

# ***Women's Leadership: A Case Study From Cambodia***



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## Summary

In a rural commune in Kratie province, a group of women motivated to work for the emancipation of other women, gathered together and initiated a series of activities aimed at promoting new roles and opportunities for women in their community. They gave birth to a network of women involved in initiatives and small projects, in order to encourage women's self-confidence and capacities. Together, these women were able to step out of traditional roles and engage in new public and social activities.

With the support of NGOs, and by taking advantage of the decentralisation process, that has begun to create opportunities for local political leaders since the 2002 commune elections, these women have been able to gain important leadership positions in their communities, and in the 2007 commune elections a woman was elected to serve as the chair of the commune. According to these women, their activities have had an impact on the perception of women and gender issues by the community, and their interventions have been effective in reducing domestic violence, widespread among the families in the commune.

For this reason their experience offers a great opportunity to learn more about strategies that women can employ to gain representation in politics and in their communities while seeking gender equality. The Heinrich Böll Foundation has thus started a discussion and research initiative with this group of women and their community since 2008, hoping to gain insight from their efforts and results.

The first question this case study would like to answer is how these women were able to gain their relevance within their community and in local politics, to the point of even becoming village and commune chiefs. According to them, they started by setting up a network of volunteers, helping women get health care and health education. They focused on building self-confidence and self-esteem, in order to overcome the negative impact of gender discrimination and the feeling of being inadequate and incapable. They encouraged women to take on new tasks in social organisations such as fishery committees, rice banks, or in other small development projects. The initial group of motivated women grew into a "critical mass" of nearly 20 or more women, all active at different level with the community.

The personal commitment of the women has been very important in shaping their leadership role, and has required that they negotiate changes within their personal sphere, and reshape their private lives. Convincing their husbands to accept their new role as women leaders has demanded patience and skill, but their efforts have been paid back by the esteem of the women in their community. They have become role models: their actions have illustrated that things can be changed and that women and men can negotiate new gender roles while living together in peace and mutual satisfaction.

During this process of leadership building, they have been confronted with crises, in particular when communities' resources, forest and access to water sources, were in danger. The women inspired and led the villagers to protect their rights. This distinguished them in their communities as trustworthy and accountable leaders, willing to act and even take risks for their community. Noticeably, women leaders have different political affiliations, but this diversity has not created divisions or tensions. They have been able to overcome political differences and cooperate with each other.

The second research question concerned how women leaders have been able to pursue gender equality, and in particular to counteract domestic violence, which is widespread in Cambodia. The women's group has dealt with the problem in different ways. On one

hand, they have encouraged women to report episodes of violence and to look for support and justice, instead of considering violence to be part of their duty as housewives, to be endured in silence. Victims of domestic violence in the community found the women leaders to be compassionate and attentive listeners, understanding their problems and willing to find solutions, more than their former male colleagues. The women volunteers' network and women in different roles and positions in the community engaged in educational activities about women's rights and in counselling with the most problematic situations. But most importantly they applied the law, treating domestic violence as a severe offence, without showing tolerance towards perpetrators. They pushed the police force to perform their duties, and to use all the means available to them, including imprisonment, whenever necessary and appropriate.

The women leaders profiled in this case study continue to represent an example for individuals in their communities, who acknowledge their capacities, correctness and accountability. Many community members mention the changes occurred among the leaders' families and husbands, who agreed to deal with household chores like cooking and washing, and have let their wives free to travel and fulfil their political roles. These changes are considered inspiring, and new men's roles present an example, even for community men.

For many village women, domestic violence has decreased. They feel that local authorities are listening to women's calls for help more and dealing with the issue properly. However, some have stated that there haven't been substantial changes. Violence continues to ravage certain families. From further discussions with community women on this subject, it appeared that the number of cases has in fact significantly decreased. The commune chief, for example, mentioned that at the beginning of her mandate her telephone rang every night, and she had to deal with domestic violence related emergencies on a daily basis. Now, however, the remaining cases are the more complex or entrenched and this has had an impact on the collective perception of the issue. Associated with violence against women, the study has highlighted the often unacknowledged problem of alcoholism among the men, which seem to be increasing.

The discussions with village women revealed the changes that occurred during the years covered by the research; during the discussions, community women wanted to talk more about their daily problems of land scarcity, lack of employment, and families' disbanding, than about women's leadership. While in 2008 the commune leaders maintained that there wasn't a land problem in the community, by 2011 it has become a major issue. The price of land has increased since 2008, and many families have sold their land to get cash and are now labourers in others' fields. Also, land concessions have impeded access to forest land, where villagers used to find non-timber products. The situation of land property has become extremely intricate, and only the most powerful people in the community seem to be able to protect their own interests.

Migration in the country and abroad is peaking, driven by media campaigns that solicit young women to leave the country to work as maids or factory workers in Malaysia or South Korea. The perception that companies facilitating overseas migration are fully supported by the government increases their appeal and promotes migration as an easy and safe way to get money. The dark side of the issue, the difficulties faced by girls there, their aloneness and lack of legal protection, is not fully acknowledged.

Because of these critical situations, women leaders find it difficult to support grassroots women and answer their needs. The process of political decentralisation in Cambodia does

not yet provide local authorities with the power and the means to develop policies about development in their areas. Women leaders find themselves bare handed in dealing with crises, or have their range of action restricted to decisions concerning small infrastructure rebuilding. Secondly, the institutional gender mainstreaming program that accompanies decentralisation, has gained momentum. This implies a significant change in gender referral principles: awareness of gender discrimination and its implications, and the need to restore women's self-confidence and esteem have been replaced by a vision that equates gender to "women's and children's affairs". This discourse promoted by the institutional gender mainstreaming bodies is extended to women leaders through meetings, workshops, provincial gatherings etc., where this perspective is continuously reiterated without any further analysis of gender discrimination and its impact and implication, nor any elaboration on policies to target it.

Even more important, the NGOs in the area do not counteract this tendency and have stopped providing women leaders with the critical inputs and tools they need to analyse such new trends. On gender related issues, NGOs seem to have given away their role of advocates for new and progressive social perspectives, and instead given into the institutional gender mainstreaming discourse.

In conclusion, the experience in this community shows that by mobilising women, building networks and focusing on self-confidence and awareness of discrimination, it is possible to achieve important results in terms of women's participation in social life and decision-making. It also stresses the relevance of women leaders' accountability and example: gender roles should evolve at the personal, social, cultural and political levels. Leading by example is what made women leaders in this community succeed, and gain trust and acknowledgment. Nevertheless, in order to secure their achievements, results need to be constantly reviewed and strategies updated. And grassroots women and communities' participation is crucial to activate this process. If local women leaders limit themselves to follow the conservative agenda proposed at the institutional level, they will not be able to answer the needs of the women they seek to help, and will lose the capital of trust they have worked so hard to establish.

### **Acknowledgments**

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### **Why this cases study?**

In 2008, the Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBF), the German Development Cooperation (GTZ) and the Cambodian Committee to Promote Women in Politics (CPWP) launched a research project in the North East of Cambodia, in order to discuss women's participation in local politics and find out what were the major obstacles they were facing. During the field work, we came in contact with a non-indigenous commune where a number of

women were holding relevant leadership positions in formal politics and community organisations, such as commune chief, village chiefs, or chiefs of committees. The discussion with them showed that their high share in leadership positions was the result of a long term strategy, pursued for years, based on collective action.

At that time it wasn't possible to analyse the reasons for their success: a success that differed very much from the typical situation in rural Cambodia where women very often play only a marginal role in local politics. Interestingly, however, during this first discussion, the women leaders of the community made some important claims. According to them, their political style differed from the mainstream. They were more accountable to their constituents rather than those in positions above them. They valued transparency and were not corrupt. They worked as a group without adopting the hierarchical structure model of mainstream politics. And they were able to implement measures to reduce violence against women with some success.

