Mini Report following the Joint Round Table Discussion on “Successes and Challenges of Women on the Results of Commune/Sangkat Council Election in Cambodia”

held in Phnom Penh on 11 July 2012

A. Executive Summary

The purpose of the following mini report is to summarize the issues raised during the Joint Round Table Discussion entitled “Successes and Challenges of Women on the Results of Commune/Sangkat Election in Cambodia” held at the Sunway Hotel in Phnom Penh on 11 July 2012. The Discussion was co-organized by the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (“CCHR”) under the Project to Promote Women’s Political Representation in Cambodia, and the members of the Committee to Promote Women in Politics (CPWP), which include SILAKA, Gender and Development for Cambodia (GADC), the Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (“COMFREL”), the Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI), Cambodian Women for Peace and Development (CWPD), Women for Prosperity (WfP), Neutral & Impartial Committee for Free & Fair Elections (NECFEC), and the Women’s Media Centre (WMC)— under the heading “Women for All”.¹

There were three objectives to this Round Table Discussion: to disclose the results of the June 2012 Commune/Sangkat Elections with regards to the representation of women; to discuss critical issues and challenges related to the further promotion of women in politics; and to begin preparing a strategic plan for increasing the percentage of women elected at the national level to 30% for the upcoming national election in 2013, in order to reach the Cambodian Millennium Development Goal (the “CMDG”) in 2015. 92 people, excluding the organizers, attended the Round Table Discussion, including 42 representatives from non-governmental organizations (“NGOs”), 38 representatives (including two members of parliament and 32 representatives of women commune councilors from different provinces) of five political parties – the Sam Rainsy Party (the “SRP”), FUNCIPEC Party (the “FCP”), the Human Rights Party (the “HRP”), the Cambodian People’s Party (the “CPP”), and the Norodom Ranariddh Party (the “NRP”) — and 12 representatives from donor agencies.²

B. Introduction

The Royal Government of Cambodia (the “RGC”) has committed to increasing female representation at all levels of government in a number of documents, including the CMDG—which sets a target of 25% women’s representation at the commune/Sangkat level by 2015³ — the Rectangular Strategy for Growth, Employment, Equity and Efficiency, and the National Strategic

¹ “Women for All” is a working group comprising 16 organizations, including local and international NGOs working to promote women’s political participation in Cambodia.
² A full list of the organizations is provided in Annex 1.
³ The Cambodian Millennium Development Goals’ 2015 target is female representation of 30% in the National Assembly and Senate; and 25% at Commune level (CMDG 3).
Development Plan. Moreover, there are efforts by the RGC to encourage verbal introductions or recommendations of individuals to fill high ranking posts, particularly placing women candidates at the top of the party list for election. Despite these commitments, women continue to be elected in much smaller numbers than men due to a variety of economic and societal challenges. This figure shows that the RGC still faces challenges in meeting the CMDG. This challenge arises as a result of a lack of commitment on the part of political decision-makers at the national level in establishing an adequate legal framework or action plan for promoting gender political empowerment and representation.

The Round Table Discussion comprised three different panels, each addressing a separate set of topics. The first panel of presenters analyzed the results of the June 2012 commune elections and discussed the potential causes of such an under-representation of women at the Commune Council level, and offered some potential solutions to these problems. In the second panel, three women politicians shared their own electoral experiences in order to further illustrate the successes and challenges that women may face when entering politics. The third and final panel was composed of representatives of the three political parties, including two Members of Parliament, who discussed their party’s stance with regards to women’s political representation and promoting equality. Following the panels, the participants were able to ask questions and put forward recommendations.

C. Issues Raised and Discussed

1. Analysis of the Commune/Sangkat Council Election Result

The first panel focused on discussing the results of the elections – and the implications of those results – during which women won 2,038 seats, or 17.79% of the total number of seats (11,459). Panelists agreed that while this figure did mark an improvement from the 2007 elections, when women won only 14.6% of seats, the increase in representation is minor and remains a far cry from the CMDG target which the RGC has committed to. The panelists agreed that it was particularly problematic that the positions to which women were elected were overwhelmingly in the lower ranks of the councils – 1,590 women received Member seats; only 164 achieved the position of Second Deputy; 189 were elected First Deputy; and a very minimal 95 were elected to the most senior seat of Commune Chief.

