

# Promoting Political Participation of Indigenous Women in Cambodia

Margherita Maffi & Hong Sineath

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The views in this study are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the supporting organisations.

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Indigenous women attending a workshop in Kratie

# Executive Summary

This research was launched by the Heinrich Böell Foundation (HBF), the Administrative Reform and Decentralization Program (ARDP) of the German Technical Cooperation, and the Committee to Promote Women in Politics (CPWP) in order to better understand the obstacles, challenges and opportunities that indigenous women in Cambodia face in their efforts to participate effectively and equally in the public sphere.

The research was conducted in the northeastern provinces of Mondulkiri, Ratanakiri, Stung Treng and Kratie, and involved women from different indigenous ethnic groups as well as ethnic Khmer and Lao women. The research methodology made use of approaches derived from women's studies, action research, and indigenous studies, and included a series of discussions with different women's groups about women's experience, knowledge and vision, as well as interviews with other informants.

Discussions with indigenous women highlighted the strong impact of the socio-economic changes that are currently facing indigenous communities on the lives of women. Most have found that the sharing of responsibilities between women and men has become less balanced, leaving women with a greater workload to assure family livelihood. Solidarity among villagers is decreasing, and massive in-migration of outsiders is weakening indigenous identity. In women's view, men are more easily seduced by consumerism, and succumb to negative behaviors such as alcohol abuse. The impact of the external world on indigenous communities is gendered, promoting values that are male biased.

Indigenous women rely on their traditional authorities, and see them as the backbone of their society. Women play many roles in traditional society, as elders, religious leaders, healers, medicine women, midwives, or repositories of ancestral knowledge. These roles have become diminished over time, however, and they haven't yet been replaced by participation in formal authorities such as commune councils, even if women's participation in commune councils is

seen as very important to indigenous women. Women see female councilors as facilitators for dealing with authorities, and consider them effective and honest. Many women would like to stand as candidates, and think that their participation in commune councils may help improve the status of women in general.

The indigenous women who were elected to serve on commune councils provide varied perspectives. Some of them feel disempowered and marginalized. Other women councilors feel they are confined to “gender issues” only, and are never called to deal with other governance issues. Very often the word “gender” is ascribed to general services such as health or child care, and has lost its reference to gender related discrimination and the need to address it. Female commune councilors have to struggle at each step of the process: to gain a place on the list that facilitates their election, to gain a role on the council, and to obtain their husband’s support during their mandate. Many female councilors claim to exert a leadership style that is qualitatively different to that of their male colleagues and mirrors the perception that community women have of their female councillors: they are more transparent than male councilors, more people oriented and tolerant, and resistant to corruption.

For women in indigenous communities, the main obstacle to their participation on commune councils is the power imbalance that puts them in a weaker position compared to men. They view their limited capacities, such as the lack of skills in written Khmer language, as the outcome rather than the cause of this imbalance. Most of the stakeholders interviewed for this study perceived the lack of capacity as the main cause for indigenous women’s exclusion, and they tend to address this in their work, leaving aside the issue of gender discrimination. Particularly in the case of indigenous women, the lack of literacy in a language that is not their own is often confused with a general lack of education, placing the women in the unenviable position of being considered ignorant, without skills or limited in knowledge.

Indigenous female councilors have a more articulate view of the challenges and obstacles to their full participation in politics. Among the factors that can help women overcome these obstacles are the support of the family and the community, a certain level of income that allows women the free time to join in political activities, support from political parties, willingness to deal with community problems, bravery and preparedness to face opposition by male dominated councils.

In some communities in Stung Treng and Kratie provinces, where the dominant ethnic group is Khmer, women have gained important positions in commune councils and local authorities. Women there have reiterated the idea that when women gain access to local authorities, they can have a positive impact on governance, promoting a governance style based on consultation, one that is focused on community needs, and works to lessen gender related discrimination for the benefit of the whole community.

Among the recommendations elaborated through the research findings are the following:

- recognize indigenous women's knowledge, understanding and needs;
- link gender programs to the current situation experienced by indigenous communities;
- avoid replicating mainstream approaches that do not consider indigenous needs, vision and way of doing things;
- support indigenous women in their willingness to participate in politics, taking care to ensure they are not disempowered through educational projects that undervalue their knowledge, identity, status, and social role;
- re-examine gender issues in the context of local authorities, in order to enable female councilors to manage all tasks related to their role, and at the same time support efforts against gender related discrimination;
- review assumptions and requirements that impede indigenous women's participation in commune councils, especially the limitation of language;
- investigate other mechanisms that guarantee indigenous women's representation in politics, such as reserved seats or quotas;
- advocate for indigenous rights over land and resources, which are a prerequisite for indigenous women's participation in the public sphere;
- inform policies with the best examples available, inferred from situations where women have gained decision-making positions and are the accepted and appreciated leaders of their communities.



Indigenous women attending a workshop in Kratie



Despite considerable progress in the past decade, Cambodian women remain largely marginalized within the political sphere. In the Northeastern provinces of Ratanakiri, Mondulakiri, Stung Treng and Kratie, indigenous women's participation in formal political processes is even more difficult. In order to successfully promote the participation of indigenous women in local decision making it is necessary to better understand their perceptions and aspirations.

Indigenous communities are undergoing dramatic changes that are affecting their way of life, and their economic, social and cultural world. Some of these changes affect both women and men, but some are gender specific and have a deep impact on the life of indigenous women. The capacity of indigenous women to participate in political processes and represent their communities is closely related to such changes.

## Objectives and Scope

The aim of the study is to provide understanding and insight concerning:

- traditional governance structures, decision making processes and women's leadership roles in indigenous communities
- recent changes to those traditional structures, as well as their underlying factors
- challenges and obstacles faced by indigenous women in successfully articulating their political agenda and participation in governance
- obstacles to their participation in formal political processes

Moreover, the study provides specific recommendations on how to promote the political participation of indigenous women. The research covers the four northeastern provinces of Ratanakiri, Mondulakiri, Stung Treng and Kratie.

# Methodology

The research was conducted by merging three perspectives: action research, women's studies and indigenous research, as summarized below.

**Action research** allows the production of knowledge with the participation of all actors involved. Through a series of cycles of collective analysis and reflection, action research develops actions appropriate to the context and aimed at empowering the people involved.

**Women's studies** have developed new approaches by dismantling the supposed neutrality of science and exposing its bias: knowledge is not neutral; it is produced in a patriarchal context where women's experience is compared to the male model. By putting women as the starting point, it is possible to uncover the social dynamics that discriminate and disempower them.

**Indigenous research** argues that science, despite the claim for neutrality and objectivity, reflects the bias of the dominant culture which produces it. Indigenous have always been described, studied, measured, and interpreted in comparison to a model, which was predefined by the dominant culture and science.

A number of guiding principles have provided direction during the discussion (see annexes). The study was conducted through discussion with women's groups in different villages of Mondulkiri, Ratanakiri, Stung Treng and Kratie provinces, during the months of May, June and July 2008 (see annexes) . Additionally, other stakeholders, such as the Local Department of Women's Affairs and NGOs, were interviewed. Discussions were structured around the issue of women's participation in politics, and women were free to communicate their experiences, concerns and vision of the future, according to their own priorities.

This document summarizes only the initial phases of this research project, which is going on with other steps, such as meetings, gatherings and workshops, where the women involved continue the search for the causes and for the solutions.

# Indigenous Women's Participation in Traditional & Formal Local Authorities

## Indigenous women and traditional authorities

Traditional authorities are represented by community elders, who are designated by community members on the basis of their capacities to take care of the villagers' well-being, to solve the conflicts that arise in the community or among neighboring communities, and to ensure continuity to the indigenous society.

The elders' role is to maintain the coherence and the functioning of the community, which is the fundamental unit of the indigenous social life. Moreover, they ensure the positive integration of the community in the spiritual world that governs the indigenous universe. According to many women the ongoing changes are undermining the system of governance adopted by indigenous communities and based on the elders. The new values derived from money, wealth, and technologies are affecting traditional ways of life based on austerity, common efforts, solidarity, and respect for spirits and elders. For the young generation, it is difficult to adhere to traditional rules; the rapid destruction of natural environment causes the desecration of indigenous beliefs and cultural identity; the massive invasion of external subcultures triggered by mass media is corroding indigenous values and identity.

