



WAVE
WOMEN'S ACTION FOR
VOICE & EMPOWERMENT

IWDA INTERNATIONAL
WOMEN'S
DEVELOPMENT
AGENCY



WAVE: WOMEN AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN CAMBODIA - LITERATURE REVIEW

Prepared by Stella Mulder.

Reviewed by Dr Tracy McDiarmid, Lisa Vettori and Sopheary Ly (IWDA
intern).

OCTOBER 2019
RESEARCH REPORT

Introduction and Background

The following review considers literature in English on women and leadership in Cambodia. It was undertaken in 2018 in preparation for *Public Perceptions of Women as Leaders* research to be conducted by Cambodian women's rights organisations in partnership with International Women's Development Agency (IWDA).¹ The focus of the literature is on women and political leadership; however, women's activity in social and economic spheres is also of interest. The review was updated in October 2019 to reflect changes.

The Government of Cambodia conducted a national census in March 2019. Initial reports were being generated at the time of writing. Some of the literature reviewed here draws on data from the previous census (2008) which may be moderately out of date.

The Kingdom of Cambodia is a sovereign state bordered by Thailand, Lao and Vietnam. Originally a monarchy, Cambodia became part of the French imperial territories in the 1860s and remained under French colonial rule until independence in 1953. A brief period of political stability was followed by escalating internal conflicts, culminating in the radical revolution known as the Khmer Rouge period from 1975-1979. The number of people killed during these years of extreme violence is so high that this period is widely accepted as one of genocide.²

Prolonged civil war following the Khmer Rouge period came to an end in 1991 with conflicting parties signing the Paris Peace Agreement. Cambodia held its first free election in 1993 with support from the United Nations Transitional Authority (UNTAC). The Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia was ratified the same year.³

The current population is approximately 15.3 million people, with 51.5% women and 48.5% men.⁴ In part as a consequence of the violent conflict, Cambodia currently has a very large young population, with 31% of people under 15 years old.⁵ Around 77% of people live in rural areas.⁶ The official national religion is Theravada Buddhism, with 95% of people estimated to be affiliated with this. The population includes a number of indigenous and non-indigenous ethnic minority groups.⁷

Historically, agriculture has been the dominant sector in Cambodia, with the majority of people working on land. In recent decades, however, there has been significant growth in other sectors, most notably garment production, construction and tourism. Over the past 20 years, Cambodia has had one of the fastest growing economies in Asia with poverty estimated to have halved between 2000 and 2010.⁸ However, the picture is not straightforward, with high levels of poverty continuing, especially in rural areas.⁹ Although agriculture remains the dominant sector, globalisation has had a huge impact. Consequences have included high levels of migration for work and the forced removal of land from families. Writers reviewed here agree that while Cambodia has achieved an outstanding reduction of poverty at a national level, there are significant ongoing challenges in

¹ Partner organisations were: Banteay Srei, Gender and Development Cambodia (GADC), Amara and United Sisterhood Alliance.

² See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khmer_Rouge#Number_of_deaths for sources on this issue.

³ Royal Kingdom of Cambodia, *The Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia*, 2010, unofficial translation available at <http://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/kh/kh009en.pdf>.

⁴ Statistics at October 2019. See *Provisional Population Totals of General Population Census of Cambodia 2019*, available at nis.gov.kh. IWDA refers to designations of

women and men acknowledging that these categories are not fixed and recognising diversities in gender identity.

⁵ Figure retrieved October 2019 at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.0014.TO.ZS?locations=KH>.

⁶ Figure retrieved Oct 2019 at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS?locations=KH&view=chart>.

⁷ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnic_groups_in_Cambodia.

⁸ The Asia Foundation, *Democracy in Cambodia 2014: a survey of the Cambodian electorate*, 2014, p.7.

⁹ Asian Development Bank, *Cambodia: country poverty analysis*, 2014.

relation to human development, transparency in government and environmental degradation.¹⁰

These consequences have particular relevance for the status and experience of girls and women in Cambodia. Women's participation in the labour force has risen dramatically in the past 20 years. However, women are less likely than men to be engaged in safe, formalised work, there is a significant gap in wages between women and men across all sectors and women are poorly represented industrially in terms of trade union membership.¹¹ The current Cambodian economy is characterised by a very large component of microenterprises, the majority of which are operated by women. These include trading of household and agricultural goods, food preparation, the provision of domestic and other personal services and processing waste.¹² Whilst these very small enterprises can offer some opportunities to women, they are often highly vulnerable to environmental factors and changes in the local market.

Women in Cambodia

Several national gender assessments have been conducted in Cambodia in the past 15 years.

A Fair Share for Women: Cambodia Gender Assessment 2004 was produced as a collaboration between UNIFEM, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, UNDP, the Department of International Development of the United Kingdom and the then Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs.¹³ The Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) went on to produce a 2008 assessment under the same title.¹⁴

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) published a further *Country Gender Analysis* in 2012. Based on 2008 data, the

report describes Cambodia as a country undergoing rapid social and economic change with significant implications for gender relations.

In 2014 MOWA published a series of gender assessment reports. These include an executive summary document, a policy brief on gender mainstreaming and an assessment of national 'gender relations and attitudes.'¹⁵ Although produced by government, the MOWA documents offer a strong critical view of the status of women in Cambodia and accord with much of the analysis by independent observers.

The ADB and MOWA reports indicate that women have become increasingly active in the economic sphere in Cambodia in recent decades, working in the formal labour market, owning land and having a degree of influence in decision making about family assets. The reports suggest there is some flexibility in how labour is divided between women and men in present day Cambodia and that women in some contexts can have a high degree of autonomy.¹⁶

However, the reports are clear that there is significant ongoing disparity between women and men. This is discussed in relation to access to employment, wages, health outcomes and experiences of violence. The reports concur that women are highly underrepresented in public decision making and that lower levels of formal education and gender norms have a strong influence on opportunities for girls and women. MOWA argues that, while the social change that has been taking place in Cambodia may have some benefits,

women are expected to follow social norms, and beliefs which allow men to enjoy their 'gender privilege', while women under-value

¹⁰ See The Asia Foundation (2014), pp. 8-9; Ministry of Women's Affairs, *Gender relations and attitudes: Cambodia gender assessment*, 2014, p.9.

¹¹ ActionAid, *Integrating women's rights into social movements in Phnom Penh, Cambodia: challenges, opportunities and effectiveness*, 2016, p.11.

¹² Gender and Development Cambodia, *Women and informal economy in Cambodia*, 2015, p.2.

¹³ UNIFEM et al, *A Fair Share for Women: Cambodia Gender Assessment 2004*.

¹⁴ This report does not appear to be available online but may be available by request from the Parliamentary

Institute of Cambodia via <http://library.pic.org.kh/newgenlibtxt/View?From=Library&CatId=159&OwnLibId=1&LibraryId=1>.

¹⁵ Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA), *Gender mainstreaming: institutional, partnership and policy context* (Policy Brief 1), 2014 and *Gender relations and attitudes: Cambodia gender assessment* (Policy Brief 2), 2014.

¹⁶ Asian Development Bank, *Cambodia: Country Gender Analysis*, 2012, p.2.

their own capacity and potential. Invisible social norms continue to confine women to household and childcare duties, while at the same time the family's economic status pressures women to engage in income-generating work.¹⁷

The 2012 ADB report similarly concludes that “Cambodia remains a hierarchical society with strong ideas about power and status” and that “attitudes toward gender roles still emphasize the woman as household manager and the man as provider.”¹⁸

A 2016 *Cambodia Gender Assessment* produced by consulting firm Banyan Global for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has a strong focus on USAID's priorities in Cambodia and the region.¹⁹ The report is based on data collected in a relatively short timeframe and does not have the same breadth of data as the ADB gender assessments. Nevertheless, it endorses the findings of the earlier reports in relation to the tension between economic changes resulting in women's increased work outside the home and prevailing social norms endorsing women's domestic role as primary. The report suggests that, while women are significantly underrepresented in leadership and management positions, change is taking place. Researchers report that interviews with key informants:

revealed a sense among respondents that in the last decade women's ability to actively participate in community discussions has improved markedly, with women now demonstrating more confidence and willingness to speak in community settings. Respondents viewed this as an opportunity to further enhance women's agency, although the degree to which this is happening varied by location (...) respondents mentioned increased levels of family support for women's involvement in development activities, with many female respondents

citing family support as a key ingredient in their successful participation.²⁰

System of Parliament

The Kingdom of Cambodia is a constitutional monarchy operated as a parliamentary representative democracy. The head of state is the King of Cambodia, currently Norodom Sihamoni. The head of government is the Prime Minister of Cambodia, an office held by Hun Sen since 1985 – the longest serving non-royal leader in South East Asia.

