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A GENDERED ANALYSIS OF DECENTRALISATION REFORM IN CAMBODIA

KIM Sedara and Joakim ÖJENDAL *with*
CHHOUN Nareth and LY Tem

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A Gendered Analysis of Decentralisation Reform in Cambodia

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Acronyms

CC	Commune Council
CDRI	Cambodia Development Resource Institute
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women
CNCW	Cambodian National Council for Women
COMFREL	Committee for Free and Fair Elections
CPP	Cambodian People's Party
D&D	Deconcentration and Decentralisation
DGPSR	Democratic Governance and Public Sector Reform
ICLD	International Centre for Local Democracy
IULA	International Union of Local Authorities
LAMC	Law on the Administration and Management of Communes/Sangkats
MoWA	Ministry of Women's Affairs
NEC	National Election Committee
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
PRK	People's Republic of Kampuchea
SSCS	State Secretariat of Civil Service
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

Glossary of Khmer Terms and Phrases

charekptoeulkloeun	personal behaviour (ចរិតផ្ទាល់ខ្លួន)
cloeuytorb	responsiveness (ឆ្លើយតប)
khan	district in the urban areas (ខ័ណ្ឌ)
kmeanpakkmean rot	no party no state (គ្មានបក្សគ្មានរដ្ឋ)
kanakpaknoyobay	political party (គណបក្សនយោបាយ)
ormnach	power (អំណាច)
pakdoeuknourm	party leads (បក្សដឹកនាំ)
pakneung rot	party and state or party first and state second (បក្សនិងរដ្ឋ)
rotaknuvat	state is responsible for executing all the state's affairs (រដ្ឋអនុវត្ត)
sangkat	commune in the urban areas (សង្កាត់)

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ABSTRACT

The commune/*sangkat* elections in 2002 and 2007 marked a significant step forward in Cambodia's democratic decentralisation process. Decentralisation is the most deep-cutting public sector reform and the politically most important democratic development in Cambodia. The reform rearranges power structures, creates space for a more pluralistic political representation, addresses gender equality in local politics, and triggers articulation of new opinions. However, reforms continue to face significant challenges: female representation in political decision-making bodies remains inadequate, gendered articulation of ideas and priorities has limited resonance, and entrenched gendered power structures are not easily altered and even less readily removed. Taking democratic decentralisation and gender equality into account, this study aims to explore the space for women in Cambodia's emerging local governance system: To what extent is there an increased gender balance? How do women manage to articulate and pursue their views in local politics? In answering these research questions, we empirically examine two critical issues: female representation in the commune council and women's political articulation and influence in local politics.

1

INTRODUCTION

The Law on Administration and Management of Communes/*Sangkats* (LAMC) and the Law on Commune Elections, both declared in 2001, define Cambodia's democratic decentralisation. These laws established the commune as a pivotal nexus for sub-national governance and development. The country has since held commune/*Sangkat* elections in 2002 and 2007, a process commonly regarded as the most deep-cutting public sector reform and the politically most significant democratic development in Cambodia since the introduction of the 1993 constitution (Öjendal & Kim 2009). Building on the initial success of this local government reform at commune level, in 2005the Royal Government put forward its vision for a wider public sector reform under the banner "Deconcentration and Decentralisation" (D&D). This was subsequently codified through the Strategic Framework for Decentralisation and Deconcentration. With the adoption of the Organic Law in April 2008 and the indirect elections of district/*khan* councils and provincial/municipal councils in May 2009, Cambodia is now embarking on the second phase of reform. It is expected that there will be a significant delegation of functions and authority from the central to the provincial and district levels with the aim of deepening the development of democratic governance at sub-national level, improving basic service delivery under a unified administration management system, and creating a comprehensive local governance programme through functional assignments. Overall, the "big-bang" democratisation of Cambodia attempted through the UN-led intervention in 1992/3 is gradually becoming deepened, localised and inclusive—or, so it seems.

These reforms are inherently political, driven by various interests such as the need to acquire political legitimacy, safeguard money flow, and generate status in society (Hughes & Un 2007; Blunt & Turner 2005). As such, the reforms rearrange power structures, create space for a more pluralistic political representation, trigger articulation of new opinions and address gender equality in local politics as well as accountability, service delivery and overall responsiveness (Kim 2012; Kim & Öjendal 2009). Hence, from a normative point of view, these reforms harbour high development potential (Manor 2008) in terms of deepened democracy, greater gender equality, better service delivery and improved infrastructure. However, and to the surprise of nobody, the reforms face significant challenges where change is partly resisted and historical social structures prevail; the gender aspects of inclusion, participation and democracy are possibly some of the more difficult changes to instil (Öjendal & Kim 2006; cf. Lilja 2010; cf. Kent 2010). Although there are signs of deepened gender equality, female representation in political decision-making bodies remains inadequate, gendered articulation of ideas and priorities has limited resonance, and established (gendered) power structures remain entrenched and are not easily altered let alone removed. Or as Kent and Chandler (2008:128) put it: "The problem of sharing 'real' power and responsibility remains trapped in the nexus of old and new norms, in a 'deep anxiety' about the loss of tradition and the dissolution of moral order". Hence, processes of change are set in motion, but resistance is thick.

Not only structures of socio-political situation are changing, agency also is being triggered on a broad base. Politically involved Cambodian women organise and embrace identity politics to lobby and compete for public office (Lilja 2009), but women's involvement in formal decision-making remains obstructed and efforts to increase the female share of political positions, voice and influence is an uphill battle (COMFREL 2007a; Thon *et al.* 2009; cf. Öjendal & Kim

2006; cf. Lilja 2009). From a micro-perspective, despite the fact that Cambodian women are fairly active, indeed dominant in small-scale economic affairs and household chores, it is still considered "inappropriate" for women to be active in politics (Ledgerwood 1992; Frieson 2001). Although this reflects a conservative view of Cambodian politics, many new influences and patterns are also apparent. The process of post-conflict reconstruction, influenced by the inception of Western principles of democracy and liberal market economy, and the inflow of international assistance have initiated a transformation of the old norms of society (Ovesen *et al.* 1996; Öjendal & Kim 2006; Lilja 2010). A wealth of expressions of deepened gender equality is visible and a multitude of processes boiling that was not present before. In this sense we concur with Stivens' (2010:1) claim that "modernisation (in Asia) is in itself, by its very nature, a gendered process". Taking its point of departure from CDRI's previous policy research on Decentralisation and Deconcentration (D&D) reform in Cambodia, this study scrutinises to what extent D&D reform has served to extend the space for gender equality in local politics in Cambodia. In its attempt to explore the space for women in Cambodia's emerging local governance system, the study addresses the overarching research questions: To what extent is there an increased gender balance? How do women manage to articulate and pursue their views in local politics?

Before we plunge into theorising our enquiry, let us elaborate on how we set about answering these questions.

1.1. Research Objectives and Methodological Approaches

It is a fact that female numerical representation in political fora is increasing. But we also know that this in itself is only to a limited extent addressing the core of the problem, which goes beyond mere representation. Hence, and in line with recent international research on politicised gender issues (Kayumba 2010; Sylvester 1994; Rydström 2010), we are only to a limited extent interested in numbers and figures. Although not insignificant, there is a distinct limit to what can be usefully achieved on this headcount basis. To reach anywhere close to gender equality in Cambodian local politics necessitates scrutiny of the more subtle processes emanating from both explicit and implicit gender-based power structures. A full gendered "power-analysis" of local politics is beyond the scope of this report (cf. Lilja 2009; cf. Frieson 2001; Ledgerwood 1992), nevertheless we attempt to complement the analysis of figures and numbers – *representation* – with analyses of *articulation* – are women using their increased representation and are their voices being aired and heard? Thus, we cover two levels gradually taking us to the core of the nature of gendered local politics in Cambodia.