Other aspects of the election results discussed included the disparity in representation between different parties. Of the total number of seats won by the ruling CPP, 21.48% went to women, the

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4 The first panel’s speakers were Mrs. Ros Sopheap (Executive Director of GADC and Deputy Secretary General of CPWP), Mrs. Sonket Sereyleak (Gender and Education Coordinator at COMFREL); and Mr. Ou Virak (President of CCHR).
5 The second panel’s speakers were Ms. Tek Nim (SRP Commune Chief of Am Laing Commune, Thpong District, Kampong Speu Province), Mrs. Deum Kunthea (NRP Former Second Assistant to Commune Chief of Triel Commune, Baray District, Kampong Thom Province), and Mrs. Pich Sreyphal (CPP First Deputy of Trapaing Chong, Bakan District, Pursat Province).
6 The party representatives on the third panel were Lok Chomteav Mu Sochua (SRP), H.E. Yem Punnarith (HRP) and Lok Chomteav Neang Chhayana (FCP).
highest percentage of representation among all political parties. Women candidates of the main opposition party, the SRP, won the second highest percentage of seats with 11% – almost half that of the CPP. Three additional parties achieved very minimal female representation: the NRP (5.77%); FCP (3.31%); and the HRP (1.50%) while two parties achieved no female representation whatsoever: the League for Democracy Party; and the Cambodian Nationality’s Party.\(^7\)

The panelists also discussed potential explanations for the low representation of women in the elections. COMFREL’s representative discussed the fact that only 501\(^8\) (representing 0.45% of total candidates and 1.76% of women candidates) women were placed in the first spot on the candidate lists – a decision made by individual political parties which determine which candidates are included on electoral lists and in which order – and proposed that this was the main reason for the small number of women who actually won seats in the election. The failing to place women in the first spot on the list was suggested as the main reason why the HRP failed to achieve a higher percentage of women elected (1.50%), despite them having a female representation of 21.34% on their candidate lists.

2. Analysis of the Results - Successes and Challenges

Throughout both the first and second panels, panelists addressed what they saw as successes and challenges with regards to female political representation in Cambodia. COMFREL discussed their recent surveying activities, which highlighted a number of successes, not only in terms of women’s representation in politics but also with regards to women’s participation in elections. Their election survey of five communes in Koh Andet district, Takeo province, found that of those women who did not vote, the overwhelming majority chose not to because they “didn’t have time” (36%), rather than because they “didn’t understand politics” (5.80%), their votes were “obstructed by friends and family” (1.20%), they lost or could not find their name (16.30%), or gave an incorrect name and/or data (12.80%). Moreover, the report of COMFREL’s monitoring of women’s political participation in the 2012 commune council elections in the same area found that women candidates encountered little difficulties in undertaking their election campaigns. It was also found that women applicants who had received training were no more likely to be accepted as candidates by political parties.

Women’s chances of electoral success were highlighted by the case of Ms. Tek Nim, who is the Amlaing Commune Chief, Thpong district, Kampong Speu province, and who spoke during the second panel. Tek Nim discussed how her success stemmed from the establishment of effective channels of communication between herself and her local community. She has conducted extensive advocacy with local citizens, which has given her a true understanding of the issues in her commune, which were largely related to a land conflict with the sugar company Koh Kong Plantation Co Ltd co-owned by Ly Yong Phat. She explained how this level of communication had

\(^7\) Three additional parties ran lists in the elections but won no seats.

\(^8\) Out of 111,056 total candidates, 28,481 were women.
never been experienced by her local community who had just been ignored previously, and she believes that her attentiveness to their particular concerns was the true key to her electoral success. However, Tek Nim also recognized that part of her success was directly linked to the SRP’s policies, which to a large degree focused on the issue of land conflicts.

