Mini Report following Round Table Discussion on the “Role of Women in Politics at National Level”
held in Phnom Penh on 7 February 2013

Executive Summary
This mini report summarizes the issues raised during the Round Table Discussion (“RTD”) entitled “Role of Women in Politics at National Level”, held on 7 February 2013 in Phnom Penh. The event was organized by the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (“CCHR”) under the Project to Promote Women’s Political Representation in Cambodia.

The objective of the event was to bring together various stakeholders including political party members and individuals working towards women’s political participation and representation to discuss issues concerning the role of women in politics at the national level in Cambodia. The RTD further provided political parties with a forum to discuss their policy platforms as they relate to promoting women’s political participation and representation, given the upcoming national elections scheduled for 28 July 2013. 44 participants (33 females) attended the event including 34 people from 30 non-governmental organizations (“NGOs”), one independent consultant, and nine representatives from six political parties.¹

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 Cambodian Millennium Development Goals – which sets a target of 25% women’s representation at the commune/sangkat level by 2015 – the Rectangular Strategy for Growth, Employment, Equity and Efficiency, and the National Strategic Development Plan. Despite these commitments, female political representation in Cambodia remains low. Women face a variety of economic and societal challenges as well as a lack of commitment by political decision makers at a national level, in establishing an adequate legal framework or action plan for promoting female political representation and empowerment.

The RTD comprised of two panel discussions. The first addressed the significant role of women’s political participation at the national level. Each panelist gave a short address in response to a series of questions concerning strategies to promote women’s political representation and challenges women face in becoming political representatives. The second panel discussion addressed the same topic, and a series of questions were presented to members of the FUNCINPEC party, the National Rescue Party, the Nationalist Party, and the League for Democracy Party.

Issues Raised and Discussed

Women’s Political Participation – Challenges

¹ A full list of participants is provided in the Annex.
The panelists agreed that there remain a number of challenges – cultural, socio-economic, and political – that hinder women’s political representation. Many of the barriers discussed included women’s ability to pursue a wide range of opportunities, including careers in the political sector, higher education and positions of leadership.

Traditions and social norms have had significant consequences on the socio-economic status of women. Women in Cambodia are responsible for a disproportionate amount of the housework, and this can deprive them of the time to pursue political careers. Women further struggle to balance family life and political participation. The panelists identified lower levels of education and literacy rates amongst women as having a significant effect on women’s ability to participate politically, in both the nomination and voting processes. Furthermore, young women are increasingly migrating to neighboring countries in search of employment opportunities – this was seen as a factor that contributes to low levels of female political participation in Cambodia. Women’s lack of financial independence and inability to self-fund their political career was also discussed - the lack of social assistance available for women creates obstacles for women seeking political involvement and participation.

The panelists also discussed the stereotypes and cultural expectations of Cambodian women that remain influential in the political arena. The pervasive discrimination against women within the political framework – particularly within political parties – has significantly impacted the opportunity for women to be promoted to positions of increased responsibility and power. The complicated election process further enhances discrimination against female participation in the electoral process, and is a hindrance to women’s political empowerment – as the voting structure is very confusing. The lack of independence of the National Election Committee (the “NEC”), as the majority of members are members of the ruling party, also contributes to women’s ability to become politically involved and to further their political positions.

Despite these challenges, women’s political participation in Cambodia has improved at commune/sangkat, and national levels. Female representation in the second and third mandate following the commune/sangkat election increased from 9% to 18%. Women are also playing a more active role in facilitation in their communities, particularly as regards issues concerning women and children. The panelists discussed the implementation of quota systems and noted that women should not be concerned if they are elected through a quota system, as quota systems have been implemented in many countries where there are fewer female representatives to ensure equal opportunity and access to higher education and employment. The panelists suggested that elected women can work to overcome any difficulties they face in leadership positions, and can undertake capacity-building activities once elected. Panelist agreed that quota systems should be implemented to ensure democracy and representative leadership in Cambodia.

