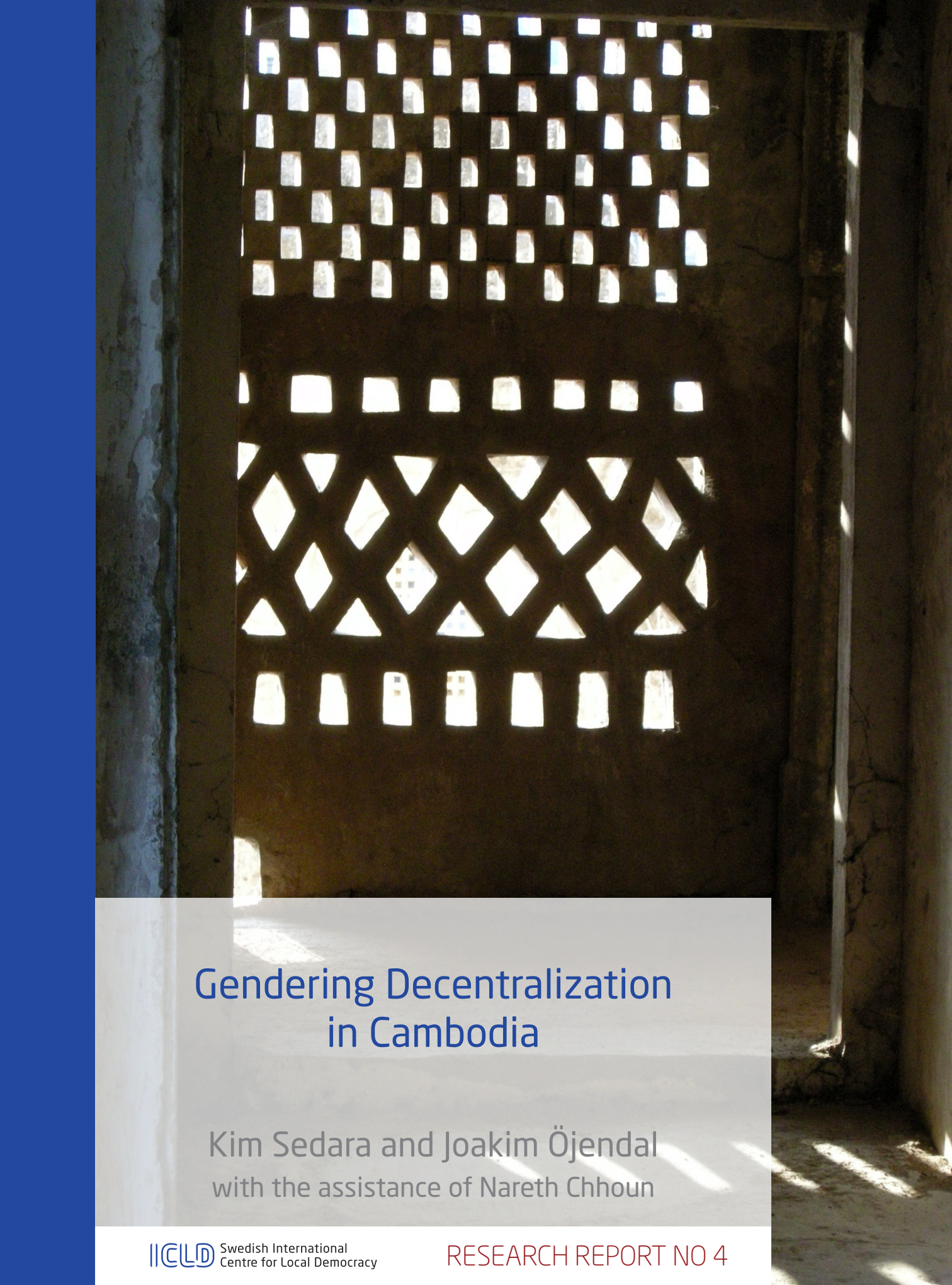




# Gendering Decentralization in Cambodia

Kim Sedara and Joakim Öjendal  
with the assistance of Nareth Chhoun



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## RESEARCH REPORT NO 4



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## ABSTRACT

Cambodia's process of democratic decentralization has been marked by the commune/*Sangkat* elections in 2002, 2007, and 2012. The decentralization reform is commonly regarded as the most deep-cutting public sector reform and the politically most significant democratic development in Cambodia since 1993. The reform rearranges power structures, creates space for a more pluralistic political representation, addresses gender equality in local politics, and triggers articulation of new political views. However, the reforms continue to face significant challenges: female representation in political decision making bodies remains inadequate, gendered articulation of ideas and priorities have a limited resonance, and established gendered power structures are entrenched and not easily altered. Taking democratic decentralization and gender equality into account, this study aims to explore the space for women in Cambodia's emerging local governance system by asking: *How has decentralization altered the conditions for women in local politics? To what extent is there an increased gender balance in local political bodies? How do women manage to articulate and pursue their views in local politics?* In answering these research questions, three critical issues will be empirically examined: the general impact of decentralization on gender issues; female representation in the commune council; and, women's political articulation and influence in local politics.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We would like to acknowledge the invaluable contribution and cooperation of our interviewees - villagers, village chiefs/committee members, and commune councilors in the four communes we visited. We are largely indebted to Ms. Chhuon Nareth for their contribution to the fieldwork and other aspects of the research. We have also appreciated the support of Ms. Ly Tem Our gratitude and thanks also go to Ms Thon Vimealea, Mr Lun Pide and Mr Ou Sivhuoch for their invaluable support as members of the research team.

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## ACRONYMS

|         |                                                                            |
|---------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| CC      | Commune Council                                                            |
| CDRI    | Cambodia Development Resource Institute                                    |
| COMFREL | the Committee for Free and Fair Elections                                  |
| CEDAW   | Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women |
| CNCW    | Cambodian National Council for Women                                       |
| 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                                                |
| NFSK    | National Front for the Salvation of Kampuchea                              |
| NGO     | Non-governmental Organisation                                              |
| NP-SNDD | National Programme for Sub-national Democratic Development                 |
| PRK     | People's Republic of Kampuchea                                             |
| SSCS    | State Secretariat of Civil Service                                         |
| UNDP    | United Nations Development Programme                                       |
| WB      | The World Bank                                                             |

## GLOSSARY OF KHMER TERMS AND PHRASES:

|                             |                                                            |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Charek ptoeul kloeun</i> | personal behavior                                          |
| <i>cloeuy torb</i>          | responsiveness                                             |
| <i>khan</i>                 | district in the urban areas                                |
| <i>kmean pak kmean rot</i>  | no party no state                                          |
| <i>ormnach</i>              | power                                                      |
| <i>pak doeuk nourm</i>      | party leads                                                |
| <i>pak neung rot</i>        | party and state or party first and state second            |
| <i>rotaknuvat</i>           | state is responsible for executing all the state's affairs |
| <i>sangkat</i>              | commune in the urban areas                                 |

## PREFACE

The mandate of the Swedish International Center for Local Democracy (ICLD) is to contribute to poverty alleviation by promoting local democracy and local development. In order to fulfill this mandate we offer decentralized cooperation through our Municipal Partnership Programmes, capacity building programmes through our International Training Programmes and knowledge management through our Knowledge Centre. The Centre documents and publishes key lessons learned from our ongoing activities, initiates and funds relevant research and engages in scholarly networks, organizes conferences and workshops and maintains a publication series.

Visby, Sweden  
October 2014

**Jerker Stattin**  
Acting Secretary General

This report *Gendering Decentralization in Cambodia* by Kim Sedara and Joakim Öjendal is the fourth paper to be published in ICLD's Research Report series. Kim et al. examine to what extent the local government reform in Cambodia, called the process of Deconcentration and Decentralization (D&D), has fostered an increased gender balance in Cambodian politics. Hence, the study seeks to answer if and to what extent, the decentralization reform has altered the conditions for women in Cambodian politics.

By reading this report you will gain insight into a critical question applicable to local governments beyond Cambodia, i.e. women's access to the political arena, and the role of local democracy in that process.

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reform in Post Conflict Cambodia". Dr. Kim's primarily research and publications focus on local democracy, civil society and election, gender, and political economy of post conflict Cambodia. He is currently serving as a professor in political economy at the Royal School of Administration, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.



# Gendering Decentralization in Cambodia

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Cambodia's process of democratic decentralization is defined by the Law on the Administration and Management of Communes/*Sangkats* (LAMC) and the Law on Commune Elections declared in 2001. These laws established the communes as a pivotal nexus for sub-national governance and development. The country has since held commune/*sangkat* elections in 2002, 2007, and 2012. This process is commonly regarded as the most deep-cutting public sector reform and politically the most significant democratic development in Cambodia since the introduction of the 1993 constitution (Ojendal & Kim 2009). Building on the initial success of this local government reform at the commune level, the Royal Government put forward its vision for a wider public sector reform under the heading of Deconcentration and Decentralization (D&D). This was subsequently codified through the Strategic Framework for Decentralization and Deconcentration (in 2005). With the adoption of the Organic Law in April 2008, Cambodia is now embarking on the second phase of reform with the 'indirect' elections of its district/*khan* councils and provincial/municipal councils held in May 2009. Through this reform, it is expected that eventually 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 the sub-national level. It would also improve 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-intervention in 1992/3, is gradually, or so it seems, becoming deepened, localised and comprehensive.

