presence among protesters greatly diminishes the use of force.

making change. Observers note that women can be more effective in taking on this dangerous work, but even their ability to diffuse violence in the public sphere does not protect activists from individual attack. Last year, Eva Galabru was verbally threatened, knocked to the ground, and beaten outside her office. Although there have been numerous cases of locals being attacked and even killed for their political or human rights work, Eva Galabru is one of only two expatriates to have been attacked.³⁵

Traditional peace NGOs such as the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) have provided significant support to individuals and local NGOs and helped produce a strong group of Cambodian peace builders, the majority of whom are women.³⁶ One notable local NGO is the Alliance for Conflict Transformation (ACT), which trains government officials and others in conflict resolution techniques. Another group, called Women Peacemakers, is an entirely volunteer group of about 30 young people, mostly women, who travel at short notice to communities that need support for nonviolent action. They also provide ongoing nonviolence training. Women are at the forefront more often than men in community-based conflict transformation and in interviews were often described as being particularly brave in their work.

3. Promoting Human Rights and Advocating for Legislation on Violence Against Women

Respect for human rights—through the development of new legal structures and protections as well as the enforcement of existing laws—is a cornerstone of good governance and a priority for international institutions working in post-conflict societies where abuses are rampant. In Cambodia, advocacy for human rights standards is a priority for civil society organizations. Many of these organizations, described below, are headed by women who have taken the lead in highlighting the centrality of *women's* rights to the human rights agenda.

The executive director of the prominent human rights organization LICADHO is Dr. Kek Galabru,

who played an important role in the peace negotiations and has been recognized for her courage and activism. One observer reflected, “Kek Galabru has successfully protected many victims of human rights [abuses]. We depended on her to protect the monks during the 1997 peace march.” Dr. Galabru’s daughters have served as the coordinators of LICADHO since its creation in 1991.

Other human rights organizations, including Cambodia Vigilance, the Human Rights Task Force, and the Cambodian Institute for Human Rights, have promoted women’s human rights in particular. There are a number of organizations that focus exclusively on women’s human rights, including the Project Against Domestic Violence (PADV) and the Cambodian Women’s Crisis Center. They and others

provide support to victims of domestic violence, as well as conduct research, training, counseling, and advocacy for legal reform. Overall, however, there is a lack of understanding among human rights organizations and their donors that women’s rights are human rights;

gender issues have not been mainstreamed even within NGOs with women’s rights units. Many male and female human rights activists do not understand the concept of gender and its connection to human rights. According to one gender trainer, Chhay Kim Suor of the Cambodian Men’s Network, “the human rights activists laughed at us when we talked about husbands raping wives, saying that this was the man’s right to have sex and it was the wife’s duty to provide it.”

Many respondents cited women’s contributions to formulating legislation and laws on women’s human rights and gender equity as critical to promoting good governance. Their attempts to expand democratic freedoms and protect vulnerable citizens have demonstrated a respect for the rule of law and reflect a desire to strengthen the legal framework of the country. Frequently in these efforts, women’s NGOs take the lead but consult with and receive support from the Ministry of Women and Veteran’s Affairs (MWVA). Several NGO coalitions have formed to play an advocacy role and press for the passage of relevant legislation. The proposed or passed laws promoting gender equity include:

[Women’s] attempts to expand democratic freedoms and protect vulnerable citizens have demonstrated a respect for the rule of law and reflect a desire to strengthen the legal framework of the country.

- *the draft law on domestic violence accepted by the Council of Ministers in June 2002 but delayed by the National Assembly;*
- *amendments to the law on trafficking mandating heavier punishments for perpetrators in cases where victims are under age 15;*
- *amendments to a formerly restrictive abortion law to ensure women's choice in abortion up to 14 weeks of pregnancy without restriction; and*
- *labor code that protects women and children in dangerous occupations and ends discrimination on the basis of sex.*

The most high profile, controversial, and divisive of the proposed laws is the Domestic Violence Law that has been in formulation since 1996. The drafting of the legislation, advocacy around its adoption, and the resistance it met from male parliamentarians is a revealing case study.

The proposed Domestic Violence Law was inspired through the work of PADV, which was established by an American expatriate in the mid 1990s and later run by Cambodian women. The draft law was one of the challenges that MWVA took up after 1998, working extremely hard to secure input from women's NGOs so that the draft law would represent the needs of Cambodian women as they defined them. CAMBOW, a network of 62 women's NGOs, made important contributions to the draft law. Hor Phally of PADV, a member of the CAMBOW coalition, explained:

For example, women's contributions were made through CAMBOW to analyze the definition of "wife" in the law. We wanted the definition expanded to include abuse that could be against mistresses, girlfriends, second wives, and anyone that had [contact] with the offender—because all of these types of people in the domicile are potential victims—not just the legal wife or recognized wife of the husband.

In addition, women lobbied to ensure that the draft law addressed the complexities of marriage. Most Cambodians do not go through legal marriage proceedings but instead choose traditional wedding ceremonies convened by Buddhist monks and lay priests. As Hor Phally explained, "Most people do

not have marriage certificates. How will this impact court procedures in cases of domestic violence if there is no proof of marriage and the law states that a husband cannot beat a wife, for example? ... We need to make sure that there are not loopholes in the law that offenders can take advantage of that discriminate against the women victims."

Finally, CAMBOW lobbied the MWVA to ensure that servants are included as members of the domestic unit and therefore vulnerable to violence by men in the household. "We see often that servants are victims of physical violence and sexual violence, but there is nothing in the law to protect them. All human beings should have legal rights," said Hor Phally.

When the draft law finally went to the National Assembly for debate and a hearing in 2003 it met with some controversy and finally rejection by male members. Explanations of the legislative setbacks of the Domestic Violence Law have focused on CAMBOW's contributions, signaling a point of tension between women in the civil society sector and the largely male National Assembly. The Minister of Women and Veteran's Affairs was herself criticized and accused by male National Assembly members of breaking up the family and corrupting traditional Khmer culture, because the draft law recognized the rights of "second wives," mistresses, and servants. Pok Nanda of WfP, whose organization was involved in the NGO-ministry consultations on the draft law, recalled:

In the law we wanted to have it stated that all members of the household, including servants and housekeepers, be considered as having rights; but some men in the National Assembly did not want that. The young girls who come from the provinces, extended family members who become servants in the homes of their wealthy urban relatives, are vulnerable to beatings and rape. We wanted to say, "You cannot beat or rape anyone, regardless of who they are," and have this stated in the law on domestic violence. But the Minister of Women's Affairs was all alone and didn't get the support she needed to get this passed through the National Assembly. Some other women members of parliament from other parties also supported her, but they were constrained by their party leaderships also who were against the legislation.

