WOMEN WALKING SILENTLY: THE EMERGENCE OF
CAMBODIAN WOMEN INTO THE PUBLIC SPHERE

by

JOAN M. KRAYNANSKI

has been approved for

the Center for International Studies by

________________________________________

Elizabeth Fuller Collins
Associate Professor, Classics and World Religions

________________________________________

Drew McDaniel
Interim Director, Center for International Studies
Abstract

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WOMEN WALKING SILENTLY: THE EMERGENCE OF CAMBODIAN WOMEN INTO THE PUBLIC SPHERE (65 pp.)

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This thesis examines the changing role of Cambodian women as they become engaged in local politics and how the situation of women’s engagement in the public sphere is contributing to a change in Cambodia’s traditional gender regimes. I examine the challenges for and successes of women engaged in local politics in Cambodia through interviews and observation of four elected women commune council members. Cambodian’s political culture, beginning with the post-colonial period up until the present, has been guided by strong centralized leadership, predominantly vested in one individual. The women who entered the political system from the commune council elections of 2002 address a political philosophy of inclusiveness and cooperation. The guiding organizational philosophy of inclusiveness and cooperation is also evident in other women centered organizations that have sprung up in Cambodia since the early 1990s. My research looks at how women’s role in society began to change during the Khmer Rouge years, 1975 to 1979, and has continued to transform, for some a matter of necessity, while for others a matter of choice.

Approved:_______________________________________________________________

Elizabeth Fuller Collins

Associate Professor, Classics and World Religions
Dedication

To my daughters, Anny and Rachel
Acknowledgments

There are a few individuals who I would personally like to thank for their encouragement and support in completing this thesis. My advisor and friend, Elizabeth Collins, was my primary editor and supporter. Not only did she offer valuable editorial suggestions, but she found some funding to help support my first research trip to Cambodia. I would also like to thank my other thesis committee members, Claudia Hale and Diane Ciekawy, who offered valuable suggestions on how to make this thesis a more complete work. I would like to thank the Southeast Asian Studies Program for funding my second research trip to Cambodia with a Luce Research Award. I would like to thank Ann Shoemak for the thorough final edit and for her inspiration on the topic of Cambodia. I am grateful to all the Cambodians who talked with me and shared their experiences, without their generosity this thesis would not be complete. In particular, I would like to thank Netra Eng for always providing me with the most successful leads and being my friend.
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Introduction

Cambodia is a small picturesque land with a population of approximately 13 million people. The Khmer people are predominantly Buddhist, and they adhere to a traditional hierarchal social structure with men dominating the public sphere and women engaged in the private sphere. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, this land of abundant rice paddies and quaint provincial capitals began to suffer politically and economically from years of ineffective leadership. The political chaos and economic decline in Cambodia during this time period worsened as a result of heavy aerial bombardment due to its proximity to the Vietnam/USA engagement. A revolutionary movement, the Khmer Rouge, gained control of the country from 1975 to 1979, leaving in its wake social and economic devastation.

Following the defeat of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, women accounted for a disproportionate majority of the labor force. Many Cambodian women, traditionally reserved while relegated to a subordinate role in the family unit, became a major force in rebuilding the social and economic daily apparatus of this shattered society. Throughout the 1980s, as the country was rebuilding under the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party, women were called upon to fill nontraditional roles due to circumstances of necessity. Women were encouraged and trained to fill government jobs, work in the manufacturing sector and participate in national associations. Chanthou Boua (1983) talked with women in the early 1980s who found their role as “head of house” an incredible burden. But, for those women who willingly participated outside of the private sphere, this was an opportunity to utilize untapped skills, gain experience and establish their presence in the public sphere.
The political landscape in Cambodia changed once again in the early 1990s. The Paris Peace Agreement of 1991 established a cease-fire among the four warring political factions and established a timetable for elections. In conjunction with the arrival of a large United Nations team sent to oversee the truce and scheduled elections, a large number of international aid agencies set up offices in Cambodia to assist with the political, social and economic development of the country. According to the 2004 “Cambodian Gender Assessment”, this early international aid supported a variety of women-centered nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) emphasizing the concept of gender equality. Cambodian women would come to rely on support and encouragement from international and local NGOs, as the more gender neutral practices of the 1980s socialist style government were abandoned for a more western model of liberal economics and democratic politics in the 1990s.

In 2000, the Cambodian government, under the leadership of Hun Sen, enacted laws to establish the first multi party elections for commune council positions under the government’s decentralization plan. A well-organized women’s movement formed to place women candidates on 30 percent of the party ballots for the commune council election. Although women held some seats in the National Assembly and positions in the Ministries, the commune council elections gave women the first opportunity to engage actively in public affairs within the political arena. Of the nearly 13,000 women who stood for the election, over 900 won seats on the commune councils.

**Defining the Thesis**

This thesis puts forward two questions. First, what are the challenges for and successes of women engaged in local politics in Cambodia? Second, is women’s
involvement in local politics contributing to a change in traditional gender regimes? My research observing women’s involvement in local politics began in June of 2002, four months after the first commune council elections. At that time, during my first visit to Cambodia, I was invited to attend an honors ceremony, held in Phnom Penh, congratulating those women who had been elected to commune council positions. Hundreds of women dressed in the traditional Khmer sampat (skirt) and white blouse sat in row after row of neatly lined chairs awaiting recognition. Beginning with that event and throughout the following two years I interviewed women commune council members, and individuals who organized and supported their effort to participate in local politics. At that time, I perceived women’s engagement in politics as a lens for viewing the advancement (or perhaps regression) of democratic practices in Cambodia.

My ethnographic research was guided by Clifford Geertz’s (1983) approach to observation and the analysis, whereby an interloper and observer can only attempt “to determine how the people…define themselves as persons…to themselves and to one another” (p. 61). Likewise, my quest for viewing change within the Cambodian experience was prompted by my desire to view Cambodians as more than victims. While many writers focus on the victimization of Cambodians, Judy Ledgerwood and John Vijghen (2002) make the point that “Khmer society is neither mad, destroyed, nor returning to a nostalgic past. Rather it is constantly being re-created, re-imagined, and negotiated through the everyday actions of people going about their lives” (pp. 109-110).

My research indicates that a social transformation for women is occurring in unison with women’s efforts to participate in a democratic process. The four women I have observed and interviewed over a three-year period are contributing to the
enhancement of participatory democracy by their work in the commune councils and, along with other women involved in civil society organizations, are also in the forefront of defining a more public role for women.

In the early 1980s, all segments of society struggled to piece their lives back together, hoping to regain the social and economic lifestyles of years past. But, it was women who were called upon at this time to break with the past and develop a more public presence, a role greatly divergent from their previous conditioning. In an effort to understand the complexities of cultural change on Cambodian women who are undergoing political and social restructuring, I focus my analysis on “self identity” rather than gender equality by using the work of Peggy Watson (2000). In examining the postsocialist position of women in Eastern Europe, Watson brings a cultural sensitivity to feminist theory in transitional developing countries where empowerment and disempowerment are at stake. As Cambodian women gained empowerment in the 1980s, it was essential in the 1990s that they redefine themselves under yet another regime change. Watson brings forward the theory that a broader pattern needs to be realized in time of political and social reconstruction, recognizing that “Paradoxically, to focus exclusively on a categorical idea of gender…which compares ‘men’ on one side and ‘women’ on the other is to endorse the underlying terms of transition, terms which themselves are productive of masculinism” (p. 207) In circumstances where political and economic changes impose sharp divergence from previous conditions, as in the case of Cambodia, it is paramount to be sensitive to the evolving social conditions as evolving allegiances are connected to past shared experiences, common to both women and men.
Watson’s theory calls into question wider political inequalities as a pertinent consideration of women in developing countries.

While Cambodian women do not stand alone in the effort of rebuilding the social, political and economic infrastructure of the country, women must redefine their cultural identity in order to continue to engage actively in that effort. Cambodian women have been conditioned, by the dictates of a patriarchal structure, to be content to have value in the private sphere – the family unit – but to “walk quietly” in the public sphere. Bit (1991) finds the position of the Cambodian women as distinct from other Asian gender patterns due to the independence Cambodian women are permitted in the family. Seanglim Bit describes these secure and well established roles as having “extensive authority to decide on household, financial, and other matters relating to the future of the children and the family budget…charged with maintaining a harmonious environment in the home …[and] expected to take the initiative to resolve family conflicts” (p. 48). Women’s subaltern position within Cambodian society relegates them to appreciating and accepting their role as household managers while recognizing their obligation to be loyal and to submit to the authority of their husbands. This conditioned acceptance had been perpetuated for centuries, an intricate entanglement of consent and coercion in a patriarchal paradigm.

Watson maintains that women’s positioning within society can be transform when there arises a perceived need for individual identity. By developing a culturally sensitive position for feminist theory in non-western cultures, Watson emphasizes “identity transformation” as the key to understanding the nature of how the progression of a more gendered society occurs in developing nations (2000).
In keeping with Watson’s theory that allegiances are based on shared experiences, Cambodian women saw themselves as contributing to the effort for reconstruction and development, rather than as agents for social change, in the 1980s (Boua 1983). Underlying this effort, Cambodian women were experiencing a deepening sense of self-worth. The transformation of self-identity for Cambodian women can be traced through the following three historical periods.

