

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT IN CAMBODIA

In 1995 forty Cambodian women and 107 children were given seventeen acres of land on the remote Koh Kor Island in the Tonle Bassac River, some nineteen miles south of Phnom Penh. Most of these women were either widowed or abandoned by their violent husbands and without homes or food. A non-government organisation (NGO) named the Hagar Project (working with Cambodian street women and children since 1993) had found difficulty in integrating the women being treated at the Hagar shelter and decided to build a community exclusively of women and children. As Reuters described: “The section of the island inhabited by the women is finely manicured and dotted with wooden houses on stilts. ... Women work agricultural fields, tend livestock and feed ponds full of fish that are consumed on the island and sold to nearby villages.” These women also sew handicrafts for sale in the country and overseas. They hire men to do heavy lifting and ploughing; otherwise there are no men living on the island. The 42 year-old leader of Koh Kor told Reuters, “When our sisters here meet difficulties, the community helps them. Our people’s living conditions here are better when compared with previous conditions because the community encourages the women to earn money to feed themselves.” According to the project director, “These mothers are very happy to govern themselves. They actually don’t want to bring men on island.” He summed up: “The most striking characteristic we can see is that they’ve regained a desire to live ... a sense of the future, a hope, especially for their children. That’s very, very important.” (Gaffar Peang-Meth, 2000).

At the same time this unique project building on the capabilities of women was being established, the Cambodia I was experiencing stood in sharp contrast, with scant opportunities for women. Despite an official government policy of ‘gender equality’ in a country where the majority of the adult population was women, the 1997 Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) program I managed in Phnom Penh was taking enrolments that were 90 percent male. AusAID’s agreement to accept participants nominated by the government had left them with no choice other than to accept enrolments that overwhelmingly favoured males. The Cambodian cultural bias towards males holding positions of power meant that male government officials were

preferred choices to work in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and to study post-graduate courses in Australia. This ensured higher levels of education for the younger males expected to hold future positions of power and continuing male dominance in the government. Women had little hope of accessing future leadership positions. This lack of appreciation of women's capabilities contrasts sharply with the 'women's island' experience and highlights the need to look more deeply into the history of Cambodian culture to understand why women's potential contribution to the development of their country was being devalued.

1.1 Overview of thesis

This thesis is an attempt to meet some of this need. Its starting point is the opening up of a shattered and impoverished Cambodia to international aid and development in the early 1990s, promising a better future for the majority women and children. However, despite a heavily supported national development agenda promoting the alleviation of poverty and empowerment of women, and despite a few progressive examples in and near the urban centres, the Western-driven development process failed to address the needs of women, and the situation for the majority actually worsened in the 1990s. To understand the ways in which cultural and political aspects might account for the failure to alleviate widespread poverty and empower women in the Cambodian development process, it is important to understand the context of Cambodia's history. For this reason the thesis is chronologically arranged, beginning with an overview of the cultural developments that have taken place in over 1000 years of Cambodian history. Following this, I have analysed the ways in which these cultural changes have impacted on the lives of Cambodian women in the 1990s. These historically-based understandings of the culture provide the background and context for Cambodian women's experiences of Western-initiated gender and development (GAD) policies and practices designed to empower Cambodian women, introduced in the same period. The final chapter discusses the failure of the national government, supported by international funding agencies and non-government organizations (NGOs), to implement GAD policies and practices designed to alleviate 'feminised poverty' and women's disempowerment in the 1990s. Fundamentally, the thesis questions the appropriateness of applying Western gender models in the Cambodian context. In particular it considers the ways that cultural

understandings of power, patronage, and women's place in society have acted as barriers to the process of the development agenda for women in Cambodia.

1.2 Introducing gender awareness

At the beginning of the 1990s, adult women accounted for 64 percent of the population and headed 35 percent of households in Cambodia. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 1990) described the situation for the majority of women and children as desperate. In 1992 an advocacy group of women, including leaders from the 1980's Women's Association of Cambodia and returnees who had trained overseas or worked in positions of leadership in the refugee camps, was earmarked to undertake skills training from the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) while a new, egalitarian constitution was being drafted. Group reports presented on the situation of women covered issues of family, health, education, the economy in rural areas, the economy and professional/state employees, the private sector, the community and the society, and women in difficult circumstances. These were to be used as the basis for forward planning of gender-balanced development projects.

