

Cambodian Women's Roles in Education and Leadership: Empowerment

Phirun Dim¹

Techo Sen School of Government and International Relations,
The University of Cambodia, Northbridge Road,
Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Abstract

This research study explores key issues faced by Cambodian women that obstruct them from exercising their roles in social development, education, and leadership. Solutions based on the findings will be useful to bring about equal participation of women and men in all social fields so Cambodia can achieve the millennium goals of the government for sustainable development. The research study can be useful to all Cambodian people, the government, policy makers, human rights workers, women, and all social work-related organizations and departments.

I. Introduction

Throughout history, the Buddhist Pagoda was not only a religious place but also a social and an educational center where Cambodian people were educated on morals, good living practices, knowledge, and skills for their future career. Under French colonization, from 1863 to 1953, the Cambodian educational system adopted the French educational model, and pagoda education was mostly replaced by 'Franco-Khmer public schools' classified by different levels of education. New subjects were introduced such as "arithmetic, French, and geography in addition to traditional subjects." It was not until the first year of Cambodia's independence in 1953 that a new curriculum was recommended by UNESCO to reform the Cambodian educational system. However, during Democratic Kampuchea from 1970 to 1975 under the Khmer Rouge regime, formal education was eradicated and scholars and other educated individuals were killed. Therefore, the structures of formal education were destroyed and replaced by the education of *Angka* (Organization), which educated people

¹ Doctoral student in Public Administration; e-mail dimphearun@hotmail.com.

to work and serve for the benefits of *Angka* led by the Khmer Rouge. From 1979 to 1992, schools and other facilities for education were in a destitute situation. Dilapidated schools and pagodas were renovated for Cambodian people to get their education. Scholars and teachers who survived from Pol Pot's regime volunteered or were encouraged to work as teachers. After the Paris Agreement in 1991 and between 1993 and 1994, reforming the Cambodian educational system was a major priority of the Royal Government of Cambodia with support from educational partners, international organizations, and the World Bank (Filippi, 2011, Ayers, 2000; Hays, 2014).

According to Hay (2014), however, there are only 65 to 70 percent of children being educated in formal schools and the dropout rate was high in the first and second year of primary education. Among these dropouts, girls faced a higher rate of dropout.

Because of long-lasting, ancient Khmer traditions, culture, and way of life, Cambodian people tend to form negative social perceptions toward women in society. Common misconceptions are that women are weak, inferior, and submissive in terms of making important decisions in life such as getting married or choosing their own partner (USAID, 2013). As shown by a 2013 USAID report, Cambodian women were expected to do most of the housework such as cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, child rearing and so on. Additionally, they were also perceived to have more burdens and more responsibilities for the whole family such as child rearing and taking care of young and older people in the family.

Thus, women have had fewer opportunities in self-development, getting a higher education and building their leadership abilities since they have more responsibilities and burdens than that of men. More importantly, less social value is given toward women's roles in socio-economic and political development.

This inequality has hindered Cambodia's ability to reach the Royal Government of Cambodia's development goals. However, having noticed that Cambodian women are important labor for socio-economic development, and building up women's capacities and abilities was a good mechanism for sustainable development lead to the setting of the millennium development goals. Therefore, women's participation in socio-economic and political development was pushed to the forefront of government strategy.

To dig for in-depth answers to the addressed issues and discover potential solutions, three main questions will be addressed here:

Cambodian Women's Roles in Education and Leadership

1. What were women's roles in education and leadership?
2. What societal priorities obstructed Cambodian women from exercising their roles in education and leadership?
3. What are possible ways to empower Cambodian women to obtain roles in education and leadership development?

The purpose of this study is to address some key issues that obstruct women from fully participating and exercising their roles in social development through education and leadership. Moreover, the research study addresses possible solutions that can be implemented to provide women the opportunity to play important roles in social development. Moreover, this research study focused mainly on changing Cambodian's negative mindsets and traditions that discourage and discriminate against women's roles in social development through education and leadership.

II. Education in Cambodia: A Historical Perspective

There are five distinct phases that can be identified in the development of education in Cambodia:

1. traditional Buddhist education;
2. the French Protectorate;
3. post-independence;
4. under the Khmer Rouge; and
5. after the Khmer Rouge regime.