First was the period of social and economic upheaval during the KR years from 1975 to 1978. Cambodians emerged from this period shattered; their cultural symbols had been destroyed, and psychologically they lived as “ghosts” in an environment devoid of personal emotion and relationships. Women experienced their husbands and sons taken away or killed as they were forced to watch. Recalling the abduction of her husband, one widow expressed her utter devastation, “They took him away from my heart and left me and my children like birds without a nest” (Boua, 1983, p. 59). Next to the deaths and disappearances, collective meals, with men, women and children seated separately, was what women spoke most bitterly about according to Boua. All of the cultural rhythms that dictated day and night came to a stop during the Khmer Rouge years as the majority of the population was uprooted and moved to locations where forced manual labor was imposed on all but the leadership.

Following the Khmer Rouge years came the second period, which saw the rebuilding of the country’s infrastructure and culture during the Vietnamese occupation and post-Vietnamese period from 1980 to 1990. The demographics in the wake of the Khmer Rouge years forced women into a more public role in society. Due to years of military combat within Cambodia and executions and forced labor under the Khmer
Rouge, the male population was depleted. Many women returning to their villages or towns following the defeat of the Khmer Rouge were the sole providers for remaining family members. In the farming villages, the People’s Republic of Kamuchea established *krom samaki*, or solidarity groups, whereby the members would assist each other in the planting and harvesting of rice, and each member would receive a share of the harvest based on the amount of labor provided. This system allowed widows the opportunity to provide food for their families. Many women participated in government-sponsored training courses to fill civil servant positions, although, according to Boua (1983), few held high ranking positions. In an effort to provide a health care system for women and children, the Women’s Association was established. This organization gave women the opportunity to participate in a national effort that involved organizing, networking and accountability.

The third period is the current period that began in the early 1990s, when a large influx of foreign aid became available for social, political and economic development, giving women the opportunity to operate independently and publicly. Issues related to the advancement and equality of women were prominently featured in the agendas of international aid agencies establishing operations in Cambodia. Leading up to the 1993 national elections, a media effort was conducted to encourage women to participate in the voting process. As these efforts have evolved in the 21st century, women have increasingly gained more experience and public exposure in development efforts. Bringing the issues of women into the formal political arena through elected positions on commune councils demonstrates yet another step in the development of self-identity as it
relates to the consolidation of democracy. Transformation continues today, as more women become actively engaged outside of the private arena.

The Research

The ethnographic research for this thesis was conducted in Cambodia during three four-week trips in June 2002, June-July 2003, and December 2004. In 2002 I began the preliminary work of this thesis. Many individuals granted me interviews, both in their official capacity and privately. Others allowed me to use their libraries and shared copies of publications not available outside of Cambodia. In 2003, it was with the assistance of the Directors of Women for Prosperity (WfP) and Cambodian Women for Peace and Development (CWPD) that I was able to locate the four women commune councilors that I interviewed. The generosity of time and information provided me by the directors or staff members of WfP, CWPD, Oxfam Hong Kong, Help Age International, Cambodian Development Resource Institute, Center for Peace and Development, National Archives of Cambodia, Cooperation Committee for Cambodia and the Asia Foundation greatly assisted in my understanding of the political and gender climate that exists in Cambodia today. The former Minister of Women’s Affairs and longtime activist for women, Mu Sochua, shared with me her experiences and analysis on the development of women’s position in Cambodian society since the early 1990s.

All of the above interviews were conducted in English, but I recruited an interpreter from the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) to assist me in interviewing the four women commune councilors, as none of them spoke English. My interpreter, a young Cambodian woman, was a fourth-year student at the RUPP studying Telecommunications. She was quick to understand my research goals and was very
considerate in reshaping my stock questions in appropriate Khmer vernacular with requisite courtesy. I understood her to be a little apprehensive about participating in the interview sessions with elected official who were aligned with political parties that she did not support. However, she responded professionally throughout the interviews. The interpreter also assisted me in conducting a survey in one commune council area to determine if residents were familiar with and/or used the services of the commune council.

I did not construct a stock questionnaire for the four women commune councilors that I interviewed. Rather, I began my initial interviews by asking them to discuss their current work in the commune councils and constructed additional questions as the conversation warmed up and they became more at ease with me.

During the 2003 National Elections, I participated as an Election Observer in Takeo Province. This experience provided me a first-hand opportunity to observe the mechanics of the Cambodian election process. I was also fortunate to come in contact with another graduate student who was doing research on commune council women in rural areas of Cambodia. My research was focused in Phnom Penh, where women are less constrained by cultural customs. This was made evident by the large percentage of women elected to commune councilor positions (17.6 percent, compared to the national average, 8.5 percent). This insight into rural women’s political experiences gave me a broader understanding of the conflicts and barriers Cambodian women face. The sharing of our experiences proved incredibly helpful in analyzing my own research.
Thesis Outline

This thesis is arranged into five chapters: Introduction, History of Cambodian Political Culture; The Situation of Women in a Cambodian Context; Four Commune Council Women; and the Conclusion. The political history of Cambodia, beginning with the post-colonial period, is presented to provide a background for the political culture of Cambodia. Chapter Three, on Cambodian Women, presents those social and political stigmas that have shaped women’s lives during a more contemporary time until the present. My ethnographic research on four commune council members is detailed in Chapter Four. I have used pseudonyms for the four women commune councilors I interviewed and received their permission to use the information I collected in the interviews for this thesis. I agreed not to publish any information I recorded at the week long Women’s Workshop I attended in June 2002, and I have therefore made only general reference to that event. In Chapter Five, I present my conclusions.
History of Cambodian Political Culture

My research is focused on women in local politics. The political situation that has brought these women into the political arena is entwined with events from Cambodia’s political history beginning in the 1940s. A democratic style of government was first introduced in the late 1940s in Cambodia, and it was a short-lived experience. Several diverse styles of government followed until, in 1993, democracy was reintroduced and continues today. The political actions of current and past regimes have produced both positive and negative circumstances that have shaped the women commune councilors’ actions and philosophies.

To understand the political challenges these women face, it is essential to have an understanding of the political culture of Cambodia. Cambodia’s political culture has been dominated at each period presented in this chapter by strong centralized leadership, predominantly vested in one individual. Political party leadership by members of the royal family dominated the political culture for several decades, beginning in the late 1940s. This union of politics and royal heritage continues to be a vested feature today as represented by Prince Norodom Ranariddh, leader of the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Co-operative Cambodian Party (FUNCINPEC), a leading political contender in contemporary politics. Historically, patron clientism rather than political philosophy has been the mechanism for building political party membership and loyalty. These characteristics of the political culture as represented at the central level also dominate district, regional and village level politics.

In sharp contrast, the style of politics the women commune councilors have established or espouse in their commune councils (discussed in Chapter Four) is one of
inclusiveness and cooperation. Women’s organizations have developed a strong system of networking across political party lines. As a political entity, women commune councils focus on an issue-oriented agenda. As newcomers to the political party structure, women as individual party members have been brought into the political system not under the traditional system of patron clientism but rather in conjunction with decentralization.

**Post Colonial Cambodia (1945-1954)**

The 1945 accords outlined Cambodia’s partial independence from French colonial rule. The accords gave Cambodia autonomous status with the King and an elected advisory council governing. A constitution was drafted through negotiations by King Norodom Sihanouk’s representative and the French. At Sihanouk’s insistence the constitution had to be ratified by a consultative assembly made up of members of political parties contesting the election. Two primary parties, the Democrat Party and the Liberal Party, along with several smaller parties, formed and participated in the assembly election. The Democrat Party, a conglomeration of Issarak¹ supporters, intellectuals, younger members of the state bureaucracy and the Mahanikay sect of the sangha,² envisioned a democratic Cambodia and supported full independence from the French. The Liberal Party, *Kanaq Sereipheap* (literally Freedom Group), derived its development from those groups within the country that supported the status quo, a more elite group that included wealthy landlords, older members of the state bureaucracy, the Sino-Cambodian commercial elite and the Cham ethnic minority. The Liberal Party supported

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¹ An anti-French pro-independence movement foreshadowing and laying the groundwork for Sihanouk’s push for Cambodian independence.
² Of the two Mahayana Buddhist sects in Cambodia, the Mahanikay sect was the largest, predominantly situated in the rural areas. In the early 1900s the Mahanikay sect was responsible for initiating progressive changes in Cambodian Buddhism by translating the Buddhist texts into Khmer, publishing books and thereby transforming mystical Buddhism into a symbol of Khmer nationalism (Edwards 2004).
a continued Franco-Cambodian relationship. Both parties were headed by Cambodian princes who advocated the ideologies of their respective parties (Chandler 2000).

The national election of 1946, establishing the Consultative Assembly, drew more than 60 percent of the registered voters. The 1946 electoral process, unlike the 1993 UN sponsored election, did not emphasize citizens' engagement or an international funding commitment to support such an operation. Although the number of voters was impressive for the first democratization initiative in Cambodia, it has been surmised that most Cambodians, unfamiliar with self-government or civil rights, voted following the age old patron/client system. The Democrat Party’s surprising victory was due to its political organization that skillfully made use of the traditional patronage system. By initiating their political campaign through familiar and trustworthy institutions (Buddhist monasteries, schools, ministries and government services), the Democrats were able to win a large majority of the assembly seats (Chandler 1991).