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 more pluralistic political representation, trigger the articulation of new opinions, and address gender equality in local politics, as well as accountability, service delivery, and overall responsiveness (Kim 2012; Kim & Ojendal 2009). Hence, from a normative point of view, these reforms harbour a high development potential (cf. Manor 2008) in terms of deepened democracy, a higher degree of gender equality, better service delivery, and infrastructure improvements. However, and to the surprise of no one, the reforms face significant challenges where change is partly resisted and historical social structures prevail; possibly the gender aspects of inclusion, participation, and democracy are the more difficult changes to achieve (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 have limited resonance, and established (gendered) power structures are entrenched and not easily altered, and even less so, removed. Or as Kent 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'" (Kent 2010:128). Hence, processes of change are set in motion, but resistance is thick.

Not only structures are changing, but agency is also triggered on a broad base. Cambodian women do have strategies to form and conduct political identities (Lilja 2009), but women's engagement 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 and Kim 2006; cf. Lilja 2006). From a micro-perspective, despite the fact that Cambodian women are 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). While this represents a conservative view of Cambodian politics, many ‘new’ influences and patterns can simultaneously be observed: 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 all initiated a transformation of the old norms of society (Ovesen *et al.* 1996; Ojendal & Kim 2006; Lilja 2010). A plethora of expressions of deepened gender equality is visible and there is a multitude of processes that were not present before. In this sense we do associate with Stiven’s claim that modernisation (in Asia) is in itself, by its very nature, a gendered process (2010:1). Taking its point of departure from CDRI’s previous policy research on the Decentralization and Deconcentration (D&D) reform in Cambodia, this study will scrutinize to what extent the D&D reform has served to foster gender equality in local politics in Cambodia. Hence, this study aims to explore the space for women in Cambodia’s emerging local governance system. The overarching research questions for this study are *to what extent decentralization has fostered an increased gender balance, and how do women manage to articulate and pursue their views in local politics?*

Before we theorize this query, let us elaborate on the methodology we have used to study this question.

## 1.1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

The introduction above has basically made three claims of significance for this study, which will be further elaborated in the theoretical section. These are: i) *decentralisation matters* for the possibility for women to engage in politics; ii) *representation* of women in political fora has increased the last decade for a variety of reasons, among them decentralisation and; iii) Although representation has increased, this does not necessarily mean that women are equally able/allowed to *articulate* their opinions in full. These are the three critical fields - change through decentralisation, degree of representation, and the substance of articulation – that provide a framework for both the empirical study and the conclusions which are organised accordingly. In combination, these issues provided critical insights and enabled us to form a deeper understanding of the D&D reforms and their ability for enhancing gender equity, in particular the formalisation of the gendered role in local politics. The three critical issues are defined as:

- *To what extent has the decentralisation reform altered the conditions for women’s engagement in local politics?*

This is the most general question addressed in a broad manner.

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

And given that there is an increased female representation in commune councils:

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

The latter question was subsequently broken down into sub-categories emphasising the ability to exercise *voice* and *power*. These three fields constitute the empirical base of this paper.

The 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; Ojendal & Kim 2006, 2011; Kim 2011 forthcoming). Cambodia is, relatively speak-

ing, fairly monolithic in terms of political and institutional set-up. There are, however, certain historical experiences that differ. These could include the depth of activities in the civil war, length and depth of exposure to international development aid and its value system, and different economic conditions. To give a semblance of geographical representation, the particular provinces for the empirical base of this research were:<sup>1</sup>

- i) TK commune, southeast province
- ii) KC commune, central province
- iii) TT commune, northwest province
- iv) KL commune, central province.

The four communes are all headed by female council chiefs. The rationale for selecting these four commune councils was three-fold:

- i) A wealth of contextual knowledge from these sites was already generated through previous studies. From these studies we gained insights in political, socio-economic, and general situations.
- ii) Since the study attempted to analyse the role of women in local politics, we focused on communes with prominent female presence, and the four selected communes were all headed by female elected commune council chiefs.
- iii) We managed to balance the geographical locations of the four communes by selecting two communes in the northeast of the country (KC and KL commune), one commune in the southern part of the country (TK commune), and one remote commune (TT commune) in the northwest.

This study was based on in-depth interviews, seeking qualitative data, with different key informants: commune chiefs (all are women), commune councillors (both men and women), heads of political parties in each commune, village chiefs (mostly men) and village committee members (most are women). Given our limited time and resources allocated for this study, we did not conduct a quantitative survey to get quantitative data. Instead we occasionally draw on secondary sources for quantitative data (eg. Ojendal & Kim 2011).

Despite the fact that four commune councils were selected for in-depth interviews, this study was not by design a comparative study of the four communes. Rather, the gendered politics in the commune councils are used as the unit of analysis in order to gain insights toward understanding the power-permeated gender dimensions within the process of D&D reform. This study does not claim to represent a full spectrum of gender issues in local politics in Cambodia – due to its limited number of sites and interviews – but rather seeks to highlight some key issues and processes. Finally, the fact that we deliberately chose communes with female commune chiefs may have tilted the sample towards ‘pro-female’ communes. However, it gave us richer material and experiences upon which to build.

## 1.2. RESEARCH ETHICS AND DELIMITATIONS

During all phases of this research, the ethical code of conduct for conducting gender research has been taken into account. The nature of gender research is, by definition, sensitive. Firstly, gender research often questions established power structures and has the potential to destabilize the prevailing order of power between the haves and the have-nots. Secondly, gendered research (on men and women) is personal; all interviewees are either a man or a woman, being addressed (and questioned) by the research

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1 These are kept anonymous for ethical reasons.

in their personal capacity. The combination of addressing established power positions and the personal dimensions makes it potentially volatile. Hence interviewees were approached in a sensitive manner, and measures were taken to protect individuals from harm or trouble. To protect informants' privacy and integrity, the names of informants as well as the real names of the commune and district are not disclosed.

### 1.3. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

'Decentralisation' is no longer a new phenomenon. It has a long history (cf. Rondinelli & Cheema 1983), becoming a global trend in the 1990s, and has now been labelled the 'quiet revolution' (Campbell 2003; cf. Grindle 2009; cf. World Bank 2008; cf. Ojendal 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, participation, and to bring government closer to where people live and work (Litvack *et al.* 1998; Manor 1999). However, when it comes to country specific implementation, decentralization is an elusive term, the design as well as the outcome depends on social, political, historical, cultural and economic contexts (Crook and Manor 1998; cf. Treisman 2006; cf. Manor 2010). This is especially true when we focus on gender aspects (Ahikire 2007). The International Union of Local Authorities' (IULA) *Worldwide Declaration on Women in Local Government* stated 15 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 and Schnyder 2005:6).

This is a claim which has been widely supported since then. For instance, Beall (2005) explained that experiences from Africa show that decentralization has frequently served as an important vehicle for increasing women's representation and political participation.

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

This leads us to inquire where and how women are, or are not, fully represented. Local government is possibly the most accessible level for enhanced female representation in politics. Or as Byrne and Schnyder states: "With decentralization 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). They continue to state:

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 more accessible starting point for action. (2005:7)

Along the same lines, a previous study by United Nations Development Programme indicated that supporting local government through decentralization with greater levels of transparency, accountability, and responsiveness to citizen's demands, constitutes the most appropriate mechanism for boosting gender equal representation (UNDP 2000; cf. WB 2001).

However, this is not to be taken for granted. Ahikire, for one, cautions that although numbers increase, real influence does not necessarily follow (2007). In her study from Uganda, she finds that although inclusion of women has taken place on a grand scale (even on quota-basis), women's power has not been permeating local politics. Hence, it is possible that the establishment of participatory local government - through democratic decentralization - would enhance women's equality in the form of increased representation. However, it is also likely that surrounding discourses impede a deeper political voice. This is a pattern emerging from the established literature. Below we will address these two levels of gender in local politics.

To sum up; although female representation in political fora is increasing numerically (see further below), we know that representation in and of itself, only addresses the core of the problem to a limited extent. Hence, and in line with recent international research on politicised gender issues (Kayumba 2010; Sylvester 1994; Rydström 2010), we are only marginally interested in numbers and figures. Although numbers are important, there is a distinct limit to what can be achieved on this 'head count' level. To reach anywhere close to gender equality in Cambodian local politics, attention must be paid to the more subtle processes at play. Those nuances need to be investigated. Having said that, a full gendered 'power-analysis' of local politics is beyond the scope of this report (cf. Lilja 2006; cf. Frieson 2001; Ledgerwood 1992). Nevertheless, we attempted to complement the general analysis of *change*, and that of figures and numbers- as seen in an analysis of *representation*- with analyses of the *articulation* of political ideas. That is, are women using their increased representation to utilise their voice and to exercise power that comes with the office? And to what degree are their voices being heard and listened to? Thus, we cover three levels gradually taking us to the core of the nature of gendered local politics in Cambodia.

