Leadership Pathways for Local Women: Case Studies of Three Communes in Cambodia

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Abstract

Women's leadership is necessary for Cambodia's sustained development. Their involvement in leadership roles in the public sphere and politics is crucial and has been shown to impact positively on poverty reduction. Governments, NGOs and international organisations have been increasingly aware that sustainable development is significantly linked to gender equality and women's empowerment, key factors in ending extreme poverty. It is only logical then that Cambodia should pay greater attention to developing future generations of women for leadership, especially at the grassroots level. This study aims to determine how this may be achieved.

There is a consensus that the current lack of women's representation in local politics risks slowing down the pace of local development. The case studies presented in this paper shed light on the complexity of local women leaders' real-life situations (experiences, behaviours and emotions) and explore the patterns of interaction through which they attained leadership. Three communes in the north-eastern provinces of Kompong Cham, Kratie and Steung Treng provide the empirical basis for the study, which addresses three main research questions: What types of work, personal characteristics and resources influence women to become local leaders? What experiences have women local leaders been through? What can be learned from their backgrounds and experiences to assist in the formation of a practical leadership model to help guide other women aspiring to be local leaders? In response to the latter, the study offers a practical leadership model that is intended to help increase women's participation in local politics.

This study finds that to achieve leadership, women must build up a portfolio of local work experience. Second, they should have a minimum level of education and demonstrate certain personal characteristics such as personal drive, confidence, gentleness, softness, integrity and friendliness. These internal factors gain people's trust, recognition and support. Lastly, women need the continuing support of government, NGOs, family, villagers and others, including political parties. Greater opportunities for women to get involved in local politics will enable them to have access to local work experience, build their capacity and enrich their education. The findings will assist organisations and women to address barriers to leadership and to create and make the most of opportunities.

1. Introduction

1.1 The context of the study

Cambodia is a hierarchical society and gender inequalities persist across almost all societal sectors (Gorman, Pon and Sok 1999). Nationally, women hold only 20 percent of top political positions, 15 percent of middle management positions and 18 percent of local leadership roles (Sethi 2013). The majority of Cambodian women are engaged in informal and unpaid domestic work, making them financially dependent on men and at times subject to domestic violence and abuse.

Of Cambodia's population, 51.1 percent are female and 48.9 percent male (World Bank 2012). Because women comprise more than half of the human resources, development goals cannot be reached without their involvement in the sustainable improvement of well-being in society (Reddock 2000). Women leaders are necessary for the development of Cambodia, and their involvement in leadership roles in the public sphere and politics is crucial and impacts on poverty reduction (Ministry of Women's Affairs 2008). Lilja (2007) conducted interviews in 1996, 1999, 2002 and 2007 with Cambodian women who had local leadership positions. She found that those women were known to be compassionate and often understood people well, taking care of basic needs, domestic duties and education among others and raising awareness of women's and children's issues in decision-making (Lilja 2007, 2008).

The Ministry of Women's Affairs (2009) has developed a five-year strategic plan to build women's capacity to participate in decision-making at all levels. These strategies were developed in four phases: Neary Rattanak (Women are Precious Gems) Phase I (1999-2003), II (2004-08), III (2009-13) and IV (2014-18). These strategies aim to ensure gender responsiveness within national policies, legislation and reform programs (Prak and Schuette 2007). The Law on Administration and Management of Communes/Sangkats (LAMC) in 2002 and the Law on Commune Elections in 2001 articulate democratic decentralisation and promote democratic development in Cambodia. The framework for decentralisation and deconcentration reform, approved in 2005, and the Organic Law, promulgated in 2008, set out steps to delegate functions and authority from the central to the subnational level. They both include strategies for addressing gender equality in local political life (Kim and Öjendal 2012). Increasing women's roles in politics is also an objective of Rectangular Strategy Phase I and II, National Strategic Development Plan (2014-18), the Cambodian National Council for Women Five-Year Strategic Plan 2010-14 and the National Program for Sub-National Democratic Development 2010-19 (Ministry of Women's Affairs 2014).

Despite this, the effectiveness of projects to strengthen gender equity and increase women's representation implemented by government, civil society and international agencies remains limited. Lack of representation is considered a key problem leading to political disempowerment and marginalisation (race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality), thus obscuring women's interests. Without that basis, awareness of women's issues may not be raised or discussed let alone solutions found. For instance, many Cambodian women at the local level endure sexual/ physical/emotional abuse because their plight is not recognised as a consequence of social assumptions or deeper systematic prejudice embedded in a traditional mindset, all of which could be reoriented. Women face multiple challenges, notably cultural norms and attitudes; disparities in education, sharing of domestic responsibilities, child care, financial and family support; and negative perceptions of women (Griffith 2010).

Data on women's representation at subnational level is limited. However, at the time of a 2008 policy brief on women leaders, 11.8 percent of deputy governors, 14.6 percent of commune councillors and 30 percent of village committee members were women (Ministry of Women's Affairs 2008). The number of women leaders at the local level is clearly lagging far behind that for men. In the provinces it is worse; for instance, in north-eastern Cambodia, women leaders at the local level are rare (Prak and Schuette 2007). In 2012, based on data from the National Election Committee (2012), the proportion of women candidates in the north-eastern provinces was less than 30 percent.

1.2 Research significance, aims and questions

Social, political and economic change has unfolded cautiously throughout the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. However, due to the efforts of national and international agencies to increase gender inequality, the number of women entering local politics has gradually increased. This small success at least provides an important end sight for women interested in becoming local leaders. Despite widespread recognition of the critical need to develop future women leaders in grassroots Cambodia, few studies have sought to understand the complex leadership pathways aspiring local women must navigate.

Based on an in-depth analysis of the experiences of selected local women leaders, this study develops a practical leadership model that aims to increase women's participation in local Cambodian politics. The model is able to provide an understanding of leadership pathways for Cambodian women who want to be local leaders in the future. The result of a qualitative methodology and case study approach designed to explore the complexity of leadership in Cambodia, the model draws on the real-life situations of women local leaders in three communes in the north-eastern provinces of Cambodia.

Developing a practical leadership model is one way of helping to increase women's participation in local politics. Craft (2012) asserts that the absence of role models prevents other women from progressing in their careers. Therefore, in order to fill the gap between the absent leadership model and the need for more women to become local leaders, the study employed three main research questions to guide enquiry:

• What type of work, characteristics and resources influence women to become local leaders?

• What are the experiences that women local leaders have been through?

• What can be learned from women's backgrounds and experiences to inform the development of a practical leadership model to help guide other women aspiring for leadership positions in local political life?

These questions guided the research throughout, from data collection and analysis to interpretation of the findings and the creation of the model. It is hoped that the findings will encourage women into leadership roles at grassroots level, and that the model will be a useful guide for women to reach higher positions in their careers. As a consequence, they will then be able to participate in decision-making and thus help to reduce the cycle of poverty in which many women are trapped.

1.3 Methodology and case selection

This study employed a qualitative methodology to address the three main research questions. A case study design was used as part of this approach because it can capture the complexity of real-life situations (experiences, behaviours and emotions) of how women become local leaders. For the data collection, multiple techniques were applied to select participants and record their perspectives. These included key informant interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation and informal interviews, together with snowball sampling and analysis of archival records. Fieldwork was undertaken from May to June 2014.

Fieldwork was conducted in three communes in the north-western provinces of Kompong Cham, Kratie and Steung Treng. To ensure participant confidentiality, the communes are referred to as KP, KO and KS. The rationale for the selection of these communes is based on three reasons:

1. Previous studies (Kim and Öjendal 2012; Thon et al. 2009) have already started to build a better understanding of local leadership in these communes to which this research can usefully contribute.

2. Some women provide active leadership in the communes, notably as commune chiefs, commune councillors and village committee members.

3. Women leaders at the local level in the north-eastern provinces are rare. This means that they are worthy of investigation and observation (Prak and Schuette 2007).

The fieldwork was divided into two phases:

Phase 1: In-depth interviews were held with nine women leaders: three commune chiefs, three commune councillors and three village committee members. Structured observation was used during interviews and at commune meetings held by women leaders. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, was recorded or noted and took place in the interviewee's house or at commune offices; repeat interviews were conducted with the same informants to verify facts.

Phase 2: Two focus group discussions were conducted in each commune, one for villagers and the other for male councillors. The division between villagers and male councillors was to avoid any power dominance that might have inhibited or discouraged conversation. These discussions allowed for some crosschecking of informants' responses to increase the validity and trustworthiness of data. Family members and neighbours who have had some influence on the women leaders were also interviewed. The duration of each focus group discussion was around one hour; these discussions were recorded and noted.

1.4 Scope and limitation of the study

The study findings are indicative rather than representative because research was conducted in three communes only, as per the case study approach. Also, the interviews with key informants and some villagers might not cover all aspects of leadership issues for women in Cambodia. For instance, the relationships between women leaders at the commune level and women leaders at district or provincial level are also important. The study sample is small, but it provides an informative snapshot of life for rural women seeking and experiencing leadership.

1.5 Structure of the paper

Following this introduction, the paper is organised into six sections. Section 2 discusses the literature on how women become local leaders and provides a conceptual framework for leadership development. Sections 3, 4 and 5 look at what factors encourage women to become local leaders based on three core themes: type of work (experience), personal characteristics (internal factors) and resources (external factors). Section 6 synthesises the findings to determine a general pattern of a leadership pathway to Cambodian women's influence and participation in local politics. Section 7 concludes and provides some recommendations for improving women's leadership and political participation.