The Democrat majority envisioned the assembly as a legislative body representing the will of the people and it repeatedly attempted to diminish Sihanouk’s power as established in the constitution, while demanding full independence from France. The relationship between the Democrats and Sihanouk was sustained sufficiently to allow for ratification of the constitution and regulation of the quasi-independent government operations, although it encountered great difficulty in bridging opposing ideological visions for Cambodia. Following successive assembly elections in 1947 and 1951, in which the Democrat Party continued to win substantial majorities, Sihanouk dissolved the assembly, named himself Prime Minister, and appointed a non-Democrat cabinet. The French supported his actions by sending French troops into the capital on the day of the
staged coup. Now holding absolute political power, Sihanouk proclaimed his initiative to gain full independence for Cambodia by 1954. Thus Sihanouk would bring to fruition one of the demands of the Democrat Party, Cambodian independence. But representative democracy would be eliminated, and the establishment of a centrist political ideology left factions on the left and the right to eventually pull the country into chaos.


Following the 1954 Geneva Conference that granted full independence to Cambodia, Sihanouk entrenched himself in Cambodian politics by linking his abdication of the throne with the creation of the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* (People’s Socialist Community). Sihanouk, the self-proclaimed leader of the *Sangkum*, advocated the elimination of all political parties. With elections scheduled for 1955, Sihanouk’s *Sangkum* was positioned to compete with the Democrat Party. Sihanouk established a national security office to oversee the election. The national security force was credited with threatening and intimidating Democrats and their supporters, beating up their campaign workers, shutting down several independent newspapers and imprisoning their editors, along with other violations. Not surprisingly, the 1955 election gave the *Sangkum* 83 percent of the vote and all the assembly seats. The political parties faded away due to inclusion of their membership into the *Sangkum*, dropping out of the political scene because of Sihanouk’s brutal tactics, or disappearance into the marquis to join the growing communist movement in Cambodia. Prince Sihanouk as the leader of

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3 The ideology that Sihanouk’s political party advocated was Buddhist socialism. For a description of Buddhist socialism, see Suksamran, 1993, 137-139. According to Chandler, Sihanouk’s use of the term socialism put him in line with other contemporary leaders of the time, “including his new friends Sukarno, Nehru, and Zhou Enlai.” (1991:87)
the Sangkum was to become the only viable political power in Cambodia until 1970 (Chandler 1991; 2000).

Sihanouk ruled over Cambodia at a time when international events and Cold War politics diminished the possibilities for internal development. Initially, Sihanouk established agreements with the United States (US) government. In exchange for military and economic aid Cambodia allowed the US strategic positioning in Cambodia to further their military efforts in Vietnam. Eventually breaking off relations with the US, Sihanouk developed a strong relationship with the People’s Republic of China and was provided financial assistance with no strings attached. Arrangements were made by Sihanouk with the North Vietnamese to allow them to travel and transport arms to South Vietnam. The complexities of managing relations with its neighbor Vietnam, while proclaiming a position of neutrality, gave Sihanouk an unstable international image as unstable. Internally, he was quietly criticized by both the right and the left.

Sihanouk’s economic policies were weak, and although Cambodia’s economic base was in agriculture, rice and rubber, he failed to provide for advancement in mechanization, improving crop varieties or irrigation. The government’s agricultural credit program did little to alleviate the indebtedness in the rural areas, causing an increase in landlessness and a flow of unemployed into Phnom Penh. His nationalization programs in the areas of banking, import/export and manufacturing were unsuccessful, and in 1969, in an effort to increase revenues, Sihanouk opened a large casino outside of Phnom Penh (Chandler 1991).

At the end of his reign in 1970, Sihanouk’s years as Cambodian political patriarch would leave a legacy of repression, inept economic policy, erratic fluctuation of domestic
and external policies, peasant dissatisfaction, and deeper poverty, corruption, and rebellion from both the left and the right factions on Phnom Penh’s doorstep.


In January 1970, Sihanouk departed Cambodia for his annual vacation. He left behind a government on the brink of revolt, evident two months later by the National Assembly vote of no confidence in Sihanouk’s leadership. With Sihanouk removed as chief of state, the conservative and pro-American forces within the Sangkum took control of the government. Sihanouk’s secret agreement with the North Vietnamese, to allow bases to be established on Cambodian soil, and for the movement of arms through Cambodia to facilitate those bases, was now revealed. The new government, under the leadership of Lon Nol and Sirik Matak, opposed such an agreement and demanded that the North Vietnamese leave Cambodia. They were unable militarily to make that happen, however.

The rural population presented another impediment to the success of the 1970 coup. Large mass demonstrations, protesting the removal of Sihanouk, occurred in the provinces surrounding the capitol and in the northwest region. Although initially peaceful, the demonstrations quickly turned violent. According to Ben Kiernan, although the rural protestors appealed for the return of Sihanouk, it was not so much their desire to have him return to power but, rather, that his absence, as the ‘quasi-religious’ patriarch of Cambodia, created a void (1982, pp. 218-219).

With new agreements established with the US government, the Khmer Republic was propped up financially and militarily. Neither was sufficient to stabilize the government nor stem the tide of the insurgency that was growing in the countryside. The
insurgency, labeled the Khmer Rouge by Sihanouk, gained additional strength as the new
government’s corrupt practices and repressive policies became evident. Initially trained,
armed and supported by the North Vietnamese, the Khmer Rouge or Communist Party of
Kampuchea (CPK), began visualizing their movement as independent and uniquely
Cambodian and their numbers and territorial control grew.

In 1973 the Americans began an aggressive eight month bombardment of eastern
Cambodia in an effort to control the supply line of the North Vietnamese to the South,
which had been sanctioned by the Cambodian government.4 This aerial bombardment of
the countryside caused unknown numbers of deaths and massive migration of rural
peasants into Phnom Penh and regional capitals. Ineffective in shutting down the Ho Chi
Minh Trail, the chaos resulting from the bombardments aided the Khmer Rouge in their
now aggressive campaign to control the country.

By 1975, with Phnom Penh surrounded by insurgent forces, the Lon Nol
government was relying on the Americans to airlift rice and ammunition into the city.
Lon Nol departed Phnom Penh in April. The 1970 coup that had put Cambodia’s right
wing element in power collapsed. Lon Nol’s government had taken on the legacy of
Sihanouk’s failures and was unable or unwilling to move the country toward economic
stability or cohesive democracy. During the morning of April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge
walked into Phnom Penh and established themselves as the revolutionary leaders of
Democratic Kampuchea (DK).5

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4 It needs noted that the bombing of Cambodia by the US military was an illegal act according to US laws
governing rules of engagement.
5 The CPK/KR were victorious in their arms struggle before the Vietnamese could claim their victory over
the South Vietnamese government and the Americans. Although the Vietnamese pushed for the CPK/ KR
to hold back their military operations until they could be victorious in Vietnam, the CPK/KR believed the
The Khmer Rouge Years (1975-1980)

The most succinct description for the three years, seven months and twenty-one days of the Khmer Rouge revolution that established the government of Democratic Kampuchea is painted on a sign above a bar in Phnom Penh, “The Heart of Darkness”. What was thought to be the end of years of conflict, population migration and death, a time for a new beginning, instead became a period of unimaginable hardship and cruelty for the population of Cambodia.

Soloth Sar (alias Pol Pot), Ieng Sary, Nuon Chea, Son Sen, Ta Mok and others comprised the Standing Committee that defined the philosophy of the CPK and determined the course of action the government would follow. Theoretically, the Standing Committee conducted decision-making collectively, but according to Philip Short (2004, pp. 340-341), Pol Pot was the sole decision maker and slipped into the role of self-appointed liberator-ruler of Cambodia. His self-aggrandizement was reflected in the uniqueness claimed for the new revolutionary state of Cambodia, “The standard of the [Cambodian] revolution of April 17 1975, raised by Comrade Pol Pot, is brilliant red, full of determination, wonderfully firm and wonderfully clear-sighted. The whole world admires us, sings our praises and learns from us” (cf Short 2004, pp341-342).

Following the coup of 1970, Pol Pot accepted the support of Sihanouk to bolster the image of the insurgency among the peasants. This political relationship between the Khmer Rouge and Sihanouk was encouraged by their mutual comrade Zhou Enlai, Prime

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only chance they had for ‘continued existence’ was to press forward (Kiernan 2004, p. 297 and Short 2004, pp. 238, 239, 263).
6 According to Michael Vickery, the battle for leadership of the CPK and the revolutionary government was not determined until several months after the April 1975 taking of Phnom Penh, with Pol Pot and his group winning control over the more Vietnamese-influenced members of the CPK. The purges that followed brought about the installation of the Tuol Sleng detention and interrogation center and prompted the flight of suspect CPK members to Vietnam (1999, pp. 154-163).
Minster of China. China’s leaders took on the role of advisor and financial supporter of the Khmer Rouge and Sihanouk. The need for Sihanouk as an icon to camouflage the true ideological intent of the insurgency ended, and he was literally and figuratively discounted. Visualizing Cambodia as an independent nation, the historical suspicion of Cambodia’s eastern neighbors, the Vietnamese, turned into yet another obsession for Pol Pot.

Most of the western world remained in uncertainty as to the state and condition of the Cambodian nation for several years following the revolution because of a self-imposed news blackout. Information on events in Cambodia and DK’s military attacks on Vietnam were little known in the outside world. Those members of the Khmer Rouge who became disillusioned with Pol Pot’s style of governing or felt they were targeted as Vietnamese sympathizers took refuge in Vietnam. The Cambodian military force involved in the 1979 liberation of Cambodia, the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation (the Front), was led by Heng Samrin and Chea Sim, recent defectors to Vietnam from the KR forces. Supported by over 100,000 Vietnamese forces, they returned to Cambodia and brought an end to the KR leadership (Chandler 2000, p. 223).