With the advent of a democratically elected government and egalitarian constitution in 1993, an unprecedented 90 percent of eligible people turned out to vote. The international community was free to help rebuild Cambodia's shattered society and infrastructure, and assist in the process of empowering women. A widely publicised 'Women's Summit' was held in Phnom Penh on International Women's Day, and newspapers included features bearing such titles as "Women's Rights Movement Starts" and "Women Want Bigger Say in Post-War Society". Banners prepared by the Ministry of Culture displayed Khmer proverbs including "Strong as an ant, powerful as a spirit, dauntless as a woman", and "One father is worth 1,000 friends, one mother is worth 1,000 fathers". Over 100 women of diverse backgrounds from several provinces were brought together to discuss and prioritise issues of concern (Redd Barna, 1993).

Following the withdrawal of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) after the elections, the Cambodian Development Resource Institute and the Secretariat for Women's Affairs (1993) conducted workshops to promote awareness of

gender and development (GAD) issues, and a wide range of developmental needs, including village cooperation, literacy training, family health and birth spacing. However, while the international community was focussing on the stated main issues of *reconstruction and rehabilitation* (*Phnom Penh Post*, 1993), initial euphoria following the elections was marred by unease in the new coalition government comprised of two opposing parties, the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC) royalist party, and the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), predecessor of the 1980's Communist party. They were seen as becoming increasingly corrupt as they jockeyed for power, touting for international aid and organising structural readjustment to be eligible to join ASEAN.

Against this background, funding agencies and NGOs released reports outlining the development needs of women and children. In addition, a Secretariat of State for Women's Affairs (SSWA) was set up in consultation with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 1993, headed by a man, Secretary of State Keat Sokhun. In 1995, a dynamic, well-qualified returnee, Mrs Mu Sochua was appointed special advisor on women's affairs to the first prime minister (FUNCINPEC). After much negotiation and planning, in early 1997 SSWA joined with Veteran's Affairs to become a full government Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs (MOWVA, more commonly referred to as MOWA), remaining under the weak leadership of Keat Sokhun who remained strongly influenced by his conservative CPP undersecretary, Im Run. MOWA was to assist in setting up and coordinating women's projects, and negotiating conditions with leaders at local and district levels. MOWA was also to lobby for the advancement of laws protecting women's rights, and laws against the exploitation of women. These laws were to be based on provisions in the new constitution¹ while incorporating a more gender sensitive 'women's code' (SSWA, 1995a:72). SSWA asserted that continuing, armed conflict in Cambodia had resulted in:

feminisation of poverty leading to urban migration, slavery and destitution

shortage of farmland for rural women

inability of a large number of women returnees to earn a living, thereby becoming targets of economic and sexual violation

¹ The constitution was in accordance with the 'Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women', adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979 (<http://www.un.org>).

repeated displacement of many women and children
disability in families adding to the burden of women. (SSWA, 1995a:72)

Accordingly, the purpose of MOWA would be to work to improve the living conditions of women, ensure their full participation in all levels of planning and development, and safeguard women's rights and interests at all levels of government and society. MOWA's stated objectives were to:

- enhance women's skills through equitable training and education
- ensure full recognition and participation of women in decision making at all levels of national planning, reconstruction and development
- create a network of women throughout the country with representatives to safeguard their rights at all levels of government and society. (SSWA,1995a:74)

MOWA's purpose was to be achieved by establishing a focal point in every ministry and development institution to ensure the full representation and participation of women. This was to be achieved by providing policy and program guidelines to raise the living conditions of women, particularly women in the 90 percent rural majority. Objectives were also to be achieved by working closely with women in provincial development centres charged with the task of identifying needy families. MOWA was to be supported by UNICEF and several NGO programs concerned with family food production, credit, income generation, clean water, literacy and child-care. MOWA aimed to carry out research in order to understand the position of the women it intended to lobby for through the media. MOWA was to assist the Ministry of Health (MOH) by providing health education, and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MOEYS) to ensure that girls attended and remained at school through providing scholarships to female teachers and conducting public awareness campaigns. MOWA's development policy aimed to:

- ensure that the gender sensitive laws and laws concerning women's rights outlined in the women's code were adopted by parliament, and a legal framework for implementation was in place
- inform women as to legal rights and sensitise the police force, the judiciary and those concerned with women victims of violence

undertake advocacy to gain full recognition of women's contribution in national reconstruction

provide women with equal access to facilities to promote equal opportunities programs. (SSWA, 1995a:75)