2. Literature review – how women become local leaders

How best to develop a meaningful and effective tool for enhancing gender equity in a complex world remains a contentious issue (Parpart 2008). Unsurprisingly, therefore, there is no clear pathway to women's leadership in local arenas in Cambodia. In response, this study seeks to develop a conceptual framework which relates the key concepts of leadership to gender as a background. It then looks into real examples of what factors make women become leaders, both within and outside of Cambodia. Using that as a basis, the developed conceptual framework provides a guide to explore how some women succeed in accessing local leadership roles.

2.1 Concept of leadership

Leadership is variously defined by different scholars: as the activity that helps people reach a common objective or purpose (Giammatteo 1981); the ability to influence others or to mobilise people (Antonakis, Cianciolo and Sternberg 2004; Johnson 2009; Sweetman 2000); or as individual traits, leader behaviours, patterns of interaction, role relationships, relations with followers and follower perceptions (Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 1995; McCauley 2004). An understanding of the concept of leadership as involving both leaders and followers is an important reminder that the performance and success of leaders does not depend solely on the leaders themselves, but also on the followers' attitudes, perceptions, relationships and interactions with the leaders. Thus, a comprehensive study of leadership qualities must consider the followers and the common social, political and cultural perceptions of leaders, especially where gender differences might play an important role.

2.2 Gender and leadership

Leadership in most societies is traditionally associated with men. By implication, men are considered powerful, authoritative and knowledgeable. Eagly and Carli (2007) posit that men are fast-tracked to leadership whereas women must negotiate a labyrinth of conflicting demands. Globally, opportunities for women in leadership roles are not equal because their paths are obstructed by many barriers (Kellerman and Rhode 2007). Those barriers include traditional stereotyping (employment discrimination), lack of support networks and work-family conflicts. Although some women become leaders, the ways of getting there, whether direct or indirect, are subtle and difficult to discern. According to Duerst-Lahti and Kelly (1995), few women can reach top management or leadership positions because they face a "glass ceiling".[1]

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1 The term "glass ceiling" was introduced in 1987 as a metaphor for women's inability to break into executive offices. For example, in the United States' political environment, women experienced offensive remarks and sexual harassment from men, which often created "invisible" barriers to women's promotion to leadership positions (Duerst-Lahti and Kelly 1995).

2.3 How women all over the world become leaders

Different country experiences provide different views on how women become leaders. Based on her interviews with hundreds of women, including Hillary Clinton and Kathleen Hall, about who can beat the gender barriers, Jamieson (1995) points out that women from all walks of life can "break through" in some way. The key factors for women to acquire leadership positions are a good education, the ability to communicate to the public effectively, and to be seen as a moderating force. Next, women should demonstrate fairness and treat both sexes equally. In addition, women should know how to diffuse a tense situation by creating a cooperative and peaceful atmosphere. Lastly, women should hold onto their leadership dream without thinking about the passing of time and their age. It is never too late for a woman to become a leader.

Economic and social status, family support, competency, ability to create social capital, financial support and democratic leadership style are found by various authors[2] to be key factors that help women in the political leadership sphere. Kim and Öjendal (2011) highlight how socioeconomic changes in Cambodia have reoriented ideas about women in leadership. They claim that the value of gender equality is widely recognised in society; for instance, there are more opportunities for women commune committee members to lead social affairs and commune work. Next, family support (father, husband, brother) plays an important role in helping women to develop the self-esteem necessary to pursue their dream as leaders in public office (Halpern and Cheung 2008; Jensen 2008). Eagly and Carli (2007) assert that women can become leaders by challenging two commonly held misgivings about their leadership skills: women must prove their social competence and their ability to create social capital. Women also need financial support to realise their leadership dreams, especially in politics. Hoare and Gell (2009), from their case studies in the Philippines, Israel and the United Kingdom, found that without enough financial support at all levels of government, women cannot enter leadership roles. Another way to increase their chances of success is for women leaders to be democratically orientated in their style. Tracing the contemporary theories on transformation and transactional leadership styles, Jogulu and Wood (2006) contend that women seem to follow a more democratic, collaborative (also known as "participative") leadership style than the traditional male model which is quite hierarchical. An example of a successful woman leader is Janet Holmesà Court, an Australian company director and philanthropist, who turned the hierarchical pyramid of leadership upside down by encouraging and empowering people to pursue their dreams (Eagly and Carli 2007).

Women typically confront many challenges before achieving a leadership position. As stressed in the literature, pathways to becoming a leader involve two big spheres—leaders' attitudes and behaviours (inside factors) and followers' perceptions (outside factors)—and the interactions between them. These factors form the framework for understanding women's paths towards leadership. Basically, if they have an education, interpersonal communication skills and family support, women leaders can influence hierarchical structures in society and can find opportunity from changes in their way of life. They can get into leadership by working collaboratively and by balancing family and work. In addition, by demonstrating their values through being approachable, kind and helpful, women can more readily navigate the labyrinth.

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2 For detailed examples see Ly (2015), pp. 16-21.

2.4 Leaders in the Cambodian context

2.4.1 Who are considered local leaders in Cambodia?

Local communities in Cambodian society comprise the commune and the village (Thon et al. 2009). Commune and village leaders are important in that they are the closest people to the villagers and are able to organise communities to deal with specific local issues. This contrasts with district chiefs who are considered outsiders *orlokthum* (big persons) (Ledgerwood and Vijghen 2002). According to Ledgerwood and Vijghen (2002), there are different types of leaders who have a strong influence on, or power in, local areas. They divide these local leaders into six domains:

1. Administrative: officials or official leaders at subdistrict level, commune councillors and village chiefs.

2. Religious: laymen, nuns, monks and pagoda committee members.

3. Knowledge: educated individuals working as health workers and teachers.

4. Spiritual: traditional healers.

5. Economic–political: the rich and powerful, considered the most important persons in the village.

6. Development assistance: aid workers or NGO activists and foreign personnel.

These six types of local leaders have different levels of power in different contexts and situations. This study selected only administrative, mainly women, leaders at commune and village level for further exploration.

2.4.2 Commune and village structures and roles

In 2002, the Cambodian government embarked upon political decentralisation by organising commune/sangkat elections. The commune structure consists of a commune chief, first deputy commune chief, second deputy commune chief and commune committee members. The commune council has a five-year mandate. Three elections have been held so far, in the first (2002-06), second (2007-12) and third mandates (2013-17). According to Article 20 of the Sub-decree on Decentralisation of Powers, commune authorities have two roles: to manage local affairs and to serve as an agent of central government (Royal Government of Cambodia 2002). Their services are to meet basic commune needs concerning agriculture, economics, public works, social order and security, women's and children's issues. By 2014, the monthly salary of commune councillors had increased three-fold since 2008: commune chiefs now get USD25 to USD75 a month, first and second deputy chiefs USD20 to USD60 and commune committee members USD17.50 to USD50.

The village structure consists of a village chief, a deputy chief and a village assistant. They are selected by commune councillors and villagers. According to Article 22 of the Sub-decree on Decentralization of Powers, Roles and Duties to Commune/Sangkat Councils, every village committee member must be a village resident, and at least one must be a woman (Royal Government of Cambodia 2002). The main duty of village chiefs is to promote consultation and cooperation in their commune/sangkat council. In 2014 the monthly salary was USD30 for a village chief, USD25 for a deputy village chief and USD20 for a village assistant. Local government officials are the lowest grade of officer and receive the lowest pay among

government workers (World Bank 2005). The *Cambodia Daily* of 3 September 2013 reports that although local government officials' salaries had doubled under the sub-decree released on 31 August 2013, the pay was still not enough for them and their family to live comfortably.

2.4.3 Women leaders in Cambodia

Past and present debates in the literature provide a varied and incomplete picture of how women become leaders in Cambodia. For example, Ebihara (1968) mentioned that morality, in general, was a component of village leadership. Later, Collins (1998 cited in Ledgerwood and Vijghen 2002) added that a reputation for moral integrity and a degree of humility were important for effective leadership. Ebihara (1968) found that in the 1950s and 1960s the selection of local leaders was based on literacy, competence, good character, relative wealth and willingness to work for low pay. Sin (1995) examined networking among Cambodian women and their leadership roles. She opined that some Cambodian women occupied high political positions due to their loyalty to a political party, courage, determination and experiences in social struggles and achievements. Women became leaders by networking with men in top leadership positions, so women politicians needed to learn "the political ropes"[3] through building mentorships and cooperation with male political workers (Sin 1995).

Some of the above mentioned attributes are still important today. For instance, Sin (1995) suggested that a strong personal drive is key to overcoming the unique physical, environmental, psychological and financial barriers women face. Nguon (2000) also pointed out that an emphasis on girl's and women's education has a significant role to play in multidisciplinary advocacy efforts to promote women's leadership. She claims that education can bypass the barriers of sociocultural differences, low self-esteem and low self-confidence. Education for girls and women is essential. Education improves the chances of women moving themselves into leadership positions, gaining recognition in public affairs and having a strong, consistent voice in social issues. Thus faster progress is achieved in development, gender parity, poverty eradication and peace building.