From the evacuation of Phnom Penh during the first days of the revolution, the KR imposed unthinkable physical and emotional abuses on the Khmer people, including: obliteration of the social organization of the family unit; intensive labor with only

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7 Sihanouk retained his alliance with the Khmer Rouge while in exile and in September 1975 returned to Phnom Penh to participate in the revolutionary government as permanent Head of State. His political status and lifestyle were diminished to a mere ghost of his past prominence and he soon resigned his position within the DK and remained in Phnom Penh for several years confined to a small domestic space while under close scrutiny (Short, 2004, pp. 329-336).

8 David Chandler states that it was not until mid 1978 that the DK opened up to outside observers, “welcoming visits from sympathetic journalists and foreign radicals, and establishing diplomatic relations with several non-Communist countries such as Burma and Malaysia” (2000, p. 222).
starvation food rations; destruction of all things related to Buddhism; and the loss of freedom of movement and personal expression. In January of 1979 when the invading forces had secured Phnom Penh, most historians would agree that the population was grateful. Yet, as one style of communism replaced another and the Vietnamese established a prominent presence in and military control over Cambodia, it would only be a matter of time before Cambodian identity would be again challenged.

**The Vietnamese Intervention Years (1980-1993)**

When the new government, People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), was established in Phnom Penh, a younger and less senior member of the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation (the Front), Hun Sen, rose to political prominence. The rebuilding of Cambodia’s infrastructure, political, economic and social, was orchestrated by a highly acclaimed Vietnamese military strategist and negotiator, Le Duc Tho.

The campaign that ensued to win the hearts and minds of the Cambodian people was political and humanitarian. The Vietnamese Communist Party oversaw the formation of a new government, the writing of a new constitution, and policies linking Cambodia as an independent state within a triad of Indochina solidarity – Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. In an effort to gain acceptance of yet another communist government, a more open agenda was established. The platform set up by the PRK included: destruction of all aspects of the DK; return of basic rights – freedom of movement, religion, opinions, association and freedom to return to former homes; establishment of a mixed economy.

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9 Vickery states the three, Heng, Chea and Hun, had belonged to the Eastern Zone faction under the KR, perhaps the least repressive Zone, and were ‘domestic Communist’, that is not trained in North Vietnam like many other members of the Front (1999, p. 217).

10 According to Short, Le Duc Tho gained recognition not only as a military strategist during the French and United States’ wars with Vietnam, but in negotiating the 1973 US-Vietnam cease fire, and, along with Henry Kissinger, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize which he turned down (2002, p. 9).
that promoted industry and agriculture; encouragement of voluntary cooperative
associations; redevelopment of an educational system; and recognition by neighboring

The PRK faced multiple political entities claiming the right to rule over Cambodia
and a hostile international community. The Khmer Rouge continued military actions
against the PRK forces from a position in the northwestern region along the Thai-
Cambodian border. Internationally supported refugee camps sprang up along the Thai-
Cambodian border for refugees of the Khmer Rouge years and those fleeing the
instability following the new occupation. These camps also acted as cover for retreating
Khmer Rouge troops. Internationally, the Khmer Rouge was recognized as the legitimate
government, holding Cambodia’s seat at the United Nations (UN). Two past political
leaders, Sihanouk and Son Sann, established governments in exile and joined with the
Although several camps, including the sitting government in Phnom Penh, claimed
political rights over Cambodia, it would be three major super powers, the United States,
China and the Soviet Union, that would determine the fate of Cambodia.\(^{11}\)

In 1989, the Vietnamese pulled its military force out of Cambodia; the PRK
reestablished itself as the State of Cambodia (SOC) with Hun Sen as Prime Minister; and,
China and the Soviet Union began decreasing their financial support with the intent of
totally relieving themselves of involvement in the Cambodian situation. Sihanouk and

\(^{11}\) China in providing support for Sihanouk and the KR saw its advantage in either of these political entities
as sympathetic governments for Cambodia. The United States’ support for the KR stems from its vengeful
attitude toward the Vietnamese as the victors of the US-Vietnamese war along with support for the Chinese
position because of the US’s newly developed relationship with China (Shawcross 1984). The Soviet Union
and the Eastern Bloc countries provided military and economic support for Vietnam and Cambodia.
Hun Sen foresaw the need for a climax to the complex situation of Cambodia before the international community turned its focus and funding toward other distressed states. Both men were instrumental in bringing about the Paris Agreement of 1991 mandating national elections that would be financed and supervised by the UN. From 1991 until 1993, when multi-party elections were held, Cambodia saw an unprecedented infusion of international aid, aid workers, and UN troops and technicians.¹²

**Cambodia’s Second Democracy (1993-Present)**

Cambodia’s second attempt at establishing democracy began with the 1993 United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) mandated national elections. Although multiple irregularities marred the election, 90 percent of registered voters, approximately four million people, cast ballots in a unifying effort to bring an end to decades of conflict (Ledgerwood 1996b). Of the 20 political parties participating in the 1993 elections, two received an overwhelming majority of the votes. The National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Co-operative Cambodia Party (FUNCINPEC), often referred to as the royalist party, led by the Prince Sihanouk’s son, Norodom Ranariddh, received 45 percent of the votes. The Cambodian Peoples Party (CPP), led by Hun Sen, leader of the incumbent government, received 38 percent (Chandler 2001, p. 240).¹³ As incumbent prime minister and head of the police and the

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¹² Under the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), from 1991 to 1993, over $2 billion dollars was spent on Cambodia, up until that time it was the most costly operation the UN had sponsored (Chandler 2000, p. 240).

¹³ The Paris Peace Agreement (PPA) stipulated that a 66 percent majority was required to establish a government, establishing a need for coalition building (Roberts 2001, p. 44).
military, Hun Sen insisted on a 50/50 division of political power rather than accept a secondary position in a coalition government.\textsuperscript{14}

FUNCINPEC, although the clear winner of the 1993 election, failed to recognize the necessity of maintaining its base in rural areas, while the CPP, in light of a second placing in the election, consolidated its power. During the 1993-97 political term, the CPP outplayed FUNCINPEC because of its knowledge base from years of governing, its military superiority, and Hun Sen’s desire to remain in command (Hughes 2003).

The second national election in 1998 brought violence, allegations of coup plots, and exile for some of the political contenders. In spite of conflicts that occurred, the population once again came in record numbers to cast their votes. This election saw the rise of a new, potentially viable opposition party, initially called the Khmer National Party, later renamed the Sam Rainsy Party after its leader, Sam Rainsy. The 1998 election favored the CPP, which won 41 percent of the vote, putting it ahead of FUNCINPEC in the popular vote, but still in need of a coalition partner to set up a government. Following the 2003 election, another victory for the CPP, the central government was in limbo for almost a year while the CPP, FUNCINPEC and SRP battled out a coalition arrangement. In both the 1998 and 2003 government coalitions the CPP chose the more submissive partner, FUNCINPEC.

In 1996, following the neo-liberal approach to developing democracies, international organizations, including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and others, pushed for a decentralization policy in Cambodia. The Cambodian

\textsuperscript{14} It has been noted by scholars that coalition building is ill suited to the political culture of Cambodia. According to Roberts, power sharing “is as oxymoronic and inappropriate to the former ruling party of the 1980s [the Communist Party] as it is to the Khmer royalty” (2001, p. 116).
Development Resource Institute (CDRI), an organization providing policy input to the government, has defined the government’s position on decentralization as seeing a need to “extend and deepen democracy”. By early 2001, laws regulating the election and the administration of the commune councils were enacted (CDRI 2003, p. 4).

The Cambodian government has five authority levels: central, regional, district, commune council, and village. Since the 1950s, control rested at the central level; the ruling government appointed all government officials at the four sub-levels. It was decided that commune councils would best meet the objectives of the government’s decentralization agenda - allowing for participation and ownership in development decision making and engendering party collaboration. Membership of a council ranges from five to eleven, depending on population. Each council has a chief, two deputy-chiefs, and two to eight council members, all elected for a five-year term. The Ministry of Interior (MOI) has an oversight role, while the provisional/municipal governors are the first reporting unit for the councils. Village chiefs primarily rely on the council chief for assistance on matters of local concern. The councils are delegated duties that affect local issues of security, public services, welfare of citizens, and social and economic development. Predictably, there are some areas in which a council’s authority under the new decentralization laws is contested. For example, although councils are charged with “protecting and conserving the environment”, they have no authority over forested areas within the boundaries of their district (Mansfield et al. 2004, pp. 5-7).

15 The paternalistic oligarchy, so representative of Prince Sihanouk’s political reign of the 1950s and 1960s, became the hallmark of all successive regimes up to and including the present (Roberts 2001, pp. 115-116; Chandler 1991, pp. 3-6).
Cambodia’s decentralization campaign was the initial step to extend democracy to the local level. During the build up to electioneering for the council election of 2002, the three primary parties - CPP, FUNCINPEC and SRP - agreed to support 30 percent women candidates to stand on their ballots. For almost a decade, women’s organizations in Cambodia had been developing networks and strategies that laid the groundwork to support political participation by women. According to Mu Suchua, Director of Khemra in 1991 and first Minister of Women’s Affairs, UNIFEM encouraged her in the early 1990s to utilize the organization and network of women involved with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to bring women into the political sphere. Along with Cambodia’s move to decentralization and deepening democracy, a movement of women would enter the political arena with a collective agenda and heretofore untapped skills, not as a challenge to elitist politics but as a catalyst for a different style of governing.