These issues, and particularly how to gain significant representation and participation in local politics, and how this leadership share is going to benefit women and promote gender equality, are at the core of the worldwide debate concerning women in politics. We thus decided to study the experience of these women in more depth, with the aim of identifying strategies and practices that could be extended and shared to other communities and groups working for gender equality. We hope that this case study could offer some insight into the process of building women's leadership and contributes to the development of projects and policies in this domain.

### **Background data**

The commune is located in Kratie province, along the Mekong River, and is comprised of 7 villages and 10,630 inhabitants: 5,644 are females and 4986 males. Nearly one half of the population is under 18 years. The majority of the people, 89%, live off of agriculture, combining paddy rice production with fishery and non-timber forest product exploitation; 5% are involved in businesses and 6% are employed by the public administration. Recently, significant land areas in the province have been given in concession to private companies, reducing land and forest for the inhabitants. This is exposing villagers to problems due to the scarcity of resources, and many people have turned to migration to ensure their livelihood. Men move to other provinces in search of forest products no longer available in their province. Women move to nearby areas to work as labourers in plantations or, pushed by campaigns promoted by radios and TV, as workers or maids in Malaysia.

In 2007 local administrative elections, a woman was elected as chief of the commune. In the previous 2002 poll no women were elected in the local commune council. The elected commune chief is a member of the opposition party, which has gained a relevant share of votes during the last administrative elections. The election of a woman as commune chief is not an obvious outcome: only 69 women have been elected out of 1662 communes in Cambodia, or 4.1%. In the commune that is the subject of this project, however, women play a very active role in local authorities and social organisations: a woman is village chief, a woman was among the first members of the fishery committee, and women are active in other projects and structures, including a network of women health volunteers.

For these reasons the commune provided a valuable opportunity to understand which have been the enabling factors for women to gain representation and participation in decision-making, and how their active participation reverberated among other women in their community.

## **Research questions and methodology**

The case study has focused on two main questions:

- ➔ What has enabled this significant representation of women within the commune?
- ➔ How this has impacted community women's life and, in particular, the occurrence of domestic violence?

The questions have been addressed to two different groups: the women's leadership group and women in the community. The group of women leaders included: the commune chief and a commune councillor; a woman village chief; women village vice-chiefs; the commune gender focal persons; village gender focal persons; chiefs or vice chiefs of community based organisations such as fishery committees and rice banks; members of the network for health care; a representative of the NGO who supported the women network in the commune; and male members of the commune council. Village chiefs or committee members also participated in some of the discussions. The research questions have been discussed during different visits to the commune in 2008, 2009 and 2011. Most of the discussions took place at the commune hall or in private homes.

The discussions with the community's women were concentrated during field visits in 2010 and 2011. Women's groups varied from 5 to 20 participants, and the large majority were middle aged farmers. Discussions took place in houses or little stalls along the road and were public. Meetings and conversations with the village women, in contrast with the talks with the women leaders whose points of view are representative of their group, do not represent the totality of the population and can only be considered indicative of certain themes and perceptions. That does not diminish the relevance of their points of view.

In order to protect people's identities, their names have not been collected and the name of the commune is not mentioned.

The analysis of the data has been carried out by studying all the testimonies and discussions collected during the field work, and by identifying the different themes in relation to the research questions. Results showed some key recurrent issues as well as original isolated contributions. These key elements have been organised in a grid, where all factors have been summarised in different categories to facilitate the understanding of the process. Key elements of speech that help to draw the grid have been reported in the text. Some themes that appeared in many discussions have been isolated and reported in separate stories. The results have been discussed with the women leaders groups and a representation of village women in order to validate the findings and discuss future steps.

## Results

### Outline of the Key Themes Identified

↙	Women's Motivation ↓	↘
Private sphere	Community	Society at large
Limited role in family and society; willingness to change gender roles and step out of tradition.	Women's exclusion and marginalisation; their willingness to help women gain a voice and participate in community life.	Support by NGOs to engage in empowering women and furthering women's projects.
↙	Women's leaders objectives ↓	↘
To get more freedom, change role from housewives to women engaged in social action and politics.	To convince women to be active and assert their rights, and to encourage stepping out of traditional roles.	To gain access and voice in male dominated social and political structures.
↙	Strategies they have adopted ↓	↘
To create dialogue, use patience and cleverness to gain space and support for new gender roles; strengthen links with other women in the group and help each other.	To answer women's practical needs like health care access; create networks, deal with problems, show solidarity and transparency; use support gained in family to convince other women.	To endure and counteract discrimination; use support gained in family and among community to gain voice and space; be efficient, learn, gain experience; work hard.
↙	Results ↓	↘
Husbands support their wives' social and political work and feel proud of the women's work; husbands take new roles helping at home and become examples for the community; the ties between the women leaders become very solid and trusting.	Women trust women; networks help women to solve problems; women dare to speak and start to recognize their rights; domestic violence is reduced; women leaders show that changes are possible; women leaders are recognised as capable and trustable by women and men.	Women gain a role in politics and local governance; women are considered skilled and able to deal with problems; communities lead by a mix of women and men get better results than communities where women are discriminated against.
↙	Obstacles and negative trends ↓	↘
Families are too poor to participate in activities; families' ties become more fragile, many women are left alone; new forms of discrimination that were previously unrecognized (girls moving to Malaysia); gendered impact of social and economic changes, such as increase alcohol consumption.	Weakening of the women's network; less development projects where women can participate and less participation by young women; community facing new problems due to lack of resources and migration; the women's initiative lacks inputs and updates to deal with new problems.	Institutional gender mainstreaming policies focus on "women's and children's affairs" not gender discrimination; NGOs follow the government's gender agenda instead of elaborating on changes and helping communities to develop a progressive gender equality agenda.

#### What drove women to become active in social and public life?

The group of women leaders were pushed to become active and engage in social activities by their awareness of gender based discrimination and by their exclusion from social and political spaces. The lack of roles for women, besides house chores, represented a very strong motivation for engaging in social work and gathering together to find

solutions and strategies. Turning their motivation into action has been facilitated by support from some NGOs, who implemented development projects specifically targeting women in their area.

At the same time, at the country institutional level, some new steps were taken to include a gender focus into the local administration and the process of decentralisation. In fact, at the first administrative elections only 8.4% of women were elected to commune councils in Cambodia and this urged some measures to increase the number of women candidates and women engaged in the local administration. The concept of women and children focal persons, launched as a pilot project in 2002, was then extended to the whole country and one such person was appointed in each commune. Increased focus on women's representation in commune councils in the 2007 elections resulted in an increased share of 14.8 % of female councillors nationwide.

In the case study commune, the 2002 elections did not succeed in bringing women into the commune council, while after the 2007 elections the commune counts 2 women among the 7 members of the council, and one of them in chief position.

Moreover, community based social organisations such as fishery committees or forestry committees, started to appear in many communities.

As a result, there were new opportunities for the group of women in the commune to become active in social and development projects or in the local administration. Nevertheless, the fact that positions are available does not imply that women can easily get access to them; in fact, having been able to engage in the roles and positions made available by such development is among the most relevant achievement of this group of women.

#### **Woman leader**

*Women lack capacities, and this is an obstacle because they are not confident. So education is very important, but the first education should be about women themselves and how important they are! So that they can speak, have confidence, and participate. Then they should learn how to be involved, how to participate, and they should know the law, and have techniques to persuade others, and know how to build the community. They have to be clever, they should consider very deeply all situations and be flexible, don't run but manage issues step by step. They must work at solving problems and be patient, never run away from the problem. Women who can read and write can help the other to establish networks. The NGO help us to build solidarity and capacities, they helped me to study and to learn skills.*

#### **NGO Officer**

*My organization initially helped these women to select some focal women in the communities, and then we helped them organize these women into networks at village and commune levels. But then we realised that we should strengthen their capacities and enable them to understand their roles and responsibilities, and their rights to participate in social work. We want them to understand what roles in the community women can hold to participate in the social work, where normally our women always face constraints. Until they do not understand that they are equal citizens they will not engage in active social roles.*

Their capacity building at first was centred on women's awareness of discrimination and their right to equality, more than on technical abilities or general knowledge about

management or leadership. Only later did they achieve technical abilities and general knowledge about management or leadership. This important theoretical basis is one of the characteristics of this group, and comes out in all the meetings and discussions. This awareness is not a common feature of women's organisations in Cambodia, that often fail to recognise in women's problems the effect of gender discrimination and see capacity building only as a technical problem.