Understanding villagers' attitudes towards leaders is also important. One of the main notes from the National Conference on Women Moving towards Progress, held in Phnom Penh on 6-8 September 2011, stressed that leadership does not rely only on the capacity of an individual, but that the talent and charisma of that person are also factors (Silaka 2011). Charisma here means the skills, traits and abilities of a leader to influence and be a positive role model for followers. Because of bias in some societies, women have rarely been lauded as charismatic leaders. Regardless of gender and status, scant attention has been paid to the kind of leadership style rural Cambodians would like to see from their leaders (Devarachetty 2012). A survey of roughly 15 percent of villagers in three communes on leadership (Thon et al. 2009) finds that villagers' attitudes towards leaders are based on various perceptions depending on socioeconomic status, education and ethnicity.

Villagers' attitudes apart, kinship and patronage still lie at the heart of Cambodian social organisation, according to Ledgerwood and Vijghen (2002). This underlines the importance of networking and patron-client relations for women's participation in politics and leadership identity (Lilja 2006). Networking takes different forms. Women can network abroad, within the village, with other women, among female politicians, within political parties or the family

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3 The *political ropes* refer to political ties that affiliate women to a political party. For example, a woman can be nominated or recommended by a political party worker and then seek support based on that connection.

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(Lilja 2006, 2008). A study in northeast Cambodia (Maffii 2011) claimed that the families and husbands of women leaders in Kratie province had agreed to help with household chores so as to leave their wives free to travel and be active in their political roles. This action is the opposite of the traditional code of conduct for women, *chbapsrey*,[4] that they should be subordinate to their husbands and be responsible for all housework.

Historically, men have been dominant in the political sphere, whereas women's direct participation has been rare. Because of widespread social movements, there are now greater chances for Cambodian women to get involved in politics. As Kim and Öjendal (2012) point out, post-conflict Cambodia has been influenced by Western democratic principles since 1993. Gender equality has been introduced by international NGOs and donor agencies to help women move out of the traditional domestic trap. They want to see a better political situation for women where they can share their views and make decisions which affect their lives.

The success of women in leadership not only depends on personality, talent, a sharp mind, popularity, courage, education, networking and commitment, but is also derived from the new situation created by decentralisation and deconcentration reform, NGO activism on gender equality, socioeconomic change, and timeliness. "Women are seemingly most successful in generating popular support in their private capacity, and are partly aided by public policies and laws" (Kim and Öjendal 2011, 21). Women can become leaders when the time seems right. However, as Kim and Öjendal (2011) contend, in the commune/sangkat elections, political parties are the determining force in forming gendered local political representation.

The party system in Cambodia uses the straight party-list (proportional representation) system and this demands closer links between voters and their elected representatives (Reilly 2007). Political parties usually appoint their candidates and compile their candidate lists. Then the voters select a political party. Nominated candidates then ascend to political positions (Kim and Öjendal 2014). Thus political parties are the gatekeepers in local politics, appointing women as leaders regardless of their personal achievements and attributes. Effectively, "The party system constitutes a conservative block of patriarchal resistance to greater gender equality" (Kim and Öjendal 2014, 23). This emphasises the importance of establishing a quota system, or regulations to promote women in politics, under the policy framework for gender equality.

All in all, the literature seems to favour factors such as morality, reputation, literacy, competency, relative wealth and loyalty as the internal strengths that local leaders should have. Recent literature seems to focus more on personal ambition, education, interpersonal relationships, government reforms, NGO activities, family support and political party support as the driving factors to increase women's leadership. Women face various barriers such as a traditional social-cultural mindset (patriarchal society), inadequate assistance from political parties, insubstantial support from policy implementers, low education, low self-confidence, low self-esteem, poor household economy and vulnerability when working at night (Kim and Öjendal 2011; Lilja 2007). All of these can hinder their opportunities for leadership.

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4 *Chbap* means law and *srey* means women. *Chbap Srey* is enshrined in a Cambodian traditional melody called "*Phouchhong Leelia*". It was written in the nineteenth century for guiding daughters and wives in Cambodian society (Kraynanski 2007). The *Chbap Srey* was published as a book and subsequently taught in schools.

2.5 Conceptual framework

This research synthesises three main themes that have been found to influence Cambodian women's ability to take up leadership roles: "type of work" (developed from Ledgerwood and Vijghen 2002; Kim and Öjendal 2012), personal "characteristics" and "resources" (see, for example, Ebihara 1968; Sin 1995; Lilja 2006, Silaka 2011; Ledgerwood and Vijghen 2002; Mafii 2011; Kim and Öjendal 2011). Figure 1 provides a framework for these themes. The *type of work* here focuses on the work experience that led the women in the study to become local village or commune leaders. *Personal characteristics* (internal factors) focus on education, character and personal drive. Lastly, *resources* (external factors) covers government reforms, NGO activities, family and personal support, and political ropes (party connections).

This literature review has identified key internal and external factors thought to enable women's leadership. Key defining attributes are education, personal characteristics and communication skills, though opportunity, family and outsider support are also important. A stark gap in the literature is the lack of a comprehensive model that charts pathways to community leadership roles for women. This study therefore aims to develop a pre-assumption framework for leadership for women in Cambodia.

Figure 1: Internal and external factors that influence women leaders
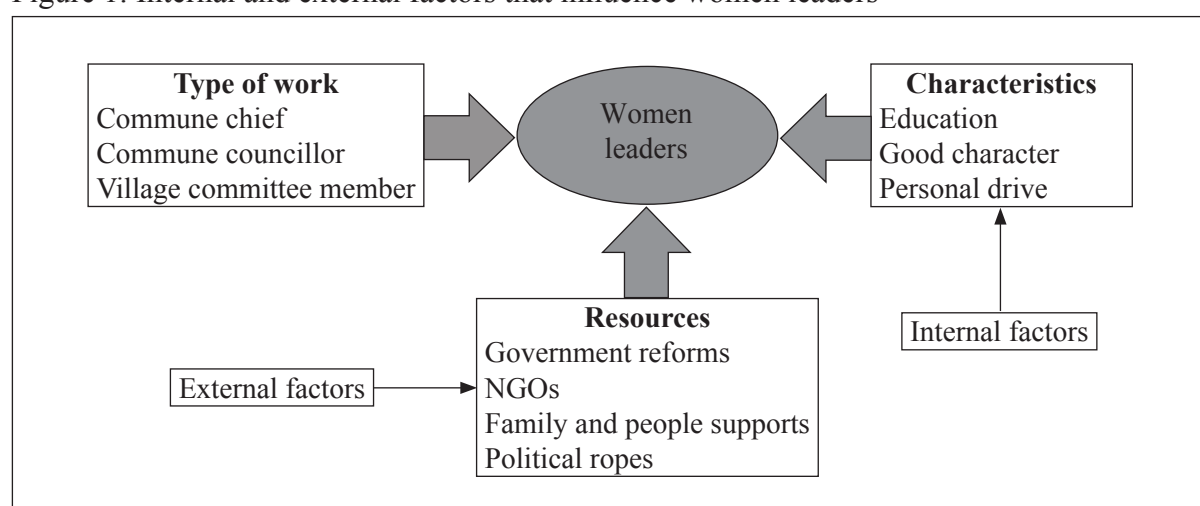
Sources: Kim and Öjendal 2012; Ledgerwood and Vijghen 2002; Ebihara 1968; Sin 1995; Lilja 2006; Silaka 2011; Maffii 2011; Kim and Öjendal 2011

This conceptual framework as a synthesis of past research provides a guide for exploring the reality of how some women local leaders succeeded in taking up leadership roles. This study takes this framework, tests it and adapts it to the current context. The following sections describe the actual lived experiences of women leaders from three communes in north-eastern Cambodia. Consistent with the themes identified in this review, Section 3 focuses on the type of work, Section 4 explains personal characteristics and Section 5 looks at resources.

3. Type of work (experience)

Village assistant, deputy village chief, commune councillor (gender focal person) and commune chief are the main local leadership opportunities. Knowing about the working experiences of each woman leader is an important part of this research because it shows how they paved a way to leadership. This section is divided into three parts according to three types of women local leaders: village leader, commune councillor and commune chief. Eight of the nine participants claimed that their working experience had helped them reach their current leadership positions.

3.1 Women village leaders

Information from field interviews and observations in the three study communes (KP, KO and KS) indicated that female leaders' work experience gave them a chance to get involved in serving their villages. Not every woman can realistically hope to become a member of the village committee, however. Place of residence helps, while previous experience gives confidence in a woman's ability to perform the tasks expected of her. Villagers prefer a leader who has worked with them.

The participants, one from each study commune explained:

> Before becoming a village assistant, I was a volunteer worker in a village. I disseminated information and educated villagers about birth control. (Village assistant, Kompong Cham province, 10 June 2014)

> I started as a village assistant in the second mandate, while I was also working at an NGO-assisted orphanage. (Village assistant, Kratie province, 26 May 2014)

> I took up this position just a month ago. I decided to go for it because I used to be a village assistant; villagers knew and liked me, so they voted for me. (Deputy village chief, Steung Treng province, 14 May 2014)

3.2 Women commune councillors

Work experience is also important for the selection of women commune councillors. These women either have knowledge about women's and children's health care or are thought to have enough capacity to handle some of the commune's work. One woman councillor used to be a village volunteer worker and another was a village assistant; they both worked with local NGOs before they became commune councillors. A woman leader in Steung Treng province acquired the position of commune councillor without any previous work experience; however, other factors (described in Section 5) enabled her to achieve a leadership role.