In 1998, Mrs Mu Sochua, was elected to head the newly set up MOWA, representing the less powerful, but leading party in the coalition, FUNCINPEC. Mu Sochua was strong, outspoken and educated, with a Master of Social Welfare from the United States of America. Her appointment gave new heart to the GAD-NGO community still reeling from a brutal coup in 1997. However, although Mu Sochua had won the hearts of women she had worked with in refugee camps for almost six years and was the most suitable candidate, many Cambodians treated her with suspicion, seeing her as an outsider who did not understand the needs of the poor within the country. She remained the Minister of Women's Affairs into the new millennium. However, although the mandate of MOWA was to assist in mainstreaming gender-sensitive policies within all government ministries, it was consistently sidelined. The other male-dominated ministries perceived 'women's affairs' as being the exclusive domain of MOWA, claiming that their ministries were already undertaking enough 'gender mainstreaming'. Added to this, large amounts of funding intended for MOWA and MOEYS were diverted into supporting the respective armies of the competing sides in the coalition government. Under Mu Sochua, MOWA continued to work with NGOs to promote women's rights and better support for women and, realising the need to address the pervading cultural bias against the respect and empowerment of women, in 1999 introduced a new policy promoting women entitled *Neary Rattanak* "Women are Precious Gems".²

Throughout the 1990s, international funding bodies in conjunction with MOWA persisted in assisting the numerous local and international NGOs to conduct the wide range of programs aimed at empowering women and improving their status through advocacy and human rights training, skills training, micro-credit and poverty alleviation. At the same time MOEYS was committed to improving education and encouraging girls to remain at school. However, even though MOWA, MOEYS and NGOs committed to

² This title was intended to replace the widely spread slogan 'Women are cloth and men are diamonds', meaning that women's moral stains cannot be removed whereas men are unable to be stained.

GAD had endeavoured to carry out their mandate to assist women and promote gender equity at all levels, by 1998 the situation had worsened. Mu Sochua complained that even though there were marginally more women in power than in 1994, the people continued to live in fear because of the followers of “a single man [PM Hun Sen] violating our human rights”. She said that because the gap between men and women was so wide MOWA faced an uphill battle to push for women’s rights (interview, 1999). Consequently, by the end of the decade, little of MOWA’s aims had been achieved, particularly in the rural sector.

1.3 Barriers to development

As this thesis argues, in addressing the failure to alleviate widespread poverty and lack of women’s rights in Cambodia, there have been two fundamental problems. The first problem has been the mismatch of Cambodian cultural understandings and Western concepts of women’s empowerment. The second, related problem has been the serious tardiness of the Cambodian government in fulfilling its obligations to the international funding agencies whose purpose was to assist in post-war rehabilitation and poverty alleviation and the empowerment of women.

In relation to the first problem, Cambodians see the place of women as keeper of household finances and central to the family and the home. Added to this, the majority of women are illiterate, and apart from facing a constant battle for survival, these women place enormous importance on maintaining impeccable personal behaviour that includes being quiet, submissive and accepting, and maintaining the family reputation at all times. The aims of development practitioners have been to mainstream women through ‘top down’ policies and programs, and empower women at the grass roots ‘bottom up’ level, articulating women’s needs and bringing pressure on the state to act on their behalf. However, practitioners failed to achieve their outcomes because many Cambodians perceived them as ‘patrons’ and reciprocated accordingly as dutiful ‘clients’ in accordance with traditional understandings. At the same time, the practitioners complained that the Cambodians were demonstrating a ‘handout’ mentality and refusing to ‘think for themselves’.

This cultural mismatch frequently resulted in unfortunate confrontations at the local level. Chandorovann Dy, Khmer interpreter for the International Red Cross in Cambodia in 1993, commented on the way Western aid workers frequently lost their patience with local women, calling them ‘stupid’ (interview, 1994). According to Dy, this occurred because Cambodian women were deeply concerned with Buddhist considerations of respect and maintaining ‘cosmic balance’ in their relationships with the aid workers. On the other hand aid workers were only interested in getting on with the job of treating the women and teaching them Western health and hygiene practices.

The second problem, the tardiness of the government to fulfil its agreements with international funding agencies, is to be explained in part by endemic patterns of patronage, nepotism, corruption, overloaded armies and political infighting. Although Cambodian law has been exemplary in its stated dedication to equality for its citizens, administration of that law has been one of the biggest problems facing the country throughout the 1990s. In their attempts to enrich themselves through accessing foreign aid and to remain in power at all costs, the ruling elite demonstrated a disregard for the international development agenda, and a total disinterest in attending to the needs of the poor, particularly women.