In her capacity as chair of the Commission on Women and Social Affairs in the National Assembly, Men Sam An is recognized for her hard work on behalf of the nation's women. A member of the CPP, she voiced her support for the Domestic Violence Law but admitted with some reluctance that male National Assembly members had put up resistance:

The draft Domestic Violence Law—I really helped to support this law, and the NGO community also helped to support this from the community level ... The MPs do not want to implement it because they think that it represents foreign influence and that it does not fit with our Cambodian traditions. This law was in fact modeled on the German law on domestic violence and it was drafted in the Ministry of Women's Affairs with technical assistance from foreigners ... Some of the male MPs want to have it so that before legal actions are taken [by victims] there are efforts at family reconciliation first. This was one of the sticking points that prevented the passing of this draft law.

Because of their willingness to work across party lines and their style of leadership, women's participation contributes to good governance.

At the time of writing, the draft Domestic Violence Law remains in limbo.

4. Promoting Cross-Party Connections and Empowering Women at the Grassroots

Decentralization is generally recognized as one of the pillars of good governance because it provides a mechanism for people's participation in the formation of policies and a means for rural development and poverty reduction.³⁷ As one analyst has observed, "democratic decentralization, it is argued, results in a state apparatus more exposed and therefore more responsive to local needs and aspirations. This in turn produces systems of governance that are more effective."³⁸

Though the impetus for Cambodia's decentralization has come from donor-led initiatives rather than from the government's commitment to deepening democratic processes, there is an understanding that poverty reduction and decentralization are intricately linked. This has been reinforced through UNDP and international NGO projects operating in Cambodia

over the past decade. From the government's standpoint, women's inclusion in decentralization processes has been more of an afterthought, added on to a list of considerations rather than mainstreamed from the inception of policy. To fill the void, international NGOs and local groups have taken a leading role in creating networks and providing capacity building for grassroots women, enabling their participation in local government structures.

Cambodia is divided into 20 provinces and four municipalities and these are administered through subdivisions into districts, communes, and villages. The population is predominantly rural with 85 percent living in villages. More than one third of Cambodians live in dire poverty, and the vast majority of the country's poor live in rural areas.³⁹ There are two decentralization initiatives underway in Cambodia,

designed to engage this grassroots population in decision making. Both of these initiatives have impacted women and men differently. The first is the SEILA program, which works for devolution of the state's

economic power from the capital outward to the provinces, districts, and communes and the establishment of locally-elected village and commune development committees. This major reform initiative of the government began in 1996. The second decentralization initiative was the commune council elections of 2002, marking the first popularly elected governing body at a local level in Cambodia's post-independence history.⁴⁰

The SEILA Program and Women's Participation in Local Development Committees

With funding and technical expertise provided by UNDP, the government established its main reform program, SEILA. The objective of SEILA is to "contribute to poverty alleviation in rural areas through implementation of a decentralization policy."⁴¹ Considered an experiment in reform, SEILA operates in five provinces to help local government structures plan, finance, and implement development initiatives.⁴²

The planning process for the initiatives initially passed through groups called Village Development Committees (VDCs) and Commune Development Committees (CDCs). The latter no longer exist as

part of the SEILA program as such, since the CDCs were subsumed into the elected commune councils after 2002. A very few VDCs exist in some parts of the country as single-issue operations in concert with specific NGO projects.⁴³

A striking advance for women, instigated largely by the international actors involved and supported by the MWVA, was the requirement that 40 percent of the positions on the VDCs be held by women, thereby increasing women's participation in rural development and local governance. Some observers have remarked that women's involvement at this level has been good preparation for their advancement to commune-level politics. Elaine McKay of the Project for Gender Equity at the MWVA explained:

There is tremendous importance [to] women in governance, especially at the commune and village level. Looking at this issue suggests that if women were tasked with responsibilities at the local level then they would have a vehicle to gain prominence. At the Ministry of Women's Affairs, we had a project where we trained 1,000 volunteers in the villages on reproductive health, such as birth control; 98 per cent of these were women ... These women exhibited a confidence, a belief in what they were doing. Some of these women then stood for commune council elections, and many became one of the 40 percent quota female representatives on the Village Development Councils.

Prior to the commune council elections of 2002, the SEILA program was the cornerstone of the government's decentralization program. The extent to which the VDCs and CDCs truly have been vehicles of popular participation in local-level development and governance is dependent on their autonomy from the political party structures that control local authorities. Several studies have indicated that local village and commune chiefs quickly became ensconced in the VDCs and CDCs in order to oversee the distribution of humanitarian aid in their communities, thus buttressing their positions as local patrons and enabling them to place their relatives on the committees.⁴⁴

In one study on the gendered impact of Food for Work programs, villagers stated that often they did not know when officials were from development organizations or the government.⁴⁵ A summary

of suggestions by villagers to the World Food Programme made it clear that women's needs had not been considered and that local distribution networks had sometimes been manipulated by local leaders. Interestingly, although there was concern that women are reluctant to speak out in public, suggestions for improvement included:

- putting women on the committee that allocates work parcels;
- choosing and training women and the poor if the organization wants them to be leaders; and
- giving priority to women and the poor in distributing work allotments, to prevent leaders from eating villagers' benefits.⁴⁶

Women's Participation and Experience in Commune Councils

The commune council elections of February 2002 marked an important step toward dismantling authoritarian local-level structures that had been in place since the 1970s and toward providing a political mechanism for democratization processes to reach deeper into the countryside, where most Cambodians live and work. The commune council elections had been delayed many years due to intransigence and a slow-moving bureaucracy and were marred by political violence and intimidation. Nevertheless, there was good voter turnout, and for the first time, women's participation was supported through NGO and donor initiatives.