The two critical fields of representation and articulation will be systematically examined in separate sections, and the ensuing explanations will provide critical new insights that enable a deeper understanding of D&D reforms and their scope as mechanisms for enhancing gender equity, in particular the formalisation of the gendered role in local politics. The critical issues are:

- *How is the gendering of political representation in the commune councils proceeding? In numerical terms, how has female representation improved and what does that imply?*

  And, given that female representation in commune councils has increased:

- *How has the articulation of women's views and preferences in these commune councils been pursued and with what consequences? How have the women in the commune councils been able/allowed to articulate their political views/roles, and their constituencies' preferences?*

These two fields constitute the empirical base of this paper. Contextual understanding derives mainly from previous studies and research experience of the Democratic Governance and Public Sector Reform Programme (DGPSR) of CDRI since 2002 (including Thon *et al.* 2009; Öjendal & Kim 2006, 2011; Kim 2012). The communes selected for the empirical research are TK in Takeo province, KC in Kratie province, IT in Battambang province and KL, Kompong Cham province.[1]

The rationale for selecting these four communes is three-fold:

1. A wealth of contextual knowledge built through previous studies at these sites allows deep insights into localised political, socio-economic and general situations.

2. The study focuses on communes with prominent female presence and female elected commune council chiefs head all four selected communes.

3. The study sites are spatially balanced; two communes are the northeast of the country (KC and KL), one in the south (TK) and one remote commune (IT) is in the northwest.

This study uses qualitative data garnered during in-depth interviews with different key informants: commune chiefs (all women), commune councillors (men and women) and heads of political parties in each commune, village chiefs (mostly men) and village committee members (mostly women).

By design, this research is not a comparative study of the four selected commune councils. Rather, the gendered politics in the commune councils is the unit of analysis used to gain insights towards understanding the power-permeating gender dimensions within the process of D&D reform. Due to its limited number of sites and interviews, this study does not claim to represent a full picture of gender in local politics in Cambodia, but instead seeks to highlight some key issues and processes. Finally, that we have deliberately chosen communes headed by female commune chiefs may tilt the sample towards pro-female communes. However, it gives us richer material and experience to build on than would otherwise have been the case.

1.2. Research Ethics and Delimitations

We are aware of the ethical code and our responsibility to apply it when conducting governance research. By definition, "gender" is a sensitive issue that goes to the core of politics and invades the private sphere. First, it questions established power structures, destabilises the prevailing order, and rearranges it as an idea among the haves and the have-nots. Second, this kind of research is personal because it addresses and questions all interviewees, whether male or female, about their personal capacity. Addressing established power positions *and* personal dimensions is a potentially volatile mix that can thwart the best-intended efforts. Hence, it is imperative that interviews be conducted in a sensitive manner and measures taken to protect individuals from possible repercussions. To protect informants' privacy and integrity, their names and the real names of the communes and districts are not disclosed.

[1] These are kept anonymous for ethical reasons.

1.3. Theoretical Underpinnings – 'Gender' in Democratic Decentralisation

Decentralisation is no longer a new phenomenon. With a long history (Rondinelli & Cheema 1983), it became a global trend in the 1990s and has since been labelled the "quiet revolution" (Campbell 2003; cf. Grindle 2009; cf. World Bank 2008; cf. Öjendal 2002; cf. Manor 1999; cf. Crook & Manor 1998). The main motive behind various governments embracing decentralisation, particularly in transitional and developing countries, is to enhance democracy and participation, to bring government closer to where people live and work, and to strengthen state-civil society relations (Litvack *et al.* 1998; Manor 1999). When it comes to country specific implementation, however, decentralisation is an elusive term. The design as well as the outcome depends on social, political, historical, cultural and economic contexts (Crook & Manor 1998; cf. Treisman 2006; cf. Manor 2011). This is especially true when we focus on gender aspects (Ahikire 2007).

The IULA's *Worldwide Declaration on Women in Local Government* stated more than ten years ago:

> Local government is in a unique position to contribute to the global struggle for gender equality and can have a great impact on the status of women and the status of gender equality around the world, in its capacities as the level of governance closest to the citizens… *(1998, taken from Byrne & Schnyder 2005:6).*

Institutional reforms are meant to create space for women to participate and articulate their rights, and governments need to let these fully come into practice (World Bank 2001). A study by Kazuki Iwanaga (2008) on women's political participation and representation in Asia observes that women as a group have consolidated enormous voting power, but women's political representation continues to lag behind in most countries. In a democracy, where the issue of equal rights is a cornerstone, there is of course no reason why women would not be equally represented in political fora. Some claim that democratic decentralisation cannot be said to have succeeded until the interests of women are represented at all levels, especially local level (IULA 1998: 1).

This leads us to inquire where and how women are fully represented, or indeed, where and why they are not fully represented. Local government is possibly the most accessible level for enhanced female representation in politics. Or as Byrne and Schnyder state: "With decentralisation the local level of governance is taking on increasing importance as a service provider and point of access to the political system and is thus a key arena in the struggle for women's political empowerment." (2005:6),and they continue:

> Local government has the possibility to be an important point of access to the political system for women… Women may find it easier to become involved politically at the local level because of family and domestic commitments, and through support from local NGOs and community groups which make it a more accessible starting point for action. (2005:7)

Along the same lines, a previous study by UNDP indicates that supporting local government through decentralisation with greater levels of transparency, accountability and responsiveness to citizen's demands constitutes the most appropriate mechanism for boosting gender-equal representation (UNDP 2000; World Bank 2001). Moreover, Beall (2005) explains that experiences from Africa show that decentralisation has frequently served as an important vehicle for increasing women's representation and political participation.

However, it cannot be taken for granted that effective women's representation will emerge hand-in-hand with decentralisation. Ahikire (2007), for one, cautions that although numbers increase, real influence does not necessarily follow. She finds that in Uganda, the inclusion of women has taken place on a grand scale (even on quota-basis), but women's power has not been permeating local politics. Hence, it is possible that the establishment of participatory local government – through democratic decentralisation – would *enhance women's equality in the form of increased representation*, but it is also likely that *surrounding discourses and material conditions impede a deeper political voice*. This is a pattern emerging from the established literature.

The following empirical discussion overviews the general gender issue in the Cambodian context by way of context and background, then looks at the changing situation of female representation in local political institutions, and finally discerns which gendered voice has been triggered and considers the implications of the changing situation.

2

BACKGROUND TO GENDERED GOVERNANCE IN CAMBODIA – 'THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGING'

This section provides the context of gendered political representation in Cambodia in terms of legal framework, policy documents and previous studies on the topic. While there is some writing on political gender issues in Cambodia[2]–on which we draw – there are no explicit studies on how the decentralisation reform has encouraged or discouraged female inclusion in local politics. Gender roles in Cambodia are described as rather complex, intermingling "modern" ideals with embedded traditional/cultural, social and behavioural norms, which all are in a state of flux (Kent 2010).This constitutes a rather complex *problematique*.

Box 1: Gender Issues as Reflected in Decentralisation Law

Article 19 of the Sub-decree on Decentralisation of Powers, Roles and Duties to Commune/Sangkat Councils (2002: 5-8):

A commune/*sangkat* council shall appoint a woman councillor to be in charge of women's and children's affairs. If the commune/*sangkat* council does not have a woman councillor, the council shall appoint a woman as an assistant in charge of women's and children's affairs. For the village level, Article 22 of the sub-decree describes that the village chief, deputy village chief and village assistant shall be the residents of the village who are entitled to vote and at least one of them shall be women. Pursuant to practical situation of each village, the commune/*sangkat* council shall strive to select a woman to be the village chief or deputy village chief.

Rectangular Strategy and National Programme for Sub-national Democratic Development (NP-SNDD 2010-2019: 85):

Increased gender equality is recognised as a key component of the strategy. Women are described as the backbone of Cambodian economy and society and it is stated that all women are entitled to equal access to healthcare, education, skills training, economic resources and activities, and to decision-making positions at all levels and in all sectors. An important achievement has been the recognition of gender equality as integral to the main government reform programmes, public administration reform, legal and judicial reform, public finance management reform, and decentralisation and deconcentration reform. At the sub-national level capital/provincial, and municipal/khan/district and commune/*sangkat* levels, women representatives in the councils at these administrations must be ensured.