Following from this introductory chapter, the paper will *firstly* discuss the general gender issue in the Cambodian context (Chapter 2). *Secondly*, we will empirically review the changing situation of women's engagement in local politics, their presentation in local political institutions, and finally, which voice and power women are able to exercise (Chapter 3). *Thirdly*, we discuss the implications of our findings on the three levels of analysis, and conclude on what decentralization has meant for enhancement of gender equality in the political sphere (Chapter 4).

## 2. A BACKGROUND TO A GENDERED GOVERNANCE IN CAMBODIA - 'THE TIMES THEY ARE A CHANGING'

This section of the report will touch upon two main issues. First, the general literature on the role of decentralization in promoting gender equality is reviewed. Secondly, gender and decentralization within the Cambodian context such as legal framework, policy documents, and various reports and studies related to the gender issue is screened. While there is some writing on political gender issues in Cambodia<sup>2</sup> - from which we will draw - there are no explicit studies to date on how the decentralization reform has encouraged or discouraged female inclusion in local politics (possibly Thon et al. 2010 qualify as such).

### 2.1. RECENT TRENDS AND POLICIES ON GENDER EQUALITY

Gender roles in Cambodia have been described as rather complex, intermingling 'modern' ideals with embedded traditional/cultural, social, and behavioural norms, which all are in a state of flux (cf. Kent 2010). This constitutes a rather complex *problematique*.

First of all, gender issues have become a part of mainstream politics in Cambodia over the last five years. Already in the 'decentralization law' (2001), gender issues were brought in (though in a slightly conservative way, see Box 1), and again in a more sophisticated way in the 'D&D'-strategy' from 2005 (RGC/Strategic Framework 2005), and perhaps most explicitly in the recent Rectangular Strategy (2010, see below). The potential improvement of women's access to politics in terms of different levels of leadership is visualised through structural institutional reforms including decentralization and deconcentration (see Box 1&2), public financial management reform, harmonisation and alignment measures, and mechanisms for increasing effectiveness and efficiency in responding to gender concerns (MoWA 2008). This, in itself, provides a break with previous patterns, and though insufficient in isolation, it has been followed by increased participation of women in politics.

#### BOX 1:

*Article 19 of the Sub-decree on Decentralization 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 decentralization 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.

2 The most noteworthy are Ebihara 1968; Ledgerwood 1990; 1992; 1996; UNDP 2000; Frieson 2001; Lilja 2006; 2009; Thon et al. 2009; Jacobsen 2008; Kent 2010; and Derks 2008.

The progress of women's representation has mainly taken through the processes of various direct and indirect elections. The proportion of women elected to the National Assembly increased significantly from 5.8 percent in the 1993 national election to 12.3 percent in 1998, 20.3 percent in 2003, and 22 percent in the 2008 elections (Statistical Yearbook 2008). The proportion of women as secretary of state and under-secretary of state respectively has also increased from 7 percent and 9.6 percent in 2003 to 7.7 percent and 14.6 percent in 2008.

Within the institutions reformed through the 'Organic Law' - which has just been initiated - 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 8 percent in the 2002 commune elections to 14.6 percent in the 2007 elections. The senate was first appointed in 1999 and reappointed in 2004 with an increase in the proportion of women appointed to senate seats from 13 percent in 1999 to 21 percent 2004. With the shift to indirect election of the senate by commune councillors in 2006, the proportion of women in the senate declined to 15 percent.<sup>3</sup>

The figures above and below 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 instance is there anything close to a numerically equal representation. Instead the representation ranges in the 20s at the most. Second, *all* trends demonstrate increased gender-equal representation.<sup>4</sup> If these trends continue for another two to three elections, gender equality, as representation goes, would be within reach. The tables below show more fully the percentages of women in different government administrative levels.

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

| Year      | Senate             |              |            |
|-----------|--------------------|--------------|------------|
|           | Total No. of seats | No. of women | % of women |
| 1999-2005 | 61                 | 9            | 14.75      |
| 2006-2010 | 61                 | 9            | 14.75      |
|           | National Assembly  |              |            |
|           | Total No. of seats | No. of women | % of women |
| 1993      | 120                | 7            | 5          |
| 1998      | 122                | 15           | 12         |
| 2003      | 123                | 24           | 19         |
| 2008      | 123                | 26           | 21         |

Source: National Election Committee (NEC) data. (cited from CNCW: National report on CEDAW 2010)

**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              | 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

<sup>3</sup> This is because the senate members used to be appointed by the political parties, but since 2002, the senate has been indirectly elected by the commune councillors constituting a more conservative political grouping (MoWA 2008).

<sup>4</sup> The exception is the Senate indirect election in 2006. This break in the trend is likely to be attributed to a change in the political system rather than a deviation from the otherwise dominating trend of increasing the presence of women in politics.

**Table 3: Women Elected as Commune/Sangkat Councillors, 2002 and 2007, add 2012 commune elections 18%**

| Year | 2002         |            | 2007         |            | 2012      |            |
|------|--------------|------------|--------------|------------|-----------|------------|
|      | No. of women | % of women | No. of women | % of women | No. women | % of women |
|      | 1,065        | 9.41       | 1,717        | 15.12      | 2,038     | 18         |

Source: NEC data. (cited from CNCW: National report on CEDAW 2010)

**Table 4: Womens share of the two major parties inthe national election 2013 (preliminary)**

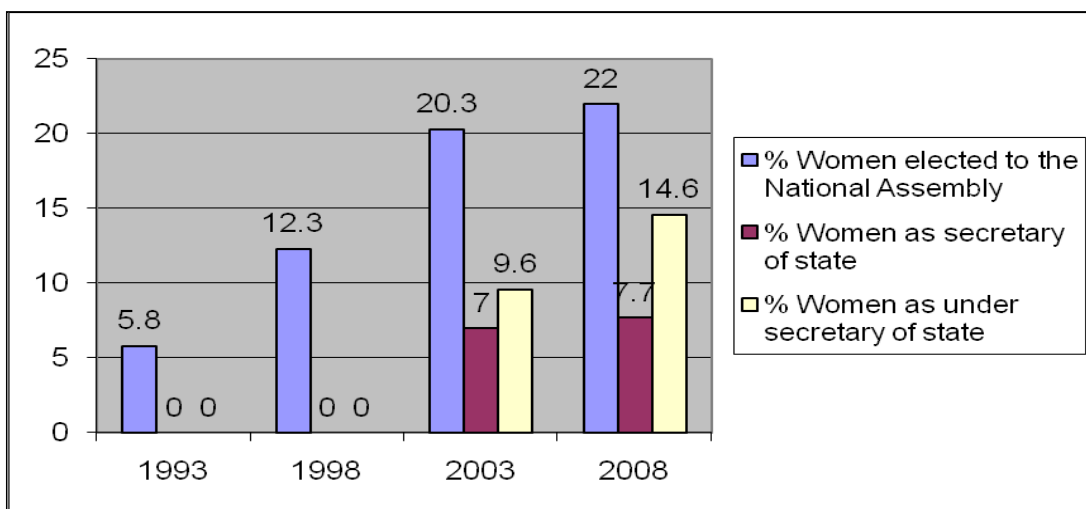
| National election 2013 |        |       |
|------------------------|--------|-------|
| Party                  | CPP    | NSRP  |
| Percentage             | 26.47% | 12.4% |

Source: NEC data.

**Table 4: Women CivilServants, 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%    |

**Diagram 1: Female Political Representation**



## 2.2. HISTORICAL GENDER ROLES IN FLUX

Turning to the social sphere, the study conducted in the pre-civil war years of the 1960s by May Ebihara on the role of women in rural society of Cambodia – 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 in some other rural societies. 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 households 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 sales in markets and as professionals within the public administration (cf. Derks 2008).

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; Ledgerwood 1996; Ovesen *et al.* 1996; Luco 2002; Frieson 2001; Ojendal & Kim 2006; Lilja 2009; Jacobsen 2008). Hence, women have been politically repressed and/or marginalised, although this has been slowly changing for some time. For instance, in the 1980s, in line with the communist tradition, the women's movement, was established under the Front (the core group which consists of Revolutionary Women's Association and the Youth Association). This would – it was widely assumed – enhance political education, act as a bridge between the party and the masses, and serve as training grounds 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 PRK government (Iwanaga 2008). Remnants of this system of 'mobilising' women (as a social category) to serve the political party, remains relevant.

The post-conflict nation building of Cambodia since 1993 has been heavily influenced by Western principles of democracy and market economy via aid inflow and various international intervention activities, which run counter to a number of traditional elements in the Khmer world view 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, which is generally perceived as contradicting the essence of Cambodian culture<sup>5</sup>. The political status of women is also enhanced by the influence of globalisation including the introduction of new norms through policy and practice by NGOs and donor agencies, especially concerning the political identities of rural areas in Cambodia (Lilja 2008; 2009).