Traditional authorities are responsible for maintaining the cohesion of the society through the application of the customary laws. Some of those laws regulate conflicts between families and couples, assuring women protection against violence and discrimination.

*"Young people don't understand, they only think about money, even for meetings, youth don't come if you don't provide them some money! They don't understand, they don't listen to the elders, they don't respect the elders. And elders have no idea about how to face this problem, how to face the youth! It is very difficult for our communities."*

***Tampuan woman in Veunsay district,  
Ratanakiri province***

Traditional authorities include women, who play different roles in it, contributing to their status within the community. The loss of respect for elders and for their traditional authority is going to be a rough loss for indigenous women and runs the risk of seriously undermining their status. The elders are perceived by indigenous women as an irreplaceable structure in their society.

The indigenous legal system is complex and covers many different domains. The role of elders is to guarantee the fairest compliance with the laws and the aims that infer their application: keep the society cohesive and functioning. Moreover elders play the role of advisers whenever the community is facing decision making concerning management of resources, relationships with

other communities, or crises. Most of the informants affirmed that traditional authorities are only composed of men, as indigenous women are not entitled to become elders. However the women in the villages gave us a different vision.

One of the forms of female authority within villages is linked to the spiritual life, as religious celebrants and healers. Other women elders are traditional midwives. During the discussion these women said very few but relevant things and were very much respected and listened to by the other women. Further women's roles came to the

surface during the discussions related to specific skills and knowledge.

The changes ongoing in indigenous societies, under the pressure of "economic development", are weakening beliefs and respect for the traditional and the spiritual world. They threaten to cut back the importance of women leaders and contribute to the weakening of indigenous women's status.

*"Traditional authorities are more important than anything! More than the Village Chief, more than the commune council. Without elders the society cannot work. When some of the elders die, we usually hold a meeting to choose the new one. It is a very important choice. In many cases elders come from families of elders, their father, or grandfather were elders too. It is a very important role."*

***Indigenous woman, commune council member in Ratanakiri province***

*“Elders can be women or men, now we have 2 or 3 women elders. They do the same thing as men. We do not have preferences; we go to see the elders in case of problem or conflicts. If there is a woman we talk with the woman, if there is a man we talk with the man. We do not have a problem, we discuss all together. The elders should be good at speaking, normally they avoid conflicts, they respect the people, they think about the future, they have education, they have higher knowledge, they have wisdom and experience.*

*When an elder dies he designates a new elder. New elders are chosen by elders that are dying or become too old.”*

*Bunong woman in Sen Monorom district, Mondulkiri province*

Women play important roles within the indigenous communities, not always visible or fully understood by external observers. When the cultural environment of the observers is one where women’s involvement in the public sphere – including their role as religious leaders, medicine women, birth attendants, or depositaries of knowledge and skills - is not considered appropriate, or when a clearly discriminatory vision biases the observer, women’s participation remains invisible and is not valued.<sup>1</sup>

## Summary

- Traditional authorities are perceived as a primary condition for the existence of indigenous communities
- Women play many different roles of authority and prestige within the communities: elders, religious leaders, healers and medicine women, midwives, depositaries of knowledge
- Women’s roles are often downsized by observers biased by gender or ethnic based prejudices

1. “Where are your women?” is the question that Cherokee leaders asked to the British in a encounter to sign a peace agreement. Cherokee women, unlike the British ones, had important advisers’ and decision makers’ roles in their communities (Gonzales P. and Rodriguez R., 1998). Institutions imposed on indigenous people, by not recognizing women’s role, power, knowledge and prestige, dramatically undermine indigenous women’s rights and status.

## Commune councils in an indigenous context

Indigenous societies have been independent from the Khmer nation for most of their history, therefore not subjected to centralized forms of governance. Their state of independent nations is testified by the periodical exchanges of tributes between the indigenous tribes and the Khmer Kingdom through the centuries (Ironsides & Baird, 2003).

Indigenous communities are decentralized entities. Their governance system is based at the village level, where the community, led by the elders, makes its decisions based on consultation, discussion and consensus. This is further underlined by a physical place, *salaphum*, in the middle of the village, designated for the community assemblies. This explains the extreme variability existing among villages and communities, despite the homogeneity of cultural practices, languages and systems of belief that characterizes each ethnic group.

Actually, the process of decentralization, as it is implemented in the indigenous areas, does not consider indigenous diversity and identity. Local

languages, geographical distribution of ethnic groups, particular linkages between villages, the role of traditional authorities, are all aspects of indigenous societal organization that are not taken into account by the actual commune councils' structure. In particular Khmer as a unique working language is a major obstacle for the political participation of indigenous in general and women in particular.

*"We go to meet the commune council for problems concerning land, land conflicts, or conflicts concerning animals grazing. Normally they listen to the people, and the wrong side has to pay fees and provide something to drink to make peace."*

***Bunong woman in Pech Chenda district, Monduliri province***

### The role of commune councils

Commune councils are seen as linked to the central government, involved in decisions that are beyond the village level. Commune offices are often far from the

villages, and women address the commune councils for problems that could not be handled at the community level. Perceptions varied considerably: for some women commune councils are effective in dealing with community

problems; some women raised the problem of the cost of commune councilors' services.

The attitude of the women varies according to the composition of the commune council: the more ethnic indigenous members there are, the more it is perceived as effective and reliable. Commune councils with a majority of Khmer ethnic people are considered more distant from the community.

In villages where women are confronted with illegal land sales or land grabbing by private companies or powerful people, many women express their disappointment with and their subsequent lack of trust in local authorities.

*“Now we have a problem here! A land conflict with a company that took 2,500 hectares of land, just now, in April 2008. They just seized it; they didn't ask permission, they are going to do a plantation. They played a trick on us; they make people sign a white paper, which in fact was a sale document. “Just wait and you will all become laborers” says the company, “why do you complain?” We are not going to become laborers, never! The authorities proposed to us an agreement, with 1 hectare for each family, but we disagree, it is not enough, you cannot make a life with one hectare here. And what about the children?*

*There is lot of land farther away, why they do not take that one? All the villages nearby are touched by this problem, we know that the commune is involved, the district is involved too. We don't want to blame them because we know they have been pressured by the top, by the company, by the powerful, and don't dare to speak. But we do not have alternatives, so we will struggle until we die for our land, our future and our children! “*

***Bunong women in Pech Chenda district, Mondulkiri province***

In other communities, where local authorities are willing to act for the well-being of the people, providing advice and support to the people, women's perceptions are very different.

*“In this village we have a food security problem, some families do not have enough rice, many fields around here now belong to Khmer families and to indigenous families who have a lot of land. One family wanted to sell its land, they had 9 children, they cannot feed them. They were starving, they couldn’t manage it anymore. The commune councilors came and advised the people not to sell land, they explained the importance of land, and the importance of securing the community land. But for that family there were no alternatives. So the people in the village discussed, then came together and bought the land, to avoid newcomers buying it. It is the only case of that happening recently, because the community and the commune council all understood the importance of keeping our land and not selling it anymore. Without the support of the commune, a lot of land would have been sold around here.”*

*Kreung woman in O’chum district, Ratanakiri province*

## Summary

- Indigenous women perceive commune councils as a structure related to the top more than to the communities
- Indigenous women’s perception of commune councils varies according to their ethnic composition, their proximity to the village and their effectiveness
- There are no special legal regulations that take into consideration indigenous cultural diversity in relationship to commune councils



## Women in commune councils in indigenous areas

Among the target provinces of this study, the elected female representatives are summarized in the following table.

Women in Commune Councils in Cambodia's North- East *							
	Total		Women				
	Number of communes	Commune councils members	Women elected (%)	Chief of commune	First deputy	Second deputy	Members
Mondulkiri	21	107	17 (15.95)	-	1	3	13
Ratanakiri	49	253	36 (14.23)	-	4	8	24
Kratie	46	282	49 (17.38)	4	5	3	37
Stung Treng	34	176	29 (16.48)	2	5	2	20

\* data from the National Election Committee of Cambodia reports on 2007 administrative elections, [www.necelect.org.kh](http://www.necelect.org.kh)

The ethnic composition of the female representation in commune councils is not available, as results are not aggregated by ethnic groups. Despite the difficulty of finding viable data, all informants agree on the fact that the 2007 elections have brought a number of indigenous women into the commune councils; the trend seems to be more pronounced in Ratanakiri than in Mondulkiri.

