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Underrepresentation of Cambodian Women in Politics and Leadership Roles

The underrepresentation of women in politics and leadership roles is the major alert in Cambodia. In 2020, women held less than 20 percent in political positions, were 14 percent of the overall judges, and made up about 20 percent as lawyers (Stankovits). There is a big gap between policy and practice to promote women to have equal opportunities in the political arena and other leadership roles. As a consequence, women's voices are unlikely to be heard in the public sector because most of the political positions and decision-making are mostly taken by men. However, women are integral to the future development of Cambodia because they could also bring necessary and missing opinions and creative solutions that the men don't. The underrepresentation of Cambodian women in the major role of leadership and politics causes serious barriers for Cambodia to be sustainably developed; therefore, Cambodian women need to have equal rights and opportunities to uplift their voice in enhancing their goals as well as the country's well-being. Thus, this paper will introduce the inequality of women's participation in leadership positions, and discuss the importance of women's participation in leadership. Then, it will analyze the causes and possible approaches to increase the number of women in leadership roles.

Cambodia still faces the inequality of representing the women in the larger labor force such as leadership roles in the society. The government has set the plan to prioritize gender equality while working on the Millennium Development Goal and Rectangular Strategy Phase II and III to bring down the gender gap in promoting the equal participation of women in politics,

economics, education, and society (Dim 229). However, Cambodia is still in slow progress to meet these goals. According to a report by the National Cambodian Human Rights Organization (LICADHO), Cambodian women don't have access to the long-standing and well-established networking that could be found in the neighboring countries: Thailand and the Philippines (10). Consequently, compared to those neighboring countries the number of women involved in society is still low (Dim 229). This situation shows that there is a slight chance that women can be involved in any public decision-making because they were abandoned by the public sector and didn't have access to the networking to share their voices and thoughts.

The statistics that show how many women are involved in politics might be shocking to those who have not known Cambodia before. According to Voice of America Khmer Service (VOA Khmer), there were only 25 women out of the overall population who worked in the National Assembly which was equal to 20 percent of the legislature in 2015 (Kimseng). This proportion did not improve for a decade because there was already 19 percent since 2003 (Kimseng). According to data shown in the National Institute of Statistics (NIS), "Women held 7 percent of minister positions in 2008, slightly increasing to 11 percent in 2013 and 2016 while women in secretaries of state positions increased from 8 percent in 2008 to 20 percent in 2013 and 19 percent in 2016" (59). The data above clearly shows the proportion of women involved in politics was hard to increase over time, but at the same time, the rate also decreased which was a disadvantage to women participating as governors. More surprisingly, there was only one woman in the provincial governor position in 2017 (63). Moreover, only 26 out of 150 deputy governors were women, and only 7 out of 197 district governors were women (63). Those were the most recent statistics showing the proportion of women participating in politics over time, and there are not many changes to this recently. Based on the data, Cambodia is struggling to meet the

expectations to increase substantially the number of women in the legislature and other political positions.

Despite the policy to foster gender equality for the last two decades, the underrepresentation of Cambodian women in public decisions, politics, employment, and education is still the issue (UNDP). Women are not fully participating in society, and they have fewer choices than men on how to live their lives. Women in the workforce are an important component for the country to develop both socioeconomically and politically. According to the study, increasing women's potential and abilities is an essential factor in socio-economic development as well as the mechanism for sustainable development that also helps meet the millennium development goals (Dim 218). Women could bring a necessary perspective to society because their participation in leadership roles might influence social change when their voice is heard in the public sector. As a result, the participation of women in leadership and politics would lead to the fulfillment of the country's development as a whole.

Poverty and cultural norms prevent women from participating equally in the workforce and obtaining leadership roles in society. The lack of financial support hinders women from going to school and leads women to work in unskilled occupations as well as become sex workers to fulfill their financial needs. Furthermore, cultural norms that hold negative stereotypes toward women, force women to marry at a young age, and lead to political bias are the greatest barrier for women to have equally participating in leadership roles.

Poverty has driven Cambodian women to be uneducated. Cambodia is one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia. According to the Asian Development Bank, in 2018 about 72 percent of Cambodia's population live on less than \$3 per day (Gillispie). Thus, financial deprivation leads to a lack of education and opportunity. Most families could not support the

necessary expenses for school such as tuition fees, uniforms, school materials, transportation to school which led to the higher chance of children dropping out from school. According to NIS, in a survey of people under the age of 18, 43 percent of girls in urban areas and 54 percent of girls in rural areas were unable to attend school in 2016 (34). About half of Cambodian women failed to be educated. Since they were not in school to consume the knowledge, they were unlikely to know about the country's history. For this reason, it made them have a hard time catching up with political issues. Because women were illiterate, people concluded that women could not be involved in the leadership roles and not be able to make necessary for the country's future.