First, gender issues have become an integral part of mainstream politics in Cambodia over the last five years. Already in the Decentralisation Law (2001), gender issues were brought in, though in a slightly conservative way, with Article 19 of the 2002 Sub-decree on Decentralisation of Powers, Roles and Duties to Commune/Sangkat Councils (see Box 1), and again in a more sophisticated way in the D&D-Strategy from 2005 (RGC 2005), and perhaps most explicitly in the recent Rectangular Strategy (RGC 2010a). Potential improvement in women's access to politics in terms of different levels of leadership is visualised as occurring through structural institutional reforms including D&D (Box 1), public financial management

[2] The most noteworthy are Ebihara (1968); Ledgerwood (1990; 1992) UNDP (2000); Frieson (2001); Lilja (2009; 2010); Thon *et al.* (2009); Kent (2010); Derks (2010); Öjendal & Kim (2006); and, Kim & Öjendal (2011, 2012).

reform, harmonisation and alignment measures, and mechanisms for increasing effectiveness and efficiency in responding to gender concerns (MoWA 2008). This provides a break with previous patterns, and though inadequate in itself, increased participation of women in politics ensued.

2.1. Trends in Women's Political Participation

Progress in women's overall political representation has mainly been achieved (and found its outlet) through the processes of direct and indirect elections. Let us introduce some numbers and figures. The proportion of women elected to the National Assembly increased significantly from 5 percent in the 1993 national elections to 12 percent in 1998, 19 percent in 2003, and 21 percent in the 2008 elections (NIS 2008) (Table 1). Further, the proportion of women as secretary of state increased from 7 percent in 2003 to 7.7 percent in 2008 while the proportion of women as under-secretary of state rose from 9.6 percent to 14.6 percent.

Within the institutions reformed through the recently initiated Organic Law, women make up 10.1 percent of municipal and provincial councillors and 12.6 percent of district, town and *khan* councillors (Lilja 2010). The proportion of women elected to commune councils increased from 9.41 percent in the 2002 commune elections to 15.12 percent in 2007, and then to18percentin the 2012 elections. When the senate was first appointed in 1999,14.75 percent of the seats went to women; on reappointment in 2006, women won 14.75 percent of the seats. However, with the shift to indirect election of the senate by commune councillors in 2006, the proportion of seats held by women remained the same at 14.75 percent.[3]

Table 1: Women in the Legislative Branch, 1993-2010

Year	**Senate**(% of women)
1999-2005	14.75
2006-2010	14.75
Year	**National Assembly** (% of women)
1993	5.00
1998	12.00
2003	19.00
2008	21.00

Source: National Election Committee (NEC) data (RGC 2010b: 26)

Table 2: Women in the Executive Body in the Fourth Legislature,2008-2013

Deputy-prime minister		Minister		Secretary of state		Under-secretary of state	
Total	Women	Total	Women	Total	Women	Total	Women
10	1	26	2	198	15	204	30
100%	10%	100%	8%	100%	8%	100%	14.71%

Source: State Secretariat of Civil Service (SSCS) data (RGC 2010b: 26)

[3] Senate members were originally appointed by the political parties; however, since 2002 the senate has been indirectly elected by commune councillors who constitute a more conservative political grouping (MoWA 2008).

Figure 1: Women Elected as Commune/Sangkat Councillors in 2002, 2007 and 2012

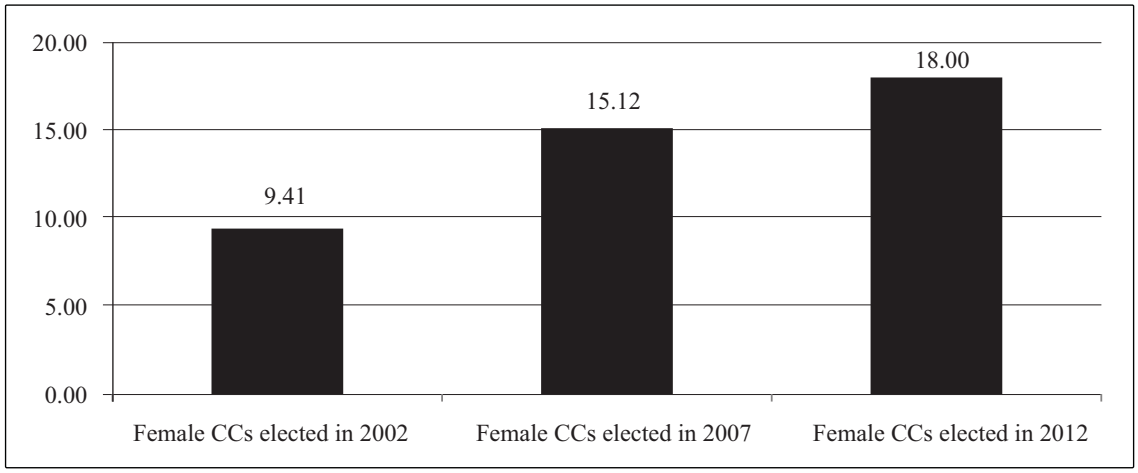
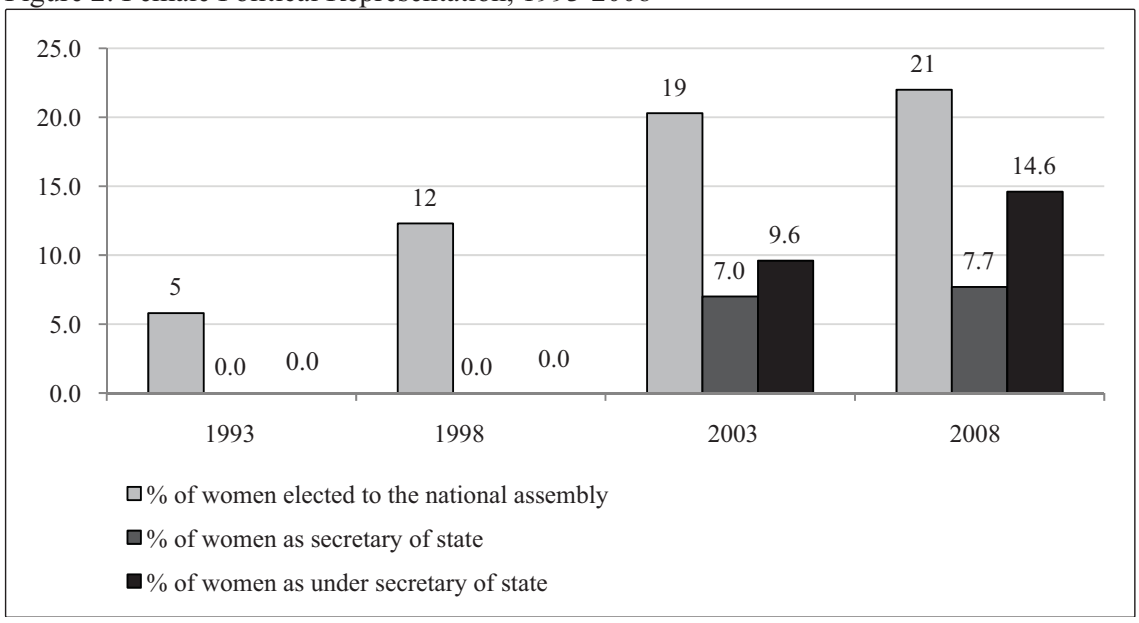


Table 3: Women Civil Servants, 2006-2009

2006		2007		2008		2009	
Total	Women	Total	Women	Total	Women	Total	Women
167,220	51,046	176,344	57,114	179,016	58,270	182,228	61,298
100%	31%	100%	32.38%	100%	32.55%	100%	34%

Source: SSCS data (RGC 2010b: 27)

Figure 2: Female Political Representation, 1993-2008



Source: NIS 2008

The figures above and in the tables 2 & 3 indicate two things. First, that representation of women in the executive as well as the law-making branch of government remains low at all levels. At no time is there anything close to a numerically equal representation. Instead, women's representation ranges in the 20 percent at most and there are wide gaps between any semblance of gender equity. Second, all trends are sharply heading towards closing this gap. If

these trends continue for another two to three elections, gender equality, as representation goes, should be within reach. Tables 1-3 show the percentages of women in government at different administrative levels.

