

HOW FAR HAS CAMBODIA COME ON GENDER EQUALITY? *Reflecting on the CEDAW Concluding Observations*

In 1992 Cambodia ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The move responded to the groundswell of grassroots momentum built by women who were fighting to pull themselves out of poverty and neglect and who were, one by one, claiming their rights to peace and development. Evident in the lead up to the Cambodian elections in 1993, this women's movement was made up of a small nucleus of teachers, students, development workers and other prominent women who organized public debates on issues of gender – a term and concept that was, at that time, still very alien. In a landscape where 40% of girls never started school, only 5.8% of the National Assembly was women and where there were no women to be found among provincial and district authorities, this movement of women had a lot to fight for.

There was no Ministry of Women's Affairs in 1992 and no national policy response to women and gender issues. Twenty-one years on and the Royal Government of Cambodia has identified gender equality under the fourth priority area of its latest Rectangular Strategy and the Ministry of Women's Affairs is set to produce its fourth national strategy on gender equality, Neary Rattanak IV. In 1992 there was no legislative response to issues primarily affecting women. Now Cambodia has legislation on trafficking and domestic violence.

However, whilst statistics on women's political participation and access to primary education have improved, traditional challenges and emerging issues mean that there is still a long way to go before Cambodia achieves gender equality. This is a reality that not only Cambodia, but every country in the world, faces. Having just completed a review of Cambodia's progress towards implementing CEDAW, the Convention's Committee has recently issued its preliminary Concluding Observations which provide a comprehensive picture of what still needs to be done.

In the Concluding Observations, the Committee acknowledges and commends the progress made by the Royal Government of Cambodia towards gender equality. This includes efforts to mainstream gender through the policies of all ministries, eliminate gender stereotypes in school curricula and develop a second National Action Plan for the Prevention of Violence against Women (NAPVAW). However, the Committee also identifies forty-two principal areas of concern with recommendations for action.

Emphasising that land issues are not a gender neutral phenomenon the Committee expresses particular concern about the use of intimidation and harassment by law enforcement personnel against women human rights defenders advocating for land rights. As land rights activist Yorm Bopha completes her first

year of a three-year prison sentence, women land rights activists, and those protesting for her release, have been dispersed with excessive force.

Indeed, the Committee goes on to recommend the inclusion of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 into the new NAPVAW. Resolution 1325 recognises the role of women in peace building and the Committee's recommendation speaks of a need for Cambodia to address the way in which the security sector interacts with communities and with women in particular. After the tragic events of the November 12 garment factory protests, the need for such reform is imperative.

Making the connection between trafficking and labour migration, the Committee recommends an increase in dissemination of information on deceptive recruitment. The Committee also asks that the Government ensures that trafficking for domestic servitude be addressed through bi-lateral agreements and an effective criminal justice response. These recommendations come as Cambodia opens up a new migration corridor for domestic workers to Singapore, and re-assesses the ban on sending domestic workers to Malaysia. The recommendations are unquestionably necessary for the protection of Cambodian female migrant workers.

The Cambodian offices of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN OHCHR) concur with the CEDAW Committee in recognising the work of the Government in the progress made to date towards gender equality. In light of the Committee's Observations it is clear that the focus on gender equality must be maintained and strengthened if this goal is to be achieved. In this regard it is critical that specific targets for gender equality are developed into the national post-2015 agenda. Both UN Women and OHCHR will continue to assist the Government in implementing the Concluding Observations.

Those few women who took up the cause for women's rights and gender equality in Cambodia in the 1990s must be congratulated for their bravery and commitment – and Cambodians should be proud of how far the country has come in making national commitments to gender equality. The future of gender equality in Cambodia, however, is now in the hands of all partners in society and government. And much of this charge can be lead by the large and dynamic population of young Cambodian women and men. With four years until the next CEDAW review, the Concluding Observations can serve as a critical to-do list for us all to take forward the work those women started to eliminate discrimination against women in Cambodia.

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