A recent study on local leadership has revealed that women leaders face major constraints of culture and tradition, family pressure implying a double workload, and other more subtle barriers (Thon *et al.* 2009). These constraints have typically rendered female leaders to lack support and cooperation from their family members and colleagues. Some women leaders have faced divorce as a result of participating in politics. The study also found that women leaders for related reasons – not because women are not 'suitable' – lack the self-confidence and capacity to serve as top local leaders. This sentiment is typically shared among the male (and some female) leaders and villagers constructing a self-fulfilling prophecy. In a vicious circle, this general lack of trust in the capacity of women leaders makes them feel inferior, reifying the initial suspicion (Thon *et al.* 2009).

This creates a dual image of women trapped in traditional norms and expectations, yet being expected to claim a seat at the political table, invited without enthusiasm. If they remain passive, no political power

5 See Hughes *et al.* 2006 for reflection on Cambodian culture(s) and its ability to 'adapt' to modernization.

will be available; if they bid for power, they are questioned by a thick conservative discourse protecting established positions (typically held by men among the local elite, being deeper entrenched in the party system than what many women are).

## 2.3. SUMMING UP THE CONTEXT FOR GENDERED LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Overall, in the post-1993 period, gender awareness has been growing in tandem with different reforms within the government, especially, many would argue, within the decentralization and deconcentration reform (and their forerunners, 'CARERE' and 'Seila'). The emerging political space for women within the ongoing D&D reform is marked by a slow but tangible shift of power positions between the sexes (Ojendal & Kim 2006). 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.

In summary, most current legal and policy documents have gender mainstreaming as a crosscutting theme. Statistics show there has been an increasing degree of female representation in various levels of legislative and executive bodies through direct and indirect elections since 1993, and in the local context, since 2002. Historically, women started to become represented in politics in the 1980s, but not always in a way that has allowed fair and full access to power. In spite of a push for enhanced gender equality, female participation is still facing a lot of constraints; women are not fully recognised as power-holders in the social, political, and economic arenas of Cambodian society, creating a complex mix of both 'old' and 'new' gender politics and gender norms. In order to expose the complexities – the relative progress and the reactions to that progress – of the increasing formal space for women in local governance, the next chapter will put the empirical situations of the three chosen fields in the four commune councils under scrutiny.

### 3. FINDINGS FROM THE EMPIRICAL REVIEWS: CHANGE, REPRESENTATION AND ARTICULATION

Decentralization 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, 12 July 2010

The data used for this empirical chapter derive from two different sources. The first source is the quantitative baseline survey conducted in 2008/9 (Ojendal & Kim 2011) in five communes of five provinces (Kompong Speu, a central province, a northwest province, Kompot, and Siem Reap provinces) with 646 voter respondents. The second source of information is the recent in-depth interviews in four communes (two in central provinces, one in a southeast province, one in a northwest province) with commune council (CC) chiefs, CC members, and village officials. This chapter is divided into three sections analysing in turn: i) general roles and impacts of decentralization on the gendering of local politics, reviewing the quantitative survey data and the perceptions of both male and female informants in the targeted communes; ii) degree and nature of female representation in local political fora; iii) the ability of women in these fora to articulate and influence local politics.

#### 3.1. DECENTRALIZATION AND ITS IMPACTS ON GENDERED LOCAL POLITICS

As we saw above, women are oftentimes assumed to have easier access to politics in its local context (UNDP 2006; Byrne and Schnyder 2005). Is that the case in Cambodia as well? Let us check some basic figures on how women view the local authorities in order to confirm or reject this claim.

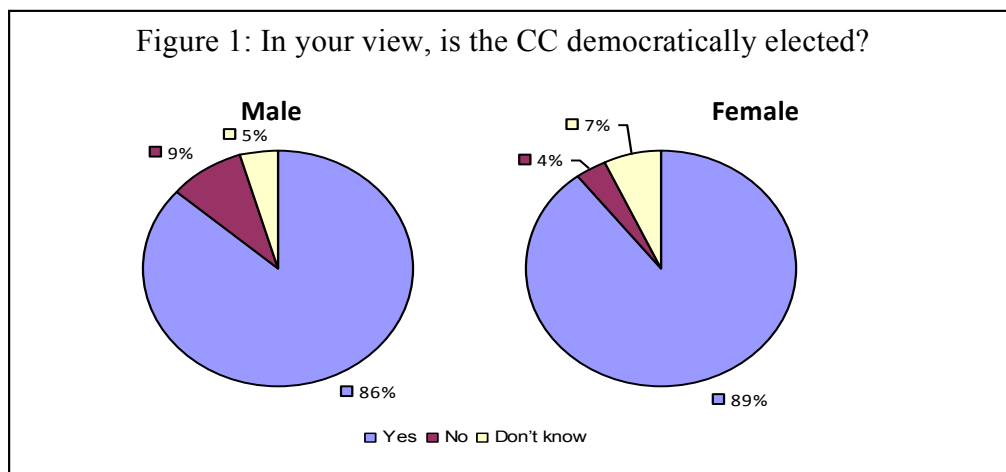


Figure 1 indicates that almost the same number of male and female respondents believe that CCs are democratically elected, with female voters having equal (or slightly higher) confidence in the democratic content of the decentralization reform. It seems that overall confidence in the emerging local authorities is high among both women and men, and that women have slightly more confidence in the establish-

ment of commune councils. Therefore, the overall assumption that women have easier access to politics at the local level seems to hold true, at least among the public. The perceptions of female and male commune councillors on decentralization reform and its gendered aspects are described below.

According to the qualitative interviews, the information from field interviews and observation indicate that decentralization has introduced various avenues for women to attain leadership in their communities. However, some measures are shallow, the depth of which must be critically questioned and empirically scrutinised. A female commune chief in a southeast province expressed her view on the roles of gender since the implementation of decentralization as: '[We can] talk about the role of women in politics and development in the commune level, though there is some [empty] rhetoric....'

Interestingly, she continued:

.....but since decentralization 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 the social affairs in the community...

Female CC chief, a southeast province, 25 June 2010

It is obvious that gender awareness is enhanced by recent reforms. A commune chief in a northwest province offered her view on decentralization and gender:

Gender awareness is getting better because of decentralization reform, opening up [opportunities] for women to participate in elections and engage with many activities in the community. The [main] enhancement of awareness of gender comes from the efforts by NGOs and the media.

Female CC chief, a northwest province, 12 July 2010

The constraints to achieve gender equality in Cambodia are substantial (as we saw above). Many of the interviewed informants said that the constraint from traditional norms is not as major a problem anymore as both men and women have changed their perceptions since the implementation of decentralisation<sup>6</sup>. While this may be jumping to conclusions, the point needs to be investigated. A group of male commune councillors stated:

I think 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 less under pressure from traditional norms compared to how it was in the past.

Group of male CC councillors, a central province, 16 June 2010

Another commune councillor expressed that:

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 face a lot of burdens in the family, taking care of their children, household chores, and economics.

Male commune councillor, a central province, 17 June 2010

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<sup>6</sup> The shift of the traditional norms is also caused by, for instance, economic, social factors and migration of people (Also cite Dirks on Factory worker).

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. 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 very 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 decentralization process, there are mixed perceptions on the actual implementation of the associated gender policy. A group of male commune councillors in a southeast province offered their views:

Even though there is strong support and policy from the government and development agencies to promote women, it is still more or less rhetorical because when it comes to the 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, a southeast province, 24 June 2010

Another obstacle for gender equity is the lack of full commitment for implementing agreed policies at all levels. A female commune chief in a central province stated that:

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 not a clear role and line of communication between the commune, the political party, and the individual 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, a central province, 19 June 2010

Overall, the initial outcomes of decentralization on enhanced gender equality are rather encouraging, given the relatively short time period it has been in operation. As illuminated above, many informants at the commune level expressed that since the implementation of decentralization in 2002, a number of 'new' conditions have been emerging locally. In summary:

- 'New conditions' have created space for women to participate in local politics, in generally increasing the number of female representatives (leaders) at the commune and village levels.
- Women are being increasingly appreciated within their respective political parties, who (occasionally) see that women on their voter lists as an asset.
- The reforms have influenced and somewhat changed the old/traditional norms and perceptions of women's role in local politics; public awareness of gender issues is rising, and women have played a critical role in intermingling household economy and social affairs with the work of the commune councils.

Therefore, a range of progressive changes are tangible, although that does not mean that all obstacles are removed.

### 3.2. VIEWS ON FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN THE COMMUNE COUNCIL

Part of the justification for the decentralization reform was that it was needed in order to introduce a legitimate local government. Before more concretely discussing women's representation in the commune councils, we will present some results from the survey which offer the general overview of women's (and men's) views on representation in relation to the commune councils.

