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GATEKEEPERS IN LOCAL POLITICS: POLITICAL PARTIES IN CAMBODIA AND THEIR GENDER POLICY

Kim Sedara and Joakim Öjendal
With the assistance of Chhoun Nareth

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Acronyms

CPP	Cambodian People's Party
CCHR	Cambodian Center for Human Rights
Funcinpec	French acronym that can be translated as "National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia"
HRP	Human Rights Party
IP3	Implementation Plan 3
NEC	National Election Committee
NGO	Non-government organisation
NRP	Norodom Ranariddh Party
SRP	Sam Rainsy Party
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

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ABSTRACT

Gender issues have become a part of mainstream Cambodian politics over the last decade, and gender-neutral electoral systems have been developed in cooperation between donors and government. Female representation has been achieved primarily through direct and indirect elections at different levels. And although Cambodia is a male-dominated culture in a patrimonial society, attention has turned to attracting female voters, and the strategic importance of female leaders and role models is being slowly realised. Predictably, driven by popular demand, gender issues have become a part of mainstream Cambodian politics over the last decade.

Political parties are the key determining forces in shaping gendered local political representation. *Thus, this study aims to explore the situation of women in political parties in Cambodia by focusing on the research question: How do the parties perform locally and what do they do to promote gender equality internally?* In answering this research question, two critical issues are empirically examined: political party policy and women's political articulation and influence in local politics.

The report comes up with two main findings. First, women are under-represented in local politics in spite of marked progress in the last decade and strong policies from all major actors. It appears that there are major and elusive impediments to a more thorough change towards gender-equal political representation. Second, while local politics may be the most accessible political arena for women, experience from other countries in similar predicaments suggests that also here, the party system constitutes a conservative bloc of patriarchal resistance to greater gender equality.

1

INTRODUCTION

When the Cold War ended in the early 1990s and intense efforts were put into resolving outstanding conflicts and reconstituting Cambodia, it had suffered from almost three decades of violent conflicts, social fragmentation and political turmoil. The ensuing UN intervention aimed at introducing a liberal political system as a way to democratise and reconstruct Cambodia as a polity and a society (UN 1991; Öjendal & Lilja 2009). Theoretically, a self-evident part of every liberal system is the equal rights of all individuals, implying the full right for women to engage in politics. In spite of struggling with transition to democratic rule (Heder 2005; McCargo 2005)—and definitely with gender equality—winning votes became important for the political parties. And although Cambodia is a male-dominated culture in a patrimonial society (Ledgerwood 1992; Pak 2011), women's votes became attractive, and the strategic importance of female leaders and role models are being slowly realised. Predictably, driven by popular demand, gender issues have become a part of mainstream Cambodian politics over the last decade, and gender-neutral electoral systems have been developed in cooperation between donors and government (National Programme for Sub-National Democratic Development 2011; Kim & Öjendal 2012; Lilja 2007).

From a very unfavourable point of departure, there is distinct statistical progress towards political gender equality. Female representation has been achieved primarily through direct and indirect elections at different levels; in particular, decentralisation and the establishment of locally elected commune councils have proved important (Kim & Öjendal 2012). The proportion of women elected to commune councils increased from 8 percent in 2002 to 14.6 percent in 2007 and almost 18 percent in 2012. Deconcentration under the 2008 Organic Law has shown some modest progress, women making up 10.1 percent of municipal and provincial councillors and 12.6 percent of district/khan councillors (*ibid*).

Although the ratio of women in government institutions has increased gradually, it remains very low. The inclusion of women in politics still faces significant challenges where change is partly resisted and historical social structures prevail. Political change occurs across the board, but gendered aspects of inclusion, participation and equal treatment are possibly one of the more difficult changes to achieve, trapped as they are in patrimonial politics, electoral systems and party politics (Hughes & Un 2007, 2011; Öjendal & Kim 2006). For example, a recent study (Kim & Öjendal 2012: 133) points out that the effectiveness of the promotion of women in politics hinges largely on the political will and organisation of the political parties. A study by Lara Griffith (2010: 7-8) states:

> Structural bias in electoral and political party processes limits women's political participation. The electoral law lacks specific measures to redress discrimination and advance women's participation, while the electoral system gives political parties a dominant gatekeeper role. Parties lack the necessary capacities and policies to increase women's participation, with women marginalized from key decision-making processes.

Various studies on gender and democratic reforms in Cambodia indicate that policy commitments remain unimplemented and/or nested in high politics involving vested interests counterproductive for gender equality. The possible exception, and what many women themselves consider as the natural "entrance point" to working politically, is the local level

(Kim & Öjendal 2012; Griffith 2010; Thon *et al.* 2009; National Programme for Sub-National Democratic Development 2012).

All the major political parties involved in elections in Cambodia have distinct policy commitments to enhance gender equality in local politics, and there is now a mandatory position for women in the village committee. Moreover, commune councils are where the biggest increase in female participation has been experienced, which are also where women feel it is realistically possible to enter formal politics (Kim & Öjendal 2012). In spite of this, no council that we know of is even close to gender-equal representation, and all are having difficulty in realising their policies of more equal composition. Of course, the key dynamic to achieve this rests not with the councils themselves, but rather with the political parties.

To state the point of departure for this report, gender equality is tentatively taking place and being promoted in policy, but the creation of a gender-neutral political environment cannot be taken for granted. While there are many socio-political explanations for this, the political parties seem to be occupying the central role as gatekeeper and simultaneously being the possible agents of change. Against this background, we will study how the political parties develop gendered policies and cope with the recruitment, promotion and inclusion of women in local political bodies. Below we will review the theoretical underpinnings for such a query.

1.1. Theoretical Underpinnings

The World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development begins with the question "Why does gender equality matter for development?" and quotes the definition of development used by Amartya Sen, who sees development as a process of expanding freedoms equally for everyone, and as such gender equality is an objective in its own right. The report further states that gender equality is "smart economics" for three reasons: first, because if women have equal access to education and economic opportunities, there will be a benefit for societal productivity; second, improving women's status and well-being feeds directly into other development outputs; and third and most relevant for this study, "leveling the playing field—where women and men have equal chances to become socially and politically active, make decisions, and shape policies—is likely to lead over time to more representative, and more inclusive, institutions and policy choices and thus to a better development path" (World Bank 2012). And without doubt, we claim, it would lead to a deeper democracy.

The success or failure of policies for women's participation in politics largely depend on the electoral system, access to decision-making, the political will of leaders and sufficient financial resources (Sacchet 2005; UNDP 2007). More precisely, experiences from other countries have indicated the centrality of political parties as gatekeepers for women accessing political positions (Lovenduski 2010; Freeman 2010). This is especially true when candidates are elected from a party list; in such a system, if women are not put in the top positions on party lists, they will not make it into political bodies. As Norris and Lovenduski (2010) remind us, in most countries the recruitment of political candidates is governed primarily by internal party rules, rather than by law. Hence, there is a need to understand the incentives and the impediments for political parties to put women on the list.

In order to understand how parties differ in their treatment of gender-equal recruitment and in their strategies to promote female representation, we need, Lovenduski (2010) claims, to look at how parties develop policy and how they are organised internally. It is not very daring to assume that institutional aspects of parties—such as internal functioning, culture, history, ambitions—serve as key constraints on women's representation in decision-making and hence in political influence and power. Some take it further, viewing political parties as the

principal instruments of patriarchy, being highly efficient in marginalising women in politics and government; it is claimed that political parties generally continue to be spaces of male dominance, where women continue to face serious obstacles (regardless of whether or not the electorate desires more women in leading positions). It seems that the leaders of political parties want women as voters and workers but not as leaders or decision makers (Lovenduski 2010; Norris & Lovenduski 2010).

However, political parties remain necessary in a multiparty democracy, and the parties nominate their candidates; voters choose parties whose nominated candidates then ascend to political positions. Hence, there is no way around women having to gain trust, status and power within the parties in order to gain political positions and influence (Ahikire 2009). A wide range of inhibiting factors are identified in the literature. In a patrimonial culture without strong incentives for change, party leaders may choose women to organise and educate other women, being visible for attracting female votes, but the women they choose are those without competing claims on political power (Freeman 2010). Another view (Norris & Lovenduski 2010) is of a possible relation between the degree of formal processes inside the party and the number of women in electable positions. There is commonly also a persistent male discourse in which women are automatically seen as not "competent" unless they display extraordinary capacity (Öjendal & Kim 2006).

