Mini Report following Round Table Discussion on “Mechanisms to Promote Women’s Participation and Representation in Politics at the National Level” held in Phnom Penh on 28 March 2013

Executive Summary
This mini report summarizes the issues raised during the Round Table Discussion (the “RTD”) entitled “Mechanisms to Promote Women’s Participation and Representation in Politics at the National Level” held on 28 March 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 RTD was to present and review CCHR’s report entitled “Politics in the Kingdom: Increasing Female Representation,” and to bring together various stakeholders, including civil society and political party representatives, in order to discuss different mechanisms to promote women in politics. A total of 26 participants attended the event, including 24 representatives from 20 non-governmental organizations (“NGOs”), and two representatives from two political parties.

Introduction
The underrepresentation of women in Cambodian politics stems from a common perception of women not being qualified enough for political leadership, as well as the economic restraints and discrimination faced by women when participating in the political decision-making process. The Royal Government of Cambodia (the “RGC”) has committed itself to increase female political representation, including via specific targets through the Cambodian Millennium Development Goals (the “CMDGs”), to be achieved by 2015. These goals, however, can only be achieved within the set timeframe if more effective mechanisms are implemented than those currently utilized.

The RTD comprised of two discussions. The first discussion comprised a presentation of CCHR’s report “Politics in the Kingdom: Increasing Female Representation” and addressed questions regarding the report. The second was a panel discussion, during which panelists highlighted and debated various mechanisms that can be used to promote women in politics. Both political parties and civil society organizations contributed to the discussion by sharing their experiences and discussing various obstacles that contribute to the underrepresentation of women in politics, as well as different mechanisms to overcome those obstacles.

Issues Raised and Discussed

Promoting Women’s Participation and Representation in Politics at the National Level – Challenges
The panelists widely agreed on the various obstacles that prevent women from political participation. The challenges discussed below need to be overcome through efficient collaboration
between civil society organizations and political parties regarding the development and implementation of different mechanisms to combat the underrepresentation of women in politics.

1. Cambodian society’s perception of women is based on strong traditional and cultural values. Women are often viewed as the weak, submissive counterpart to men, mainly responsible for domestic tasks and the well-being of their families. This perception regularly leads to a lack of educational opportunities for women, hindering their opportunities to pursue a career. Many voters do not believe in women’s abilities for leadership and in their competence to manage high-ranking positions, and therefore neither support nor vote for women who are running for office.

2. Cambodia uses a party-list proportional representation (“PR”) voting system. While the proportional component is advantageous to potential female representatives, because it facilitates the implementation of candidate quota requirements, the electoral party lists can also be significantly unfavorable to women’s increased representation. They grant full power to the political parties, letting them decide who is ranked in which order. Candidates’ success thus fully depends on inner-party connections and networks, as well as their own budget, with which they have to finance their election campaigns. Cambodian women usually neither have the financial means to run campaigns, nor the necessary support within the party, due to the negative perceptions mentioned above. This causes a significantly lower number of women on parties’ candidate lists, which in turn leads to low female representation. The panelists discussed the advantages of a majority/plurality system, which would guarantee the transfer of power from inner party circles to the voters and ensure that the candidate who is most popular among the citizens is elected.

3. A widespread lack of higher education opportunities among women not only contributes to prejudices regarding their inability to lead, but also limits them in the process of pursuing a political career. Women need high levels of knowledge and qualification to prove themselves and convince their fellow party members of their abilities and competence. Low levels of education and limited access to information therefore induce low levels of female representation in politics. However, due to generally increasing percentages of enrollment in higher education, younger women have better chances at getting an education and therefore could be promising prospects for future female representation in politics.

4. There are no mechanisms in place that support women after they are elected. In order to succeed in their positions and fulfill their responsibilities, women need assistance through training and capacity-building, not only to be elected, but after the elections as well.

5. One of the biggest challenges to overcome is women’s fear. Women are frequently discriminated against and deprived of their rights and thus are often too afraid to participate in politics, especially within opposition parties, because they fear losing their jobs, their businesses, and the support of their families.

Promoting Women’s Participation and Representation in Politics at the National Level – Political Party Strategies

Political party representatives agreed on the challenges discussed in the first panel and highlighted the economic restraints that women face, especially regarding the expenditures they are confronted with, when running election campaigns. According to the political party representatives, the inner-party decisions regarding the ranking of candidates on the election lists depend on the candidates’
level of active engagement within the party, and financial abilities. As explained above, women often cannot afford political campaigns and their active participation is restrained by discrimination; therefore a greater proportion of men are appointed to the higher ranks of party lists. The representatives agreed on the responsibility of the government to provide financial assistance to female candidates, given that the parties do not have the means to support their female members.

The political party representatives further discussed the importance of education and capacity-building for women and supported the civil society organizations’ demand for increased investment in this area.

Recommendations
The following recommendations emerged during the RTD:

- With regard to the negative stereotypes of women, the panelists suggested that men in particular and citizens in general should be educated on the importance of equal representation of women in politics, in order to build trust in female leadership and women’s capacities.
- The Cambodian party-list proportional representation voting system, despite its disadvantages, provides the easiest way to apply quotas; therefore the panelists recommended amending electoral laws to mandate a national gender quota of a minimum of 30% female representation on party candidate lists.
- With regards to women’s low levels of education, the panelists suggested increased investment in capacity-building, training and general education of women, and young women in particular. NGOs should develop strategies to increase women’s capacities as activists and advocate to political parties for their support. Furthermore, as regards the support of women after they are elected, investments in training and capacity-building opportunities and general support systems are needed.
- In response to the political parties’ suggestion to demand financial assistance for female candidates from the RGC, NGO representatives suggested exempting women from obligatory financial contributions to their political parties and creating a foundation for each party to provide economic support to its female members.
- With regards to the intimidation of women and the lack of courage to participate in politics due to discrimination and economic pressures, the panelists highlighted the need of a law preventing discrimination against women in politics. A legal framework could consolidate women’s right to be represented in the political system and help protect them from injustice and intolerance.
- Finally, women themselves should be encouraged to fight for their rights and to more fully commit to political activism through establishing networks between female politicians on one hand and between female politicians and the electorate on the other hand. Networks will help women to find the courage to politically participate, to feel supported by other women, to exchange experiences and advice and to prove their abilities and competence to the public.

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Annex

The following organizations attended the Round Table Discussion:

- Banteay Srey
- Community Legal Education Center (“CLEC”) 
- Committee for Free and Fair Election in Cambodia (“COMFREL”) 
- Committee to Promote Women in Politics (“CPWP”) 
- Cambodian Women for Peace & Development Association (“CWPD”) 
- Indradevi Association (“IDA”) 
- International Foundation for Electoral Systems (“IFES”) 
- Khmer Youth Association (“KYA”) 
- The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (“NDI”) 
- Neutral Impartial Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (“NICFEC”) 
- National Committee for Sub-National Democratic Development (“NCDDS”) 
- Open Institute (“OI”) 
- People Improvement Organization (“PIO”) 
- Paz Y Desarrollo (“PYD”) 
- SILAKA 
- STAR Kampuchea 
- Strey Khmer (“SK”) 
- Women for Prosperity (“WFP”) 
- Youth Council of Cambodia (“YCC”) 

The following political parties attended the Round Table Discussion:

- FUNCINPEC Party 
- Sam Rainsy Party