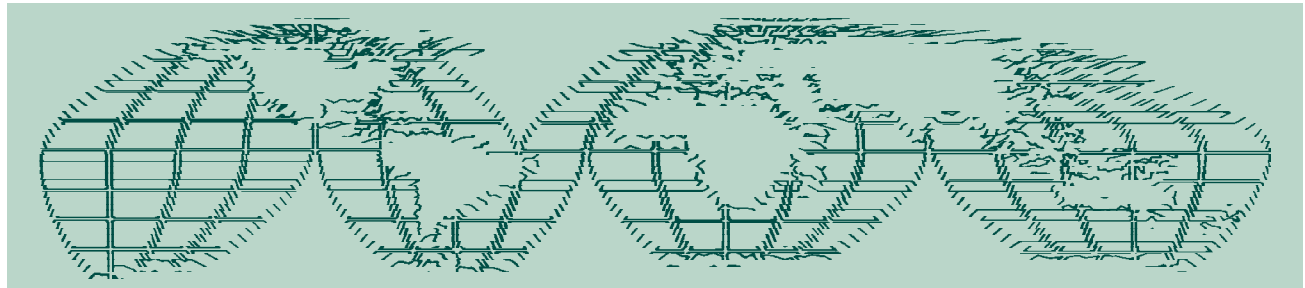


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## Aftermath: Women and Women's Organizations In Postconflict Cambodia

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### Summary

**T**HE EFFECTS OF TWO DECADES of conflict and genocide in Cambodia on women and gender relations have been all-pervasive. The war—in particular, the four-year rule of terror of the murderous Khmer Rouge—largely demolished women's psychological well-being, family roles, interpersonal relationships, economic activities, and participation in the political arena.

In the wake of the carnage, the international community mobilized to help create and nurture a variety of indigenous women's organizations aimed at improving the lot of Cambodian women. This was a new phenomenon for Cambodia: before the postconflict era, independent women's groups were unknown.

In January 1999, USAID's Center for Development Information and Evaluation fielded a team to Cambodia to explore the role of women's organizations in that country. The mission was part of a broader study of women in postconflict societies that included as well Bosnia, El Salvador, Georgia, Guatemala, and Rwanda.

Despite their small number (18), the team found that women's organizations have been contributing to the empowerment of women in various ways. They are helping women through vocational training and microcredit programs. They are assisting victims of HIV/AIDS, of domestic violence, and of trafficking and forced prostitution. They are also beginning to influ-

ence the political landscape through voter education and advocacy programs. As one midlevel trainee told the team: "Men cannot abuse women if women know their rights. Now we understand how to work together for justice."

But women's organizations continue to face many obstacles. The country has no tradition for civil society organizations. Nor is the government always supportive of women's organizations. The organizations depend upon external assistance for their programs and survival, which limits their autonomy and the capacity to fashion new programs. The leadership of these organizations is dominated by one charismatic figure reluctant to delegate authority. Most of the women's organizations have yet to develop an open management system in which the staff can discuss issues and problems freely.

Women's organizations will require continual international support to survive and play an important role in improving the social and economic conditions of women and promoting gender equality. Thus the international community can help by taking a long-term perspective and providing technical and economic assistance.

### A Land Ravaged by War

A country of 11 million people, Cambodia, has been a victim of the Vietnam War and the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge under dictator Pol Pot. Few other

countries in recent history have experienced such agony, wholesale destruction of their social fabric, and utter devastation of their economic and political systems. Between 1969 and 1993, the country suffered clandestine military operations by the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong, carpet-bombing on a massive scale by the United States, genocide under the Maoist Khmer Rouge, large-scale internal migration, invasion by Vietnam, and recurring guerrilla attacks by the defeated Khmer Rouge and their allies. Only after 1993 did Cambodians begin to live in relative peace. That the country has survived and has begun reconstruction is a tribute to both the resilience of its people and the generosity of the international community.

Unquestionably the worst of the more than two decades of conflict came with the Khmer Rouge dystopia of 1975–79. In its first major act, the Khmer Rouge ordered the evacuation of the capital (Phnom Penh) and all provincial towns. They forced all residents—even hospital patients—to move to the countryside. The Khmer Rouge summarily executed those who resisted or were unable to move. Thousands died in this forced migration.

