

4. Strengthening the Voices of Women Leaders

Lessons from Cambodia



Participants at a Female Councillor Forum discussing the forum's objectives

Recent reforms mean women in Cambodia now have the opportunity to stand for election to local councils. But many women councillors face discrimination and hostility from their male colleagues, and feel that they lack the skills and confidence to carry out their roles effectively. This paper describes the work of Women For Prosperity, which has helped many women councillors in Cambodia to challenge discrimination, forge positive working relationships with their colleagues, and fulfil their responsibilities as elected officials to the people in their communities.

Introduction

Despite recent improvements in economic growth, and a reduction in the numbers of people living in absolute poverty, Cambodia remains one of the poorest countries in South-East Asia. In rural areas, poverty is particularly extreme, a problem compounded by the fact that thus far, the Cambodian government has failed to extend the social services such as health care and sanitation that could reduce people's vulnerability to the effects of poverty. Women, children, disabled people, elderly people, and ethnic minority groups are particularly affected by poverty in rural areas. Women, for example, have significantly lower educational attainment levels, literacy rates, and access to public services than men. Central government has traditionally been characterised by a lack of transparency, limited mechanisms of accountability, and corruption, leaving poor people with little opportunity to contribute to decision-making, which is heavily concentrated in some key ministry offices, such as the Prime Minister's office, the Ministry of Economy and Finance, and the Ministry of the Interior. Culture reinforces the authoritarian style of governance, since many Cambodians relegate decision-making authority to elites who have power in their communities. Poor, rural women in particular lack opportunities to participate in decision-making. Although the government has indicated a commitment to increase the number of women in decision-making positions, little progress has been made and targets are unlikely to be met.

At the local level, poor women and men's lack of voice means that local development plans have traditionally not reflected their priorities. In recognition of this, in 2001, the royal government of Cambodia introduced a policy of decentralisation, with the aim of strengthening pluralist local democracy, promoting local and economic development, and reducing poverty. Following the introduction of the decentralisation policy, local-level commune (or *sangkat*) elections were held in Cambodia for the first time in 2002.¹

Women For Prosperity

It is in this social and political context that Oxfam GB's partner Women For Prosperity (WFP) works. WFP was formed on 1 July 1994 as an independent, non-profit, non-government organisation. Its aims are to enable women to support their families economically and to experience personal safety and security, while maintaining their values and identity. WFP also seeks to empower women in the recognition and exercise of their rights, on equal terms with men, through leadership training, advocacy, lobbying, media campaigns, and awareness-raising with government officials, policy makers, and the general public. Activities have included training courses on 'Women's Legal Rights and Advocacy' and 'Human Rights, Women's Rights and Democracy'. These have been offered to female and male

local-government and NGO officials, and are designed to equip participants with the tools necessary to become human-rights and women's-rights activists so they can in turn influence decision-makers at all levels.

WFP recognised that the introduction of decentralisation and the announcement of local, commune-level elections provided an important opportunity for women in rural areas to enter local government and to participate in decision-making that would impact directly on the welfare of their communities. As such, WFP developed a comprehensive training programme for women who wished to stand for election in 2002, which was offered to 5,527 female candidates from all political parties. In the event, relatively few women were actually elected (only 977 [8.7 per cent] of the 11,261 councillors elected were women). But significantly, 34 women were elected as commune chiefs; prior to this, no woman had ever occupied this position.

Many of the women who were elected in 2002 found carrying out their duties as councillors very difficult. In response to this, since 2004 WFP has provided ongoing support and training to all female commune councillors, in partnership with Oxfam GB and other donors. This has taken the form of training on 'Women and Good Governance', as well as the establishment of a national women's network and a series of national-level Female Councillor Forums (FCFs). These forums allow women councillors from all political backgrounds to share experiences and learning, build solidarity, and advocate and lobby policy makers on gender and development issues. Participating in these activities has strengthened the confidence and skills of women councillors, enabling them to fulfil their professional duties to a higher standard, and to realise their potential as leaders of their communities. The women councillors' network has now been recognised by the Ministry of the Interior, which may in future provide funding towards it.

Barriers to women's active participation in local government

The low numbers of women elected in 2002 reflect the considerable obstacles that women face to participating in local government and other decision-making institutions in Cambodia. Low levels of education among women mean that many feel they do not have the skills, experience, or qualifications to act as representatives of their community. In addition, high levels of poverty force many women to focus on earning money to support their families, which means that they do not have sufficient funds to stand for election. Some women also feel politics is simply men's work in which women should not be involved. Perceptions that women are not capable of serving as councillors and that women's participation in government is

'inappropriate' also discourage women from standing for election. The patronage system and the active role of traditional authorities in Cambodia's patriarchal society undermine the creation of democratic, inclusive local governance by making it very difficult for anyone who does not already enjoy a high status in the community to get elected. This particularly affects women, who are less likely than men to have the right connections, or the wealth, to benefit from the patronage system. It also means that if they are elected, women councillors may be under pressure to serve the interests of powerful members of their community, rather than those who are poorer and more marginalised; this diminishes their ability to be accountable to local women.