Because of family poverty, girls are sent away to find jobs to support their families financially. In addition, without education, they aren't able to find a proper job but, rather, an unskilled labor job. Most women end up working in the garment industry or leave the country to find unskilled jobs in the neighboring countries: Malaysia and Thailand (Kaing). According to (LICADHO), the number of Cambodian women who work as laborers or domestic help in other Asian countries like South Korea keeps increasing (43). Moreover, some of them were not in safe conditions because some of them got their jobs through illegal immigration (43). Thus, those women had limited opportunities within their careers, so they remained trapped in the poverty cycle (43). More importantly, the majority of overseas workers would lead Cambodia to lose important human resources, and the absence of those women would be one of the reasons why they were underrepresented in the leadership roles.

In addition to working in menial labor and working overseas, Cambodian women were forced to be sex workers to make their living and often to help support their families.

The evidence shows by LICADHO, “The research indicates that 64.45 % of prostitutes have been forced into this work, 52.9% were duped by the prospect of a good job, 11.04% were sold by family members” (27). This information shows that some of them were forced to do this job, and some of them unwisely chose to work in this field because they grew up without the knowledge that would support them to find the right job. According to LICADHO, Cambodia has the largest sex industry even though it is illegal to operate this business (27). The lowest estimate of sex workers from 2002 to 2003 was 18,256 sex workers that included the directed and indirect sex workers, and the highest estimate was around 100,000 sex workers (27). This job has made Cambodian women vulnerable. They were discriminated against and were not likely to be welcome in any important leadership role in politics.

In addition to poverty, cultural norms such as negative stereotypes, early marriage, and unsuitability for politics prevent women from stepping into the advancing workforce and the public sphere. Traditionally, common negative stereotypes viewed women as weak, subservient, and submissive to men in terms of making decisions and choosing their partners (Dim 218). In society, women are infirm, less intellectual compared to men. Men are the head of the family, and for any important decision in the family, women need to seek their husband's approval first. From this misconception, women are not worthy enough to receive recognition from society. Also, women are responsible for household chores and taking care of everyone in the family (Dim 218). Women are expected to do the housework such as cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, taking care of the children and the older family members in the house. Because of misconceptions and the major workload as housewives, women don't have time to involve themselves in social work that they wish to do outside their family circle which leads to their absence.

Early marriage is another cultural norm that limits women's participation in the workforce and political arena. In older generations' perspectives, women are growing up to be housewives. In Cambodian society, it is hard to go back to school when you have a husband. Once women get married, they tend to prepare themselves to create a nice family, and it becomes harder to leave their family behind to pursue what they like. They know that they are going to be a mother, and they have more responsibility for taking care of their children and the family. It is the hard truth that not every woman would abandon their family just to go for her dream. According to the data from UNICEF in 2005, about 25 percent of Cambodian women aged between 20 to 24 were married before they turned 18 years old (Saoyuth). By looking at the data, we can assume that those women might not be able to finish high school or enter the university level because being married was the reason stopping them from going to school.

Early marriage became the reason for the limited choice for women to step outside their family circle to do what they want or to achieve their goals in society because they lose their chance to go to school. I remembered when I was in senior high school, there were only three female students left in the class. Some of my classmates were married before they graduated high school. Moreover, they were not able to come back to school because they had a husband and a family to take care of. Another example of my family living experience, my mother was forced into an arranged marriage with my father when she was 18. When she was 21, she had two children. She had to ask my father for everything because my father is the breadwinner. My mother sacrificed everything just for us. She didn't have time to think about her goal or wanted to be an empowered woman because, in her life, her family comes first. The story of my mother and my friends is the real example that shows that the cultural norm of being married early really

affects their lives and prevents them from heading further from their family circle to the outside world.

Cultural norms also lead to political factors that prevent women from participating in leadership roles. Reference to USAID 2013, the reason that excluded women in social, political, and economic development was from the traditional mindset that thinks that women should not be involved in the important political arena because they didn't have enough capabilities to defeat the men (Dim 223). This perception has taken away women's chance to participate in any leadership and limited their choice-making to within their family. This perception is also a huge barrier for women to have the motivation to step up in the higher-leadership roles because they know that they are unlikely to be supported in this role. Furthermore, women are unlikely to be promoted as a leader in a high position to increase responsibility and power in the political arena (Dim 225). This shows that Cambodia is still the male dominant world in which most of the important jobs are taken care of by men.