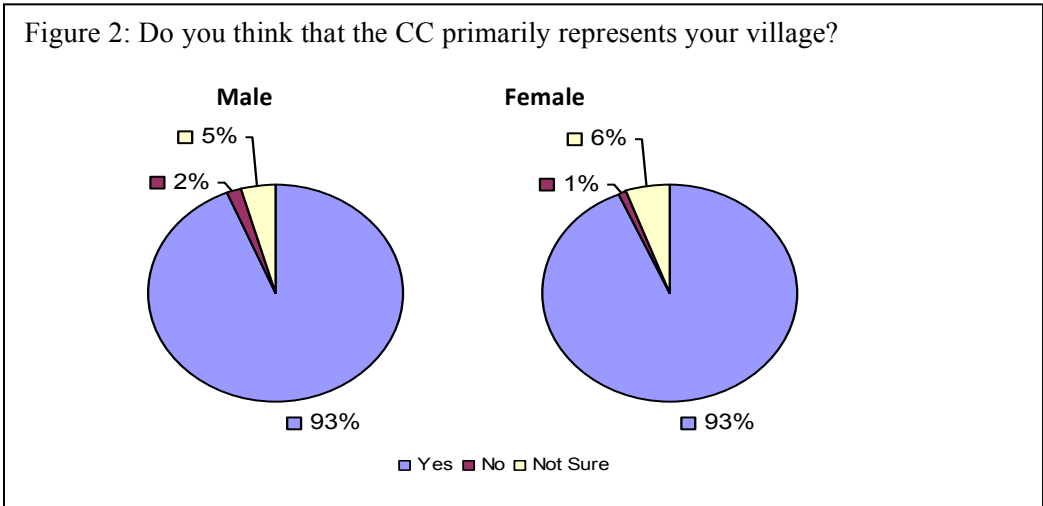


Figure 2 indicates that over 90 percent of respondents, both males and females, think that commune councils are well representing the constituencies in the community. These are observations that the commune councils are gradually deepening their political legitimacy.

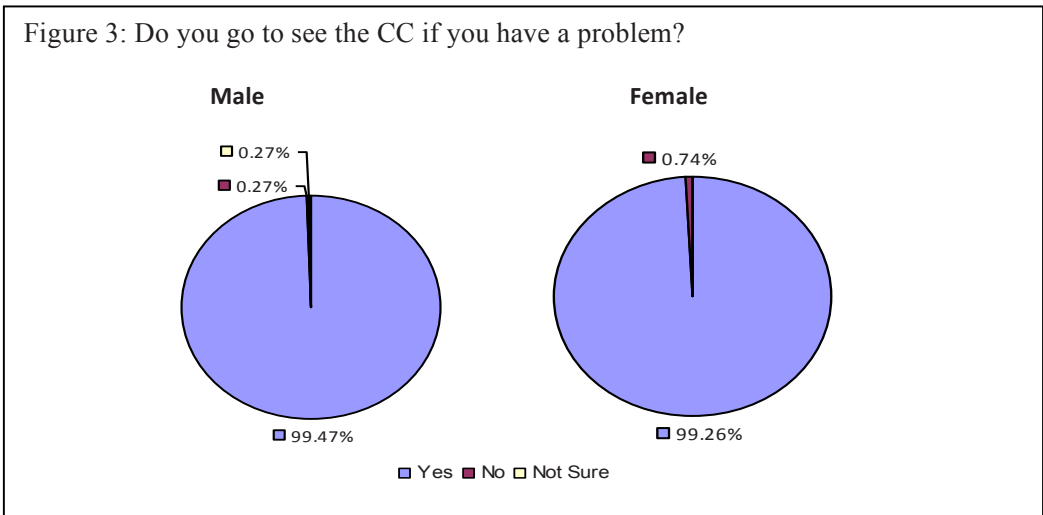
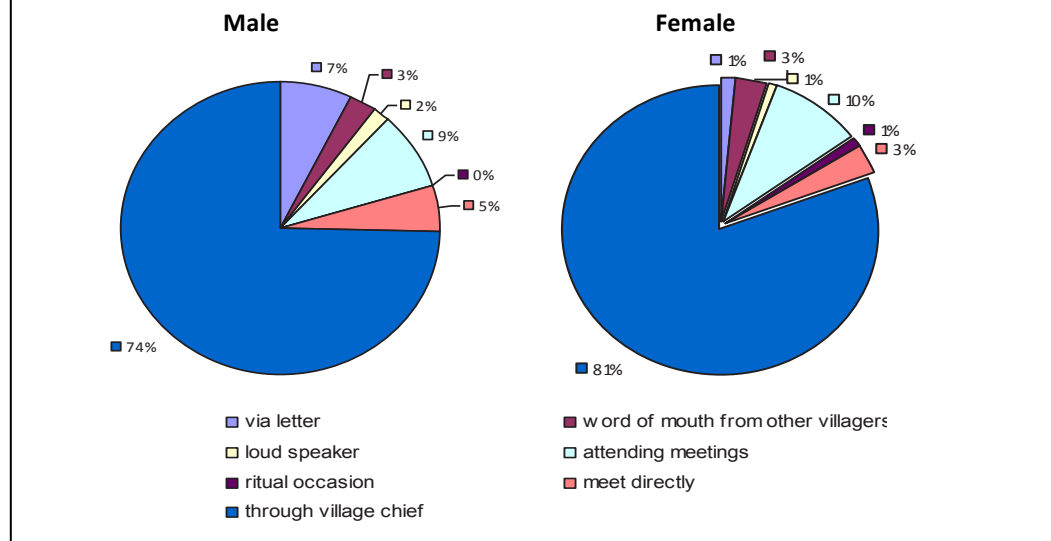


Figure 3 shows that the overwhelming majority would go and see the commune councils if they had a problem. While they may hesitate to actually do so unless there are severe problems, it is clear that in their mind, the commune councils are approachable, which is a reversal of the historical situation.

Figure 4: How do you receive information from the CC?



As we can see from Figure 4, over 70 percent of males and over 80 percent of females say they receive information regarding commune councils through their village chief (which will be followed up below), followed by around 9 percent of both males and females who get the information through attending the village meetings.

Judging from the perceptions reviewed above, there are no significant differences in how men and women regard vital aspects of the emerging local governance authorities; or to put it differently, the commune councils are equally legitimate for men and women as the local political authority. The caveat is that the village chiefs – a position only indirectly touched by the on-going democratization and with far less female representation - emerge as significant gatekeepers at the very local level.

As we saw above, the overall representation of women in the commune and village levels has gradually increased. In addition to some female elected commune chiefs and commune councillors, some women have ‘voluntarily’ served as the commune focal persons, village chiefs and village assistants. Many people interviewed said that they have no doubt that women’s representation is increasing at all levels of local government, especially at the commune and the village levels. A group of male councillors put it:

This commune is headed by a female council chief and clerk, and we have 13 villages. In all the villages, women are working hard to help their communities. They are very committed to work for 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:

I think the constraint of traditional norms is not the problem anymore for women because women are well aware of their rights, more engaged in both community development and political issues.

Currently, women are bolder and more intellectual than before. I am confident that the number of female CCs 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, a central province, 16 June 2010

To be considered and placed as the primary candidate on the voters' party-list within the current electoral system, women need to have had a long involvement and commitment to the political party. A group of male councillors shared 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 CC chief because some old party activists either passed-away, moved out or resigned.

Group of male councillors, a southeast province, 24 June 2010

Besides commitment to the political party, which is an utmost important precondition to women's (or indeed anyone's) representation in commune councils, female leaders are commonly ascribed some critical qualities that men assumedly do not possess in similar quantities, such as patience and the ability to be soft, easily approachable, humble, and generous with deep attachment to the community, particularly towards the poor, single headed households, and children. A male deputy commune council chief in a northwest province put it:

In this commune, female leaders work patiently and understand the local situation well, especially social-welfare issues. Our female CC chief is gaining more insights and interaction with people—being approachable by 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, a northwest province, 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. 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 women speak the language other women in the community wish to hear.

CC member, a central province, 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 than men in the community.

Whereas these may be regarded as stereotypes and or discursive constructions (cf. Ledgerwood 1996), 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, were 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, 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, a central province, 16 June 2010

The mechanism of women's representation primarily depends on two factors: political party priorities and individuals' personality and attitude (and how these are comprehended locally).<sup>7</sup> A female village focal person in a central province expressed her views:

[The degree to which we are] having women working in the commune or village is determined by the political will and hierarchies of each political party. For this commune, many people do not like the CPP, not because they dislike the party but because people 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, a central province, 16 June 2010

As expressed above, women's representation is gradually increasing and people broadly recognise that women perform well in socioeconomic and political leadership in the communities. However, proper female representation is still hampered by a number of factors such as: lack of political will within the political party to prioritise women, vague law enforcement, limited self-confidence, women not being fully supported by men in their political endeavours, and lack of resources to be responsive to the need of people. But a male local chief of a political party in the commune level said:

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/.../ There are three reasons: first, it's difficult to find a competitive female candidate and, second, it's not yet time for women to work as the 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.

