A. Executive Summary

The purpose of the following mini report is to summarize the issues raised during the Round Table Discussion entitled “The Role of Women in Political Participation at the Commune Level”, which was held by the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) at Hagar Catering & Facilities Management in Phnom Penh on 30 April 2012. The objective of this event was to bring together various stakeholders to discuss gender-related representation issues in the context of the June 2012 Commune/Sangkat Elections. Twenty-seven people participated in the Round Table Discussion including seven representatives from four political parties (Sam Rainsy Party, FUNCINPEC, Human Rights Party, and Norodom Ranariddh Party),¹ nineteen representatives from non-governmental organizations (NGOs)² and media organizations, and one independent consultant. This session was the first in a series of Round Table Discussions conducted as part of CCHR’s Project to Promote Women’s Political Representation in Cambodia (the Project). The Project is part of the regional program “Building Sustainable Partnerships to Promote Women’s Political Representation in Southeast Asia” (IKAT Program) which is managed by the Indonesian NGO Kemitraan in cooperation with the National Democracy Institute (NDI) based in Indonesia and funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

B. Introduction

The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has committed to increasing female representation at all levels of government in a number of documents, including the Cambodian Millennium Development Goals, the “Rectangular Strategy for Growth, Employment, Equity and Efficiency” and the “National Strategic Development Plan”. However, although women comprise more than 50% of Cambodia’s population, only 16.86% of the current Commune Councilors are women.

The first panel of presenters³ focused on the causes of such underrepresentation of women at the Commune Council level and possible solutions to those problems. In the second panel, each

¹ A representative of the Cambodian People’s Party was invited to join the round table discussion as a guest speaker but the invitation was unanswered.
² A list of the NGOs and media organizations is provided in the annex to this document.
³ The speakers in the first panel were Ms. Pok Nanda (WfP), Mr. Keo Darith (CPWP, NICFEC) and Mr. Utama Sandjaja (Kemitraan Indonesia).
of the representatives of the four political parties present at the Round Table Discussion then put forward their party’s position on the issues raised and responded to recommendations from the floor.

C. **Issues Raised and Discussed**

1. **Women’s Political Participation – Barriers and Solutions**

All speakers agreed that women have a unique and important role to play in politics, and in particular are uniquely able to express and conceptualize solutions to problems faced by women in Cambodia. They highlighted a number of barriers to higher levels of female representation at all levels of government, but particularly Commune Councils. Such barriers included:

- Women lack training and educational opportunities that would equip them for participation in politics. This is particularly relevant when women are required to compete with more qualified men in their own and rival parties.
- Women must overcome traditional stereotypes that view women as weak, less intelligent and capable than men, and more suited to domestic tasks. This is particularly so for rural women.
- The loss of income for the family that usually comes with political activity discourages women from engaging in politics.
- The expectation that women will fulfill domestic duties in addition to their political roles and the failure of political parties to accommodate this dual role means that women are often unable to fully participate in all aspects of political life and are subsequently overlooked for promotion within the parties.
- Women wishing to stand for opposition parties rather than the ruling party often face intimidation and ostracism from the community.
- There is a lack of visible and inspirational women in positions of political power to act as role models for future generations and to encourage women to participate in politics generally.
- Women often lack self-confidence and will decline high ranking positions in political parties for that reason.

The panelists suggested some solutions or strategies for tackling the above problems. These included:

- As the political parties are responsible for the party lists (both inclusion and ranking of candidates) and for selecting leadership positions, they must be proactive in promoting

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4 The party representatives in the second panel were Lok Chomteav Neang Chayana, (FUNCINPEC), H.E. Yem Punnarith (HRP), H.E. Sao Rany (NRP) and Ms. Chea Sokuntheany (SRP).
women within their ranks in order to increase levels of representation, not just levels of participation.

- Women should be provided with equal access to higher education and training opportunities so that they are better equipped for political life.
- A quota should be introduced requiring that a minimum of 30% of the candidates on a party list are women.
- Cooperation and networking between civil society, media organizations, and party elites is essential to promote the necessary legal and institutional change.

2. **Women’s Political Participation – Political Party Positions**

All of the representatives of the political parties taking part in the Round Table Discussion agreed that it is important to increase levels of representation of women in Commune Councils and all other levels of government. They also agreed that the inclusion of female candidates is generally beneficial for the party and attracts voters to the party. The political party representatives stressed various attempts to raise the number of female candidates on the party list by providing women with required resources and strengthening their capacities and knowledge.

None of the political parties represented had formally adopted a voluntary quota for female representation in the Commune Council party lists in their written documents, although they all stated that their parties sought to include and promote women where possible. In general, the representatives were reluctant to agree that a quota was necessary or desirable. The representatives stressed variously that a 30% quota would prevent women from achieving higher levels of representation, that it would result in decreased or limited quality of representation and that parties other than the ruling party would struggle to fill the quota. The ruling party was criticized for exerting pressure on opposition parties and thus intimidating especially women to register as opposition candidates. Additionally, the scarcity of resources and the lack of financial support for candidates in opposition parties make it difficult for them to convince women to run for election.

D. **Recommendations**

The following recommendations were put forward:

- A number of participants suggested that the political parties take a more proactive role in promoting women’s representation and specifically consider the 30% list quota as an aspiration or long-term goal. In general, the party representatives agreed to pass the suggestion of formally adopting an aspirational women’s representation goal of 30% on to their party leadership for consideration.
- The participants confirmed the need for training for female candidates to equip them with the relevant skill set to compete successfully in an election and in politics in general. Training opportunities for women should be offered permanently and not just
before the elections to be actually effective in the long run. The political parties called for civil society to provide the training courses and promised to support them in return.

- In order to enable fair and democratic competition the participants appealed to the RGC to fully respect and guarantee freedom of expression of all political parties. Participants also called on civil society and the media to be vigilant in monitoring the elections in order to inhibit any kind of discrimination and to ensure that female and male candidates have the same chances of winning seats.

Annex 1: The following organizations attended the Round Table Discussion:

- **NGOs:**
  
  Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC)
  Banteay Srey
  Cambodian Women's Crisis Center (CWCC)
  Cambodian Women's Development Agency (CWDA)
  Cambodian Women for Peace and Development (CWPD)
  Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL)
  Gender and Development for Cambodia (GADC)
  Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)
  Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBF)
  Legal Support for Children and Women (LSCW)
  Neutral & Impartial Committee for Free & Fair Elections (NICFEC)
  Open Institute (OI)
  Partnership for Governance Reform in Indonesia (PGRI) (Kemitaraan Indonesia)
  People Center for Development and Peace (PDP-Centre)
  Youth Resource Development Program (YRDP)
  Women For Prosperity (WfP)

- **Media Center:**
  
  Voice of Democracy (VOD)
  Women Media Center (WMC)