

Political Participation of Indigenous Women in Cambodia

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Summary

This article presents the findings of an action research project undertaken in Cambodia's northeastern provinces to highlight indigenous and Khmer women's experiences within the commune councils, and to identify the obstacles impeding their full political participation and their ability to transform political practice and style. The study found that the roles of female commune councillors are in many cases constrained to activities consistent with common gender stereotypes. At the same time, their status is challenged by a male-dominated social and political life. The study showed that women involved in local politics claimed to have a different style of governance. This leadership style can be regarded as an important path to achieving democratic participation, and is very relevant in order to respond to the problems currently encountered by indigenous people, including illegal land sales, land-grabbing, mining, deforestation, and pressure from agro-industrial companies.

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Introduction

Cambodia is a multi-ethnic society that includes, aside from the dominant Khmer ethnic group, Cham, Vietnamese, Chinese, Lao minorities, and indigenous groups. Indigenous ethnic groups are mostly concentrated in the northeastern provinces, in forest-covered areas upon which they rely for their subsistence. Even if numerically less relevant than those of other Southeast Asian countries, Cambodian indigenous people are characterized by a distinctive civilization, whose cultural traits, including languages, are still very much alive. For centuries the Cambodian indigenous groups, part of a larger indigenous cultural area extending beyond Cambodian borders, have been scarcely integrated into Khmer society, with which they do not share substantial cultural, religious, or socio-political traits.¹ The series of events that have affected Cambodia since the fall of Khmer kingdom—such as the rise of other regional powers, French colonization, the Vietnam War, the Cambodian civil

1 Defined as proto-Indochinese, Cambodian indigenous peoples are Austro-Asiatic and Austronesian and speak languages of the Mon-Khmer family. They are considered representatives of the original inhabitants of Cambodia as they were there before the influence of Indian civilization (Bourdier 1995).

war, and the Khmer Rouge regime—have impacted indigenous communities too, who have reacted by increasing their retreat from mainland Cambodia and by finding sanctuaries in the deep forests and mountains areas (Baird 2008).

When peace and stability were re-established in the country, the links between indigenous communities and the centralized Cambodian structures were progressively re-established; the indigenous provinces of Ratanakiri and Mondulkiri, located in the northeast and inhabited by a majority of indigenous people, became the target of economic activities and development projects. Cambodia, a constitutional kingdom ruled by a multi-party democracy, went through a reorganization of local government, which established commune councils that were elected through general suffrage and were placed in charge of local affairs and administration.² The decentralization of decision-making at local level, a process in which many foreign aid agencies have been involved as driving forces, has not come without difficulties. Due to the conflicting influences of a legislation focused on the autonomy and participation of local communities in development, and a traditional system of decision-making that is centralized and hierarchical, the scarce budget allocated locally and the lack of resources in general contribute to weaken the process. (UNDP Cambodia, 2004) The decentralization reform was adopted in the indigenous territories without considering special measures to preserve indigenous diversity and identity, such as the acknowledgement of indigenous traditional authorities, the adoption of local languages, or the recognition of ethnically based communities' borders, which further enhanced the contradictions already implicit in the process (NGO Forum of Cambodia 2006a).

The first commune election in 2002 resulted in very limited representation of women all over the country, who filled just 8% of all council seats; in the second mandate in 2007 the percentage of women elected increased to 14.6%, though the number of women in chair positions remained inadequate. Only 4.6% of all commune chiefs are female, placing the participation of women in decision-making in Cambodia at a very low level, matched by their low levels of participation in the executive and judiciary branches (Ministry of Women's Affairs of Cambodia 2008).

With the decentralization reform and the direct election of commune councils, new opportunities emerged for indigenous women to participate in formal local governance. Very few studies have been dedicated to gender roles in indigenous societies in Cambodia (Kelkar 1997; Van den Berg 2000), and none of these studies was focused on women's roles in traditional local governance. This lack of

² Cambodia includes 24 provinces and municipalities, which are divided into districts, communes and villages. Commune councils, numbering 1,621 countrywide, grouping a minimum of 5 to a maximum of 7 or 8 members, according to the size of the population, are elected by general suffrage every 5 years. Candidates for election must be listed by political party. For a better understanding of the decentralization process in Cambodia, see the website of the Administrative Reform and Decentralization Project managed by the German Technical Cooperation GTZ along with the Cambodian Ministry of Interior, www.ardp.org.kh.