Chief of a political party, a central province, 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 the commune level work based on the policy from their own political party rather than from the government. For example, as a CC chief I know exactly the situation in this commune especially domestic violence and poverty, but I do not have the resources to help them.

Female CC chief, a central province, 19 June 2010

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

<sup>7</sup> This is a complex issue: currently also many with a long history and strong commitment to the party are often marginalised due to corruption and nepotism inside the party allowing newcomers with connections, and, in particular, people with money to rise through the ranks: The newcomers are typically rich with money to spend, especially for the electoral campaigns, and they are swiftly ranked at the top of the list. These newcomers are often not very popular, and less attached to the community. This could be seen as a first phase of where money is entering politics, as in many other Asian assumedly democratising countries such as Thailand and the Philippines (cf. Seidl 2000; cf. 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 land conflicts have not been resolved.

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 a southeast province 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 works that are considered as men's work. These kinds of misconceptions must be changed to improve the role of gender [edpolitix] in the future.

Female CC chief, a southeast province, 25 June 2010

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

- The increase in women's representation at the commune and village levels is through elected commune councils, commune focal point persons, and village focal persons. We find that female leaders are widely regarded as committed and engaged in assisting and representing their constituencies.
- The attitude and perceptions among men and women in the community are changing in that they increasingly trust women to be their leaders, though counter-discourses remain.
- Women's representation in local politics is increasing in contemporary Cambodia, but to what degree is primarily dependant 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 that female commune chiefs assist people regardless of party loyalties, 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 a women's nature, being (or regarded as being) socially and traditionally gentle, patient, and generous.
- Despite having seen much progression in women's representation in local political parties, we still face several constraints of a more elusive nature. For instance, female leaders are not fully supported by the government, political parties, or their male counterparts, which in combination constitutes a thick discursive barrier to equality in political representation.

Women's numerical representation is heightened, and there is a real progress in terms of perceptions on female representation in political fora.

### 3.3. THE SPACE FOR WOMEN'S POLITICAL ARTICULATION AND INFLUENCE IN LOCAL POLITICS

Women's political articulation is here defined as the degree to which elected female commune councillors have autonomy, knowledge, and ability as defined by the D & D process to make their priorities heard in formal and informal political discourse. First, as with the above sub-sections, the results of the underlying survey provide some information at large on women's ability to articulate their political views.

Figure 5: Have you ever voiced a demand to CCs?

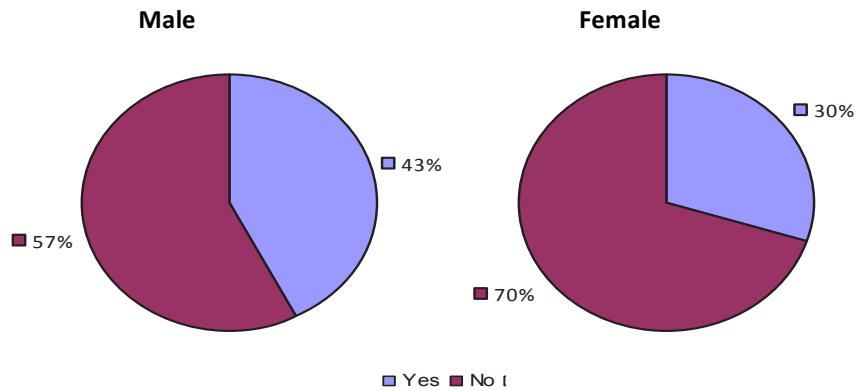
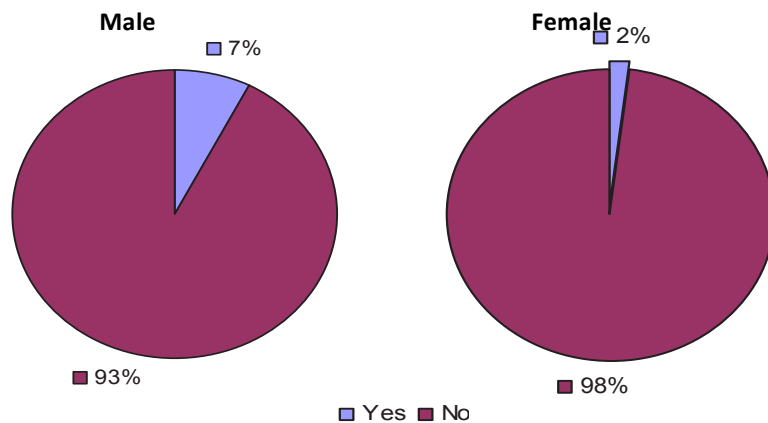


Figure 5 indicates that less than half of the respondents have ever voiced demands to CCs, and the figures for females doing so are distinctly lower – 30 percent compared to 43 percent for men. It is clear that women have *a priori* higher barriers to articulating political demands.

In a similar fashion, the overwhelming majority of voters, over 90 percent of both male and female respondents, neither know the amount of budget the commune council receives every year from the central government, nor which projects are being pursued (cf. Fig. 6). Again, women's general knowledge (on public affairs) is lower than men's. It seems that there are higher barriers for women to access (and exercise) politics.

Figure 6: Do you know what the development projects/budget in the commune for the year are?



### Do women have a political voice in formal institutions?

Many informants state that female leaders in the commune level require different circumstances than men in order to be able to articulate their role effectively including: i) sufficient financial resources and decision making power as stipulated in the law; ii) full support, permission and trust from the political party; iii) a certain (i.e. higher than men) level of education/capacity, working experience, good understanding of the community and self-confidence; and iv) good personality and popularity in the community.

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

The current CC chief of this commune is very committed to the people in the commune and is very popular among the people 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 politically discriminate between people from different political parties and she is also transparent—not corrupt. She is trusted by her political party because she has been working for the local authority since 1979.

Group of male councillors, a central province, 28 July 2010

The passage above illuminates some critical aspects that would enable female commune councillors to articulate their responsibilities: being locally popular among 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 for a gendered local democracy and heightened roles for women.

Women's *de facto* ability to be able to effectively articulate their responsibilities is through the possible trust and cooperation they are awarded from other male dominated fora (police and district authorities, but also from within the *Sangha* and the local economic elite) who collectively, and possibly, unknowingly, control/dominate the discourse (eg. Ahikire 2007). However, the 'thick discourse' on men's superiority to handle politics may be destabilized. A male deputy commune council in a northwest province envisaged:

There is no difference between the ability of men and women in [articulating priorities and] doing their tasks. During the time of fighting the KR, many women were even in the army. Women can do the job as well as men can.

Male deputy CC, a northwest province, 12 July 2010

Lack of financial resources renders women leaders' articulation of priorities to mere 'rhetoric' (as we saw above) and dependency for financial and material supports from political parties, NGOs, and the central government via the CSE.<sup>8</sup> A group of commune councillors in a southeast province expressed their views:

Decentralization 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 wished. The lack of resources is the chief problem, hindering [women's] ability to articulate (*cloeuytorb*)<sup>9</sup> [opinions and demands] and make decisions independently.

Group of male CC members, a southeast province, 24 June 2010

8 Dependency on the central government and political parties/elites is the main issue hindering female leaders from being able to articulate their role and make decisions effectively. The fact that they tend to have local support does not necessarily change that. As long as the 'decentralised' authorities are dependent on central funds, the local popularity/legitimacy is not a factor for revenue-raising, hence barely impacting on what can be achieved (since financial restraints are the major impediment to progress in the short run). (Bring this up into the text)

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

However, the commune councils are normally unable to realise (all the) popular demands. In order to make people understand the difficulties of being unable to be fully responsive, the commune chiefs (as well as all the councillors) need to be flexible, patient, and transparent vis-à-vis people. The commune chief in a northwest province 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 CC has every year.

Female CC chief, a northwest province, 12 July 2010

Similarly, as a commune chief in a northwest province put it:

As I personally understand, commune councillors have more chances than before, in particular a woman like me, to engage in leadership of the commune. However, the major constraint in terms of implementing responsibilities is [that] we do not have revenues, only the CSF once a year and the only extra [financial] support to assist us to do our job for the people is some support from NGOs.

Commune chief, a northwest province, 12 July 2010

Another constraint to attracting women with good ability to articulate their, as well as their constituents', preferences to 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.<sup>10</sup> 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 the young and qualified people do not like to work with the local authorities.

Group of CC members, a central province, 28 July 2010

To sum up:

- 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, and in particular children's, women's and social welfare issues.
- Women are listened to, but especially so when they utilise entrenched and stereotypical approaches pertaining to how women 'should' behave, emphasising their ability (true or not) to speak softly, listen and to engage in social affairs.

This opens up for questions on how representation actually generates political power and how it can be utilised.

### **Do women have political power?**

In Cambodia, it is difficult for a leader (man or woman) to be independent (Kim 2011). Patronage through extended vertical networks is perceived as natural and even obligatory (Chandler 2000; Marston 1997; Pak *et al.* 2007; Kim 2011), and the informal power structure has always been competing with

<sup>10</sup> This is partly a result of previous reluctance to allow women into 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, typically held by the rural population. If 'mistakes' are made the popular ridicule can be cruel including concrete 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'.