Overall, there appear to be three levels of working for increasing the proportion of women in decision-making positions within parties. In Lovenduski's (2010: 84) words:

> *Rhetorical* strategies whereby women's claims are accepted in campaign platforms … *Positive or affirmative action* in which special training is offered to aspirant women, targets are set for the inclusion of women and considerable encouragement, including financial assistance, is given to enable women to put themselves forward to be considered … *positive discrimination* in which places are reserved for women on decision-making bodies, on candidate slates, on shortlists. In addition, special women's committees with significant powers may be set up parallel to or within existing party decision-making structures and institutions.

These strategies seem to reflect well women's ascendance—or the lack thereof—in political parties in Cambodia (Kim & Öjendal 2012). In some cases women have taken up positions in leadership structures of political parties; this has not automatically translated into a greater political influence. In some cases women are nominally elected to leadership roles that are in fact performed by men (Sacchet 2005). Moreover, according to UNDP (2007), money is a prerequisite for competing in most political systems. Financial resources often determine whose voice is most heard. The financing of representative political institutions often reflects and even worsens gender imbalances (UNDP 2007: 5).

Theoretically, this boils down to issues of localised discourses and the political economy of gendered change, and to some extent reflections on the impact of electoral systems and the party system. Empirically it questions if and how parties include and promote women internally, what obstacles are overcome in the process, and what the results are.

1.2. The Central Research Question and Its Operationalisation

Considering the above, and drawing on the topical literature on Cambodia (Kim & Öjendal 2012; Griffith 2010; Thon *et al.* 2009; Öjendal & Kim 2006; Lilja 2007; 2009) and documented experiences from other countries (Lovenduski 2010; Ahikire 2009; Freeman 2010; Goetz 2010; Norris & Lovenduski 2010; UNDP 2007; Sacchet 2005), political parties are the key determining

forces in shaping gendered local political representation. Accepting these postulates, this study aims to explore the situation of women in political parties in Cambodia by focusing on how the parties perform locally and what they do to promote gender equality internally.

A number of aspects of gender equality in local politics will be in focus and treated empirically. These are:

1. Policies: What efforts are there to involve women in party work? Are current policies conducive to including women in meaningful roles in party politics?
2. Recruitment and selection criteria of women: What are the party's criteria for women to be political candidates? To what extent can female candidates match these criteria?
3. Decision-making. Are women given opportunities to make decisions? Are women's voices considered by the leadership?
4. Given that women's "competence" is often questioned,[1] capacity building is required to correct the imbalance: What efforts are made to enhance women's "competence"? Is capacity systematically generated?
5. Financial resources and the role of money: Are there any financial resources earmarked for women's affairs by the parties? Are resources spent on enhancing women's significance in party politics?

By empirically addressing these issues, we aim to illuminate the role political parties play in promoting gender of local politics, hence addressing the core problem of female under-representation in local political bodies.

1.3. Methodological Approaches

In the empirical investigation, we will include all the political parties of national significance, namely: Cambodian People's Party (CPP), Funcinpec, Sam Rainsy Party (SRP), Norodom Ranariddh Party (NRP) and Human Rights Party (HRP). Of these, the CPP is dominant and has a much larger presence than any of the others; hence it appears more frequently in our interviews. At the time of writing, the SRP and HRP are merging, but will here be treated as different entities. Funcinpec and the NRP are on the verge of insignificance and have been given minor attention.

The study begins with a desk review of relevant literature on gender in Cambodia, general theory and experiences from other countries and the publicly stated policies of political parties on gender. We apply a qualitative approach and in our fieldwork use semi-structured interviews and in-depth participatory observation.

Four provinces were chosen as sites for this study: Kompong Cham, Kratie, Takeo and Battambang. Two communes in two districts were selected in each province, where one commune is headed by a female and the other is chaired by a male. There were two reasons for selecting these communes: our previous study on gender and local governance reform (Kim & Öjendal 2012) included fieldwork in four of these communes and built good rapport with, and access to, local actors; the four corresponding communes were chosen in order to widen the scope, enhance representativity and contrast the four original female-run communes.

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[1] Women's "competence" is often a "catch 22" argument: women are not "competent" because they are not experienced, and they are not experienced because they are never considered "competent". Women's stated lack of competence will not be taken at face value in this report.

Another justification is the geographical spread: Takeo in the south, Battambang in the north-west, Kompong Cham central and Kratie in the north-east. The latter two are neighbouring provinces, but we chose them because Kompong Cham is the most populous province, and one Kratie commune is headed by a female from the opposition.

The informants were to a large extent senior officials of political parties at all levels. Provincial interviewees were governors or deputy governors (mainly female deputy governors), and provincial councillors from different political parties. We likewise interviewed district governors or deputy governors from different political parties, and in the communes we interviewed a majority of the councillors, naturally belonging to different political parties. Gender balance was sought among the informants.

Obviously, this study does not claim national representation of gender local politics. Of 1633 communes/sangkats in the country, only eight were chosen for this study.

2

GENDER AND PARTY POLICY

The Cambodian constitution provides equal protection for citizens of both sexes. Article 31 affirms: "Every Khmer citizen shall be equal before the law, enjoying the same rights, freedom and fulfilling the same obligations regardless of race, color, sex, language, religious belief, political tendency, birth origin, social status, wealth or other status". Article 35 affirms equal political rights for men and women: "Khmer citizens of either sex shall be given the right to participate actively in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the nation." There is no limitation in the constitution on the right of women to participate in politics.

Moreover, women are recognised as "the backbone of the economy and society" in the government's Rectangular Strategy for Growth, Employment, Equity and Efficiency, Phase II. This strategy commits the government to empowering women by increasing the number of female teachers and girls enrolled in formal education, improving the presence of women in public administration and decision-making positions at all levels of government, developing women's capacity to participate in commune council elections, providing more job opportunities for women, protecting women's rights and preventing violence against women. Further, ambitions to reduce gender disparities can be seen in the National Strategic Development Plan and the Cambodia Millennium Development Goals, which aim to "put in place effective measures to remove barriers that women face, and increase opportunities for women to fully participate and benefit from development" and to reduce "gender gaps in education at all levels". Hence, government policies are not just about establishing rights, but also about pro-actively promoting women throughout society, including in politics.

Provincial, district and commune administrations have also undergone substantial structural transformation through decentralisation and deconcentration. Gender has been mainstreamed within the structure of sub-national administrations. Provincial, district and commune women and children committees were established to look after the well-being of women and children. In the Implementation Plan 3 of the decentralisation reform, the overall goal of the gender strategy is to achieve a gender-responsive local government and local development that promotes gender equality and women's empowerment in all aspects. This includes equal participation and access to leadership and decision-making positions, resources and services (National Programme for Sub-National Democratic Development 2011: 108).

All the way from the constitution to commune and village administration, policy encourages the role of women, including their political involvement, displaying an awareness of structural change in society. However, some claim that despite the efforts to develop gender equality, gender mainstreaming and policies promoting gender in all sectors by the government and donors, there is little change (Prak & Schuette 2007). A delay and/or discrepancy between policy and its implementation is not in itself abnormal.

The lived reality of women's political engagement to a large extent displays the opposite pattern. A number of scholars have explored male dominance within society as well as the symbolic constructs that are assigned to gender identities (Ebihara 1968; Martin 1994; Ledgerwood 1990). In Cambodian political culture it is common for women to be considered weak, vulnerable and subordinate to men (Lilja 2007). Historically, women have not been expected to take controversial political positions or to act independently and publicly (Öjendal & Kim 2006; Derks 2008; Ledgerwood 2006). Cambodian women are sometimes portrayed as shy, honest, gentle, active, hard working, humble and unenlightened (Ledgerwood 1992). In

politics, women are frequently seen as publicly submissive to the male hierarchy rather than active and participatory (Frieson 2001); men are considered political actors while women are seen as non-political (Lilja 2007).

The discrepancy is obvious, and it is also officially recognised in the government's five-year plan that challenges remain in the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women (Ministry of Women's Affairs 2009). Representation of women in the executive branch of government is low, particularly in senior national decision-making positions and provincial and district administrations. Another stated challenge is women's participation in decision-making and women's lack of experience in leadership and management in politics and public office. Capacity development for women is reported as limited (*ibid*).