comprehension of indigenous women's roles within their original societies hinders the understanding of the changes that occur when indigenous communities are assimilated into mainstream societies, and may obscure the consequences, in terms of loss of status and authority, that women experience.³ In the case of commune elections, the political environment in which indigenous women are called to participate, along with the political parties and local authorities, are structured around gendered values and a hierarchical, male-dominated vision of political life (Kraynanski 2007). Moreover, this bias merges with the abrupt changes that indigenous communities in Cambodia are enduring under the pressure of intensive land use by agribusiness, mining companies, infrastructure projects and massive migration from lowland provinces of non-indigenous settlers (NGO Forum of Cambodia 2006b). The economic and socio-cultural model that dominates the macroeconomic framework for development—based on market-oriented reforms, massive exploitation of natural resources, and substitution of self-subsistence agricultural systems with cash crops—is conducive to gender, ethnic, and class inequalities (Berik et al. 2009). In the specific context of indigenous women in Cambodia, this trend has had a dramatic impact on their life, status, and well-being (Maffii 2008).

How effective is indigenous women's involvement in commune councils' elections, and how much power and status can indigenous women gain from and retain in this process? These are the main questions this research project has tried to answer. During the study a new perspective has emerged, as many women see female elected representatives as bearers of special positive qualities, exerting a transformative power over politics to ensure good governance, and this had broadened the scope of the research.

Methodology

Our research started in May 2008 and ended in 2009, and was carried out in the northeastern provinces of Cambodia, the Ratanakiri and Mondulkiri provinces, where indigenous groups form the majority of the population; and the Stung Treng and Kratie provinces, where indigenous groups are relevant but not the dominant ethnic group.⁴ The women who participated in the discussion were mostly

3 The role of women in decision-making in indigenous societies is often obscured by gender biases held by the observers, such as anthropologists, development officers, and policy-makers, which prevent them from recognizing and valuing the varied and important roles played by women: "The process of engendering description of the Other has had very real consequences for indigenous women in that the ways in which indigenous women were described, objectified and represented" (Tuheway Smith 1999: 46). For an extensive analysis of "the shift from matrilineal to patrilineal societies within forest communities" see Kelkar and Nathan, "Gender relations in Forest societies in Asia, Gender, Technology and Development", 2001, 5, (1): 2, as well as all the rest of the volume dedicated to this subject.

4 For data concerning indigenous populations in Cambodia, see Ironside 2005. The 2008 Census of Cambodia, which has collected information on citizens' ethnicity, has not yet been released.

Brao/Kreung/Kavet, Tampuan, Jaray and Bunong, the major ethnic groups, but also Kachak, Lao, as well as Khmer.

The methodology of open discussions and conversations was validated during previous research with indigenous and minority women all over Cambodia (Maffi 2006). A number of guiding principles have been outlined in order to provide direction during the work:

- The women who participate in the process contribute actively in the production of meaning and knowledge, which is recorded and communicated in the form of direct speech;
- The women contribute by communicating experiences, stories, feelings, and concerns about or visions of the future according to their own priorities;
- The practice of researching is instrumental to women's aspiration to emancipation, and the value of eradicating gender, ethnic, and other kinds discrimination informs the whole process of creating knowledge together.

Discussions and interviews occurred in villages, in commune houses when available, in private homes, or under a tree. Women participants belonged to different age groups, and to different wealth strata. All the women who wanted to participate in the discussion were welcomed, without particular selection criteria, except for being members of the community; the number of women varied, from small groups of 5 to 6 women, to larger groups of 15 or more. Discussions were managed in a non-directive way, and the topic of the study—women's participation in local formal politics—was introduced only after having discussed what the participants felt was urgent and relevant for them to communicate. This approach, despite being time-consuming, allowed the participants and the researchers to develop a holistic vision, where the topic of the research could find a place among the other problems and perspectives that constitute the fabric of women's experiences. Different translators have contributed to facilitate the discussions. Other actors have contributed to circumstantiate the research: community elders; representatives of the Provincial Departments of Women's Affairs; commune councils' male members; and representatives of NGOs. We are deeply aware that these results can only provide a partial insight, which is situated within and dependent upon the context where the study was conducted and the researchers' own subjectivity and interpretation.