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 the formal state institutions (Mabbett & Chandler 1995; Thion 1993).

What exists at the grassroots' level is a great deal of personal dependency, and, in the particular case, 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 '*Kanak Pak Noyobay*'). Hence, influence must be sought through these pillars.

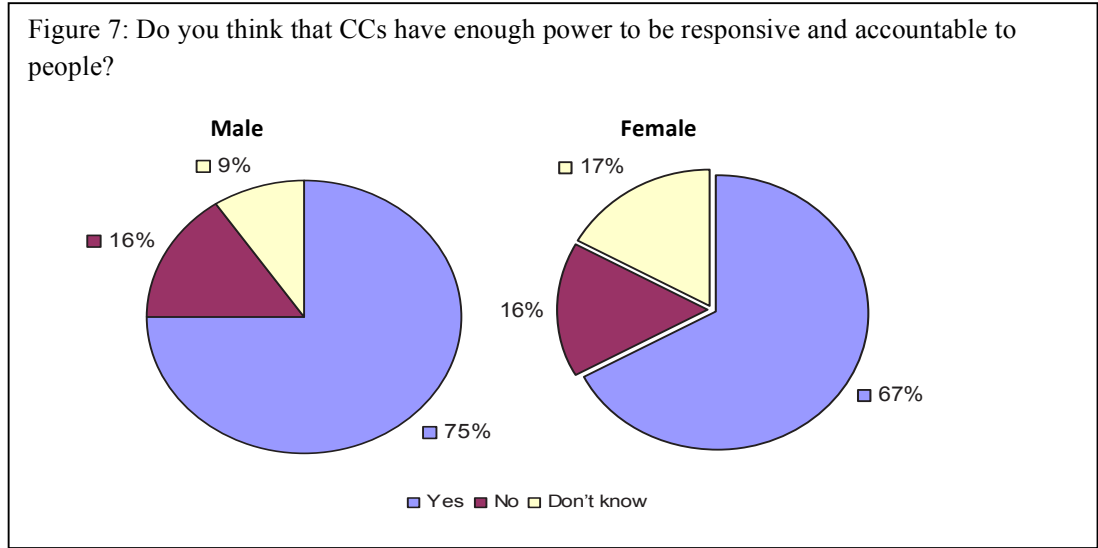


Figure 7 shows that more than two thirds of the respondents believe that CCs have enough power to be responsive and accountable to their constituencies and that considerably more male than female respondents accept this as true. Overall, women seem to have somewhat lower faith in the commune councils being able to pursue formal power.

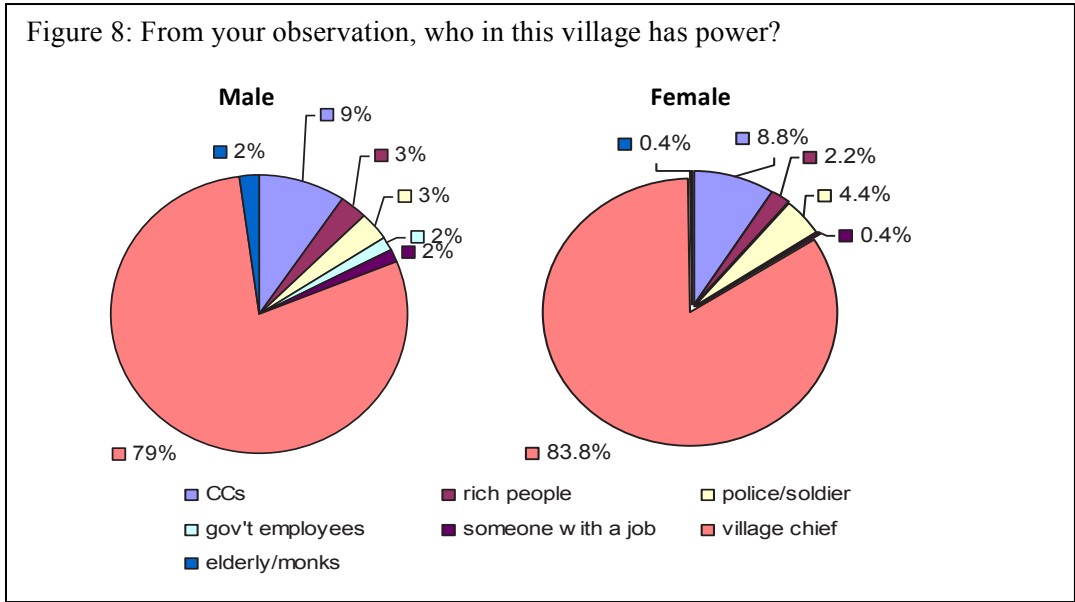


Figure 8 indicates that most of the respondents believe that the village chief is the one who possesses the power to influence. More females (83 percent) than males (79 percent) reported to believe this.

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

In the current situation, as a commune council member, we cannot be independent. We have to have be committed to a political party because the system works through a party list. The preferences of a political party are the most influential ones, and ones we cannot change.

Group of male CCs, Kompong Cham, 28 July 2010

A female commune chief in a northwest province expressed her view on the most important political factors:

Currently our electoral system is based on proportional party base. 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, a northwest province, 12 July 2010

To possess legitimate power, leaders should be clear regarding the three core elements of power. A female commune chief in a central province described her view of the legitimate power:

I would like to share with you that power in the commune level now is associated with individuals or 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.

Commune chief, a central province, 19 June 2010

However, the separation between the state and political party remains ambiguous. Many local politicians are still projecting the system of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) from the 1980s, implying that the party leads and the state executes (*pakdoeuknourm* and *Rot aknuvat*) or party first and state second (*pakneung rot*). A commune councillor in a southeast province further explains this:

With the current party-based electoral system, the most important [strategy] for individuals to secure power or position in the government must be from a [good position within a] political party because we still believe that the party leads and the state implements (*pakdoeuknourmand* and *rot akuvvat*). Other factors for generating power are individuals' capacity, networking, popularity within the party and community. These are the factors through which the commune council operates.

CC member, a southeast province, 24 June 2010

Variations on the theme above includes 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 if there is no party, there is no state (*kmeanpakkmean rot*). This is a political

slogan from the 1980s, it remains the same today. Individual capacity and popularity is very important because you can make your party win the vote./...../money is now the most important since it generates power. If you are rich it means you are also powerful in the party and would be placed as the top candidate during the election time—then you are in a prestigious position.

CC chief, a southeast province, 25 June 2010

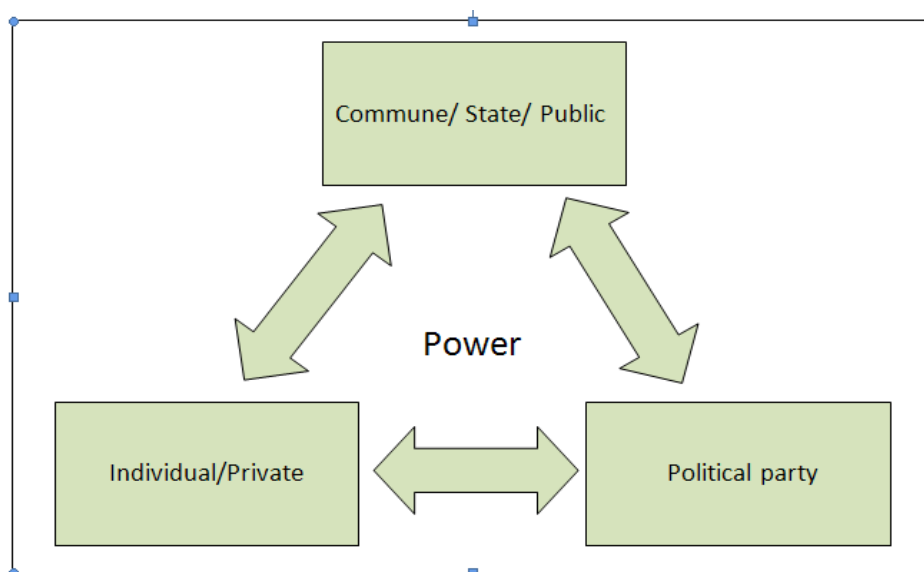
Another group in a southeast province described their view on power in Cambodia:

The political party, personal capacity, and [state] authority are equally important, but the real power nowadays depends on first the 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 bring good election results to the party

Group of male CCs, a southeast province, 24 June 2010

The diagram below is an illustration of the empirical field information with commune councillors and village authority leaders. There are three dominant structures in Cambodian society that reflect how power can be gathered and maintained. In the diagram below, in order to protect their power, the *most* important political sphere (seen in a gendered perspective) is that women have to be trusted by, and actively engaged with, a political party (because of the party-list system).

*Diagram of power structure in local authority*



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 rational 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. The support from within the party is thinner, being squeezed between historical patriarchy, and emerging money politics, both favouring men.

