

Women's Rights are Human Rights: Cambodia Needs to Respect Women's Rights to Self-Determination, Expression and Bodily Integrity:
An Open Letter to Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen,
the Prime Minister of Kingdom of Cambodia

19 February 2020

As Cambodian advocates of women's human rights and gender equality, we acknowledge the great effort of the Royal Government of Cambodia to promote gender equality in all sectors and at all levels, particularly to end violence against women and girls, to enhance women's participation in decision-making, and to economically empower women. The highly appreciated achievements have been the result of Cambodia's fulfillment of its obligations as a State Party to the CEDAW Convention and of the implementation of national laws and policies, especially the Rectangular Strategy, Sustainable Development Goal plans, National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP), Neary Rattanak Strategic Plans to promote gender equality and women's empowerment (NR) and the sectoral gender mainstreaming action plan (GMAP) at the national and sub-national levels.

On 17 February 2020, the Cambodian National Council for Women (CNCW) organized its annual meeting, which was presided over by Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen, the Prime Minister of Kingdom of Cambodia and Honorary Vice-Chairperson of CNCW. During the annual meeting, Samdech spoke to the audience and referred to criticism of women who do online business by linking promotion of their products to their manner of dressing. To address that concern, Samdech urged the National Committee to Uphold Women's Values and Khmer Families, the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunication, the Ministry of Interior and other relevant authorities to investigate and repress women whose businesses use those online practices which affect social morality, Khmer women's values and Khmer culture. These measures concern those of us who are working to promote women's rights and gender equality in Cambodia. Samdech's recommendation to target women entrepreneurs seems contradictory with CEDAW and the above-mentioned national laws and policies that the Cambodian government promotes.

In regard to Samdech's call to restrict women's rights and freedom to clothing choices, by claiming that they affect Khmer women's dignity and national tradition and culture, there has been no legal nor official document defining "women's value and Khmer social values/culture" or explaining the purpose of upholding these concepts. It is important to note that social values are arbitrary, relative, and constantly changing. Also, there is no evidence-based research that affirms that women's clothing choice is the root cause of degradation of social morality. Notably, discussions and studies of social morality are rarely used to hold men accountable for their criminal acts of violence against women and girls. Perpetrators who go unpunished are empowered to commit violence again.

The statement made by the Prime Minister that women who wear "sexy outfits" could provoke sex crimes is an example of blaming victims. The culture of victim-blaming perpetuates violence against women and gender-based discrimination in our society. The proposed measure also contradicts the Minimum Standards for Basic Counselling for Women and Girl Survivors of Gender Based Violence developed by the Ministries of Women's Affairs and Health in 2016 which states that service providers must "never blame the survivor for the violence" and must "not ask the survivor what they did to cause the violence." Furthermore, in January 2020, representatives from the Ministry of Women's Affairs,

Ministry of Information, and Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts all publicly expressed the same position that a person operating an online store is within their individual rights when “wearing revealing clothes or using profane language” in a Facebook live-feed.

The claim that “women’s wearing revealing clothes provokes sexual desires among men, leading to sexual violence and human trafficking” is a patriarchal view which is false and misleading and should be discouraged. In fact, there is much evidence-based research showing that violence against women stems from discriminatory gender stereotypes and a victim-blaming culture – both of which are deeply rooted in Cambodian society – as well as weak law enforcement resulting in a culture of impunity, and is not based on women’s dress, physical appearance or actions.

The Royal Government of Cambodia has committed to the “gender equality era,” the “fourth industrial revolution era,” and “leaving no one behind” in its commitment to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. It should further be noted that women running online businesses are becoming economically empowered through utilizing the best and most accessible mode of technology available, based on their own preference and that of their clients. Therefore, the government should support women’s entrepreneurship and their rights over their body and self-expression.

We urge the Cambodian government to uphold its treaty obligations and implement article 5 of CEDAW which requires Cambodia to take all appropriate measures to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women and to implement the CEDAW Committee’s 2019 concluding observation, paragraph 25 (a), which requires the government to systematically “assess the impact of measures adopted to combat gender-based violence against women and girls, and continue to explore and adopt innovative approaches to address the root causes of such violence.”

Punishing women for their choice of clothing is therefore part of the root cause of violence, rather than its cure, and must be rejected. We appeal to the Cambodian government to acknowledge that **Cambodia Needs to Respect Women’s Rights to Self-Determination, Expression and Bodily Integrity** in order to achieve gender equality and end gender-based violence in Cambodia.

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