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Cambodian Youth Perspectives

Edited by

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Chapter 18 | A Female Leader and Gender Equality in Cambodia

Saren KEANG

Future Scenario

On August 20, 2038, a historic event occurred in Cambodia. The Women for Cambodian People Party (WCP) won the 2038 election, putting in place the first ever female Prime Minister of Cambodia. Chea Chan Rachana, the elected Prime Minister, was born in Siem Reap, completed her higher education in the US, and had worked for a while in the United Nations. She founded WCP in 2035 and became popular soon after due to her charismatic character and her realistic promises on how she would change Cambodia, particularly with respect to gender issues. In her campaign, she declared that if she got elected, Cambodia would become a gender-equal society where women leaders would be seen in all sectors including government offices, civil society organizations, and the private sector.

A month after she took the office, Prime Minister Rachana passed a law that required all Ministries, NGOs, companies, and other institutions to appoint two leaders (one male, one female) in their respective entities. She calls it the “Two for All” policy. From that day onward, no entity is allowed to have only one leader/director. This is to ensure that whatever decisions have to be made, it will come from the perspectives of both genders. Her rationale is that if it takes two opposite sexes to create a life, it must also take both of them to solve life’s problems. She believes that when a male and a female leader, sharing equal power, work together, the world will become a better place.

Today, August 10, 2038, we see that every office in the whole country is led by two leaders (a male and female). With female leaders having equal power to their counterpart, new legislation and policies are being passed on a number of gender issues. One of them is the law on equal pay for men and women. Regardless of the type of job, women and men must be paid exactly the same amount of salary. Second, female economists have come up with a new development indicator called the Women Happiness Index. It measures the level of happiness of women as an indicator of development. A country is considered to be progressing only when their women are happy/satisfied. Third, higher education for girls is completely state-sponsored. No woman going to a university has to pay tuition fees. Finally, the provision of childcare is mandatory for all entities hiring female staff who are mothers of babies and small children.

Rachana’s passion for gender equality has been nourished through her education in a single-sex university in the US and her work with the UN. She cultivated enough courage and dedication to start her own political party because she has had amazing female mentors who guided, motivated, and supported her to choose this path. That is why during press interviews, Rachana talks relentlessly about the importance of mentorship programs for women. However, her dream

would still not have become a reality if she hadn't received support from grassroots women organizations such as Cambodian Women Making Wave and Fund for Cambodian Women Politicians. These organizations are founded by Cambodian philanthropists themselves whose vision is to see more female leaders taking charge of their country.

The failure of the previous government to address major problems including poverty, corruption, and inequality started to fuel the Cambodian people to stop believing in male leaders alone. At the same time, the rise of social media played a role in making the Cambodian people aware about female leaders in other countries and their amazing work. Cambodians began to believe in the possibility of having a competent female Prime Minister in their own country. The political climate in Cambodia was also more friendly towards opposition parties, as the government received a lot of pressure from the UN and other key international players to open the political playing field. All of these changes made it possible for Rachana to start her party, to operate the campaigns successfully, and to finally get voted in as the first female Prime Minister of Cambodia.

If you watch the news about Cambodia today, you'll see an interviewer talking to two Ministers from the same ministry, the Ministry of Justice, at the same time. Co-Minister Dara and Co-Minister Rany are on the news a lot, sharing the progress of how gender roles and gender norms are gradually losing relevance and women leaders are making very impressive impacts on different spheres in the country.

Introduction

In this paper, I will argue that a female Prime Minister and the "Two for All" policy will bring about a more gender-equal and prosperous Cambodia. A female Prime Minister is important for Cambodia because she will bring a new/better type of leadership as women are "powerful agents of change" (Women Deliver, 2021) and they outscore men on most leadership competencies including taking initiative, building relationships, inspiring/motivating others, collaboration and teamwork, and problem solving and analytical skills (Zenger and Folkman, 2020). The "Two for All" policy (a man and a woman head of all departments) will enhance gender equality in the country by ensuring that decisions made at the top come from the perspectives of both men and women, which will ensure that the policies serve both genders. This is the first step for Cambodia to address gender issues. In the future, other genders (LGBTQ) will be included in the top offices as well. This paper will shed light on the status of gender equality in Cambodia, discuss key factors that can help women leaders across the world become successful, and propose policy solutions that can help Cambodia reach the goal of having a female Prime Minister and becoming more gender equal.

