

Interview

On the situation of women in Cambodia

“If you improve the situation of women, everyone will benefit”

Friday 11 December 2015, by [KHUS Thida](#) (Date first published: 28 October 2015).

Thida Khus is the Executive Director of SILAKA, a Cambodian NGO that has been working since 1997 to increase the participation of women in all aspects of decision-making in Cambodia. A passionate and seemingly inexhaustible advocate of gender equality and women's rights, Thida will be speaking at the Heinrich Böll Foundation on December 7th about the situation of women in Southeast Asia - Cambodia in particular - and current international initiatives to advance women's role in society.



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One of the things you're going to be speaking about in Berlin is this year's Beijing+20 summit. What is that?

Thida Khus - Beijing+20 is the review of the World Conference on Women in Beijing that was held in 1995. It is a plan of action that the world government agreed to implement to advance women's rights with respect to the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Not many people know about Beijing+20. Nobody talks about it. Cambodia doesn't have a report about it, has never had a workshop on it, or any community dissemination. We only talk about the Millennium Development Goals. And we talk about CEDAW itself. What we should be talking about is how plans are implemented at the Cambodian level - that has never been developed. It's not even in the consciousness of the government to try and look at Beijing+20 and how it relates to Cambodia.

What was the situation for women like in Cambodia when the first Beijing conference took place in 1995?

Many of our problems at that time were about single mothers with the responsibility for raising children. We'd just come out of a war - the first UN-supervised election was in 1993 - and there was a lot of aid money pouring into Cambodia. Before, many women had been suffering a lot from malnutrition and couldn't get pregnant. So it was in 1995 that women started rebuilding families. But the men who had come back from war didn't know how to be fathers. And since there were

fewer men than women, some of them developed the belief that they could go out to get several wives to support them. So it wasn't the men who were supporting the family, but the women supporting them. The men would come to marry a woman, father several children, and then – when faced with responsibility – move on to another wife.

In some ways, women were more equal under the rule of the ultra-communist Khmer Rouge, because they were given jobs that were previously done exclusively by men. Did that have any effect on the position of women after the regime collapsed?

Of course. And from 1979 to 1991, Cambodia pretty much copied communism under the direction of the Vietnamese. They had rules on monogamy, and women played a prominent role in the military and government administration. During the war, many women were heads of districts and provinces. But after Vietnamese withdrawal, they told the women, "Oh, it's a new era now, you don't have to do that anymore". And the women didn't know any better, so they said, "OK, it's time for us to relax". But now they realise they were tricked! This is maybe the story of all women around the world – after the war the men come back and take power.

Is the representation of women in politics better today than it was when Cambodia held its first democratic elections in 1993?

You can see an increase. At the beginning of the National Assembly in 1993, they comprised only 6 per cent [women], and we have increased the number of women substantively since then. The Ministry of Women's Affairs likes to report on this achievement. But at the National Assembly, still only 19 per cent are women, and at the sub-national level it's only 12 per cent – even lower. All the political parties promise a 30 per cent quota, but they don't put it into the law.

What difference would it make to women's lives if there were more women in politics?

For us, the relationship is that when you have just a few women, it's difficult to influence people because it doesn't have a snowball effect. You need at least 30 per cent [women] to influence a discussion group. But having women in positions of decision-making does not guarantee that policies and decisions are sensitive. In 2015, the women who are elected at the National Assembly do not understand their roles because they have never been engaged in policy discussions. They have never received pressure from other women in the country because they are so blinded by the policies of the party. They are still dominated by the men who are making the decisions. The main reason to have an increase in the number of women in politics is so that they can be models for others – to show that you can't be submissive all the time.

What needs to happen to ensure that these women really are playing an active part in decision-making?

We are working to build their capacity, to make them more accountable, to help them understand their role. We want to connect women – comparing notes between women who work for women in different fields to say what we want together as a policy advancement, and articulate that to the policy-makers at the governmental level. [Women in politics] have to play an active role. They have to understand why they are there, and that they're not just doing it for women – it's for the children and the rest of the population. Because if you improve the situation of women, everyone will benefit. They're the change-makers in the family.

After 1979, you spent over a decade living in America. Do people ever accuse you of having a perspective that is too foreign regarding the way things should work in Cambodia?

Yes. That's why I dig into history. I tell them I do this so that Cambodia can go back to its roots – it's not that I copied this from anyone else. Before I started working in this field, I attended a symposium in France on Cambodian history and was awakened: In the old days – in the first century – it was only a woman who could be a "king". Historically, Cambodia had women as its leaders. If you speak to the King now, or [Prince] Ranariddh, he will always say "chaa" [the word for "yes" used only by female speakers]. We never understood why, but the explanation comes from the history of that time.

So what changed?

More than 20 centuries of transformation! We changed because of the influence of the Indians, the Chinese, and life under the French protectorate for 100 years. The administration then looked to women as those who would stay at home and didn't pay attention to women's education so much. This had a definitive effect on Cambodian women. Culturally, they're supposed to have power.

Is it useful to make comparisons between Cambodia and other countries in the region?

Each situation is very unique, I cannot compare them. If you compare the amount of women elected to the National Assembly, we represent a pretty high proportion. But what did 90 per cent of them do for women in the country? Nothing. Well, not nothing, but it's hardly noticeable. Because they don't speak about anything different than the men.

Can ASEAN play a positive role in pushing for gender equality among member states?

ASEAN will be developing its vision for the post-2015 agenda when member countries meet in Kuala Lumpur this month. We may still see something, but there's no word about gender topics for now. They say "people centered", or "community focussed", but it's all the elites doing things at the top. But one good thing is that there is now networking and communication among NGOs in the ASEAN countries, which can help us.

What could the government do right now to really improve the lives of Cambodian women?

Government policy only addresses macroeconomics without focussing on small enterprise. The majority of registered businesses – 60 per cent – are owned by women. But they are struggling. There is really nothing to support micro and small businesses [which are generally those owned by women]. You have women who are selling small things at the market to support their families. What kind of policies do you have to support them? We should dedicate more resources to that.

P.S.

* "If you improve the situation of women, everyone will benefit". From the Heinrich Böll Stiftung website:

<https://www.boell.de/en/2015/10/28/political-economy-asean-regionalisation-process>

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