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

- Female leaders face additional obstacles such as (extra) dependency on financial resources from the central government, political parties, and NGOs.<sup>11</sup> Cooperation from men and political parties is oftentimes necessary in order to ‘allow’ women to be able to articulate and execute their priorities properly.
- Many discussions on gender issues in Cambodia refer to the assumed lack of self-confidence among women putting them in an awkward situation. In order for women to be further empowered they need a certain degree of autonomy, trust, and support from within.
- 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 the authority and support.

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11 This is a dilemma for male councillors as well, but the problem is reportedly enhanced for women.

## CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study aimed to scrutinize 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 head count'-approach, we applied a leveled approach where three different levels of female engagement in local governance was empirically investigated: *gendered change emanating from decentralisation; extent of female political representation in the commune councils*, and, *how women are articulating and the exercising power in their role as local politicians?*

### 4.1. GENDERED CHANGE EMANATING FROM DECENTRALIZATION

According to the legal and regulatory frameworks of the Cambodian government, and seeing the number of women engaging in the political arena of the government at different tiers of government institutions, it is obvious that the government has seriously considered the role of women in the political sphere. Gender mainstreaming is increasingly being applied through various policy mechanisms, most critically through national and local elections (and recently via a limited quota system applied to the national and sub-national levels). At the local government level, women engagement in local politics is not new, but a 'new norm' is emerging where women are more frequently then previously represented in official fora. Women are occasionally recognized locally as legitimate and competent leaders. As such, it is evident that the decentralization reform, and in particular the establishment of the commune elections/councils, have opened up space for women to engage with local politics in the commune councils to a higher degree than before.

Democratic decentralization positively impacts women's ability to engage in local politics. However, it is also important to understand *how* decentralization impacts women's engagement with local politics and with which outcome.

### 4.2. THE EXTENT OF FEMALE POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN THE COMMUNE COUNCILS

The ongoing socioeconomic transformation in Cambodia have influenced and changed the (potential) roles of women in various ways. The traditional norms that have been applied to women are gradually diminishing for a number of reasons. There are push factors where women have to, or want to, move out to work far from home. New norms have reduced the impediments and risks to moving far from home, creating more opportunities for women. There are also pull factors where there is a need for better and more legitimate local leadership, which women can provide. Media, development advocacy, and overall capacity building targeting women offered by NGOs have played a crucial role in increasing gender awareness and countering the argument that there are no skilled women available for taking up political leadership roles.

Having said that, there is no doubt that the equalization of local political representation faces some deep-seated resistance. The 'head count' has revealed a progressive outcome of the gendering of politics, but male politicians still dominate on all levels. There is a powerful discourse surrounding the gender issue in politics that questions the idea of female authority, which limits the possibility for women to work efficiently as local leaders. This lack of confidence in women as authority figures is often 'felt' by women (adding to a historical condition) and as a result, it becomes difficult to get qualified female candidates to act in local political arenas (which also have been observed in other places). Women who may seek political positions are subject to public critique based purely on their gender. In addition, laws and policies often sound better than what they prove to be in reality. Most importantly, going to the core of the po-

litical power-structures, the political parties are not pro-active in promoting gender equality. As a result, there is no real political will to encourage women to engage in local politics. On the other hand, we can claim that there is a decline in resistance to accepting women in politics, and some political parties have found that putting female candidates high on the party-lists is in their strategic interest..

### 4.3. THE ABILITY OF WOMEN TO ARTICULATE POLITICAL PRIORITIES AND PROJECT POWER

Although female representation in local politics has increased numerically, the ability of those women to articulate their and their constituencies' preferences has not been demonstrated. Women are often allocated responsibility for 'women affairs' such as social welfare, domestic violence, household economy, and children affairs. While it is a first step to invite women into politics, the delineation of responsibilities based on gender could also be seen as a way of reinforcing gender stereotypes, including those that perpetuate ideas that women's 'softness' makes them unable to be leaders. In the post-war era, these issues are not necessarily marginal issues, but have (occasionally) come to the fore in the (local) development discourses. As we have seen, some female leaders have gained deep and sound political legitimacy in local politics based on their competence in gender-associated areas even though their legitimacy drawing on stereotypical and discursively upheld views on women, their role and place (cf. Ledgerwood 1996).

The pattern of women dealing only with 'woman issues' is one that needs to be broken in order to give women full and real access to local politics. Moreover, the partial success of women in politics is to be found, it is often claimed locally, in the way women listen and speak: it is typically emphasized and appreciated that women leaders are easily approachable, humble, and patient. These characteristics are much sought after among people in the local communities., It is not perceived as 'weak', but rather as an approach that avoids 'hiding' behind *ormnach*, and instead takes people and their problems seriously. Those women leaders are seen to be exercising a higher degree of accountability. Interestingly, as we have seen elsewhere, male leaders also seek to adopt this style of leadership because it better fits the time, as well as the emerging political system (cf. Öjendal & Kim 2006; cf. Thon et al 2010).

The lack of financial resources to realize the demands from constituencies tends to hurt female leaders disproportionately and feeds into (real and constructed) perceptions of lack of executive capacity and political self-confidence. Finally, it is still – widely and deeply – believed that women leaders cannot handle issues of security effectively (at least not in remote communes).

Women's enhanced political representation and widened political articulation have paved the way for women leaders to become forceful decision-makers in the local political arena to a degree not seen before. Since there is an increasing number of women in the commune councils and at the village level, women leaders are increasingly using their local influence to affect politics. However, reflecting on individuals' relative power and their ability to make explicit changes, it becomes obvious how difficult it is to make an impact within the local governance system, especially one where there is not only a collective that rules, but also one with a permanent 'coalition government' within the commune council, and one with a very strong party in the background exerting dominance.

The mechanisms for women to influence and project their newly won power are, for the most part, based on crude criteria such as their relative power position within the dominant political party, the financial resources 'invested' in local politics, and individual charisma (which may be soft and caretaking or hard and protecting). 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. This is not necessarily due to gender biases as in some cases, the political party remains the dominant center of influence.

## 4.4. OVERALL FINDINGS

This study was primarily interested in to what extent there is an increasing gender balance, and how women manage to articulate and pursue their views in local politics.

In terms of *D&D reform*: As indicated in the statistical data, as well as in the information gathered from the in-depth interviews, the overall perception of decentralization is such that reforms have opened up different opportunities for women's participation in local governance (at least in the 'rural' community as researched in this report). Decentralization reform and socioeconomic factors have enhanced the political space and improved the awareness of gender through providing a forum where women are 'allowed' to engage politically and access at least a small budget for local development work.

In terms of *popular discourse*: The awareness of gender issues, as well as the acceptance of female leaders, has increased sharply since the inception of the decentralization reform in 2002. There are at least four fundamental forces that have contributed to this improvement of awareness: i) strong support from the government's institutions (to a limited extent by political parties via a party list electoral system); ii) efforts of training and advocacy by NGOs and civil society organizations; iii) economic and social dynamics associated with the liberal system, (introducing 'modernity'); and iv) through a changing popular discourse (partly driven by the presence of mass media). These influences have, especially through the local commune elections, created the opportunity for women to engage in democratic and development activities, providing a distinct shift from the old norms.

In terms of *policy*: The government has through its recent policies integrated gender aspects as a cross-cutting issue to be embedded in many sectors at different levels. Most of our female informants at the commune and village levels expressed clearly their understanding on rights issues and have, at times, responded by demanding increased equality. Many of the interviewees expressed that without the electoral decentralization at the commune level and strong support in terms of policy, it would be difficult for women to have such opportunities.

In terms of *social norms*: Much progress has been made in the eight years of decentralization implementation. Many informants, especially men, stated that women are good in managing the committee locally because, they think, women are more patient and attached to children, social and household affairs. This is a dual progress: on the one hand it has created opportunities for women to achieve a higher presence in local political forum, while on the other hand, creating an environment where women are restricted to participating in gender-stereotyped positions such as working with 'women affairs'. For good and bad, their performance is also judged on the basis of gender-stereotype. Many constraints remain for achieving a more gender-equal situation. Female leaders are not fully appreciated by their male counterparts, neither in the commune council, nor within the political party. In this study, women were considered weak in terms of dealing with security affairs and constrained in their leadership by social and traditional norms. Many policies remain shallow and difficult to implement locally due to both the need for major efforts to transform social norms, as well as for lack of financial support (which women may need more than men due to their higher need to 'deliver'). Most importantly, the political will from the top leaders to alter social norms is, at best, halfhearted.

The political reform of decentralization has opened up political space for women to participate in local governance. It has also started to re-arrange social norms that have been used to effectively prevent women from entering politics. While this is politically very interesting, the process must be kept dynamic in order to reach gender equality in local governance in Cambodia. The major impediment to deeper gender equality rests primarily with the social norms upheld by both men and women, including within the conservative and politicized party system. The process of decentralization has begun to change those

norms which hinder women participation in politics and real gender based transformation is increasingly a possibility.



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