Context Analysis

Gender Status and Related Policies in Cambodia

Gender equality in Cambodia has a long way to go. Women's participation in public decision making and politics remains low. There has not been any female Prime Minister in Cambodia to date. The proportion of women elected to the National Assembly in 2018 was a mere 21.6% (27 out of 125 seats) and only 16.1% in the Senate (10 out of 62 seats) (IPU, 2021). In 2013, there was only one female deputy prime minister and women only made up 10.7% of the ministerial positions, 20.54% of Secretary of State appointees, and 17.60% of Under Secretary of State positions (ADB, 2014, p.3). There have been no woman governors at the capital or province level, and female members of sangkats (communes) was merely 17.8% in 2012 (ADB, 2014, p.3).

According to the Cambodian Constitution, article 35 states that "Khmer citizens of either sex shall be given the right to participate actively in the political economic, social and cultural life of nation" (The Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia, 1993). However, Cambodian people's perceptions are deeply influenced by the entrenched social and gender norms that make them view women as not as capable as men (Dim, n.d., p.223). As a result, women are not often encouraged to take on leadership positions.

The Cambodian government has been taking some initiatives to improve gender equality such as developing policies and strategies to mainstream gender into line ministries. However, they do not have a quota policy. Half of the countries of the world today uses some type of electoral quota for their parliament to ensure high representation from women (International IDEA, 2021). Quota systems can ensure that women constitute at least 30% or 40% in elective offices (International IDEA, 2021). Quota policies have been effective in countries like Rwanda, New Zealand, and Sweden where women's representation in the parliament are 61.3%, 48.3%, and 47% respectively (IPU, 2021). Cambodia does not have quota policies because the government "considers that it can be a form of discrimination against men" (Khourn, n.d.). They do, however, take any other measures including introducing other policies, for example: 1) one out of three members of a village committee should be a woman, or; 2) there should be at least one woman among provincial and district deputy governors (Khourn, n.d.).

The government has introduced several policies and strategies to mainstream gender and promote women to more senior positions. Those include:

- 1) **The National Strategic Development Plan 2019-2023 (NSDP):** includes indicators relating to gender equality and puts emphasis on line ministries' roles in mainstreaming gender in their sectors.
- 2) **Neary Rattanak V (2019-2023):** Promotes the participation of women in decision-making at all levels through increasing the number of female civil servants and elected leaders, as well as strengthening their capacity and opportunities for promotion.

- 3) **National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women (2019-2023):** aims to protect women from all forms of violence so that they can live full dignified lives and participate fully in society, including in political sphere.

These policies call for higher attention of different stakeholders to engage women in all sectors including political participation. However, in reality, the progress made is mostly around social and economic participation only. There are no clear action plans that help reduce barriers for women to enter the political sphere. As a result, women promoted into high political positions are very few. It would be helpful if Cambodia had quota policies to ensure a specific number or proportion of women were promoted in certain political offices.

Challenges of Women’s Participation in Politics

Gender Norms

Traditional norms in Cambodia put more pressure on women to be in charge of domestic work and childcare, and discourage or even discriminate against women involved in the political sphere (Kem, 2016). The Cambodian political arena is a masculine model. Men “dominate the political arena, formulate the rules of the political game, and define the standards for evaluation” (Kem, 2016, p. 4). Women, on the other hand, bear the burden of housework and professional work, which puts them at a disadvantage in terms of available time to participate in anything else including politics (ADB, 2004). As a result, only a few women have the capacity and time available to engage in the political sphere. If the domestic burden for women is reduced, there is a high chance more women will be involved in politics.

Danger/threats for Women Involved in Politics

“Women involved in politics around the world are constrained not only by the proverbial glass ceiling, but also by the quiet threat of violence they face” (CFR, 2017).

A 2016 report found that worldwide “more than 44% of elected female representatives have been threatened in office, including threats of death, rape, beatings, or abductions” (CFR, 2017). For example, Jo Cox, a female British politician, was murdered by a misogynist in 2016; Indira Gandhi, India’s third Prime Minister was assassinated in 1984 by two male Sikh bodyguards; Agathe Uwilingiyimana, Rwanda’s first female Prime Minister was assassinated in 1994 (Batha and Zweynert, 2016). In Asia, particularly, female politicians receive a lot of threats and are at high risk. In Afghanistan, nearly all of the female candidates in the 2010 elections received threatening phone calls’ (CFR, 2017). Although Cambodian female politicians have not been hurt, there are good enough reasons for them to be fearful of what could happen to them given examples from neighboring countries and threats for Cambodia women in other sphere such as journalism (Nhek and Teng, 2021).