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16 Cambodia, a follower democracy, was moved by external rather than internal forces to initiate a democratic government in response to mandates established by international donors and lacks the inclination or ability to institutionalize participatory political processes (Hughes 2003).
17 Personal interview, Phnom Penh, December 2004.
The Situation of Women in a Cambodian Context

Cambodian Women: Traditional Paradoxes

Cambodia’s current constitution provides a liberal framework giving women equal access under the law and as participants in society. The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women have both been endorsed by the Cambodian government. As a developing country with a new democratic government, Cambodia has structurally positioned itself for a more gender equitable society. Cambodian tradition dictates a more paradoxical position for women.

Cambodian Buddhism ranks women in a lower position than men in the social hierarchy (Mackay 1995, p. 43). For example, matters of household finance are assigned to women – duties that are not looked upon favorably within the Buddhist concept of merit. Traditionally Cambodian women have been apolitical, taking a subordinate role to men in matters of public concern as noted in May Ebihara’s ethnography, *Svay, A Khmer Village in Cambodia* (1968). Yet in matters of strength and wit, women have proven themselves in Cambodian folklore, as represented in the tale of the *Mountain of the Men and the Mountain of the Women* (Neak 1990). This folktale recounts a challenge by the King to a group of young women and a group of young men to determine who could

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18 Only once in the post-colonial period has the possibility of a female monarch been promoted; following the death of Sihanouk’s father in 1960, demonstrations in the northwest in support of Sihanouk’s mother ascending to the throne aroused Sihanouk’s suspicions about his mother’s political ambitions. For the remainder of his political tenure his mother was recognized only as ‘symbolizing’ the throne (Osborn 1994, pp. 118-120).

19 Ebihara’s ethnography, her dissertation, is the only inclusive anthropological ethnography produced on Khmer cultural characteristics. In addressing a panel at the Association of Asian Studies in honor of her work in Cambodia, she was not only recognized by her colleagues but by the Cambodian villagers she observed, as her ethnography was the basis for remembrance of their history following the destructive KR years (personal observation, New York, April 2003).
build the highest mountain; through cunning and physical endurance, the women win the challenge and are honored by the King. In the late twentieth century, a more genteel view prevails regarding the expectations of and performance by women, as described by Boua, “From infancy…[she is] trained to be different from a boy…a nice girl is one who makes no sound when walking on a wooden floor” (1982, p. 46). The paradox overall lies in their subordinate position requiring good judgment in financial matters, loyalty, and physical strength, while assuming a reticent demeanor.

The chbap srey, a code for women, emphasizes proper behavior for young and adult women regarding their comportment, activities and sexuality (Ledgerwood 1996).20 The chbap was written in the nineteenth century for the daughters and wives of the Royalty and elites of Cambodian society. Women were expected to be submissive and private, a role for women that is rigidly defined and limiting. The chbap, as a book of moral instruction for women, became the standard of behavior to all classes. From a very young age, women are schooled in proper behavior as dictated by the chbap. Instruction from the chbap is included in primary education today. One of the council members I interviewed told me that it was hard to take the “code” seriously; after all, it was a book written by men for women.

From the late 1960s until the present, women have also been guided as much by survival strategies as by the chbap. For more than three decades, Cambodian women have experienced military offenses, displacement, genocide, starvation, flight and loss of loved ones. In 1980, following the defeat of the Khmer Rouge, 26 percent of Cambodian households were headed by women, with women accounting for almost 70 percent of the

20 Ledgerwood (1996a) notes that there are several versions of the chbap srey. For reference purposes, I refer to the version she indicates in footnote 4, p. 151, Chbap broh, chbap srey (1959).
adult population in some areas (Boua 1983). Today, 29 percent of households are headed by women.\textsuperscript{21}

Cambodian men are conditioned to show respect for women. However, violence against women takes place out of the public space, as illustrated in this short excerpt from an article on Cambodian women from the website of the organization Women Waging Peace:

…though male soldiers have a shameful history of violating women in private, they are culturally prohibited from doing so in the public arena…If two to three men talk to solders, they beat the hell out of them. But if it is women, they don’t. Soldiers find it very difficult to deal with women; they are used to raping them, not calmly discussing if a women is standing up to them. (cf McGrew et al. 2004)

Relying on the customary codes of conduct and behavior, women can now use those codes from a position of power rather then being submissive to them, at least from a public position. This is evident as women have begun putting themselves in the forefront of numerous movements for change that protest inequalities and abuses. In a 2002 demonstration at the National Assembly, women led the protest over violation of land rights and illegal logging (McGrew et al. 2004).

**The Women’s Association 1979-1993**

The socialist government installed by the Vietnamese in 1980 philosophically and economically supported Cambodian women and allowed them a more public position in society. Women occupied many government positions, and a strong organization called the Women’s Association was established and funded by the government. In *Cambodian Women and the Legacy of War*, Vic Mackay claims that, when she visited Cambodia in

\textsuperscript{21} Personal interview with Kate Frieson, Phnom Penh, December 2004.
January 1993, there were 1.8 million women participating in a network of local branches of the Women’s Association throughout the countryside. Based on her observations and interviews with Women’s Association members in rural and urban areas, Mackay was struck by association members’ holistic understanding of economic, educational, health and hygiene issues. However, she pointed out that the structure of the Women’s Association facilitated upward transmission of information and downward transmission of policy (1995 pp. 101-105). Three of the four council members I interviewed were members of the Women’s Association.

Another observer described the Women’s Association as an organization for promoting political ideology in a society that was greatly depleted of males. The association’s magazine, Revolutionary Kampuchean Women, was published several times a year to report on women’s issues. Kate Frieson infers that upon close reading of several issues it was apparent that women’s issues “were conflated with the state’s military objectives” (2001, p. 13).

The 1990s and the Emergence of Women and Politics

Following the May 1993 national election, the Women’s Association ceased operation. Its replacement was the Secretariat of State for Women’s Affairs, which evolved into the Department of Women’s Affairs and in 1998 became a full ministry, the Ministry of Women and Veterans’ Affairs (McGrew et al, 2004). Also, women-centered NGOs emerged, some primarily focused on economic development, while others supported human rights efforts, communication, and health.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, women’s associations have worked to promote gender equality in the new constitution. Khemara, an NGO founded in 1991 by Mu
Sokhua and which was focused on technical training for women, became the hub of a women’s advocacy movement to push for the inclusion of women’s issues in the 1993 constitution. The following statement on the Khemara web page illustrates its goals:

The status of women in Cambodia has not reached the political level needed to ensure the full protection of women and their full participation in Cambodian society. Advocacy at all levels to change the image of women is a long-term agenda. Advocacy will rely heavily not only on the leadership of women but on public campaigns, public education and changing social and cultural values. (updated on March 1, 1996)

In 1993, Mu Sokhua was appointed Secretary of Women’s Affairs and, in 1998, Minister of Women and Veterans’ Affairs. Though Sokhua and others’ efforts to convince the government to mandate 30 percent candidacy for women on electoral ballots failed, women’s organizations negotiated with the political parties and were given assurances that the parties would support 30 percent women candidates to stand on their ballots for the commune council elections. The political parties did not execute an aggressive recruitment drive for women candidates and appear to have provided only lip service to women’s participation, but their agreement was a “green light” to quickly organize the recruitment and training of women candidates for the commune council elections by NGOs. Many Cambodian women, working through NGOs, were responsible for the training of women candidates. One NGO, Women for Prosperity (WfP), took the lead. WfP solicited assistance and aid from international organizations and collaborated with other women-centered NGOs to promote women candidates and participation in the commune council elections, particularly in the rural areas (UNIFEM 2002). This actualized into 16 percent women candidates with 8.5 percent elected as compared to .5 percent women commune council chiefs under the old system.
The Diversity of Cambodian Women-Centered Organizations

Other women-centered organizations had preceded the effort to support women candidates in the commune council elections. Women’s engagement and participation in civil society, heavily supported by international financing and advocacy, has shown its weight in expanding democratic principles. Three primary areas are worth noting: women’s activities in promoting the unionizing of garment workers; media production; and control within the sex industry. All three were forerunners to the success of women in the commune council elections.

In the late 1990s the garment industry grew rapidly due to favorable quota system agreed to by the US government. In 1995, 20 garment factories existed; those numbers grew to 220 in 2002. By 2002 the garment industries employed approximately 160,000 workers; 85 percent were women, primarily from the rural areas (Hughes 2003, pp. 185-186). In the lead-up to unionization, spontaneous walkouts and demonstrations at the National Assembly were staged over working conditions and wages by garment factory employees. The initial walkouts and marches were met with violent confrontation by armed security guards and police and, in some cases, the firing of some of the activists. Today most of the factories are unionized under a joint government/International Labor Organization (ILO) voluntary program. The success of the garment workers union has been internationally acknowledged as US and European markets, following the expiration of a favorable quota system, now promote Cambodian manufactured apparel because of its more humane working conditions.

The Women’s Media Center (WMC) came into existence following the 1993 UNTAC sponsored elections. A group of women, under the auspices of UNTAC, worked
in radio and video production during the pre-election process promoting women’s participation in the democratic process and women’s rights in the upcoming election. From that group of women, five would establish the WMC in 1995, continuing the promotion of women’s issues. As stated on their web site: “The Women’s Media Centre envisions a society where women’s participation and portrayal in the media are equal to men’s so that the public will recognize the capabilities and appreciate the value of women and encourage them to be active in all areas” (WMC). Of those five founding members, one came from KHEMARA, and two were journalists in the private sector and government between 1979 and 1991.