1. Traditional Buddhist Education

Cambodian people placed a high value on those who were educated in Buddhist Wats (pagodas), a place where people celebrated religious ceremonies and where monks and holy men lived. This kind of education was a formal education for all Cambodian people; especially for men. The education was traditional, which focused on morality, Buddhist philosophy, and some life skill building (Library of Congress, 1987).

Many monks have traditionally worked as teachers, supplementing the work of other educators in the country. The classes were taught by monks and the students were mostly men or other monks because they had a greater opportunity to pursue a higher education since the educational system was Buddhist oriented and followed the Buddhist doctrine, which favored men in professional and academic sectors. The major subjects were Buddhist doctrine, history and the importance of gaining merit while other subjects such as mathematics, Cambodian history, geography, science, hygiene, civics, and agriculture were secondary subjects. Within these educations, boys were suitable for learning about these

subjects since society provided more value and opportunities for boys or men to get such an education over girls (Library of Congress, 1987).

2. The French Protectorate

Cambodian Traditional Education was gradually changed from 1863 to 1953 during the French colonization when a Western formal education model was introduced and implemented in Cambodian educational system alongside traditional education (Khut, 2016). In 1863, Cambodia was colonized by the French through a treaty between King Norodom and the French to protect Cambodian territory. During colonization, the French indoctrinated the Cambodian people to adopt European culture and support French ideology by mainstreaming those ideologies in the educational and social administration systems. Parents preferred to have their sons educated in public schools over their daughters. Most children received a higher education at pagodas when they finished their first to third grade education; therefore, girls had less opportunity to get a higher education. Rather girls received limited knowledge from public schools, since most of the instructors were monks (Ayers, 2000; Filippi, 2011). Franco-Khmer public schools were exclusively conducted in the French language by 1950. The focus remained on boys to support French ideology and become elite citizens in support of French occupation (Ayers, 2000).

3. The Post-Independence Era

The emergence of civil war was clearly seen in 1970 when forces led by General Lon Nol backed by the United States toppled Prince Norodom Sihanouk from the throne through a military coup. For this reason, an exiled government was created by Prince Norodom Sihanouk in Beijing (China) with support from his alliance - the Khmer Rouge. To achieve their objectives, communist ideology was adopted by leaders and followed by 50,000 soldiers. The United States backed Lon Nol, while China backed the Khmer Rouge. Phnom Penh became a battlefield and the United States destroyed much of Cambodia by dropping more than 500,000 tons of bombs on Cambodia. Consequently, many thousands of misplaced people moved to the city prior to the Khmer Rouge takeover (Greenberg Research, 1999).

Therefore, during the early 1970s Cambodia was inevitably drawn into the Vietnam War. The national instability and political turmoil led the Lon Nol regime to reduce educational funding and many school closed in rural areas. Simultaneously, many teachers fled to join the Khmer Rouge movement while student and teacher demonstrations frequently occurred

in Phnom Penh. By early 1972, the United States bombardment aimed at slowing the spread of communism from the East, resulted in serious damage to the education system and infrastructure (Dy, 2004: 95)

Dy (2004) also showed that most Cambodian people were deprived their opportunities from getting formal education, which was left from French colonization and under Prince Norodom Sihanouk regime.

4. Under the Khmer Rouge

In 1975, the Khmer Rouge came into power; this was the beginning of Pol Pot's regime. All people living in Phnom Penh and other major cities were forced to leave their homes to achieve the Khmer Rouge's goal "to establish a peasant, communist society free from Western influence". Under the rule of Pol Pot's regime, more than 1 million to 2 million people died in the so called "Killing Fields"; thousands of people migrated to neighboring countries; and thousands of people were tortured, executed, starved, and worked to death (Greenberg Research, 1999).

During the war, men were mainly employed in fighting against opponents; therefore, men and boys were deployed as soldiers and many were eventually killed in battles. Many Cambodian women became widows and eventually played various roles in society and (LICADHO, 2004; UNDP, 2014). All educational structures were demolished and most educators, instructors, scholars, and students were slaughtered. Most of the schools and universities were converted to prisons or detention centers where many innocent people were tortured and slaughtered. Some educators survived by hiding their identity and living simply as simple peasant working hard for the purposes of Angkar (organization). The education systems were implicit which aimed to inculcate children with revolutionary ideology and communism (Ross, 1987). Men and women were both involved in the revolution and administration and played important roles for the purposes of Angkar led by Khmer Rouge. Ms. "Khieu Thirith, a powerful minister of social action, was responsible for directing the youth movement" (Hays, 2014).