The lack of fit between Cambodian understandings of culture and Western understandings about the empowerment of women through WID and GAD policies is a key aspect largely missing in the literature informing policy. To begin to redress this problem, and to begin to understand the complexity of these cultural differences and the way they have affected the process of development, this thesis employs an ethnographic approach to the collection and interpretation of data. In broad terms, it adopts the ‘thick description’ approach of Clifford Geertz (Geertz, 1993:89) who describes ‘culture’ as “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life”. In this thesis, Geertz’s definition is used to argue that historically-inherited Cambodian cultural understandings and practices at all levels of society have been at odds with Western notions of mainstreaming gender equity and women’s rights, making the stated aims of MOWA and women’s NGOs difficult to fulfil. Although the 1990s promised democracy,

development and freedom of speech, increasing authoritarianism in the powerful, male-dominated government backed by a corrupt judiciary and police force led to worsening conditions for women in the majority poor. The same cultural aspects account for the paucity of government funding allocated to MOWA and MOEYS, the lack of government support to women's NGOs, and the inability of the women themselves to bring about change. One of the issues of key concern to funding agencies and the government, which this thesis addresses, is the extent to which the national development agenda promoting GAD in Cambodia has addressed women's socio-economic needs in a culturally sensitive way.

1.4 Significance of the project

This issue is not, of course, limited to Cambodia. Enloe (1989:14-16) reminds us that "women are at the bottom of most international hierarchies: women are routinely paid less than even the lowest-paid men in multi-national companies; women are two thirds of all refugees". She says that planning for substantial development in all poorer countries requires knowledge of the societal hierarchies and gender divisions of labour. But as Ramusak (1999:79) notes, before the 1990s there was very little research on women and gender issues in Southeast Asia. In Cambodia, due to an unbalanced population where women have carried a disproportionate share of the struggle for survival following more than twenty years of war, the need for such knowledge has been particularly acute. In the 1990s, Cambodian women's labour accounted for over 50 percent of all food produced, and they shouldered a totally disproportionate and unrecognised share of the burden of their country's survival. As in other developing countries, Cambodian women were more likely to engage in aspects of community life affecting the basic needs of their families, while men participated at regional and national political levels.

As outlined in the following chapters, a number of internationally funded projects in Cambodia have attempted to build on equitable community involvement of women. However, as this thesis argues, this strategy has typically been undermined by the inapplicability of Western feminist notions of women's empowerment and gender equity in the context of Cambodian cultural understandings of family, hierarchy and cosmic

order. Compounding the mismatch has been the assumption of many NGOs that they know best what Khmer women need, and then, for cultural reasons, find that they have unwittingly assumed positions of patronage and failed to connect with the people they had intended to empower. This helps to explain the failure of macro and micro-development initiatives focussing on the rights of women. In providing a deeper understanding of Khmer culture and the place and situation of women, this thesis aims to provide relevant information for government and non-governmental organisations in forward-planning for programs designed to increase the participation of women at all levels of planning and policy-making in Cambodia. In the light of criticisms of the World Bank and its failure to end discrimination against women in third world countries (Hutcheon, 1995:1), it also aims to question at a global level the applicability of Western notions of Women in Development (WID) and Gender and Development (GAD) in a non-Western context.

1.5 WID and GAD in Cambodia

As a number of commentators have pointed out, until the 1990s the main approach to project policy-making and implementation of the upgrading of women in developing countries was WID, which focussed on projects for women. Even though results of this approach were proving to be ineffective, many development agencies maintained their WID focus in projects due to inflexibility in their stated policy directives, thereby limiting effective social change in the countries in which they worked (Rathgeber, 1995:206; Razavi & Miller, 1994; Staudt, 1994).³ In her chapter 'Gender and Development in Action', Rathgeber pointed out that a WID view assumes a 'women's voice' largely drawn from the experience of 'white middle class' women, and is largely inappropriate in the socio-cultural context of other countries. Whereas WID places emphasis on providing women with opportunities to participate in male-dominated social and economic structures through women's projects, a more 'gender fair' GAD approach sees the women themselves as the agents for change at a bottom-up level, leading to a fundamental re-examination of social structures and institutions and a rethinking of

³ Boserup's ground-breaking studies of women in Africa in 1970 clearly showed that changes brought about by utilising modern Western notions in the colonial and post-colonial periods caused women's essential contribution to agricultural production to become invisible, eventuating in a male monopoly of

hierarchical gender relations within the society. Rathgeber (p.207) claims that this should ultimately lead to the loss of power of entrenched male elites at the top-down level, thus affecting both women and men. She explains that the more equitable GAD approach focuses on the *condition* of women, including their material state in terms of education, access to credit, technology, health status and legal status. And to alleviate the concrete disadvantages of women, a GAD perspective also focuses on the *position* of women, including the inherent social relations of gender and complex relations of power between men and women.