## How community women perceive female commune councilors

For most of the community women, a female commune council member is a facilitating factor when women have to deal with authorities outside the village. Women prefer to speak with women rather than with men. Somehow, a female councilor seems to reduce the ethnic divide that women perceive when dealing with commune authorities. This preference is not expressed when women have to consult or to address traditional authorities within the village.

Women in commune councils facilitate dealing with authorities. Moreover, female representatives are seen as an opportunity for improving women's general conditions, by providing an image of capacity, prestige, and status that can influence men's attitudes toward women.

*"For us it is very important that a woman is in the CC. We do not speak freely and easily with men, but we can communicate with a woman. And women can help each other better."*

***Bunong community in Sen Monorom district, Mondulkiri province***

## Community women's willingness to participate in commune councils

When asked if they would like to stand as candidates in the next elections, many women in the communities clearly showed their willingness and their interest, especially the youngest members. Some women consider their possible election as a way to better women's condition in the community. The majority of them seem to view the issue as a challenge, an opportunity for demonstrating women's capacities, and overcoming discrimination.

Elder women were very supportive of the idea of other women wanting to stand as candidates. When women didn't express interest in a possible candidature as commune councilors, this was mainly due to a feeling of hopelessness, linked to the language gap: not being able to speak, read and write in Khme.

*"I would like to be elected at the commune council, other women want it. It is good if women are elected, women can manage things as men, some affairs even better. Moreover, if women are elected as commune councilors, men will consider them more."*

*Kreung community in O'chum district, Ratanakiri province*

### Summary

- Indigenous women perceive female councilors as a facilitating factor when dealing with authorities
- Female councilors are perceived as more competent and effective, closer to the community, less prone to corruption
- Women in the community are interested in standing as candidates and think that their participation in commune councils can improve their status

## The experience of indigenous women elected in commune councils

Most of the indigenous women elected in commune councils are relatively young, as middle age and older women are cut off by the language gap. Many of them have previously been involved in community work. Some were Gender Focus Persons appointed by the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Some have carried out villages' activities without a clear mandate, but were well-known and have the esteem of the people in the community. Some have been involved in NGO activities at the village level, and then were appointed as candidates. In some cases, political parties have selected women candidates based on their Khmer literacy, while in other cases they have taken into account their skills and their popularity within the communities.

According to the Cambodian laws, candidates for the commune councils' elections have to be appointed by political parties and included in their lists. So the entire process of selection and ranking among the other candidates is crucial for women to succeed. In the actual system, only a position at the top of the list will provide some chance to be elected. This issue is of great importance in terms of policies to enhance women's representation.

*"Of course your position in the list is important, because if you don't have a good position you will not win, you must be near the top."*

*CC member in Ratanakiri province*

*"Political parties should put women candidates at the top of the list, if you are at the bottom, there is no hope!"*

*CC member in Mondulakiri province*

No indigenous women have been elected at the post of commune chiefs in the provinces of Mondulakiri and Ratanakiri. There is one female first deputy in Mondulakiri, but we could not establish her ethnicity. In Ratanakiri, 4 indigenous women are first deputy chiefs; in Kratie, the 4 women who are commune chiefs, are not indigenous, and in Stung Treng the presence of indigenous women among commune chiefs or deputies was not confirmed.

*“I was elected in 2007. I was the only woman elected, because people in the community trusted me and knew me well. I have done everything alone, I was registered as a candidate by the party and people voted for me. I got the village support. To be successful you must be good at speaking, otherwise people will not consider you, and have a supportive husband, because if the husband does not agree you will have a lot of problems at home. Some husbands are afraid that women cannot do the work, and then they will be looked down upon by the other people...My husband is proud of my work, and this helped me.*

*I do not have much problem with the language because we help each other in the commune, I prepare my work in Bunong, and then we translate it together into a definitive Khmer version.”*

#### ***CC member in Mondulkiri province***

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*“I used to participate in NGO activities in the community, this is my main experience. I became an orphan at the age of 3 years, and I got married at age 15. I could only study at grade 1, from 1981 to 1983. At that time we used to study with a teacher under the tree, there was no school at that time; but the teacher was there and the children all participated. I was selected to be part of a community committee, but I felt bad because I couldn’t read and write very well. So I studied by myself, I tried to improve my knowledge and to learn more, especially to read and write in Khmer. Then I participated in more community activities, and when the last election arrived I stood as a candidate and was elected.”*

#### ***CC Member in Ratanakiri province***

Previous work as activists provides women with the experience of working with the communities, understanding their needs, establishing effective links with its members, and building their experience in finding solutions. However, the ethnic composition of the commune is extremely relevant, according to the women’s testimonies. An indigenous environment facilitates communication between women and downsizes the obstacles that women face.

Of course women who have been elected in both mandates have increased chances of being accepted as a member of the council with equal capacities and responsibilities. The role that indigenous women are called to play within the councils varies; it depends upon their experience, the context of their election, their relationships and links with the communities, and the ethnic composition of the commune council. All these factors contribute to determine the power that the female councilor can retain.

*“I have been in this position since 2002. I participate in all activities, not just gender, all activities concerning women. In the council there is a good collaboration, and other members listen to me, but it is not always so, it depends very much on the relationship.*

*A woman must know how to speak, she must know how to address the elders, how to compromise, how to solve the problems, and she must have experience, and wisdom. I was trained by an NGO.”*

***CC member in Ratanakiri province***

*“Now the CC is made up of all IP, it is easy because we can talk together in our language, and have the same culture. The other members listen to me. I have been involved in community activities with NGOs, and I have done a lot of work in the villages, I still do. I always share with them what I have learned during meetings and workshops, and what I have studied while attending these meetings.”*

***CC member in Ratanakiri province***

## **Women councilors as “gender persons”**

During our discussions we have found that very frequently women councilors, as well as their male colleagues, conceive their role as related and limited to “gender”. However, the following are often classified as “gender issues”: crucial social services related to health, sanitation, child care, disability, elder care, as well as the collection of population statistics and data segregated by sex. The term “gender”, instead of underlining the need to counteract gender related

discrimination and improve the status of women, becomes a synonym for other social needs. This confusion is extremely detrimental because “gender issues” are seen as marginal within the context of the multiple tasks of the commune, and, by consequence, under-funded. Thus, services that are crucial collective needs, important for the general well-being, are being neglected.

*“The idea of extending women’s responsibility to issues other than gender is good, but before this they must have the capacity. Women have low education, so they cannot participate. If the government wants to increase the number of women in Local Authorities, they should broadcast the program and inform everybody, so women can apply. Each party should choose women from the villages, 10 to 15, and train them, so that they will become good citizens. I support the government program, but men could become angry with this idea, and the program should support them and educate them too.”*

**Male CC member in Mondulkiri province**

On the other side, this idea of gender, deprived of its central content, which is discrimination against and control over women, downsizes the need to promote women’s rights policies. In many cases collecting statistics on women and children among villages is described as the main task of women councilors and is called “gender”. The idea that women in local authorities should get involved in all kinds of issues and that their role

should not be restricted to “gender” has been received with skepticism by other male commune council members. One male commune council member, in a commune where no female representatives have been elected, showed a point of view quite reductive of the role of women...

*“It is better if there are women because they can talk and explain things that are embarrassing for men, like hygiene and sanitation...”*

**Male CC member in Mondulkiri province**

## Women’s marginalization within the commune councils

In some cases the role of women is the one of “commune waitresses” preparing tea, cleaning and welcoming guests during meetings. Relegating women to the role of waitresses and hostesses is a widespread tendency. Only the endurance and the fortitude of individual women has allowed them to affirm themselves as true political representatives. Not all women are prepared, once elected, to face such a battle that requires strength and extreme determination.