Many studies have indicated that women play significant and recognised roles in "minor fields" such as household economy and social welfare (Ebihara 1968; Ledgerwood 1996; Frieson 2001; McGrew *et al.* 2004). More importantly, gender relations are not static but are constantly negotiated in the face of modernisation, societal change and global influence (Öjendal & Kim 2006; Kent 2010), as in other modernising Asian societies (Rydstrom 2010). The introduction of liberalism in Cambodia in the early 1990s, and the overall change in the political climate—making politics less power- and violence-infested—allows women more easily to assume leadership roles and to operate within the public sphere without necessarily challenging the prevailing political culture (Thon *et al.* 2009; Öjendal & Kim 2006; Ovesen *et al.* 1996: Derks 2008).

In spite of change, many factors still undermine women's participation and influence in politics, emanating from history and tradition. Although female leadership is more acceptable, popular demand from society and support from men for women's leadership and increased participation in general are still limited (Thon et al.2009). The pattern of distinct progress is accompanied by massive resistance, creating a dual pattern:

> Cambodia has made remarkable progress in establishing the institutional arrangements for mainstreaming gender equality objectives through the government and donor consultative machinery … but the actual impact on sector policies and budget is still weak and a broader based constituency for changes needs to be developed, within government, among donors and with civil society (Prak & Schuette 2007: 10).

Moreover, empirical studies on women's engagement in politics have indicated that although the number of women has increased gradually in different government institutions, women lack real decision-making power, resources and the ability to articulate their role and responsibility, rendering women disproportionately dependent on the party system for their further involvement (Kim & Öjendal 2012; Thon *et al.* 2009; Lilja 2007; National Programme for Sub-National Democratic Development 2012).

Also, the commune and village—where access to politically influential positions is relatively easy—harbour continuing limitations and biases against women expressing their views, taking part in community affairs or standing for office:

> Women are not ranked high when they choose to stand for office, in needing to mobilize financial resources to support their own campaigns, in being refused by their spouses to take part in community activities (Catalla & Kong 2009: v).

Before we dig deeper into gendered local politics, the paper will review some statistics and the contemporary gender policies of the major parties.

2.1. Political Parties' Gender Policies: History, Structure and Organisation

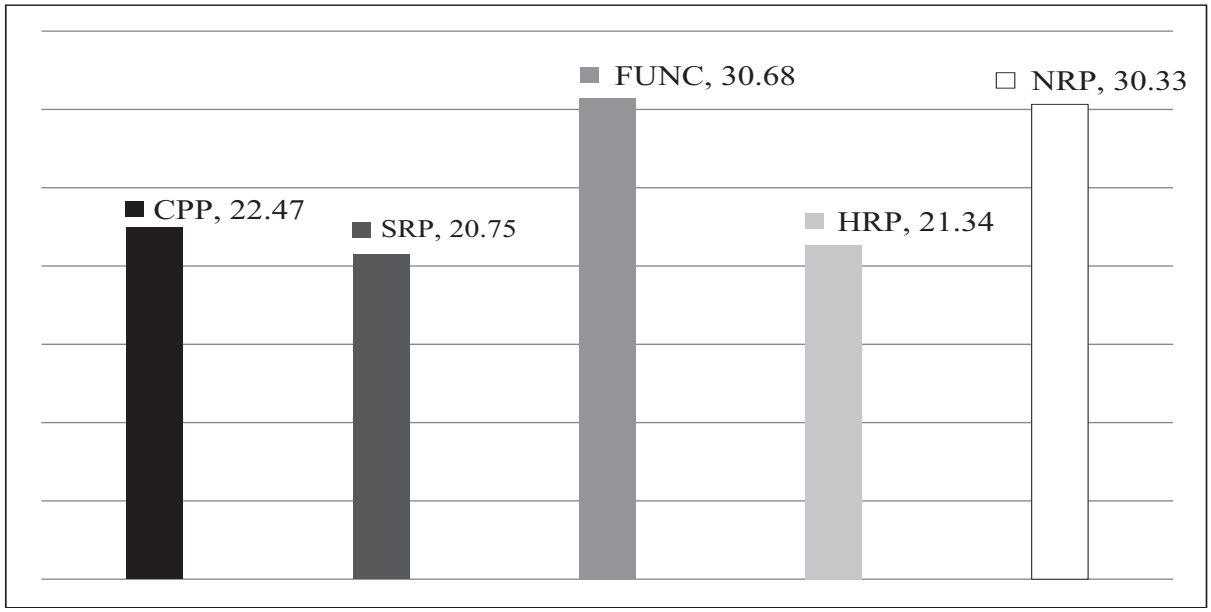
Below are the figures for female candidates from each political party, elected female councillors from each political party and average percentage of council candidate lists contesting the 2012 commune elections, plus women elected as commune councillors in 2002, 2007 and 2012.

Table 1.The Proportion of women elected to the National Assembly in 1993, 1998, 2003, 2008, 2013

Year	National Assembly (% of women)
1993	5.00
1998	12.00
2003	19.00
2008	21.00
2013	20.33

Source: National Election Committee (NEC) data (RGC 2010b:26)
CCHR press release- 10th September 2013

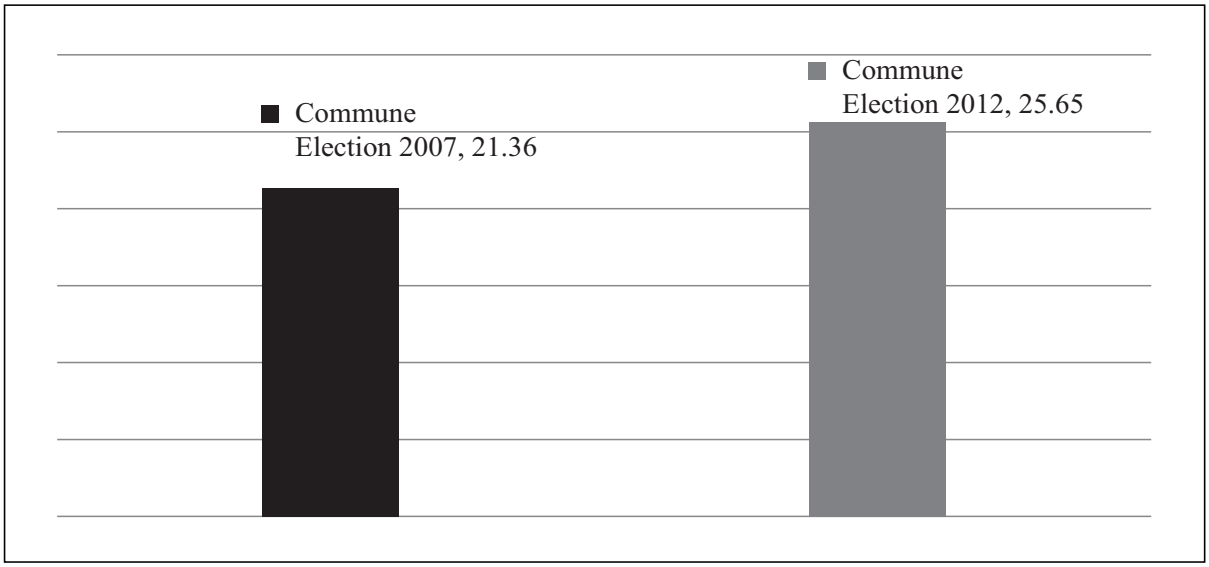
Figure 1. Percentage of Female Candidates in Commune Election 2012



Source: NEC 2012

Figure 1 displays the percentage of female candidates nominated by each political party for the 2012 commune election. However, the significance of the percentage is doubtful because, in the electoral party list system, more significant is how high women are put on the list. If female candidates are not ranked near the top in the party list, they will not be elected.