The Parliament has two chambers: the Senate or upper house (currently 62 seats) and the National Assembly or lower house (125 seats). The Prime Minister is appointed by the King on the advice and with the approval of the National Assembly. Two seats in the Senate are appointed by the King, two by the National Assembly and the rest are elected by the Commune Councils representing the 24 provinces of Cambodia. Members of the National Assembly are voted for by citizens through the party political system and are elected for five years. There have been six national elections since the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement, with the most recent election taking place in July 2018.

Governments under Prime Minister Hun Sen have been characterised by analysts as increasingly autocratic over time. Civil and political rights became particularly constrained in 2017, with the government arresting the leader of the opposition, dissolving the main opposition party (Cambodia National Rescue Party) and shutting down several independent media outlets.²¹ This change of environment prompted the Economist Intelligence Unit to re-categorise the government from “hybrid” to “authoritarian”, a classification which remains in place.²²

At the time of writing, 11 of the 62 seats in the Senate (17.7%) and 25 of the 125 seats in National Assembly (20%) were held by women.²³

¹⁷ MOWA (2014a), pp 2-3.

¹⁸ ADB (2012), p.2.

¹⁹ USAID Cambodia, *Cambodia Gender Assessment*, 2016.

²⁰ USAID, p.5.

²¹ See <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/cambodia>.

²² Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2018: Me too? Political participation, protest and democracy*, p.39.

²³ Data as at October 2019, retrieved

<https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=9&year=2019>.

Discussion of women's representation at national level often focuses on the number of women in the National Assembly. The current proportion of 20% is significantly higher than the 6% representation in the first government (1993). However, the proportion did not increase in the most recent election and falls short of the government's own target of 30% by 2015.²⁴ At the time of this review, Cambodia was ranked 107th out of 193 countries in terms of representation of women in national politics, down from 96th in 2018.²⁵

Local political system

Cambodia is organised administratively into a series of geographic divisions of decreasing scale from the national (commonly referred to as 'central') government to village level. There is some variation in how these divisions are listed and named but a summary is:

Krong – provinces and municipalities

Khan – districts and sections

Sangkat – communes

Phum – villages.²⁶

Discussion about 'local level' politics in Cambodia usually relates to the *sangkat* level of government or Commune Councils. Communes are groups of villages in a locality. Commune Councils were established in 2002 as part of the government's process of 'decentralisation'. This was a public reform process intended to devolve power from the central government to local governments with the aim of ensuring "local-based economic and social

development with high levels of effectiveness and efficiency."²⁷

Over 1,600 Commune Councils were established, with commune members elected by voters through the political party system. The role of the Commune Council is to coordinate and make decisions on administrative and development issues in the locality. Areas of responsibility include agriculture, public works, 'women's and children's issues', security and social order. There are significant arenas over which Commune Councils do not have authority: forestry, telecommunications, national defence foreign policy and fiscal policy.²⁸

The Commune Councils are the lowest level of administrative authority of the central government. Under Cambodia's 'Organic Law', members of the other levels of government (provincial/municipal and district) are not elected by popular vote but are "indirectly elected" by Commune Councils and governors appointed by the Ministry of Interior.²⁹ Therefore the only level of local government for which community members can vote is the Commune Council. Each Commune Council has a chief, first deputy and second deputy; these roles and the ordinary members are appointed for 5 years.

The decentralisation legislation also had an explicit objective of increasing women's representation in sub-national levels of government, with a number of administrative roles intended to be filled by women only.³⁰ A sub-decree of the legislation requires each council to have a woman member who is responsible for 'women's and children's issues'.³¹

²⁴ Millennium Development Goal cited by Cambodia Center for Human Rights (CCHR), *Policy Brief: Women's Political Representation in Cambodia*, 2013, p.3. Original source cited unavailable at the time of writing.

²⁵ See <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>.

²⁶ Groupings adopted from Sokunthea Koy, *How women's roles in local politics are understood at the commune level: Boeung Preah commune, Cambodia*, 2016, p.2. The official divisions are more numerous, as set out in Article 145 of the Constitution of Cambodia: *Reach Theany* (Royal Capital City), *Khet* (provinces), *Krong* (municipalities), *Srok* (districts), *Khan* (arrondissements), *Khum* (communes) and *Sangkat* (quarters). See www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/kh/kh009en.pdf.

²⁷ Turner cited in Koy (2016), p.25.

²⁸ Ly, p.8.

²⁹ Kingdom of Cambodia (2008), Article 14.

³⁰ Positions reserved for women are outlined in Tem Ly, *Leadership pathways for local women*, 2015, p.26. It is not clear how these requirements are monitored and enforced.

³¹ Chhoeun, Thavy, Panha Sok and Clodagh Byrne, 'Citadel of Women: strengthening female leadership in rural Cambodia', *Gender and Development*, 16(3), 2008, p.537. As part of a national gender mainstreaming effort the Ministry of Interior decreed in 2009 that all sub-national levels of government (i.e. provincial/municipal, district as well as commune) were required to establish Women's and Children's Consultative Committees (WCCCs, now

Some analysts have seen the decentralisation process as an opportunity for women to become more involved in politics, suggesting that local government is a viable entry point into politics and public decision making for women.³² The proportion of women on Commune Councils has fluctuated since 2007 and in 2017 was 16.8%.³³

Research based on interviews with women leaders in North-Eastern Cambodia suggests that the decentralisation policy could be having some effect in rural areas. Researcher Tem Ly argues that the government's "actions combined have had an impact on the mind-set of the Cambodia people, both men and women."³⁴ She quotes a woman elected as commune chief:

Previously, there was no female commune chief. When there was a demand from the government to have 30 percent of women leaders in the commune level, I had that chance and I could become a commune chief.³⁵

As with parliamentary representation, however, the actual numbers of women on Commune Councils is still considerably lower than the central government's revised target of 25% by 2022.³⁶ Apart from the requirement for one woman member to oversee 'women's and children's issues', there is no quota.³⁷ Further, MOWA's assessment in 2014 was that, while the number of women leaders at commune level has increased, "they do not influence decision-making."³⁸

Recent research by Sokunthea Koy provides useful insights into the idea that decentralisation by definition

provides opportunities for women to become more involved in local government. This research is based on interviews and focus groups with community members and local authorities in Beoung Preah Commune. Koy reports that both women and men in her study expressed the view that women's participation in Commune Councils is beneficial; however, participants specifically stated that women councillors are well placed to deal with matters relating to 'women and to children'.³⁹

Margherita Maffii raises similar concerns in her 2011 discussion of a four year program on women's local leadership supported by German political organisation Heinrich Böll Foundation.⁴⁰ Working with women in one province, Maffii suggests that decentralisation initially made a significant impact locally as new positions became available at village and commune level. Women organised themselves, developed a good reputation within their communities and a woman was elected as commune chief. Maffii suggests that over time, however, as institutional gender mainstreaming has gained momentum in Cambodia, the focus shifted "from gender discrimination and the need to act for gender equality, to a generic discourse, which equate[s] 'gender' with 'women's and children's affairs, very often interpreted as health care, child care, hygiene and sanitation."⁴¹ As Maffii, Koy and others suggest, this framing of women's participation in local government is problematic as it reinforces stereotypical notions of what issues women have authority over and, in doing so, weakens women leaders' broader influence.

Koy further argues that, while Commune Councils were established to enable more influence at a local level, the agenda of individual councils is subject to two factors: the

known as Commune Committees for Women and Children).

³² Chhoeun, p.537.

³³ As reported by the Government in Royal Government of Cambodia, *Sixth periodic report submitted by Cambodia under Article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 2018*, p.38. The Phnom Penh Post reported this figure as 20% in 2018 following dissolution of the main opposition party and the consequent redistribution of seats. See Leonie Kijeswki and Kong Meta, 'Women still underrepresented in politics,' Phnom Penh Post, 6 March 2018.

³⁴ Ly, p.62.

³⁵ Ly, p.64.

³⁶ The Government of Cambodia target for women's membership of Commune Councils is 25% by 2022 and 30% by 2030. See Royal Government of Cambodia, *Cambodian Sustainable Development Goals (CSDGs) Framework (2016-2030)*, 2018, p.105.