In her paper for the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISID) and UNDP workshop ‘Technical Co-operation and Women’s Lives’, outlining the difficulties of integrating GAD policies aimed at mainstreaming gender issues in developing countries including Cambodia, Staudt (1994:9) pointed out that obstacles to transformative mainstreaming of women through using a GAD approach continued to prevail. She warned that, unlike experiences encountered in implementing other new policy issues, the de-institutionalising of male dominance in institutional operations would remain an onerous challenge, and the nature of bureaucratic institutions further complicated this. At the same time Razavi & Miller (1994:27) highlighted the reality that women themselves frequently presented a hindrance to gender mainstreaming, preferring to sideline the issue and prioritise family and kinship gender relations in the trade-off between security and autonomy.

Gender workshops and NGO programs working with Cambodian women, to assist in designing strategies for the implementation of GAD policies aimed at mainstreaming women in leadership and development projects, have been funded by donor agencies and conducted under the auspices of the Cambodian government since the opening up of Cambodia in the early 1990s. However, despite their efforts and although the newly-implemented laws generously provided for gender fairness, this thesis suggests that Western concepts of ‘gender equity’ remained at odds with Cambodian understandings of the designated roles of males and females. Cambodians saw Western ideals of gender as advocated by Western women and Western-trained Cambodian women as a threat to

technology and agricultural economy. She claims that prior to the introduction of Western policies, these women had enjoyed relative equality to men in agricultural production.

Cambodian cultural understandings of women's supportive role. Added to this, Cambodian men in positions of power not only saw GAD as a threat to their culture but a threat to their own traditional power base. In this context of conflicting interests, this thesis argues that cross-cultural misunderstandings between Western-determined WID/GAD models and the prevailing socio-cultural setting in Cambodia rendered gender mainstreaming largely ineffective in the 1990s.

CHAPTER TWO

WHOSE AGENDA? THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS IN THE 1990s

2.0 Introduction

UNIFEM (2003:20) figures for 1999-2000 reveal Cambodia as having the lowest levels of achievement in gender equality and women's empowerment in Asia. The human poverty index in the 1990s was second only to Bangladesh (Ministry of Planning, 2000:5). These figures are certainly disappointing considering the amount of foreign aid (an estimated two billion US\$, half of the national budget) that poured into the country in the 1990s. This began with the 1991 Paris Peace Accords bringing an end to the stalemate caused by international isolation.¹ This was followed by the arrival of UNTAC, enabling Cambodia to open up and move towards democratic elections and a free market economy. During this period, barriers to development in Cambodia occurred at all levels. These included poverty, trauma, lack of skills and education, ill health, a hierarchical and corrupt government, and - most importantly in terms of this thesis - a lack of understanding of the people and their culture by aid providers and practitioners at all levels. As the review of literature covered in this chapter shows, agendas based on Western understandings of development have largely failed to achieve sustainable project outcomes. This has been due to fundamental misunderstandings of Cambodian socio-cultural frameworks and practices, resulting in an inability to work with the people and meet their needs at grass-root levels.

In order to understand the needs of Cambodian women more clearly, in 1990-1991 UNIFEM (Hedman, 1991) investigated the statistical records held in Cambodian government departments. Finding these to be uncoordinated and patchy, Hedman established the need to undertake fresh gender specific statistics to enable forward planning for WID/GAD policies and programs. Following this, a report presented to the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (Hartke, 1992) stressed the need for women to be represented within UNTAC, so that gender aware policies could be

¹ Eva Mysliwiec (1988) provides an excellent account of the suffering of Cambodians under isolation from the West in *Punishing the Poor: The International Isolation of Kampuchea*. The book grew out of the shared experience and concerns of NGOs working with Khmer people both in Kampuchea and on the Thai-Kampuchean border. It was commissioned by 32 participating organisations and published by Oxfam.