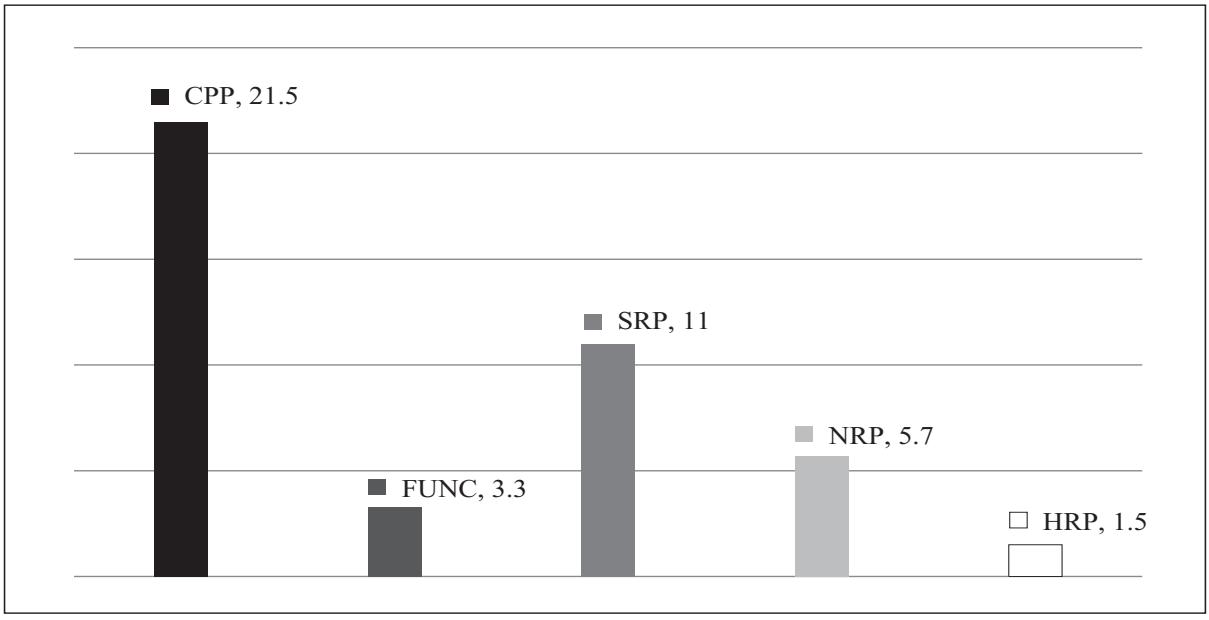
Figure 2. Average Percentage of Females in Candidate Lists Contesting Council Elections



Source: NEC 2012

Figure 2 shows the average percentage of females in the candidate lists from all political parties in the commune election in 2007 and 2012.

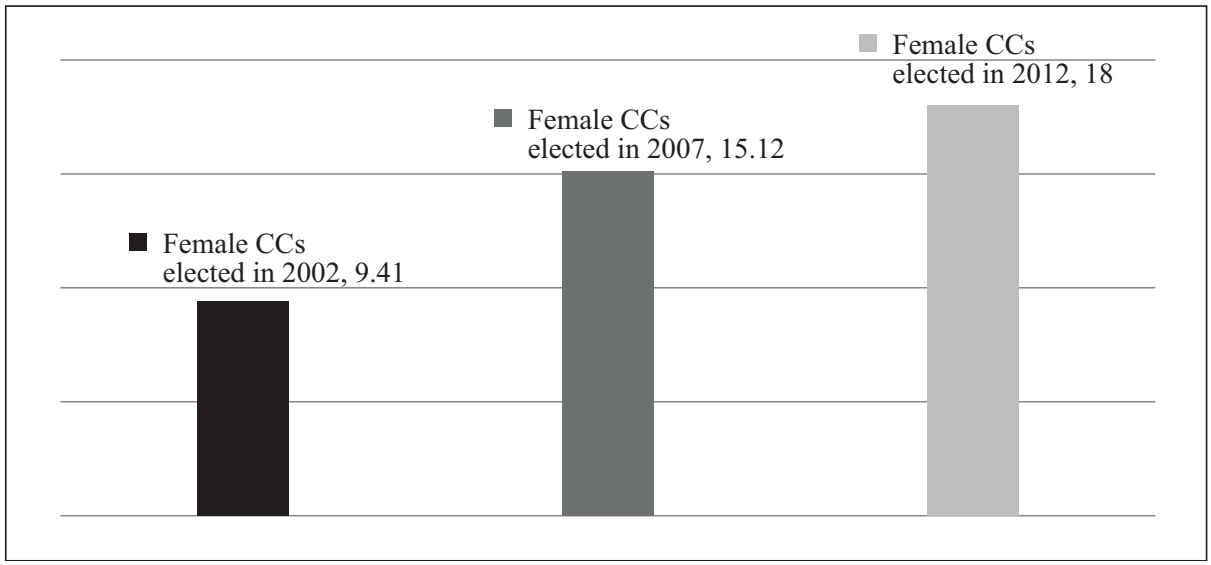
Figure 3. Percentage of Elected Female CCs from Each Political Party in Commune Elections 2012



Source: NEC 2012

Figure 3 shows that average percentage of female candidates from each political party that have been elected and served in the commune council by 2012.

Figure 4. Women Elected as Commune/Sangkat Councillors, 2012, 2007 and 2012



Source: NEC 2012

Let us now briefly review the background and gender policy of each political party involved in local government (commune council).

The Cambodian People's Party originates in the national movement of the Cambodian people for independence. With Vietnamese assistance, the (now) CPP overthrew the Khmer Rouge regime and started to rebuild Cambodia. Since 1979 it has remained in power (except during power struggles in 1992-97). The party's policy is to strengthen and expand multiparty liberal democracy, support free and fair elections, protect and promote all rights of citizens, uphold and practise Buddhism and strengthen freedom of the press. It has also been sharply criticised for not living up to its policies (Heder 2005; McCargo 2005).

The CPP claims that it has a broad gender equality agenda in that it: continues to raise gender awareness in commune/sangkat development; seeks to increase the number of women in decision-making in commune/sangkat development planning and governance; generates more chances for work and employment to improve women's economic condition through skills training and retraining; strengthens partnership between the state and the private sector and civil society to support women entrepreneurs; and provides job markets for women. More broadly, it says it works for more formal and non-formal education for women and girls, especially those coming from poor and/or ethnic families; promotes women's social and moral values and family; and strives to increase harmony in the family and society. Finally, it is eager to strengthen legal protection for women and girls by consolidating the implementation of the law against household violence, and law to suppress human trafficking and sexual exploitation and related legal tools.

The Sam Rainsy Party was originally founded under the name of Khmer Nation Party in early November 1995 under the leadership of Sam Rainsy, the former minister of economy and finance. The party name was changed in 1998 after a legal battle over the right to the name. The SRP is the primary opposition party, with seats in the Senate, National Assembly and many sub-national councils. Its gender policy contains a commitment to gender equality and women's rights and leadership roles within the party as well as in all levels of government. There is a four-point action plan: 1) removing restrictions on women's political participation, including restrictions on women's suffrage and candidacy; 2) increasing the number of women

national, provincial and local elected officials; 3) ensuring that political parties include women in meaningful leadership positions and in meaningful numbers; and 4) encouraging greater participation of women in government decision-making and advocating legislation that enshrines full equality of men and women.

Funcinpec is an acronym for the *French Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Independent, Neutre, Pacifique, et Cooperatif*—"National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia". It is a royalist party that traces its roots to Norodom Sihanouk, the former king, prime minister and head of state between 1941 and 1970. The party played a critical role during the UN intervention in 1992-93, winning the national election and forming a coalition government with the CPP. Since the 1998 national election, Funcinpec has gradually been losing popularity because of difficulties challenging the CPP and various internal problems. Currently, the party has seats in the National Assembly and commune councils. The party claims to have initiated strong affirmative action for women in politics. Women are playing, and should be encouraged to play, a critical role in politics and social, cultural, and economic development (interview with Tep Nonary (deputy secretary general) and Phan Sophy on 5 April 2012).

The Human Rights Party was founded in 2007. Its political platform is for a legal checks-and-balances system, changing the culture of one-man rule. The party leadership is elected at a convention. Its gender policy aims to promote women's and children's rights and effectively prevent human trafficking and eradicate drugs and other social problems, also reaching out to restore social morality.

Among all the political parties, overall gender policies are strong; all the parties seem committed to empower women and encourage their political participation. However, the gender policies are broad and elusive. There are problems of gender equality because of the failure to implement relevant policies. The CPP and SRP have the clearest policies on gender.