Since political bias exists, it is very difficult for women to raise their status in this area even though they are capable enough to do the job well. In the Cambodian voting system, "Political parties rank their candidates on a closed list, and voters cast their ballots for a political party. Each political party is then allocated seats based on the proportion of votes cast for their party, with the candidates selected based on their rank on the party list" (Election in Cambodia, 1 and 2). Unfortunately, women don't have equal opportunities to be the party's candidate as men. Evidence shows, "the failure to place women in the first or second spot on the list was suggested as the main reason why there is such a small number of women who actually win seats" (Dim, 255). Only 0.45 percent of the total candidates and 1.76 percent were female candidates on the list for the June 2012 election (USAID 2013). The political parties paid less attention to women's

role in leadership because female candidates are rarely promoted to the higher position in the party (Dim 226). In addition to the voting system, the lack of encouragement from voters that they don't trust women to be the leader is also the issue. According to USAID 2013, "Many voters do not believe in women's abilities for leadership and in their competence to manage high-ranking positions, and therefore neither support nor vote for women who are running for office" (8). Therefore, the women do not have a chance to prove their real abilities in leading the party as well as getting a high-ranking position in politics.

To increase the representation of Cambodian women in the workforce and leadership roles in society, we need to awake the consciousness of women by increasing the number of women in these roles. Next, we must provide access to education, training, and financial aid to support poor students. Then, we need to eliminate the negative stereotypes of women by getting help from the government and creating programs to support women in the workforce and leadership roles. Lastly, we should promote this campaign through social media.

Increasing the number of women in leadership roles awakens and empowers other women to follow in those footsteps. As stated by USAID 2013, women normally have low self-esteem, and because of that they are afraid or refuse to step into a more responsible job like higher-ranking positions in politics (9). Evidence shows that to positively encourage women to be interested in leadership roles increased the number of women in political parties because those empowered women would have a powerful influence on other women's lives by having a chance to use their rights and voice to fight against social injustice of violence and exploitation (Dim 227). Women empowered women. Thus, women will start to pay more attention surrounding issues that happen in their community and other women as well. Having role models seems like

the best method for encouraging and motivating them to come to their consciousness that they also could do the better things that their role model can do to support themselves and the country.

After making women aware of their potential, enhancing the educational system available for all women is the next solution to increase the number of women in leadership roles. Education is necessary for women because it teaches women about the morals of living, educational history, social issues, and other important things that are useful for them as a foundation to create their lives within their choices. Moreover, education could raise the women's awareness of their rights and acknowledge all factors that lead to bias against them (USAID 2013). Educated women know more about their real potential and how they can reach that potential to use in their role as good citizens and leaders of the country. Therefore, higher education should be prioritized for women because it is a way to increase their knowledge and gain more capability to compete with men in leadership roles whether in politics or society (Dim 223 and 224). Without education, women are perceived as unqualified for leadership positions (Dim 224). As a result, education is a really important factor that leads women to leadership roles and allows them to gain more necessary knowledge to back up their potential because to get into a high-ranking position, I believe, we need to have high educational background.

However, accessing education might be hard for girls who come from low-income families because their families might not be able to support them in going to school. They have to find a job to support themselves and their family; that would take away their chance to go to school. To implement this case, financial aid and scholarship would be the best option that could help those girls that are having a hard time paying for their tuition and other necessary fees for going to school. Fortunately, there was a program called "OPTION" that Cambodia got financial support from UNICEF and the U.S. Department of Labor to provide scholarships to aid the girls

who are not able to remain in school (Gillispie). This scholarship is very impactful because it not only can keep girls going to school but also help prevent girls who need to migrate because of family and natural circumstances from being sexually trafficked (Gillispie). By having financial support, we could gain more women in the school. There is a hope that in the next generation, Cambodia will gain more educated women that are full of capabilities that could help the country to grow sustainably.

In addition to education, providing social training helps strengthen women's skills to step into larger leadership roles in society and politics. School is where the women can go to get the knowledge, but it also requires them to join any necessary programs or organizations to apply their knowledge from school to use in the real working world. Providing social training programs within the country such as occupational training, vocational education, and entrepreneurship training could also encourage women to gain leadership and other necessary skills (USAID 2013). Within the training, women have the chance to build up their leadership skills, social interaction, knowledge, and ways to uplift equal rights and social development (Dim 226). Therefore, practical training helps women to be ready for their future careers and to be involved in civil society without fear, which would lead them to get another great strength to fight injustice. Thus, creating some program that could gather women to join and train them to be a leader at an early age could help a lot to strengthen their skill and their confidence to show the world about their voice and their powerful self that lead to a big change.

