The Role of Women in Cambodia

The Asia Foundation
Improving Lives, Expanding Opportunities

Cambodian women represent 51 percent of the country's population, yet their ability to participate as equal partners in social, political, and economic life is severely constrained. Conservative traditional norms value women less than men, and persistent gender power imbalances lead to poverty, illiteracy, gender discrimination, and other obstacles that prevent women from effectively participating in Cambodia's development.

Cambodian women are significantly underrepresented in the political sphere, in both elected and appointed positions. In 2012, only 18 percent of all elected commune councilors were women. Men dominate all branches and levels of government, and are paid more than women for the same work. Many female politicians face marginalization and limits on their effective participation. Serious gaps in education persist, with fewer girls attending and completing school, as parents prioritize boys' education while girls are expected to help out at home. Gender-based violence and trafficking in persons for both sexual and labor exploitation remain serious problems. Women in Cambodia are important economic actors, often responsible for the production and marketing of products. Nonetheless, they are historically underrepresented in decision-making and leadership capacities. It is also much more difficult for women to obtain business loans, and this financial constraint keeps women in poverty.

APPROACH

The Asia Foundation's decades of work in women's empowerment focuses on three key, mutually reinforcing areas: expanding women's economic opportunities, increasing women's and girls' basic rights and security, and promoting women's effective participation in political and public life. As research has demonstrated that investing in women is one of the most powerful ways to reduce poverty and accelerate development, the Foundation partners with local organizations and leaders at all levels of society to make a positive change. The Foundation's Women's Empowerment programs focus on providing girls with a quality education, empowering women in public decision-making, and promoting women's economic and legal rights. These strategic investments equip women with the skills to pull themselves out of povertyand claim their rights. This empowerment offers a multitude of benefits, not only for women and girls, but also for their families and local communities.

Education-especially for girls-is associated with increased productivity, better health outcomes for women and their families, greater environmental awareness, and the increased participation of women in public life. Recognizing these benefits, The Foundation's Tertiary Scholarship for Girls program enables young women to give back to their communities using the skills and knowledge that only an education can provide.

The Foundation supported the first-ever research on Violence Against Women in the 1990s, and

CAMBODIA

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supported many of the leading legal aid and gender-based violence organizations that operate at the local and policy levels. Our work also involves enhancing access to justice for women affected by gender-based violence.

The Foundation also runs programs that address prevention, protection, and prosecution, as well as those that safeguard the rights of women who are most vulnerable to exploitation, and provide direct assistance to victims of human trafficking.

To increase the effectiveness of Cambodian women's participation in local governance, the Foundation conducted a program to increase the confidence and skills of female commune councilors so that they can be more proactive in their work. The program also strengthened their ability to advocate for policies and the allocation of resources that address critical needs of women and children in their communities.

ACTIVITIES

The Asia Foundations women's empowerment programs focus on education for girls, empowering women in public decision-making, and promoting women's economic and legal rights through the following activities:

- Providing undergraduate scholarships to economically disadvantaged young women.
- Creating nationwide networks and forums for female commune councilors to share common concerns and identify strategic solutions to local governance challenges.
- Convening a national round-table discussion with national and subnational government representatives to share on-the-ground experiences and challenges faced by female councilors.
- Supporting business training and networking opportunities for women entrepreneurs.
- Leadership, advocacy, and negotiation training for female councilors.
- Conducting research to better understand the prevalence and characteristics of human trafficking, including labor exploitation.
- Providing access to legal aid and raising awareness of legal rights among trafficking survivors.
- Providing access to credit to female entrepreneurs.

ACHIEVEMENTS

- Secured a national commitment from the Royal Government of Cambodia to support female councilors.
- Engaged 325 female commune councilors from 13 provinces in a wide-reaching networking event.
- 97 percent of 128 female councilor forum participants received additional commune council committee assignments, proving that their male counterparts trusted in the professional abilities of female councilors.
- Over 1,800 victims of trafficking received legal and social support.
- Trained 778 officials from the Royal Government of Cambodia on the National Minimum Standards for the Protection of the Rights of Victims of Trafficking.
- Provided scholarships for 116 young women from poor families in rural communities to pursue four-year undergraduate degrees at Western University in Kampong Cham, Cambodia.

EXPERIENCE

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> "Being the only woman in the council I used to feel inferior, but since the forum I feel empowered."
>
> – **Commune Councilor, Kratie**

The Asia Foundation is a nonprofit international development organization committed to improving lives across a dynamic and developing Asia. Headquartered in San Francisco, The Asia Foundation works through a network of offices in 18 Asian countries and in Washington, DC. Working with public and private partners, the Foundation receives funding from a diverse group of bilateral and multilateral development agencies, foundations, corporations, and individuals.

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