The Khmer Rouge obsessively distrusted anyone who could think and reflect. The regime demanded nothing less than complete control of its citizens' thoughts, achieved through fear, repression, and indoctrination. They severed links with the outside world by denying people access to mail, radio, telephone, and other forms of mass communication. They abolished money. They closed schools and universities. Those suspected of working with the previous regime suddenly disappeared. Perceived as enemies of the state, the educated—teachers, doctors, and other professionals—met the same fate. The Khmer Rouge carried out systematic ethnic cleansing (against ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese) and what has been termed autogenocide. Estimates of the dead during the Khmer Rouge's sanguinary 42-month reign range from 1 to 3 million, out of a 1975 population of 7.3 million.

The Khmer Rouge attempted to wipe out religion. They also sought to undermine the institution of the family. Children were often separated from their families. When not separated, they were encouraged to spy on their parents. The Khmer Rouge also promoted mass weddings in which young men and women were ran-

domly selected for marriage. Cumulatively, these policies resulted in a disintegration of the institution of the family.

While Cambodian society endured horrific suffering on the domestic front, the Khmer Rouge's irredentist designs on Vietnam would soon lead to turmoil on an international level. Combined with the persecution of indigenous Vietnamese, the Khmer Rouge's claims on various parts of southern Vietnam led to heated border clashes in which hundreds of Vietnamese civilians were killed. Cambodia's eastern neighbor retaliated by invading Cambodia. It toppled the Pol Pot regime on 7 January 1979. Vietnam then installed a new, essentially totalitarian government friendly to its interests.

Establishment of a new regime failed to bring peace, however. Guerrilla warfare soon erupted, as the Khmer Rouge, supported by China, launched operations in the north. Thus fueled, the warfare continued for another nine years, draining the country's capital and human resources.

With the end of the Cold War, the major powers finally initiated diplomatic efforts to bring peace to Cambodia. Those efforts culminated in the formulation of a peace plan in 1989. The plan called on the different factions to disarm and form an interim coalition government under Cambodia's prewar leader, Prince Norodom Sihanouk. It also stipulated that the United Nations would establish a body, the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia, to supervise the government and to organize free and fair elections. Despite many problems, the plan was implemented in 1993, with UNTAC succeeding in holding national elections. Voter turnout was remarkably high—90 percent. A constitutional monarchy was formed, with Sihanouk named as king.

## **Conflict and Cambodian Women**

It is evident that the effect of the attenuated conflict on the lives of Cambodians was all-pervasive. Here we look at the effect on Cambodian women in four particular contexts.

## ***Status and Role in the Family***

The conflict affected the institution of the family in at least three profound ways. First, the Khmer Rouge sought to undermine family cohesion and redefine the roles of family members. They assigned men and women the same tasks in agriculture, irrigation, and other activities. They encouraged family members to spy on one another. They organized marriages between randomly selected people without the consent of their families. The cumulative effects of Khmer Rouge policies on the family have been devastating.

Second, the large-scale movements of people resulting from carpet-bombing, forced evacuation of cities by the Khmer Rouge, and a guerrilla war on the Thai border contributed to family disintegration. Often, husbands drifted away under physical and psychological stress, abandoning their families.

And third, the high number of casualties of young men in combat resulted in a demographic imbalance. Those casualties created a surplus of women of marriageable age during the 1980s and early 1990s.

The upshot of these factors is, in general, a diminution in the traditional status of women. Men have found themselves in a better bargaining position for wives. They have been able to offer lower bride prices and easily divorce their spouses and find new wives. The decline in status has also led to a high incidence of domestic violence.

Another outcome is an increase in female-headed households. Women presently head between 25 and 30 percent of Cambodia's households. Such households usually face severe economic difficulties. However, the incidence of poverty is 37 percent in male-headed households, only 33 percent in female-headed households. One possible explanation: female-headed households often include relatively prosperous extended families. Another: women may simply be more adept at developing a wide range of economic activities in the informal sector.

## ***Social Contract and Interpersonal Trust***

During CDIE's fieldwork in Cambodia, many women focus-group participants complained about a lack of trust and unwillingness to help in time of need. Some recalled with nostalgia preconflict days, when people shared with and assisted friends and neighbors. Poverty seems to be a driving force behind this issue: where there is no surplus, sharing may mean hunger.

This problem has had a profound effect on microcredit programs in Cambodia. It is noteworthy that the average size of self-help groups for credit ranges from three to five—low, compared with other developing countries. A number of women indicated they would join only immediate family members for group credit programs. Because of the difficulty of persuading unrelated individuals to work together, credit groups have established new requirements. Relatives may be members of the same economic group, but they must physically live in separate households.