Women’s Political Participation – Political Party Strategies

Political party representatives agreed that female political participation is important at the commune/sangkat and national levels. Although a number of NGO representatives suggested a 30% quota be implemented to increase and maintain women’s participation in politics, none of the political parties indicated that their parties had, or were considering, internal quota systems or any other concrete strategies to promote women’s participation in their party. The panelists also
discussed reforms to encourage younger women to participate in politics, and the necessity to educate women on their rights and duties as political participants.

A number of panelists voiced support for advocating for freedom of expression, encouraging an independent justice system, and the abolishment of the culture of impunity that exists in Cambodia. The equal allocation of funds to candidates from all political parties was also discussed and recommended. Panelists further agreed that it was necessary to rally for changes in societal perceptions of women and to encourage female participation in all political processes. Organized training and capacity building workshops and meetings for women once they are elected was considered to be effective and necessary, as was continuous support from candidates’ families.

Finally, the panelists discussed the quality and effectiveness of female workers, based on their age. It was concluded that young women are skilled in conducting successful political campaigns, but that a collaborative working environment involving both young and older women was encouraged and considered productive.

**Recommendations**

The following recommendations emerged throughout the RTD:

- The RGC should incorporate a quota system in the election law, which would legally require parties to allocate 30% seats on their lists to women, and would allow for sanctions against parties that do not adhere to the quota requirements. The quota system should also include a mechanism that prohibits parties from placing female candidates at the lower end of their lists.

- 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 female candidates are equally distributed throughout the lists.

- Civil society organizations ("CSOs") and political parties should advocate to abolish the culture of impunity that exists in Cambodia and encourage an independent justice system that promotes freedom of expression and equal political participation.

- Programs that work towards building women’s confidence and capabilities as political representatives should be implemented and institutionalized. CSOs (including NGOs) and political parties need to employ strategies that provide female candidates with ongoing political training, and possible methods for income generation.

- The RGC should provide more funding and resources to support female candidates from all political parties.

- Recent female university candidates should become politically involved by volunteering at the commune/sangkat level to gain experience. Furthermore, to achieve greater participation by women in politics, families and society should motivate and support women who are politically active or successfully elected.

- Women should participate in the election process, and vote on 28 July.

- All stakeholders, including CSOs, the RGC and the media, should support awareness-raising initiatives aimed at changing negative traditional perceptions of the role of women in politics.
Annex 1:
The following organizations attended the Round Table Discussion:

- Cambodian Human Rights Development (“ADHOC”)
- Cambodian League Confederation (“CLC”)
- Cambodian Women for Peace & Development Association (“CWPD”)
- Committee for Free and Fair Election in Cambodia (“COMFREL”)
- Committee to Promote Women in Cambodia (“CPWP”)
- Community Legal Education Center (“CLEC”)
- Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (“CCC”)
- Democracy and Human Rights Organization in Action (“DHRAC”)
- Heinrich Böll Stiftung (“HBF”)
- Indradevi Association (“IDA”)
- International Foundation for Electoral Systems (“IFES”)
- Khmer Youth Association (“KYA”)
- Khemara
- Legal Support for Children and Women (“LSCW”)
- Life with Dignity (“LWD”)
- National Committee for Sub-National Democratic Development (“NCDDs”)
- Open Institute (“OI”)
- PAZ Y Desarrollo (“PYD”)
- Spanish International
- People Center for Development and Peace (“PDP Center”)
- People Improvement Organization (“POI”)
- Strey Khmer (“SK”)
- The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (“NDI”)
- Urban Poor Women Development (“UPWD”)
- United Nations Development Programme (“UNDP”)
- Vicheasthan Bandosbondal Neakropkrong Kangea Aphivath (“VBNK”)
- Voice of Democracy (“VOD”)
- Women for Prosperity (“WFP”)
- Women Media Center (“WMC”)
- Women Pace Maker (“WPM”)
- Youth Resource Development Program (“YRDP”)

The following political parties attended the Round Table Discussion:

- FUNCINPEC Party
- Human Right Party
- League for Democracy Party
- Nationalist Party
- National Rescue Party
- Sam Rainsy Party