

## Gender Inequality among Men and Women in Cambodian Society

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Gender inequality is a difference in status, power and prestige that women and men have in groups, collectivities and societies. Gender inequality continues to be an issue in Cambodia as many citizens still believe that men are better than women. Generally, women in Cambodian society are seen as inferior to men and are often considered mentally weaker. This view is especially prevalent in rural areas of Cambodia.

Women's status in Cambodia was relatively high in ancient times, with several outstanding female leaders in Khmer history. Linguistically, the position of women was assumed to be higher in ancient Khmer history. The Khmer word "Me" meaning "Mother," is used to denote a commander (Me toap) and the leader of a group (Me krom). In ancient times, Khmer women held high positions in the central government and greatly contributed to nation building. The first country covering current Cambodian territory was Funan or Nokor Phnom, from the first century until the middle of 6th century. Funan was headed by a queen called Neang Neak.

Under the Angkorean Empire, Queen named Indradevi, consort of King Jayavarman VII, was said to have great influence over the king in term of governing. Indradevi was highly educated woman, talented in many fields. For example, she is well-known for being in charge of directing professors in Buddhist Institute to make stone scripture of King Jayavarman VII. She was the first real woman role model, contributing to the social, educational and religious development of the country. Likewise, the women played dominant role in Angkorean society especially participation in decision –making process.

However, after the Angkorean Empire ended in 15th century, women's status gradually declined and they became subordinate to men. In current Cambodian culture, women's rights and freedoms are limited in almost all spheres. Customs, belief, social norm and code of women reinforce discrimination against women and thus strengthen their subordination to men.

Meanwhile, women are not equal to men because men see themselves as the intelligent actors; therefore, gender inequality



The participation in decision making process at grass root level and most of them are men, at Chi Poch commune, Mesang District, Prey Veng Province, Cambodia

in the mindset of Cambodian citizens is deep-rooted. As a result, women are discouraged to participate in any decision-making at the grass root level, because those women also believe that they are intellectually inferior to men, and they are reluctant to participate in the decision-making process and also reluctant to take part in social and political



One man came out to show his idea whereas woman did not

actions because of this mindset, especially in the rural area. Not only this but also women are obliged to take care of the household since an early childhood: helping mother to take care of house work while their male siblings are enjoying freedom, accepting the parents' decision to get married, supporting the husband to work outside and taking care of children. The teachings in the "Code of Women" informing girls they shall be

patient to their future husband also prevent them from questioning their legal rights. Approximately 25% of adult women, they have ever suffered from domestic violence also show that women are educated to be patient to the violence by their husband. Social values that women stay in a private sphere are deeply rooted in the rural areas. Such a traditional value that women shall be obedient to her parents and eventually to her husband also limits the ability of women to fully participate in the society as well as in the decision making process in development in their community.

Even the mindset of Cambodia people in this way, we look at the Cambodian Constitution, the supreme law of Cambodia, article 31 states that:

*"Khmer citizens are equal before the law, enjoying the same rights, liberties and duties regardless of race, color, sex, language, beliefs, religions, political tendencies, birth origin, social status, wealth or other situations. The exercise of personal rights and liberties by any individual shall not adversely affect the rights and freedom of others. The exercise of such rights and liberties shall be in accordance with the law".*

We can see here that the spirit of the law and the mindset of citizens differ. So why is the vast difference? The reason they favor to this idea because of illiteracy, belief, custom and social norm. Especially rural area citizens are not familiar with law, there are about 49 percent is literate in Cambodia which is a small amount, and it is observed that urban literacy rates both men and women continue to be higher than rural area according to National Institute Statistics of Ministry of Planning. Therefore, they are

not intent to join or expose their concern and needs in any decision in the public, and also women themselves don't want to take part in activities such as decision making in public, politics and social activities as men do.

By looking at the mindset of rural citizens, we can see that Cambodian citizens have a deep-rooted mindset that men are better than women. They still think that men have a main role in their family as well as in society. Women themselves think that they are inferior to men. As a result, the gender inequality has been still the barrier for Cambodian citizens even we live in modern time; however, this challenge needs time to be improved, but the government should spend more on education in order to strengthen education system and eradicate illiteracy in Cambodia.