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## ***Economic Burdens and Opportunities***

The conflict imposed economic hardships on women, but it also opened new opportunities to participate in the economic sphere. Because of the mass mobilization of men into the military, mass killing, and increased labor demand for war and rehabilitation work, women were forced to undertake activities and perform economic roles that had been restricted to men. This led to the undermining of the traditional sexual division of labor that had characterized Cambodian society.

During the conflict, women made significant employment gains in the industrial sector. Before the democratic transition, most workers—7,000 of 11,000—in state industrial enterprises were women. With the transition to a market economy, the ownership of many of these enterprises passed into private hands, and increased numbers of men entered into the

labor market. Nonetheless, in the garment industry, which has emerged as the largest industrial employer, women still constitute 90 percent of the work force.

The presence of a large number of expatriates, especially UN peacekeepers, also led to a rapid growth in another industry—prostitution. While prostitution had existed in the past, it had been hidden. To meet the demands of the expatriates, many entrepreneurs openly set up brothels, which were soon frequented by local customers as well, institutionalizing the phenomenon. Initially these brothels imported commercial sex workers from Vietnam and Thailand, but soon they were also recruiting from the countryside. According to a recent study, more than 14,000 women work as prostitutes. Girls under 18 make up more than 15 percent of these sex workers.

### ***Political Participation***

As in many war-torn societies, women's involvement in politics increased during the conflict. Although a few women did occupy important positions in the Sihanouk government, the Khmer Rouge were the first to organize women at the grass-roots level. Early on, Khmer Rouge guerrilla leaders established a women's wing of the Communist Party of Kampuchea. Once the Khmer Rouge came to power, the women's wing assumed more power and prestige and became another instrument of political repression and intimidation.

The communist regime that succeeded the Khmer Rouge took major steps to enhance women's participation in the political process. It promoted women to leadership positions in commune solidarity groups. Some scholars have suggested that the regime did so mainly because men were reluctant to serve in these groups, as officeholders received no salary.

The situation began to change during the transition to democracy. In a major irony linked to the peace process, women's political participation has declined rather than increased during the transition. Only five women, for example, were elected to the new National Assembly in 1993. It is likely that war fatigue, political disenchantment, the unstable economic situation, and the reassertion of the Khmer identity with its emphasis on women's traditional roles have contributed to this phenomenon.

## **The Emergence Of Women's Organizations**

The emergence of independent women's organizations has been a postconflict phenomenon. The country had no experience with civil society organizations, let alone any created by and for women. Five factors have contributed to the emergence of women's organizations:

- The *political opening* created by the democratic transition. After more than two decades of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, this political opening has been an essential, though not a sufficient, condition for the growth of all kinds of voluntary organizations, including women's organizations.
- The presence of a large number of *international nongovernmental organizations*. In interviews with the CDIE team, many women leaders acknowledged that the impetus for establishing their organizations came from international NGOs.
- The generous *availability of resources* for women's organizations. Viewing indigenous organizations as an essential buffer between state and citizen, international NGOs provided generous financial and technical resources to those organizations. (In recent years, though, international funds have been dwindling.)
- The growth of *gender sensitivity* among national policymakers. It became recognized that the development of Cambodian society was not possible without the involvement of women. This sensitivity provided philosophical and practical justification for establishing women's organizations.
- The *return of Cambodian women* who had gained education or experience in leadership outside the country. Having lived outside Cambodia, sometimes in Western democracies, these refugees or expatriates were aware of the contributions that civil society organizations can make to different cross-sections of the population.

## Impact of Women's Groups

As of December 1998, women's organizations numbered 18. These groups have taken on the mission of improving the lives of Cambodian women. Broadly speaking, they are involved in three arenas: *economic development, social service, and advocacy and democracy.*

Despite their small number, women's organizations have been contributing to the empowerment of women in various ways. For one thing, they are helping vulnerable women through vocational training and microcredit programs. Credit programs are particularly effective, helping women initiate small income-generating activities such as farming, poultry raising, and petty trade. Moreover, access to credit has given women new confidence and identity.

Women's organizations are assisting victims of HIV/AIDS, of domestic violence, and of trafficking and forced prostitution. Although only a small fraction of the needy women receive assistance, the aid does make a difference in the lives of those women. The real contribution of these organizations lies in generating public awareness of these problems. Pioneering efforts of many organizations have helped center public attention on the plight of commercial sex workers and the victims of forced prostitution. Their activities have led to the arrest of many brothel owners and the rescue of young girls enslaved as prostitutes.