3

FINDINGS FROM EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

Below, the paper will describe the actual implementation of gender equality policy as seen from the parties involved along the indicators stated above, namely: 1) the overall policy implementation of the political parties, such as percentage of women and affirmative action; 2) recruitment and ranking of female candidates; 3) decision-making power of women; 4) targeted capacity building; and 5) available financial resources for the purpose.

3.1. Gender Policies: Real, but Not

Sub-national officials, both men and women, say that the role of political parties is important for gender equality. All political parties aim high by setting their ideal percentage of female candidates in the electoral list above 20 percent. And all the political parties that we talked to expressed strong commitment to and appreciation for increased involvement of women in local politics. Moreover, all parties involved in sub-national government recognise that contemporary Cambodia's political climate has changed, and that there is a marked improvement, acceptance and appreciation of women aspiring to positions inside the parties. However, many constraints remain.

Although there is no official quota (or even official recommendation) for inclusion of female candidates, each political party has its own informal goal. This is a bit random, however, and the stated percentage varies even inside the same party from one province to another. The following quotes give examples of this confused picture. A female CPP commune chief in Battambang province said:

> The CPP intention is to have 30 percent women in the candidate list. However, in this commune we have four female candidates out of a total of 16 CPP candidates for the upcoming commune election (female commune chief from CPP, Battambang province, 28 February 2012).

The stated ambition for most parties in most provinces seems to range from 20 to 30 percent. Some would aim higher, said a CPP female district councillor in Battambang:

> The CPP gender policy is clear that we aim to reach 30-35 percent of women engaged in politics at all levels [in our province]. I think this percentage reflects the agenda of the government. However, this 30-35 percent is high and hard to reach in reality. For example, in this district we have the highest ratio, but it is still only 20 percent. It is easier said than done (district councillor from CPP, Battambang province, 29 February 2012).

Policy commitments remain unbent, though. A strong message on gender policy and CPP commitment was delivered by a female provincial councillor in Kompong Cham province:

> The CPP is the main and ruling party in the government. It pays serious attention to gender issues, and, as a result, we see that equality is moving forward very well through mainstreaming and better understanding of gender issues in our society. Our top leader, the prime minister, values gender equality greatly, and at the sub-national level we implement his policy advice seriously. The CPP recognises this as the backbone of our society and in all sectors of the government (provincial councillor, CPP, Kompong Cham province, 26 March 2012).

The main opposition party, the SRP, has a strong commitment on gender as well, but in reality there is an even greater challenge. Two male district councillors from the SRP in Takeo province explained:

> The structure and policy on gender of the SRP are really good. We appreciate and value gender equality strongly. For example, some top leaders in the party are women, such as H.E. Tioulong Saumura and H.E. Mu Sochua. However, in reality it is not easy to realise the policy locally because the SRP is an opposition and we are suppressed by the CPP … so women are reluctant to join the opposition (district councillors from SRP, Takeo, 20 March 2012).

While historically a lack of security in Cambodia has been described as a deterrent to female inclusion in politics (Kim & Öjendal 2012), the pressure on opposition parties likewise provides a real, constructed or imagined obstacle for women. This seems to grow into a party slogan. A male SRP provincial councillor in Kratie province expressed his view on gender policy in his party:

> Talking about gender equality in the SRP in this province, our party has a clear agenda and policy that we are striving for gender equality in the party and are seriously committed on this issue. Our party plans to reach 25 percent and more of women in the political process. This figure is in the policy of the party, but in reality it is extremely difficult to reach this goal because women are afraid to be associated with the SRP and because of family burdens and economic and capacity and other constraints that women face; for example, women themselves are reluctant and lack confidence (provincial councillor, SRP, Kratie province, 24 April 2012).

No doubt opposition parties also have a far smaller pool of engaged women to draw on, not only having fewer followers but also being less well established in rural areas.

A male Funcinpec deputy governor of Kratie province gave his view:

> Gender equality is an important factor that everyone pays attention to, especially Funcinpec. The party put up a woman as prime ministerial candidate and initiated establishing the Ministry of Women's Affairs. The party also encourages women to engage in all sectors and levels of government. Our policy aims to have at least 30 percent of women in the candidate list. However, the actual number of women who will be in local government depends on how many seats our party wins (provincial deputy governor, Funcinpec, Kratie province, 24 April 2012).

He could have added that it depends even more on how high on the list the female candidates are placed. Funcinpec has had dwindling voter support for some time and thus faces a double challenge in simultaneously managing decline and promoting women. Another party with a similar dilemma is the NRP. A male NRP provincial councillor in Kratie described the gender policy in his party in almost exactly the same terms:

> Our party considers gender equality as the core of the party and society. For the upcoming commune election, we aim to have at least 25 percent of female candidates in the list. However, the number of female candidates who will be in the government depends on how many seats our party wins (provincial councillor from NRP, Kratie, 24 April 2012).

Given the overall political situation, it seems unlikely that the gender policies of these parties will be practicable in the near future, emphasising the make-believe character of policies in this field.

A female CPP provincial councillor emphasised that gender equality is not only a technical task, implemented through the candidate list, but starts to have a social impact and is itself affected by social change, and that this is what parties should base their ideas on:

> My personal observation working every day with women in the community is that the role of women and their engagement are really important for our community. This is a good sign that the public appreciates the roles of women, because women are soft and interactive and very approachable by everyone. This is the reason why all the parties—not only the CPP—should consider gender seriously [since it is] beneficial for our society and country (female provincial councillor, CPP, Kratie, 24 April 2012)

As can be seen from this quotation, in spite of a far stronger position for women, and in spite of very pro-female policies, stereotypes persist ("women are soft and interactive and very approachable by everyone") and are internalised among female politicians themselves. As was pointed out in another study (Kim & Öjendal 2012), the number of women on councils and on the candidate list may not be the biggest challenge; the liberation from other stereotypes may be even more difficult and has hardly even begun.

As the quotes from different officials reveal, all political parties value gender equality and seek to enhance the role of women in local politics. All parties have stated policies of aiming to have 20 to 30 percent of women in the electoral list. However, parties are less interested in discussing women's priority on the lists, so even if they achieve the ratio on the list, a smaller number reach the local councils. In defence of the failing policies, there is local consensus that it is difficult to reach the goals since many women are reluctant to engage with politics (possibly because they are not invited), not many women have the capacity (as defined by the male-dominated local party leaderships), there are socially defined family burdens (which men often do not share), and often women are not fully supported by their families (which makes their engagement next to impossible).

3.2. Female Candidates—No 'Competent' Women Available

Given the party-list system defined in the electoral law, recruitment and ranking of females on the candidate list are crucially important; if a woman is ranked at a top spot in the list, there is a high chance that she will be in the council if the party receives popular support. However, according to informants from different parties, female candidates are rarely ranked top in the list. The reasons for this are predominantly stated to be that, first, they have to strategise to win elections and, second, the political economy surrounding candidate lists. The former is biased against women because it is still widely believed that men are more attractive as local leaders, and the latter is biased against women because women have less money and fewer political connections.

There are also intra-party formal—though not necessarily transparent—procedures at work. The CPP conducts an internal poll to select and rank its commune candidates, looking for popular and qualified candidates. Many CPP activists interviewed said that the initial ranking of candidates largely depends on the internal poll, although the district and provincial party group and the working group make the final decision. Other parties used internal polls as well.

However, the SRP has ceased to do this because of financial and organisational constraints, and the other parties have used but never formalised it.

Each political party says it tries to select candidates based on qualifications and popularity among party members and in the community. A female CPP provincial councillor from Kompong Cham province said:

> The selection of party political candidates for the election is a good process, [both] top down and bottom up. The top just advises the lower levels, the commune and district, with clear guidelines—for example, to seek popular candidates, good performance and commitment to the community etc. Our party has an internal commune poll to identify the popularity of candidates—the ranking and decision are based on the result of the internal poll (female provincial councillor, CPP, Kompong Cham province, 26 March 2012).

Similarly, a male CPP district councillor expressed his view on the selection of female candidates:

> The selection and ranking of female candidates are very difficult. Normally, our party bases selection on the result of the internal poll, but the final decision to be pro-active for supporting women depends on the provincial standing committee of the party. However, the standing committee needs to think of other factors as well. The main criteria are commitment to the party, good performance, good capacity, popularity etc (district councillor, CPP, Kompong Cham province, 26 March 2012).