The small number of women representatives in local government is in itself a significant issue, but just as important in the context of promoting women's leadership is the fact that many of the women who were elected did not feel able to perform their new roles to a high standard. Immediately after the 2002 elections, many women councillors reported that their capacity to take up their new responsibilities as councillors was limited. They felt unable to assert themselves during council meetings, and they knew that this would impact on their ability to raise issues of concern to them, relating to marginalised groups and poor people (particularly women and children). They were also worried about how they would balance their council duties with their traditional household, family, and child-care responsibilities. Some female councillors also reported being marginalised by their male counterparts.

Removing barriers and empowering women councillors: Female Councillor Forums (FCFs)

WFP recognised the importance of empowering and supporting the women councillors who were elected in 2002, in order that they would be able to serve as effective leaders in their communes. So in 2004 the organisation shifted its programme focus from capacity-building on women's legal rights to developing a network for women commune councillors from across the political spectrum, and providing training at a series of Female Councillor Forums (FCFs).

The FCFs aim to improve the work performance of participants and to address the special challenges facing many female councillors: low confidence; lack of experience in office; discrimination from male colleagues; lack of family support; and low visibility as elected officials. The forums are open to all women councillors, rather than being targeted at those from particularly poor or marginalised backgrounds, because these are issues that affect women councillors regardless of their political or social background, given the highly patriarchal hierarchical nature of Cambodian society. And in fact, the

majority of women elected in the 2002 commune elections came from poor households anyway.

In 2005 FCFs were run in seven pilot provinces (Battambang, Pursat, Svay Rieng, Siem Reap, Kampong Cham, Kampong Thom, and Kandal), with financial and technical support from Oxfam GB and other donors. Participants came from different communes and districts in each province, and represented different political parties. Following the success of the FCFs run in 2005, forums have since been run each year in nine provinces.

Learning from each others' experience

At each forum, the women councillors who are participating are asked by the WFP facilitator to decide the objectives for the forum. Common objectives identified at each forum have so far included:

- Strengthen self-confidence and leadership skills
- Build skills to improve female councillor performance
- Strengthen co-operation and solidarity among female councillors
- Form a network to share experience and provide mutual support
- Jointly develop strategies to solve the problems participants face in their work
- Make women councillors more visible in council affairs
- Develop participants' public presentation skills

Participants are also asked to identify particular issues and problems that they would like to discuss. At the forums, participants have identified a wide range of issues that they feel are impacting on their capacity to fulfil their roles effectively. These include lack of personal finances; the challenges of balancing their household responsibilities and their work as councillors; lack of support from their husbands; a low standard of living; and domestic violence. Once participants have come up with a list of issues, the facilitator then asks the women councillors to prioritise one or two issues that they wish to address at the forum, before dividing them into small groups to discuss how they would approach this problem. Within their groups, those with experience of dealing with this particular issue successfully are asked to explain what they did, and how it worked; those who have made unsuccessful attempts to deal with this issue are also asked to share their experiences. In this way, participants are able to learn from each others' experiences, and to work together to develop a strategy to address the particular issue in question, which can then be implemented by each councillor once she returns to her commune. The important thing in this exercise is that every participant must have the opportunity to contribute, as agreed in the ground rules for the exercise. In this way, this exercise promotes the self-confidence of

each individual, and emphasises that each individual idea is valuable and important.

Challenging discrimination against women councillors

One issue identified at many of the FCFs was the overt discrimination faced by many women councillors. Working together in small groups, participants at the FCF were asked to define the issue and its cause, as they saw it, and to come up with a list of actions that each councillor could implement back in her commune. Below is an example of the outcomes of one such discussion.

Issue identified:

Discrimination against female councillors; male councillors failing to value the work of female councillors

Suggested cause:

Divisions within the commune council, and party politics

Some strategies for action:

- Each political party to call a meeting of their own members to discuss the problem
- Set up and respect ground rules to give each council member an opportunity to speak at meetings, and for other council members to listen respectfully without interrupting
- Encourage discussion about women and men sharing responsibilities
- Set up a reporting and evaluation system, involving all members
- Encourage each member to understand their role and responsibilities, as well as those of the commune council as a whole
- Give women councillors the opportunity to attend training (e.g. district training, provincial training, NGO training)
- Recognise that mutual respect and understanding, including supporting each other's work, are essential for the development of the commune
- Work together to support each other rather than waiting for instructions or assignments
- Promote gender equality within the commune, e.g. by providing effective gender training
- Integrate gender into commune planning