However their first steps were not easy. Most of the initiatives failed because of their lack of experience: small agricultural projects ran out of water; chicken banks were eaten during festivities. In their view, during this apprenticeship they have made "all the possible mistakes" and together had to respond for their actions to the NGOs supporting them; that experience strengthened their ties and the group's solidarity.

### **Leadership building**

In a small community, the private sphere is not so private and personal facts are exposed to the entire group. Women activists had to be coherent in order to be credible and convince other women to take new roles and overcome gender norms and stereotypes. The group of women leaders first had to come to terms with the weight of tradition within their own families. For most of them this required a lot of endurance, patience and cleverness. The women learned ways of negotiating new roles, and found a common ground that helped them relate to the community's women, because all of them had to deal with the same obstacles.

#### **Woman leader**

*For women it is difficult to attend meetings, because when husbands complain, they say that women learn to answer back to them. They complain with me, because I dare to speak and reply to men. The main obstacles come from husbands; often they disagree and don't want their women to work outside. How we step out from tradition? We try to build our capacities by working hard; we persuade men and children. We had to be patient; we worked a lot in the community but also at home. I had to prepare everything at home for my husband before going to work or before a meeting, so he did not complain if I was going to be late. It was a lot of work, sometime too much!*

#### **Woman leader and commune chief**

*I have faced many problems before I reached the position of commune chief, because I am a housewife, and I always had to leave my family behind. Sometimes to become a leader we have to sacrifice not only our time but also our money. We meet all kind of obstacles. Our husbands sometimes give us a chance, but sometimes they do not. However, we must be determined in our actions, even though he forbids us or he is not satisfied, or angry with us. We should try to be calm and behave normally with him in order to reach our goal. I have reached my goal today but it does not mean that I reached it easily. We must struggle with all the obstacles: sometime my husband did not talk to me when he was so tired with a lot of work and I did not have time to help him. But we must decide that to hold this position we must be patient. Even though we faced a lot of problems confronting with him we should stay calm and be kind. We must be aware that we do not fulfil our role as housewives and deal with this. Now my husband supports me, he can take care of many tasks at home, and he is proud of my role and my work.*

### **A different vision of leadership**

The group cohesion has helped them to deal with the difficulties of social work, and to overcome their differences, including the ones due to their political orientations. In fact, women from the opposition party and women from the government party worked together, sharing the same goal of improving women's lives and making them participate more in their community life. Two important episodes have facilitated the consolidation of the group. In one of the cases, there was a mismanagement of public property when a lake was illegally sold to a private party without previous agreement from the community. The women's group took leadership of the initiative, and succeeded in terminating the illegal contract, and restoring the lake to the community. Another episode involved one of the women, who leads the efforts against illegal fishing in the area, which also involved some local authorities colluding with illegal fishing groups. These episodes have contributed to the acknowledgment of the women group's abilities and commitment by the entire community.

According to the women's group they have been able to express a different political style, more transparent and closer to people's needs. Their model of leadership, based on collective decisions, discussion and listening, is more accountable to the people than to the top authorities, and is not corrupted. People recognise their correctness and transparency.

#### ***Woman leaders***

*Women in authorities are closer to the people, more participative, better at listening to the people and more on the side of the people. They stay very close to the villagers; they are on the villagers' side. They do not look for personal advantages and gain, sometime they even lose money, but they do not do this for greed or for personal advantage. Women in politics are quick to solve problems, but in particular women don't want and don't like corruption!!! We discuss with villagers about corruption, and protest about a case of corruption, and now the corrupt men don't dare to act anymore. If there is some pressure from the top on us we will hold a public forum and ask NGOs to attend. Now we have pressure, but we can manage it at the village level; if it will become too much we will call for meeting and go public.*

### **Empowering women**

To achieve confidence and push women to get involved in new roles, the group of women leaders create women's networks and spread simple messages about women's rights. They built women's capacities and overcame the sense of ineptitude resulting from marginalisation by working with "women only" groups. This offered the women the chance to gain self-confidence in an environment protected from direct competition and antagonism exerted by men. One of these spaces was the health network. The activity was simple: create a support network for women in need of medical care, help them reach the hospital when in need, and provide them with information about medical care, or small funds to support them in the most critical cases. Other projects in the commune included a rice bank, a home-made fertilizer group, and an agricultural producers group.

**Woman leader**

*At the beginning it was very hard, women were scared to step out of tradition, they do not have means, and they do not know how to read and write. They have to learn confidence and know that they can do things by themselves. We create groups and build solidarity, and we train women to network together and learn how to negotiate. We get the support of the community; they saw us working very hard, and we were always humble, modest, and we asked villagers to correct us, and we support them and try to bring their problems to the top authorities.*

The women leaders present themselves as a group, and stress their egalitarian and non-directive attitude. The number of active women in the commune increased and during the meetings in the commune there were often more than 15 women participants, all vocal and skilled in articulating their aims and vision. During one of the last meetings, in 2011, attended also by male commune councillors and members of committees and community organisations, none of the original women leaders were present, but the women participants replied to the male participants without being intimidated. The women were very skilled at getting a consensus in relevant gender issues.

**A well-structured analysis of gender issues**

The group of women involved in social and political activities in the community has acquired an articulate and thoughtful ability to analyze gender issues. During the various discussions, including the last meetings held in 2011 to validate the case study results, their view about women's issues did not reflect the dominant view promoted by gender mainstreaming at institutional level in Cambodia.

**Women leaders and commune councillor's discussion about gender**

*The obstacles faced by women are: their lack of knowledge due to the fact that women have little opportunities to study; their poverty and insecure livelihood, which also limit their participation in social and political activities; discrimination by men, who do not praise women's contribution, and are not interested in what women say; the pressure of tradition and the low value given to women; gender roles imposed by tradition, limiting women's life to house work and women's education because if they learn how to write they will write love letters to lovers; women as breadwinners, even in families where there is a husband, because husbands do not care too much and leave women alone to care about children; violence against women, domestic violence, rape, and the continuous feeling of be in danger and lacking safety that affect their psychological well-being.*

During a meeting of women leaders in local administration and in community social organisations from the entire province, the group of women from this commune was the only one providing insight about the origin of women problems in relation to discrimination. The statements expressed by the other delegations were all limited to the assessment of generic issues, such as women's lack of "education", women's poor health, women's limited skills, and domestic violence, without attempting to link them to gender based discrimination.

## **The impact on community women: the issue of domestic violence**

According to the women's group one of their successes in changing traditional gender norms in their community was with the occurrence of domestic violence. Domestic violence is a major concern in Cambodia, therefore the claim made by the women leaders appears very significant. On one side they have promoted education among citizens about women's rights and the protection offered by the law to prevent domestic violence. On the other side, they have been effective in sanctioning the perpetrators, creating an environment less tolerant and more dissuasive, breaking the cycle of impunity and misplaced tolerance.