Today WMC employs a staff of over 40 working in media production (radio and television), research, networking and service provision. The WMC operates with a team management structure; five co-directors oversee each of five independently operating areas. Drew McDaniel, who prepared an evaluation of Cambodian Media Programs for the Asia Foundation, remarked that lacking an overall manager and adopting a team approach “worked well for this group. I sensed a high level of camaraderie among staff and a spirit of cooperation at all levels of the organization” (1997).

Historically, prostitution has been an integral, although shaded, component of urban and rural society in Cambodia, with the exception of the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese occupation periods. Socially scorned by society, prostitutes come to the profession through coercion, trickery, force and poverty. Estimates of commercial sex

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22 The biographies of these three women, Chea Sudaneth, Som Khemra and Tive Sarayeth, are available on the WMC web site, http://www.wmc.org.
23 The Khmer Rouge ideology focused on the nation or *Angkor* (as symbolic of the nation) as the unit of social concern thereby relegating marriage, procreation and children as activities and elements controlled by the state. Although prostitution was forbidden, many women were forced into marriages as sexual unions of the state.
workers in Cambodia range from 14,000 in Phnom Penh to 55,000 nationwide (Advocacy). Because prostitution has an ambiguous status in Cambodia, where it is not illegal, yet not legalized under the law, prostitutes are subject to harsh and degrading conditions by brothel owners, and harassment, theft and illegal imprisonment by local police. The Women’s Network for Unity (WNU) grew out of this egregious segment of the population. Cambodian sex workers chose to individually and collectively protect themselves both emotionally and physically from the hazards of their profession.

The WNU collective was provided stimulus and support by the Women’s Agenda for Change initiated by Oxfam Hong Kong and officially organized in 2001. By July 2002, boasting 3000 members nation wide, WNU publicly celebrated its second anniversary as reported in a full page article in the Phnom Penh Post (July 5-8, 2002). Having stepped out of social isolation, the WNU members are embracing a bold agenda that encompasses personal, economic and societal issues, such as: putting value to their lives, gaining respect in society, raising awareness of their issues, legalizing prostitution as an effort to self-manage their own businesses, and promoting the use of condoms.

**Assessment of Women’s Efforts**

In 2001 and 2003 studies were commissioned by The Asia Foundation Cambodia to access the knowledge and attitudes of the Cambodian electorate regarding the upcoming elections. The 2001 study produced results from a survey conducted between July and August 2000 on the 2002 commune council elections. The 2003 study focused on the upcoming 2004 National Assembly elections and was conducted between February and March 2003. Each survey represented a random sampling from 1,006 in-person interviews of Cambodian citizens 18 years of age or older from 24 of the countries
25 provinces. Both surveys dedicated a few questions to gender. Both surveys repeated some questions as an attempt to gage “the progress of democratization.” In the gender category the recurring question was “Do you think a woman should make her own choice for voting, or do you think men should advise her on her choice?” (2001 p. 80; 2003 pp. 82-83). The results indicated an increase by the respondents for women making their own choice from the 2001 to the 2003 surveys by 12 percent – from 69 percent to 81 percent.

While the 2001 council survey indicates that the majority of those surveyed thought most commune council members should be men, a follow-up question revealed overwhelmingly that respondents thought that women would make good council leaders. The study interprets the inconsistency in the responses to the two questions as a cultural conundrum. The first question deals with activity in the public sphere, traditionally reserved for men, while the second question draws on individual capabilities (2001 p. 79). The first question presents itself as a gender issue and invokes a traditional response. Had the questions been reversed, giving the respondents an opportunity to assess capacity first, their response to whether men or women should hold council seats might have produced a different outcome.

The 2003 study allocated a more diverse set of questions to the issue of gender and politics. Two questions pertained to gender and representation: 92 percent of respondents stated that they would like to see more women as members of the National Assembly; and 50 percent stated that it made no difference whether they were represented by a man or women. This indicates a slightly different perception on gender and representation than presented in the 2001 council survey. Additionally, two
questions drew out positive responses on women’s placement on party ballots, as placement on the ballot determines the prospect for election. A majority of the respondents stated that they would be more likely to vote for a list of candidates that included a woman in the second or third position on the list. The follow-up question revealed that respondents would strongly favor (78 percent) a law to mandate a woman holding one of the three top positions on a party ballot.

Writing in 2004, McGrew et al. say that women’s opportunities in the formal political arena have only advanced slightly, but their presence is pervasive “through civil society and community activism…They are active at all levels of government, from the village (the smallest administrative unit), through the commune and province levels, to national efforts” (p. vi). My encounters with women in Phnom Penh in the summer of 2003, following the national election, confirm that women are engaged in political conversation.

On two occasions, I met with three Cambodian high school teachers. On both occasions, I was the guest at one of their residences for a delicious Cambodian meal. Following each meal, during which they entertained me with amusing conversation, they directed our after dinner conversation toward politics. Because the outcome of the election was unclear, as the three primary parties seemed to be unable to form a coalition to run the government, they offered up several scenarios as possible outcomes. They drew me into a discussion of the pros and cons of their projected political outcomes. All of these women had experienced the Khmer Rouge and the reconstruction years and shared a lived history of Cambodia’s political turmoil. These three jovial, middle aged women were neither novices nor naïve about the political developments of their country.
A very impromptu interaction occurred at the phsa tmay (New Market), as I was browsing the makeshift stalls that surround the perimeter of the circular market building. A young woman, appearing to be in her early twenties, who was managing one of the stalls, approached me with this question, “What do you think of our election?” My response was to inform her of what I had observed at several voting stations in Takeo Province. From what I had observed, the situation seemed to comply with Cambodian election laws. Guided by more specific questions from this inquisitive young woman about candidates and possible outcomes and scenarios for Cambodia’s political future, our conversation continued for almost an hour. We had attracted a large crowd of other women stall workers. Stretched into the walkways of the marketplace, eight to ten women sat on small blue plastic stools or leaned on merchandise and listened. Another young woman had been translating our English language conversation into Khmer for the onlookers. At the end of our conversation, the young woman asked what she could do and I gave her the advice advocated by one of the commune councilors I interviewed, learn more about politics and get involved.

Moving from a submissive domestic position that was reinforced by a cultural perspective centuries old, Cambodian women have created for themselves the opportunity to pursue broader roles in society, for some a matter of necessity, while for others a matter of choice.
Four Women of the Commune Councils

Cambodian politics is traditionally regarded as the territory of the central elite. Decentralization of state government opens up the opportunity to bring more locally based political actors into the arena of discourse. While the central government might define and dictate the structure and processes that lead to decentralization, the individuals who are the actors on the ground give us a clearer picture of how Cambodia’s decentralization scheme acts to democratize Cambodian politics.

The women who actively participated in the commune council elections are the key to my investigation of the cultural shifts in political praxis in Cambodia. Throughout the Khmer Rouge period and years of the Vietnamese occupation, women were encouraged to be active citizens. Although both historical epochs are identified by male leadership, the role of women as passive citizens as dictated in the pre-1975 culture began to change. In my research, I identified the emerging role of public political women as a productive arena for observing political change.

In the summer of 2002, just four months after the commune council elections, I was invited by the Director of WfP to observe a week-long training session in Phnom Penh for 25 women elected to council positions within the municipality. The workshop was organized by WfP, held at the office building of the Cambodian Women for Peace and Development NGO (CWPD) and facilitated by CWPD staff members. I attended four morning sessions and one afternoon session. I was given permission to record the sessions and, for the first two sessions I attended, a Cambodian woman translated the training dialogue and the participants’ discussion for me.
Although themes of democratization, transparency and leadership resonated throughout the week-long workshop, the major theme was that through their leadership the issues of women could be a primary agenda item of council work. This was reinforced in group songs that spoke about women’s ability to be leaders and proclaimed that women’s leadership, uniting all Cambodian women, would lead to prosperity for all citizens.

Today, as throughout Cambodia’s history, patron-client relationships continue to determine political status. What was striking from the discussion at this workshop was that this group of woman council members hoped to break down patron-client politics by promoting an issue-oriented agenda. The issues – domestic violence, economic independence through technical training, reduction of poverty, health issues and increased educational opportunities for girls – primarily addressed the needs of Cambodian women and indirectly the communities they represent.

The four women whom I observed and interviewed over a three-year period provide insight into change occurring in the political landscape. The four Cambodian women, whose names have been changed to, are: Ana, CPP Council Chief; Pal, CPP Council Chief; Khieu, Sam Rainsey Party First Deputy; and Sou, FUNCINPEC Second Deputy. Each woman, in her position as council chief or deputy, negotiates within her commune council in an effort to fulfill her duties as prescribed under the decentralization policy. For each woman, the understanding of public service is concomitantly aligned with her own personal history and experiences.24

24 The three primary political parties were represented within this group of women. Of the four councilors whom I interviewed, two were seasoned CPP members, one had aligned herself to several political parties and the fourth had no prior political association.
Ana

I first interviewed Ana in the summer of 2003. She is an unobtrusive woman. She participated in the workshop I observed in 2002. I know this because I can identify her standing in a line of women who posed for a group photo, not because she stood out among the participants. I didn’t recall her, as others took the spotlight. As I came to know her through her work in the commune council and her own report of the philosophical ideals that guided this work, she shone above the others as an adept and democratically guided politician.