Women were elected to 954 councilor positions out of 11,261 (eight percent) in 1,621 councils across the country. WfP prepared female candidates in the run-up to the commune council elections. The organization trained 5,527 women across the country and provided ongoing support to those elected. It also promoted cross-party cooperation and contact by providing a space for women from different parties to meet, discuss issues, and recognize the commonality of their experiences as women in politics. The significance of women's elected status, says WfP founder Pok Nanda, is that "women councilors will be able to use their new positions and power as advocates of women's interests, and there will be greater recognition of the specific problems, needs, and interests of women."⁴⁷

There is concern, however, that because the 2002 commune council elections did not include a 40 percent quota like that for the VDCs, and because the commune councils are replacing the CDCs, the number of female representatives in local governance

Women for Prosperity's Cross-Party Work with Commune Council Members

Governance in Cambodia is characterized by political violence, intimidation, and, because of the dominance of one political party—the CPP—an absence of cross-party cooperation. One party wielding such power has had negative consequences for women's alignment across parties for the purposes of promoting gender issues, particularly at the national level. Female political activists spoke of their frustrations trying to form networks with women members of the CPP. Any such inter-party networks are perceived as weakening the party's hold on power and thus forbidden. As Khong Sun Eng of the Siem Reap Office of Women's Affairs said, "The conflicts in Cambodia stem from the entrenched disagreements among the political parties," and women, just as their male colleagues, get caught up in these divisions.

Despite this, and in the face of harassment and threats, Cambodian women working through NGOs are at the forefront of building bridges across party lines. Women for Prosperity (WfP) is one of the most effective organizations in this sector. Led by returnee Pok Nanda, it has pioneered a program that not only encourages and enables women to enter politics, but also bridges cross-party divides at the commune level. Among its network are women council members from all sides, including the three main political parties. WfP focuses on the common challenges facing women in politics regardless of ideology and provides ongoing coaching, thus building their skills over time. In preparation for the 2000 commune council elections, WfP supported 5,527 candidates, offering guidance in public speaking, assisting in speechwriting, answering questions from voters, and combating challenges from male party members unsympathetic to women's participation. With plans to formalize a nationwide network, WfP has not only forged new political ground for women's participation—it has provided an effective model for bridging the impasse that exists at higher levels.

Many women commune council members contacted through the Women for Prosperity network spoke highly about its value and its positive contribution to enabling women to enter politics.¹ A woman commune councilor from Kampot noted:

Before the election, I knew nothing about law or even how to become a candidate. But later, a teacher from WfP came and taught me and other candidates about how to be a candidate. And also she urged me to complain to my party, suggesting to them to put women's names at the top of the list.

Thida Khus of SILAKA adds: "Pok Nanda has brought in women to politics. She is a pioneer for women in politics; she has done a good job at that."

The collegial and productive discussions among the commune council women in four separate focus group interviews indicated that these women had overcome partisan politics in the recognition that gender issues and women's political participation are a common point of commitment. All had received candidate training from WfP before the 2000 commune council elections.

These trainings have provided a basis on which to build up relationships over the past three years, and the loose network has been an important source of mutual support. They all expressed great enthusiasm about this connection and hoped it would continue. The commune council women themselves lack the means and access to communication to organize; they rely on the abilities of WfP, based in provincial capitals, to spread the word and set up meeting times and contact points. The value of the network was apparent from the extremely high participation rate and the open and active discussions. In general, the groups also praised their WfP network organizer; these organizers are working with other NGOs and are "sub-contracted" to assist WfP to organize meetings and, for some, to conduct trainings. Meeting these groups of women commune councilors was a high point of this research because of their great enthusiasm and principled views. As they are able to cross party lines, they should also serve as a model for national government—especially at a time such as the conducting of this research, when the government has come to a standstill due to a national-level impasse in forming a government.

With support from the Asia Foundation, WfP currently is putting forward a proposal to formalize a commune council women's network across the nation. Five or six regional chapters would meet several times throughout the year, with an annual meeting of the more than 900 commune council members planned in Phnom Penh. WfP is taking the lead in establishing and maintaining networks of female politicians at the local level and has managed to bridge the political divide that has prevented women politicians at the national level from forming such networks and coalitions. If properly funded, the national women's commune council network could be an important grassroots mechanism to influence gender equity policy from the bottom up, providing a model of nonpartisan politics that many of the respondents said was crucial for good governance and lasting peace.

¹ It should be noted that WfP representatives were present during the commune council women's focus group discussions, and commune councilors may have felt some obligation to speak positively of the WfP. That said, all three researchers on this project were of the opinion that the views expressed were genuine and that there was a deeply felt appreciation for the work WfP had done to encourage women's participation in politics.

is diminishing.⁴⁸ Moreover, the mechanisms linking VDCs to the commune councils are not clearly stated in government legislation, making women's gains at the village level uncertain in the overall local governance structure.

Women's participation in the decentralization process is increasingly perceived to be a critical component that has yet to be fully realized. Women commune councilors speak about the extent to which their male counterparts rely on them to address the community's needs:⁴⁹

In my commune, I am always given the responsibility for getting the information to the people when we have to inform the community about something. And women are asked to do work related to food supplies, if there are distributions—for example, distribution of information, networking with people, connecting with the NGOs, and food for children. The male councilors ask me always to do this kind of work.⁵⁰

The importance of women in politics was linked by interviewees to their ability to impact social programs and development. Leu Chenda, Chikreng commune council chief in Siem Reap, stated: “Without women, there would not be so many policies for children. Also, we don't forget about the rights of women and we help develop the rights of women.” Chief Duch Malin (Yeang, Puok commune, Siem Reap) added: “For women in politics, it is like we are the mothers of the commune and think about what is needed to look after the people, but as for men, they think more about respect.”

Women commune council members also addressed the different political cultures of men and women:

If more villages had female chiefs instead of all male village chiefs the way it is now, then many more problems could be solved. The villagers would trust a female chief and be able to come and talk to her about their problems, [like] domestic violence or not having enough food to eat. Women are more sympathetic than men, so women would be able to solve many more problems than male leaders ...⁵¹

Concern was noted by some councilors that male opposition party members were deeply entrenched

in their political networks, which compound discriminatory attitudes towards women. Chea Phally of the Siem Reap commune council recalls:

When we wanted to have women candidates, you know what the commune male leaders said? They said, “How can a woman look after a commune's security? How can a woman go and check out a problem that takes her far away to a remote village?” But we said to look at Chenda, who has been a commune chief since 1979. Throughout the whole period of fighting against the Khmer Rouge, she was there. Women are just as capable as men in looking after security. We do it in different ways. For example, the elders have information to help solve conflicts. And women are the ones who respect the elders. So we must work with the elders also, to teach them that discrimination exists.⁵²

Peou Savoeun, who works for the MWVA in Siem Reap, adds:

There is some progress because women are beginning to have some influence and their numbers are growing, in part due to the Ministry of Women's Affairs and NGOs. But we still face discrimination. For example, if there are two candidates for office, one male and one female, the party will pick the male because of his established networks. Women do not have the party cliques to rely on and help them get in.