### **Woman leader**

*Domestic violence is where some changes happen. Our network women dare to deal with the problem with the community, the commune councillors and even the police. Women's problems are taken very seriously now. Domestic violence before was very high, at least 40% of families and women reported cases of violence, but they did not dare to speak and denounce. Now it is reduced. Cases of domestic violence are immediately reported to authorities and police, and the culprits are being arrested and prosecuted according to the law. The village chief is a woman, the vice chief is a woman, the commune chief is a woman, no authority is going to condone the crime of domestic violence, so now we have much less cases. People think very carefully before doing such offences! And also men improved a lot, now they help a lot, they help in the family, they wash the clothes, some men feel ashamed but the majority does not feel ashamed anymore by cooking or doing housework.*

### **Woman leader and commune chief**

*Domestic violence has decreased very much. Before there was so much fighting that almost we couldn't sleep. At night people called me: "Come! There is domestic violence." I use to give my phone number to the people, and this is the reason why I never changed my number and never turned off the phone at night. Then we asked for police intervention and that is one of the reasons why it has decreased. There are still some episodes, but just some, not as much as before. There was a citizen living nearby who was violent at home. We intervened but we thought he just needed to be educated because it was the first time. Later on I couldn't be patient any more because he hit his wife very seriously. I was very angry and I told the chief of the police to handcuff and arrest him. We cannot keep people more than 48 hours under arrest so then he was released and walked back home, screaming all along the road:*

*"This happened because you – he meant all people in the village – have been so stupid to elect women! If the commune chief was a man, he will not have brought me to the police post and handcuffed me. That happened because the commune chief is a woman. There are many men here who did not vote for a man to be chief, they vote for a woman, and now authorities are pro-women!"*

*Then the people come to inform me, and I say: "No problem, next time lets bring him to sleep in a comfortable place in town". Now he is scared and has brought his wife to another village. His wife told me that since then he stopped hitting her. So this part of the village is now quiet. Wives threaten husbands: "If you dare to hit me, I will tell the commune chief to arrest you like that guy."*

According to the women active in the networks, together with the lack of tolerance for the perpetrators, it has been important to work with the families where violence has occurred, to introduce the concept of a woman's right to live free of violence and to try to negotiate and advise husbands.

Another very important issue in the fight against domestic violence is the role played by women in local positions of authority. The fact that there are women representatives makes the women victims of violence feel more at ease in reporting their cases. Moreover, the women in local governing positions, for example village chiefs and the commune chief, do not deny or downplay problems of violence. Rather, they are very quick in answering the calls for help. According to the group, this ensemble of approaches- education about rights, acknowledgment of the problem by authorities, and enforcement of the law- have been the key to their success in dealing with domestic violence. Last but not least, women in decision making positions contribute to enhance women's status in the community, and this has important repercussions on the occurrence of violence against them.

### **Village women speak about their leadership**

During the discussions held with village women, the role and activity of the women's leaders group comes out less obviously. It has to be said that the discussions tended to shift continuously from the research topic, toward other problems that women felt to be urgent and overwhelming, such as poverty, families disbanding, and a lack of resources. Many women did, however, recognise the work done by the leaders to spread information about women's rights and to encourage women to take new roles.

#### ***Woman in village 3***

*Women can work with men, can help each other and exchange roles. Women have changed their role and worked together, to educate and strengthen people. They are patient in their work, and help villagers and women to understand more. We know that they have skills, and try hard to improve people's lives. Now if an organisation comes we can tell them our needs, because the women leaders made many meetings and we learned. And we have a health volunteer group if the villagers are poor they help them with health care.*

*We know about women and men equal rights, we are not afraid to come to meetings and to talk. We attend the meeting and when they ask us our opinion we discuss, and we demand what we need. If we do not attend the meetings we will ask throughout the network.*

Many villagers, when asked to elaborate about the women leaders active in their commune, concentrate their answer on the commune chief. The appreciation of her capacities and skills was shared by the majority of the participants in all the villages. Some of them underlined the importance of her example and how this influenced the people in the community.

#### ***Woman in Village 1***

*I think she is very brave, and she is strong, and she dared to stand for the elections and being elected. She has done good things and she knows that people will accept her. That's why she decided to stand for the elections. We also rely on her, and this makes her even braver. Even if she is a woman, she went on, and dare to be a candidate; if a woman is weak she cannot do such thing. She has worked for the people since 1979. She was chief of the commune association, she has been an example for the people and she has always made good deals.*

*She dared to talk in meetings; she was not afraid, she spoke without fear, so there was not reason for not electing her. She struggles a lot, overcoming obstacles, for the people. She sacrifice herself for us, so why we should not dare to do it for her? If we request her to do something for us she does it. For example we ask her to repair the road, the road was very bad during the rainy season, even carrying water or riding bikes was difficult, so we request: "Commune Chief, please help us to improve the road, it is very difficult to bring home water". So she built the road and the well and we have been very happy!*

### **Woman in Village 2**

*She is a good example. Man or woman is the same, if they are not good, if they cannot work well, people do not elect them. So if she was not good, people would not elect her. She is kind and we love her, she never confiscates anything from the people. If there is conflict, she helps the people and can solve the problems very well and can lead people very well. She educates people to earn legally and she provides a good example, so people love her because she works well. I feel that if the chief is not afraid, we the people, we are not afraid either, we want to be brave like the chief. If the chief is brave, we are brave too; if she is good, people are also good.*

Politics and political affiliations weren't among the topics discussed during the meetings, but it is probable that they have played a role in the appreciation, or disapproval of the commune chief as revealed during some of the discussions.

### **Women in Village 1**

*The commune chief is good, is brave, she is never afraid of others; wherever she goes she dares to intervene, even when there are conflicts. If she wasn't working well or she was corrupt, we wouldn't elect her. But she is not corrupt. She works well, she can help the people, and she can make complaints to help the people when the people have problems, like land conflicts. However, she cannot really win, but she can make some resistance. She can analyse things and can complain for us. For example the price of the ferry, she tried to reduce the fees for us. The ferry owner wants 1000 riels, and she asked to reduce it to 700 riels. It has been not reduced, but she has tried.*

### **Woman in village 4**

*I do not know about this commune leader, if she is good or not, if she is corrupt or not. Before, the chief was a man now is a woman, but there is no difference. We choose the party list to represent the candidates and when the party has a majority of votes they win, like the national elections. I do not see any development of the village, it is still the same. When they campaigned they said that if they will win, the price of the ferry would decrease and they would build more roads, but in fact nothing happen and the ferry price is still the same. I am very angry. The price of gold increased too and gasoline last mandate was around 3,000 riel and now is above 5,000 riel. I know that for the gasoline does not depend from the commune, but for the ferry boat, they promised 700 riel and now it is still 1,000 riel.*

It was interesting to note that what the women leaders have mentioned in relation with their private struggle with husbands, to make them accept their new roles, was perceived by their constituents as an important example.

**Woman in Village 2**

*I want to say that her husband is very nice, that's why she can be a commune chief, because if her husband was like mine, she wouldn't be able! He cooks rice for her wife, support her, encourage her, and never complain or make conflicts. When his wife needs to travel, to go away even one day, he did not wait his wife to come home and make food for him; he is very easy.*

**Woman in Village 1**

*The commune chief husband and the village chief husband are not jealous of their wives. Other men here if their wives have to go somewhere to study something are very jealous. The commune chief and village chief husbands are very easy. I think that if we work for the people we need to be committed and devoted; if we are not devoted to the people, it doesn't work. So he does not wait his wife to cook for him, he cooks, he is committed too.*

**Man in Village 2**

*Yes, [village chief husband] is a good example in our community. I don't want to look too proud of myself, but me too, when my wife cannot cook on time, I help to cook. Women have a lot of work, men have only one work, and we must help each other. So also the commune chief, she leads well and her husband is not jealous of his wife.*

The women leaders are appreciated for their capacities and for the fact that they volunteer to spend their time with the people without extracting money from them. The honesty and integrity of the leaders group has to be understood in contrast to the corrupt practices that unfortunately are reported at many levels in local politics.

**Woman in Village 2**

*People listen to them because they work well. They never want to take money from the people. Whatever they do, they do not take money from us. They give people advice, educate and explain, they help people to find solutions as they can. If they cannot, they send other people from their network to help.*

Concerning domestic violence some women affirmed clearly that violence was reduced, that education and examples helped them to deal with it, including learning about their own rights.

**Woman in Village 2**

*They have helped us solving conflicts, they help us with our husbands, who drink a lot and get drunk. They hold meetings and explain the issues, and help us with reconciliation. And also for health, they explain about the Health Centre, to come when we have fever or are sick, and they are friendly even if we are poor and do not have money. If we ask for help they help us, and this make us feel relieved. Before when we were sick we remained at home, we did not know where to go, and if we went to the hospital we did not have money to pay for it. With health care here in the village we can go without spending too much.*

**Discrepancies**

Not all the villages shared the same ideas and feelings about the impact of the leadership or the positive results achieved in terms of reducing domestic violence or making access to health services easier for women. In some villages women mentioned an

increase in violent behaviour by husbands, and besides spousal abuse, also in sexual assaults or violence in general within the communities.