It was hard to find women first or second deputy commune chiefs, which is a limitation of this research. All three women commune councillors serve as gender focal persons and are responsible for women's and children's affairs. Yet villagers considered them to be leaders in the local context, and selected them based on their work experience.

A woman commune councillor in KP commune related her work history:

> I started the job in the third mandate. Before that I was a village volunteer. I educated women and children about health care. As I remember I often helped poor people who did not know how to cure their diseases. I guided them on how to access health care at the

provincial hospital or the hospital in Phnom Penh city, so people in the village knew me and they voted for me. (Kompong Cham province, 9 June 2014)

Work experience is also crucial in KO commune. The commune councillor there briefly described her work background:

> After the war, I was a farmer and a housewife. In 2002, I was a village assistant and worked with some NGOs who aimed to help my village. I have been a commune councillor since 2002. (Kratie province, 23 May 2014)

3.3 Women commune chiefs

The interviews revealed that relevant work experience underlay the appointment of each woman commune chief. Both political parties and villagers preferred a person with work experience. Of the three commune chiefs, one used to work at a district office, one with a local NGO and the third had been working with the commune for a long time and had moved up from one position to another.

The commune chief in KP commune said that women have more chance of being approached if their work experience makes them eligible for a leadership position:

> I was elected as a commune chief in the third mandate. Previously, between 1985 and 1990, I worked with a district youth association. Then I got married and stopped working for a while because I had to raise my children. However, in the third mandate, people from the district persuaded me to stand as their candidate in the commune/sangkat election. They asked me several times before I decided to stand. (Kompong Cham province, 6 June 2014)

Again, the commune chief in KO commune was selected by her political party because of her work experience with NGOs, as she explained:

> I have been working [as commune chief] since 2007, the second mandate. Before that, I was a farmer. Then I worked for VFP NGO. The NGO works with vulnerable people and its aim is to fight corruption. While I was there I worked with a woman who is now a commune councillor. We advocated land law and disseminated other information to villagers. We received training and transferred what we had learned to villagers. From that experience with the NGO, my party elected me to be a commune leader. (Kratie province, 21 May 2014)

A commune chief in KS commune revealed how she climbed the career ladder and why she was elected as a leader. She first worked as a commune councillor, then as first deputy commune chief, and lastly as commune chief. She knew work experience was important for her progression. Having worked in the commune for many years, she had a very rich experience of local affairs. This is why villagers liked her. Work experience was the driving force for this woman leader. Without that, it is unlikely that she would have been approached by the political party or elected by villagers; in her words:

> As a candidate, I was put at the top of the party list. They selected me based on my work experience. In the first mandate I was a commune councillor, in the second mandate I was the first deputy commune chief and in the third mandate I was made commune chief. On top of that, villagers trust and like me, so they voted for me. (Steung Treng province, 12 May 2014)

3.4 The importance of relevant work experience

It is evident that women who want to become local leaders must have work experience helping poor villagers in their locality. Thus women aspiring to leadership roles need to build rapport with villagers and prove their worth through their actions. Women can build their credibility step by step by working as a volunteer in a village, then with local NGOs and lastly with the commune. Political parties and villagers are interested in women who have such work experience, and are likely to single them out for opportunities that can eventually lead to their election as local leaders.

4. Personal characteristics (internal factors)

During the interview, a question was asked regarding the kinds of characteristics women leaders should have. Some said women leaders should be soft in nature, friendly, gentle, nice and ordinary. Others mentioned education, personal drive, courage and confidence. And some suggested a mix of these traits. This section categorises characteristics into four groups: education, personal drive, courage and confidence, and a gentle/soft/moral/friendly demeanour.

4.1 Education

The findings show that educated women are more likely to become leaders. However, rural women leaders' educational attainment does not need to be as high as that of women leaders in the cities. Commune and village-level women leaders in the three study communes mostly have primary education, though some have secondary education too. Education was the first response from most of the informants when asked about the personal characteristics leaders should possess. They think educated women leaders know what is right and wrong. Although women can understand local situations and can therefore help villagers, having some level of education ensures they can carry out the duties stated in the sub-decree. A group of male councillors in KS commune shared their opinions about this issue:

> We think that the most important characteristic for women leaders is education. Without education, women cannot become leaders. When they have an education, they can provide training to villagers. (Focus group discussion, Steung Treng province, 19 May 2014)

A woman commune chief in KS commune confirmed that due to her education she can understand women's rights and has the confidence to demand gender equality in her commune:

> I consider myself an educated woman and I understand my rights as a woman. So I can oppose gender inequality in my village. (Steung Treng province, 12 May 2014)

Villagers also reflected similar opinions, that women leaders should be educated, not only for the leader's benefit but also to help villagers. Villagers expect leaders to provide the information they need to help them.

> I think that women should have an education, so they can empathise with and understand people's circumstances—who is rich or poor, and who has fewer or more resources. For instance, some low-income villagers seek advice from women leaders. Women leaders teach them how to deal with debt. Women leaders teach us how to save money. For instance, we have created a savings group in the village to help those who are in need.

> Group members can borrow money to set up a small business. Men, on the other hand, do not care much about these kinds of problems. (Villagers, focus group discussion, KO, Kratie province, 29 May 2014)

Education can build a woman's confidence. Women with no education dare not enter local politics, besides which it is hard for them to get involved. Having an education gives them the courage to join local discussions and meetings and access needed information.

When asked about the quality of education, respondents referred to knowing how to read and write and using their literacy to serve the commune and undertake village tasks. They usually do advocacy work, provide training, deliver administrative services, and resolve conflicts for villagers. Given that it is hard to find a woman leader with higher education who is willing to serve the commune or villages, local leaders are expected to have a minimum education. A male commune councillor in KP commune confirmed:

> Women should have an education, but this does not mean that women must have higher education. Knowing how to read and write is enough for local leaders. (Focus group discussion, Kompong Cham province, 12 June 2014)

4.2 Personal drive

A male councillor in KP commune pointed out that unless women seize the opportunities that come their way, they cannot hope to become a commune or village leader.

> Women should have a good heart and willingness to serve if they want to become local leaders. Women should volunteer. For instance, a male village chief will select a woman but will ask her permission first. If she says yes, then she can start doing voluntary work in a village as a first step. (Focus group discussion, Kompong Cham province, 12 June 2014)

Working with people in the commune and villages is not easy. Leaders often deal with a lot of issues and the salary is low. So, without personal drive, women are unlikely to attain leadership. Women from the three communes shared in common the view that wanting to serve their nation influenced their decision to become local leaders.

In KO commune there is a lack of women representatives to support women's and children's issues, both outside and inside the home.

> Actually, I want to see more women involved in social work, so I decided to take part in commune work. If there are more women leaders, problems will be solved more readily because women leaders stay closer to the people, and people are also more likely to approach women leaders for help. Women work fast and effectively and better understand women's problems. (Woman commune chief, Kratie province, 21 May 2014)

A similar situation was reported in KS commune in that there were many cases of domestic violence. Most vulnerable people such as women and children are affected by the consequences. It was a desire to reduce domestic violence that prompted the current female commune chief to take up her role. She hopes that her involvement will make a difference.

> What has influenced my aspiration is domestic violence. I think this is the main issue in my commune and I wanted to solve it. I do not want to see conflict increasing in my commune. Every year I do what I can to reduce domestic violence and help my villagers. (Steung Treng province, 12 May 2014)

In KP commune, where issues such as domestic violence, land grabbing, indebtedness and health concerns are the main social problems, a female village assistant emphasised that it was in her nature to help people. She did not care much for the financial rewards that she got from serving her village.

> The main reason that I wanted to do this job is to serve people. Although I know this job offers few benefits, I want to help people because that is what I always do. (Kompong Cham province, 10 June 2014)

4.3 Courage and confidence

A key aspect underlying the notion of personal drive was courage or self-confidence, a quality noted by other people and by women leaders themselves. Women were no longer bound by the traditional idea that they should be silent and avoid decision-making positions where men mostly dominate. Male councillors and villagers now wanted to see more women leaders who dare to speak up and take leadership positions. The following sections describe three different points of view.

4.3.1 Women leaders' points of view

Women leaders saw their courage or confidence as a catalyst for them to attain their dream. The actions of some female local leaders in the communes showed how they had the courage or confidence to seize the opportunity of a leadership role.

> When the government demanded that 30 percent of commune leaders should be women, someone from district level came and asked me if I were to be elected as commune chief, would I accept the job. I said that I was not afraid of anything. If I was elected, I would do it. Finally, I was elected and became a commune chief. (Woman commune chief, KP commune, Kompong Cham province, 6 June 2014)

> I think that although the government reforms have had an impact on women, women themselves should have the courage and dare to participate in society if they want to become leaders. (Woman commune chief, KO commune, Kratie province, 21 May 2014)

4.3.2 Male commune councillors' points of view

Male commune councillors work closely with female commune chiefs and female councillors whom they may or may not support. From their knowledge of the nature of working at commune level, they also opined that women should be brave. Bold leaders can handle commune and village tasks because they have the courage to discuss issues and make decisions with other workers to solve conflicts and problems. A woman leader has to prove that she is strong enough to manage difficult issues. Male councillors are impressed by confident or brave women, and will therefore accept that women can work with them well. Political parties also seek brave women leaders to work for them because a brave leader will be active and gain a lot of support for the party. They will take risks to pursue goals. A group of male commune councillors spoke about bravery and courage as key inner resources for women local leaders.