*“I’m the second deputy since 2007, I was selected by the authorities who came to the village and said that they needed a woman in the list. Villagers selected me, then they asked me and I agreed. But my role in the commune council is not relevant, I prepare tea, boil water, and welcome guests during meetings. The Chief of the commune and the commune clerk make all the decisions. The clerk manages the commune budget, I don’t know anything about money, about planning or anything else. We only follow the chief and the clerk in decisions. I don’t really know what the programs are, as everything is managed by the clerk; he receives and manages the money of the commune. I have never seen money for women’s and children’s affairs, or even discussed a project.”*

*CC member in Stung Treng province*

### Summary

- Commune councilors’ experience varies according to the circumstances of their election and their previous role in the communities
- There is a tendency to relegate female councilors to the management of “gender” issues
- “Gender” tends to cover general services like health, sanitation, child care more than the need to act against gender related discrimination
- Often “gender” come after other problems and are under-funded, therefore neglecting crucial social services
- Female councilors have to struggle to affirm their role, and in some cases they suffer marginalization and trivialization

## Obstacles that oppose indigenous women's participation in commune councils

### Obstacles seen by the stakeholders

Most NGO representatives, the officers in the Local Departments of Women's Affairs, as well as other informants, indicate the lack of education as the primary single obstacle that blocks indigenous women's access to commune councils. There is little elaboration on the fact that for indigenous women Khmer is a second language, and their first languages are not written. Very few, if not any, of the stakeholders, have conducted surveys or research aimed at determining indigenous women's own perception of their needs in terms of support for participating in politics.

Disparity in literacy is not seen as related to gender discrimination. The lack of female officers holding management roles in gender programs among NGOs working in indigenous areas may contribute to erase gender discrimination from the theoretical tools that guide their work.<sup>2</sup> So indigenous women, by the fact of their being illiterate in Khmer, become uneducated, lacking skills and capacities, and this opens the way to a series of "educational programs" that fail to procure the very substantial thing that indigenous women need, literacy in Khmer language.

*"Most depend on the parties, how they really support women's participation in the election, through their list and their policies. Many talk about gender, but in fact they do not really support women participation. When in a commune the gender focus person is even a man, how can this fit with women's empowerment?"*

*If political parties want to support women, they must involve them; they must put them at the top of the list, help them during the campaign, and do all what is needed to guarantee women access to a political role. What happens is that women in indigenous areas increase their capacities by becoming activists in their communities, and this does not always make them good candidates for political parties..."*

**NGO in Monduliri province**

2. The fact that while discussing "gender" projects with NGOs male officers, women in lower staff position were offering us glasses of tea and water, was self explicative.



In that context, barriers to indigenous women's participation tend to become pervasive and even to exceed the reality. For example in Mondulkiri several stakeholders mentioned the need for commune councilors to hold at least "grade 9" education. But the law that regulates the administrative elections and defines candidates' qualifications did not mention such a threshold, which would cut from office many male candidates as well. Only a few stakeholders gave us an analysis that goes beyond the appraisal of women's illiteracy and provides a deeper perspective. For other actors poverty and lack of means is the main limiting factor.

In fact we could observe during the field work that all commune council members have a motorbike to move around, which is beyond the economic means of many indigenous families. The honorary for commune council members doesn't cover even the minimal expenditures related to their duty.

Some actors recognize that something in the attitude of indigenous women concerning participation

in social organization is changing. Women tend to attend the meetings, to participate, to be more active and talkative. For some NGOs this is an important aspect and during our discussions they were genuinely interested in understanding the changes related to gender roles that they observe in indigenous communities.

*"Now we do not have problems in encouraging women's participation, they are more active, many times we have found more women than men attending the meetings. We see that women are more willing to protect their resources, they resist pressures and don't want to sell their land. Men are the ones who want who sell, who become consumerist, who are more attracted by modern life. We need to understand better what is going on because it is very important for our work and for the communities."*

*NGO in Ratanakiri province*

## Summary

- Prejudices and biases are often creating stereotypes of indigenous women as ignorant, incapable and unskilled
- Khmer illiteracy is often confused and classified as ignorance

- Often indigenous women are targeted by educational programs, but seldom by programs that recognise their knowledge and skills
- Gender discrimination is not recognised and taken into consideration
- According to some stakeholders, poverty and lack of will by political parties are among the obstacles
- For some stakeholders indigenous women's participation in politics is increasing and NGOs should support this trend

### Obstacles seen by community women

The discussion with the women in the communities reveals that they don't feel inadequate to fulfill posts of responsibility. Even if there is a general concern about literacy in Khmer language, which is a second language for all of them, they do not feel less capable or unequipped for being in a role of authority.

Many women identify their lack of rights and power to be the main barrier

to their full participation in the political life. The chronic lack of time for women, resulting from an unequal share of tasks and work among women and men, does not allow them to acquire some of the elementary qualities to stand as candidates, like learning how to read and write in Khmer language.

Men, not women, need to be educated in order to allow women participation in local politics!

*"I want to stand as a candidate for next commune elections and work there, same as the men. We must not have just men alone in power, because they use this against the women. Women are as good as men. The problem is that when they organize the election meetings in the village they call only for men. The main problem is men's education, men should be educated to help women, and release the burden in housework and to work to ensure the livelihood and so on."*

***Lun woman in Ta Veng district,  
Ratanakiri province***

Although involvement at the village level does not seem problematic for many women, participating in activities outside their village poses more problems. For some women, the difficulties reside in having more than one barrier to bypass, one due to gender and the other to ethnicity. With the growing presence of Khmer migrants in the region, often in a position of social and economic dominance, Khmer models of behavior are becoming a constant source of comparison and frustration.

In many communities women complain about the fact that meetings were held without inviting them, and candidates selected only among men. As a result, no women were elected in these communes. Indigenous women are less literate in Khmer language than indigenous men but are also in an unfavorable position to fill this gap.

The problem of Khmer illiteracy has to be inscribed in a holistic perspective concerning indigenous women's life and problems, as they clearly underline. Women have no time for learning Khmer as well as for taking care of themselves, for relaxing, for leisure.

*“How to have more women in the commune councils? First the government must support women's rights, because just education cannot change the women's situation. Men's and women's equality, this is the right rule for authorities. And husbands should learn to be housewives too, learn to cook, wash, watch the children, and so on. We would be happy to rule the community, we can do it!”*

***Tampuan woman in Veunsay district,  
Ratanakiri province***

*“We were not invited to attend the meetings for the elections, but if we were invited we would not have felt prepared, we think that we cannot participate and cannot be suitable candidates. We have children to look after, how can we go to the meetings with our children along? Khmer people do not have children with them when they attend the meetings, we would be ashamed; we want to be like the Khmers.”*

***Bunong women in Oreang district, Monduliri province***

## Summary

- Indigenous women do not feel unequipped or unable to fulfill the post of councilor
- They see gender related discrimination as the main obstacle for their participation in politics
- Their condition as women, and the uneven division of work between men and women, is impairing their progress
- Indigenous women have to overcome gender, ethnic and social barriers

### Obstacles seen by the female councilors

The women that have been elected and are now working in the commune councils have underlined further obstacles.

*“I have some cashew nut fields, but my husband takes care of them. If my husband wasn’t collaborative and helpful, and if I had to go in the field every day to ensure our survival, how could I have worked in the commune council? How could I have attended the meetings, the workshops, or visited the villages?”*

**CC member in Ratanakiri province**

*“For me the main obstacles for women to enter the CC are of course literacy, but also working together with their husbands. Husbands must agree and be collaborative and their education is very important, because if husbands don’t understand the relevance of this work, for women it becomes very difficult. Women must be confident and must have some free time. If they work in the field they have no time. Political parties who set up the lists are also important, because they can support women or not. But the most important thing is the willingness, the commitment to work for the community, a strong motivation to support the community; this is the most important factor in overcoming the obstacles.”*

**CC member in Ratanakiri province**

Husbands' support is stressed by all the elected women as a factor that could make women leave a post if not ensured. Politically active women have to be away from home, cannot perform all the family work, and this has to be negotiated, otherwise they risk a rise in conflicts. As some women said, not all men will accept this, and husbands' understanding is crucial; according to some women husbands need to be educated to understand women's new roles. Indigenous women may stand for election and work as CC members only if their living standards improve, their livelihood is ensured, and their workload at home decreases. Poverty is a limiting factor for women's participation in political life.