Some female politicians find male governing styles less professional, and have observed behavior such as drinking on the job and being disrespectful of their constituents. Ya Soeun, a Kompong Cham commune councilor, stated: “When men go to the field, they drink a lot and speak nonsense, are boastful, and forget their responsibilities. Any time they speak about something, they forget to include women.” Lung Sovannary, a Kompong Cham commune councilor, added that, “Men mostly speak immorally, mostly about weapons and their physical strength. We don't have women beating men, but only men beating women. For the most part, men think they are the ones to give the orders, and that women should carry them out.” In contrast, Lung Bunny, a female commune councilor from Kompong Cham province, spoke of women's abilities to engage in planning, use social skills to reach ordinary people, and connect with constituents:

Women have a natural pedagogical ability to get people to quickly understand something. Women always prepare a plan for their work; and women have better morality than men, in terms of how they dress, their speech, even how they smell. When women go to the field, they speak about women's topics, and so the women in the village like to listen to us more than to men.

The women commune councilors themselves showed their solidarity across party lines, as they struggled with the same issues: lack of funds and government support, unequal treatment from their male counterparts, difficulties in juggling family and job, and lack of support from society in general. Others who work with these women expressed admiration for their courage, stamina, and achievements. Sieng Huy of the Center for Social Development (CSD) notes:

Those women are courageous. They try very hard to work and they struggle to overcome the oppression upon them. They also try very hard to see the people they represent, much harder than the men. The women have a very important role. One man told me in Kampong Cham about the VDC's; if there were no women in them, the work would be very difficult. For example, women are very good in getting money and donations from the people, more than men. For building something or planning something, women are the best. But the problem is that many men don't value the women or their work. They don't allow the women to participate.

The implementation of decentralization programs in Cambodia provides an opportunity to increase women's political participation. This is not only beneficial for the women elected and their constituents: Because of their willingness to work across party lines and their style of leadership, women's participation contributes to good governance.

Mechanisms and Structures For Enhancing Women's Political Participation

The Cambodian constitution states that men and women are equal before the law and in their participation in the social, cultural, political, and economic life of the country. Cambodia is also a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Yet in the last decade, the government has done

little to increase women's political participation or to alleviate the socioeconomic barriers they face.

Donors are the driving force behind the few initiatives that do exist. UNDP and the World Bank exert considerable influence and pressure on national policymaking. But even they have not done all they could, given the substantial leverage they have—the government's budget is almost entirely dependent on foreign aid. Cambodia's Governance Action Plan, prepared in 2001, set out four cross-cutting areas for reform: the judiciary and legal systems, public finance, civil service, and anti-corruption. Strong recommendations from the donor community and NGOs led the government to add gender equity as a fifth segment of the Governance Action Plan.⁵³ This document charges the government with "recognizing women as full-fledged members of society" and "investing in" women's leadership.⁵⁴ As demonstrated below, there has been limited systematic implementation of these commitments.

The Ministry of Women and Veteran's Affairs (MWVA)

Within state-based institutions, the Ministry of Women and Veteran's Affairs is the only entity promoting women's voices. Initially established as the Department of Women's Affairs, it was elevated to a full ministry, the Ministry of Women and Veteran's Affairs (MWVA), in 1998, coinciding with the appointment of former NGO leader Mu Sochua as minister. Despite limited resources, this body adopted a five-year strategic plan in 1999. Called Neary Rattanak, or "Women are Precious Gems," the plan's title countered the old Cambodian saying that "men are like gold, and women are like cloth," denoting women as less valuable than men and more easily soiled.

Mu Sochua is the most well-known and cited female politician in Cambodia. She was named by almost every interviewee (male and female) as a role model, in part because of her often-thwarted attempts to promote women's issues in general, and women's participation in governance in particular, with commitment and compassion.

Our [Minister] Mu Sochua is very strong and capable. She came from an NGO background and is an activist, and she applies this thinking and learning from the grassroots to formulate

policy. She even challenged the Prime Minister on every policy facing women and children.⁵⁵

As in other developing countries—in fact, most countries around the world—elites engage in politics in greater numbers than grassroots, rural, or low-income citizens. Many prominent Cambodian women currently holding top positions in the government or promoting women in politics from within the NGO sector received a university education abroad and were inspired to return to help rebuild Cambodia's shattered society when the country opened up during the UNTAC era. The social and political gulf dividing elite and grassroots women is an emerging issue and difficult to bridge as long as traditional status markers remain entrenched.

Mu Sochua represents a new type of politician who is attempting to break down such barriers by going out to rural areas and to the grassroots. She meets with sex workers, garment factory laborers, street stall sellers, HIV victims—people most officials of her status ordinarily would not “lower themselves” to meet. In her own words, good governance can be achieved when the public has a voice and can be heard:

Empowerment, a sense of respect—we should give it back to the people ... empowerment is the people talking to me, not whispering to me how they have been abused or how they are victims, but loudly as one voice in a group saying what they need ...

Many interviewees spoke with admiration of Mu Sochua's strength and efforts, noting that there is a long way to go toward the full realization of women's rights. In fact, some have suggested that the ministry is weak as a separate institution because it allows women's issues to be sidelined rather than mainstreamed. Donors, too, are concerned about MWVA's weak institutional capacity and its lack of support from the leadership and other more influential ministries. The World Bank Country Gender Report highlights some of these concerns:

For example, it was not until 2001 that senior management of the MWVA received basic training in gender concepts. The structure of the ministry is geared towards the delivery of services yet very few staff have experience in gender analysis, strategy development and in the provision of policy advice. In short, MWVA is struggling to find a balance between program

implementation and policy coordination/advocacy in the face of weak institutional capacity. The biggest challenge the Ministry faces is to get consensus and agreement on the plan [to mainstream gender] from other Ministries.⁵⁶

In spite of these challenges, MWVA has been instrumental in the formation of gender focal points in line ministries, introducing “gender budgeting” as a means of highlighting the discrepancies between the allocation of resources and the needs of men and women, promoting government-civil society gender networks to draft laws and legislation on gender equity, and creating the reporting mechanisms for CEDAW, among other achievements.⁵⁷

Its willingness to network and consult with women's NGOs and the minister's commitment to bridging gaps between elite and grassroots women are particular strengths of the MWVA and examples of the way it promotes good governance.