The ruling party faces difficulties in the recruitment and ranking of female candidates, being torn between a new political situation, central policies and recent insights on one hand, and perceptions of competence, local networking and old leadership style on the other. A male district governor in Kratie province explained:

> The female CPP candidates are ranked rather high in the list. Unfortunately, in this district, there are no female candidates ranked first because we are facing difficulties finding female candidates who have a strong commitment to politics, qualified to be local leaders. This is because most women are not interested in politics, having no capacity or education and having a lot of responsibilities in the family (district governor, CPP, Kratie province, 24 April 2012).

The qualification requirements for political candidates are remarkably similar; each party strives for popular and qualified candidates, being restrained by the conservative nature of local politics and established networks. A male district councillor from the main opposition party revealed:

> In principle our party wants to have many good female candidates, but it is very difficult because women face many burdens such as family, lack of capacity, intimidation from other parties … As a qualification, we need bravery from the candidates in addition to commitment to the work, a high capacity and of course popularity in the community—though these requirements are difficult to find (district councillor, SRP, Kompong Cham province, 26 March 2012).

Women often need to display competencies additional to those possessed by men; they need to combat irregular qualifications, social stigmas and family issues. A long-serving CPP commune councillor explained the dilemmas of pro-active, pro-women recruitment:

> Ranking depends on the result of the internal poll, in which the leaders of the party have the right to vote. For example, in this commune, 250 active CPP members voted in this internal poll, such as party chief in the commune, village chief, group leaders … The decision is not based only on the report from the commune or village or just the result of the internal poll, but the top leaders also come down to check because sometimes nepotism or corruption within the system might occur. The main factor behind realising the party's policy is [to find those with] the ability, experience, networking and popularity. Capacity or education of candidates is not that important because in politics we have to think who would bring more votes (male commune councillor, CPP, Kratie province, 25 April 2012).

A district deputy governor from Funcinpec in Battambang province expressed, in a similar vein, his view on the recruitment and selection of female candidates:

> We do not have a fixed requirement for each female candidate to be selected for the election list, but we are flexible in the local situation. Our principal requirement would be education, capacity, interest in and commitment to work, popularity in the community and accountability and responsibility to people. However, this is easier said than done. In reality it is extremely hard because it is difficult to find qualified female candidates. Also, we have to compete with other big parties that have resources and popularity, for example the CPP (district deputy governor, Funcinpec, Battambang province, 29 Feb 2012).

Another male Funcinpec district deputy governor offered a similar view:

> The policy of our party strongly favours women engaging in local politics. However, we do not have women at the top of the list because of their lack of qualifications and too small commitment. They are ranked at second place at the highest because at the top of the list they need to be capable, popular and committed and to perform well. Another factor is that women are not politically strategic in campaigns. This is the prime reason that some parties do not put them at the top of the list, since the party is concerned about popularity and gaining votes (district deputy governor, Funcinpec, Battambang province, 1 March 2012).

This informant had not attained the insight that women leaders are broadly asked for (Öjendal & Kim 2006) and that a higher degree of gender equality could benefit the party's popular appeal. For the NRP, the selection and ranking criteria of female candidates are similar to those of other parties, emphasised by its smaller size. A male NRP provincial councillor in Kratie province stated:

> We do have internal selection among permanent party members looking for candidates who are popular and capable of doing the job well, but this is difficult since we do not have many members. We end up putting up the same candidates because our party is small (provincial councillor, NRP, Kratie province, 24 April 2012).

To sum up, all the parties have progressive policies on gender issues and strive to engage women in local politics. However, in reality it is possible only for the major political parties, the CPP and to an extent the SRP, to implement anything resembling the stated policies. Women are rarely ranked at the top of the electoral list since all the parties prioritise winning the election, and they tend to believe that they need a man as a lead figure to do that. Even when women are

allowed in the top positions, there are many secondary constraints. For instance, many women have social burdens involving social, family and economic constraints.

3.3. Decision-Making Power of Women—Democracy as a Problem

The formal decision-making power of women inside parties is among the most important factors for a more gender-equal political environment. Women remain in a small minority among powerful men decision makers. All the political parties involved in the sub-national democratic reforms have developed policies on gender and are seemingly giving priority and commitment to women to reach decision-making positions. As we shall see, decision-making by women is nevertheless constrained by both the predictable factors (male-based structure) and some party-specific ones.

While Khmer culture has a tendency to be centralist and top down, this is definitely true of the organisational structure and subculture of the parties. A female district councillor in Takeo province explained that she does have the power to make decisions during party meetings, but must still get consensus from "the boss":

> As a female elected district councillor, I have the power to make decisions and express my ideas in the meetings of the party, but all of my decisions must be with the consensus from my boss and in line with the party's policy. But my experience is that all of my ideas and decisions are listened to and considered by the party and the council (female district councillor, CPP, Takeo province, 20 March 2012).

This has gender significance, since "the boss" is almost always a man. Other parties describe the same situation. A male Funcinpec district deputy governor described his view on the decision-making power of women:

> Our party has a long history in gender and appreciation of women in politics. In terms of decision-making power of women and policy, we are at the sub-national level and just execute policy from the national level. So we are not sure about this issue (district deputy governor, Funcinpec, Battambang province, 29 Feb 2012).

There are very narrow opportunities for women to reach decision-making positions, and if they do, they nevertheless need to ask some man before implementing decisions, creating an awkward mix of male dominance and top-down structures.

Another paradoxical process that appears frequently in the narratives of informants is that the democratisation of the party inner culture operates against the ascendance of women, who often feel that they are in a minority position and find it almost impossible to "demand" anything or to change their weak power base. This partly contradicts the above argument, but also constitutes a contradiction that is not seen by the actors themselves: centralism and democracy are routinely made compatible in contemporary Cambodia in a hybrid system (Lilja & Öjendal 2009), on all levels. Women tend to end up with the worst mix of these two processes. As regards democratisation, a district councillor from the SRP stated: "… real decision-making power of women is difficult [to achieve] because, in a democratic system, we must base decisions on the voice of the majority, so women are still in a difficult situation since they are a small minority" (district councillor, SRP, Takeo province, 20 March 2012).

Another female commune councillor from the opposition in Takeo province expressed a similar view:

> The actual decision-making power of women remains a real problem because now we base ourselves on the majority even inside the party. So in reality women remain in a minority compared to males … The voice of women is not really considered, so women are still marginalised from the real decision of all kinds of political and democratic reforms (female commune councillor, SRP, Takeo province, 21 March 2012).

Even in the CPP, which has faced critique for their democratisation policies, (Heder 2005; McCargo 2005), the same democratic processes tend to work against women. A female CPP provincial councillor described her situation:

> Decision-making power for women remains a big problem since women are still a minority. This means that we need to change the norms and attitudes mainly among men. When it comes to decision-making power of women, it is still rhetorical commitments in our society, [which is why] government and NGOs must work hard together to change this problem (female provincial councillor, CPP, Takeo province, 21 March 2012).

A female CPP provincial councillor from Kratie province said:

> As for decision-making power, women remain a minority in the leadership of the party. For example, the CPP makes decisions by the standing steering committee—we have 17 members in this committee but only me as a female … saying that political influence [is equal] is hypocritical (female provincial councillor, CPP, Kratie province, 24 April 2012).

Also from the "other side"—males trying to act on calls for a higher degree of gender equality—internal democracy is seen as a problem. Some people at the commune level said that it depends on the party, and that it would need to apply affirmative action. A CPP commune councillor in Kompong Cham said, "… the head of the party must apply more affirmative action and push forward in order to get legitimate support from the majority of men. Only by doing this will the voices of women be considered" (female commune councillor, CPP, Kompong Cham province, 27 March 2012).

Also inside the parties we identified attitudes that women simply are not accepted as leaders, where men do not see female leadership as a real possibility. "To improve this, the male majority must change their attitude, be flexible to the reality and listen to the ideas of women. Whether this will happen remains to be seen" (female provincial councillor, CPP, Kratie province, 24 April 2012).