Political parties play a crucial role: they can support, or not support, they can rank women in the list in positions that facilitate their election; they can help women during the campaign and provide support to them once elected.

However, women elected strongly stressed the idea that commitment to work for the community's well-being is the single most important factor. Women must be ready to see their time and even their private life reduced by their position as commune council members. Some of them mention courage as an important quality, because the work requires standing up in front of audiences, in many cases dominated by men, to face confrontational situations, to travel along very bad roads, mostly alone.

## Summary

- Indigenous women councilors identify many obstacles to women's participation
- Husbands need to understand and support women councilors' work
- Women who stand as candidates cannot be poor; they must travel, they are busy, they cannot ensure continuous work in their farms. They should have a situation of economic security
- Political parties' support is crucial to succeed
- A high commitment and devotion to the work is required, which can be a limiting factor
- Women need to be brave, dare to speak out, and be prepared to face opposition by male dominated councils

## Obstacle related to socio-economic and cultural changes

### Women's work

*"All work is done by women now, we do much more work than before, and without help from the men! What do the men do? They drink! They go around with motorbikes!*

*Modernity has changed men's work, they do not have to produce tools, or repair the house like before, they have less work to do, they do not go into the forest very often, they do not cut wood or bamboo like before. Mostly they do business, if they know how to do it, otherwise they spend money."*

**Jaray woman in Oyadao district, Ratanakiri province**

Women in all visited communities agreed: something has changed in the way work is shared among men and women. Their workload has increased, their time for leisure and rest has decreased, and they find themselves trapped in a situation where they are responsible for the provision of everyday subsistence. In fact the work of women, in the market economy, has lost

value and visibility because it is not a source of cash. But families' still relies on the work that women carry out in the family farms, which allows companies and plantations to hire labourers at very low wages, because their subsistence is provided by women farmers, often left alone in this task.

Other factors contribute to increase women's work and decrease their quality of life, especially the loss of indigenous natural habitat.

*"No more forest is left near the village. A company was allowed to cut the trees. We cannot find the vegetables that we use to collect before; we now have very strong storms, because the forest protected the village from strong winds, we have drought and flooding all the time, it seems that the weather is getting crazy. We do not have wood for building and repairing the houses, we have to walk kilometers to collect enough wood for cooking, it is very tiresome. We do not find medicinal plants, for example the ones for blood disease, cannot be found anymore. We do not have wild animals to hunt anymore, and even the fish in the river are less. So life is becoming more difficult. And the company just cut the trees and went away."*

**Tampuan women in Veunsay district, Ratanakiri province**

## Family life

Conflicts within the family are increasing, and many are due to the fact that men seem more prone to consumerism, at the point of selling land to get cash. Secondly, conflicts are linked to the increasing unreliability of men in terms of sharing work and responsibility within the family. Men seem more easily seduced by the new values that free market economy is bringing into the

*“Why do men drink more than before? Because now they have money! The rich like to drink because they have a lot of money, and the poor drink all the little money they have, and even the money they don’t have. They want to be happy, and if they know that the wife has money they ask and ask until they get it and go to drink. Before they drank only wine from the jars, now they drink white wine outside the village, and even beer.”*

*Jaray woman in Oyadao district,  
Ratanakiri province*

communities. It has to be said that modernity arrives in the indigenous society with a high patriarchal content. Social life is molded on males’ needs; entertainments such as karaokes and even commercial sex are getting more frequent in the region. Alcohol consumption, an important part of indigenous communities’ social interaction, occurs now outside the communities, in the stores, bars, and karaoke parlors recently established, and involves exclusively men.

The current economic development is focused on competition, individualism and wealth accumulation. Not only women’s productive work, but also their reproductive work, like tending and caring for children, husbands, elders, sick, is losing value. If these changes seem to benefit men in the short term, providing them with more immediate rewards, in the long term they are going to hamper both women’s and men’s well-being.

## Summary

- Men appear to be more easily seduced by the offers of the market economy and by a social environment that is culturally male biased
- Frustration is often sublimated in compelling behaviors like alcohol abuse, facilitated by a new male biased vision of social and personal life; stereotypes are replacing men’s positive roles

## Social life

The shift from self-sustained subsistence production towards a speculative and unregulated economy disrupts the basis of the economic and social life of indigenous communities.

*“Before we had more solidarity, while now everything is based on money, people care only about close relatives, while before, when people came back from hunting in the forest, they used to eat all together. Now they just cut a little piece and run to sell the rest in town.”*

*Kreung woman in O’chum district, Ratanakiri province*

Communities are under stress, many women complain about the lack of solidarity, the split of the communities, and the increasing differences between rich and poor. The massive arrival of newcomers from other provinces of Cambodia is creating new sources of problems for women. Mixed marriages are increasing, but so are the problems related to the coexistence and proximity of different cultural groups.

## Summary

- The new values introduced by market economy and commoditization of land and resources are breaking the links within the communities
- Solidarity decreases, while social differences increase
- The massive arrival of newcomers contributes weakening communities’ identities

## Violence against women

Domestic violence was mentioned by all the stakeholders as the main women’s problem in the indigenous areas. However, when we asked the women in the community and the commune council members more details about the occurrence of acts of violence, this view could not be confirmed.



The notion of widespread domestic violence among indigenous communities seems to derive more from stereotypes concerning indigenous people, who are often portrayed as problematic communities, ravaged by poverty and underdevelopment. In fact, violence against indigenous women is not so frequent and some forms of violence, such as sexual assaults and rape, are quite rare, girls' or children's rape are practically unknown. Customary laws were efficient in circumscribing episodes of violence and the status of women was not one of devalued persons, toward which violence is easily condoned.

*“Now there is a very high level of domestic violence among the communities. The reason for this is that men want power, they want to dominate. They have their own affairs, the family is poor, there is a lack of consideration for women, there is no capacity to compromise, and alcohol consumption has increased. Domestic violence becomes unmanageable when foreigners come to marry indigenous girls. They [the foreigners] can't compromise, they don't rely on traditional authorities.*

*The traditional system is very relevant in dealing with these problems. The elders are involved, at first they warn the culprit, than they send a second and even a third warning, but afterwards they set a fee to be paid. If the couple can compromise a ceremony is organized, with some animal being sacrificed, and the culprit will ask forgiveness in front of the community and the two can reconcile. But with foreigners, coming from a different culture, this becomes impossible and even the warnings are not effective. So it becomes unmanageable.”*

***Officer at the department of Women's Affairs, Mondulkiri province***

Nevertheless, some of the changes now occurring in the communities are indicators of a situation that is worsening in terms of social life: women's loss of status and gender related conflicts. Therefore violence against women may become more problematic. Many development officers propose “education” as the main activity to be provided in this domain, but there is a lack of analysis and understanding of the true gender dynamics among indigenous communities, and how changes can impact women and men differently.

## Summary

- Many development actors see violence against women in indigenous communities as a natural consequence of poverty and lack of development
- Very few of them relate the increase of conflicts to the ongoing changes in social and gender relationships
- As a consequence, specific strategies to face the emergence of violence are lacking

## Lack of services

Indigenous women are deeply affected by the lack of basic services such as education, appropriate health facilities, transportation, and other social services. While schools have been built, there is a lack of human resources, as often teachers do not come to work, or they come irregularly and do not guarantee the correct development of the education curriculum. The situation seems to be widespread, and we often received the same answer to our questions about education. Some NGOs are running educational programs based on bilingual curricula, but their action is not sufficient to cover all the needs, and many villages lack basic education services.

*“We have the school, but the teacher doesn’t come, or comes at 9 for just a little while, so the children go back home, or are left without supervision.”*

***Kreung woman in O’chum district,  
Ratanakiri province***

*“We want to have a health center better than now, because now if you don’t have money they don’t cure you, and they only speak Lao. Nurses are mostly male, so for us it is very difficult.”*

***Tampuan woman in Veunsay district,  
Ratanakiri province***

In some villages adult literacy classes have been organized by NGOs, but there is no reliable public program to support people who want to learn how to read and write in Khmer. This is especially important for women, who have less opportunities to socialize outside the village, and therefore less chances of learning the Khmer language.