> We think that women leaders should focus on bravery as an inner strength. (Focus group discussion, KS commune, Steung Treng province, 19 May 2014)

Political parties are the gatekeepers to women's promotion. They are also interested in women who have what it takes to do advocacy work and can be strong representatives for the party, thus attracting more votes.

> My political party told me that I must be brave and dare to make decisions on my own if I want to climb up to a higher position. (Woman commune councillor, KO commune, Kratie province, 23 May 2014)

4.3.3 Villagers' points of view

Villagers held a similar point of view to that of male councillors. They understood that women now have equal rights and can do men's work. They wanted women leaders to be brave enough to lead and advise them. They liked women leaders who dared to speak up in public meetings and act on their behalf to seek support from others to help their commune. A villager in KO commune offered her view:

> Women leaders should be brave. They must dare to challenge conventional wisdom. Previously, people would say that women were busy running the kitchen. However, in society these days, women have equal rights to men. Women can do men's work. Furthermore, women should participate in local meetings so that they can learn about social work. Then, when they have knowledge and have built up their confidence, they can be bold enough to take on men's work. (Focus group discussion will villagers, Kratie province, 29 May 2014)

4.4 Personal character

Having a gentle, soft, moral, friendly personality was identified as important for women leaders. This is culturally and traditionally influenced by the idea of a good Cambodian woman. Women in the past were expected to be gentle, obedient and shy. Shaped by the traditional *Chbab Strey* (Rules for Women), they were required to stay at home, serve and respect their husbands, do household chores and look after children. Men, shaped by *Chhab Proh* (Rules for Men), had more privileges than women because they had more freedom to act according to the social hierarchy (Brickell 2008; Ministry of Women's Affairs 2005; Cambodian Center for Human Rights 2013). These rules have been loosened. Women local leaders do not have to be shy, but they must have good manners. Well-mannered behaviour is interpreted as being "gentle and soft". "Moral" here refers to knowing the difference between right and wrong and possessing good judgment based on fairness and honesty. The word "friendly" means that women leaders are expected to be helpful, kind and welcoming to both rich and poor villagers.

A common perception at both commune and village level is that a soft, gentle moral nature will help women leaders build good relationships with villagers and male co-workers. In the Cambodian mindset, people do not like women leaders who behave improperly, are aggressive or drink too much. They like a leader who speaks nicely to them and welcomes them, though this applies mainly to women leaders because Cambodian women are still expected to be soft and gentle. Women leaders today must also have strong moral principles and treat people equally.

A female commune chief expressed her ideas and gave some real life examples about how she interacted with villagers who sought her help. She was quite popular in the commune as villagers liked the way she behaved. She did not discriminate against anyone and she used soft words towards them.

> I think we women leaders should maintain our character. We should uphold moral standards. We should speak and communicate with villagers properly.[5] For example, when people come to seek services at the commune, we have to look them in the eye and ask them what they want us to do to help them. We must welcome them. What I have heard people say about me is that I am friendly and know how to communicate with villagers. If we treat people well, people will like us. I have often heard people saying that I am friendly and I speak sweetly.[6] I think I am fair, friendly, show solidarity[7] and I am a moral person. Moreover, I am a simple person and I do not discriminate between villagers. (KO commune, Kratie province, 21 May 2014)

Interestingly, a female village assistant also knew her local situation and knew how to interact with villagers. She used kind words and a friendly voice to solve local conflicts.

> I do not think I have any particular talent, but when I speak to villagers they listen to me. I think women leaders should be clever and know the local context. For instance, when there is domestic violence in a village, I speak kindly to the person who caused the problem and then I give him advice. (KO commune, Kratie province, 26 May 2014)

Villagers in KS commune also claimed that women leaders should have soft skills, or "people skills", to build good communication between leaders and villagers. Thus, leaders would gain popular trust and support from villagers, and villagers would be satisfied with their leaders and happy to follow them. Villagers explained:

> Women leaders should be gentle because we want to see soft leaders who dress properly. Moreover, women leaders must be friendly with villagers and care about us. (Focus group discussion, KS commune, Steung Treng province, 16 May 2014)

4.5 Summary

A widely held perception is that women should have certain inner qualities to become local leaders. They need to be gentle, soft, moral and friendly. They also need to be educated, possess personal drive and have the courage and self-confidence to aspire to their leadership dreams. Strong interpersonal skills can help enrich the relationship between leaders and followers. In addition, women must at least be able to read and write in order to understand local problems and help villagers resolve administrative issues and mediate conflicts. Next, personal drive is both a catalyst and a consequence of women's participation in local politics. Lastly, women leaders should be bold, decisive and confident to lead well and help others in need.

5. Resources (external factors)

This section describes the resources—the external factors—that enable or encourage more women to become local leaders. Interviewees and discussants were aware that, due to the new emphasis on women's political participation as a positive impact on local development, both government and civil society are keen to create more space for women to enter local politics. There are policy reforms within government and political parties, NGO programs and other supports that share the aim to do whatever is needed to increase women's participation in local politics. The following discussion focuses on the different resources that help pave the way

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5 "Properly" here means well-mannered.

6 "Sweetly" means that women leaders know what people want to hear and how they like to be spoken to (i.e. kindly).

7 "Solidarity" refers to women leaders who are decisive and strong and who cooperate with other political parties and male colleagues.

to women's leadership at local levels. Resources are divided into reforms and policies, NGO activities, wealth, family support, villagers and mentoring supports, and women's knowledge of the political ropes.

5.1 Reforms and policies at the institutional level

Government has implemented reforms and policies to increase the numbers of women in local politics. These actions combined have had an impact on the Cambodian mindset, of both men and women. Gender main streaming has been introduced at local government level and the well-being of women and children is being paid more attention.

The findings in all three communes revealed that through the reforms, women now understand their political rights better than in the past. Local women especially are more aware of their rights including the right to participate in politics. More women are now taking local leadership roles. Men also understood women's rights and have begun to encourage more women to take leadership positions. For instance, a female commune chief recognised the importance of the government reforms that gave her a chance to be involved in local politics. She said that because of the government demand for 30 percent of leaders to be women, she was able to become a leader in her commune.

> I think the government reforms have had a positive impact on women and leadership because more women are getting involved in local politics now. Previously, there were no female commune chiefs. The demand from government that 30 percent of commune-level leaders should be women gave me the chance to become a commune chief. (KP commune, Kompong Cham province, 6 June 2014)

A female commune chief in KS commune also thought that the government reforms have provided opportunities for women. Women are told that they have equal rights to men, and this is an incentive for all Cambodian women.

> In my opinion, the government reforms have had an impact on women and leadership. The government reforms want to increase the numbers of women leaders at all levels. This is a good sign for women who want to be a leader. Because of these reforms, women now understand their rights. (Woman commune chief, Steung Treng province, 12 May 2014).

5.2 NGO activities

Nongovernmental organisations' activities in Cambodia have had an impact on local development, especially as regards women. They work through media, development advocacy and capacity building to raise awareness about gender equity. Field observations indicate that NGOs work closely with local authorities and villagers and impart knowledge to women and men, though a key aim is to provide leadership training for women. Women are also told they have equal rights to men. They encourage women to be brave and help build their confidence. The important thing is that NGOs provide women with work experience, as discussed in Section 4. Similar findings surfaced in all three communes. For example, a female commune chief in KO commune shared her experience of working with NGOs before she became a leader.

> I think NGOs' activities aim to develop women's capacity in my commune. They train women how to be brave so they can participate in politics and deal with problems in society. For instance, I have experience of working with NGOs. I worked for VFP NGO before I was able to become a commune chief. Moreover, an NGO (KADOC) is working in my commune to develop women's capacity. (Kratie province, 21 May 2014)

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5.3 Wealth

From the interviews and discussions in the three communes, local women leaders are expected to be relatively wealthy or better off than very poor villagers. This means that women must have additional income apart from the salary paid them by the commune. This is because their monthly salary is not enough to cover their living expenses. Supplementary incomes, earned from various sources as shown in Table 1, cover their household expenses. If a woman leader is very poor, she cannot help to resolve other people's problems, as she is also in need. Moreover, women leaders who have a stable living can easily create good relationships with villagers. When villagers seek their help, they can respond to them quickly by giving rice, money and other resources.

Table 1: Women leaders' sources of additional income

No.	Position	Additional income
KP commune		
1	Commune chief	Sell construction materials such as sand and stone
2	Commune councillor	Sell dirt for filling ponds
3	Village assistant	Sell boiled potatoes
KO commune		
4	Commune chief	Family members/gardening/farming
5	Commune councillor	Gardening
6	Village assistant	Work with NGO
KS commune		
7	Commune chief	Farming and gardening
8	Commune councillor	Gardening
9	Deputy village chief	Gardening and grocery store

5.4 Family support

Most participants in all three communes claimed that family support was one of the key factors that help women to become local leaders. Female local leaders pointed first to their husband. They said that their husbands devoted their time and energy to sharing household chores and running the family business. Their husbands understood that they had a duty to serve the commune and village. Family members such as children were pointed out as the next rung of help with household tasks. That said, two of the nine female leaders were widows and therefore free from family responsibilities and wifely duties. Although they had no husband to support them, other people in the commune encouraged them; this point is elaborated in the next section. A woman commune chief in KS commune shared her story.

