

By Mu Sochua

Cambodian women in politics: *breaking through the traditional image*

The socio-economic burdens of Cambodia's transition from three decades of upheaval to relative peace have been disproportionately shouldered by its women. Along with unequal access to educational opportunities and persisting cultural biases, this has proved a formidable obstacle to Khmer women seeking a more active role in public life.

Women as mass mobilisers

During the 1980s Cambodian women played a major role in the revitalisation of their society. Shattered by the long war and the Khmer Rouge genocide, Cambodia suffered further from the international isolation of its new Vietnamese-backed government. At this time, women accounted for some 60% of the population. One third of them were widows. More than half were also the principal breadwinners in their families.

Led by the Women's Association of Cambodia, women were behind a nation-wide literacy campaign. They also took the lead in caring for the thousands of war orphans and in developing a nation-wide system of cooperatives to regenerate local social and economic activity. With women still struggling to meet their families' daily needs, however, only a very few became active in formal politics.

A timid political awakening

The 1991 Paris peace agreements opened the way for Cambodian women to play a greater political role than ever before. The proliferation of indigenous NGOs (some 300 to date, of which over 40 have a women's agenda) marked an important step forward. Khemara, Cambodia's first indigenous NGO, was founded by a small group of women dedicated to a society based on democratic and gender-balanced principles. The fledgling NGO-based women's movement became involved in addressing domestic violence and sexual exploitation and also lobbied for specific articles in the Constitution to ensure greater recognition of their rights.

At the same time, Cambodian women have worked to promote a broader social and human development agenda for Cambodia's reconstruction. This reflects a more comprehensive understanding of the needs of Cambodia's deeply divided society with a particular focus on its largely neglected rural majority. In a society marked by open displays of violence, the peace-building approaches of women, involving diverse initiatives such as peace rallies and petitions,

stand out from the more confrontational tendencies of men and student groups

Through their experience as social activists, women have come to realise that overcoming gender-biased policies will demand a more active political role as well as broader changes in Cambodia's male-dominated society. After the 1993 elections, seven women joined the 120-seat National Assembly and a Ministry of Women's Affairs was created. At the same time, however, virtually no women won posts in the provincial, district and commune-level administrations. While there were twice as many female candidates in the 1998 elections, they still represented just ten% of the total at this level.

Changing mind-sets

The lack of women in official posts masks more enduring problems in Cambodian society. Even when women are elected to official positions, they still face difficulties in breaking into the 'boys' club' and playing a real role in decision-making processes. Behind the formal trappings of the parliamentary system, this still occurs informally in a largely male-dominated world. Here elections and politics are often interpreted narrowly as a means of settling disputes rather than as an opportunity to debate and advance issues linked to broader national interests.

The ability of women to make their voices heard is further undermined by traditional cultural biases against women. Women are still expected to be more soft-spoken than men, and many Cambodians see the maintenance of gender relations which discriminate against women as crucial to the preservation of the Khmer cultural identity. Few Cambodian political parties, despite their claims, have seriously invested in programmes to help women move out of their traditional gender roles. Along with fears of intimidation and a lack of formal education, this saps the confidence of many women.

The huge socio-economic demands still placed on Cambodian women are perhaps the greatest obstacle militating against their greater political role. While there is still a long way to go before women enjoy the full fruits of equality, their growing involvement in Cambodia's political life has injected a new vitality into it and placed a greater emphasis on social issues. ■