The next possible solution is to eliminate the negative stereotypes that view the role of women to be weak and submissive to the term of men in society. In order to increase the representation and the participation of female candidates in politics, people need to get rid of the gender stereotype that shapes the women to the domestic job and that sees them as less

intelligent, less competent than men (Dim 223). This could be challenging because of the traditional perspective from generation to generation, but we could find a way to reduce it step by step by proving how important women's voices and abilities could impact the society and sustainable development of a country's well-being. According to the study, people need to change their negative mindset and give women more value and understand the hardship that women go through in society because of the misconceptions of gender stereotypes (Dim 227). Also, I believe to eliminate this gender norm starts from the family and the community that they live in. Family is the first potential support for the girl emotionally, physically, and financially. If they live in a family and the community that supports them through hardship and pushes them to do whatever they want to do without limiting their choices, they would definitely have the freedom to step outside the family circle to join the society to develop the country.

Another factor to resolve this stereotype factor is to encourage the government to promote and increase the leadership role for women without bias. According to the USDP, the Cambodian government has strengthened its promotion of women in leadership by the “Leading the Way for Gender Equality” (LWGE) that progresses from 2017 to 2020. This program was led by the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, “Key areas of intervention include policy development and monitoring for gender equality and gender mainstreaming across sectors; engagement of youth, media, and educational institutions for gender equality; promotion of women in public decision making and feminist leaderships; inclusion of disadvantaged groups of women and girls; and support to partnerships, research and learning on gender equality and women’s empowerment” (USDP). By 2019, the LWGE program has contributed to increasing the number of women in civic service by one percent annually. Even though it was a slow process, at least there was an improvement showing that the governors have been working on implementing this issue.

Hopefully, there will be more effective solutions stimulated by the government to work on this issue. Therefore, sooner or later Cambodia will have more women involved in the leadership role in the society as well as the political role that would play an important part to develop the country.

The last effective factor that I would recommend to gather the attention and promote Cambodian women to participate in leadership roles is the widespread use of social media. In this current generation, social media plays a major role to spread information and influence people all around the world just for one click. Social media provides a great space for spreading information to build a democratic culture, altering the public attitude, and building women's leadership skills in public engagement (Dim 228). Social media also brings social connection and interaction from all parts of the country to lead a way for people to have an awareness of the importance of women empowerment (Dim 228). Moreover, on this platform, women have the equal opportunity to discuss and express their deepest calling and their concern to develop the country (Dim 228). Like the LWGE program mentioned above, it received the greatest support from the media program that helps disseminate the important goal of the program to the youths and the public sectors. In 2017, the program conducted the media code of “Reporting Violence Against Women” as a debate through feminist leadership sessions and social media, and it reached more than two million Cambodian youths to participate and involve in that session (USDP). This successful widespread use of social media can prove that social media is a useful and fastest tool to spread information and gather people's attention to the social issues that happen to the world.

All of the solutions that I researched and proposed above follow the pillars of civility, of the three Cs: Consciousness, Creativity, and Community. Consciousness is the ability to

personify the concepts of emotional intelligence based on being aware of our own feelings and bias and how our actions impact others (Lustbader 8). Having role models could influence and motivate the women who choose to be silent to be aware and come to their senses that they could go do like others can do and have their own goal to work on. The next pillar: Creativity allows people to become open-minded to the surrounding environment and implicit problem solving (Lustbader 11). It is the same as the way to empower women in leadership is the first to make them conscious of knowing what they want to do. Then, it's time for them to find a way to help themselves to reach their goal by the support of education and leadership training to gain their confidence and experiences. The last pillar: Community, is the sense of connecting by providing the service to enhance the physical and emotional to build positive social skills (Lustbader 13). Therefore, the family and surrounding environment is the best supporting system plus the political reinforcements and the media platform that encourage women to gain more voice and be involved in society. As a result, civility plays a significant role in motivating women to overcome from their comfort zone to step into a bigger role as the leader to expand sustainable development.

Underrepresentation of women in politics and leadership roles is still a continuing issue in Cambodia that needs to be solved so that women would have equal opportunities to participate in leadership roles as well as leading the country. This contentious issue happened because of poverty and the incivility throughout Cambodian society, the cultural restriction of women's obligations as housewives not valuable enough to be the leader of the country. This traditional perspective has deeply shaped Cambodians' mindset and is hard to change, but we can fight for this so that it won't bring much of this thought to the next generations. The government has been reinforced to solve this issue by creating rules and programs to promote more women in society

and in political roles. On top of that, we need to take action to eliminate these negative stereotypes and uplift women's voices in public and encourage women to become leaders both in their family and the country. From this progress, hopefully, Cambodians will gain more empowered women that have full potential and commitment to become leaders to help Cambodia step out from poverty and become a sustainable development country.

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