Government – NGO Partnerships

A practice of public consultation in politics is emerging in Cambodia, and women's NGO coalitions have provided models for active cooperation with the MWVA on the development of policies and legislation. These coalitions fall roughly into two types of networks—those that address gender concerns broadly (e.g., mainstreaming and balance) and those that focus on single-issue campaigns (e.g., domestic violence or trafficking).

The Khmer Women's Voice Center and Women's Media Center are both organizations that provide important capacity-building and public information projects on the role of women in society, including in politics and government. WfP, Khmera, and Amara, among others, provide women's political training. The NGO Committee on CEDAW monitors the government's adherence to and implementation of the international convention. Organizations such as these provide important information and capacity building to strengthen links between civil society and government.

Umbrella groups such as GADNet and CAMBOW worked with the MWVA on the development of legislation pertaining primarily to women's rights. Additionally, they supported the ministry's outreach program to ensure that women's needs were adequately addressed. Formed by the NGO Gender and Development, GADNet is a network of 62 agen-

cies working on gender issues that meets quarterly to discuss ways to promote gender equity. Members of this network also coordinate over single issues, such as a peace rally in February 2002 to protest the killing of three female commune council candidates during the commune council election campaign period. An important source of public pressure for increased numbers of women in government, GADNet members also have an advocacy role.

Gender and Development (GAD) is an NGO notable also for its formation of the Cambodian Men's Network, which brings together thousands of men in the provinces—youth activists and male members of civil society—to combat violence against women. A unique institution in Cambodia, the network operates in five regions of the country that include 10 provinces, including Phnom Penh. The Men's Network has gained public recognition through its annual 16-day White Ribbon Campaign (November 25 – December 10), which promotes awareness among men on domestic violence and the need for men to eliminate all types of violence against women in Cambodian society.

Supported by the Asia Foundation, CAMBOW is a more recently formed coalition of 32 local NGOs working to advance the causes of women in Cambodia. CAMBOW is led by Kek Galabru from LICADHO and Hor Phally from PADV, though GAD also plays a key role in the coalition. While some respondents were concerned about overlap in the activities of these groups, the need for better coordination among them, and the lack of outreach to rural areas, there was general support for the work such groups were doing. There was also recognition that in the Cambodian political landscape it is women who are leading efforts to bridge the divide between government and civil society.

An active, politically-engaged civil society that participates in the development of public policy is a critical component of free and open societies. Despite the repressive and difficult political environment in Cambodia, women's NGOs and networks are reaching out to shape, support, and challenge the government

and the political process. Such partnerships are an important model for the promotion of democratic values.

Quotas

Unlike many other countries in the world, Cambodia has been resistant to the notion of quotas for women in government or parliament. The numbers of women in politics is still extremely low, with fewer than 1,000 female commune council members out of some 12,000 nationwide and only 12 female candidates⁵⁸ elected out of 123 members of the National Assembly during the July 2003 elections (six from the CPP, three from FUNCINPEC, and three from SRP)—a mere 10 percent.⁵⁹

Women's NGO coalitions have provided models for active cooperation with the MWVA on the development of policies and legislation.

Such low representation is a source of frustration and anger for many respondents, who feel the pace of change is too slow. Tioulong Saumura, National Assembly member

for the SRP, was particularly outspoken on this:

I feel so frustrated about the contribution of women to political processes because basically there are none or so few. Usually there can be contributions in politics in two ways. The first is through political institutions, such as the National Assembly and the government. And secondly, within civil society, [which] is mostly led by women. ... There are far too few women, far from the threshold of numbers they represent. Only some 10 percent of MPs are women, but our population is 53 percent women, and they account for most of the GDP output. The economy is [driven] by women but they are not represented at the political level.

The issue of quotas for female candidates remains controversial in Cambodia, and those who advocate for their use have been generally unsuccessful. Human rights groups, particularly those focused on women's rights, proposed a quota system for the 2003 National Assembly elections but could not gather support within the National Assembly, Ministry of Interior, or the National Election Commission. Several NGOs, including WfP, also lobbied the three main political parties to implement quotas. Many women inter-

viewed for this report cited these fruitless efforts as an example of their uphill struggle for women's rights.

Political parties finally agreed in principle to a quota system for candidates, but women were generally put at the bottom of the party electoral lists. As a result, very few women ultimately were elected. For some women, such as Ing Khanta Pavi (secretary of state for the MWVA) the mere acceptance of the quota system by the main political parties was a success:

We need a quota of women commune and National Assembly candidates. This has not been approved by the government, but we did succeed with the three main political parties to use a quota system of 30 percent female candidates. This was one achievement ...For the commune council elections the government said it was unconstitutional to have a quota. But for the political parties in this recent election, they agreed. If we didn't put a quota of 30 percent then they would always fall back on the old argument that they couldn't find capable women to fill the list.

A foreign adviser within the MWVA said that the quota system failed to get women into office because they were not put at the top of candidacy lists, and unless this happens its impact will be minimal.⁶⁰ Other respondents said that because Cambodian politics is such a male-dominated domain, with men faulting women's lack of experience and capability as an excuse to ignore the issue, only a quota system could break down stereotypes. Says Mu Sochua:

We've increased to five the number of newly elected MPs [National Assembly members]. Now what we need to do is to prepare the candidates, to help them build up their constituency base from now until the next election in five years time. The political parties need to reform themselves. We are raising the quota issue in FUNCINPEC and want to work for the next four years on getting more women higher up on the candidacy lists.

In order to develop a political system and government that truly reflects and represents its population and capitalizes on the skills of all its citizens, Cambodia must create mechanisms to more actively promote women's participation in governance.

Obstacles to and Perceptions of Women in Leadership

Barriers to Women's Participation

Despite MWVA efforts, the work of NGOs, and the increasing acceptance of women in politics, obstacles to their participation remain formidable. Interviewees for this study generally viewed the obstacles as "piece-meal," or single issues, as detailed above (e.g., a lack of financial resources, lack of self-confidence, positioning within party structures, and insufficient education). Very few framed the problem in terms of systemic inequity between men and women. One man, Chhay Kim Suor, head of the Cambodian Men's Network to combat violence against women, was an exception:

If society has a balance of contributions by men and women then we can find real and lasting peace...I think that to encourage women we first of all have to teach the men...how to share their power...and men have to give up some things, [for example] they have to share the housework, let women go out to participate in society, and encourage them to join politics.