Traditional Authorities and Formal Authorities in a Gender Perspective

Indigenous villages are guided by traditional authorities—represented by elders who are designated by community members based on their capacities to take care of the villagers' well-being, to solve the conflicts that arise in the community or among neighboring communities, and to ensure continuity in the indigenous society.⁵ The

⁵ The term "community" refers to a group of individuals sharing a common habitat, normally represented by the village, and corresponds to the main indigenous social structure. The term

elders' role is to maintain the coherence and the functioning of the village's community, which is the fundamental unit of indigenous social life. The elders are perceived by indigenous women as an irreplaceable structure in their society:

Traditional authorities are more important than anything! More than the village chief, more than the commune council (...). Without elders the society cannot work. When some of the elders die, we usually hold a meeting to choose the new ones. It is a very important choice. In many cases elders come from families of elders, their fathers or grandfathers were elders too. It is a very important role. (Kreung commune councillor)

When elders get old or die, there will be other elders, because without them who will take care of the community? Who will take care of the different problems?

The village chief is different, he is responsible for informing the community about the decisions from the upper authorities, what the top says, and then he brings to the top the answers from the community. But the elders are in the village, they are in charge of advising people, holding meetings, organizing ceremonies or consultations in case of problems. First we have the elders, then the village chief, then the commune council, and all have different roles. (Kreung woman)

Concerning the role of women as traditional authorities, some differences appeared between indigenous groups, but in general women are considered entitled to be elders, and even if men's and women's roles as elders may differ, the division of tasks does not seem to imply a hierarchy:

The elders should be good at speaking; normally they avoid conflicts, they respect the people, they think about the future, they have education, they have higher knowledge, they have wisdom and experience. New elders are chosen by elders that are dying or have become too old. Elders can be women or men, now we have 2 or 3 women elders. They do the same as men. We do not have preferences; we go to see the elders in case of problems or conflicts. If there is a woman we talk with the woman, if there is a man we talk with the man. We do not have problems, we discuss all together. (Bunong woman)

For other informants, such as NGOs and governmental officers, indigenous women do not play an important role in the traditional structure of governance. In some cases this vision informs their approach to the communities and their idea of development:

There are no women in traditional authorities, elders are only men! (Male Bunong NGO officer)

Elders are men; I have never seen a woman in the role of an elder. Women may be religious leaders, not elders. Women are less important than men and don't play a role among traditional authorities. (Male Khmer NGO officer)

We work in agriculture and livelihood. But indigenous women cannot read and write, they are not educated, and they are not so skillful. If we organize trainings or other kinds of learning, women go back to the communities and cannot repeat and explain what they have learned. So mostly we train men. Women participate too, but as you

"commune" refers to an administrative territorial division, resulting from the colonial era, and does not reflect the indigenous division of space and territory.

know, also because donors want gender [i.e. gender issues to be included in projects and programs, the editors]. (Male Khmer NGO officer)

Differently from the elders, commune councils are clearly perceived as structures involved in making decisions that are beyond the village level. Women go to the commune councils for problems that couldn't be handled at the community level. In some cases formal local authorities' practices seem to have integrated the traditional practices into use in the communities. In other cases, formal authorities are perceived as less effective in dealing with community problems, or the cost of their intervention is not seen as affordable:

We have elders in this village, and they can handle the problems. We go to see the commune authorities only if the problem is very big, but normally we do not have these kinds of problems and our elders can manage most of them. (Brao woman)

The presence of female commune councillors is perceived as a facilitating factor when women have to deal with authorities:

For us it is very important that a woman is in the commune council. We do not speak freely and easily with men, but we can communicate with a woman. And women can help each other better. (Bunong woman)

Indigenous Women Elected in Commune Councils

The gender composition of commune councils in the four provinces of this study is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Women in Commune Councils in Cambodia's Northeastern Provinces

Gender composition of commune councils in Mondulkiri, Ratanakiri, Kratie, and Stung Treng*							
	Total	Women					
	Number of communes	Commune members	Women elected (%)	Chief of commune	First deputy	Second deputy	Members
Mondulkiri	21	107	17 (15.95)	-	1	3	13
Ratanakiri	49	253	36 (14.23)	-	4	8	24
Kratie	46	282	49 (17.38)	4	5	3	37
Stung Treng	34	176	29 (16.48)	2	5	2	20

* data from the National Election Committee of Cambodia; www.neselect.org.kh; March 2009

Unfortunately, official data concerning the ethnicity of female councillors are not available; according to our informants, indigenous female councillors make up 80%

of the total female councillors in Ratanakiri, a much smaller percentage in Mondulkiri, and non-significant percentages in the other two provinces. Most of the indigenous women elected to commune councils are young or just entering middle age. Many of them have been previously involved in community work, some with NGOs or with the local department of the Ministry of Women's Affairs:

I was elected in 2007. I was the only woman elected, because people in the community trusted me and knew me well. I have done everything alone; I was registered as a candidate by the party and people voted for me. I got the village support. To be successful you must be good at speaking, otherwise people will not consider you, and have a supportive husband, because if the husband does not agree you will have lots of problems at home. Some husbands are afraid that women cannot do the work, and then they will be looked down upon by the other people. (...) My husband is proud of my work, and this helped me.