Nevertheless, the panelists agreed that despite these successes, there remain a number of challenges. It was agreed that the RGC’s current gender mainstreaming policies\(^9\) are insufficient to achieve the CMDG targets by 2015, as they only set out broad and vague objectives with little guidance on how to achieve these goals. As a result, challenges that hinder women’s political representation are often ignored and left unaddressed. Such challenges include:

- The lack of training and education opportunities for women that would equip them for participation in politics. This is particularly problematic when women are required to compete with more qualified men in both their own and rival parties.
- The traditional stereotypes that portray women as weak, less intelligent and capable than men, and more suited to domestic tasks, in addition to cultural norms dictating that elder men hold leadership positions.
- The lack of focus by political parties on promoting women in politics, which translates into women rarely being placed at the top of the party candidate lists.
- The relegation of elected women to positions low on the ranks of formal leadership, which gives them little opportunity to prove their leadership qualities.
- The image crisis between women as “victims” and women as “leaders” in society, whereby the promotion of the former perpetuates the belief that women are weak and still subservient to men and discredits any notion of political capability.
- The cultural norms that require women to balance the role of “politician” and “mother/wife”, which strains them both financially and physically.

In addition to Ms. Tek Nim, two additional women, who have both been in politics, shared their experiences during the second panel. The first speaker, Mrs. Dim Kunthea, is the former second deputy to the Commune Chief of Treal Commune, Baray district, Kampong Thom province. Dim Kunthea lost her seat in the recent commune elections. She explained some of the potential reasons for losing the elections, which included a lack of financial resources to support her political participation, especially during the election campaign, a lack of time to campaign in her own commune while simultaneously overseeing other communes as part of her job duties, and the change in political structure which occurred when the FCP and NRP merged. She believes that these circumstances may have caused her supporters to stop trusting her and her party.

\(^9\) The RGC has implemented a number of gender mainstreaming policies, such as the Rectangular Strategies I & III; National Strategic Development Plan (“NSDP”) I & II; and “Neary Rattanak” I – III. Such policies largely set out broad and vague objective outlines, with little strategic discussion, for instance NSDP II speaks of “providing employment opportunities for women”, but provides no further guidance on what and how this objective is to be achieved.
The second speaker, Mrs. Pich Sreyphal, is the current first deputy of Trapaing Chong commune, Bakan district, Pursat province. Mrs. Pich Sreyphal’s experience in politics has led her to believe that a particular challenge that women face is their financial dependency on their husbands, particularly within the communes where average salaries are much lower than at the district level. A woman’s inability to self-fund her political career gives rise to two problems: first, it allows men to effectively control women’s careers, either by refusing to give funding altogether, or by encouraging their wives to remain at home by offering them higher salaries; second, it perpetuates the stereotype of women as subservient and ineffectual – an image which is wholly incongruous with – and inappropriate to – the political arena. Her proposed solution to this challenge would be to increase income levels in the communes.

3. Political Parties – Stances and Strategies

During the third panel, representatives of the three attending political parties – the SRP, HRP and FCP – presented their parties’ stances and strategies on promoting gender equality in politics. All of the representatives agreed that it was important to increase the levels of representation of women in Commune Councils and all other levels of government. Furthermore, they all agreed that the inclusion of women in politics would greatly enhance policy decisions, and would bring Cambodia more in step with democratic ideals. It was concluded that the absence of women in leadership positions is a particular problem, and that there are inherent problems with the electoral system itself. The ruling party was particularly criticized for not allocating more of its resources to funding and encouraging female political participation.

While the party representatives agreed on the problem regarding low female representation and agreed that it was an issue to be addressed, they expressed disagreement with regards to solutions. Much of the discussion was centered on the issue of placing women on candidate lists, and whether parties should use positive discrimination in order to increase female representation. The party representatives were divided on this issue. Some took the stance that candidates should be selected purely on their credentials, and that the problem of low representation arises from restricted access to education, training and funding for female candidates. The opposing view stressed that women should be prioritized and placed at the top of the candidate lists, because a greater number of female role models would help break down stereotypes and increase female political participation.