The other common feature is that women are seen as weak in decision-making, and need to work harder to be assessed as equally competent:

> Women themselves have to put in a lot of effort and commitment and build self-confidence in order to reach their goal. To fight for equality, women can't just wait to see the policy in practice but must make a lot of effort to promote women via education and other capacity building activities (female provincial councillor, CPP, Takeo province, 21 March 2012).

In sum, women still face many difficulties in exercising their decision-making power of women in local politics. Centralism and internal democracy (paradoxically) are aspects of party work that make it difficult to achieve substantial change. To change general attitudes and shift old norms among the men in the party is still a major challenge in terms of women having their

voices considered. The constraints are remarkably similar between parties and provinces. Although structural, some of the issues above can be addressed by building the capacity of women and enhancing their understanding of the political process, a strategic topic to which we now turn.

3.4. Limited Capacity Building for Women in the Parties

If lack of engaged women and low capacity are identified by the parties as constraints, one might assume that they would be keen to address that situation. However, there are almost no capacity-building activities intended for women, nor are there any gender equality reforms initiated by the parties. They provide political guidelines and strategic thinking only. Capacity building on gender issues is overwhelmingly dependent on local and international NGOs, typically in collaboration with the Ministry of Women's Affairs. NGOs and other civil society organisations play a critical role in empowering women and enlightening on gender issues. Interestingly, there is ample space for NGOs and civil society organisations to engage inside political parties. There are, however, only a handful of NGOs working directly with the opposition parties, whereas most of the capacity building programmes must go through the state administration, which is overwhelmingly controlled by the CPP. This to a certain extent marginalises the opposition parties from capacity building.

A SRP district deputy governor brought up several issues and described the situation of capacity building on gender in a comprehensive way:

> Most of the capacity building on gender is provided by NGOs, not much by the party. The reason is that political parties do not have financial and human resources to conduct the training. Of course, when it comes to opportunities for training for women in different political parties, most opportunities are given to women in the ruling party because NGOs must work through the administration of the government and the ruling party has the decision-making power to allocate those opportunities to its members. In each institution this opportunity should be equally shared with all women in different parties (male district deputy governor, SRP, Battambang province, 1 March 2012).

There is virtually no training inside the parties. A male CPP district councillor described the situation:

> Training on gender by a political party rarely takes place because the party does not have the capacity and resources to do it. The party is advising on the political principles and strategy. Most of the training on gender issues is organised by different NGOs (district councillor, CPP, Kompong Cham province, 26 March 2012).

A male SRP commune councillor echoed this:

> For capacity building on gender, we entirely depend on NGOs. Some NGOs work directly with our party, inviting us to attend different workshops or training activities, and some NGOs work on this capacity building in collaboration with government institutions (commune councillor, SRP, Kompong Cham province, 27 March 2012).

Secondly, the fact that capacity building is handed over to NGOs means that there is geographically unequal implementation and, more importantly, a structural issue of who can access these initiatives. A male Funcinpec commune councillor in Kompong Cham province

expressed discontent because the smaller political parties do not have fair access to the training:

> Up until now, our party has not had much access to the capacity building offered by the NGOs on gender issues. A long time ago we received training by an NGO that invited us directly. In the party, we have only monthly and annual meetings—just sharing reports on our activity. The party lacks resources and capacity to offer training on gender. If NGOs invite the authorities directly by channelling invitations to the administration, the small parties like us are excluded because the ruling party will provide these opportunities to their members (commune councillor, Funcinpec, Kompong Cham province, 27 March 2012).

Two SRP male district councillors expressed similar critical views:

> Capacity building and other related opportunities offered by NGOs are mostly given to the ruling party because those NGOs are working directly with the state administration, so the opposition is normally marginalised … NGOs should work or invite the opposition directly for different opportunities for capacity building (district councillors, SRP, Takeo province, 20 March 2012).

Thirdly, and slightly paradoxically, it seems that the available capacity building efforts are highly attractive, though there is generally lukewarm interest from the parties in working on gender issues locally. Although women sometimes are exhausted by the impossibility of achieving a breakthrough on gender issues, capacity building is usually viewed favourably. A female district councillor in Takeo said:

> The capacity of women on gender is improving gradually via training offered by NGOs in collaboration with the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Typically we have received a lot of training organised by NGOs, but mostly the NGOs collaborate with the ministry. We need more capacity building on gender because our capacity is still limited (female district councillor, CPP, Takeo province, 20 March 2012).

Finally, as often is the case in contemporary Cambodia, lower level officials express the most balanced and practical views. A CPP commune chief claimed that capacity building on gender needs to be a collective effort from all relevant agencies:

> To promote gender equality, capacity building on gender for women is very important. As the commune and the party, we cannot do this; it needs to be from the NGOs, government and the party together. All the relevant levels and agencies must come together collectively. The party does not have competence for capacity building on gender issues. The NGOs have done a lot on this issue (commune chief, CPP, Battambang province, 1 March 2012).

The key messages on capacity building on gender in political parties are that parties do not do capacity building, and when NGOs do it, it is not neutral and/or comprehensive. As is clearly expressed by the opposition and smaller parties, opportunities for capacity building are mostly given to the ruling party; hence the opposition and smaller parties do not have equal access. It is also clear, however, that these courses and efforts are attractive locally, and although painfully sluggish, change is going on.

3.5. Financial Resources—Approaching Zero

Lack of financial resources is a key constraint on promoting women inside the parties. Funding is also commonly seen as the backbone for enhancing political gender equality (Sacchet 2005; UNDP 2007). Scarce financial resources lead to slow change, and women are not motivated but are robbed of access to further education and/or financial compensation. The only general funds are accessed through the Ministry of Women's Affairs in collaboration with different international NGOs. There are also some petty funds available within parties and possibly some outside support. Below are descriptions of financial resources for gender equality from local actors.

A CPP female district councillor expressed her view on the financial resources to implement gender policy in the district:

> To get a gender programme to work well, we need clear delegation of decision-making power, technical support and especially financial support. However, so far we have not received any financial support to implement gender activities from the party or the government. The only money we have now is the salary as a district councillor. As a focal person on gender in the party, I must work using my meagre salary (female district councillor, CPP, Battambang province, 29 Feb 2012).

It is clear that there is no comprehensive funding, but instead petty funds from here and there, if that. A CPP male district official described the financial resources on gender:

> So far we do not have any earmarked funds for gender activities, only the salary for councillors from the government and those gender focal persons. The councillors spend their own salary for different gender activities. This is the reason we do not see many activities on gender (district official, CPP, Battambang province, 1 March 2012).

This is true across the board. A SRP male district councillor echoed those views:

> Shortage of financial resources from the party is the major problem hindering our work … The funding on gender [support] from the party is zero. The councillors have to spend their meagre salaries to implement the work for the party, and we deduct 7000 riels per month from our salaries for the provincial party to use for general activities (district councillor, SRP, Kompong Cham, 26 March 2012).

A male SRP commune councillor asked a good question on financial support from the political parties:

> All the political parties appreciate gender equality very strongly as well as other issues related to women and children. For example, in this commune we have a women and children committee that has some small annual funding. But I wonder, if it is so important, why do the parties not spend money to support this gender programme? Currently it is not progressing much due to lack of funds to do the work (commune councillor, SRP, Kompong Cham province, 26 March 2012).

However, there are financial resources at least in the largest party (Pak 2011), and there is no doubt that there are major financial flows also in rural areas. Occasionally slightly more funds find their way to gender dimensions of party work. An explanation of the humble funding for gender policies was given by a male CPP commune councillor:

> As a party, we have some small funds and other means to help women and children in case of emergency. But we do not have a separate budget from the party for women's affairs. Though the party has some funds for assisting general party commune work, most of the party funding comes from the personal contributions of party members at the provincial and national level (commune councillor, CPP, Kompong Cham province, 27 March 2012).

A CPP district deputy governor said that some small funding from the party is available on request:

> We do not have a separate budget for gender, but in general if there is a real need of money in the district or commune for the party to work on gender, we always make a request to the provincial level. Usually, we get some money from the party's working group (district deputy governor, CPP, Kompong Cham province, 26 March 2012).

Smaller parties with declining voter support suffer more, and have even more difficulty finding funds to support internal gender equality. A male Funcinpec provincial deputy governor described the situation in his party:

> I totally agree that financial resources are very important to get everything moving forward, especially on gender. However, in our party we do not have the financial resources to do anything for the party, not only on gender but also other things. It is hard for the party (provincial deputy governor, Funcinpec, Kratie province, 24 April 2012).