A long-time female activist in the CPP, Peov Savoeun of Siem Reap Women's Affairs stated that:

The customs and traditions of the nation oppress women. As I said, girls are not allowed to go to school; they are taught from a young age that they should not venture far from home and that they should stay in the home with the mother, in the kitchen, helping to look after children. So the culture does not help women have the confidence to go into politics. First we must raise awareness of these things, among men leaders as well as generally in society.

On the whole, respondents did not make a direct conceptual link between a society sex-segregated in almost every aspect of its social relations and the lack of women in politics. Rather, the explanation offered by the majority of Cambodians, both women and men, appeared to derive from characteristics of women themselves rather than their status in society. Women's "lack of confidence," their "lack of ability," and their "shyness" form a triangular block for women's entrance into politics, according to many respondents. A fourth commonly cited obstacle was lack of financial resources and gendered access and responsibility for such resources within the family.

Support from men, whether husbands of commune council members or members of the community, was considered essential to sustaining women in politics.

An additional and particularly serious obstacle respondents identified as preventing women from entering politics is their physical security while campaigning; for those female politicians who join opposition parties, there is a particular danger of political violence. In the campaign period leading up to the 2002 commune council elections, three female candidates were killed. Election campaigns in post-settlement Cambodia have been fraught with violence, most of which is targeted at opposition parties and carried out predominantly by district- and commune-level authorities in the police, military, and civilian government structures.⁶¹ While this topic was too sensitive to be addressed by the commune councilors in focus group discussions, several members nonetheless raised it as an issue of general concern. Lung Sovannary of the Kompong Cham commune council, explains:

Society intimidates and blocks women. For example, people generally all over do not like to see women enter politics. This is because, for one thing, they say that women cannot [perform as well as] men, and...there are risks and dangers going into politics. For example, if the wife dies because of political activities, who will then look after the husband, the children, and the parents? For a woman to go into politics, those who don't like us say, "Do you want to die?" And some

others say [with sarcasm], "You are supposed to stay in the house and you don't agree? Why do you invite trouble to come into your life?"

A final issue that deserves greater attention is men's disinterest in or antipathy to women joining politics. As in all areas of gender mainstreaming, if the main political parties and government leaders fail to recognize women's potential, efforts to recruit women will not gather momentum. A combination of tactics will be needed to raise awareness and support among the male leadership in government at all levels, within political parties, and within society, so that efforts by NGOs, donors, and the Ministry of Women and Veteran's Affairs achieve maximum impact.

Confidence in Women's Leadership

In the course of this research, most respondents identified clear differences between women's and men's contributions to good governance, the need for men to recognize and value women's contributions, and the need to increase the number of women at all levels of government. Respondents typically characterized Cambodian women as aspiring to peace, good at negotiating, more honest, less violent, and adept at solving conflicts through discussion rather than with violence. Khong Sun Eng in the Siem Reap Office of Women's Affairs notes:

Men like to drink and they easily become irresponsible. They do not work harder than women do. Men are always speaking about

Former Khmer Rouge Women

Responses about women's role in society and governance in one focus group proved a notable exception to the data collected in the majority of interviews. This divergent view came from a group of former Khmer Rouge women living in a "defector village," Chamkgar Bai. The original inhabitants of this village were 300 families who came from the mountain Phnom Voar in 1996, following their leader, village chief Chouk Rin. At the time of this research, he was being tried for the murder of three foreigners in 1996. The political tension in the village was thus quite high, and the interview was stilted and difficult. These women repeatedly denied any discrimination against women in politics, education, or the home. Saying that women had equal rights and equal access in all walks of life, they explained that there were only two women commune councilors because that's who the people preferred in their vote. A member of the focus group of Khmer Rouge women in Kampot explained:

If men have rights to do something, women have too. Men and women should provide help to each other. If women are unable to solve a problem, they can ask for help from the men. ... For example, there's a problem in a family, men and women should discuss together. Before doing something, we should all agree.

The results of this focus group are interesting because they are so different from the majority of respondents and the dominant view in Cambodia. To adequately assess the views of these or other former Khmer Rouge on gender and governance, or to draw significant conclusions, a much more in-depth research process would be necessary.

themselves; they never speak about women's problems. Men are always impatient when women talk about their troubles. Women like to talk to people and like to listen to people. When women do something they always have a plan. Women are softer physically than men and are more responsible for their work. Usually, women have better morals than men.

That female politicians are perceived as more honest and less prone to corruption than male counterparts is attributed both to women's reluctance to damage their reputations in the face of greater public scrutiny than men encounter and to women's greater regard for the wellbeing of their constituents. A member of the commune council in Battambang explained why, in her view, women were less corrupt:

I think women get used to raising children. They usually show generosity to all their children...in spite of poverty, mothers try to feed their children and send them to school. So when they join the government, they serve and sacrifice for the people honestly like mothers sacrifice for their children. Women tend to help women and children like they help their own children.⁶²

The concept of gender equity in governing bodies was also a position that many respondents thought was crucial for good governance and the overall development of Cambodia. As one respondent explained:

It is important to include women in politics because women know what hurts the people; they know the hearts of the people and what they are thinking about. Men are not so patient to listen to ordinary people because they think of their status as leaders, whereas women are patient and think of themselves as the mothers of the commune community.

Perceptions such as these—that women are less corrupt, more honest, and more responsive to their

constituents—are difficult to quantify or to prove. Yet they are powerful social forces, responsible for growing public support for women's increased political participation, and mirrored in the views of women and men in other post-conflict societies.⁶³

Women's Skills in the Domestic Sphere: An Asset in Politics

Interestingly, respondents viewed women's contributions to good governance primarily through the lens of their domestic roles. Because the majority of Cambodian men and women, regardless of social class and educational background, tend to define women's primary role in society as homemaker and mother, respondents took this role as their cue to identify a nurturing and mothering role for women on the political stage. For example, Peou Savoeun of the Siem Reap provincial office of the women's ministry made

a remark often echoed by other respondents: "To have peace in the country we must have peace in the family. What we do in the family is the same as what we must do in leading the nation."