2.5 After the Khmer Rouge

At the beginning of the 1970s, more than 20,000 teachers lived in Cambodia; only about 5,000 of the teachers remained 10 years later. Soviet sources report that 90 percent of all teachers were killed under the Khmer Rouge regime. Only 50 of the 725 university instructors, 207 of the 2,300 secondary school teachers, and 2,717 of the 21,311 primary school teachers survived. The meager

educational fare was centered on precepts of the Khmer revolution; young people were rigidly indoctrinated, but literacy was neglected, and an entire generation of Cambodian children grew up illiterate (Hays, 2014).

Most young Cambodian people under the age of 14 were illiterate and had no basic education (LICADHO, 2004; Hays, 2014).

According to Ross (1987), the Cambodian educational system followed the so-called Vietnam-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) and was closely related to the Vietnamese educational system which contained four classes in primary level, three classes in secondary level, and three classes for the second tier of secondary education. However, according to Hays (2014), student enrollment was still low since parents needed to pay school fees, which many families could not afford. Moreover, Malika (2014), USIAD (2013) and CRDB (2015) showed that female enrollment still remained low in spite of removing school fees. This low female enrollment remained because of the perceptions of parents and Cambodian people were influenced by long lasting beliefs and traditions that placed more value and opportunity on boys. More importantly, because of the family financial burdens parents were forced to be selective in deciding which children were sent to school. CRDB (2015) showed that between the years 2000 to 2001 the number of girl students in primary school was 80.7 percent, but dropped to 13.7 percent in lower secondary school and 5.4 percent in upper secondary school.

As shown by Aikman *et al.* (2011) and UNESCO (2003), the number of women with access to higher education could not be increased until all education related institutions were strengthened. Moreover, expanding education in agricultural professions and removing inequalities in acquiring educational opportunities for all Cambodian people requires enhanced curriculum development, and the commitment of policy makers to bring about changes to allow men and women to have equal opportunities.

III. The Evolution of the Present-day Education System, with Particular Reference to Gender Issues

The following section will discuss social perceptions, discrimination, leadership, societal participation, financial barriers, and the lack of role models and support for Cambodian women.

1. Social Perception, Discrimination, and Leadership

Cambodian culture, norms, traditions, and values were influential factors that shaped Cambodian's perceptions toward women in society. Women were perceived as “weak, submissive counterparts to men” in terms of rights and responsibilities ranging from lower level tasks to higher-level tasks in daily life. Consequently, these perceptions became the main factors in limiting women's status and their participation in Cambodian socio-economic development. Moreover, Cambodian women were expected to do most of the housework such as cooking, cleaning, clothes washing, child-rearing and so on; they were also perceived to have more burdens and more responsibilities for the whole family such as taking care of young and older people (parents or relatives) (USAID, 2013). Thus, women were struggling to participate in social and economic development activities because they were expected to stay home and take care of their families and household. They were unable to share these burdens with men, and were not often encouraged or allowed to gain much of an education (USAID, 2014).

Although there were some policies for raising women's rights and capabilities in socio-economic development, most people's mindset, mainly men's mindset, still perceived that women should be submissive to men (USAID, 2013). In addition, USAID (2013) furthered showed that another failure of Cambodia to include women in social, political, and economic development comes from the social expectation that women should not be involved in any important social or political arena. The mindset is that women do not have enough capabilities. This misconception hinders women's ability to actively participate in all aspects of political roles and socio-economic development. In addition, a perception exists that there are no possible solutions for women to help them balance between domestic duties and political roles. Hence, women don't receive equal opportunities in education, professional life, or the chance to be promoted as leaders since most voters,

do not believe in women's abilities for leadership and in their competence to manage high-ranking positions; therefore, neither support nor vote for women who are running for office. Increasing female political participation and representation will thus require that women overcome traditional stereotypes that view women as weak, less intelligent and capable than men, and more suited to domestic tasks. This is particularly so for rural women (USAID, July, 2013).