³⁷ Royal Government of Cambodia (2003), p.35.

³⁸ MOWA (2014), p.11.

³⁹ Koy, p.76.

⁴⁰ Maffii, Margherita, 'Women's leadership: a case study from Cambodia', Heinrich Böll Stiftung Cambodia, 2011.

⁴¹ Maffii 2011.

priorities of the higher levels of government (district and province) and, importantly, the workings of political parties locally. In relation to the latter, Koy's finding in Beoung Preah province is that women candidates are consistently placed lower than men on party lists at elections. She argues that there are therefore important qualifications to be made to the idea that decentralisation facilitates women's political participation:

These debates indicate that there is a policy challenge for increasing women's participation in the decentralisation process when the legislation has no control over the internal policy of political parties.⁴²

INTERVENTIONS TO INCREASE WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

Successive parliaments since 1993 have introduced and extended legislation to increase gender equality in Cambodia. There is currently a complex framework of laws intended to enshrine equality between women and men, including in relation to political participation. National plans have consistently emphasised gender mainstreaming as a priority. There is consensus amongst observers and academics that the policies in place for gender equality in Cambodia are sound and deserve recognition. Most analysts argue, however, that implementation of the legislation has been poorly enforced and monitored.

CEDAW

The Government of Cambodia signed the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) in 1980 and ratified it in 1992.

A combined initial, second and third periodic report on activity towards CEDAW commitments was submitted in

2003 (reviewed by the Committee in 2006).⁴³ This document reported on gender mainstreaming legislation and efforts to increase the participation of women in leadership roles. It noted "informal evidence" that increased involvement in public decision making was reaping benefits for women and that, whilst women still held a limited number of positions, "the trends are positive."⁴⁴ Notwithstanding this, the report made a strong comment on the challenges of implementing legislation intended to increase gender equality, stating:

Most line ministries have not developed gender mainstreaming strategies and their senior leadership does not understand or take seriously the need to address gender disparities in policy development and implementation.⁴⁵

This first report recognised that women candidates were being relegated to lower ranks in political party lists at elections and that, while the Convention had been translated into Khmer, efforts to disseminate and explain it to women in rural areas had been slow.⁴⁶

The government submitted a combined fourth and fifth report in 2010 (reviewed 2013). This report similarly both presented an optimistic picture of change in Cambodia and boldly stated the ongoing challenges. It highlighted the government's stated commitment to gender mainstreaming and the increased focus on the prevention of violence against women. The report went on to acknowledge significant gender gaps in economic empowerment, education, health and participation in decision-making, concluding:

Perceptions and traditional gender norms need to be changed in order to empower women and facilitate women's participation in politics and decision making. Women still face stigma when participating in political life, especially at sub-national level.⁴⁷

⁴² Koy, p.28.

⁴³ Royal Government of Cambodia, *Initial, Second and Third Report on the Implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in Cambodia*, 2003.

⁴⁴ Royal Government of Cambodia (2003), pp. 35-37.

⁴⁵ Royal Government of Cambodia (2003), p. 40.

⁴⁶ Royal Government of Cambodia (2003), p.14.

⁴⁷ Royal Government of Cambodia (2011), p. 10.

The report also argued for political parties to assign more women to electoral lists for national and sub-national elections.

The Committee on CEDAW highlighted several issues in its concluding observations on the 2011 report from Cambodia. These included the absence of a definition of discrimination in national legislation:

The Committee notes with concern the delegation's response that the State party does not consider it necessary to amend its legislation by adopting a comprehensive definition of discrimination that prohibits both direct and indirect discrimination. The Committee is also concerned that there have not been any cases involving discrimination against women before the courts of the State party.⁴⁸

Another issue highlighted by the Committee was the influence of the *Chbab Srei* or 'traditional' code of conduct for girls and women in Cambodia:

Chbab Srey, the traditional code of conduct for women, is deeply rooted in Cambodian culture and continues to define everyday life on the basis of stereotypical roles of women and men in the family and in society.⁴⁹

Many authors reviewed here refer to this text and their concerns are summarised below.

The sixth periodic report on CEDAW from Cambodia was submitted in June 2018. The government concludes in this report that:

Cambodian women face difficulties as social norms on gender relations continue to

constrain development of women's potentials and women's empowerment in the economic, social, public and political life. (...) The nation will redouble its efforts to further increase women's economic participation and political empowerment to achieve gender equality.⁵⁰

At the time of writing, women's rights organisations in Cambodia were preparing a shadow report for this CEDAW period.

Government frameworks

The Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia states that all Khmer citizens have the right to vote and to stand as candidates in elections. Further, it states that "Khmer citizens of both sexes have the right to participate actively in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the nation." Article 45 states that "all forms of discrimination against women shall be abolished."⁵¹

The Government of Cambodia has developed a series of 'National Strategic Development Plans' (2006-2009, 2009-2013 and 2014-2018).⁵² Each plan has included a requirement for gender mainstreaming across all levels of government. The current plan states that gender mainstreaming remains "a cross-cutting issue," with the economy, legal protection, health, HIV, nutrition and politics identified as focal points.⁵³

The government's political platform is known as the 'Rectangular Strategy for Growth, Employment, Equity and Efficiency'. Now in Phase IV, the strategy is described by the government as "the backbone of the economy and society" and recognises gender equality as a key component.⁵⁴ The Rectangular Strategy includes specific

⁴⁸ United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, *Concluding Observations on the Combined Fourth and Fifth Periodic Reports of Cambodia*, 2013, p.3.

⁴⁹ United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, p.4.

⁵⁰ Royal Government of Cambodia, *Sixth periodic report submitted by Cambodia under Article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, 2018, pp. 45-46.

⁵¹ Royal Kingdom of Cambodia (2010), articles 34, 35 and 45.

⁵² A *National Strategic Development Plan 2019-2023* was being drafted at the time of this review. See https://data.opendevlopmentmekong.net/dataset/the-draft-of-national-strategic-development-plan-nsdp-2019-2023/resource/5392b351-64ef-43d6-b94d-9dc0956e98ae?type=laws_record.

⁵³ MOWA (2014a), p.1.

⁵⁴ Royal Government of Cambodia, *Rectangular Strategy for Growth, Employment, Equity and Efficiency: Building the Foundation Toward Realizing the Cambodia Vision 2050 Phase IV*, 2018.

measures to promote gender equality and empower women.

*Neary Rattanak*⁵⁵ is a specific national plan for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women in Cambodia, produced by the Ministry of Women's Affairs. In its fourth iteration at the time of writing, the 2014-2018 plan identifies the following strategic priorities:

1. Promote women's access to training, employment, resources, social protection and voice in the economic sector.
2. Increase women's and girls' access to education and training.
3. Promote access to health services for women's specific health needs.
4. Ensure safety for women and girls through action plans, laws and regulations to prevent gender based violence.
5. Promote participation of women in decision-making at all levels.
6. Improve aid effectiveness through institutional capacity development.⁵⁶

Implementation of the plan is devolved to Gender Mainstreaming Action Groups (GMAGs) within individual government bodies, with support from MOWA and the Cambodian National Council for Women (CNCW).

The assessment of observers over time is that, while the legislative frameworks for gender equality and measures for gender mainstreaming are good, implementation has been constrained. The Asian Development Bank concludes that there is limited capacity within government to analyse how government policies impact women and men differently and that social norms relating to gender have a profound influence: "In Cambodia, gender is still seen as a women's issue, and getting men to participate in gender sensitization training is difficult."⁵⁷

Academic Trudy Jacobsen writes about the critical role women played in rebuilding Cambodia following the

prolonged period of conflict. She argues that, while governments have formally lauded this contribution, women's participation in decision making has in fact declined since 1979. She too acknowledges that good legislation for gender equality is in place but asks the question, "Why have post-revolutionary governments been reluctant to enforce gender equitable legislation?"⁵⁸ Analysing literature produced following the Khmer Rouge period, Jacobsen suggests that political leaders, in response to a period of profound turmoil, turned to ideas of 'traditional' roles for women and men. Women were cast as the 'moral regulators' of society, responsible for safeguarding 'traditional' Cambodian culture. In the context of social reconstruction, the socially acceptable woman was conceived of as virtuous rather than powerful.⁵⁹

The Ministry of Woman's Affairs, which has played a critical role in the development of gender mainstreaming in Cambodia, is candid about the challenges of implementing the existing legislation:

Gender dynamics have not been thoroughly examined and reflected in designing national policy, and limited attention has been paid to addressing and changing negative gender stereotypes that suppress women's freedom.⁶⁰

Several reports discuss the role of political parties in relation to women's access to leadership roles.