I do not have much of a problem with the language because we help each other in the commune, I prepare my work in Bunong and then we translate it together into a definitive Khmer version. (Bunong commune councillor)

I used to participate in NGO activities in the community, this is my main experience. I became an orphan at the age of 3 and I got married at 15. I only finished grade 1, from 1981 to 1983. At that time we used to study with a teacher under the tree, there was no school at that time; but the teacher was there and the children all participated. I was selected to be part of a community committee, but I felt bad because I couldn't read and write very well. So I studied by myself, I tried to improve my knowledge and to learn more, especially to read and write in Khmer. Then I participated in more community activities, and when the last election came around I ran as candidate. There were other women candidates, but they failed and I was the only one elected. (Kreung commune councillor)

How effectively elected indigenous women are incorporated into decision-making within the councils varies. Previous experience as a community leader provides women with more decision-making power because of their relationships and links with the communities. The ethnic composition of the commune council is also relevant: indigenous councils facilitate indigenous women's integration by facilitating communication and de-emphasizing the gender divide.⁶ Unfortunately, the most authoritative women in the communities, such as religious leaders, traditional birth attendants, or elders, often do not match the basic requirements to run as candidates in commune elections, especially the qualification of literacy in written Khmer. In some cases we have found that female councillors are only called to do inferior tasks such as preparing tea, cleaning, and welcoming guests for the meetings.

I have been in this position since 2002. I participate in all activities, not just gender, all activities concerning women. In the council there is good collaboration, and other members listen to me, but it is not always so, it depends very much on the relationship.

⁶ We observed how the attitude of a female councillor changed as soon as the Khmer clerk, who was attending our meeting, left the office. She became more talkative and confident, and we could discuss in depth many issues that she had answered very briefly and superficially before.

A woman must know how to speak, she must know how to address the elders, how to compromise, how to solve problems, and she must have experience and wisdom. I was trained by an NGO. (Tampuan commune councillor)

Now the commune council is made up of all indigenous people; it is easy because we can talk together in our language, and we have the same culture. The other members listen to me. I have been involved in community activities with NGOs, and I have done a lot of work in the villages; I still do. I always tell them what I have learned during meetings and workshops, and what I have studied while attending these meetings. (Kreung commune councillor)

I have been the second deputy since 2007. I was selected by the authorities, who came to the village and said that they needed a woman on the list. Villagers selected me, then they asked me and I agreed. But my role in the commune council is not relevant: I prepare tea, boil water, and welcome guests during meetings. The chief of the commune and the commune clerk make all the decisions. The clerk manages the commune budget, I don't know about money, planning or anything else. We only follow the chief's and the clerk's decisions. I don't really know what the programs are, everything is managed by the clerk; he receives and manages the money of the commune. I have never seen money for women's and children's affairs, or even discussed a project. (Khavet commune councillor)

In the view of most women councillors, as well as for their male colleagues, women's roles at the commune level are limited to "gender issues." The meaning of the term *gender*—introduced by foreigners as part of the development paradigm, a word for which there doesn't exist an equivalent in Khmer language—very often does not relate to the need to counteract gender-based discrimination, but is a synonym for womanly issues, which vary from collecting population statistics segregated by sex, to social services such as health, sanitation, child care, disabled or elder care, or in general, women's and children's issues. Those "gender issues" are seen as marginal compared to other management tasks, (such as infrastructure-building), and are by consequence under-funded. The consequences are twofold: the neglect of crucial services on which the general well-being of the community depends, and a shift of focus, from gender equality towards a non-specific concept of women's and children's needs or care services.

I must understand about gender, so I must collect statistics in the villages, because this is gender and this is what I have to do. (Bunong commune councillor)

I don't know what I should answer to the women in the villages, and what my role and duty in the commune council is. I know that they do not have a budget for women's affairs, or at least the money does not come to me; the chief says that there is no money, so I don't know what to do. In the commune council they do not discuss too much, they never ask me about problems concerning women. I don't dare to raise the problem because I do not have a solution. (Lao commune councillor)

Obstacles to Indigenous Women's Participation in Commune Councils: Gender Biases in the Political Sphere