Malika (2014) reported that Cambodian women had equal rights as men; however, in reality, discrimination against women still exists such as in social works and the political arena. Women need more capabilities and more knowledge to compete with men and gain

employment as leaders in politics and social work. Thus, women must gain more education, and female enrollment through higher education must be prioritized. More importantly, financial support and gender discrimination in society refrain Cambodian women from becoming active participants in society; therefore,

[i]t needs to promote changing attitudes, beliefs, and behavior. Change will only happen if a critical mass of people wants it to happen. In one sense, promoting women's status in society is like a jigsaw puzzle – we need all the pieces to fit together in order to have a complete picture. The first piece lies in educating women to obtain reasonable knowledge of their roles and potential. The second piece of the puzzle is establishing the political will to empower women and follow up on the implementation of gender legislation. Another crucial part is support from men; they need to change their attitudes toward female partners, both at home and in the workplace, in order to work towards promoting a more substantial political role for women. Last, women must also have confidence in themselves to improve their level and their voice in society (Malika, April 2014).

Even though there was a positive result from public surveys showing significant changes in public attitude toward women's leadership, "cultural norms were still influential barriers to women entering and advancing in politics and the public sphere" (USAID, 2014).

2. Limited Capacity

Additionally, low education and inadequate training are among the major factors that hinder Cambodian women from participating in all social and economic development. The deficiency is seen mainly in politics, since women were likely to have lower capabilities in performing the given jobs than that of men. Therefore, women had fewer opportunities to be promoted as leaders at their workplaces. In addition, many Cambodian women were not formerly taught about the "country's history, present political situation, or future developments." Thus, they were not able to fully access information about their own rights, and because many did not receive higher education they were perceived as unqualified for leadership positions. Thus, education is the key solution to alleviate discrimination against women in leadership, promote more women to participate in social development, and build women's self-confidence (USAID, 2013).

In addition, two main factors in forming the gender gap in education were monetary costs and social attitudes toward gender roles. Poor families and those living in remote areas were particularly impacted by the costs of education, and the family's survival depended on women staying home to take care of all household labor. Therefore, many poor Cambodian families withdrew their children from school since education at school was a long process

and required the investment of time, money, and efforts. Second, social stereotypes were also a barrier for girls and women in accessing education. Cambodian people placed more value on men, and they viewed men as the breadwinner and in the leader of families; while, girls were viewed as inferior and less important. Moreover, women were supposed to work at home and be a housewife (Gorman *et al.*, 1999). Therefore, discrimination against women in Cambodian society was the core issue that hindered sustainable development. Thus, combating this discrimination became the main obstacles for the Cambodian government to overcome in order to achieve the millennium development goals and rectangular strategy Phase II and Phase III (9 goals, 25 overall targets, and 106 specific targets). Those goals are eradicating extreme poverty and hunger; achieving universal nine-year basic education; promoting gender equality and women's empowerment; reducing child mortality; improving maternal health; combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; forging a global partnership for development; and de-mining, UXO and victim assistance (Ministry of Planning, 2015).

3. Political Factors

Discrimination against women in political parties was also a main obstacle for all Cambodian women wishing to participate in politic arenas. The stigma was that women had no chance to be promoted as leaders or to reach high positions in politics. Cambodia implemented the so called “party-list proportional representation (PR) voting system”, in which all Cambodian people – men and women – had the same chance to be promoted to higher ranking political positions. However, political bias still existed in selecting party representatives. Since the political parties select representatives, the selecting party members decided who would be included on the lists for ranking selection, “Candidates’ success thus fully depended on inner-party connections and networks, as well as their own budget, with which they had to finance their election campaigns”. This was a major problem for women in raising their voices in the political arena. USAID (2013) reported:

The failure to place women in the first or second spot on the list was suggested as the main reason why there is such a small number of women who actually win seats. Only 501 out of 28,481 female candidates (representing 0.45% of total candidates and 1.76% of female candidates) were placed in the first spot on the candidate lists for the commune/sangkat council elections in June 2012. For instance, only 1.5% of HRP candidates elected to commune/sangkat councils were women, despite having had 21.34% of candidates being female (USAID, 2013).