The organizations have also been raising awareness of gender issues through the media. The Cambodian Women's Media Center, for example, produces a television series, in the style of opera and drama, that explores gender-related subjects in inventive and interesting ways. These programs question the traditional roles and images of women. More important, the leaders of women's organizations are providing important role models that contrast sharply with the sexualized and objectified images of women common in imported movies and television series from the West, Thailand, and Hong Kong.

Women's organizations have also begun to influence the political landscape, though in a limited way. During elections in 1998, a few women's organizations participated in voter education programs for women. One group has begun to address leadership training for increasing women's participation in politics. By promoting participation, the group is also highlighting the issue of gender equality. "Men cannot abuse women if women know their rights," a midlevel trainee told the CDIE team. "Now we understand how to work together for justice."

In brief, women's organizations are redefining and expanding the limited social, cultural, and economic roles available to women in Cambodian society. Empowerment remains a critical issue for women, whose social status and respect in society has been altered by loss of family, demographic shifts, changing kinship and marriage patterns, and a woman's increasingly burdensome role as sole supporter of her children.

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## Obstacles to Fuller Success

For all their merit, actual and potential, women's organizations in Cambodia face many hurdles, both cultural and practical. Broadly speaking, no tradition exists in Cambodia for voluntary organizations. Moreover, women suffer from a low social status, which impedes their assumption of leadership roles in public. There is also a shortage of trained and educated women who possess technical and managerial skills and expertise. Often a section of political leaders and government officials feel threatened by the emergence of women's organizations; the officials are not supportive of them.

Women's organizations also suffer from many organizational and managerial problems. Most groups are led by charismatic leaders who are unwilling to delegate authority and power to the midlevel professionals. Consequently, the management styles of these organizations are nonparticipatory. Most organizations also lack monitoring and evaluation capabilities,

although many are gradually acquiring them. Some organizations follow the model of affluent international NGOs with a large support staff, air conditioners, and four-wheel-drive vehicles, rather than the more realistic example of local government agencies.

Finally, women's organizations are totally dependent on international funding—understandable, given the scarcity of local resources. Neither the government nor the private sector is in a position to fund them. Economic dependence on international donors makes women's organizations beholden to the international donors, restricting their autonomy and independence. These organizations remain under constant pressure to change their agenda to reflect the apparent funding priorities of the international community.

## Lessons Learned

The Cambodian experience draws nine major lessons:

1. Comprehensive, targeted interventions based on a coherent policy framework are needed to help women and reconstruct gender relations in the conditions of postconflict societies. Gender-blind policies and programs are not sufficient to solve their problems.

2. The war undermined the sexual division of labor, creating new opportunities for women in economic and political affairs. Women entered into various occupations closed to them earlier. They also held important offices at national and local levels during the conflict. After the war, international donors have developed programs to consolidate those gains. International donors can follow such a course in other postconflict societies.

3. Education and training of women in refugee camps can prepare them to assume leadership roles in postconflict societies. Thus it makes sense for the international community to support education and training in refugee camps, enabling them to acquire new

skills, experience, and vision to help reconstruct gender relations—and their country—upon their return to society.

4. Newly founded women's organizations can carry out a wide range of programs. Therefore, the international community can use newly created women's organizations to channel humanitarian and developmental assistance in postconflict societies.

5. The international community can help establish women's organizations in postconflict societies. Such organizations can develop local roots and gain political legitimacy despite their dependence on international resources.

6. International donors should consider multiyear funding for women's organizations, allowing the groups to concentrate on their social, economic, and political development activities.

7. Women's organizations provide an important setting for women to gain self-respect and participate in decision-making. Thus the international community can support the growth of such groups in postconflict societies not only to channel assistance to needy populations but also to empower women socially.

8. Women's organizations often follow the example of international NGOs in their working conditions, spending considerable resources on four-wheel-drive vehicles, spacious offices, and large support staff. Such operations are questionable under the conditions of postconflict societies. The international community should try to foster a realistic and affordable vision among women's organizations.

9. In Cambodia, women's organizations have not specialized. Instead, they undertake similar programs, competing with one another for external resources. International donors can learn from the Cambodian case and encourage sectoral specialization by women's organizations.

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*This Highlights, by Ross Bankson, of Conwal Incorporated, summarizes the findings of Working Paper No. 307, Aftermath: Women in Postconflict Cambodia, by Krishna Kumar, USAID senior social scientist; Hanna Baldwin, of DevTech Systems, Inc.; and Judy Benjamin, of the International Rescue Committee. To access this Highlights from the Internet, key in [www.info.usaid.gov](http://www.info.usaid.gov). Click on Publications/Partner Resources, then on USAID Evaluation Publications.*

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