Women don't feel inadequately prepared for positions of responsibility in local authorities. Apart from literacy in the Khmer language, which is required by law for candidates running in commune elections—a second language for indigenous people, whose own languages are still spoken and alive—they do not feel less capable or less equipped to take on a role of authority. Gender-based discrimination is seen by them as the main limiting factor, as well as the changes that are affecting their societies and have a direct impact on their lives:

We want to be candidates; it is very important to have women in commune councils. Women can help each other better, and in the end men will be proud of women if they succeed. But before, we need to convince them—we don't know if they will allow women to run for election. Now it is very difficult with our men! (Bunong woman)

I want to run for office in the next commune election and work there, the same as men. We must not have only men in power, because they use this power against women. Women are as good as men. The problem is that when they organize the election meetings in the village, they only call for men. The main problem is men's education: men should be educated to help women, release us of the burden of housework, work to ensure livelihood and so on. (Lun woman)

The fact that women were not involved in decisions concerning the candidates' lists is the result of different factors. In some cases women themselves may perceive politics as a male domain, where they do not dare get involved. But more important seems to be the chronic lack of time of women, resulting from an unequal share of tasks and work among genders, which does not allow them to acquire the elementary qualities to run for office, like literacy in the Khmer language. That said, even when women manage to overcome the obstacle of Khmer literacy and run for office, they interact within a highly gendered space, because district and provincial officers are quite exclusively male and most often Khmer.⁷ Indigenous women who want to engage in politics have to bypass the complex interaction of gender and ethnic barriers. We asked a commune council member for his explanation of why women are absent in these areas, and he gave us his version of the facts:

I do not understand why we have no women in this commune, because women are better in doing things related to women and children. Concerning the idea of having more women in the local government, it is good, because there are issues that men do not dare to speak about, or are embarrassing, like hygiene and sanitation, and women can educate about this much better. (Male commune councillor)⁸

⁷ The ratio of the number of commune councils to the number of elected women is 1.04:1. A female commune chief from Stung Treng told us: "I'm always the only woman, in every meeting, at the commune, at the district or the province; it is very difficult and demands a lot of strength and determination." More detailed data concerning composition of the communes councils can be found at www.neselect.org.kh.

⁸ The interview had to be postponed until the day after because at 8 a.m. the man was too drunk to answer our questions. The day after, he was also drunk, but less so.

Gender Biases in the Socioeconomic and Cultural Context

Indigenous women are less literate in the Khmer language than indigenous men, but are in an unfavorable position to fill this knowledge gap:

We work too much now; we have a lot of work; men just go to the market, or go around, and have time for leisure. Men are more often free than us, or they do the big work, you know, with big results; women are busy all the time, you don't see the result of our work, our work is invisible! Men's work is valuable; women's work has little value. (Kreung woman)

Before, women and men used to work together: go together to the field, plant, and do everything together. But now it is different, women go to the field alone; they even do the heavy work. The men of the old generation worked more than now. Now women participate in the heavy work, even cutting down the big trees. Before, that was men's work, but now women even repair the house and cut wood. Modernity has made it much easier for men; men are more free, and have time and money to go and drink. (Bunong woman)

The market economy has arrived in indigenous areas in the form of plantations, agribusiness companies, and cash crops. Despite these reforms, families' subsistence relies on women's work as subsistence farmers even more than before, because men are hired as laborers or take care of cash crop transport and marketing, leaving women alone with the task of cultivating their plots. The destruction of the natural habitat is also a contributing factor to the increase in women's work and the decrease in their quality of life:

No more forest is left near the village. A company was allowed to cut down the trees. An NGO helped us to complain, so they left some trees for the people, to repair the houses, but the forest has disappeared. We cannot find the vegetables that we used to collect before, in the months when the fields are not productive; we have now very strong storms, because the forest protected the village from strong winds, so now we are very scared for our houses every time there is a storm. We have drought and flooding all the time; it seems that the weather is getting crazy. We do not have wood for building and repairing the houses. We do not have wood to make fire, we have to walk kilometers before collecting enough wood for cooking; it is very tiresome. We do not find medicinal plants: some are lost now, the big trees from which we used to collect some of the medicines, for example the ones for blood disease, cannot be found anymore. We do not have wild animals to hunt anymore, and there are fewer fish in the river. So life is becoming more difficult. And the company just cut the trees down and went away; the land is not productive now and has been abandoned. (Tampuan woman)

According to many women, men are more easily seduced by the new values that the free-market economy is bringing into the communities:

Men always want to sell land. My husband asks me every day to sell the land, because he wants money, cash. We fight about this every day! (Jaray woman)