> I have eight children. All of my family members are busy and work as teachers or district officers. My husband is also helping to build a school. We all leave for work early every morning. The first ones home have to cook, and then we help each other with different household tasks. My husband usually cooks the rice and looks after my granddaughter. What is important is that my husband has devoted his time to me; otherwise I could not do anything. It means that my husband supports me and we divide our household chores. When I go to work I cannot help my husband but when I am home I help him. This mutual help also applies to the family's farming and gardening. The most influential person is my husband. He always supports me. If he does not help me I cannot go anywhere. For instance, if I go out who will cook? So he helps me with the household chores. My husband does not mind doing women's work. (KS commune, Steung Treng province, 12 May 2014)

Another female commune chief explained that her husband and others supported her career as a commune leader. They were proud of her because, in their view, there were not many women who could become local leaders. Her husband was happy to take on her housework responsibilities and let her engage fully in commune work. She said a woman leader can bring a good reputation to her family.

> I am married and have five daughters. They all have their own families now. Besides my knowledge and experience, I think family support is also important. I was able to become a leader because my husband, children, relatives and neighbours always supported me. I am especially proud of my husband because he is so helpful and very supportive. He is responsible for housework: he cooks for me, so when I am home I just eat. Actually, he has his work to do too but he still does housework for me. He has never complained. He wants to see his family have honour in our community by contributing well to society. If I want to be a good leader, my family should be a role model. Therefore, I think women should have support from their family and relatives. (Woman commune chief, KO commune, Kratie province, 21 May 2014)

5.5 Villagers' support and mentorship

Villagers' support

Support from villagers and others is crucial for women who want to be leaders. Knowing how to gain such support was critical for women in building their social capital. The study finds that the ability to win villagers' support was not only associated with personal traits, but also with where female leaders lived. Locals only trusted people they knew and who had lived in their locality for a long time. They were happy to be led by someone with whom they were familiar. They were not keen on having an outsider as a leader, even if she or he was highly educated. They seemed to favour a leader with whom they have developed a close relationship. In rural Cambodia, people usually live as a close community and know each other's backgrounds. A group of male councillors stated:

> A local leader is chosen through the votes and support of villagers. If we choose women candidates from outside, we are sure that villagers will not support them. I think to be considered as a local leader, a person must have lived in the commune since childhood and participated in commune activities. (Focus group discussion, KS commune, Steung Treng province, 19 May 2014)

All of the nine female local leaders were born and still lived in the place where their parents used to live. They have lived in very close-knit communities and have built mutual connections (i.e. a stock of social capital) with villagers. Besides having good relationships with neighbours and other villagers, they were well aware of the situation in their areas. A woman leader, male councillors and villagers stressed the importance of the personal connections between leaders and villagers.

> I have been living in this commune since I was born. Villagers already knew me because I was friends with both rich and poor villagers. I always welcome them. My position is based on my mandate; if villagers still support me I can continue doing this job and if they do not, then I have to stop working as a commune chief. (Female commune chief, KP commune, Kompong Cham province, 6 June 2014)

> What is important for leaders is that they must be well known and liked by the villagers. (Male commune councillors, focus group discussion, KP commune, Kompong Cham province, 12 June 2014)

> A woman leader should do good things that make villagers like her. She must know villagers' needs and treat them fairly. For instance, my female commune chief has our support and trust, so the party will select her. (Villagers, focus group discussion, KP commune, Kompong Cham province, 16 June 2014)

Mentorship

Women leaders also benefitted from the support and mentorship of their male counterparts and other local women leaders. This particularly applied to the two village leaders who were widows.

> Encouragement from villagers is what mainly motivated me to take up this position. Moreover, my female commune chief and male commune councillors also encouraged me. (Female deputy village chief, KS commune, Stueng Treng province, 14 May 2014)

> The male village chief encouraged me to work as a village assistant. (Female village assistant, KP commune, Kompong Cham province, 10 June 2014)

5.6 Political ropes

Political parties are the gatekeepers in electing local women to leadership positions. Knowing the political ropes and having good party ties are key to women being elected at the commune level and selected at the village level. "Political ropes" can refer to both formal and informal connections between women and powerful people in politics or to a third person who can influence decision makers in the political parties. The third person may be a friend or former co-worker. A critical question is how women who want to become leaders can orient themselves politically. The experiences of women commune leaders help to answer this question.

One commune chief explained how building relationships with party members enabled her to become a leader. Another said that she knew someone at the district level who paved the way for her to become a leader. Party members have the power to vote for their candidates and rank them on the party list, and she had already created a good network with male counterparts within her party to gain their support. Clearly, social connections and networking are crucial for women wanting to become leaders.

> I was asked by someone from the district to stand as their candidate in the commune/ sangkat election for the third mandate. I used to work at the district level which is how that person knew me. When I was newly elected, I was trained to do the job by both district and province-level people. They have taken care of me. They know that I am clever and can handle the job. Moreover, I already had good relationships with male counterparts in the party. I think they are happy to work with me (Female commune chief, KP commune, Kompong Cham province, 6 June 2014)

Building networks with people who have power in the political parties could help women to reach to leadership positions, as a female commune councillor stated:

> The party does not always want to put women candidates at the top of the party list. However, a woman who has money, networks with high-ranking party actors and has won villagers' trust may have more chance of being put on the party list. Thus, to gain popularity within their party, women need both formal and informal networks. (Female commune councillor, KO commune, Kratie province, 23 May 2014)

Good communication with people in her political party is what enabled one woman, who had no previous work experience, to become a commune councillor. Cognisant of the importance of networking with people in her party, she built the necessary relationships with party members before being appointed to work in the commune.

> I knew people in higher positions and they recognised my capacity. They knew me as a loyal and calm person. I am very good at building working relationships with high-ranking people. Whenever I go to parties or celebrations, I try to get along and make friends with them. Therefore, I think they can see me from this point of view. Let me tell you how I was selected. The head of the party and I are not related, but he chose me because he knows that I am an active person. For instance, I can do advocacy work on behalf of my commune chief. I can work cooperatively with other male commune councillors and the commune clerk. They all trust me. Thus, strong support from political parties is needed. Then they will put you as their top candidate on the party list, so you will be easily elected as a leader. (Female commune councillor, KS commune, Stueng Treng province, 13 May 2014)

5.7 Summary

Because of government reforms, women leaders today have more opportunities to get involved in local politics. They receive capacity development training provided by NGOs. Beyond that, women are encouraged by their family, villagers, male and female co-workers, and party actors to pursue their leadership dream. Additional income from family businesses or farms can maintain their standard of living, so they can devote their energy to their work. Poor women cannot go far or help others because they are trapped in poverty. It is therefore this unique mix of external factors, combined with internal factors that can help some women fulfil their leadership potential.

6. Discussion

Section 5 answered the first two research questions: (1) What type of work, characteristics, and resources influence women to become local leaders? (2) What are the experiences that female local leaders have been through? But it does not fully address the third research question, which seeks a practical leadership model to help guide women towards local leadership. Thus, this section scrutinises how local women can reach a leadership position. The type of work, characteristics and resources needed for this to happen will be summarised after comparing the conceptual framework in Section 2 (Figure 1) and the findings presented in Sections 3, 4 and 5.

Although the three main themes—type of work, characteristics and resources—shown in Figure 1 are the dominant factors, the conceptual framework has to be adjusted. The following discussion reorders the subthemes according to the dimension of time: past and present. The intention is to develop a convenient pathway for future local women leaders to follow. The future is discussed along with recommendations in Section 7.

Past and present

Lessons learned from the nine women local leaders' life stories, at both the commune and village levels, indicate that they have been influenced by their past and present actions. However, there is no literature in Cambodia that combines subfactors to develop a timeline

that portrays a clear pattern or pathway for women to follow. Rather, scholars provide diverse findings on what women should do in order to reach leadership positions in different contexts. Ebihara (1968) focused on morality, literary, competence, good character, relative wealth and willingness to work for less money. Sin (1995) raised political ropes, networking, loyalty, encouragement, determination and experience in social struggles. Lilja (2007) gives more importance to education that can build women's confidence. Ledgerwood and Vijghen (2002) argue that kinship and patronage in a cultural context is what Cambodian women should focus on. Maffii (2011) claims that family support can help women gain leadership. Prak and Schuette (2007) state that women are freer to go outside of the house and that they are often involved in the social and economic spheres because they become an income source for their family.

Kim and Öjendal (2012) agree that all the above-mentioned factors are important for women, but they contend that government reforms and NGO activities should be considered as well. These authors helped this study identify key factors that influence women, but they did not draw clear connections between each factor. Thus, if local women want to reach a leadership position in the future, this study suggests that continuity—the links between past, present and future—will be the umbrella for three main themes: type of work (work experience), characteristics (internal factors) and resources (external factors). Women need to understand that their past work experience is important, they should build up their local work experience, improve their inner resources and at the same time gain external support. From the empirical information and the conceptual framework, this study finds that work experience, internal and external factors are interlinked and interwoven, as outlined in the following sections.