2.2. Women, Culture and Political Engagement

Turning to the social sphere, May Ebihara's study, conducted in the pre-civil war years of the 1960s on the role of women in Cambodia's rural society– the only full-length academic study of its kind from pre-war Cambodia – indicates that Khmer villagers traditionally do not have a rigid sexual division of labour and behaviour patterns as some other rural societies do. Many tasks are performed by either or both sexes and in many cases, a man occasionally executes what is normally a woman's task, or vice-versa, without incurring derision or embarrassment (Ebihara 1968: 190-191). Also in contemporary Cambodia, women have multiple roles in society; within the household, they typically have control over resources as well as being responsible for bringing up children. In rural areas, women commonly assist in agricultural work and in urban areas women frequently work in informal sectors and enterprises, especially in the garment sector, as well as in markets and within the public administration (cf. Derks 2010).

Historically, public decision-making and politics have been strongly associated with male characteristics, and crude display of strength has been central and pervasive for amassing political power (Ebihara 1968; Ledgerwood 1990; Ovesen *et al.* 1996; Luco 2002; Frieson 2001; Öjendal & Kim 2006; Lilja 2009). Hence, women have been politically repressed and/or marginalised, though this has been slowly changing for some time. For instance, in the 1980s, in line with communist tradition, the women's movement was established under the Front (the core group comprised the Women's Association and the Youth Association).This would, or so it was assumed, enhance political education, act as a bridge between the party and the masses, and serve as a training ground for future party members and state cadres (Gottesman 2003: 59). Rural women were highly involved in the physical reconstruction of Cambodia in the 1980s. However, only a few women had high-ranking political positions in the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) government (Iwanaga 2008). Remnants of this system of mobilising women (as a social category) to serve the political party are still relevant today.

The post-conflict nation building of Cambodia since 1993 has in contrast been heavily influenced by Western principles of democracy and market economy via aid inflow and various international interventions, which run counter to a number of traditional elements in the Khmer worldview and its view on gender (Ovesen *et al.* 1996; Lilja 2009). Political representation, decision-making and gender equality are currently being promoted with the support of international agencies. In addition, political status of women is enhanced by the influence of globalisation including the introduction of new norms through NGOs and donor agencies' policy and practice, especially concerning the political identities of rural areas in Cambodia (Lilja 2009; 2010). This creates a dual image of women trapped in traditional norms and expectations, yet expected to claim a seat at the political table albeit invited grudgingly. If they remain passive no political power will be available; if they bid for power they are questioned by a thick conservative discourse protecting established positions. The increase of women's representation in political leadership results primarily from the inception of developmentalism and the overall change towards a more flexible political climate. In the post-conflict situation, where development is becoming more important than security, there may be more demand as well as space for female leaders.

Tellingly, a recent study on local leadership reveals that women leaders face major constraints of culture, tradition and family pressure (the triple role), and other more subtle barriers (Thon *et al.* 2009). These constraints typically mean that female leaders lack support and cooperation from family members and colleagues. Some women leaders have faced divorce because of their involvement in politics. The study also found that women leaders for related reasons – not because women are deemed unsuitable – lack the self-confidence and capacity to serve as top local leaders. This sentiment is typically shared by male (and some female) leaders and villagers, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. In a vicious circle, this lack of trust in their capacity makes women leaders feel inferior, reifying the initial suspicion (Thon *et al.* 2009).

Statistics show there has been an increasing degree of female representation at various levels in legislative and executive bodies through direct and indirect elections since 1993, and in the local context, since 2002. Historically, the first wave of women's representation in the political sphere started in the 1980s, but always in a way that stymied fair and full access to power. In spite of a push for enhanced gender equality, women – somewhat predictably – still face many constraints; they are not fully recognised in the social, political and economic arenas of Cambodian society, creating a complex mix of "old" and "new" gender politics and gender norms. In order to expose the complexities – progress and reactions –of increasing the formal space for women in local governance, the next chapter presents an empirical investigation of female leaders' political engagement in the four study commune councils in terms of *representation* and *articulation*.

3

FINDINGS FROM THE EMPIRICAL REVIEWS

> Decentralisation has changed the old norms and practices of women and it has offered women like me the opportunity to participate in leadership activities at commune level through local elections. As an elected commune council chief, I have to deal with various issues of security and the overall responsibilities in the commune. From time to time, my work means I have to travel far from home to different provinces for many days at a time. In the past, this kind of travelling was not acceptable because it was considered improper for a woman, but now I can do it without any repercussions from my relatives or husband. Many young girls travel and work far from home in the cities for many months in order to make a living. This makes them more confident and independent. *Female commune chief, Battambang province, 12 July 2010*

Empirical data used in this chapter is from two different sources: quantitative baseline survey in 2008/9 involving 646 voter respondents in five communes in Kompong Speu, Kratie, Battambang, Kompot and Siem Reap provinces (Öjendal& Kim 2011); and information collected in 2010 during in-depth interviews with commune council (CC) chiefs, CC members and village officials in four communes in Kompong Cham, Kratie, Takeo and Battambang provinces. This chapter is divided into three sections, analysing: (i) general roles and impacts of decentralisation on gender, quantitative survey data and the perceptions of male and female informants in the communes; (ii) female representation in local political fora; and (iii) the ability of women to articulate and influence local politics.

3.1. Decentralisation and its Impacts on Gender

As previously mentioned, women are often assumed to have easier access to politics in its local form (UNDP 2002; Byrne & Schnyder 2005). Is that generally the case in Cambodia as well?

At first glance, information from field interviews and observations indicates that decentralisation initially introduced various avenues for women to attain leadership in their communities. However, some measures are shallow, and their scope must be critically questioned and empirically scrutinised. A female commune chief in Takeo expressed her view on the roles of gender since the implementation of decentralisation: "[We can] talk about the role of women in politics and development at the commune level, though there is some [empty] talk…."

Interestingly, she continued

> …..but since decentralisation in 2002, some women have been considered and promoted by their political party and government to take part in local leadership for example; having opportunity to access capacity building and knowing their rights, women start to demand equality, and women are actively engaged in social affairs in the community… *Female CC chief, Takeo, 25 June 2010*

It seems clear that recent reforms have progressively enhanced gender awareness. A commune chief in Battambang offered her view on decentralisation and gender:

> Gender awareness is getting better because of decentralisation reform, opening up [opportunities] for women to participate in elections and engage in many community activities. The [main] enhancement of awareness of gender comes from the efforts by NGOs and the media. *Female CC chief, Battambang, 12 July 2010*

Many informants said that the constraint from traditional norms is no longer a major problem as the perceptions of both men and women have changed since the implementation of decentralisation.[4] While this may be jumping to conclusions too fast, the point does warrant further investigation. A group of male commune councillors stated:

> The constraint of traditional norms on women is not a major problem anymore; it has gradually changed. All institutions seem to work hard to disseminate the values of gender [equality]. People are well aware of their rights, including equality of women in all sectors in society. Women are under less pressure from traditional norms compared to how it was in the past. *Group of male CC councillors, Kratie, 16 June 2010*

Another commune councillor said:

> From my own view, there is a change in terms of women's leadership in the community in that the traditional norm is not a constraint for women anymore. The success of women in leadership depends on individual personality, bravery, level of education, networking and commitment. However, many female leaders still shoulder many burdens in the family, taking care of their children, household chores and economics. *Male commune councillor, Kratie, 17 June 2010*

It is widely recognised that women leaders tend to be more active and more deeply committed to the household economy and community social affairs than their male colleagues are. A group of male commune councillors shared their views on the role of female leaders:

> A female leader pays serious attention to household economy, women, children, and the social welfare of people in the community. She does not politically discriminate between people from different political parties. She is scrupulously transparent and not corrupt. This is her good personal charisma [*charekptoeulkloeun*]. She always cares for the poor and others in the commune. *Group of male councillors, Kompong Cham, 28 July 2010*

Despite many positive outcomes, primarily emanating from the decentralisation process, perceptions of the actual implementation of associated gender policy are somewhat mixed. Male commune councillors in Takeo opined:

> Even though there is strong support and policy from the government and development agencies to promote women, it is still more or less rhetoric because when it comes to actual implementation, women still lack self-confidence, have low education and are more dependent on men. It is very difficult to convince them to exercise their own rights. *Group of male councillors, Takeo, 24 June 2010*

Another obstacle hindering improved gender equity is the lack of full commitment to implement agreed policies at all levels. A female commune chief in Kratie voiced her observations:

[4] The shift in traditional norms is also caused by economic and social factors and migration of people.