Ana’s life began in a small rural village, the daughter of poor farmers. Ana claims that there was no time for leisure or playful distractions in her household when she was a young girl. Her mother died young, leaving several small children, and Ana, the oldest, took on the responsibility of looking after her siblings and the domestic duties of their household. Following the Khmer Rouge years she found herself in Phnom Penh, and one year later, she married.

Ana was elected commune council chief in 2002. Since 1985, under the previous system of political appointees, she had served in this position. The present commune council, which has nine members from three parties, includes two women. This commune council is located in the metropolitan area of Phnom Penh and is comprised of nine villages with mixed economic stratum. The boundaries stretch from a heavily active business district located on a main thoroughfare to a less densely populated residential

25 All interviews with Ana were conducted in June and July 2003 in Phnom Penh.
26 In urban areas, as in Phnom Penh, commune councils are referred to as sangkat councils, but throughout this paper for the sake of consistency I refer to all as commune councils.
area. The business district also accommodates the wealthier and the most impoverished apartment dwellers, while the residential area is lined with gated private residences.

Ana did not respond to my questions concerning how and why she became involved in politics during the 1980s. She told me only that she was a member of the Women’s Association and that she was appointed commune council chief in 1985. Her business like manner is reflected in the surroundings of the commune council offices that she oversees. The waiting area, and the large adjoining opened reception room and office held only one row of six wooden chairs and a large wooden desk with one chair. There was more open space than furniture which presented an eerie and somber atmosphere. A few pictures hung on the wall in the reception area; those were of members of the current government. Ana’s office was also sparsely decorated. Her large desk held only a telephone and small writing tablet. On my first visit I took a picture of her standing at her desk and later framed it for her as a gift. On my second visit, the framed photograph was prominently placed on a bookshelf overlooking her desk.

As a seasoned commune council chief, Ana is aware of how the citizens and the workings of the commune council have changed over the years, particularly since the 2002 elections. She recalled that in the past citizens regularly attended commune council meetings and participated in discussions of proposed projects. Then participation dropped off several years ago; she attributed this to people having less free time. To compensate for the drop in participation, Ana constructed a questionnaire that was hand carried to citizens of the commune council. She felt the need to draw out the ideas of the citizens.
Because it is essential for citizens to assist financially in the support of the commune council’s projects, their involvement in determining priorities was crucial.

In meeting with the new commune council members following the election, she promoted an inclusive philosophy, emphasizing the need for harmony despite the different party ties of the council members, “We [commune council members] must cooperate because, if we don’t, if we have conflict, the work of the commune does not get done.” Her commune council was able to complete an infrastructure project that benefited the citizens of the commune. The commune council built a new storm sewer system, replacing an old dysfunctional system that caused flooding of the streets during the rainy season. The project was funded primarily by a residence tax; the amount of the tax was determined by the length of line needed per property and the individual’s ability to pay. Funding was requested from the municipal government, but the commune council only received a small sum from this source. However the commune council was able to collect fees from residents and complete the project. Because it is essential for citizens to assist financially in the support of the commune council’s projects, Ana says that her goal in maintaining good relations within the commune council is to complete a project that shows benefits for the citizens.

Commune council development projects, and safety and security consume a large portion of Ana’s time. When there is an incident involving domestic violence, Ana defers to the village chief. But when a village chief is unable to resolve a situation, she intervenes. Ana’s strategy is to talk with the perpetrator
(generally a husband), to educate him on the effects of his behavior on his wife and family, and the consequences for him, a possible fine or jail time. If there are recurring incidents, she follows up by having the husband removed from the residence. In one case, when the husband was removed from the household leaving the wife and children financially destitute, Ana recommended the woman for a vacant village chief position. Through Ana’s efforts, the woman was appointed to the position and could manage to support her family.

“Cooperation rather than corruption,” Ana told me, was how her commune council functioned. She attributes the successful cooperative behavior, at least in part, to the Khmer nature. However, Ana admits the Khmer nature can also reveal negative behavior, as in the situation of a corrupt village chief within her commune council. When she became aware of corrupt practices by this village chief, she requested that the people of the village bring their protest directly to her, which they did. She was able to stay on top of the situation and put the village chief on notice. She told the village chief that, if the problem persisted, he would be dismissed.

In our final interview, Ana said that she would like to travel to America. She proudly told us of two recent excursions outside of Cambodia, visiting Singapore and Thailand. Ana confessed that, when traveling, the one thing she always noticed was the local ‘sewer systems’, which brought all three of us to tearful laughter.

When we were departing the final interview with Ana, out of earshot of her office, the young interpreter very gently touched my arm and in a low voice
said, “She is a wonderful woman; I would vote for her”. This showed a complete shift in attitude from her initial hesitation to be drawn into a conversation with a CPP member. Both my interpreter and I agreed that Ana was the most impressive and seemingly most effective commune councilor we interviewed.

**Pal**

Pal also represents the CPP as a commune council chief in Phnom Penh. Pal’s personality can be easily described as jovial. She can grab the attention of a crowd with her vivacious and animated body language. At the 2002 workshop, whenever she spoke, she had everyone’s attention. My first interview with Pal was held in her second floor office.\(^{27}\) A spacious room filled with furniture that reminded me of a business executive’s office, it was a sharp contrast from the straightforward and basic office that Ana occupied.

Pal was born in Phnom Pen and began her studies in pharmacy at the university in 1975. Her education was cut short by the Khmer Rouge take over of Cambodia. In the early 1980s she was recruited to represent the commune council where she lived because she was the most qualified.

This commune council is composed of four members of the CPP, which include three women, and three male SRP members. Located in a mixed commercial and residential area, the front doors of the commune council office are rolled open to the sidewalk and street. The council area is a busy and bustling place with a large amount of pedestrian and street traffic looking in or stopping

\(^{27}\) All interviews with Pal were conducted in June 2003 and December 2004 in Phnom Penh.
by. Small shops line the street and three or four floors above balconies overflow with laundry, plants and people.

The long front office of the commune council is a busy place. Commune council members sit around long tables writing in large ledger books or talking to constituents. The walls are plastered with posters, notices and charts. At my first visit in 2003, Pal’s office was on the second floor. In 2004 her office had been moved to the first floor. The new office, a small cramped room, was located at the rear of the main office with a large window that overlooked the main work area. Pal said she moved her office to the ground floor so it would be more convenient to the people.

In talking about the governance of the commune council, Pal said that all members respect each other, and she credits this to her good governance practices. The commune council holds meetings and all citizens are welcome to participate and present their ideas for projects.

This is a hectic and densely populated commune council area. In talking about some of the issues she deals with, Pal points to problems with children and drugs, children not attending school, and a sewer fire that caused an explosion and several deaths. The major projects funded by the council are infrastructure projects, such as water, roads and sanitation.

Pal believes strongly in education. She is the only commune council member I interviewed who has a post-secondary education. During the 1980s, she was chosen to travel to Russia for training, and in the 1990s, she attended workshops in Singapore on women’s issues and commune council work. She is
proud of her accomplishments and has worked to provide training for women in her commune council. Pal feels that if women educate themselves to understand the law and how it affects them, particularly in domestic violence situations, they can fight the abuse rather than remaining silent and abused.

Pal urges women to become politically involved. She advises women, “to learn what politics are about, to go beyond the surface, be involved”. She intends to bring up with her party, the CPP, the value of women commune council members, because they are active in the council, not corrupt and take their work seriously. Pal said that, if she is asked by her party, she will be a candidate for the 2007 commune council elections.

Khieu

A member of SRP, Khieu is the First Deputy, responsible for performing the accounting duties of her commune council. I first interviewed Khieu at the Women for Prosperity office. All other interviews took place at her commune council office. Khieu had attended the 2002 workshop but I did not recall seeing her, nor had I included her in my photographs.

Khieu is a widow with three sons and two granddaughters. She supports two of her sons and herself with her commune council earnings and a part time job brokering real estate. Khieu talked to me briefly about the Pol Pot years as though she was speaking of someone else’s trauma. From her family of ten, only she, and one sister and brother survived. It appeared that she reflected on those

28 All interviews with Khieu were conducted in June and July 2003, and December 2004 in Phnom Penh.
times with less emotional stress or difficulty than the problems she faces today in her commune council work.

Khieu’s civic involvement began in 1980 under the Vietnamese/Cambodian reconstruction government. Following the defeat of Pol Pot, Khieu went to Kampong Chhnang before relocating to Phnom Penh in the mid 1980s. She was an active member of the Women’s Association while in Kampong Chhnang. Khieu recalled a very positive attitude toward women during her involvement with the association. The policy put forth to association members was that women were important. Women were encouraged to be active, and the association maintained that, whatever men could do, women could do, and women could do some things that men could not do. Khieu’s work as an association member involved education of women and assisting them with their conflicts. Khieu said that political propaganda was presented at association meetings. When I asked how this affected her work in the association, she brushed it off with a wave of her hand.

For some time in the early 1990s, Khieu was a member of FUNCINPEC, but she became disillusioned because of the party’s corrupt practices. When Sam Rainsy formed his opposition party, Khieu joined. Khieu was impressed that Sam Rainsy returned to Cambodia to help rebuild the society. She believes that he is fair and more importantly, not corrupt. She recognizes that it might be dangerous to participate as a member of this opposition party, but she claims that she “would rather die for a good cause.”
This is a large council that includes 14 villages and an 11 member council. Khieu claims it is an old commune council. The office is set back from the road, a four lane street that leads toward the airport, some distance from the center of the city. It was hard to judge the type of residents that occupied the commune council as most of what I saw in the vicinity were government buildings, commercial enterprises and university buildings. The building also housed a police station. The commune council chief and four members including one woman are from the CPP; the SRP has a total of five members including Khieu, and there is one FUNCINPEC member.