Health services are often unaffordable or unviable too, because of their costs, or because they are scarcely adapted

to specific indigenous women's needs. The provision of other basic services, like access to clean water, sanitation, child care, transportation, among the firsts, is still insufficient. This contributes to a situation in which indigenous territories, exploited for their natural resources, are left behind in terms of the development of services and infrastructures that benefit the communities.

*"We have a problem with development here. Here there is no development. Where are the good roads for the people, not for the companies or the buyers? Where are affordable markets where indigenous people's products can be brought and sold? Where is cheap transportation for products coming from remote areas? Who controls prices and stops speculation? Where are the extension services, the subsidies and the support for small producers? Where are the factories for processing our raw materials? Jackfruits fall down without being sold, people do not know how best to rotate new crops like soy or cassava, we have no markets to sell, no transport to bring products, prices are falling due to the lack of affordable transports, speculation is rampant! Before people had the forest, the fish, the meat, less people, enough food, no big problems. Now, after development, the forest is gone, there are concessions everywhere, much more people with an uncontrolled inflow of migrants, water, fishing, hunting resources are overexploited, and new business, like mining, are coming in! So how can people make a living? It is normal that people have a lot of problems and women have a lot of problems too!"*

***Indigenous activist in Banlung district, Ratanakiri province***

## Summary

- Indigenous communities are affected by abrupt economic, cultural and social changes
- Modernity comes into communities with a strong emphasis on money-related values, forcing communities to move away from sustainable agricultural practices, towards a market driven production
- Lack of focus on social services is damaging women and impairing their advancement and well-being

# Women in Politics: A transformative force

The indigenous women elected as commune councilors, similarly to the women in the communities, expressed the idea that women in local authorities show great commitment and integrity. According to some of them, women can stand against corruption, can defend the interests of the communities, and can better protect their environment.

*“I’m sure that women will make better leaders, and dare to stand up against authorities, even big authorities, to protect land and communities.”*

***Bunong woman in O’reang district,  
Mondulkiri province***

*“Normally women are more effective, more successful, more quick and concentrated, do not stop along the road for a drink, are more responsible than men, who are easygoing and let things be. Women consider community before everything, are against land sales and if there are funds they can manage it very well.”*

***Tampuan informant in Banlung district,  
Ratanakiri province***

This mirrors the idea brought up by community women, about women valuing protection of resources and livelihood, and men being more prone to the offers of market economy. Some female councilors claim a very high level of commitment and willingness to work for the community to provide solutions to the problems of the people. They emphasize the link between the female councilors and the community of electors established by their previous work as social activists and organizers.

According to some stakeholders, female councilors are more attentive to the social problems of the communities, and are more effective in providing benefits to the villagers. Classifying important social affairs as gender creates the conditions for a certain absence of men engaged in local politics when dealing with such problems.

*“Women are more resistant to corruption, are more efficient and have higher commitment. Women in the commune councils are very hard workers, and very reliable.”*

**CC member in Ratanakiri province**

*“The more women there are in the local authorities the better it is for natural resource protection. Women are very committed, not easy to cheat, and are stronger in standing up against land sales. When I got involved, I went to measure, I verified that the sale was legal. But I’m afraid that illegal land sales occur under the table, that some affairs are signed at home! With me it is not easy to do under the table land sales. They cannot come to my house at night and get me drunk, or invite me out in town to drink in a karaoke. Women resist corruption, it’s true.”*

**CC member in Mondulkiri province**

Many women in the communities express their belief that women make very good community managers, and possess characteristics that increase efficacy and can have positive feedback for the whole community. Women are considered more trustworthy, closer to the community and more committed to the general well-being. This reveals a certain dissatisfaction with the actual work of some local authorities, mostly male dominated. Men in authority are seen as more easily distracted, less focused on the problem, and more prone to corruption.

*“Women tend to be closer to the community, more concerned than men, less prone to doing something wrong, they generally work more and better than men. As soon as there is one woman, the other women in the community become more vocal, they start mentioning problems to the woman leader, and start asking to solve those problems and needs. For example access to clean water; if men alone are in charge they don’t care, they take the motorbike and go to bathe in the river; but for women the clean water is very important, they wash tools, wash the children, wash the clothes, fetch drinking water, and they know that the general level of hygiene depends on the availability of clean water. A woman in the CC advocates for these kind of vital issues!”*

**Department of Women’s Affairs, Ratanakiri province**

## Transforming politics

In Ratanakiri and Mondulkiri none of the elected female councilors are playing a directive role within local authorities, while in Stung Treng and Kratie we came in touch with female commune council chiefs or vice-chiefs in positions of responsibility and power. Both communities were mentioned as examples of good governance by local provincial authorities. According to the women active in these communities, their political style is characterized by:

- accountability to the community
- collective leadership based on consultation and discussion
- transparency
- focus on the community's problems, requests and needs and active commitment to solving people's problems
- focus on women's problems and active commitment to improving the status of women<sup>3</sup>

The election of a woman as commune chief was not an isolated event, but the result of a collective women's initiative, which has created a critical mass of women involved in communities' activities and among local authorities at various levels, including village chiefs, vice-chiefs, deputy commune chiefs and commune members. None of these steps was easy.

*"Women here are the chief of village, the chief of commune, the vice chief of commune. The community supports them because they are qualified, because they are all hard workers, because they are humble and modest, always, and ask villagers to correct them if they do something wrong. Women in authority are closer to the people, participate more, listen more, and are more on the side of the people. They are first of all accountable to the community! And they listen to the problems of the villagers and are able to bring it to the top. We do not do this for money, a commune chief receives 25 USD in a month, for a lot of work, at home, during holidays, with people coming everyday, even at night. I must comply! I have the satisfaction of doing a good job!"*

**Commune Chief in Kratie province**

3. These findings match the ones found by a comparative study in the Asia Pacific Region, Jean Drage for UNESCAP (2001).

Those communities in Stung Treng and Kratie are ethnically Khmer, and this is surely a facilitating factor, as the situation of their communes is not comparable to the status of crisis that is shaking indigenous societies. Despite these differences, we are convinced that their experiences are very relevant and can be a source of inspiration for other communities.

*“To encourage women to be represented and participate in politics you should provide chances for women to work; women must participate in savings groups, in employment, they must have chances to be employed, because they are better workers than men! Networks must be built, and women must have experience together, in any activity at the village level, they must have chances to speak, to interact, to work together. Here women work in groups in every village; in any sector of village development we choose women to work. This is how we built women’s participation and how we got these results.”*

***Women’s group in Stung Treng province***

The women see their role as one at the service of the community, more than one of authoritative leadership. Accountability to the community appeared to be a crucial aspect of their practice. By being on the side of the people and listening to their needs, women have the capacity to work with the people, answer their problems and find solutions for the community well-being.

Similarly to what we found among indigenous women in other provinces, resistance to corruption is identified as one of the characteristics of women in local governance. Being supported by the community and working in strict cooperation with villagers, is for these women the better guarantee to resist corruptive pressures or pressures aimed at diverting governance from its main aims and duties.

The problem of discrimination against women and the need to address it are at the center of this approach. It was very interesting to learn from these women about the process that brought them to acquire the trust of the community and the power to represent them. It is a process of women’s empowerment, achieved through a long term steady commitment, which at the end has strengthened the whole community, women and men.

The process that these women describe is molded by the need to address discrimination and regain dignity. First of all, women have to regain self-esteem and pride and learn “how important women are” in order to wipe away the dominant idea that women are less able, less educated, less good. Secondly, they have to unveil and discuss the reasons why discrimination occurs, a process that helps them to free themselves from the sense of guilt.

As women emphasize, awareness does not imply confrontational strategies, on the contrary, it helps to find strategies that are fair and viable. The path is full of obstacles, as women’s participation in politics, in decision making positions, is still considered an exception and is in many cases opposed.