In 2013 the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) convened a series of round table discussions on women's political representation. These discussions were attended by representatives of NGOs and the major political parties. The parties all stated their strong support for increased representation of women in national and sub-national government. According to CCHR, however, not one party had a quota or other 'concrete strategy' for achieving this.⁶¹ The top recommendation from the round table discussions was that the central government should introduce a quota system for political parties, requiring

⁵⁵ Translated by Tem Ly as 'women are precious gems', p.4.

⁵⁶ Paraphrased for brevity. Kingdom of Cambodia (2014), p.15.

⁵⁷ ADB, p.12.

⁵⁸ Trudy Jacobsen, 'Beyond aspara: women, tradition and trajectories in Cambodian politics' in K. Iwanaga (ed),

Women's Political Participation and Representation in Asia: Obstacles and Challenges, 2008, p. 149.

⁵⁹ Jacobsen, 162.

⁶⁰ MOWA (2014a), p.2.

⁶¹ Cambodia Center for Human Rights (CCHR), *Policy Brief: Women's Political Representation in Cambodia*, 2013, p.12.

them to have at least 30% of women on their candidate lists in ‘zippered’ form (alternating names of women and men) and enforcing sanctions for parties which do not adhere to this requirement.⁶² Women candidates from the two major parties in the 2017 Commune Council elections reported having their names “pushed down their party’s ballot lists to make space for male candidates.”⁶³

Sokunthea Koy similarly reports that local representatives of political parties spoke about the importance of women’s participation but could not substantiate this with party policies or strategies:

When interviewing political party leaders in Beoung Preah commune, it seemed that there were no clear documents which show a commitment to increasing women’s numbers in the commune councils but each political party claimed that they have willingness to promote women in local politics.⁶⁴

Political parties in Koy’s research also claimed that they struggled to find eligible women candidates when local elections were due.

LITERATURE ON VOTER CONSIDERATIONS OF WOMEN CANDIDATES

There are few sources of information in English about public views of women as political leaders and the implications for voting in Cambodia. National public opinion surveys conducted by The Asia Foundation in 2000, 2003 and 2014 provide some relevant data. A series of Women’s Forums organised by NGO Banteay Srei in 2008, whilst not directly documenting public views on women candidates, notes issues relating to the election of women to Commune Councils. Several young women researchers from Cambodia have produced important

work in recent years on public perceptions of women as political leaders. These include Sokunthea Koy, Tem Ly, Chankanitha Vong and Srey Mom Lund (for ChildFund Cambodia). These reports discuss community views of women as leaders but do not specifically ask respondents about voting decisions.

The Asia Foundation’s *Democracy in Cambodia* surveys are a good source for contextual data on the views of voters in Cambodia. The aim of these surveys was “to assess attitudes and priorities of the voting public that may contribute to or constrain democratic reforms.”⁶⁵ The 2000 survey does not appear to be available online. The 2003 report is available and includes a short section on women and democracy.⁶⁶ The majority of participants in this survey said they would like to see more women in the National Assembly and that they would be more likely to vote for a woman candidate if she was placed in the top three names of a party list at national election.⁶⁷ The three surveys are similar in design and content and repeat some questions for comparative purposes.

The 2014 survey is based on interviews with 1,000 people from all 24 provinces. Respondents were asked about their views on the overall direction of Cambodia as a nation, local levels of government, democratic values and the general election that took place the previous year. Importantly, report authors point out that this survey was conducted following a government “crackdown on opposition” at the beginning of 2014 and suggest that this political context must be considered when interpreting results.⁶⁸

The 2014 survey reports high public dissatisfaction with the central government. The majority of people interviewed said they believed that, in principle, “voting can make a difference,” but reported a low level of trust in the processes of national elections. Many people said they thought the 2013 elections were not “free and fair”. The survey also reports that most respondents said they did not have enough information about candidates at elections and were unsure of the differences between

⁶² CCHR, p.15.

⁶³ Leonie Kijewski, ‘Women pushed aside: Many female candidates find themselves sliding down pecking order.’ Phnom Penh Post, 31 May 2017.

⁶⁴ Koy, p.98.

⁶⁵ The Asia Foundation, *Democracy in Cambodia – 2014*, 2014, p.3.

⁶⁶ The Asia Foundation, *Democracy in Cambodia – 2003*, 2003, p.14.

⁶⁷ The Asia Foundation (2003), pp.84-85.

⁶⁸ The Asia Foundation (2014), p.3.

political party platforms.⁶⁹ Importantly, half of all participants in this survey suggested that the decisions and activities of the Commune Council in their locality had a greater impact on their lives than the policies and programs of the central government.⁷⁰

The 2014 survey asked a brief series of questions about women as political leaders. Questions and abbreviated results are shown.

Democracy in Cambodia – 2014 ⁷¹

Would you prefer to be represented by a man or a woman in the National Assembly?

Does not matter - 39% / prefer man - 38% / prefer woman - 23%

Do you think that commune council members should be mostly men, or do you think that women should be just as active as men in commune councils?

Women should be just as active – 85% / should be mostly men – 13% / don't know – 2%

Follow up question for respondents who stated a preference for men: Why do you say that?

Men are stronger / have more time for work / have greater knowledge / are braver

Do you think a woman should make her own choice when voting, or do you think men should advise her on her choice?

Woman should make her own choice – 94% / men should advise – 6%

Results from these questions are presented clearly in the report. Analysis of the data is somewhat limited.

The report compares some of the 2014 results with similar results in the 2000 and 2003 surveys. A surprising result from the 2014 survey is that, while most participants said women should be as active as men on Commune Councils, more people said they would prefer to be represented by a man than a woman at national level than in 2003. Nevertheless, comparing results from the three surveys overall, report authors conclude that

there has been a positive shift in attitudes towards women as political leaders, suggesting that the 2014 survey indicates:

evidence of a major shift in Cambodians' understanding of the appropriate role of women in society. Potential causes of this shift include increased exposure to international norms through the media, the influence of civic education, and direct experience with female commune councilors.⁷²

Other work on voter views of women leaders includes the 2008 paper *Citadel of Women* by Thacy Chhoeun and colleagues. This paper provides a summary of discussions that took place at the Women's Forums organised by Banteay Srei in 2008.⁷³ The Forums were attended by community workers and aspiring women leaders and facilitated group discussion about 'female leadership traits.' The authors document which characteristics participants saw as being common to all leaders and which they saw as differentiating women from men. The qualities common to all leaders included a capacity to see value in one's own work, being self-assured and having the confidence to raise issues with commune leaders. Characteristics which participants believed set women leaders apart from men were being able to see their own limitations, a desire to share their skills with others and a greater willingness to work without a fee. Participants also suggested that women political leaders tended to be more consultative than men and more interested in achieving consensus in decisions, leading to more inclusive outcomes.⁷⁴ The discussions at the Women's Forums were informed by an interest in ascertaining which candidate attributes are deciding factors for voters in Cambodia. They provide useful data for further research on which characteristics are most relevant to voters and the differences people may perceive there to be between women and men in terms of political leadership.

A 2013 study by Srey Mom Lund on behalf of ChildFund Cambodia provides useful data on girls' and women's

⁶⁹ The Asia Foundation (2014), p.9.

⁷⁰ The Asia Foundation (2014), pp.4-5.

⁷¹ The Asia Foundation (2014), pp. 39-41.

⁷² The Asia Foundation (2014), p.40.

⁷³ Chhoeun et al, pp. 538-546.

⁷⁴ Chhoeun et al, pp. 541-542.

views of women holding leadership positions.⁷⁵ Participants nominated a range of characteristics - being financially secure, well educated and inclined to put the community before themselves – and personal qualities - being ‘brave’, trustworthy and able to think analytically – as essential for women to be effective as leaders. A strong theme in interviews with older women was their respect for young women as potential community leaders:

I like the fact that young women leaders are so brave and can solve problems with good solutions. Children today are so much smarter than back in my generation. I am very proud when they know how to fight back because they have knowledge.⁷⁶

Although both national and Commune Council elections are based on party political representation, some observers suggest that voters in Cambodia may be more inclined to vote for individuals, possibly as recommended to them, than to vote based on affiliation to a political party ideology.⁷⁷ This may be important in considering voting behaviour and voter considerations of women candidates.