#### **Woman in village 4**

*Here domestic violence did not decrease. It increased or is the same as before. Men do not listen, we do not know why. We do not know why the families fight. They do not speak out about the reason, but mostly it happen when the husband drinks beer; he comes home, fights with his wife, the children cry, then the husband shouts, and so on. When they are drunk, they came home and are angry. Women are the ones who get hit, they rarely hit men; women do not have power to hit the man, women cannot win, men are always over us.*

When these points of view have been reported back to the leaders group, they advanced two explanations First, cases of domestic violence have been reduced in number but some have become very difficult to solve, with families falling into spirals of violence that last for years. Villagers may perceive that violence persists even if less widespread, due to such intractable cases. Second, the definition of domestic violence encompasses a wide range of problems, including rampant alcohol abuse that affects the male population of different ages and classes, and is not recognised and acknowledged as a social problem.

Another important contradiction appeared during a village discussion about health care. The women there did not know that the commune has mechanisms to facilitate free care for poor families, despite the presence of health care volunteers. The issue has been discussed with the women leaders, and has highlighted some problems concerning the role of the volunteers and perhaps a certain fatigue in this women's network activity. Before, the volunteers were selected by the poorest families, but have since had their mandate renewed by the commune authorities. This may explain the distance that has appeared in some villages between the volunteers and the women that they are supposed to support, and this lack of feed-back from the people may influence their capacity to update their agendas and develop new initiatives.

Another very crucial issue that has come up in many village discussions is the increasing scarcity of resources, such as land, forests and water, and the problems that this is creating in villagers and women's life. Access and control over resources is perceived as unequal and unfair: powerful people are not forbidden to cut trees while poor villagers are arrested even when they are recruited as labourers to cut the trees. Lack of land and resources is forcing migration abroad but also to nearby areas and this weakens family ties, exposing women to the risk of abandonment. In fact many women attending the discussions have been left alone by husbands who simply disappeared and many appeared overwhelmed by the daily battle to ensure their livelihoods and that of their children. These women seemed to be cut off from any social initiative or project. Migration of young women to Malaysia, an increasing trend in the area, solicited animated discussions too, with women clearly against or in favour of migration. Some girls, recently repatriated, took the opportunity of our meetings to tell their stories of hardship and humiliation. Both issues have been reported as separate stories, to provide a better insight about the problems.

In both cases the women leaders group did not seem to have deeply discussed the issues, or elaborated on ideas and possible strategies to support women with such specific needs. Only few of them, including the commune chief, were opposed to or concerned about this migration, which exposes young women to overexploitation and mistreatment,

and is another aspect of traditional gender roles for the young women called to sacrifice themselves for their families.

One of the reasons for this lack of reflection and elaboration on issues that have a crucial impact on women's lives may be related to the increased importance that institutional gender mainstreaming is having, and the kind of discourse about gender roles that it spreads. In fact during the above mentioned provincial meeting with women leaders, gender was equated to "women's and children's needs" and these restricted to only 2 areas -- women's and children's health and education. But if the governmental position on gender equality is marked by a conservative agenda, it is much less understandable that NGOs have adopted the same perspective. The NGO that historically supported the women leaders group in the commune, during an interview to share the case study results, adopted the same approach. They did not consider it a regression compared to their previous capacity building activities centred on discrimination and the need to redress its impact on women and seemed quite satisfied about being in track with the government position.

Two other issues need to be mentioned in this chapter: the lack of younger women working with the leaders, and the reduction or disappearance of many small projects such as agricultural gardens, home compost making, and chicken and rice banks. The NGO who supported all these activities has determined that the women's group is strong enough to carry out the task itself, and has withdrawn its support. This may have been premature, causing the reduction of women's initiatives. But possibly the ongoing changes in the availability of land and resources have created different priorities and strategies, and the boom that has boosted microfinance in rural Cambodia has pushed families to look for other sources of support.

### **Lessons learned**

The case study shows how a group of women has been able to gain voice and relevance in the social and political realm in their commune. Pushed by a strong motivation to work together and promote new opportunities for women in their community, they have supported women's activities, building their capacities and making them aware of the impact of gender discrimination and its consequences. Their capacity building has been centred on "*how important women are*" and aimed at enhancing women's self-confidence and self-esteem.

With the support of a local NGO, the group has been able to include more women, who have been able to assume new tasks in social organisations. For example, women have assumed roles with the fishery committee or as health volunteers, or in formal political or administrative positions whenever these became available - like gender focal persons in villages or in the commune, village chiefs or vice chiefs, commune councillors and commune chief.

Their experience has been primarily fostered by a genuine commitment to changing gender roles, as shown by their personal struggles with their husbands and families to affirm their right to engage in social or political activities in addition to their traditional roles. By standing as consistent examples of the feasibility of their message - *gender roles can be changed* - they have been recognised as trustable leaders. The value of their leadership has been further exposed during specific episodes or crises that have involved villagers' rights. On such occasions they clearly took sides with the villagers and helped them deal with the authorities and protect their resources. This has contributed to

strengthening their bonds with the community, which considers them to be accountable and not corrupt leaders, not afraid to stand up for the villagers.

The group of women leaders has undertaken several initiatives to improve the women's situation, in particular concerning their participation in social and economical activities, such as small agricultural projects, increasing access to health care, and creating a network of health volunteers. One of the areas where they have been particularly active is the struggle against domestic violence, which was widespread in the commune. They have used their leadership positions to deal with the issue of violence in a holistic way, by providing education and training on women's rights, by counselling families and helping them manage conflicts, and by counteracting impunity and tolerance for the perpetrators.

Together with these positive achievements, in favour of an active involvement of community women in social, development and political activities, the case study has identified new trends that indicate some contradictions and regress.

Among the main areas of concern is the reduction of development projects managed by village women. Another is the existence of a certain amount of disconnection between the networks of women volunteers and the women in their community. Both facts cause grassroots women to be less active and aware of their rights. Together with that, a lack of discussion about the new social crises and problems that have affected the community, in particular the scarcity of resources and migration, issues that differently affect women and men have had repercussions for gender equality.

One of the major reasons why a very promising situation that has achieved important results shows signs of stalling is the current dominance of the conservative governmental gender mainstreaming policy. This vision has colonized the agenda of women's action at many societal levels, including NGOs that should promote new and advanced approaches. In this situation it becomes very difficult for grassroots women leaders to acquire the tools to deal with global crises and to develop practices and content adapted to new and complex realities.

The new women's leaders that arise from this conservative policy are more connected with the political and institutional hierarchy; their capacity building is oriented toward limited technical tasks, and no longer reflects the links with grassroots women. Such a process leaves behind the grassroots women and their demands for gender justice, and their efforts to organise and have a voice in politics.

In conclusion, the positive results that came from this experience need to be elaborated on and extended. The new problems and the challenges identified should be debated and fully understood. If grassroots women's leaders get lost in an institutional agenda that includes not only the governmental but also the non governmental sector, this will weaken grassroots women, and their participation and capacities to stand up for gender and social justice.