6.1 Work experience

The three types of leaders—commune chief, commune councillor and village leader—linked their current positions to their past work in their localities. Their experiences were usually related to local development projects through which they interacted and developed rapport with villagers. Thus their past work experience became concrete proof for villagers and party actors of their ability to handle a leadership position whether it be to serve the commune or the village. This finding supports Sin's (1995) work stating that past experience is crucial for local women. Moreover, work experience is also the stepping stone for local women to move up from one position to another. The trend is usually for women to move from village volunteer or local NGO worker to village committee member and then to commune councillor. Neither the international literature nor the Cambodian literature trace this trend. Thon et al. (2009) describe the work history of some local leaders, both men and women, but the study makes no claims about work experience being a means for women to become leaders. Therefore, work experience as a critical component for preparing women for leadership is a key finding of this study.

However, to have those work experiences in the first place, there are criteria that women should meet, for instance, a minimum level of education, certain inner qualities, external supports and ties.

6.2 Internal factors

Apart from work experience, this study finds that women require four main inner strengths to be able to become local leaders: an education, personal drive, bravery/confidence, and a gentle/soft/moral/friendly nature. First, without an education, women cannot hope to become local leaders because they have to perform administrative tasks and other activities described in the Sub-decree on Decentralisation of Power, as well as roles and duties to commune/ sangkat councils. A minimum of a primary education was thought to be sufficient for women local leaders. With that education level they can read and write properly and they can carry out commune and village tasks; this finding confirms that of Thon et al. (2009). Presumably, women who have a basic level of knowledge can receive information and understand what is right and wrong. This can enhance their confidence to lead. This confirms earlier studies by Ebihara (1968), Lilja (2006) and Nguon (2000).

Second, personal drive is influenced by social context, that is, if and when women perceive social problems and want to take part in dealing with them. This finding confirms the work of Sin (1995) who states that personal drive can overcome all challenges that women have to face. Women understand that their contribution can change and help society to some extent, though they know that they will not get much financial benefit from it. Next, the bravery and confidence that Nguon (2000) and Lilja (2006) pinpointed encourage women to find leadership positions and accept the opportunity to lead. Finally, women should develop their own characteristics because it is the key to gaining trust and support. From the findings, villagers or voters expect their female local leader to be gentle, soft, moral and friendly. Women who pay attention to developing these characteristics might find it easier to attract the votes and support of followers and colleagues. Interestingly, women local leaders are widely recognised as being more approachable and kind, patient and generous than male local leaders (Kim and Öjendal 2012).

Although confidence, personal drive and education are very important, women were also influenced by external factors: government reforms and policies, NGO activities and mentorship.

6.3 External factors

Women leaders are affected by a number of external factors. Without support from government, civil society, family members, villagers and others, without their own resources (wealth) and without knowing the political ropes, women would struggle to enter local leadership roles; such findings are consistent with those of Ledgerwood and Vijghen (2002), Lilja (2006), Maffii (2011) and Kim and Öjendal (2011). These factors enable women to vie for and take up leadership positions. In addition, government reforms and policies act as a driving force in helping more women to participate in local politics.

Most participants in the study recognised the importance of government reforms and policies and their effect on local women. Kim and Öjendal (2011) claim that women are the backbone of society. Women know women's matters better than men. Women and children are among the most vulnerable members of society. They face significant challenges to the full enjoyment of their rights, including poverty, gender-based domestic violence, land grabbing, other conflicts and health and education issues. Because women seem to be active in dealing with these problems and are committed to their communities' development, it is only logical that women

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be given more opportunities to become leaders. Nevertheless, the outcomes of policies and reforms to promote women's leadership remain debatable as women are still under-represented in local politics (Thon et al. 2009; Kim and Öjendal 2014, 2012).

NGO interventions attempt to reduce the obstacles women face in entering political arenas. This study shares the same view as Kim and Öjendal (2012), that NGO activities play a major role in increasing women's participation in local leadership. NGOs provide training and build up women's confidence and willingness to work for their community via leadership roles. They also teach the idea of gender equality to both men and women at the local level. An understanding of gender equality and inequality helps reorient the mindset and attitudes of colleagues, family and villagers towards women as leaders, clearing a pathway for women's participation in local politics.

Women local leaders are expected to be relatively well off. This finding supports a key finding of Ebihara (1968), that leaders at the local level must be relatively wealthy. This is because when women are not trapped in extreme poverty, they have the time and ability to work for the commune or village. Villagers also seem to pay more respect to leaders who are richer than they are. Villagers may view a richer person as a resource from whom they can seek help. Working in the commune and village can take up a lot of a leader's time and money. Because the monthly salary that women local leaders receive is not enough for them to survive on, they must have other sources of income such as from farming, gardening and small businesses to supplement their household income. This means a double work burden for women leaders: they work hard for the commune and village, and must take on other jobs to earn enough income. Moreover, they have to look after their children and husband. Most of the interviewed women local leaders received support from family and relatives to help ease the pressures on them.

Family was not found to be a big burden in the study. With family support, especially from their husbands, women were able to engage fully in their leadership roles. Family connections also serve as a strong network for women and assist them on their journey towards leadership (Lilja 2006). The findings reveal that most of the husbands of women local leaders were working, or used to work, for local government. Some are former commune chiefs, teachers and district commune councillors, and they understand local problems, the nature of a local leader's work and gender issues. Women leaders benefitted from the support and encouragement of their husbands, and other family members helped with household chores. Some women local leaders who were widows seemed to be free from household chores because they did not have to prepare meals for a husband and could make their own decisions. However, without a husband for support, they needed the support of others to keep them motivated to work as local leaders.

The support of villagers, party members and village authorities was another influential factor in women becoming leaders, but how to get such support is the question. Villagers often select someone they are familiar with to lead them. Therefore, women who have lived in the same commune or village for a long time, or were born there, stand a chance of being elected. Villagers and notable others know their background and have built relationships with them. Basically, women aspiring to leadership need to develop a stock of social capital in their community (Lilja 2006; Eagly and Carli 2007).

Learning the political ropes, as suggested by Sin (1995), is essential. Political parties act as the gatekeepers to political office (Kim and Öjendal 2014). Establishing ties to a political party or an elected leader or powerful person therefore precedes selection or election to leadership. For prospective women leaders, the "rope" is someone they used to work with or know and with whom they have built a good relationship. That person will connect them with a political party. This kind of networking acts as a bridge, propelling women into local politics. A person's ability to lead is still relevant, however. Knowledge of their ability results in women being approached by a political party. Party political selection processes focus on background and experience in working with local villagers. The more women have a good reputation in the village, the more they will be sought out by political parties. The network approach is the traditional tendency in Cambodian society, where power rests with political party bosses (Kim and Öjendal 2014). Therefore, through knowing the political ropes, women can progress into leadership positions.

Comparison between the empirical findings and the original conceptual framework (Figure 1) provides evidence to support the key factors that influence women to become leaders as identified in the literature review. The significance of this study is that it combines these factors and rearranges them into a new logical pattern of a leadership pathway. As shown in Figure 2, this model is useful for uniting the ways to women's leadership in Cambodia.

Figure 1: Internal and external factors that influence women leaders (old)
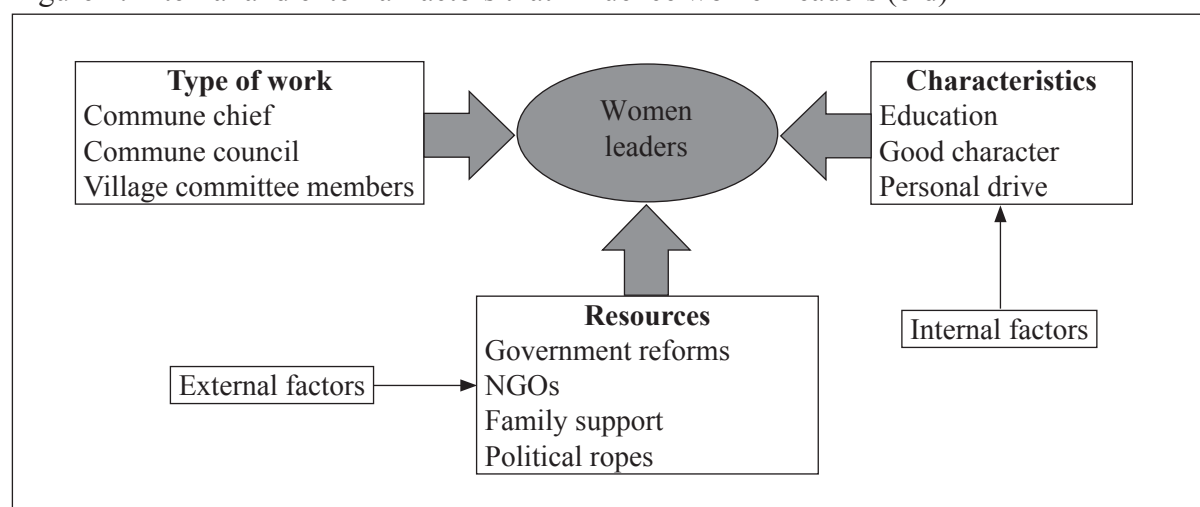
Sources: Ebihara, 1968; Kim and Öjendal, 2011, 2012; Ledgerwood and Vijghen, 2002; Lilja, 2006; Maffii, 2011; Silaka, 2011; Sin, 1995