WHY ARE THERE FEWER WOMEN THAN MEN IN POLITICAL LEADERSHIP?

Much of the literature reviewed considers why women’s representation is significantly lower than that of men. Writers point out that there are different facets of achieving political leadership roles. These include issues of supply (why there are fewer women candidates than men), the electoral context (barriers to and enablers of women’s election) and the political environment for women who do achieve leadership roles (the feasibility of influence). Political analysts, academics and civic society organisations offer a range of perspectives on these

interrelated aspects of women’s representation. Most of the literature reviewed focuses on the barriers to women being elected. There is broad agreement on the following factors.

Domestic responsibilities, lower formal education, limited access to resources

Dominant cultural values relating to women’s responsibilities for family and household are a significant barrier to women’s participation in other activities, including political work. Although women in Cambodia are more active in the formal economic sphere now than they have been in past decades, observers suggest that social expectations of women prioritising family over other responsibilities remain strong. Banyan Global suggests that women’s greater engagement with the labour force has not been accompanied by a reduction in their caretaking duties, with the consequence that “women face multiple burdens on their time and energy, and limited mobility and agency”.⁷⁸ Academic Katherine Brickell characterises housework as the ‘stubborn stain’ on development in Cambodia, arguing that “the idea of women as ‘naturally ordained’ bearers of housework responsibility” is highly influential.⁷⁹ Writers agree that responsibilities for family and household management prevent many women from expanding their opportunities in other fields of activity.

Researchers reviewed also identify limited formal education as a barrier for women. Although the gap in educational achievement between girls and boys in Cambodia is smaller than it has been in the past, it becomes more significant at higher levels of education. Participants at the Banteay Srei Women’s Forums spoke about the impact of limited formal education on women’s political opportunities not only in relation to their own sense of capacity, but in terms of how they are viewed by others. The discussions organised by the Cambodian Center for Human Rights documented similar concerns about the lack of higher education available to women seeking political leadership roles.⁸⁰ Analysts agree that women who aspire to leadership roles are at a

⁷⁵ Srey Mom Lund, *Women’s leadership: A community’s understanding of women’s leadership*, 2013.

⁷⁶ Lund, p.23.

⁷⁷ See Asia Foundation (2014), p. 11, Koy p. 81.

⁷⁸ USAID, p.5.

⁷⁹ Brickell, Katherine, ‘The ‘stubborn stain’ on development: gendered meanings of housework (non-) participation in Cambodia,’ *Journal of Development Studies*, 47(9), 2011, pp.1353-1370, p.1354.

⁸⁰ CCHR, p.8.

disadvantage due to their limited access to formal education and training.

There is frequent reference in the literature to economic barriers for women interested in pursuing political leadership roles. This relates both to the cost of being away from income generating activities whilst doing community work and to the need for candidates to have resources to increase their electoral chances. The top recommendation made by the Cambodian Center for Human Rights to international partners wishing to support women candidates is to assist them in identifying options for income generation.⁸¹ Tem Ly's research on pathways to local leadership shows that women who are successfully elected to Commune Councils are likely to have independent sources of income. Access to resources is therefore a key factor in relation to electoral success.

Political factors

As noted, political parties' stated support for women's participation as political leaders is not matched by policies or formal strategies.⁸² Research shows that women are consistently listed lower on candidate lists at both national and Commune Council elections.⁸³ Highlighting the interdependent nature of factors influencing women's representation, political party officials interviewed by Sokunthea Koy said they could not place women high on their list because women were unlikely to have the material resources to run a successful campaign.

The success of candidates is also highly dependent on the influence of inner-party networks of men which can be highly inaccessible to women.⁸⁴ Where women are successful, they are commonly assigned to low ranking roles. On Commune Councils, women have generally been elected as ordinary members rather than commune chief, first deputy or second deputy.⁸⁵

Unsurprisingly, researchers identify having the 'right' political connections as a key factor in women's success at the local as well as national level. Formal and informal connections to people with political influence are extremely important, as Tem Ly's interviews with women and men commune councillors confirm. It is widely acknowledged that the candidates at the top of the party

lists are most likely to be elected and that political parties therefore have a significant, or indeed deciding, influence on election outcomes. A woman councillor with no previous experience of working in her local community explained to Tem Ly:

Let me tell you how I was selected. The head of the party and I are not related, but the reason he chose me [is] because he knows I am an active person. For instance, I can do advocacy on behalf of my commune chief. I can work co-operatively with other male commune councillors.. They all trusted me. Thus, a strong support from my political parties is needed. Then they will put you as their top candidate on the party list, so you will be easily elected as a leader.⁸⁶

Social norms relating to gender

Review of the literature suggests that perceptions of women's role and capacity have a significant influence on outcomes for women. The discussions documented by the Cambodian Center for Human Rights indicate that views of women as subordinate to men and less capable than men of high level leadership are extremely influential.⁸⁷ The Asian Development Bank identifies 'traditional' views that women are not suited to public office as one of the most significant challenges to increasing women's political participation.⁸⁸ The Ministry of Women's Affairs describes these values as the 'invisible barrier' to women's progress:

Social perceptions of female inadequacy in politics continue to be used as a basis for their marginalization and segregation in decision-making positions. Traditional beliefs which under-value women's capacities and potential are an invisible barrier to their active participation. This is particularly true for young women who believe they are less capable than their male counterparts and less

⁸¹ CCHR, p.17.

⁸² CCHR, p.12.

⁸³ Chhoeun, p.543.

⁸⁴ MOWA (2014), p.4.

⁸⁵ CCHR, p.3.

⁸⁶ Ly, p.81.

⁸⁷ CCHR, p.7.

⁸⁸ ADB, p. 5.

suit to play a prominent role in politics and governance.⁸⁹

In discussion of gender norms in Cambodia, many of the sources reviewed refer to the influence of the *Chbab Srei* (also spelled *Srey*) and *Chbab Proh*. These literary verses in Khmer are commonly referred to as 'traditional codes of conduct' for women and men respectively. The exact origins of the texts are unclear; however, they appear to have been cited for several generations. In poetic form, the texts set out expectations for women and men in relation to behaviour and social roles. The text for boys and men underlines the importance of being hardworking and productive. The text for girls and women emphasises the importance of being quiet, patient and submissive to one's husband.⁹⁰

The *Chbab Srei* was part of the formal curriculum for girls in Cambodia until 11 years ago, with girls being required to recite passages of the text over the course of the highly formative upper primary and lower secondary years of school. The Ministry of Women's Affairs successfully argued for the partial removal of the text from the school curriculum. However, recent accounts suggest that it is still commonly referenced.⁹¹ Writers suggest that the *Chbab Srei* has been highly influential in terms of social understandings of the possible roles of women in society. As noted, the Committee on CEDAW in 2011 commended the Government of Cambodia for "its efforts to revise its school curricula and textbooks with a view to eliminating gender stereotypes" but strongly stated its concern about the ongoing use of these texts.⁹²

Several academics have analysed dominant cultural characterisations of women and men. Katherine Brickell has conducted a large scale study on women and men's views on the division of household labour in the context of women's increased participation in the formal labour force. She argues that, in spite of policies for gender

equality, national authorities in Cambodia have in fact reinforced ideas of "women's innate abilities within, and affinities to, the domestic sphere."⁹³ She suggests that debate on gender equality has failed to deeply consider these gender norms and that it is time for "national level machinery to promote through its public engagement and educational syllabuses a more nuanced construct of Khmer national identity."⁹⁴

Researcher Mona Lilja has been analysing the representation of women in Cambodia for the past two decades. She similarly argues that it is critical to move beyond the stereotype of the Cambodian woman as apolitical. Based on interviews with politicians, civil society representatives and scholars, she offers examples of alternative subject positions for women. These include 'the woman parliamentarian', 'the NGO worker', 'the activist' and 'the rural mother-in-law', an elder with the power to decide how family assets are distributed.⁹⁵

Trudy Jacobsen, drawing on work by sociologist Maria Mies, explores the impact of prolonged periods of civic conflict on gender relations. Discussing experiences in post-conflict nations including Cambodia, she suggests that despite "progressive constitutions and legal equality between men and women, and women's enormous contribution to the war effort and to the reconstruction of the economy, women are nowhere adequately represented on the political decision-making bodies and are, moreover, sent back to the family and the "subsidiary economy", whereas men "move up" after struggles for national liberation."⁹⁶ Jacobsen argues that the relegation of women to domestic spaces allows men to work in the public spaces and previously prevailing concepts of masculinity and femininity to remain uncontested. She suggests this historical perspective is useful for understanding the ways in which women are

⁸⁹ MOWA (2014), p.11.