Financial Support to Run Campaigns

“Poverty has a strong, negative impact on women’s participation in politics” (Kem, 2016, p.5). Cambodian women do not always have the means to advance their political journey even if they want to. Many are still struggling with poverty and meeting the basic needs of their families. As

a result, they are not financially capable of investing in political campaigns and other related expenses. Involvement in politics is a huge investment, financially and time wise. Not many Cambodian women have those resources to make a political dream a reality. Financial support from outsiders would help them go a long way.

Women Leaders Across the World

Women leaders across the world have some common features regarding how they get to become leaders (President, Prime Minister, Chief Executive, etc.) in their respective country.

Education and training play a significant role in preparing everyone including women to be competent leaders. Leaders like Taiwan's Tsai Ing-wen, Liberia's Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Thailand's Yingluck Shinawatra, and Hong Kong's Carrie Lam have all received higher education before they become leaders (Pletcher, 2021; The Editors of Encyclopaedia, 2021). There seems to be a trend that female leaders tend to have a strong educational background that prepares them intellectually to be competent leaders as well as convinces others to take them and their qualifications seriously. Interestingly, all four of the leaders above have studied at a University in the West. It is possible to argue that their advanced education in Europe and North America might have played a role in shaping them to be open-minded, confident, and ambitious enough to pursue a career in politics.

Countries that face conflicts also give rise to female leaders. Countries like Liberia and Rwanda have gone through conflicts and turmoil that propelled the citizens to start thinking of voting for or supporting female leaders. Before Sirleaf came to power, Liberia went through a disastrous civil war (UN, n.d.). Rwanda went through a horrific genocide that gravely divided the people. Soon after the genocide ended, more support for women to become leaders was demanded. Rwanda now has 61.3% female representation in the parliament, the highest proportion in the world (IPU, 2021). Across the African continent, people "needed women to help them transition from socialism to democracy or from conflict to peace" (Mikell, 2009, p.17) because women are more effective leaders both before and during a crisis (Zenger and Folkman, 2020).

Male leaders who fail to improve the economy also begin to lose trust from their people, which results in stronger support for female leaders instead (Phillips, 2016). Taiwan, for instance, is a good example showing this trend. Because the former president Ma Ying-jeou failed to boost the economy, Taiwanese people began to favor Tsai instead. Analysts shared that "growing public dissatisfaction with the outgoing KMT president, Ma Ying-jeou, and an economy that weakened dramatically last year, helped propel Tsai to victory" (Phillips, 2016). This example shows that female leaders will get more support in countries where the economy is struggling.

Support and mentorship from other female role models are also a factor that helps women to become successful leaders. A study about Sirleaf's success showed that "support from older role models and political leaders" is one of the key factors that helped her become President (Mikell, 2009, p. 22). Furthermore, Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand also cites Prime Minister Helen Clark as her political hero and mentor who helped her to be successful today (Wallenfeldt, 2020).

Without the mentorship and support from other female role models, these women leaders would not have been as accomplished as they have.

Support for women leaders is on the rise, especially in Africa. Burundi had their first female Prime Minister, Sylvie Kinigi, in 1993, Rwanda also had their first female Prime Minister, Agathe Uwilingiyimana, in 1993; Ethiopia had their first female Chief Justice, Meaza Ashenafi, in 2018; and Tanzania has its first female President, Samia Suluhu Hassan, in 2021 (UN Women, 2021). African people begin to lose confidence and trust in male leaders who mostly have failed to lead their country. For instance, Liberian people attribute Sirleaf's victory "to the fact that she is not a man"; and the African people across the continent start to believe that "it takes a woman to do politics right (Mikell, 2009, p. 17). The right polity interventions will help propel this sentiment to spread faster to other parts of the world too.