> Implementations of gender issues are not matched to the laws and policy frameworks of the national government. For the day-to-day management of the commune council, it is going well. But, there is still no clear role or line of communication between the commune, the political party and an individual's influence. There is still an attitude of not fully recognising women as leaders and there is not full cooperation from the men. *Female CC chief, Kratie, 19 June 2010*

Overall, the initial outcomes of decentralisation on enhanced gender equality are rather encouraging given the relatively short time it has been in operation. As illuminated above, many informants at commune level reported that a number of new conditions have been emerging locally since the implementation of decentralisation in 2002. Those new conditions have created space for women to participate in local politics, increasing the number of female representatives (leaders) at commune and village level. Furthermore, women are increasingly appreciated within their respective political party. The reforms have influenced and somewhat changed old/traditional norms and perceptions of women's roles in local politics; public awareness of gender is growing, and women have played a critical role in intermingling household economy and social affairs with commune council work. Hence, a fair range of tangible progressive changes is afoot, though this does not necessarily mean that obstacles have been removed. Let us move on to scrutinise some more detailed data.

3.2. Issues of Female Representation in the Commune Council

As we saw above, the overall representation of women at commune and village levels has gradually increased. In addition to elected female commune chiefs and commune councillors, some women have voluntarily served as commune focal persons, village chiefs and village assistants. Many interviewees unequivocally stated that women's representation is increasing at all levels of local government, especially at commune and village levels. Male commune councillors explained:

> A female council chief and a female clerk head this commune, and we have 13 villages. In all the villages, women are working hard to help their communities. They are very committed to working for the villagers. This is a real progress in our commune….*Group of male CCs, Kompong Cham, 28 July 2010*

Many people are optimistic that women's representation will increase further. A male councillor offered his view:

> Currently, women are bolder and more intellectual than before. I am confident that the number of female commune councillors will increase because of growing public awareness, advocacy by many agencies, and the commitment from various political parties to encourage women to engage in society. *Male CC member, Kratie, 16 June 2010*

Within the current electoral system, women need to have a proven involvement and commitment i.e. long service to the political party in order to be considered and placed as the primary candidate on the voters' party-list, which is paramount for reaching top positions. A group of male councillors gave their views:

> The reason that we have a female commune council chief in this commune is because she has been working for her political party and community since 1979. Another reason is that we have held commune elections since 2002. She became the commune council chief because some old party activists passed away, moved out or resigned. *Group of male councillors, Takeo, 24 June 2010*

Besides commitment to the party, a precondition of utmost importance for women's (or indeed anyone's) representation in commune councils, female leaders are commonly ascribed critical qualities, such as patience, empathy, approachability, humility, generosity and deep attachment to the community, particularly towards the poor, single-headed households and children, that men assumedly do not possess in similar quantities. As a male deputy commune council chief in Battambang put it:

> In this commune female leaders work patiently and understand the local situation well, especially social-welfare issues. Our female commune council chief is gaining more insights and interaction with people—being approachable to everyone. She is a well-respected person in this commune because she is soft, patient and generous with everyone without discrimination on political issues, rich or poor. To be a good leader, not only education or capacity is important, one also needs these kinds of good personality traits. *Male deputy CC chief, Battambang, 12 July 2010*

There is also a common perception that women are more capable of managing economic and social affairs in the community than men are (and are therefore "needed"). A male CC member stated:

> Regarding the role of women in the commune authority, women are able to mobilise more women in the community, for example at the village level. Women are good at raising money and local contributions and good at understanding the household economy of the villagers because they speak the language other women in the community wish to hear. *Male CC member, Kratie, 16 June 2010*

Similarly, a female CC member in the same commune expressed her views:

> With decentralisation, we now have a female commune council chief and generally, in our society women are more approachable. That is what people feel. In terms of addressing and advocating social issues such as health, education and conflict resolution, women are more effective in the community than men are.

Although these may be regarded as stereotypes and/or discursive constructions, the depth with which they are internalised (and applied) by men and women alike make them "real" nevertheless. She continued:

> For the political aspect, some parties, for example CPP, are not able to promote female commune council chiefs because of the internal priorities and/or political will of the party. The first candidate for the commune election from the party must be smart, popular and educated, and the most important thing is that he or she understands the local context and can deal with local situations well. However, every political party is complaining that it is difficult to find qualified female candidates for the CC election. *Female CC member, Kratie, 16 June 2010*

Hence, the mechanism of women's representation primarily depends on two factors: political party priorities and individual personalities, and history and attitude (and how these are comprehended locally).[5] A female village focal person in Kratie expressed her views:

[The degree to which we] have women working in the commune or village is determined by the political will and hierarchy of each political party. For this commune, many people do not like the CPP, not because they dislike the party but because they do not like the party's candidate. As an individual, he is not popular. This is why the head of the commune council in this commune is from another party and is female. *Female village focal person, Kratie, 16 June 2010*

As reflected above, women's representation is gradually increasing and people broadly recognise that women perform well in socioeconomic and political leadership in the communities. Or, as a male chief of a political party in the commune level put it:

> The reason that CPP does not have a female commune council chief is because the party did not put a woman as the first candidate on the party list - as you know the electoral system in Cambodia is on party basis. There are three reasons: first, it is difficult to find a competitive female candidate. Second, it's not yet time for women to work as commune council chief since we mostly deal with security issues at night time; I doubt that women would dare to go out. Third, having women in local politics depends on the party; within the current system, there is not much room for female candidates. The party does not yet strongly prioritise the placement of women candidates at the top of the list. This is only my personal view. It does not apply to all the commune councils in the country, but in remote rural areas like this women face difficulties. *Chief of a political party, Kratie, 17 June 2010*

Many of the people interviewed also connected the representation of women with the degree and nature of the delegation of power. A commune chief put it:

> Gender representation at the commune level is still rhetorical.... Many policies and regulatory frameworks have not been implemented well. Most of the local leaders at commune level work based on the policy of their own political party rather than on government policy. For example, as a commune council chief I know exactly the situation [of the people] in this commune, especially domestic violence and poverty, but I do not have the resources to help them. *Female CC chief, Kratie, 19 June 2010*

As we have seen, the deepening of gender equality at commune level is hampered by (perceptions of) the lack of qualified women and the contextual requirements to deal with sensitive issues such as land conflict and domestic violence. As a group of commune councillors argued on this matter:

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[5] This is a complex issue. Currently many with a long history and strong commitment to their party are often marginalised due to corruption and nepotism within the party allowing newcomers with connections, particularly those with money, to rise through the ranks. Such newcomers, typically rich with money to spend especially on electoral campaigns, are swiftly promoted to the top of the party list irrespective of their low popularity and weak attachment to the community. This could be seen as a first phase of where money is entering politics, as in many other Asian democratising countries such as Thailand and the Philippines (Seidl 2000; Arghiros 2001).