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## **Attachments: Stories collected during the study**

### ***A woman leader speaks: how we change gender roles***

*In the past in this entire commune, women did not have any role in the community. Women had lots of problems in the villages but they did not participate in public life. Tradition says that women should not participate, so women did not dare to speak, they did not dare to attend the meetings, and they did not participate actively in political life. We wanted to change this and we engaged in activities with an NGO who became our partner, and with the government, who wanted to get more women in local politics. So since 2004 we've worked at strengthening our women's capacity to participate in villages' and commune's work. In the entire commune our organization partner selected 5 focus villages and in these villages we asked poor families to meet together and select two focal women to represent them. So we started to have focal women cooperating with the village chiefs' assistants, who also were women. In that way we began to have a number of active women who could participate in social and political activities.*

*Then we worked to build their capacities, to allow them to develop more activities and manage small projects. But we based our capacity building on how important we women are, on our rights and the need to be confident and step out from traditional roles.*

*It has been a very hard work; when we get started women still relied very much on tradition; mothers used to explain to their daughters to be patient with husbands; even in cases of domestic violence they use to say: "this is your Karma and you have to accept it". So we trained women to make them understand that they have rights too, that they are important too, and they start to be more confident and dare to speak. They begun to come to meet our volunteers and discuss those issues with the focal persons, and look for solutions or justice. They became active, and we understood that we were succeeding. In the past, when we worked at the village plan, we saw a lot of women participating, but they did not have ideas, they just attended the meeting but every thing was up to the men: if men wanted a well, yes, let's have a well... if they wanted a road, yes, let's have a road... They weren't really interested and they did not know what they wanted. Following our activities we noticed that our women started to be more interested; they thought and discussed together about what they would like to develop in their villages. They started to express their own ideas. If 20 women participate in the village plan discussion, now at least 10-15 women express ideas for the plan; before may be only 1 or 2.*

*We succeed because women can understand women's problems, we deal with these problems every day: sick elders, children to care for, husbands... We understand women's worries, we understand problems due to discrimination and we know that even if we become leaders and are elected in chair positions, we will face problems, our ideas are not valued. We have to come together if we want to overcome discrimination.*

### ***When the chief is a woman***

*I have worked with the Cambodian Women Association since '79, and my experience with women is simple: we tried to help those who have problems, for example we helped them to reach the hospital and get health care when they faced health problems and we advised them to have their pregnancy checked at the health centre. At the beginning they did not pay attention to us but after a while they did, and now we get almost 80% of the pregnant women checked. There were no NGOs at that time, we were a small group of a few peers and we worked little by little. We wanted women to stand up, struggle, have a voice and help*

each other, and we wanted to create a women's association. Women initially did not want to participate in our activities, but slowly they started seeing that what we were doing was giving them some advantages and they started to follow us. Initially they did not dare because they were very scared; first afraid of not being able to do things, because they were not self-confident. Secondly, they were afraid that by getting involved they will be facing problems with the government and the authorities. However, after a while, they understood and participated.

I became an activist for the opposition party because I thought that it was a legal party and I dared to get involved. In 2006, one year before the communal elections, I started to consider standing as a candidate. I had to fight within the party to be put at the top of the list; other candidates sought the first places. I had to resist and claim my work with the community and my experience. They put me at the top because they thought that I could make them win, and I did it, I won.

I became the commune chief, but I was still a woman, mother and housewife. My husband supported me, but it was hard, because I wasn't at home, I had to travel, and many times I woke up before dawn to prepare food and do other tasks before leaving to not upset him. When we become leaders we have to accept the fact that we are not at home, most of the time we are busy, and our family life must change.

After my election I discovered that in the commune council there was no equality between men and women. Men reacted as men normally do; they do not want us to make changes. Even now, they have this same idea. They continue to think that men as commune councillors are better than women; that our speeches are not so relevant, that our ideas are not as good as theirs. We have disagreements with both women and men, but with men more. Men like to say that our work is not clear, not correct; they look down on us. After I won the election, one of them went through the village and told the people that after one week they would replace me and push me out. "Women cannot work as commune chiefs" he said. But until now I 'm still at my place and now this guy is ashamed whenever he sees me.

This commune was taken as an example among all the others by the district because we are efficient and capable, and were awarded by the authorities, but I said in an assembly at the pagoda that I couldn't accept the prize because people still looked down on me and did not recognise my position. For example, the interior ministry made a plan for women commune councillors to wear uniform but they did not allocate money for us. They tell us to find support by ourselves and ask for help from NGO partners... I knew that some officials in this commune made money from the forest and other people too, so I wrote a letter to them to request the money for that. But they jumped on the issue as an opportunity to criticize me and gossip about me, saying that their commune chief was a low caste, she couldn't find clothes for the commune council. At this point I reacted and I said that men still looked down on women and were not interested in what we say. Because the point wasn't me; the problem was the policy from the interior ministry. If it was just about me, I'm able to support myself and even if I could not, my husband can buy clothes for me. But the issue concerns the whole council. Where can I find the money? One shirt is 10\$, and a skirt 10\$, the tailor another 10\$, so it costs 30\$ and we have other councillors, how can I paid for it? Our salary is not enough; it does not even cover my phone cards. That's why I ask for money. But after seeming their reaction I decided to appeal for help at the provincial authorities and I said that if the top does not provide money to us, I will not have those clothes cut. And I would not buy clothes only for myself, it is all or nobody. So until now we do not have uniforms. So

*you see, they have not understood my point and only took the opportunity to put me down because I'm a woman.*

*With women is okay, the problem is only with men. We cooperate well, we are from different parties but we can work together. We are not the same as men, they are much more divided politically, but we do not have any problems; were we sharing the same attitude of men, we would never be able to cooperate like we have done.*

### **Women in local politics: questions and answers with a male local leader and commune councillor**

*Q: In this commune women reached important leadership positions, does this reflect the fact that you respect them more?*

*A: Over the time, since there were gender focal persons and a women's network, we asked them for their ideas and we got from them some good ideas to be included in our year plan, because women have experience and are important. Women are not considered useless here, in this village we support women because for example men did not care so much about domestic violence, but women care. They help and know the problem. Women know a lot of things. They know about housework, they have experiences, they know women's problems because they are women. Men go out to earn, go to the forest, and go far from their wives for half a month, or one month, so they do not know many things. Women stay in the village, know everything, at home and around, so they know when and how domestic violence happened in the village. We give priority to women for educating women. Let women inform about domestic violence and educate about it, because they can do it better than men. This is why we give them priority and consider women as leaders too*

*Q: Do the other men think like you?*

*A: It is just my idea. But we have some meetings and discussion and there are rules about gender now and we agree. Now women participate up to 40%, while before only 1 to 4%. All focal persons are women in all villages; there are women networks, women's affairs departments working with women, and men are very few.*

*Q: How was this change possible? It is because the commune chief is a woman?*

*A: Not only because of the woman commune chief. It is because of people's willingness here. We do not only promote women focus persons, but also women in leadership position and women in general; we encourage them to engage in leadership and we accept their plan to be implemented.*

*Q: Do all male members support the ideas of the commune chief?*

*A: What the commune chief raises up is a plan, a plan for all people, not just for herself. And we have 7 commune council members, 5 men and 2 women. Before doing any plan we discuss together. For example, concerning the investment plan, we discuss and make decisions all together because all of what we do is not for our private interest, but for common benefit. It is not just the problem of being a woman or man. We work without discrimination; we discuss and agree together, we do not mind women or men as long as the idea is good. We get everyone's ideas; if there is more than one good idea, we compare them and choose the best one. Priorities and needs should be done first.*

*Q: Do you think that your commune is better than the others? Do you feel you have set up a good administration?*

*A: If we consider the whole province, this commune is a kind of model for others. For example, if there is any competition at the provincial level, our commune can manage to prepare a plan ahead before all the other communes. For instance, the Rural Development*

Department, who will deal with all 48 communes in the province, often brings projects to our commune as a pilot first. Actually our neighbouring communes envy us; they said that our commune gets everything!

Q: So we can say that the commune benefit from women's participation?

A: This is gender. If there are only men without women, it cannot work, and if there are only women without men doesn't work either.

Q: Yes, you are right, but why?

A: Because if there aren't women, then projects will not target priorities and will not be effective. Also our work in the commune, as a team, will not be effective and the commune does not improve. If only men work on an issue, and women on the side, we do not understand about women's concerns, so how we can work? Then there will be gaps. That is why participation of women is a priority; women think about women's problems and men think about men's problems.

Q: In case women and men request different things, what request get first?