Men and women respondents described women's political char-

acteristics in maternal terms. Many posited that women are better able to think about other people than men, and that they are therefore more likely to think about the needs of their constituents. Chea Vannath of the CSD explained the extension of women's maternal role to the wider community:

According to our tradition, every mother is considered the first teacher. And the women, because they have the duties to look after their children and old people, seem to have a wider understanding of the people's needs...because they are responsible for others and they have a lot of patience [which is] a needed quality for leaders.

A male respondent, Bun Kakada of AFSC, shared a similar perception: "Women have tolerance from nature; they take care of the children. Women are also good at conflict management. The first conflict management that women solve is within their families."

Respondents typically characterized Cambodian women as aspiring to peace, good at negotiating, more honest, less violent, and adept at solving conflicts through discussion rather than with violence.

Respondents also pointed out that because of their experience in managing households, women are better at long-term planning. As caregivers, women are perceived to be tolerant and less discriminatory. Finally, because they are more concerned about reputation, women are less likely to engage in corruption or other activities that could tarnish their credibility.

Discussions and interpretations of gender and good governance are overwhelmingly framed within a discourse of female domesticity. The intellectual point of entry for almost all respondents was an essentialist view of women's roles in society and politics that was an extension of their roles in the family as nurturer, caregiver, and provider of material and moral sustenance. It appears that the contradictions between defense of the domestic role of women and defense of the expansion of women's roles in the public sphere are not yet widely debated or understood in society. However, acknowledgement that women's nurturing skills are relevant in the political sphere could be a move towards redefining and transforming gender roles within the context of Cambodian culture in a way that is acceptable to men and women.

Ung Vanna of the United Nations Interregional Anti-Trafficking Project echoed the views of many respondents on the complementarity of men and women, "Men and women have different skills and these complement each other and if used properly and really encouraged then Cambodia could really advance itself as a country and have a positive future."⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

Governance in Cambodia is still characterized by political patronage, violence, intimidation, and an absence of cross-party cooperation. Entrenchment of these qualities impacts citizens and hinders efforts by those seeking to promote accountable, inclusive, and democratic governance structures.

There is reluctance by the largely male elite to acknowledge that women's status in society and their engagement in public and political issues has changed dramatically as a result of the war years, the presence of UNTAC, and their exposure to the outside world. There is also an unwillingness to tackle the root causes of violence that women are experiencing, particularly domestic violence, rape, prostitution, and trafficking.

For women, the obstacles are at times daunting. They continue to bear great burdens in Cambodia's struggle towards peace. As the majority population they also represent the poorest, least educated, and politically most underrepresented sector. Yet since 1991, they have repeatedly risen to challenge existing norms. Through their civil society efforts and in local and national governance, women as individuals and in organizations have shown their

commitment to transforming Cambodia from a country plagued by violence and autocracy to one that is democratic and peaceful. Their work combating corruption, their leadership in nonviolent conflict resolution, and their ability to work across party lines, particularly at the commune level, provide models to their male colleagues and promote democratic values.

Women's efforts are bearing fruit: Public acceptance and recognition of the role and contributions of women in governance is increasing. The women's participation as candidates in recent local council elections, and the growing willingness of voters to regard them as leaders, indicates a desire for change. Women alone cannot transform the system. But the donor community is coming to acknowledge that the promotion of gender equity is a critical factor in Cambodia's transformation. Yet national commitments

have been limited, and even international efforts have not been systematic. Transforming the stagnant political space is complex and lengthy; but in this process, strengthening mechanisms and institutions that support women and widening the arena for their participation is vital to improving governance for sustainable peace.

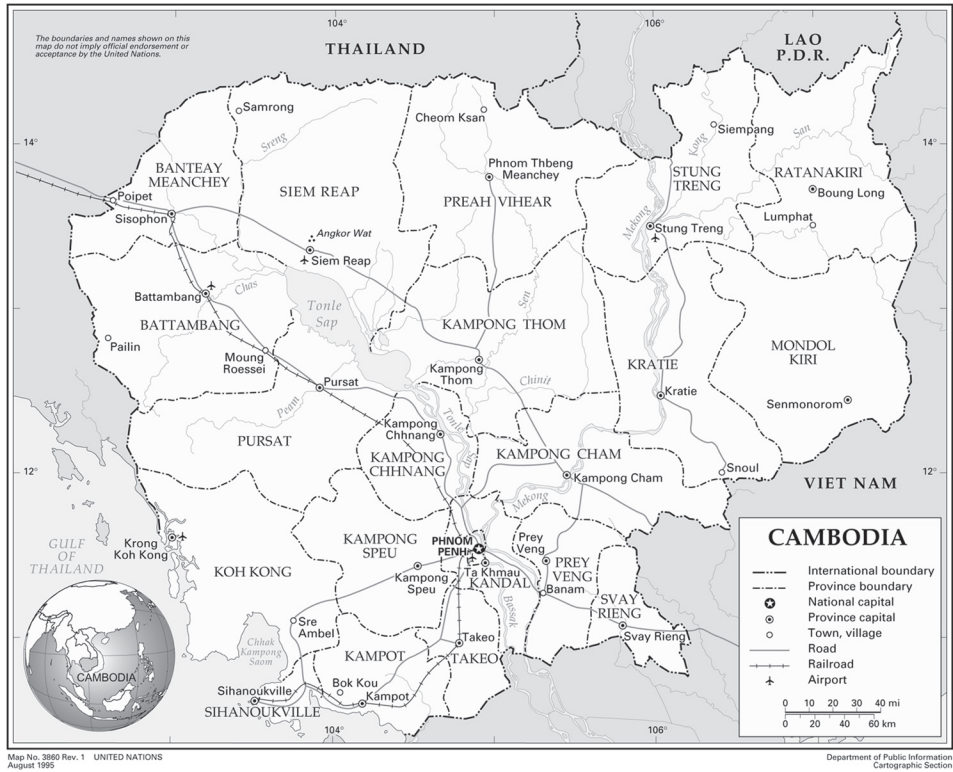
Through their civil society efforts and in local and national governance, women as individuals and in organizations have shown their commitment to transforming Cambodia from a country plagued by violence and autocracy to one that is democratic and peaceful.