To have a fair selection process, to alleviate discrimination against women in the political arena, and to contribute to women's political empowerment, the NEC has to be an independent department, meaning NEC employees do not come from one single party. Moreover, there was disdain and intimidation towards women coming from less powerful parties by people from powerful parties or communities. Political parties paid less attention to women leadership because women were rarely promoted to higher-ranking positions in the party; therefore, they had fewer chances to prove their abilities and skill in leadership. These factors led Cambodian women to have fewer opportunities in the political arena (USAID, 2013).

Similarly, USAID (2014) showed that the number of women's leadership roles in Cambodia could be increased with the participation from all parties "to improve their gender-equality policies." Such policies included listing women candidates as the first choice on voting selection forms, changing policies to show strong the commitment of the party to eliminate the gender gap and educate women at all levels. In addition to these, motivation and encouragement from family and community are important for increasing women's participation in all levels.

4. Financial Barriers

Women had more responsibilities within the family and home. They had to manage domestic tasks and take care of people in the family. Because of their duties at home, and a lack of financial security, women were often not able to obtain jobs or attend school away from their homes. This inability to leave home due to significant duties and financial instability discouraged women from participating in economic development. However, social assistance programs such as job training, vocational education, and entrepreneurship training helped promote Cambodian women in education, for they were able to receive training close to home and did not have to migrate to work in other countries (USAID, 2013).

5. Lack of Role Models and Support

Because there are less women in high positions in the political arena, women are less likely to have other women role models and thus are more were likely to lose their motivation, encouragement, and confidence when participating in politics. Additionally, families and husbands often to not fully support women to join social works or politics. Thus, discrimination against women still existed, and this discrimination prevented Cambodian

women from equally participating. However, social assistance such as “training and capacity-building” were huge contributions to help women achieve active participation (USAID, 2013).

6. Women in Social Participation

Social corruption and injustice were also obstacles for Cambodian women, and these factors created social discriminations against women. However, there were some possible solutions that could help Cambodian women to participate actively social issues. For example, increasing the number of women representatives in political parties. Women could be particularly helpful in lessening land-conflict issues if they were able to use their rights and stand up against violence and exploitation. Moreover, providing “education and higher salaries for public servants” was also essential act of discrimination against women over land conflicts and their rights to participate. Reforming communal budgets and land concessions was an effective solution to fight discrimination against women over land and social issues. Besides these, raising women's awareness of their rights, promoting their rights, providing education to all Cambodian people about women's rights and all kinds of discrimination were important factors in alleviating the social misconceptions of women (USAID, 2013).

IV. Discussion

The lack of women in leadership positions is mainly due to the gender gap and inequality between men and women. However, it will be lessened to small gap or to zero if everyone unanimously joins in eliminating prejudice against women. More importantly, changes have to be made at all levels, “ranging from individual and interpersonal levels to organizational and societal levels” such as changes in the culture of organizations, changes in the development of women's jobs, providing more opportunities for women, and promoting more women to participate in strategic positions. These steps can lead to equality between men and women in leadership successfully. At micro level, changes should be made to promote equally in sharing domestic duties and child rearing between men and women; thus, women will have more chances to work in higher positions (Northouse, 2003: 365).

To empower women and provide them more opportunities in social participation, especially in defense and security sectors, it is necessary to raise people's awareness of women's significance in contributing to develop society. People must start to change their negative mindsets and give more value to women and understand the challenges that women are

confronting in the society. Moreover, it is necessary to mainstream women empowerment in all fields ranging from local to national levels. Thus, promoting women in education at all levels ranging from family to formal education at schools is even more important. Therefore, “educational curriculums, books or literatures” have to be adjusted by balancing or providing more focus on women’s significance, roles, and contributions to the development of the society. In addition, social media and Internet websites are important for promoting and empowering women’s participation in social development, and through this avenue more people will become aware of women’s importance in social development. More importantly, government, policy-makers and other departments ought to establish programs that provide women enough capabilities, knowledge, and leadership skills so that they can perform well with productive results in social development. These goals will not be realized without support from donors, government, and other related-working departments. This is also a good solution for poverty reduction in Cambodia (Piv, n.d).