*“The first action should be focused on women, about how important they are! So that they can dare to speak, have confidence, and participate. Women had lot of problems in the villages here, they did not participate in public life and politics, tradition says that women should not participate. But we participate now, women can build the nation. Women can learn and want to step out of certain traditions, want to work like men and with men! How did we step out? We tried to build our capacity to work, we persuaded men, we were patient, we worked a lot in the community, in the commune, but also at home. It was a lot of work, sometimes too much! We build our capacity and we build solidarity among ourselves, we train ourselves to persuade husbands to take more responsibilities.”*

#### **Women’s group in Kratie province**

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*“I know that in certain commune council women members boil water and receive the guest, or prepare food for the meetings. It is not good, it cannot work! Here it is not like this, I’m have power in everything, real power. This is my second mandate, I have been in this post since 2002, and in charge of women’s affairs since 1982. Women managed to become so important in this commune because we created women’s groups in each village, and after that women’s networks, and so women’s action grew. I always tried to encourage women and provide them employment, work, and action to do. For women to have a role at the community level, they have to be encouraged to act, otherwise they are stuck in the house, in the kitchen, at home. At the beginning I used to do only what the top asked me to do, but now I have my own ideas and initiatives.”*

#### **Commune Chief in Stung Treng province**



## Improving women's status: The example of fighting violence against women

One of the impacts of increasing the number of women in local authorities and upgrading their ranks is that women's problems, such as violence against them, acquire importance, gain focus and are treated seriously.

Not only are effective measures taken to confront the problem, like stopping impunity for perpetrators, but the presence of women at all levels in positions of responsibility is improving women's status, facilitating women taking action, and contributing to lower tolerance toward such acts.

Slowly, a new gender role is starting to emerge among men, in which the culture of supremacy, domination and violence is substituted by one of solidarity, parity and mutual respect.

*"Concerning domestic violence, it is not a big problem now. Before at least 50% of men were drinking, and having conflicts with their wives, but now only in a few families. The very stubborn continue to drink, but they are few, one or two families. We educate by meeting, and sometimes we go directly to meet the family at home and talk with them. But when domestic violence occurs, we report to the police immediately and we immediately take action. We don't let these acts pass unsanctioned, and we act very quickly. This is very important: take action and do it immediately. All this has changed the situation. In addition come education, and example: our families try to be good examples and other people follow what we do, because we don't have serious conflicts and we can solve our couples' problems peacefully. My husband is very supportive, when I have a lot of work to do he works at home. Here men understand about gender, they do not ridicule men who help women anymore; they do not think, as before, that men who do home work are not real men..."*

***Commune council member in Stung Treng province***

*“Here women’s problems are taken very seriously. Before we had a lot of domestic violence. Now any case of domestic violence is immediately reported to authorities and police, and the culprit arrested and prosecuted according to the law. A village chief in this commune is a woman, in another village the vice chief is a woman, and the commune chief is a woman, so here no authority is going to minimize, downsize or condone the crime of domestic violence. Now we have much less cases, people think very carefully before committing such offenses! Before the rate was very high, affecting at least 40% of families, and women seldom reported cases of violence, they did not dare to speak and denounce, and nobody was taking action. Now it is reduced, and men have changed too, they have learned different gender roles.”*

***Commune council members in Kratie province***

## Summary

- According to many community women, commune councilors and governmental officers, women may exert a transformative power on politics
- They are more accountable to the community than to the top, more transparent and less prone to corruption
- They rely on collective work, discussion, consultation, more than on single individual leadership
- They are committed and focused on the community’s well-being
- They actively promote women’s status and act against discrimination
- They can achieve important results in confronting social problems, resulting in the general improvement of the community quality of life

Indigenous women are facing a situation that is deeply affecting their communities, their way of life, and their status as women. The gender dimension of the indigenous territories' transformation arises from the women's testimonies. Not only has their work changed and their workload increased, but it has also lost value in a market economy that values cash over anything else.

As a result indigenous women

- are losing status, knowledge, consideration;
- their ancestral roles as healers and religious chiefs are downsized;
- important parts of their identity are endangered by natural resources destruction or dispossession.

The development frame that is currently implemented, with its focus on competition, quick monetary gain, individualism, and exploitation of resources, is going against the improvement of indigenous women's condition and of their whole communities' harmonious survival.<sup>4</sup>

The erosion of women's status contributes to weaken their participation among traditional authorities. The traditional system of governance of indigenous communities is the cornerstone of their societies and appears to be the only structure that may be able to lead the communities through the crisis.

The process of decentralization in the indigenous regions is raising many questions concerning its role in promoting integration of indigenous groups. The lack of clear indications to drive the interaction between traditional and formal local authorities is an example of this incertitude, as is the issue of languages – why is Khmer the only working language? Why not bilingualism?

With the 2007 election thousands of women have entered the commune councils, but if quantitative results are significant, their qualitative participation

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4. On the impact of the dominant development model on Indigenous Peoples see the Message for the International Day of the World Indigenous People, August 8 2008, given by Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, United Nations Chairperson of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues [www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfi/](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfi/)

remains questionable. In the indigenous areas women have to face many obstacles to be considered as full member of the councils.

Many women elected in commune councils are confined to tasks related to “gender” and cut off from other decisions and activities. The actual “gender perspective” tends to include crucial social affairs that should be top concerns in local governance, such as health, sanitation, and child care. Classified as gender issues, these tasks are often under-funded. At the same time, gender related discrimination, which is the main problem faced by women, is not efficiently tackled.

Indigenous women consider their involvement in local authorities very important. According to their view, more women in authority could bring



Indigenous women attending a workshop in Kratie province

changes in the power balance between them and men, and increase equity. However, the experience of female commune councilors shows that being elected is not a guarantee; women have to struggle within the council to gain more power and consideration, otherwise they are easily marginalized. Women in commune councils, according to female councilors and community women, are highly committed to solve the problems, are closer to the communities than to the top, and are less prone to corruption and less interested in personal gain.

Concerning the obstacles to indigenous women's participation in commune councils, many stereotypes and biases are still widespread, especially among stakeholders. The lack of Khmer language literacy is simplified as a lack of "education". There is no acknowledgment of indigenous women's capacities and skills as handcrafters, as agriculturalists, as collectors of natural products, as elders, as healers, as religious celebrants, as artists, as savers and transmitters of culture. Indigenous women are more articulate in their analysis: they consider many different factors, but name gender discrimination and male domination as the first obstacle. Literacy in Khmer is limiting their participation, but they do not consider themselves unable to fulfill the role of councilors.

Women in chair positions within the commune councils in Kratie and Stung Treng show that when women gain enough power, they may have a strong impact on governance style. A genuine gender approach, aimed at readdressing inequity, is a powerful instrument for the enforcement of a true grassroots democracy benefiting the whole community. This political style is in many instances very similar to what indigenous peoples describe as their own ideal system of governance and is a promising ground for experiences aimed at increasing indigenous women's and men's participation in managing, preserving and reinvigorating their communities.

# Recommendations

## Community level

### 1. Starting from indigenous women's knowledge, understanding and needs

Indigenous women's capacities need to be acknowledged, understood, and appreciated. Projects that intend to support indigenous women's participation, empowerment, and their engagement in politics should start by listening to what the women know, what they have understood, what their experience has taught them, what causes they have recognized and how they think that the problems can be addressed.

### 2. Learning

What do indigenous women want to learn? And how does it fit with their agenda of getting rid of discrimination, of gaining more power and protecting their communities?

These are the kind of questions that need to be discussed before engaging in any training activity supposed to "empower" indigenous women. Adult literacy in Khmer language is surely an important issue for indigenous women. The few literacy programs seen in the field did not consider specific indigenous women's constraints. Such a program should be affordable, built around women's needs, and negotiated with them. Radio education programs with low power consumption radios can be utilized for distance learning, as many indigenous women move their houses in the fields during the rainy season; small solar power plants can be installed in villages and field farms, so as to have light in the evening when women gather for learning and need power for radios; content should be negotiated with the women too; examples from other countries, where distance learning targeting indigenous people has been developed, should be collected and analyzed.