Figure 2: Practical leadership pathways for women in Cambodia
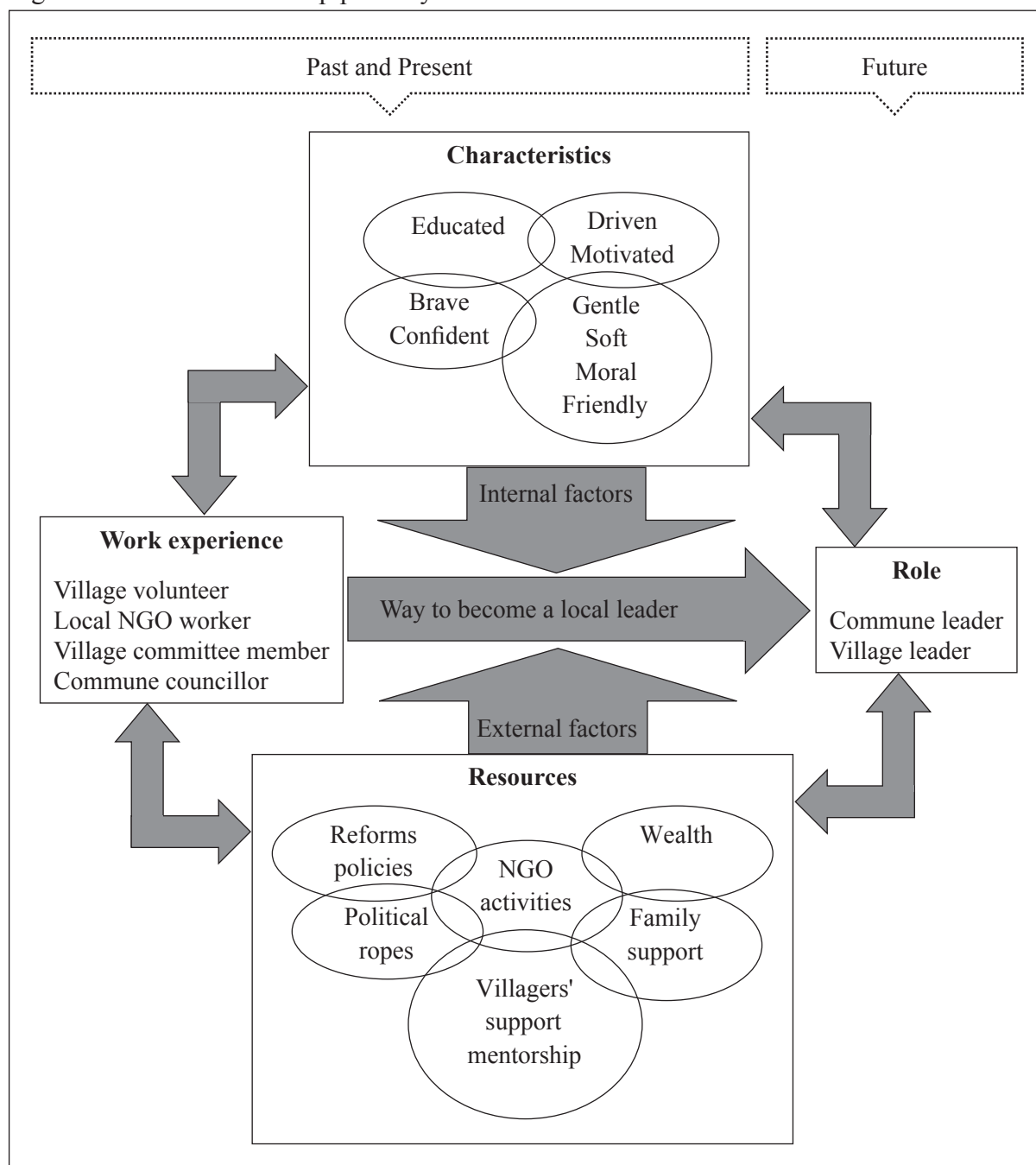
7. Conclusion and recommendations

Lack of women's representation and leadership in Cambodia not only exacerbates their continuing exclusion from political affairs and consequent disempowerment, but also slows down local development. There has not been a leadership model to guide Cambodian women aspiring to be local leaders nor has there been enough academic effort to understand the complexity and challenges Cambodian women face in their quest for leadership. This paper has focused on the success of nine women local leaders in the country's north-eastern provinces to develop a leadership model for women interested in participating in local politics. This model (see Figure 2) unites three important themes—work experience, internal and external factors—interwoven and linked with past and present life experiences and relationships.

Women seeking leadership positions should understand that their work experience is very important. Indeed, it provides a solid foundation of evidence that can propel them towards leadership. In particular, women need to accrue work experience that is relevant to local development, proves their ability to deal with complex issues and allows them to build rapport with local people. Their work experience is a stepping stone which allows them to progress to higher leadership positions. In addition, women need to develop their inner qualities ("internal factors") and secure ("external") supports.

Internal factors include education, personal drive, bravery/confidence and people skills (i.e. the gentle/soft/moral/friendly nature Cambodian women are traditionally expected to embody). Together, these factors form a driving force which both prompts and qualifies women to be leaders. First, women must be educated so that as leaders they can fulfill the duties associated with commune and village affairs. In the context of leadership at commune and village level, women do not necessarily need a higher education. A minimum education which enables them to read and write is enough. Second, a woman's personal drive is the powerful motivation that pushes her to take part in helping her community, especially in matters confronting villagers such as injustice, poverty, violence and conflict, and particularly issues affecting women and children. Next, women leaders need courage and confidence to realise their goals. Lastly, they need good people skills, characterised by the gentle, soft, moral and friendly nature commonly demanded by followers and male counterparts, whose expectations are partly shaped by Cambodian culture. Developing these inner qualities takes time and not all women are able to put them into practice, but external supports also provide incentives and opportunities for women to take up leadership positions.

External factors play important roles in increasing women's participation in local politics. Government reforms and policies, the organisation of civil society, personal resources (wealth), family support, support from villagers and others, and ties with political parties are the chief factors. First, women are important key players in helping families and entire communities escape poverty. Cognisant of this, government has passed laws and implemented policies and strategies to reduce gender disparities at local level. Women are being given more opportunities to represent their communes and villages. For instance, village committees should comprise at least one woman. There are many challenges facing women entering local arenas, however. Several NGOs have stepped in and helped speed up government interventions so that more women take part in local politics. Through NGO programs, such as those run by VFP, KADOC and Silaka, women are trained in leadership skills and their confidence built.

Women leaders are expected to be relatively wealthy because that means they will have the time and resources to help other villagers. Furthermore, women leaders need support from their families in managing household chores and taking care of children. The support of villagers, other female leaders and male co-workers is necessary to encourage new women leaders and keep them engaged in commune and village affairs. Lastly, political parties act to some extent as the gatekeepers, either keeping women out or opening the way for them to join in local politics. This emphasises the need for women to network with party members so that they stand a better chance of being selected as candidates for local political committees. Networking is one of the most important skills leaders can develop. These factors give women time and space to move outside of their home where, traditionally and culturally, they are meant to be busy in the kitchen and with their children.

In brief, this study has developed new leadership pathways for women (Figure 2). It provides a clear structure and identifies key themes and subthemes that can help bring Cambodian women to significant positions in local politics. To increase women's participation in local politics in the north-eastern provinces of Cambodia, this study makes the following recommendations:

- Women's education and engagement:

  ○ The educational attainment of the women leaders interviewed for this study may be low, but nonetheless it is better than none. The ability to read and write can be sufficient for women to set out on a leadership career.

  ○ Women should get involved in formal and informal local meetings to build relationships with villagers and to network with others who might help them attain leadership positions in the future. If women dare to make changes, then their life and the lives of those they serve will change for the better.

- Family support: Women leaders and those aspiring to be leaders need the support of husbands and family, particularly in sharing the burden of daily household responsibilities.

- Villagers, party members, commune and village-level workers should continue their support and encouragement so that women are motivated to move on in their leadership career.

- Government:

  ○ Policy should be adjusted so that each commune office has at least two women commune councillors. This means that more women would be nominated and elected at the local level.

  ○ Measures should be put in place to create an enabling environment in which women may work for a village or commune while also looking after their family, running a business and/or holding down a job.

  ○ Villagers, particularly men, should be educated about the importance of allowing women to become leaders and of women's vital role in local sustainable development efforts. Local meetings and media would be practical communication channels.

  ○ Additional funds should be allocated to help women leaders carry out their work effectively.

- Civil society:

  ○ NGOs should continue building women's capacity, confidence, administrative skills, conflict mediation skills and communication skills so that they can interact with and lead villagers and male co-workers.

  ○ Given that all relations in Cambodian society are organised hierarchically, there is still much advocacy work to be done to promote equal rights between men and women, especially in remote areas.

To sum up, without necessary supports in place, women will continue to struggle to raise themselves into leadership positions. The framework illustrated in Figure 2 provides a blueprint for women to develop their own individual plan for how they will attain a leadership role and identifies what factors enable women to achieve their leadership potential.

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