The husband spends money on wine and cigarettes, and the wife has to find other sources of money. Men don't listen to us now, they say that the money belongs to them; they do not think about the future, the children. Before, people never sold land, but outsiders came to persuade them, they offer money, and now they sell, even the

forest, they do not care about spirits. (...) They do not listen to women, they get drunk and respect women less than before. (...) Modernity has made it much easier for men; they are free and they go to drink in town. (Bunong woman)

Alcohol consumption has changed, qualitatively and quantitatively: from a socially inclusive practice, related to ceremonies and events involving all villagers, it has turned into a more private habit, displaced out of the communities, mixed with the purchase of commercial sex, in accordance with a new imported model of leisure and socialization, which is strongly segregated by gender:

Yes, and men now drink a lot, much more than before. Why do they drink? Because they go here and there, and they drink, sit together, go and meet somebody else, sit and drink, and go again, and drink again. And also because they have money!

Sometimes men are just looking for conflict. They want to have an affair and they look for conflict with the wife first! There are prostitutes in Banlung [a provincial capital], they go there.

Sometimes we get prepared to go to the field together, but then the husband sends the wife ahead, and goes to drink, and never meets the wife in the field, and she gets very angry! Some men only want make money to drink and bring nothing back home.

Young and old, they drink the same! (Kreung woman)

According to many non-indigenous informants, violence against women is increasing in indigenous communities. Nonetheless, some of these conclusions seemed biased by prejudices and stereotypes portraying indigenous people as underdeveloped, problematic communities, ravaged by poverty, and therefore violent. In fact, contrary to the mainstream Cambodian context, where very high levels of violence against women are reported, we couldn't collect any report of recent cases of murder, serious injuries, sexual assault or rape.⁹ But as indigenous communities are increasingly disintegrating and losing identity, men's alcohol consumption is growing and tensions within families are rising. Violence against women may easily escalate, as can be seen in other indigenous communities who underwent economic and/or cultural colonization; therefore the issue deserves further analysis.

Indigenous women are deeply affected by the lack of basic services. Education is often neglected or not provided on a regular basis. Teachers are not coming to work—in some cases for months—or they come irregularly and do not guarantee

⁹ In a 2005 survey, a fourth of women said they themselves have been victims of violence. (Ministry of Women's Affairs, Kingdom of Cambodia 2005). Rape and sexual assault are fiercely condemned by indigenous societies, and violence was a very rare event. Their justice system, based on payment of damages to the victims as well as to the communities, set very high fees for such crimes. However, the falling apart of communities' social and power structures causes the entire system to be undermined, and opens the door to violence. One episode occurred during one of our discussions, with a woman and her children terrorized by their drunk husband and father. Even if no physical violence occurred, it was a highly dramatic situation and the commune councilors and village elders seemed overwhelmed and powerless.

adequate progress in the education curriculum. The situation is widespread and perceived by women as a very serious problem:

We have the school but the teacher doesn't come, or comes at 9 for only a short time, so the children go back home, or are left without supervision. (Kreung woman)

The school is there, but the teacher went to Banlung [provincial capital town]. It has already been one year (...) one year without the school! (Tampuan woman)

In some villages, adult literacy classes have been organized by NGOs but there is no reliable public program to support people who want to learn how to read and write in Khmer. Health services, because of their costs, or their inadequacy to the requirements of indigenous women, may prove unaffordable or unsustainable:

We want to have a health center better than the one now, because now if you don't have money they don't cure you, and they only speak Lao. Nurses are mostly male, so for us it is very difficult. (Tampuan woman)

The situation regarding other basic services, like access to clean water, sanitation, child care, public transport, among others, is still primitive. This contributes to a situation where indigenous territories, exploited for their natural resources, are left behind in terms of development of services and infrastructure that benefit the communities who live there:

We have a problem with development here. Here there is no development. Where are the good roads for the people, not for the companies or the buyers? Where are affordable markets where indigenous people's products can be bought and sold? Where is cheap transportation for products coming from remote areas? Who controls the prices and stops speculation? Where are the agriculture extension services, the subsidies and support for small producers? Where are the factories for processing raw materials?

Jackfruits fall down without being sold, people do not know how to rotate new crops like soy or cassava, we have no markets to sell, no transport to bring products, prices are falling due to the lack of affordable transport, speculation is rampant!