> When we talk about gender representation we should focus on the real output of work; increasing the number of women in the commune is not enough. For example, there are still many social problems in the commune such as domestic violence and unresolved land conflicts. *Group of male CC members, Kompong Cham, 28 July 2010*

Clearly, most CC members share our view that representation is not enough to alter power structures. Interestingly, the qualities and weaknesses that tended to routinely be ascribed to women leaders are no longer immutable. A female commune chief in Takeo explained:

> There are still a lot of doubts about women's capacity – that women are weak, cannot work as well as men, cannot deal with the issue of security, and other tasks considered as men's work. These kinds of misconceptions must be changed to improve the role of women in the future. *Female CC chief, Takeo, 25 June 2010*

Having described the empirical findings on local perceptions of women's representation at commune level, the situation can be summarised as follows:

- Increase in women's representation at commune and village levels takes place through elected commune councils, commune focal persons and village focal persons. We find that female leaders are widely regarded as committed and engaged in helping and representing their constituencies.
- Attitudes and perceptions among men and women in the community regarding female political representation are changing in that they increasingly trust women to be their leaders, though counter-discourses remain. The main reason for this gradual change of attitude is that many have seen that women are as (or more) effective as men in their local leadership-capacity.
- Women's representation in local politics emerges as primarily depending on political party priorities. Dependency on the political party is due to the party list system dictated by the electoral system. There is a tendency for female commune chiefs to assist people regardless of party loyalty, which may not go down well with party hierarchies.
- Occasionally it is claimed that women are more effective in connecting with people in the community in terms of women's, social and economic affairs. This strong connection is commonly understood to be due to certain characteristics of women's nature, being (or regarded as being) socially and traditionally gentle, empathic, patient and generous.
- Despite much progression in women's representation in local political parties, several constraints of a more elusive nature persist. For instance, there is still a mismatch between regulatory framework/policy and actual implementation, and female leaders are not fully supported by the government, political parties or their male colleagues, which combined constitute a thick discursive barrier to equality in political representation.

Hence, women's numerical representation is heightened, and there is a real progress in terms of perceptions of female representation in political fora. Let us move to the more subtle field of articulation and influence and see how this deepened representation is reflected in pro-active politics.

3.3. The Space for Women's Political Articulation and Influence in Local Politics

Women's articulation here is defined as female elected commune councillors having relative autonomy, knowledge and ability (as defined by D&D reforms) to make their priorities heard in formal and informal political debate. This relates to Spivak's question as to whether the subaltern "can speak", and to what extent they are "heard" (1988). Consequently, we pay attention first to women's ability to speak and second the extent to which they are heard and therefore able to project influence and power.

A group of male commune councillors described their views on this issue:

> The current commune council chief of this commune is very committed to the people and is very popular because she does not use her power to exploit others. She pays serious attention to women's, children's, and social welfare issues. She does not discriminate between people from different political parties and she is also transparent—not corrupt. Her political party trusts her because she has been working for the local authority since 1979. *Group of male councillors, Kompong Cham, 28 July 2010*

The passage above illuminates some critical aspects that would enable female commune councillors to articulate their responsibilities: being popular among local people, working in a transparent manner, and being committed to the community. By possessing all of the above characteristics, women leaders may also be favoured by their own political party because in return, the party would gain electoral support. This is the basic rationale and *raison d'être* for a gendered local democracy and a heightened role for women, and *also* for the political parties.

Hence, women's *de facto* ability to effectively articulate their responsibilities is through the possible trust and cooperation they are awarded from other male dominated fora (the police and district authorities, but also from the *sangkat* and local economic elite) that collectively and possibly unknowingly control/dominate the discourse. This we have seen in many places (e.g. Ahikire 2007). However, the thick discourse on men's superiority to handle politics may be destabilised. A male deputy commune councillor in Battambang envisaged:

> There is no difference between the ability of men and women in [articulating priorities and] doing their tasks. When fighting the Khmer Rouge, many women were even in the army. Women can do the job as well as men can. *Male deputy CC, Battambang, 12 July 2010*

Another key factor stems from the availability of financial resources. Lack of financial resources renders women leaders' articulation of priorities to mere "rhetoric" (as we saw above) and dependency on financial and material support from NGOs, political parties and the central government via the Commune/*Sangkat* Fund.[6] A group of commune councillors in Takeo expressed their views:

> Decentralisation is really good for women because they can get access to the political system in the commune; [but their active involvement] is not yet as extended in terms of ability to do things as the commune authority wishes. The lack of resources is the chief problem, hindering [women's] ability to articulate

[6] Dependency on central government and political parties/elites is the main factor hindering female leaders from articulating their role and making decisions effectively. That they tend to have local support does not necessarily affect this status quo. As long as decentralised authorities are dependent on central funds, local popularity and legitimacy does not catalyse revenue-raising capabilities, barely impacting on what could be achieved (since financial constraints are the major impediment to progress in the short run).

(*chloeuytorb*)[7] [opinions and demands] and make decisions independently. *Group of male CC members, Takeo, 24 June 2010*

However, the commune councils are normally unable to realise (all) popular demands. In order to make people understand the difficulties that hinder councils' ability to be fully responsive, the commune chiefs (as well as all the councillors) need to be flexible, patient and transparent in their dealings with people. A female commune chief in Battambang explained:

> People always ask for many things from the commune and we are not able to realise their demands. The best way to deal with this issue is to explain [the situation] to them clearly and to disclose the exact amount of money that the commune council has every year. *Female CC chief, Battambang, 12 July 2010*

Similarly, a commune chief in Battambang said:

> As I personally understand, commune councillors have more chances than before, particularly women like me, to engage in leadership of the commune. However, the major constraint in terms of implementing responsibilities is that we have no revenue other than the commune/*sangkat* fund once a year. The only extra [financial] support to assist us to do our job for the people is some support from NGOs. *Commune chief, Battambang, 12 July 2010*

Another constraint to attracting women capable of articulating their political views and their constituencies' needs and preferences within the commune councils is the lack of qualified, bold and interested women willing to join the local authorities, as most rural women (and men) are reluctant to make controversial decisions.[8] A group of CC members in Kompong Cham shared their views:

> The issue of gender is really good on paper. We have seen that many agencies are working to promote gender awareness, but in practice, it is not yet realistic. The chief problems of gender [equality] are the qualifications and confidence of the female candidates. There are not many qualified women in the political parties and young and qualified people do not like to work with the local authorities. *Group of CC members, Kompong Cham, 28 July 2010*

Many informants state that female leaders in the commune level require different circumstances than men in order to be able to articulate their opinions properly. These include: i) sufficient financial resources and decision-making power as stipulated in law; ii) full support, permission and trust from the political party; iii) a certain (i.e. higher than men) level of education or intellectual capacity, working experience, good understanding of the community and self-confidence; and iv) reputable personality and popularity in the community. This then raises the questions of how representation actually generates influence and how influence is exercised. Let us discuss women's ability to project power from their relatively increasing ability to articulate their preferences.

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[7] In the vernacular, the word articulation (*cloeuytorb*) means the ability to do things more independently in a responsible way.

[8] This is partly a result of previous resistance to women's participation in political decision-making (creating a vicious circle of exclusion), and partly a more general reluctance to air opinions which may not be possible to substantiate, a typical characteristic of the rural population. If "mistakes" are made, popular ridicule can be cruel with long-term consequences. This goes for women and men, but the practice is such that it punishes hubris and norm-breakers harder than others. Hence, women daring to venture into politics are particularly vulnerable to this kind of "threat".

…..but to what extent are they heard?

In Cambodia, it is difficult for a leader (man or woman) to be independent (Kim 2012). Patronage through extended vertical networks is perceived as natural and even obligatory (Chandler 2000; Marson 1997; Pak *et al.* 2007; Kim 2012), and the informal power structure has always been competing with institutionalised hierarchies of the state (Roberts 2006; Ledgerwood & Vijghen 2002). The dominant historical pattern is that power is personalised and rests with individuals or groups and much less with formal state institutions(Mabbett & Chandler 1995; Thion 1993). What exists at grassroots level is a great deal of personal dependency, and in particular cases, affiliation to a political party (Pak & Craig 2008). In contemporary Cambodia power is centred on three main pillars: private (individuals or personalised power), public (state/government institutions), and political parties (or *kanakpaknoyobay*). Hence, influence must be sought through these pillars to which women may have less access.