Khieu is resolute in performing her duties. She comes to the council office everyday to sit at her desk in a small room, but she feels that the commune council ignores her elected status. According to Khieu, the FUNCINPEC member and three SRP members are corrupt, along with the chief and the three male CPP members. She has documented padded receipts and observed that citizens who come to the commune council are asked for bribes. Although her position is secured for the five years of her term, her day to day experiences were troublesome.

Khieu has contacted her party regarding the conduct of the four SRP members in her council, but the party will not talk with these members. Khieu recognizes that, because this party is so small, there are no replacement candidates. She also reported incidents of corrupt practices and her chief’s dismissal of her commune council duties to the Ministry of the Interior, but she received no response to her reports. However, other reports she filed regarding
council facilities – a bathroom for the women councilors and electricity - were answered with the installation of new facilities just prior to the 2004 national election.

Khieu has discussed the obstacles she confronts in performing her duties on the commune council at Women Politicians’ Network meetings sponsored by WfP, but she felt the advice she received was inadequate. Khieu plans to continue in her position, although her party has not supported her. She expressed gratitude that she has the support of her sons in her commune council work.

My last visit with Khieu was in December 2004. She no longer had her side job and was feeling financially strapped. In an effort to upgrade her skills, Khieu was attending English language classes and a women’s leadership program sponsored by the United Nations Development Programme’s Project for Gender Equality (UNDP-PGE). Although she found her language and professional training valuable, this had not eased the difficulties that she faced in her position in the commune council. Khieu is willing to represent her party in the next commune council election and for now, she knows that she will “continue to smile through her anger”.

Sou

Sou is a Second Deputy in her commune council, elected from the FUNCINPEC ballot. She caught my attention at the training session in the summer of 2002, above everyone else. She was late when everyone else was on time. She was casual in mannerisms and dress; her beige blouse contrasted with all the other bright white blouses tucked in snugly in the circle of women in stiff
back chairs. I was told by one of the trainers that Sou was well thought of by the other participants. I first interviewed her at the Women for Prosperity office in a group interview with Khieu; all other interviews were conducted in her commune council office.  

Sou, like Khieu, is a single parent and lives with her three daughters. She is originally from Phnom Penh but was relocated to Kandal Province when the Khmer Rouge evacuated the capital. Her husband was killed during the Khmer Rouge period. She and her two daughters returned to Phnom Penh in 1980. She remarried and gave birth to a third daughter. Sou has a high school education and work experience. In the 1990s, Sou was employed by a French human rights NGO that worked with women and children’s issues.

Sou claimed to be apolitical. During the 1980s she was not involved with the Women’s Association. What drew her into politics in 2002 was estrangement from her second husband. The NGO she was working for lost its funding, and she was unemployed. Her ex-husband and another woman were running on the first and second slots on the FUNCINPEC ballot for a commune council position; she persuaded the party to place her name ahead of her husband’s and the other candidate, and she won the only FUNCINPEC position on the commune council. Sou admitted that she was able to produce a larger cash contribution to the party from her savings; and demonstrated to the party that, of the three candidates, she was the only one with sufficient education and experience to perform the duties of a commune council member.

29 All interviews with Sou were conducted in June and July 2003, and December 2004 in Phnom Penh.
Sou works under a CPP commune council chief and she is the only FUNCINPEC member on her commune council. This commune council is made up of four CPP members, four SRP members and herself, the only woman. This council abuts Pal’s and the neighborhoods are similar in appearance and constituents. Sou’s council location also draws a lot of walk-in traffic. One difference is that Sou, as a second deputy, has her own office. The office is more like a cubical with a desk, two chairs and just enough floor space to pass between the three pieces of furniture.

According to Sou’s recollections, it was through her suggestions that the commune council structure is somewhat democratic. In an effort to accommodate the multi-party make-up of the new commune council, she suggested that a show of hands would assist the decision-making process.

Sou doesn’t feel that the commune council chief engages the citizens in this commune council. Citizen meetings are only called for large events, such as the Water Festival.\(^{30}\) Within the commune council, general agreement on what major projects to undertake does not seem to be an issue, but choosing a project leader did become an issue. The question of leadership could not be resolved because either no one wanted to take on the responsibility or everyone requested the leadership position because of the status they would gain. Sou finds herself acting as arbiter between the CPP and SRP members in the discussions over the issue of project leader. The solution for Sou was simple; council members’

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\(^{30}\) The annual Water Festival is the largest Buddhist celebration in Cambodia. It draws almost one million people to the waterfront area of Phnom Penh. The waterfront area is located in Sou’s commune council and the council is responsible, along with the municipal government, for providing a safe and secure event.
experience, knowledge and personal character should be the determining factors in choosing a project director. On small projects, those generated by a citizen complaint, usually the commune council member who took the complaint executed the necessary action.

Sou’s responsibilities in the commune council are as arbiter. The cases that she handled came from commune council citizens with debt problems, property disputes and noise complaints. She also worked with the municipality district on drug and gambling issues, both prevalent problems within her commune council. As the only woman in her council, she attended to all domestic violence issues that were brought to the council. She noted that when she deals with domestic violence she is always accompanied by a CPP member of the commune council. When Sou came across a conflict that she was unfamiliar with or unable to resolve, she called in the commune council chief. She recognized these situations as learning experiences and sat in on the arbitration with the chief.

When I visited Sou in 2003, she saw the structure of the commune council as workable even though it was not perfect. In 2004, Sou’s role on the commune council had declined. The commune council chief had appointed a CPP woman who had previously held a council position to attend to domestic violence issues and to participate in women’s advocacy training. Politics had trumped skill and cooperative behavior. Sou had put effort into being accepted by the CPP members of the council, and she still felt that, personally and professionally, she was accepted. But she was disappointed that political party membership was
paramount. Sou will stand for the 2007 council elections but emphasized to me that, “[I]am not interested in power politics but rather getting a cooperative effort happening”.
Conclusion

For many Cambodian women the 1980s broke the bonds that tied them to patriarchal traditions. This was neither a gradual process nor an intentional pursuit. Women’s strength and abilities were called upon to rebuild society and provide for their families, regardless of their diminished physical and emotional stamina following the Khmer Rouge years. A peasant woman confessed to Boua that, “I don’t know what I am doing or thinking from day to day; sometimes I forget about the pot of rice on the stove and leave it to burn” (1982, p. 59). Physical survival was paramount, and those women who were left without male support took on the role of primary provider for surviving family members.

As a new government bureaucracy developed in the 1980s under the PRK, women were drawn into the civil service. Although only one woman held a ministerial rank and only five women were represented on the 35 member central committee, at other levels of the government bureaucracy women felt that there was gender equality (Boua 1982). The creation of the Women’s Association provided women an opportunity to participate in a national undertaking. As an effort to support women’s health and promote political ideology, the Association gave women a distinct role within their communities and the opportunity to network with other Association members.

The large influx of international aid that became available in the early 1990s was used by women-centered NGOs to advance a women’s agenda. Women’s involvement in media, organizing and politics were all financially supported. As the Asia Foundation surveys revealed, attitudes on women’s abilities and acceptance in politics are gradually changing. International and local
NGO support has been able to generate a grassroots movement committed to training women to participate in nontraditional occupations and changing social attitudes on the role of women.

In February 2002, the Commune Council elections initiated under Cambodia’s decentralization plan opened up the opportunity for women to publicly engage in the political arena. The women commune councilors I interviewed demonstrated an understanding and commitment to democratic principles. Sou and Ana have been instrumental in promoting a system of governing that recognizes citizen participation in decision-making and voting to resolve conflicts on the commune council. Some of the challenges faced by the women commune councilors are related to the oppositional nature of party politics. Although Sou is the only women on the commune council, she was excluded from handling women’s issues because she represents an opposition party. Because Khieu is from an opposition party, her attempts at notifying the Ministry of the Interior of corruption within her commune council have been ignored. Both women discussed these problems at meetings of the Women Politicians’ Network, organized by WfP, and were encouraged to continue their work on the commune council. Neither felt satisfied with that response. Although one of the WfP’s goals is to establish a collaborative effort among women focusing on women’s issues, regardless of party affiliation, party politics continues to challenge that effort. For Sou and Khieu to remain true to the goals of the WfP is difficult because as members of opposition parties they feel ineffective. Both understand and promote democratic ideals, but neither they nor their political parties can negotiate a just response to their issues. The CPP attempts to
retain a strong grip on local government, ignoring its own laws which implemented the
decentralization of power to commune councils.

However, women commune councilors have been able to address and
support women’s issues within the commune council structure. With Sou and
Ana’s support, women’s issues, particularly domestic violence, are now
considered viable work of their commune councils. Pal has directed much of her
attention to women and education. She also holds training sessions for women on
how to handle themselves in an abusive situation. She is actively encouraging her
party, the CPP, to promote more women on commune council party ballots and is
a spokesperson for encouraging women to be engaged in politics. As role models
for a local audience, these four women advance democratic practices and an
acceptance of women in the public sphere.

Within a cultural context, Cambodian women have been recreating what it means
to be an active member of society and a woman. By focusing on women’s issues within
the commune councils, their work produced benefits for all members of their
communities, while demonstrating that women are capable public leaders. The major
obstacle that I see as impeding women’s future advancement in politics is the hierarchical
and male dominated political structure of the current CPP dominated government.
Bibliography