Before, people had the forest, the fish, the meat, fewer people, enough food, no big problems. Now, after development, the forest is gone, there are concessions everywhere, many more people due to the uncontrolled influx of migrants; water, fishing, and hunting resources are overexploited, and new businesses, like mining, are coming in! So how could people make a living? It is normal that people have a lot of problems, that women have a lot of problems too! (Tampuan activist)

The indigenous women that have been elected in commune councils added to this set of problems the perspective they acquired through their own personal experience. Most of them mentioned the lack of wealth, and control by husbands as important obstacles to their access to positions of authority:

To me, the main obstacles for women to enter the commune councils are of course literacy, but also their husbands. Husbands must agree and be collaborative and their education is very important, because if husbands don't understand the relevance of this work, for women it becomes very difficult. Women must be confident and have some free time; if they work in the field they have no time. The poorest cannot be

candidates, they cannot afford it. Political parties who set up the lists are also important because they have the power to support or not support the female candidates. But the most important thing is the willingness, the commitment to work for the community, a strong motivation to support the community; this is the most important factor that can overcome the obstacles. (Kreung commune councillor)

From the perspective of other informants, such as NGO and government officers, education is the main barrier to indigenous women's participation. But the NGOs and the government tend to ignore discrimination and other factors, such as the changes taking place in indigenous communities and the impact that these changes have on women's lives and statuses:

The situation has improved compared to 2002, in terms of women's participation, but women do not feel confident, they have no capacities; among the women elected to the commune councils only a few are indigenous, because they lack education, *they do not have the grade 9 education as required* [emphasis added].¹⁰ (Officer of the Department of Women's Affairs in Mondulkiri)

Few have recognized that indigenous women are willing to participate in the processes that are now ongoing in their societies; likewise, few have seemed genuinely interested in understanding women's needs and promoting their agenda:

Women now are changing, they want to participate, and they do, more than men, they dare to speak out. Women want more power. Many NGOs want to encourage women's participation, but this is happening by itself! Women don't want to sell land; they want to protect resources, but they do not have the power to do it. That's why they want more power and they want to be in the authorities. But they can make a difference only if they are in a powerful position, otherwise they have to obey men, cook, prepare tea, and do not have any decision-making power. (Tampuan activist)

Women's Transformative Power

Interestingly, many women in the communities express their conviction that women make very good commune councillors, possess characteristics that increase efficacy, and can have positive feedback for the whole community:

I'm sure that women will make better leaders, and dare to stand up to authorities, even big authorities, to protect their land and communities. (Bunong woman)

Normally women are more effective, successful, quick, and concentrated: they do not stop along the road for a drink, are more responsible than men, who are easy-going and let it be. Women place their community before everything, are against land sales, and if there are funds they can manage them very well. (Tampuan woman)

Women are considered more trustworthy, closer to the community, and more committed to the general well-being. The focus on women's abilities to be better managers reveals a sort of discontentment with the work of some local authorities,

¹⁰ The law does not mention a grade 9 education threshold, which would prevent many males from becoming candidates, too.

mostly male. The indigenous women elected as commune councillors who participate in discussions and meetings shared the same feelings:

Women are more resistant to corruption, are more efficient, and have more commitment. Women in the commune councils are very hard workers, and very reliable. (Kreung commune councillor)

The more women there are in the local authorities, the better it is for natural-resource protection. Women are very committed, less easy to cheat, and are stronger when standing against land sales. When I get involved, I go to measure, I verify that the sale is legal. But I'm afraid that illegal land sales occur under the table, that some deals are signed at home! With me it is not easy to sign land sales under the table.¹¹ They cannot come to my house at night and get me drunk, or invite me out to town to drink in a karaoke bar. Women resist corruption, it's true. (Bunong commune councillor)

In the view of some informants, female councillors are also more attentive to the social problems in the communities and more effective in providing benefits to the villagers:

Women tend to be closer to the community, more concerned than men, less prone to do something wrong; they work in general more and better than men. As soon as there is one woman, women in the community become more vocal, they start mentioning problems to the woman leader, and start to ask her to solve those problems and fill those needs. For example, access to clean water: if men alone are in charge they don't care, they take their motorbike and go to wash in the river; but for women clean water is very important, they wash tools, wash the children, wash the clothes, fetch drinking water, and they know that the general level of hygiene and health depends on the availability of clean water. A woman in the commune council advocates for these kinds of vital issues! (Officer at the Department of Women's Affairs, Ratanakiri)

When Women Rule

The experience of two female commune chiefs in Kratie and Stung Treng has reinforced the perception of women's capacity to transform politics and develop new political ethics. They both are Khmer and not indigenous, but they provided important testimonies that have inspired the second part of this research, where women from different ethnic groups came together to discuss political participation:

Women here are chiefs of villages, chiefs of communes, leaders of committees, leaders of rice banks and other initiatives. The community supports them because they are qualified, because they are all hard workers, because they are humble and modest, always, and ask villagers to correct them if they do something wrong. They are first of all accountable to the community! And they listen to the problems of the villagers and are able to bring them to the higher authorities.