A: The women's one, because when women raise any request, they do not mind so much about themselves, and also because women have often a broader vision than men. Women do not mind or judge things saying that something is entirely wrong, but men often mind and discriminate. Normally, if men request something and the answer is no, there is a reply with nasty word; with women if the answer is no, women reply softly. Men have bad temper; women do not use bad words.

### **How I become a leader**

I was a farmer. In 2000, an organisation came to work on women's equality, they made contact with the commune authority, but the commune authority did not know who could work with them. My husband suggested me to work and I agreed because I did not have skill and so I could get new skills. I volunteered and the commune chief chose other nine candidates. Then the villagers voted and I won. I started to learn and to speak; before even if they allowed me to speak, I did not know what to say, I knew nothing and I understood a few words. Since I started studying my spirit grew. When there was any problem, people looked for me and villagers have confidence in me. The pagoda committee asked me to be a candidate for the fishing committee and put my name in the list; I won and since then I tried my best to help them.

Every year in late June and early July there is fish that swims up the stream to lay eggs. Fishermen come from other provinces to my village to put some dams and net and catch all these fish. The fishermen of our villages do not know what to do and they come to discuss with us, at that time the committee had 3 members only. We decided to cooperate to find a solution; I did not know the situation so we took our boats and waited. There were some provincial officers who took some money from the outsiders' boat owners, but when my group arrived the boats drove away and we could not follow them because the machine of our boat was not fast. The authority ensures they will tell the boats to stop come fishing in our waters, but the boats did not stop. So we decided to go again and stop them, but then the provincial police wanted to come. I told them: no, you do not come; you are part of the problem here. They looked at me and asked the commune police what I was doing and the commune police explained to them that I was a community's chief. So they did not arrest me.

After that one officer came to meet me and said that they wanted me to give a speech during an annual forum. I chose this title: "The worries of the people". It was the first time for

me to speak with a microphone in a theatre. I told my story about our experience with protecting our fishing area. During the break, villagers came to discuss with me, some complained with me, other were worried about the issues I have raised. But I said to them: "I did not tell them wrong things. We, as community, need to protect our place; communities need to protect what they have. So please don't be angry with me, I raise what is true and what I saw".

This was not the only problem I had to face. I became chief of the fishery committee by election and at that time I tried to promote fishermen income. It has been very difficult, we had to build our own fishing tools, but we ran out of money, and we had to find inputs and funds. People became angry, we had harsh discussions, some members hit the table and I also hit it. At the end we found an agreement. After that many newcomers arrived in our community and they wanted to join the committee. They did not go through the hardship of our initial group, they found everything easy already. And they tried to push me out. I get support from the community who recognised my work and the hardship I went through. Villagers support me because they know my mind and how I used to help them and to intervene to stop many fishing crimes. When outsiders lay their nets to stop the fishes reaching our village I call a village council and we went there and seized all instruments. After that a lot of fish came up to our village again, so my village could catch a lot of fish and so could other villages too. Villagers said that if I did not intervene, there would be no fish in our lake.

Only a few people were angry with me because they have lost their income, but I told them that I did it for all the people in village, because if we let only 4 people catch and sell fish, what about the others? I did not do it for myself or my family. When we took off their tools, all the fishes swim up again and all the people could catch it. This is how I became a leader of the fishery committee.

### **To have and have not: Discussing land issues**

Villagers: We cannot find jobs and we are becoming poorer and poorer. It causes a lot of arguments within families because we cannot find solutions. We work as labourers to dig potatoes and clear land; some parents send their daughters to Malaysia. The big plantation has forestland and hires us to clear it. But when the owner hires us to clear the land, and the authorities come, they do not arrest the owner, they arrest us. So we are very poor. The poor get poorer, the rich get richer. If the land owner hires us to clear the land, why the authority does not arrest the owner? We work for them because we are poor, but they accuse us of stealing.

The rich get richer but we are poor, we are workers. They extort money from us. When we are hired to farm and dig potatoes, we get 12,000-15,000 riel per day. But we depend from the season, if there are no potatoes, how can we earn money? We have to clear the land to get money.

We do not blame the fate; if there are rich people, there must be poor; if there are no poor, the rich will not have labourers to work for them. So, the poor are labourers for the rich, they cannot grow economically; therefore please do not arrest them. When they catch us, if we protest they will put us in jail. Or they extort money from us; if we don't pay they jail us.

We have our house land, but we do not have land to farm; all land is owned by the company. You cannot get this land, unless you are rich, and we are poor. We cannot grab the land, only the rich can. The village's rich hire us, they know us. Some have 20-30 hectares and cut trees every day. When we hear sound of motorbikes coming, we hide because we

*afraid that rangers or authority will arrest us. If we are arrested, we do not have money for wives and children.*

*They do not let us take land but the companies grab hundreds of hectares. They do not allow us to grab land, even small plots, but the company comes from outside and get thousand of hectares.*

*They do not let us cut the trees in the forest but the rich and powerful people hire us to cut trees for them. They grab forest land and they do not let us to go inside it and they put a fence to prevent us from going there, and inside they plant rubber trees.*

*They did not come to inform us and discuss about the land concession, they only held meetings to tell people to stop cutting the trees. When the people heard that the price of potatoes increased they went to clear the land to plant. People know the land is owned by a company, but the company do not use it so people can use it. They know this forest is owned by the company, but they do not have land and they wanted to plant potatoes. Whenever the company seized the land, we will hand it back to them. We do not object to this. So this is why poor people in this village cleared the forest.*

*Commune Chief Reply: It is more complicated than that. I went to the meeting with the forest administration and they told me to help them spread the information to the people: don't go to cut trees any more! They should stop. They ask people to work together to protect the forest. If they have already cut it from before, let them farm rice field, but do not continue to cut. I repeated to the people what the forest administration asked me to spread: please do not continue to cut the forest. If they come and discover somebody cutting trees they will arrest them, they say.*

*What actually happens is that all people go and cut, except for the poorest, who work as labourers for others. The villagers say that powerful people are involved; I don't know yet who are the officers cutting the forest and who don't cut, I cannot control them, but we have held a meeting and spread the information to everybody: please do not cut the forest any more because this land is the land of the state. If this land was a social land concession you could go, it would not be illegal, but this land is illegal. I explained the poorest: "If you go to cut trees as labourers for other people and the police arrive, they will arrest you, labourers or not. But they are not so interested in what we say because they see one after the other the people getting in the forest to cut trees so they follow them.*

*For what concerns the concession, they came but they did not yet divide land or defined how much land belongs to the concession and how much is for the village. It is very complicated, people clear the forest and grab land; then they claim it belongs to them, so they have the right to sell it. I have only the power to inform them, not to arrest them, so they continue doing it and if the top authorities call me for explanations I have to tell them that I have already informed them, but they continue to cut. I do not know what to do, it is very difficult! In the past most of the governmental staff used to grab land, and when people see that they follow them. Now there is no one that do that among my staff, that is why villagers trust us, follow us, right? So when I attend the meetings with the forest administration I say to them that because I respect the law, others cut my commune forest, and now they ride motorbikes, cars, and I cannot find even a bicycle. Those who respect the law get nothing, those who do not, get money...*

### ***Migrating to Malaysia: continuing the tradition of girls' self-sacrifice or new opportunity?***

*A girl who just came back: I came back before finishing the 2 years contract as home maid because it was very hard. Our employer told us what to do, if we did not listen to him, they exchanged us to another employer, and if this happened we were obliged to stay longer. I have had only one boss, but after completing the work at one house I was obliged to work in another house. I worked in 3 different houses every day. They said that those houses were their relatives' houses. When I arrived I had to wait for the boss to select me. They select those who have big and strong hands and legs. They choose and then they set the price. How much profit the company takes from us, we do not know; we only know that our salary was 200\$ per month and they will withdrew our salary for the first 6 months.*