⁹⁰ See <http://www.worldaffairs.org/blog/383-taught-to-be-worthless>. An English translation of the *Chbab Srei* can be found at <https://cambodiaexpatsonline.com/cambodian-culture-and-language/chbab-srey-code-and-conduct-for-khmer-women-t5014.html#p74365>.

⁹¹ See <https://universelles.net/2017/07/25/chbab-srey-the-way-to-be-the-perfect-cambodian-woman/>.

⁹² United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (2013), p.4.

⁹³ Brickell, p.1354.

⁹⁴ Brickell, p.1367.

⁹⁵ Lilja, Mona and Mikael Baaz, 'Gendered politics of power in contemporary Cambodia,' in Katherine Brickell (ed), *The handbook of contemporary Cambodia*, 2016, pp. 307-311.

⁹⁶ Cited in Jacobsen, pp 166-167.

“acting within the confines of their environment to effect changes to the way that they are perceived.”⁹⁷

Writers agree that work towards the increased representation of women in leadership must address both the historically influential gender norms and new norms emerging in the context of social change. In Lilja’s terms, the subject position of the woman political leader is “in development” in Cambodia and requires significant and ongoing attention to prosper.⁹⁸

LITERATURE ON WOMEN AS LEADERS IN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL SPHERES

There is limited formal research in English on women’s leadership in economic and social spheres, with much of the literature of a gender assessment nature. Reports by the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, INGOs and NGOs provide important information on women’s participation in the formal and informal economies; however, there is little analysis of women’s leadership in this sphere.⁹⁹ Similarly, there is limited formal research into conceptualisations of leadership by women in social contexts. Recent work by Mona Lilja and Mikael Baaz is a notable exception and there is some grey literature exploring the role of women as religious leaders.

Women and economic leadership

The increased participation of women in the labour force over the last two decades is seen as an important development achievement in Cambodia. The government states that “greater participation by women in the economy will accelerate the attainment of national goals, such as sustainable and inclusive economic development with a fair share for women.”¹⁰⁰ It is well established that women in Cambodia have benefited less than men from

the new opportunities for economic participation brought about by globalization. The large majority of women who are active outside the family home work in the informal sector, most commonly in agriculture, retail and manufacturing.¹⁰¹ This sector is seen as a useful domain for women because it offers opportunities for income generation that do not require high levels of formal education or technical skills. While these activities can generate cash, informal work does not have any official status, regulation or protection. Income is often irregular and accompanied by poor work conditions.¹⁰² An overview of women’s participation in the informal sector developed for Gender and Development Cambodia (GADC) highlights the significant challenges and risks for women running micro or small enterprises. These include limited access to finance and business skills and fluctuating markets for goods and services. GADC describes an environment in which women entrepreneurs struggle to survive, let alone have the capacity to lead others in bringing about change.¹⁰³

Two national organisations exist to support women entrepreneurs. The Cambodia Women Entrepreneurs Association (CWEA) was established in 2011 with support from the Ministry of Women’s Affairs. CWEA exists to bring issues of importance to women entrepreneurs to the attention of government, the business community and the media, offering training and networking opportunities to its members. It has grown rapidly since inception, from an initial 12 to a suggested 300 registered members.¹⁰⁴

SHE (Support Her Enterprise) Investments is a non-profit organization which describes itself as focusing on the ‘missing middle’ between micro enterprise and small-medium enterprise for women in Cambodia. SHE Investments supports women with micro businesses to increase the scale and impact of their enterprise with a long term vision of bringing about social change:

⁹⁷ Jacobsen, p. 166.

⁹⁸ Lilja and Baaz, p. 309.

⁹⁹ See for example Ministry of Women’s Affairs (2014c), ADB (2012), GADC (2014).

¹⁰⁰ MOWA (2014c), p.1.

¹⁰¹ MOWA (2014c), p. 4.

¹⁰² MOWA (2014c), p. 5.

¹⁰³ Ek Sopheara and Chan Sokyeng, ‘Policy review on women participation in income generating activities: GADC’, 2014, pp. 4-5.

¹⁰⁴ CWEA can be found online at <https://www.facebook.com/CambodiaWomenEntrepreneurs/> (website in development). Membership numbers taken from <http://www.ccc-cambodia.org/en/ngodb/ngo-information/3314>.

The SME sector is the backbone of any economy, but it's also a very male-dominated one. Men are more likely to have access to business training, mentoring and financing than women. They typically own larger and more profitable businesses, and are more likely to attain investment. We want women to have those same opportunities.”¹⁰⁵

Neither CWEA nor SHE Investments has conducted research on women entrepreneurs or women’s economic leadership. However, both provide a potential forum for women to develop their own business and to share their experiences with other women.

Women and social leadership

Some of the literature reviewed makes reference to understandings of women in Cambodia as being ‘naturally’ suited to household management and, by extension, community leadership.¹⁰⁶ In research based on interviews with community members, women are commonly seen as being skilled in household and resource management and having an important role to play in terms of positively influencing children and young people. The women most frequently nominated as role models in Srey Mom Lund’s study are teachers and parents.¹⁰⁷ There is limited research on conceptualisations of leadership at a community level and the identification of social leadership roles for women outside these stereotypical spheres.

Academics Lilja Mona and Mikael Baaz have written recently about alternative identities for women in present day Cambodia.¹⁰⁸ The authors acknowledge prevalent gender stereotypes but suggest that, as women have become increasingly active in the economic sphere, alternative ‘subject positions’ are emerging. They discuss political roles (women politicians, NGO workers) and

suggest two other powerful identities for women: ‘the mother-in-law’ and ‘the woman land activist.’

According to this research, there is a convention of older women in Cambodia having responsibility for family assets and wealth. ‘Mothers-in-law’ can play a critical role in the distribution of family resources, including property, and the negotiation of access to land. Age and wealth are important factors in local power relations and, the authors suggest, the judgments of the ‘mother-in-law’ can strongly influence social relations. In this sense, the ‘mother-in-law’ can be seen as an important social leader, a figure of authority who “in some senses challenge(s) the gentle and passive female pictured in the *Chbab srei*.”¹⁰⁹

Women protesting against ‘land-grabbing’ in Cambodia have received national and international attention, in part because their image defies stereotypes of ‘the Cambodian woman.’¹¹⁰ Women land activists have achieved extremely important practical outcomes in Cambodia. Some of their methods – for example, publicly removing their clothes to protest against forceful eviction - have strongly challenged prevailing gender norms. Lilja and Baaz put forward the non-violent ‘woman land activist’ as another potential subject position, suggesting that the resistance practices adopted by women activists transgress the “boundaries of prevailing femininity” and, in doing so, disrupt dominant discourses in relation to gender and power.¹¹¹

Within the context of social leadership, women’s activity in the religious sphere is also relevant. Debate about gender equality in religion, or more specifically, in Theravada Buddhism, is complicated by deeply held beliefs about religious principles and traditions. Some scholars suggest that Theravada Buddhism has an early history of gender equality, with female ordination an accepted practice in the earliest days of Buddhism.¹¹² However, ordination of

¹⁰⁵ See <https://www.sheinvestments.com/womens-economic-empowerment-programs/>.

¹⁰⁶ See work by Koy, Ly and Lund.

¹⁰⁷ Lund, p. 13.

¹⁰⁸ Lilja and Baaz, pp. 310-311.

¹⁰⁹ Lilja and Baaz, p.311.

¹¹⁰ See Robertson, Holly, *Cambodian Elections: ‘The women who lost their land and are now fighting for*

power,’ *The Guardian*, 3 June 2017. Retrieved <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2017/jun/03/dispossessed-land-cambodian-women-enter-politics>.

¹¹¹ Lija and Baaz, p.311.

¹¹² Nathaniel Adams, ‘Cambodia’s “quiet movement”’: Buddhist women in development,’ *World Faiths Development Dialogue*, 2011, p.4.

women has fallen away over recent centuries and nuns in Cambodia today have a significantly lower status than monks. Nuns and ‘wat grannies’, older women who actively participate in worship but have no religious designation, may work in temples but are subservient and in service to monks. Their standing and influence in the community are notably less than those of the male religious figures.