The interviewed informants expressed different views on how to exercise legitimate power in a local setting. A group of commune councillors in Kompong Cham aired their feelings:

> In the current situation, as a commune council member, we cannot be independent. We have to be committed to a political party because the system works through a party list. The preferences of a political party are the most influential, and ones we cannot change. *Group of male CCs, Kompong Cham, 28 July 2010*

A female commune chief in Battambang expressed her view on the most important political factors:

> Currently our electoral system is based on proportional party vote. Political party [affiliation] is the most vital factor for the exercise of power. The second most important factor is individual capacity and commitment, and the last one is the state or the commune. However, to be supported by people in the community and to work successfully, we need all three elements. You can compare this to the triangulation of the charcoal stove; it needs three pillars to hold the rice pot steady. *Female commune chief, Battambang, 12 July 2010*

To possess legitimate power, leaders should be clear regarding the three core elements of power. A female commune chief in Kratie echoed her views:

> I would like to share with you that power at commune level now is associated with an individual's personality, the state authority, and the political party. Of these three elements, the state or the commune is the most important because it is responsible for executing the legal framework of the government. The second most important is the individual capacity of leaders and their popularity, and the last one is the political party [which is important] since we are in the party list electoral system. *Female commune chief, Kratie, 19 June 2010*

However, the separation between the state and political party remains ambiguous. Many local politicians are still projecting the system of the PRK from the 1980s, implying that the party leads and the state executes (*pakdoeuknourm* and *rotaknuvat*) or party first and state second (*pakneung rot*). While still at work, this practice appears obsolete in the emerging governance system. However, arguments on its relative obsoleteness do not prevent it from being efficient, albeit in a crude way. A commune councillor in Takeo further explains:

> With the current party-based electoral system, the most important [strategy] for individuals to secure power or position in the government is from a [good

> position within a] political party because we still believe that the party leads and the state implements (*pakdoeuknourm* and *rot aknuvat*). Other factors for generating power are individuals' capacity, networking and popularity within the party and community. These are the factors through which the commune council operates. *CC member, Takeo, 24 June 2010*

A group of male commune councillors in Kompong Cham echo their view on the power structure and decision of political parties:

> The rational state law is very important for day-to-day implementation of government policy and dealing with people, but the party has decision-making power to fire or keep you in position—accountability to the party is equally important. *A group of male CCs, Kompong Cham, 28 July 2010*

A senior CC member from the ruling party in Kratie describes the decision-making power of his party:

> The epicentre of decision-making power in the party is based on producing outputs for the party, commitment to the party, and popularity among people—the party trusts you. Capacity and education are not the first priority because in the current political situation, the party has to give priority to gaining more votes and winning elections. Normally, a person cannot meet all these requirements, but capacity and education can be fixed and later improved through working experience. *A male CC member, Kratie, 25 April 2012*

Variations on the theme above include the emerging significance of money in local politics. A female commune chief expressed her view on the relationship between the political party and the state – that the current electoral system without the party would mean there would be no state, and whoever has money can climb the ladder of power within the political party. She said:

> The power structure now is simple [and remains] as it has been since 1979. The political party is of utmost importance because "no party no state" (*kmeanpakkmean rot*). This is a political slogan from the 1980s; it remains the same now. I think individual capacity and popularity is very important as well because you can make your party win the vote and you are supported by the people in the community… money is now the most important; money generates power—money. If you are rich it means you are also powerful in the party and would be placed as the top candidate during election time—then you are in a prestigious position. *CC chief, Takeo, 25 June 2010*

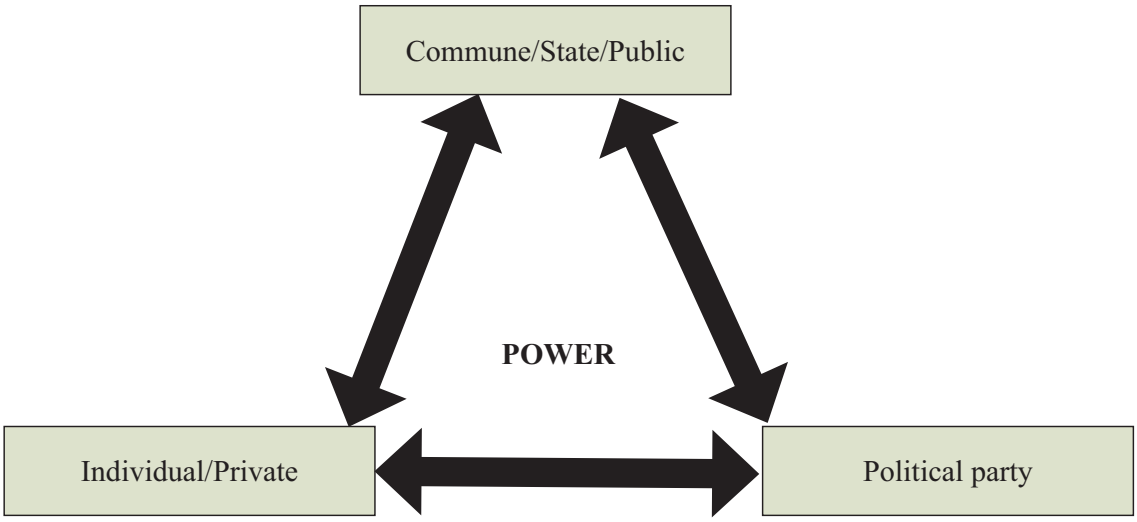
Another group in Takeo described their view on power in Cambodia:

> The political party, personal capacity, and [state] authority are equally important, but the real power nowadays depends on first money, [then] political party and authority. Political candidates who have money are popular among people and they are also trusted by their political party because they can get good election results for the party. *Group of male CCs, Takeo, 24 June 2010*

Figure 3 illustrates the empirical information gleaned from field interviews with commune councillors and village authority leaders. Three dominant structures in Cambodian society reflect how power can be amassed and perpetuated. To protect their power, the most important

political sphere (from a gendered perspective) is that women have to be trusted by and actively engaged in a political party (because of the party-list system). The second most important sphere is individual/private, where one needs to be humble, popular and patient in the community. The third important political sphere is the state institution, such as the commune, which has the rationale and legal authority to rule. Of the three, women are seemingly most successful in generating popular support in their private capacity, and are partly aided by public policies and laws. Support from within the party is thinner, squeezed between historical patriarchy and emerging money politics both favouring men.

Figure 3: Structure of Power at Commune Level



To sum up the most important political processes that would project women's power, we find the following:

- Women's capacity to articulate political opinions in formal bodies has increased through the process of decentralisation. Women are seen as being good at and interested in articulating political views, in particular children's, women's and social welfare issues.
- Female leaders face additional obstacles[9] such as (extra) dependency on financial resources from central government, political parties, and NGOs. Cooperation from men and political parties is often necessary to "allow" women to articulate and execute their priorities properly.
- Many discussions on gender issues in Cambodia refer to an assumed lack of self-confidence among women putting them in an awkward situation. In order for women to be further empowered, as indicated in the empirical discussion above, they need a certain degree of autonomy, trust, and support from political party and family.
- Women's empowerment in politics is highly dependent on the political party prioritising women, placing them at the top of the voting list and giving them authority and support.

[9] This is a dilemma for male councilors as well, but reportedly even more so for women.

- Overall, women are increasingly present and appreciated in commune councils and popular discourse to some extent further encourages women in local politics i.e. that women be active and articulate. Nevertheless, their limited access to society's "pillars of power" prevents women from projecting power on an equal footing with men.

4

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study aims to scrutinise to what extent democratic devolution has opened space for women to engage in (local) politics. In unpacking local politics, from a critical stance vis-à-vis the headcount approach, we applied a levelled approach where two different depths of female engagement in local governance were empirically investigated: First, the *extent of female political representation in the commune councils*, asking questions like how female representation has been enhanced, why, and what that implies. The second degree is *articulation and the exercise of power in their role as local politicians.* How has women's articulation of views and preferences been pursued in the commune councils? Which mechanisms enable women to pursue power in commune councils, and what are the obstacles? Discussion in this concluding chapter elaborates on these questions.

