

Young Women Leaders for the Future

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During the Angkor period, Cambodian women were very active in communities and societies, but in the present time, they are not so much active as they used to. Hopefully, they will become more active once again in the future.

Some people even believe that Cambodian women are still second-class citizens, and thus are unsuited for leadership in communities or organizations. However, in a rural commune situated along the Mekong River in Kratie Province, for instance, a group of women with a strong motivation to work for other women's emancipation came together and decided to engage in activities for inspiring women and offer them new roles and opportunities. They established a network of women volunteers and, with the support of an NGO, started small projects to encourage women to build their self-confidence and capacities, and help them step out of the old tradition and embark on new roles in the community.

When decentralization made new positions available for women at a village and commune level, these women became able to assume the role of leadership within community organizations. Little by little, other women in communities have become able to undertake new tasks in social organizations such as fishery committees and health volunteers' networks, as well as in formal political positions. The initial group of women grew into a critical mass of women active at various levels within their communities. The leaders' group has gone through a process of reshaping gender roles that has involved their personal sphere and their family relations, and has been required patience and capacities. By promoting changes within their families, those women have been able to convince their husbands to accept the wives' public roles and act positively. Nevertheless, they have been confronted with crises, in particular when the communities' access to resources such as forest or water sources was in danger of becoming lost. On that occasion, they stood up for the communities and people by taking a series of initiatives to protect resources and rights. As a result, the community people came to acknowledge women as genuine and reliable leaders.

It is noteworthy that although the women leaders have diverse political affiliations, this has never impeded their efforts to work together. Despite these achievements, however, the communities also show other trends that highlight difficulties that women leaders face in promoting women's initiatives and translating the idea of representation into action. A series of new problems arise and afflict the communities, to which there are no solutions in the short term. Lack of land and resources affects many families, and

strategies to cope with the crisis have important gender aspects, in particular when unsafe migration of men and women in search of employment is involved. Family bonds become more fragile, driving women into a situation where they have to abandon their children, and increasing the number of single mothers whose livelihood is at risk of falling into poverty. The trend of the migration of girls to Malaysia and Thailand to work as maids or workers is spreading across the nation. Women leaders find themselves barehanded, because the decentralization process has not yet been devolved locally, lacking power and tools to deal with these problems. Although local women leaders draw on their integrity and stand by the people's side, the leadership models around them are associated with patronage and corruption, and therefore community women's trust for them is increasingly affected by that.

Moreover, institutional gender mainstreaming have gained momentum, shifting the focus from gender discrimination and need for acting for gender equality to generic discourse, which equates gender with "women's and children's affairs" and is very often interpreted as health care, child care, hygiene and sanitation. This discourse is extended through meetings, trainings and forums, without further analysis or critical perspectives that may help women leaders to elaborate policies and strategies in favor of women.

In short, important results in terms of women's participation in community, social life and decision making can be achieved by mobilizing women, building networks, and focusing on self-confidence and awareness of discrimination. By adopting strategies to empower women, they can increase their ability to utilize their rights, and enforce the law. But these results need to be secured and the strategies need to be constantly reviewed and elaborated to respond to new problems and challenges. If NGOs and the government enhance their support for women in Cambodia, they will become more active and exercise leadership in their communities and societies as men do.