Policy Recommendations

"Two for All" Policy

The "Two for All" policy will help to bring about gender equality in Cambodia. The policy requires every office, institute or entity to appoint two leaders – one male and one female as the heads. This will be practiced countrywide. Many people in Cambodia still doubt the capability of women leaders and most men are not willing to give up power to women (Dim, n.d., p. 223). If we continue to insist on building women leaders to replace men, the men will not be on board. However, if we propose that women only share 50% of their power, there is a higher chance that men will join this effort. It is a win-win situation for both genders. Additionally, the two leaders will have each other to consult and discuss major issues they would face. Two brains are better than one, especially when it comes to having to make important decisions. There will be more ideas produced when two people work together, and better judgments will take place. Therefore, the "Two for All" policy will bring about co-existence, peace, and sustainable development because when men and women work together, they produce complementary collaboration and a better balance in the workplace (Reilly, 2014). For this policy to work, we need qualified women who are able to competently perform their leadership roles and duties, and education/programs to reduce prejudice/stereotypes from the male counterpart.

To produce competent female leaders who will be successful in politics and leadership positions, the following policies are needed:

Higher Education

Higher education for women is key to building competent leaders. It will help build qualifications and skills for women for various government positions and ultimately, the position of Prime Minister. Higher education will "enable individuals to expand their knowledge and skills, express their thoughts clearly in speech and in writing, grasp abstract concepts and theories, and increase their understanding of the world and their community" (Allen, 2020). Because higher education

is crucial to producing leaders in the country, relevant Ministries have to come up with policies that ensure its benefits are maximized. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) should allocate a budget to improve the quality of the existing universities and build more universities in the provinces as well. Higher education for women should be state-funded. It should be free for all women so as to encourage the highest participation possible. The government can get the budget to fund this effort by increasing corporate taxes and cutting the budget for the military.

Women's Leadership Programs

Higher education can provide knowledge to students, but they will also need leadership skills that they will not necessarily learn in a school environment.

Leadership programs for women such as goal setting, public speaking, time management, job delegating, and emotional intelligence are crucial to help people become effective leaders (Courtney, 2015). The Cambodian government has two options to consider: 1) MoEYS can integrate these leadership skills at schools/universities by updating the current curriculum to incorporate as many leadership skills as possible; or 2) the government can work with NGOs/CSOs to implement and expand these leadership programs in different parts of the country at the local level. The government can support NGOs to apply for funding from international organizations such as the UN or the World Bank to fund these programs.

Mentorship Programs for Girls

As seen in the experience of the female leaders in Liberia and New Zealand, mentorship is pivotal for helping women become successful. Mentors help to “provide girls with the skills and knowledge they need to counter stereotypes and obstacles and achieve their goals” (Girls Inc., 2021). Mentorship helps girls “become confident, prepared, and assert themselves as active leaders” (Girls Inc., 2021). To build strong female leaders, this support system should be in place at a young age. Mentorship programs should be available for girls in high school or at an early stage in university. This will help them navigate the journey of completing their education as well as planning for their future career. Additionally, there should be a mentorship program for professionals as well. Women leaders need continual support and guidance as they take on leadership positions because the job can be challenging and complicated. Mentorship can help female leaders to feel supported and confident in taking on new challenges. The Cambodian government should support NGOs and CSOs to improve existing programs and expand them to girls and women countrywide.

Friendly political climate

To encourage qualified women to step into the political sphere, the political climate in the country needs to be welcoming and accommodating. To create that political climate, the National Assembly needs to pass a legislation that encourages and supports multiple parties for the election and encourages women to establish their own party and run for election. The

government should simplify the legal process of how to register a new party especially for the female-run parties and encourage each political party to run their campaigns freely in any form. Cambodian people should be made to feel comfortable to support the party of their choosing.

Funding from Grassroot Organizations

To run a successful campaign, a large budget is needed. Cambodia needs to start building its own national funding sources for female politicians. Grassroot organizations should come together to develop a funding package for rising female leaders. New political female leaders should be provided with a fair opportunity to apply for those funding so that they can fund their political campaigns. The application process should be simple and straightforward and it should prioritize women coming from a minority/disadvantaged background. With financial support in place, new competent female politicians will have a higher chance to successfully run the campaigns and win the election.

Conclusion

A female Prime Minister and the "Two for All " policy will make a big difference in Cambodia especially in terms of bringing about gender equality in the country. When gender equality is improved, men and women will have an equal chance to participate fully in social, cultural, economic, and political spheres. When people of both genders receive equal opportunities, there is a lower risk of conflicts and people are able to coexist more peacefully. Where there is no conflict and disruption, a country will be able to develop faster. For Cambodians specifically, gender equality will mean that domestic violence is reduced, gender norms and stereotypes lose their importance, women are valued and respected by men and are given the chance to achieve their full potential, and equitable development will show its face.

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