Most importantly, media programs have a great opportunity to disseminate information and “to build democratic culture, change public attitudes and build women leaders’ skills in public engagement.” Media programs bring about social interaction between media and citizens and create open participation from all parts of the country. Therefore, women and men equally participate in social development through the media more and more, since they are free to express their concerns and find ways to develop Cambodia. In addition to the media, training is also important in promoting equality among women and men in regards to participation in community development. Through training, women can build up their leadership abilities and knowledge and promote equal rights and opportunities in social development. Participation from civil society and providing advocacy and putting pressure on government to address important women’s problems can bring about changes and promote equality between men and women in community development (USAID, 2014).

The process of promoting women to participate actively in community development cannot be achieved successfully unless there is a creation of programs that promote “mobilizing women, build[ing] networks and focus on self-confidence and awareness of discrimination.” More importantly, strategic policies to empower women, promoting more women participation in social works, and enforcing the law are important factors to allow women their rightful opportunities. These solutions open the locked door for women to show their abilities in community development, and reduce all kinds of violence against women (Maffii, 2011). However, education at all levels in the community plays a major role in

raising people's awareness, and this can bring about changes in the negative mindsets toward women's leadership and participation in community development.

1. Government Policy on Gender Gaps

The government has set gender equality as a main priority in both the Millennium Development Goals and Rectangular Strategy Phase II and III, which focus on reducing of gender gaps and equal social participation, there were more women's involvement politics, economics, education, and social participation. However, women involvement in society is still low compared to neighboring countries. As shown by USAID (2014), the percentage of women working as communal councilors was 17.8 percent, while 20.5 percent served as secretary of state, 17.6 percent worked as undersecretary of state, and 22.1 percent worked as court clerk. Similarly, Kimseng (2015) showed that in 2015, at the National Assembly "there are 25 women members which is 20 percent of the legislature," while "women with the positions of undersecretary of state number 44, representing 18.7 percent," and this is still a low number of women's participation and involvement in socio-economic and political development.

However, there seems to be a positive sign for women's empowerment in education and leadership in Cambodia from the National Strategic Development Plan (2016-2018) which focuses mainly on:

gender equality by increasing the voice, choice and safety of all Cambodian women and girls. By focusing on, responding to, and preventing violence, by empowering women legally and economically, and by strengthening women's leadership and participation in public life, Cambodia can undertake a transformative gender-responsive development agenda, and hoping that Cambodia will ensure development means progress for all (UNDP, 2014).

Even though efforts have been made to promote gender equality through empowerment, discrimination of women still exists. Unless "social norms, attitudes, belief", and negative mindsets of Cambodian people are changed women's participation in leadership roles will be limited, and so will their contributions of socio-economic and political development (UNDP, 2014).

V. Conclusions

Cambodian women and girls become powerful when their voices, safety, and choices are protected by all parts of their communities and society as a whole. Moreover, obtaining leadership roles is also important for building up women's abilities (UNDP, 2014).

Therefore, women need to be trained and educated so they have the same capacities, knowledge, abilities, and opportunities as men in social participation (USAID, 2013). More importantly, discrimination against women can be lessened by cutting down negative “social norms, attitudes, beliefs”, and negative mindsets of Cambodian people, which are negatively skewed against women’s participation and leadership in contributing to socio-economic and political development (UNDP, 2014).

In reality, discrimination against women in social works and the political arena is still prevalent in Cambodian society. Many people still do not trust women’s abilities. Therefore, women need to prove their capabilities and knowledge are equal to men. By acting in leadership roles in politics and social works, Cambodian women can prove their abilities and gain more confidence from the Cambodian people (Malika, 2014).

Even though there was positive results from public surveys showing significant changes in the public attitude toward women in leadership. However, “cultural norms are still influential barriers to women entering and advancing in politics and the public sphere” (USAID, 2014). Therefore, the Cambodian Rectangular Strategy for sustainable development in good governance was implemented in order to achieve the government’s goals. This strategy focuses on “goals of growth, employment, equity, and efficiency” in Cambodia. In addition, women empowerment in leadership, education, and social participation were core factors for stimulating social and economic development to reach the country’s goals. Thus, building up women’s abilities, capacities, knowledge, and leadership skills is the heart of empowering women to become active participants in social development, since this promotes more positive thinking toward women’s leadership. Additionally, women themselves need to build up confidence in their abilities to contribute to socio-economic developments (UNDP, 2014).

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