Similarly, although all the party representatives recognized the inherent problems with the electoral system, different solutions were proposed. While some focused purely on the election system, suggesting a legally-required quota and the idea of changing the “closed list” voting system, thereby enabling voters to vote for independent candidates, others took a more extreme stance, and proposed the restructuring of the entire political framework from national to community level in order to increase accountability, transparency and democracy.
D. **Recommendations and Strategies for the 2013 National Assembly Elections**

As it was recognized that next year’s National Assembly elections are the last viable chance that Cambodia has to increase female political representation in order for the CMDG to be reached by 2015, participants came up with the following recommendations to be implemented before next year’s elections.

- The RGC should incorporate a quota system in the election law, which would legally require the parties to allocate 30% of seats on their lists to women, thereby restricting the maximum level of male representation to 70%, and which would allow for sanctions against parties which do not adhere to the quota requirements. The quota system should also include a mechanism that prohibits parties from placing women candidates at the lower end of their lists, such as the so-called “zipper-system” which requires political parties to alternate the names of male and female candidates on electoral lists. This was recognized as a very important strategy for the National Assembly elections.
- As the political parties are responsible for the party lists (both the inclusion and ranking of candidates) and for selecting leadership positions, they must be proactive in promoting women within their ranks in order to increase levels of representation and not just levels of participation. Pending the implementation at the national level of a quota system, political parties should adopt internal policies to ensure that women make up 30% of electoral lists and that the names of women candidates are equally distributed throughout the lists.
- Programs to discuss reform of the electoral system – such as an amendment to allow voters to vote for individual candidates on a list – should be prioritized. Female politicians should work together to push for the further promotion of women in politics. It was also recognized that NGOs and other advocates for women’s rights should target the new wave of elected women, asking them to advocate for more focused commitment from the RGC on increasing female representation.
- The media should be encouraged to champion the cause of greater female representation in politics by advocating for quotas for candidate lists, equal opportunities and promotion on merit.
- Programs that work towards building women’s and girls’ self confidence should be institutionalized. Such programs would help build women’s confidence to tackle the preconceived notions of their unsuitability to enter politics.
- Civil society organizations (including NGOs) and political parties need to implement strategies aimed at providing female candidates with continuous political training, which would focus not only on enhancing their electoral campaigns, but also equip them with the required training to maximize their presence within government.
Annex 1: The following organizations attended in the Round Table Discussion:

Action Aid Cambodia (AAC)
Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID)
Banteay Srey
AMARA
Advocacy and Policy Institute (API)
Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR)
Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI)
Cambodian Network Men and Women Development (CNMWD)
Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL)
Cambodian Women's Crisis Center (CWCC)
Cambodian Women's Development Agency (CWDA)
Cambodian Women for Peace and Development (CWPD)
Cambodian Young Women Empowerment Network (CYWEN)
DanChurchAid/Christian Aid (DCA/CA)
Gender and Development for Cambodia (GADC)
Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)
Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBF)
Heifer International (HI)
Human Rights Vigilance of Cambodia (Vigilance)
International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)
JASS SEA
Karol and Setha
Khemera
Khmer Women's Cooperation for Development (KWCD)
Legal Support for Children and Women (LSCW)
Life with Dignity (LWD)
National Committee for Sub-National Democratic Development (NCDDs)
Neutral & Impartial Committee for Free & Fair Elections (NICFEC)
Open Institute (OI)
People Center for Development and Peace (PDP-Centre)
Plan International (PLAN)
PyD-Spain
Satrey Khmer
Star Kampuchea
United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women)
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
Urban Poor Women Development (UPWD)
Vicheasthan Bandosbondal Neakropkrong Kangea Aphivath (VBNK)
Women for Prosperity (WFP)
Women's Network for Unity (WNU)
Women Peacemakers (WPM)
Youth for Peace (YFP)
Youth Resource Development Program (YRDP)
Women Media Center (WMC)