Outcomes

The FCFs and the councillor network are now recognised throughout Cambodia for having contributed to increasing the capacity of women leaders at the local level, improving their ability to manage their work, and increasing their value in the eyes of male colleagues. Women councillors who have participated say they feel more confident, have better relations with their colleagues, are liaising more with constituents, and that where support from family was lacking, that support has improved. They also report that they have been able to work with other council members to foster a more supportive working environment. As a result of these improvements,

women councillors report being assigned more responsible and varied work, such as being appointed to committees dealing with planning, budgeting, procurement, land disputes, women and children's affairs, gender equality, health, civil registration, and information dissemination. Some women councillors have also gained skills in fund raising, and are using the contacts that they have made via the FCFs with NGOs and the private sector to raise money to support projects within their communes, responding to the needs of poor people, especially women. Many also report being involved in resolving disputes within the community, on issues such as domestic violence and land rights. Further, participants said that since the forums began, their opinions were more valued within their councils, and that they felt more able to challenge discrimination.

The success of the FCFs in raising the profile and credibility of women councillors among the electorate in Cambodia can be seen in the results of the commune elections held in April 2007, although of course many other factors will also have influenced the increased numbers of women elected. One-thousand six-hundred and fifty-one women were elected as commune councillors (14 per cent of all councillors), of whom 63 were elected as commune chiefs, a considerable improvement on the 34 women elected as commune chiefs in 2002.

Pum Hoeun, second deputy of Angcheum commune, Tbaung Khmom district, Kampong Cham province

Fifty-one-year-old Pum Hoeun, a midwife married with two children, was elected at the 2002 elections. Pum Hoeun represents the opposition party, as a result of which she faced considerable hostility from the commune chief, and from some other male commune council members when she was first elected. By attending the forum, Pum Hoeun learned a great deal about how to deal with others, how to communicate effectively, and how to challenge and overcome discrimination. Her hard work, increased confidence, and improved communication skills have led to her being appointed to lead committees on land dispute, domestic violence, women and children's affairs, and commune development planning. She has also established good relations with the police, and says that she can now go to them at any time and ask them to accompany her to help resolve disputes. Pum Hoeun also secured funding for the commune from various NGOs and donors, for projects to build a bridge in the commune, and to provide toilets for individual houses, directly benefiting disadvantaged members of her constituency.

Pum Hoeun is very proud that she has proved herself to be capable; more importantly, she feels a close affinity to all the members of her commune council as well as the people who elected her. As a result of her efforts to serve her community, Pum Hoeun is now respected and valued by her constituents and the political party she represents. Thanks to this, in 2007 she was re-elected to the post of second deputy in her constituency.

Next steps

Eventually, WFP plans to hand over the management and leadership of the FCFs to the women councillors themselves. This has been made clear from the start: during the first two forums, the handover process was explained to participants, and four councillors were chosen in each province by the women councillors to receive training in facilitation skills. These women have worked closely with WFP facilitators to plan and prepare for subsequent forums, and have received detailed feedback at the end of each forum. The handover process is expected to be completed by 2008, by which time subsequent FCFs will be facilitated entirely by the female councillors themselves, with ongoing mentoring and support from WFP.

In addition to handing over the facilitation of FCFs to women councillors, WFP is also working to ensure the future sustainability of this project by integrating the FCF network into existing decentralised local government structures. In early 2007, WFP organised Provincial Round Tables in five provinces, attended by: representatives from provincial and national government; representatives from NGOs working on women's rights and decentralisation; district and commune level chiefs; and councillors from three different political parties who had taken part in the FCFs.

The objectives of the Round Tables were:

- to discuss the necessity of specific support interventions for women in public office, and in particular for female councillors;
- to brief participants on the concept of the FCFs;
- to channel the concerns of female councillors to higher levels of government; and
- to discuss modes of co-operation, and to attract further financial and logistical support from Commune Councils, Provincial Local Administration Units (PLAU),² the Ministry of Women's Affairs, and the provincial governor and his administration.

As a result of the Provincial Round Tables, the PLAU have committed to take on a greater role in organising and supporting the FCF. At the Round Table, the Ministry of the Interior also pledged its support for the FCFs, and agreed to cover the expenses of councillors attending the forums, although how this will work has not yet been determined.

Duch Malin, chief of Yeang commune, Pourk district, Siem Reap province

Duch Malin is a 46-year-old widow with five children. In 2000 she was elected onto the village development committee, and in 2002 became the only woman councillor among six male colleagues in Yeang commune. Her early experiences as a councillor were not positive, and she often felt like resigning because the male councillors were so hostile towards her.