A male NRP provincial councillor described the financial resources of his party even more bleakly:

> We do not have financial resources for gender or other activities as well, for example for the electoral campaign. Gender is important in the national and international arena, with NGOs paying attention. However, for many political parties, especially for a small party like the NRP, we do not have funds to spend on it (provincial councillor, NRP, Kratie province, 24 April 2012).

In sum, no parties have a separate budget of any significance earmarked for gender issues. The opposition councillors claim they spend their own salaries to implement gender activities. A partial exception is that the CPP has some meagre personal contributions from its members and some petty funding that can be applied for. There are some commune activities related to gender because each commune has USD1200-1500 per year from Commune/Sangkat Fund for the women and children committee. These seldom promote women inside the parties, however.

4

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1. Conclusions

We approached this task with two assumptions. First, women are under-represented in local politics in spite of marked progress in the last decade and strong policies from all major actors. There appear to be major and elusive impediments to a more thorough change towards gender-equal political representation. Second, while local politics may be the most accessible political arena for women, experience from other countries in similar predicaments suggests that also here, the party system constitutes a conservative bloc of patriarchal resistance to greater gender equality. Therefore we focused on the role of the party system (and the parties) as agents of change or conservative resistance.

The central question we posed was fairly straightforward: How do political parties promote gender equality internally? This question was broken down into empirical issues of gender policies, namely stated party policies; recruitment and selection criteria; resulting female decision-making power; efforts at capacity building; and what financial resources are made available for these ends. As far as we know, there has been no previous research on the role of parties in promoting women in politics in Cambodia. This steered our methodology towards an exploratory and qualitative approach, covering a range of provinces, parties and individuals.

Below, we will review the answers to the particular questions before we discuss the central question more analytically. The assumptions above worked well in our fieldwork, and the at-large findings are distinct and valid across the board, with only minor differences related to geography, rank or party. Occasionally but not always, views differ between men and women. In actual outcomes for gender equality, the ruling party by far outdoes the others. There are, however, structural explanations for this, as we shall see below.

In terms of party policies, gender norms are progressing in all parties. At leadership level, the awareness and stated ambitions are surprisingly high, evidence that the discourse on gender equality has reached rural areas and local politics. Having said that, just a bit further down in the hierarchies, the finer shades of "gender" elude most—"gender" tends to mean "support women with women's stuff"—and loses internal focus, relevance and weight. The realisation of stated gender policies remains rare. The exception is the CPP, which increased its number of female councillors considerably at the last local election (2012) and almost reached its stated goal. In our understanding, however, this is only partly due to a better approach; in a proportional electoral system, the largest party normally gets more councillors than its proportion of the vote, and hence it is easier to elect candidates who are low on the party list (i.e. women). Paradoxically, the party least realising and responding on gender equality is the SRP, which otherwise aims to win support from the educated middle class, which might be expected to be more sympathetic to gender equality.

The recruitment and selection of women tends to be an overall ambition, but typically performed very passively. For the most part, we heard arguments emphasising the difficulties arising from the limited pool of qualified women and their inability to work on these difficult tasks—statements seemingly wide open to the feminist critique of the patriarchy's ability to "protect" itself from female inclusion. If these arguments are to be respected, they need to be qualified. Firstly, as we saw above, the opposition parties are much less grounded locally, having an extremely small pool from which to recruit women. Secondly, being an opposition

party means that political pressure—bordering on intimidation—is sometimes experienced, and this affects women negatively in a disproportionate manner (which is a stereotype, but one which nevertheless dictates behaviour in this case). Finally, opposition parties often feel very marginalised locally, and they tend to be unwilling to sacrifice even the slightest advantage at the altar of gender equality.

As for decision-making power, women typically end up with "women's issues", chairing the communal children and women's committees, being a "focal point" or filling the mandatory role in the village committee, typically allocated responsibility for kindergarten, primary school, and sorting out domestic violence. While these are important tasks, they are seen as non-political residues from other processes, hence suitable for women. As a result, the tasks women are given rarely have any funding, and as has been argued elsewhere (Kim & Öjendal 2012), women are less connected into patronage structures and are therefore in greater need of funding to get things done. The above pattern is common, but not without exception. There are several powerful women in our study, acting as both village and commune chiefs, controlling both decisions and funds, although they clearly remain a minority.

Capacity building is typically an approach used in pursuing development by both the international community and NGOs. Given the stated lack of "competent" women and the equally frequently claimed lack of women willing to work in politics, one could assume that there would be an intense focus on capacity building. To some extent that is the case, but this is rarely being initiated from inside the parties. Rather there are NGOs with external funding that are pushing to build capacity of women, preparing them to enter local politics. The twist of this is that most local NGOs are more or less coerced into working with government, and government mostly means CPP. Hence, capacity building favours women aligned with the CPP, which may also be a reason why the CPP is far more successful in equalising gender numbers.

Finally, financial resources for promoting women internally in the political parties are close to zero; any resources allocated for this purpose have external origins, and even so are minuscule.

We met neither outright dislike of women in local politics nor outspoken resistance to including more women. However, men often neither understand the weight of the issue nor show particular interest. Even those who acknowledge the significance of the issue rarely engage to alter the situation if it is of little benefit to them (which of course is a general pattern also outside gender issues). Many things are accepted because "gender" is regarded as not political and hence allowable. Simple measures such as putting women at the top of lists instead of just below electable positions would make a major difference, but that is also resisted.

Answering the question of how political parties promote gender equality internally confirms international experience as well as the feminist critique: lip service is paid by parties that in reality remain stuck in their patriarchal origins. They alienate women, not through explicit exclusion and discrimination, but through arguments on competence, keeping women at arm's length from decision-making, not actively promoting capacity building or targeted selection and certainly not spending any resources on improving the situation. To qualify this harsh assessment: One, parties are a part of the exclusionary mechanism, but the overall process includes NGOs, donors and central interests to varying degrees. Two, the fact that there are gender policies hammered out by the parties means something after all (and is a clear improvement historically), or will mean something eventually. Three, women are increasing their representation in political forums, so even if not actively promoted, they are increasingly accepted (and often recognised once in place). Finally, the policies and processes are fairly new and challenging old paradigms, so even modest success may be far better than nothing.

At bottom, there are political reasons (party elites consist of men who are protecting their privileged position), technical circumstances (limited education and experience of aspiring women), financial limitations (extremely limited resources) and social structures impeding rapid change. The issue needs to be attacked from a wide angle, to which we now turn.

4.2. Recommendations

For a more efficient gender equalisation in and of local politics, political parties need to have a more progressive approach. This was a part of our original hypothesis and was repeatedly confirmed; there is no doubt on this point. However, it remains unclear whose responsibility it is to alter the situation. Political parties are not public institutions, but run according to their internal rules. There is no law forcing gender equality. As long as there is no quota system or some other regulation, it is difficult to put formal pressure on parties to reform and to include more women in local politics.

However, even without formal legislation, there can be pressure on parties to be more pro-active on gender issues. They are significant actors in a democratic system and operate under a state-driven policy framework of gender equality. As such, they could be expected to make a greater effort. Centrally, pressure could be exerted on the parties through norm creation by external actors, and possibly inter-party cooperation to agree on reasonable standards. Given the dominant role of the CPP, it has a special responsibility to ensure that formal policies are lived up to. To some extent, the fact that all parties have a gender policy is a minor success achieved through this kind of measure.

Locally, there are other means to increase incentives. One way is to make capacity building more solid, of a higher quality and more individually empowering. NGOs and others should be cautious not to benefit local CPP branches disproportionately in this education work. It is also recommended that the committees in which women have made an inroad—like the commune children and women's committee—be given proper mandates and a real budget to work with. Although women typically have made it into decision-making positions here, their role is nullified or even reversed when there are no funds to support their work. The "soft" sectors, where women are encouraged to act, have yet to receive generous funds.

At the end of the day, it is voter pressure that will make a difference. The emerging discourse on women leaders, including their extraordinary qualities, is likely to be exploitable in external information campaigns, making the public demand more women in higher positions on the party lists. This is awareness raising that is possible only in the long run, through major measures and massive resources.

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