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- ³²Frieson, *In the Shadows...* 3.
- ³³Despite the 2003 elections, a government has not yet been formed, and at the time of writing, Mu Sochua was still minister of women and veteran's affairs.
- ³⁴Sieng, Huy. Personal Interview. 2003.
- ³⁵The other expatriate who was attacked was also working on logging issues, but for the World Bank.
- ³⁶McGrew, Laura. *Report on Peace building Activities*. Philadelphia, PA: American Friends Service Committee, Campaign Against Violence for Peace, 1998.
- ³⁷See for example, Kato, Toshiyasu, Jeffrey A. Kaplan, Chan Sophal, Real Sopheap. *Cambodia: Enhancing Governance for Sustainable Development*. Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Cambodia Development Resource Institute, 2000. 2.
- ³⁸Johnson, Craig. "Local Democracy, Democratic Decentralization, and Rural Development: Theories, Challenges, and Options for Policy." *Development Policy Review* 19.4 (2001): 521.
- ³⁹Kato et al, 71.
- ⁴⁰While the communist regimes referred to local elections during their various tenures, none were characterized by a democratic process, a system of voter registration, and external monitoring.
- ⁴¹United Nations Development Programme, Cambodia Area Rehabilitation and Regeneration Project. *Annual Project Report, 1 January 1998 to 31 December 1998*. New York: UNDP/CARERE, 1999. 1.
- ⁴²These are Battambang, Siem Reap, and Banteay Meanchey in the northwest of the country, Pursat in the southwest, and Ratanakiri in the northeast.
- ⁴³Staff of SEILA. Personal Interview. 2003.
- ⁴⁴Biddulph, Robin. "Participatory Development in Authoritarian Societies: The Case of Village Development Committees in Two Villages in Banteay Meanchey Province." Diss. Australian National University, 1996; Collins, William. *The UNDP/Carere Local Planning Process: Reinforcing Civil Society*. Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Center for Advanced Study, 1999.
- ⁴⁵World Food Programme. *The Social Impact of WFP Food for Work Projects, Working Paper Two*. 1999 Gender Research Project Working Papers. Rome, Italy: WFP, 2000. 23.
- ⁴⁶World Food Programme 21.
- ⁴⁷"954 Women Commune Councilors Eager to Make a Difference to Society." Flyer. Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Ministry of Women and Veteran's Affairs, n.d.
- ⁴⁸The World Bank. "Cambodia Country Gender Assessment." First draft. Phnom Penh, Cambodia: 2003. 60.
- ⁴⁹The authors felt that, of the interviewees for this study, those with the newly elected women commune councilors were the most uplifting and optimistic. These women arrived for focus group interviews climbing off the backs of rented motorcycles, spattered with dust and mud from their long journeys. Yet their obvious delight in greeting old friends—even those from different political parties—with whom they had received training from Women for Prosperity was heartening and gave hope for a future towards good governance in Cambodia. The women commune councilors openly expressed their challenges and difficulties and their achievements and hopes and provided some very insightful recommendations.
- ⁵⁰Hakk, Ly, 1st Deputy Commune Councilor, Svaydangkum, Siem Reap. Personal Interview. 2003.
- ⁵¹Chuy, Sakharn, 1st Deputy Commune Councilor, Reusey Lok, Cheikreng, Siem Reap. Personal Interview. 2003.
- ⁵²Name Withheld, Commune Councilor. Personal Interview. 2003.
- ⁵³The World Bank, *Cambodia Country Gender Assessment* 58.
- ⁵⁴Cambodia. *Governance Action Plan*. Phnom Penh: Cambodia, 2001. 19.
- ⁵⁵Pok, Nanda.
- ⁵⁶The World Bank, *Cambodia Country Gender Assessment* 54.
- ⁵⁷Elaine McKay, Advisor to the Ministry of Women and Veteran's Affairs, Project for Gender Equity. Personal Interview. 2003.
- ⁵⁸Fifteen women were elected initially, but three resigned immediately.
- ⁵⁹"Number of Female Elected Candidates for the Third National Assembly Election." Press Release. Phnom Penh, Cambodia: National Election Committee, 4 September 2003.
- ⁶⁰Elaine McKay.
- ⁶¹United Nations Cambodia Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. *The 2003 National Assembly Elections*. Phnom Penh, Cambodia: UNCOHCHR, 2003.
- ⁶²Name Withheld. Focus Group, Amara, Battambang. 2003.
- ⁶³Powley, Elizabeth. *Strengthening Governance: The Role of Women in Rwanda's Transition*. Washington, DC: Women Waging Peace, 2003.
- ⁶⁴Ung, Vanna. Personal Interview. 2003.

APPENDIX A: UN CAMBODIA MAP



APPENDIX B: LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACT	Alliance for Conflict Transformation
AFSC	American Friends Service Committee
BLDP	Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party
CAMBOW	A coalition of 62 women's NGOs
CDCs	Commune Development Committees
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CPP	Cambodian People's Party
CSD	Center for Social Development
CWCC	Cambodian Women's Crisis Center
FUNCINPEC	Royalist Party
GADNet	Gender and Development Network
LDP	Liberal Democratic Party
LICADHO	League Cambodgien Droits de L'Homme
MCC	Mennonite Central Committee
MP	Member of Parliament
MWVA	Ministry of Women's and Veteran's Affairs
NGO	Non-government organization
PADV	Project Against Domestic Violence
PCR	Post-Conflict Reconstruction project
PDK	Party of Democratic Kampuchea or Khmer Rouge
PRK	People's Republic of Kampuchea
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
SADP	Southeast Asia Development Program
SEILA	Major decentralization initiative
SILAKA	NGO that provides training and capacity building
SNC	Supreme National Council
SRP	Sam Rainsy Party
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCHR	United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UNTAC	United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VDCs	Village Development Committees
WfP	Women for Prosperity

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ABOUT WOMEN WAGING PEACE

Women Waging Peace, a program of Hunt Alternatives Fund, advocates for the full participation of women in formal and informal peace processes around the world. Over 250 members of the “Waging” network, all demonstrated leaders with varied backgrounds, perspectives, and skills, bring a vast array of expertise to the peacemaking process. They have met with over 1000 senior policy shapers to collaborate on fresh, workable solutions to long-standing conflicts.

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The Policy Commission is conducting a series of case studies to document women’s contributions to peace processes across conflict areas worldwide. The studies focus on women’s activities in conflict prevention, pre-negotiation and negotiation, and post-conflict reconstruction—including governance; disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration; and transitional justice and reconciliation. This body of work is pragmatic and operational, offering suggestions, guidelines, and models to encourage policymakers to include women and gender perspectives in their program designs.

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