### **3. Provide a genuine indigenous gender perspective**

Too many prejudices tend to portray indigenous women as suffering higher levels of discrimination within their societies. Outsiders' perceptions often fail to consider aspects of indigenous women's status that speaks in favor of social recognition and consideration. Indigenous female researchers should be included in research teams to guarantee a less biased analysis of gender relationships within their own societies. Opportunities should be open to them to engage in this path, such as action research, fellowships, and collective research. Indigenous female students should be given support and opportunity, including access to regional indigenous studies centers.

### **4. Link gender and indigenous needs**

If the actual trend in natural resources and land alienation is maintained, very soon there will be very few indigenous communities. As appeared during this study, the current development is causing a negative impact upon indigenous women. Gender issues should be seen within this holistic perspective. On the other side, the scarcity of women involved in gender projects in indigenous areas and a concept of gender deprived of its main focus - to address discrimination - are not going into the direction of promoting equity. Projects addressing women in indigenous areas should not simply reproduce what has been done in the rest of the country, because indigenous people have specific problems.

Specific programs implemented in indigenous territories should integrate a genuine gender vision to provide support to community women in their struggle for more equity, more representation, more participation and power.

### **5. Indigenous women's way of doing things**

Indigenous women and men have different ways of doing things, making decisions, working together, and solving problems. Development agencies committed to assist indigenous women in the task of increasing their political participation and representation should first verify if they are well equipped to match those values: if their practices are in line with indigenous women's ways of approaching and solving problems; if consultation, discussion and consensus are the basis for their internal decision making; if accountability to the grassroots is the major concern driving the actions.

## Commune council level

### 1. Support to indigenous women in commune councils

Women elected as commune councilors in indigenous areas demand support to increase their political weight and overcome obstacles due to discrimination. It is very important that women find opportunities to discuss these problems and to conceive strategies to overcome discrimination and achieve true empowerment. Forums and gatherings should give opportunities to indigenous women to discuss their own problems, share experiences and find strategies for improvement. Agenda and content of such forums should be negotiated with indigenous councilors to reflect their specific needs and be adapted to indigenous identity. The exchange between indigenous and non-indigenous women in political participation is crucial, but should be a mutual learning process, not the mere mainstreaming of practices and content developed in the dominant Khmer context.

### 2. Involve indigenous female councilors in communities' sensitization and extension of women in politics

Instead of planning external intervention by stakeholders that are carriers of a foreign culture and contents, and scarcely adapted to indigenous ways of doing things, it would be beneficial to have indigenous councilors involved in community sessions where they share their experiences, explain their roles, and encourage women to participate in the future elections. These communities' meetings can help to find better strategies to increase women's participation.

### 3. Reexamine gender issues in the context of local authorities

There is a need to reassess the meaning of gender policies at the local level, and clearly distinguish gender related discrimination from social problems and services. The advancement of the decentralization process creates urgency. Discussions, round tables and workshops have to be developed to clarify:

- a. if the role of female commune councilors must or must not be restricted to gender issues, and
- b. if the concept of gender is related to gender based discrimination or just an other term to define social services such as health, sanitation, childcare etc.

Commune councilors and all relevant stakeholders should be included in these discussions, and their views presented to policymakers.





Kreung Commune Councilor presenting at a workshop in Kratie with indigenous and Khmer attendants



## National level

### 1. Need for advocacy

The survival of indigenous peoples' identity and culture is deeply related to their capability to retain their territories and resources. Both, ILO convention No. 169 and the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People approved in 2006, exhort to:

*“...recognize the indigenous people's rights to own and control their land, to own and manage natural resources on those lands....to decide what kind of development will take place on their lands and resources”*

The incapacity to guarantee indigenous peoples' rights over land and resources signifies the uncertainty of their future survival as groups with distinct cultural identities. It is simply not possible to consider isolated aspects of indigenous women's life, in this case their participation in politics, without taking into account the situation in which this occurs, the circumstances that influence it, the contingency and urgency that women face, the need for policies that protect them and their communities.

### 2. Indigenous women in politics: assimilation or integration?

The idea that dominates stakeholders' views is:

- how to “educate” indigenous women so that they fit to the dominant political standards?

The question however should rather be:

- how the dominant political standards can be adapted to allow indigenous women to participate in politics?

First of all is the problem of language. Is it fair to limit the rights of a group of citizens based on their proficiency in a language that is not their own, when they didn't have access to educational services? Is Khmer literacy an unavoidable limit for commune councils' candidates in indigenous territories?

What about other aspects of indigenous social, economic and religious life? How about the integration of traditional authorities, customary laws, other cultural and identity related practices? Discussions and consultation should be organized so that stakeholders and policymakers together with indigenous councilors can find a way of dialoging on these crucial issues. As debates and

consultations among women are often more open and less confrontational, it could be beneficial to support discussion between indigenous and non-indigenous women involved in politics around these issues.

### **3. Indigenous political representation: quotas, reserved seats...**

How are indigenous people in Cambodia going to be politically represented? And specifically indigenous women? Is a system of quotas and/or reserved seats relevant to the participation of indigenous women in commune councils? Those opportunities could be analyzed and discussed by indigenous forums and organizations active in Cambodia; exchanges could be organized with ethnic groups and women of other countries and regions where these policies have been adopted in order to identify opportunities and related problems.

### **4. The role of political parties**

The law in Cambodia does not allow candidates to run for election other than in a political party list. Therefore, the key for women's, and specifically indigenous women's, participation in commune councils is endorsement from political parties. Projects aimed at increasing women's participation as candidates should specifically target political parties in their advocacy activities.

### **5. Recognition and visibility of indigenous women**

Indigenous women need recognition to counteract the scarce consideration they receive and the lack of acknowledgement of their status, capacities and roles. It is necessary to organize events, which instead of pointing out women's weaknesses, contribute to celebrate their qualities and their strengths. Events in which indigenous women's art, skills, knowledge and resistance are recognized and shared should be supported and organized. Media such as TV and radio should be involved in campaigns and programs to augment the visibility of indigenous women, give them a voice and promote their agenda.

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## Methodology

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The methodology of open discussions and conversations has been validated during previous research with indigenous and minority women all over Cambodia (Maffii M., 2006). A number of guiding principles have been sketched in order to provide direction during the work:

- the women who participate in the process contribute actively in the production of meaning and knowledge, which is recorded and communicated in the form of direct speech
- the women contribute by communicating experiences, stories, feelings, concerns or visions of the future, according to their own priorities; the researchers' questions are part of a holistic approach and are not separated from indigenous women's experience and their willingness to communicate it.
- the practice of researching is an instrument for women's aspiration to emancipation, and the value of getting rid of gender and ethnic based discrimination informs the whole process of creating knowledge together.

Discussions and interviews occurred in the villages, in the commune house when available, in private homes, or under a tree. Women participants belonged to different age classes, and to different wealth strata. The number of women varied, from small groups of 5 to 6 women, to larger groups of nearly 15. Different translators have contributed to facilitate the discussions. Besides women in the communities, other actors have contributed to circumstantiate the research: community elders; representatives of the Provincial Departments of Women's Affairs; commune councils' male members; representatives of NGOs.

We are deeply aware that these results can only provide a partial insight, which is situated within and dependent upon the context where the study has been conducted and the researchers' own subjectivity and interpretation.

List of districts where discussion with women's groups took place

Province	District	Commune	N. of villages	Ethnicity
Mondulkiri	O reang	Dak Dam	2	Bunong
	Sen Monorom		2	Bunong
	Sen M.	Romonea	3	Bunong
	Pechreda	Busra	2	Bunong
Ratanakiri	O'chum	O'chum	1	Tampuan
	Lak		3	Kreung
	Oyadao	Pate	2	Jaray
	Borkeo	Kak	2	Tampuan
	Jaray	Ting Chak	1	Tampuan
	Ta Veng	Ta Veng leu	1	Lun
	Ta Veng	Kraom	1	Brao
	Veunsay Tampaun	Ka Chung	2	Kreung
Stung Treng	Siempang	Sekong	1	Lao
	Santaphiep		1	Kavet
	Siembok	Koh Sralay	1	Khmer
Kratie	Kratie	Dar	1	Khmer
	Preak Pasab	Chroy Banteay	1	Khmer