4.1. Decentralisation and Gendering Political Representation in Commune Councils

Legal and regulatory frameworks for women's political empowerment and the number of women engaging in the political arena at different tiers of government clearly demonstrate that the government has seriously considered the role of women in the political sphere. A conviction that this is important is emerging through various policy reforms and regulatory frameworks. Hence, gender mainstreaming is increasingly taking place through various policy mechanisms, most critically through national and local elections. At local government level, women's engagement in politics is not new, but a "new norm" is emerging where women are represented in official fora more frequently than before and are occasionally recognised as legitimate and competent leaders. As such, it is evident that the decentralisation reform –in particular the establishment of commune elections/councils – has opened space for women's involvement in local politics to a degree that did not exist before.

Ongoing socioeconomic transformation in Cambodia has influenced and changed the (potential) roles of women in different ways. Traditional norms and old assumptions that have applied to women are gradually whittling away for a number of reasons: there are push factors where women have to or want to work far from home and there are fewer impediments and risks to them doing so and more opportunities. There are also pull factors where there is a need for better and more legitimate local leadership, which women can provide. The media, development advocacy, and overall capacity building offered by NGOs targeting women have also played a crucial role in enhancing gender awareness and countering the argument that there are no skilled women available for political leadership roles.

That said there is no doubt that the equalising of political representation faces some deep-seated problems. The headcount reveals a progressive outcome of the gendering of politics, but male politicians still dominate at all levels of government and there is always a "thick discourse" –recoursed to when needed – limiting the possibility for women to work efficiently as local leaders. Women of course sense this (adding to a historical condition) and in a vicious circle, it becomes difficult to get female qualified candidates to act in local political arenas as also observed in other places; a woman's status is more vulnerable to public critique. In addition, laws and policies often appear to be much better on paper than they prove to be in reality. Most importantly, going to the core of the political power structures, the political parties are not pro-active in enhancing gender equality. Hence, there is no real political will to encourage women to engage in local politics. Turning this perspective on its head, however, we

can claim that there is a markedly sinking resistance to accepting women in politics, and there exists a new found strategic interest in putting female candidates high on the party-lists since it may now attract popular votes.

4.2. The Ability of Women to Articulate Political Priorities and Pursue Opinions

Although female representation in local politics has increased distinctly, the ability of women to articulate their views and their constituencies' needs and preferences does not necessarily follow. Women are often pigeonholed into dealing with so-called women's matters such as social welfare, domestic violence, household economy, and children's affairs. While this could be seen as a way of crystallising gender stereotypes – and sometimes it is exactly that in the crudest of forms – it is also a way to break the discourse on women's lower values, their "softness" and inefficacy in dealing with the police, and ineptitude as leaders. In the post-war era these issues are not necessarily marginal, but have (occasionally) come to the fore in (local) development discourses; as we have seen, some female leaders have gained deep and sound political legitimacy in the local scene based on their competence in these fields.

However, the pattern of women dealing with women's issues only is one that needs to be broken or at least increasingly destabilised in order to give women full and real access to local politics. Moreover, the partial success of women in politics is found in the way women listen and speak, which is both prejudicial and "true": it is typically emphasised and appreciated that women leaders are easily approachable, humble and patient. These characteristics are highly sought after among people in local communities, not because they are seen as "weak", but rather because such an approach avoids "hiding" behind raw power (*ormnach*), instead taking people and their problems seriously. These traits could be understood as women leaders exercising a higher degree of accountability. Interestingly, as we have seen elsewhere, male leaders also seek to adopt this leadership style because it fits the time, as well as the emerging political system, better (Öjendal& Kim 2006; Thon *et al.* 2009).

However, this way of articulating political ideas and values seems to be more vulnerable to lack of resources–not "hiding" exposes leaders to their (in)ability to deliver–failing to back up good ideas and an empathic attitude. Lack of financial resources to realise constituency demands tends to hurt female leaders disproportionally and feed real and constructed deficits in executive capacity and political self-confidence. Finally, it is still – widely and deeply – assumed that women leaders cannot handle security issues effectively, at least not in remote communes.

Women's enhanced political representation and widened political articulation have paved the way for women leaders to (start to) become forceful decision-makers in the local political arena to a degree not seen before. Since there is an increasing number of female focal persons in the commune councils and at village level, women leaders are increasingly using this localised approach to influence local politics. However, through expounding individuals' relative power and ability to make explicit change it becomes obvious just how difficult it is to diffuse change throughout the entire local governance system where not only a collective rules, but one that has a permanent "coalition government" within the commune council and a very strong party in the background exerting dominance.

Hence, the mechanisms that influence and project women's power are pretty much based on crude criteria such as the power within the dominant political party, the financial resources invested in local politics, and to some extent individual charisma which may be soft and caretaking or hard and protecting attracting popular support. Even though some women are

elected to commune councils due to their personal prowess, they are often not able to exercise their formal authority in full. The latter is however only to a limited extent a gendered problem; the political party remains the centre of influence, gendered politics or not.

4.3. Conclusions

This study asked: *To what extent is there an increased gender balance, and how do women manage to articulate and pursue their views in local politics?* Let us here, to conclude, state the general situation of the gendering of local politics as far as we understand it in a few brief paragraphs.

In terms of *D&D reform*: As indicated by the statistical data as well as the information gathered from in-depth interviews, the overall views of decentralisation are such that reforms have opened up different opportunities for women's participation in local governance, at least in the rural communities, as researched here. Decentralisation reform and socioeconomic factors have enhanced the political space and improved awareness of gender by providing fora where women are "allowed" to engage politically and access at least a small budget for local development work.

In terms of *policy*: The government, through recent policies, has integrated gender aspects as a crosscutting issue embedded in many sectors and at different levels. Most of the female informants at commune and village level were forthright in expressing their understanding of rights issues and at times responded by demanding increased equality. Many of the interviewees said that without electoral decentralisation at commune level and strong support in terms of policy it would be difficult for women to have such opportunities. Many policies remain, however, rhetorically shallow and difficult to implement locally due to the need for major efforts to break social norms, as well as the lack of financial support, which women possibly need more than men due to people's higher expectations of them to deliver. Most importantly, political will from the top leaders to alter social norms is, at best, half-hearted.

In terms of *popular discourse*: Awareness of gender issues, as well as the acceptance of female leaders, has increased sharply since the inception of decentralisation reform in 2002. At least four fundamental forces have contributed to this heightened awareness: i) support from government institutions to a limited extent by political parties via the party list electoral system; ii) training and advocacy efforts by NGOs and civil society organisations; iii) economic and social dynamics (introducing "modernity"); and iv) a changing popular discourse. This set of inputs has led to especially vibrant democratic development through the local commune elections, creating the opportunity for women to engage in local politics and development activities, providing a distinct shift from old norms.

Much progress has been made in ten years of decentralisation implementation (and 20 years of democratisation attempts). Many informants, especially men, when asked about the critical role of social norms, stated that women are good at managing local committees because, they think, women are more patient and empathic when it comes to children, social and household affairs. This is a dual progress: on the one hand, it has opened a space for women to achieve a higher presence in local political fora; on the other, they are often clustered into a gender-stereotyped positions dealing with women's affairs. For good and bad, their performance is also evaluated through a stereotypical gender lens. Many constraints to a achieving a more gender equal situation persist. Female leaders are not fully appreciated by their male counterparts, or in the commune council or within the political party. Often this is said to be because women are

presumed to be weak in terms of dealing with security issues, and inhibited in their leadership by social and traditional norms.

At large, the political reform of decentralisation has opened political space and started to re-arrange social norms that effectively used to prevent women from entering politics. While this is politically very interesting, the process must be kept dynamic in order to reach anywhere close to gender-equal local governance in Cambodia. The major impediment to deeper gender equality rests primarily with the gradual shift in social norms upheld by both men and women, including within the conservative and politicised party system. We may here witness a start of this historical process.

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