¹¹ According to the Cambodian Land Law of 2001, indigenous communities have right to special communitarian land tenure; therefore land sales that occurred without the agreement of the communities should not be considered legal. The law has routinely not been enforced and communities still struggle to obtain the communal land title that should ensure their control over their resources.

We do not do this for money—a commune chief receives 25 USD a month for a lot of work, at home, during the holidays, with people coming everyday, even at night. I must comply! I have the satisfaction of doing a good job. (Khmer commune chief)

Women in authorities are closer to the people, let people participate more, listen more to the people and are more on the side of the people. They stay closer to the villagers; they are on the villagers' side. They do not look for personal advantages and gain, sometimes they even lose money, but they do not do this job for greed or personal advantage.

Women in politics are quick to solve problems, and especially women don't want and don't like corruption! (Khmer commune councillor)

In both Khmer and indigenous communities, women have achieved a significant degree of representation in a series of local economic and governance structures. This critical mass of women participating in community activities has created the basis for the election of women to the highest position at a local level, and for an important retention of decision-making power by women in general.

Conclusion

Indigenous women's authority—as elders, traditional midwives, religious leaders, medicine women, or depositaries of special knowledge and skills—is increasingly disregarded due to gender and ethnic biases of government officers and development workers, who find it difficult to recognize authority and power when it is represented by women. The “continuing invisibility of women” (Kelkar 2001), even when the role of male elders in indigenous communities is acknowledged, impairs the appraisal, recognition, and transmission of women's authority and experience, and contributes to decrease the status of indigenous women.

Moreover, as the participants in this research have pointed out, gender dynamics cannot be separated from the context of the dramatic changes that are subverting indigenous life. The assimilation of Cambodia's forest-based societies into the market economy “inevitably triggers a complete and radical transformation of how people think, what they value, and how they understand themselves and the world” (Hammer 2009). For many indigenous women, this has resulted in the increase of responsibilities in ensuring their families' livelihoods, in the context of reduced access to natural resources, which relegates them to the most tiring and least-valued tasks, precluding their access to new knowledge. Men appear more attracted by consumerism and more keen to respond to the call of the new values resulting from the free-market economy. However, men's participation in mainstream society is not without problems: increased alcohol consumption and socially destructive behavior are impacting heavily on communities. As a result, many women feel marginalized and experience a process of rapid disempowerment socially, within their communities, and at the family level. Modernity has changed the image of indigenous women: they have ceased to be invisible, only to have become visibly inadequate, uneducated, unskilled, and powerless.

The administrative elections have opened up for indigenous women new spaces in which they can express political authority, but those spaces are carved within the context of gender biases that characterize mainstream society. Women have to face many obstacles in order to be considered viable candidates, and once elected as full members of the commune councils, many are confined to “gender issues”—a term that tends to define tasks considered “female”—and are cut off from decision-making.

Nevertheless, indigenous women consider their involvement in local authorities very important and many of them are willing to engage in local politics. In their view, more women in positions of authority could bring about changes in the power balance between women and men; counteract women’s increasing loss of status; and support an agenda for gender equity. Based on their personal experiences, they consider discrimination and male domination the first obstacles to their election. Of course, literacy in the Khmer language is also a limiting factor for their participation, and the lack of organized intervention to fill this gap in knowledge increases their feelings of being cut off from politics.

Women see female commune councillors as highly committed to solving the problems, closer to the communities than to the higher authorities, less prone to corruption, and less interested in personal gain than their male colleagues. In a comparative study in twelve Asia-Pacific countries, women who were engaged in local politics claim very similar reputations: they were seen as accountable to their communities and resistant to corruption (Drage 2001). But in the eyes of other researchers, women’s capacities to express different political approaches cannot be taken for granted, as more often they are subjugated by a male-dominated political environment (Sharma 2003). The women in chair positions in the commune councils in this study seem to confirm that their governance style is the result of a “critical mass” of women engaged in social activities and of a community that shares their values. The fact that no *indigenous* women are in such a position yet reinforces the idea that indigenous women face more obstacles in their access to political power. However, the election of the two female commune chiefs in Kratie and Stung Treng is promising for future experiences aimed at increasing indigenous women’s quantitative and qualitative participation in managing, preserving, and reinvigorating their communities.

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