Attending the FCF has helped Duch Malin to increase her confidence and improve her skills. It gave her the idea of helping a particularly disadvantaged group in her commune – those affected by HIV and AIDS. Many men migrate from Yeang commune to Thailand to work, and often bring HIV back with them. Duch Malin spends time with the families of these migrants, informing them about HIV, and about other livelihood options that do not involve migration. Many people have come to her for help, and she has taken them to get tested for HIV. With the support of an NGO, she has set up a group of volunteers who accompany people to get tested, and take rice donations to people living with HIV or AIDS, orphans, and other poor families. In order to ensure that this support continues, Duch Malin intends to incorporate the project into the next commune plan. Her extensive work in this area has earned her the nickname 'Mother of AIDS'.

In 2007 Duch Malin was re-elected as commune chief. Seeing the importance of the FCF, she has advocated with local authorities at all levels to support the project. At the Provincial Round Table, she called for the provincial governor to include other elected female councillors in the forum, and to invite some male commune chiefs who still lack understanding regarding women's and children's issues. Her recommendation was welcomed by the other participants, and led to the provincial governor pledging to provide financial support to allow more councillors and commune chiefs to attend future forums.

Sum Kalyan, councillor, Damnak Ampil commune, Ang Snoul district, Kandal province

Sum Kalyan is a 42-year-old widow with three children, who was the commune trade officer before being elected in 2002 as the only woman among the five councillors. Her work was appreciated by her political party, colleagues, and by her constituents, but Sum Kalyan found speaking in public or at meetings very difficult. She would tremble every time she tried to speak, even when she had written notes in front of her. At council meetings, when each councillor would be asked to give his or her opinion, when Sum Kalyan could see that her turn was coming up, she would excuse herself and go to the bathroom to wash her face, and wait there until her turn had passed before returning to her seat. She was worried that she would make a mistake, and thought that her opinions were worthless. When she knew she had to make a speech, she would prepare several days in advance, and practise, but when the time came would be too nervous to speak.

Attending the FCF has really helped Sum Kalyan increase her confidence with regards to speaking in public, meaning that she can now contribute far more constructively to council meetings and debates. At the forum, she had plenty of opportunity to speak and make presentations in front of the other participants. 'I now feel more confident. I can speak out in front of people without trembling, sometimes I don't need to write on a piece of paper because I can memorise [what I want to say]. I can challenge my party superior and my male commune council colleagues. I feel like I have 100 spirits that protect me, thanks to the forum.'

Sum Kalyan was re-elected as commune councillor in 2007, and was chosen to be an FCF facilitator for Kandal province. At the Provincial Round Table, Sum Kalyan was brave enough to share her honest ideas and concerns, some of which related to her own commune chief's attitudes and behaviour. Her commune chief, who also attended the Round Table,

admitted his lack of understanding and support, and promised to contribute towards her expenses for attending subsequent forums.

Conclusion

The FCF project has been recognised as an important means of enabling women policy makers at the local government level to build confidence and skills, and to gain an awareness of the importance of addressing gender inequality. As such, it has received the support of various government bodies at the national (Ministry of the Interior and Ministry of Women's Affairs), provincial, and local levels. This means that these bodies are now ready to support the continued existence of the FCFs and to enable female councillors to attend them, and that the FCFs will be integrated into the system of decentralised government that now exists in Cambodia.

Many of the councillors who attended the FCFs are now more effective in their roles, particularly regarding their ability to analyse issues relating to women and children, to respond to the needs of their constituencies, and to input into decision-making. It is therefore expected that political parties in Cambodia will make efforts to revise their policies to nominate more women to stand at future elections at both commune and national level.

Through their efforts to respond to the needs of poorer members of their communities, some of which are mentioned in the individual case studies above, the councillors who have participated in the FCFs have also gained the acceptance and respect of their constituents, who now appreciate the contributions that they can make to commune development, and the importance of the equal participation of women and men as witnessed in commune councils. With this important endorsement, it is hoped that women councillors will be even more persuasive and successful in the leadership positions that they now occupy, and will contribute even more constructively to development processes at the local level.

Notes

¹ The commune council is the lowest level of local government in Cambodia, directly elected by the Cambodian people. There are five, seven, nine, or 11 members of each commune council, depending on the size of the population and the area that the commune covers. The leader of the commune is called the commune chief.

² The PLAU is the unit established under the office of the province/municipality to act as a secretariat of the province/municipality governor in the implementation of the decentralisation policy.

Cover photograph: Mey Angkhear Proeuk/Women for Prosperity

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This paper was written by Menh Navy, with input from Tath Bunheng. It is part of a series of papers written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues. The text may be freely used for the purposes of campaigning, education, and research, provided that the source is acknowledged in full.

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