*I explained these things to the people who want to leave but some do not believe me, they say that they want to test it by themselves; they have seen people who went there coming back with money without problems. So they still want to go, like I did...But it is not easy. It is difficult and we have to be very patient. No one hit me, but they blamed me because I did not understand their language. I had to be patient and I was afraid. I met only one Khmer there because they did not allow us to talk to each other. For example, my house owner used to blame me, using bad words, so they were afraid that we might tell it to somebody else, they did not want others to know. We knew only our work; I worked from early morning till late night, cleaning a 2-3 floors house, washing and ironing clothes, looking after children, preparing for the boss, doing everything. I don't know how many hours I worked: until midnight, when I prepared my bed for sleeping until 4-5am when I get up. I felt so sleepy and I become thin. If we were sick, we had to buy tablets by ourselves because if we had to go to the hospital, they would cut our salary. They take all from us when we leave Cambodia, particularly telephone numbers; they do not let us keep phone numbers of relatives or friends. They checked our clothes, then they left us only with underwear and some women come into the room and checked us, they even pull our underwear. Fortunately I hid the paper with the numbers in a cosmetic powder so that when they shook the box it did not make any sound. That is why I could come back home.*

*Another girl having been there: If the parents ask the company why the children never contact them, they say: "It is because your children don't want to call". According to them everything is clear and guaranteed. When I left to go there, they said that I already had a boss, but actually when we arrived there, I had to wear a uniform and wait for 5 days at the company for one boss to come and select me. They bring bosses to see us as if we were in a market: the boss came with his wife and children to look at us and select us. I did not call my home for one year, and then I called home and I cried. They ask me why, but they did not allow me to cry, they were afraid that we tell our relatives that they are torturing us. At that time I could hardly speak in Khmer, I was like clumsy, as I had forgotten my own language.*

*A village woman: The people in the village who send girls there seemed not worried; they only wait to receive their children's money. I am very poor; you can go and look at my house's roof. I have children but even if one of them asked me to go there I will not let her go, although I'm so poor. I just work as labourer, I'm the poorest of the poor: no land, no rice field, no house, I'm staying with my children now. But I will not send them away; some people are not poor, but they send their children to other countries.*

*A village woman: Their children are there and when they call back home and tell the parents how many difficulties they are facing, parents or mothers do not dare to say or tell this truth to the others because they are embarrassed. Instead, they say: "Oh my children*

there feel very easy..." And people who went there and came back do not dare to share or tell the others the truth: "I got hit on my head; they did this to me, etc..." They feel very embarrassed to share how it was and they say only that it has been very easy. Some do not dare to talk about it because they are afraid to complain.

*A village woman: We have land but we are poor, we do not have cows to plough and my husband died and all my children are women. So we do not use this land, we work as labourers during harvest and when we finish we do not have job to do. I did not force my daughter to go to Malaysia. She volunteered to go. She made her own decision. She demanded to go. She said she wanted to go and please do not forbid her to go. I think if she stayed here she could not find a job.*

*A village woman: When the girls accept to leave the company makes the contract and we thumbprint, and we submit it to the commune which is our witness. With the signature and the contract we receive 200 USD and 5 bags of rice. Then we receive other 200 \$ when she leaves the country. But then nothing for 6 months, she will not get money. If there is any problem, we have rights to file a complaint to the company. You see, the maid who comes back said that there is no problem. So it will be easy. But if it is not easy, we are very worried. If they arrest our daughters, we cannot do anything because we are poor. Our children are bad or good, we do not know. Frankly speaking, if our daughters would be a widow, having been already married and having experience, would be easier, but for virgin girls it will be regrettable. We feel pity. We cannot predict what is going to happen.*

*Commune chief position: We cannot ban them from sending their daughters abroad because the state has law and the ringleaders have the authorization by the company and they are legal, thus, they can come here to convince people to go. If we ban them to go, they will say that they do not have enough for living; they think that they can go abroad as labour workers and get money to send to the parents at home. They do not think about the dangers for their children living there, what they will endure, and the problems they will face. We always talk about it during the meetings and since long ago the people who want to go to Malaysia do not come to me for the signature because they know that I have this opinion and advice them. So they go to get the signature from the vice commune chief; the ringleaders bring them directly to him. Because we are women, we do not want to allow them to go, we try to prevent them to go to Malaysia but if they really want to go and they have the letter from the company who has an agreement from the government, we cannot ban them.*

## Glossary

### Gender

The term gender refers to the social differences and relations between men and women that are learned, changeable over time, and have wide variations both within and between societies and cultures. These differences and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through the socialization process. They determine what is considered appropriate for members of each sex. Other variables, such as ethnicity, caste, class, age and ability intersect with gender to create the rules and norms that define how women men or other gender identities should behave in a given social or cultural context. The term gender was introduced by feminist scholars who have elaborated on inequalities and have challenged the roots of discrimination against women, until then considered mostly as the result of biological differences: gender roles and norms, contrary to biology, are learned and can be changed. The term has now lost its initial meaning of a tool for addressing and redressing inequality, and is often utilised as a synonym for women and men.

### Gender roles

Gender roles are learned behaviour in a given society, community or social group in which people are conditioned to perceive activities, tasks and responsibilities as male or female. These perceptions are affected by age, class, caste, race, ethnicity, culture, religion or other ideologies, and by the geographical, economical and political environment. Typically gender roles distinguish productive and reproductive activities, where the first are more related to income generating and tend to be considered a male domain, while the second refer to caring and are a typical female domain. Other gender roles may refer to the public and private sphere, where men are supposed to be more involved in the public life and women in the private one. The gender roles of men and women within a given social context may be flexible or rigid, similar or different, complementary or conflicting. **Traditional gender roles are** the activities, behaviours and domains that a particular culture dictates to women and men; traditional gender roles may be perceived as archaic or out of date when the society that generate them undergoes changes and evolves to new social, economic and cultural frames. For example the traditional gender role confining women only to housework tasks does not correspond to the current society where women participate in all kind of activities in the public sphere. Gender roles are regulated by **norms**, which are ways of behaviour that are considered normal or expected: girls do not do that....men should not do this...Norms are reinforced by **stereotypes**, which are sets of characteristics that all together create a particular type of person or behaviour: serious girls speak softly, do not laugh overtly etc. or men are always brave, strong and fearless.

### Gender based discrimination

Discrimination refers to the unequal relationships between women and men. The male gender is dominating and occupies decision making positions all over the world; most of the world's cultures give to men prerogatives that are not given to women, in the private as well as in the social sphere. The value that is given to male roles, at the expense of the female ones, is reflected by the unequal division of labour. The female tasks linked to reproductive work are worldwide scarcely recognised and valued; the time of women in accomplishing the work of caring, nourishing, cleaning, etc., does not get remunerated. Women are object of male violence everywhere in the world; women die, are wounded and physically and psychologically harmed by men's violence. Women have less access to education and careers; the majority of the world's religions are lead by men and do not accept women as leaders.

### Gender mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming is a globally accepted strategy to achieve the goal of gender equality. Mainstreaming involves ensuring that gender perspectives and attention to the goal of gender equality are central to all activities, policy development, research,

advocacy/dialogue, legislation, resource allocation and planning, implementation and monitoring of programmes and projects. In 1997, the United Nations Economic and Social Council defined the concept of gender mainstreaming as follows : "...the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. **The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality.**" As a strategy, gender mainstreaming should start from **gender analysis** which is a tool to examine differences between women and men in their activities, conditions, needs, access to and control over resources, development benefits and decision-making. It looks at the inequalities between women and men, asks why they exist, and suggests how the gap can be narrowed. Gender mainstreaming has been promoted as a global strategy and has been developed at the country level, including in Cambodia, as an **institutional gender mainstreaming policy**, which is extended to all levels of planning and implementation of policies in all domains. Very often, as for the term gender, which is now detached from the concept of gender based discrimination, institutional gender mainstreaming policies refer only marginally to their original aim, which is reaching gender equality.

### **Gender Justice**

The term gender justice is utilised by scholars and activists to highlight the need to act against inequality and injustice and to address gender discrimination and redress the consequences of its impact on women; this is particularly important now, as the term gender has been depoliticized and has lost its strong reference to gender based inequalities.