The Association of Nuns and Laywomen of Cambodia (ANLWC) has been campaigning since 1995 for higher status for nuns and wat grannies. ANLWC’s stated mission is “to reconstruct this country and bring peace” by increasing gender equality, arguing, “Buddha said that women and men have equal rights.”¹¹³ ANLWC challenges the dominant perception that nuns’ primary obligation is to cook and clean for monks. It provides training to young women who wish to work in their local community as teachers, mediators and counsellors. These are emerging leadership roles:

These activities constitute a quiet movement of Cambodian Buddhist women who have walked and are walking slowly towards equal rights and gender equity and promoting the equal rights of women within the realm of Buddhism as well as in the secular environment.¹¹⁴

Some observers see this as part of a broader movement to ‘modernise’ Buddhism in Cambodia, drawing links between this work and broader changes in gender norms.¹¹⁵

POTENTIAL AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH ON

WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP IN CAMBODIA

Women as leaders in economic and social spheres

There is little doubt that women are highly active as leaders in economic and social spheres in Cambodia. However, there is limited literature on these forms of leadership. If women are “the backbone of economy and society” in Cambodia, as stated by the government, this engagement needs to be better understood and recognised.¹¹⁶ Further research on women’s leadership in the economic sphere would be valuable. Exploration of the relationship between economic leadership and subsequent political leadership could also be an area of interest in the changing economic environment of Cambodia.

Significant work towards gender equality is taking place in the form of social organising and movement building. Research on women as informal leaders in social, including religious, spheres would also be useful in understanding broader change taking place Cambodia.

Public perceptions of women as leaders

The *Democracy in Cambodia* surveys provide an excellent starting point for more extensive exploration of public perceptions of women as political leaders. There would be value in further drawing out the views of community members, particularly in relation to women’s leadership at Commune Council level. Similarly, further exploration of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ leadership qualities as documented in the Women’s Forums is important for understanding women’s political opportunities and challenges.¹¹⁷

All writers reviewed acknowledge that Cambodia is undergoing rapid social change and that this is influencing gender roles. Women’s increasing access to the formal labour force has significant implications for their

¹¹³ ANLWC Project Director Chan Sobunvy quoted in Emily Wright and Vandy Muong, ‘Gender politics in the pagoda,’ Phnom Penh Post 9/11/13.

¹¹⁴ Adams, p.7.

¹¹⁵ Wright, p.3.

¹¹⁶ As stated in successive *Neary Rattanak* documents. Kingdom of Cambodia (2014), p.7.

¹¹⁷ The study on this topic conducted in 2018-19 has now been completed. See Norm, Sina, Sok, Serey and Sabina Lawreniuk, *Public Perceptions of Women’s Leadership at Commune Councils in Cambodia*, 2019. Available at iwda.org.au.

experience of power and social recognition. ‘Traditional’ views on acceptable roles for women co-exist with newer understandings. Sokunthea Koy writes about hearing two simultaneous discourses in her research, characterising these as ‘women belong near the kitchen stove’ and ‘women nowadays can do the same as men.’¹¹⁸ Recent work by young Cambodian scholars including Koy provides a strong framework for further investigating the range of present-day views on women and their capacity for leadership.

The experiences of women leaders

The experiences of women who have filled political leadership roles are captured to some degree in research by Thavy Chhoeun, Lilja Mona, Sokunthea Koy and others more tangentially. Researchers have documented a range of impediments for women aspiring to political leadership in Cambodia. These include the challenge of combining a public role with domestic responsibilities, questioning of their own capacity and skills and, often, disillusionment with existing political processes.¹¹⁹ Research on the social, economic and political factors influencing women who hold or have held leadership roles in Cambodia is in development.¹²⁰ Learnings from further work in this area will be extremely valuable for increasing women’s participation and influence.

Changing gender norms in the context of social history

Finally, researchers on women’s participation in political leadership suggest that gender norms must be understood in the context of the Cambodia’s political history, including the extremely violent recent history. Trudy Jacobsen argues that the extreme social upheaval caused by political events in the twentieth century has had significant implications for gender relations. She suggests that resistance to changes in gender roles, often seen as an attachment to ‘traditional’ values, may be more helpfully understood as also a response to this upheaval:

the erosion of further ‘traditional’ values – or values inculcated as traditional – would

increase the vulnerability of a people already threatened with an identity crisis, as kin and client support systems, decimated by the revolutionary decade and its aftermath, slip away.¹²¹

Legislative work towards gender equality, including work on gender norms, is well underway in Cambodia. Jacobsen and others argue that further research into gender norms must take into account these historical events and relate them to broader discourses of class, location and age.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Koy, p. 82.

¹¹⁹ Chhoeun, pp. 544-545.

¹²⁰ The *Women’s Leadership Pathways* study is documenting individual women’s experiences of economic, social and political leadership with IWDA partners in five countries in Asia and the Pacific region,

including Cambodia. The research is overseen by consulting firm Le Groupe-conseil baastel Itée on behalf of IWDA and is due to be completed in 2020.

¹²¹ Jacobsen, p.168.

¹²² Lilja and Baaz, p.311

REFERENCES

- ActionAid. 2016. 'Integrating women's rights into social movements in Phnom Penh, Cambodia: challenges, opportunities and effectiveness.' ActionAid. https://www.actionaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/integrating_womens_rights_into_social_movements_in_cambodia_2015_0.pdf.
- Adams, Nathaniel. 2011. 'Cambodia's "quiet movement": Buddhist women in development.' *World Faiths Development Dialogue*. <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/cambodia-s-quiet-movement-buddhist-women-in-development>.
- Asian Development Bank. 2012. *Cambodia: Country Gender Analysis*. ADB. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/33752/files/cambodia-country-gender-analysis.pdf>.
- Asian Development Bank. 2013. *Gender equality in the labor market in Cambodia*. ADB. <https://www.adb.org/publications/gender-equality-labor-market-cambodia>.
- Asian Development Bank. 2014. *Cambodia: country poverty analysis*. ADB. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/151706/cambodia-country-poverty-analysis-2014.pdf>.
- Brickell, Katherine. 2011. 'The 'stubborn stain' on development: gendered meanings of housework (non-) participation in Cambodia.' *Journal of Development Studies*, 47(9): 1353-1370.
- Cambodia Center for Human Rights. 2013. 'Policy Brief: Women's Political Representation in Cambodia.' https://cchrcambodia.org/admin/media/analysis/analysis/english/2013_07_26_CCHR_Policy_Brief%20%20Women_s_Political_Representation_in_Cambodia_ENG_Final.pdf.
- Chhoeun, Thavy, Panha Sok and Clodagh Byrne. 2008. 'Citadel of Women: strengthening female leadership in rural Cambodia,' *Gender and Development*, 16(3): 535-547.
- Economist Intelligence Unit. 2018. *Democracy Index 2018: Me too? Political participation, protest and democracy*. EIU. https://www.eiu.com/public/topical_report.aspx?campaignid=Democracy2018.
- Gender and Development Cambodia (2015). 'Women and informal economy in Cambodia: opportunities and challenges for women's economic empowerment.' GADC. http://www.gadc.org.kh/downloads/Publication%20/Gender_View_English.pdf.
- Jacobsen, Trudy. 2008. 'Beyond aspara: women, tradition and trajectories in Cambodian politics.' In Iwanaga, K. (ed), *Women's Political Participation and Representation in Asia: Obstacles and Challenges*, Denmark, NIAS Press, 149-172.
- Kijewski, Leonie et al. 2017. 'Women pushed aside: Many female candidates find themselves sliding down pecking order.' Phnom Penh Post, 31 May 2017. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/politics/women-pushed-aside-many-female-candidates-find-themselves-sliding-down-pecking-order>.
- Kijeswki, Leonie and Kong Meta. 2018. 'Women still underrepresented in politics.' Phnom Penh Post, 6 March 2018. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national-politics/women-still-underrepresented-politics>.
- Kingdom of Cambodia. 2008. *Law on Administrative Management of the Capital, Provinces, Municipalities, Districts and Khans* (unofficial translation). Retrieved http://www.cdc-crdb.gov.kh/cdc/twg_network/country_systems_cambodia/strengthening_national_systems/documents_for_reform/sndd/organic_law_2008_en.pdf.
- Kingdom of Cambodia. 2013. 'Speech to the 56th Session of the CEDAW by Her Excellency Dr Ing Kantha Phavi.' Retrieved http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/KHM/INT_CEDAW_STA_KHM_15361_E.pdf
- Kingdom of Cambodia. 2014. *Neary Rattanak IV: Five Year Strategic Plan for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment*. Retrieved http://www.kh.undp.org/content/dam/cambodia/docs/DemoGov/NearyRattanak4/Cambodian%20Gender%20Strategic%20Plan%20-%20Neary%20Rattanak%204_Eng.pdf.
- Koy, Sokunthea. 2016. 'How women's roles in local politics are understood at the commune level: Boeung Preah commune, Cambodia.' Thesis submitted for Masters of Development Studies, Victoria University of Wellington.
- Lilja, Mona & Mikael Baaz. 2016. 'Gendered politics of power in contemporary Cambodia.' In Katherine Brickell

(ed), *The handbook of contemporary Cambodia*, London, Routledge, 306-314.

Ly, Tem. 2015. 'Leadership pathways for local women: Case studies of three communes in Cambodia.' Thesis submitted for Masters of Development Studies, Victoria University of Wellington.

Maffii, Margherita. 2011. 'Women's leadership: a case study from Cambodia.' Heinrich Böll Stiftung Cambodia. <https://kh.boell.org/en/2011/08/16/womens-leadership-case-study-cambodia>.

Ministry of Women's Affairs. 2014. *Leading the way: Cambodia gender assessment (executive summary)*. MOWA.

http://www.kh.undp.org/content/dam/cambodia/docs/DeMoGov/NearyRattanak4/Neary%20Rattanak%204%20-%20Summary_Eng.pdf.

Ministry of Women's Affairs. 2014. *Gender mainstreaming: institutional, partnership and policy context (Policy Brief 1)*. MOWA (2014a).

http://www.kh.undp.org/content/dam/cambodia/docs/DeMoGov/NearyRattanak4/Neary%20Rattanak%204%20-%20PB%20Gender%20Mainstreaming_Eng.pdf.

Ministry of Women's Affairs. 2014. *Gender relations and attitudes: Cambodia gender assessment (Policy Brief 2)*. MOWA (2014b).

<http://www.kh.undp.org/content/dam/cambodia/docs/DeMoGov/NearyRattanak4/Neary%20Rattanak%204%20-%20PB%20Gender%20Relations%20and%20Attitudes%20Eng.pdf>

Ministry of Women's Affairs. 2014. *Women's economic empowerment: Cambodia gender assessment 2014 (Policy Brief 3)*. MOWA (2014c).

<http://www.kh.undp.org/content/dam/cambodia/docs/DeMoGov/NearyRattanak4/Neary%20Rattanak%204%20-%20Women's%20Economic%20Empowerment%20Eng.pdf>.

National Institute of Statistics. 2019. 'Provisional Population Totals of General Population Census of Cambodia 2019.' NIS.

<http://nis.gov.kh/index.php/km/15-gpc/79-press-release-of-the-2019-cambodia-general-population-census>.

Phnom Penh Post staff. 2018. 'Women in the headlines: Cambodia's year in review.' Phnom Penh Post, 8 May 2018. <https://phnompenhpost.com/national/women-headlines-cambodias-year-review>.

Robertson, Holly. 2017. 'Cambodian elections: The women who lost their land and are now fighting for power.' The Guardian, 3 June 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2017/jun/03/dispossessed-land-cambodian-women-enter-politics>.

Royal Government of Cambodia. 2003. *Initial, Second and Third Report on the Implementation of the International Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in Cambodia*. Retrieved http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2fC%2fKHM%2f1-3&Lang=en.

Royal Kingdom of Cambodia. 2010. *The Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia* (unofficial translation). Retrieved <http://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/kh/kh009en.pdf>.

Royal Government of Cambodia. 2011. *Combined Fourth and Fifth Report on the Implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*. http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2fC%2fKHM%2f4-5&Lang=en.

Royal Government of Cambodia. 2018. 'Rectangular Strategy for Growth, Employment, Equity and Efficiency: Building the Foundation Toward Realizing the Cambodia Vision 2050 Phase IV.' <http://cnv.org.kh/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Rectangular-Strategy-Phase-IV-of-the-Royal-Government-of-Cambodia-of-the-Sixth-Legislature-of-the-National-Assembly-2018-2023.pdf>.

Royal Government of Cambodia. 2018. *Sixth periodic report submitted by Cambodia under Article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*. https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Countries.aspx?CountryCode=KHM&Lang=EN.

Royal Government of Cambodia. 2018. *Cambodian Sustainable Development Goals (CSDGs) Framework (2016-2030)*. Phnom Penh: Ministry of Planning. See <https://landportal.org/organization/cambodia-ministry-planning>.

Sopheara, Ek and Chan Sokyeng. 2014. 'Policy review on women participation in income generating activities: cases of women in informal sector in Phnom Penh, Kampong Chhnang and Prey Veng.' GADC.

http://www.gadc.org.kh/downloads/Publication%20/Gen der_View_English.pdf.

Srey, Mom Lund. 2013. 'Women's leadership: A community's understanding of women's leadership, based on 30 interviews with people from seven villages in Svay Rieng Province, Cambodia.' ChildFund Cambodia. <https://www.childfund.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Cambodia-Women-leadership-research.pdf>.

The Asia Foundation. 2003. *Democracy in Cambodia – 2003: a survey of the Cambodian electorate*. TAF. <https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/DemocracyinCambodia.pdf>.

The Asia Foundation. 2014. *Democracy in Cambodia – 2014: a survey of the Cambodian electorate*. TAF. <https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/DemocracyinCambodia2014.pdf>.

UNIFEM et al. 2004. *A Fair Share for Women: Cambodia Gender Assessment 2004*. UNIFEM. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/32228/cga-cambodia.pdf>.

United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. 2013. 'Concluding Observations on the Combined Fourth and Fifth Periodic Reports of Cambodia.' UN. Retrieved http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2fC%2fKHM%2fCO%2f4-5&Lang=en.

Universelles project. 2017. 'Chbab Srey – The way to be the perfect Cambodian woman.' Universelles, 25 July 2017. <https://universelles.net/2017/07/25/chbab-srey-the-way-to-be-the-perfect-cambodian-woman/>.

USAID Cambodia. 2016. *Cambodia Gender Assessment September 2016*. USAID. <https://banyanglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Cambodia-Gender-Assessment-Report.pdf>.

Wright, Emily and Muong, Vandy. 2013. 'Gender politics in the pagoda: the female voices who call for change.' Phnom Penh Post, 9 September 2013. Copy available from IWDA.

OTHER RESOURCES

Griffith, L. 2010. 'Strengthening democracy and electoral processes in Cambodia: Lessons learned and best practices in promoting women participation and representation in Cambodia 2010.' UNDP Cambodia.

Ministry of Women's Affairs. 2014. 'Leading the way: Cambodia gender assessment (executive summary).' http://www.kh.undp.org/content/dam/cambodia/docs/DemoGov/NearyRattanak4/Neary%20Rattanak%204%20-%20Summary_Eng.pdf

Öjendal, Joakim and Kim Sedara. 2014. 'Gatekeepers in local politics: political parties in Cambodia and their gender policy.' Cambodia Development Research Institute (CDRI) Working Paper Series No. 87. <https://cdri.org.kh/publication/gatekeepers-in-local-politics-political-parties-in-cambodia-and-their-gender-policy/>.

Salva, Ana. 2016. 'The "perfect" Cambodian woman.' Equal Times, 12 October 2016. <https://www.equaltimes.org/the-perfect-cambodian-woman?lang=en#.WvUOLS9L1TY>.

Sedara, Kim et al. 2013. 'A gendered analysis of decentralisation reform in Cambodia.' Cambodia Development Research Institute (CDRI). <https://cdri.org.kh/wp-content/uploads/wp71e-1.pdf>.

Sethi, Gabriella. N.d. 'Increasing women's political representation and participation in Cambodia through the implementation of gender quotas.' Presumed Heinrich Böll Stiftung Cambodia. https://kh.boell.org/sites/default/files/gabriella_sethi_increasing_womens_political_representation_120713.pdf.

World Bank. 2017. *Cambodia - Sustaining strong growth for the benefit of all*. World Bank Group. <https://hubs.worldbank.org/docs/imagebank/pages/docprofile.aspx?nodeid=27520556>

Vong, C. 2012. 'The relationship between traditional Cambodian values and women in politics.' Thesis submitted for Master of Public Administration, University of Hawai'i.

Level 1, 250 Queen Street
Melbourne VIC 3000
1300 661 812
iwda@iwda.org.au
www.iwda.org.au

