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Cambodian Center for Human Rights

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The Lives of Women in Politics in Cambodia

The Project to Promote Women's Political Representation in Cambodia



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Cambodian Center for Human Rights

The Cambodian Center for Human Rights (“CCHR”) is a non-aligned, independent, non-governmental organization (“NGO”) that works to promote and protect democracy and respect for human rights – primarily civil and political rights – throughout the Kingdom of Cambodia (“Cambodia”). CCHR’s vision is of a non-violent Cambodia in which people can enjoy their fundamental human rights, are empowered to participate in democracy, and share equally the benefits of Cambodia’s economic development. CCHR promotes the rule of law over impunity, strong institutions over strong men, and a pluralistic society in which variety is welcomed and celebrated rather than ignored and punished. CCHR’s logo – a dove flying in a circle of blue sky – represents the twin principles of peace and freedom.

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Introduction

This Booklet profiles six women politicians who have had experiences in different political positions including Her Excellency Ke Sovannaroth, elected Member of Parliament for Siem Reap; Her Excellency Chou Bun Eng, Secretary of State of the Ministry of Interior; Ms. Neang Sovanthana, a young female political activist; Her Excellency Mu Sohua, elected Member of Parliament for Battambang; Her Excellency Hou Samith, Secretary of State of the Ministry of Women's Affairs; Her Excellency Lork Kheng, Member of Parliament for Phnom Penh; and Ms. Em Phallamony, Deputy Provincial Governor of Siem Reap. The text has been adapted from CCHR's Human Rights Radio Program on "Lives of Female Politicians in Cambodia" broadcasted in November and December 2013 and from the Dialogue with Women in Leadership Roles, held on 8 February 2014 at Pannasastra University in Phnom Penh.

This Booklet has been produced by CCHR to promote and encourage public awareness of women's political representation in Cambodia.

H.E. Ke Sovannroth ¹

Cambodian National Rescue Party

("CNRP") Elected MP

In Siem Reap Province

Born 12 September 1962

Her Excellency Ke Sovannroth first began working as the owner of her own video cassette rental business. Today, she is a Member of Parliament ("MP") in Siem Reap province.

Sovannroth was the eighth child of nine in a poor family from Kampong Chhnang province. She lived in very poor conditions and faced many struggles when she was young. These experiences however, led Sovannroth to live a life of hope, inspiring her to strive for a better future. Even though Sovannroth's family was poor, she received support and motivation from her siblings to attend school and eventually in 1999 she graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Economics. She married in 1987 and has two sons. After her marriage, she continued to study, and made a living by any means possible. This included her video cassette rental business but also working for others.

From 1999 to the present day, Sovannroth has gained experience in a



number of positions within the government and political parties. After her graduation she worked as a probation official in the Department of Rubber Plantation at the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries ("MoAFF"). Later on, she moved to the Ministry of Economics and Finance. These work experiences along with her commitment to justice, ending discrimination, and empathy for the vulnerable led Sovannroth to join a political party. Her first involvement with political parties was as a founder of the Khmer Nationalist Party in 1995. Later, she joined the Sam Rainsy Party ("SRP") where she spent time in number of positions. These varied from the head of the national women's wing of the SRP in 2002, to a general secretary and member of the permanent committee from 2008 to 2013. Alongside these positions in the SRP, she stood as a candidate in Siem Reap for the National Assembly Elections in 2003, and was

¹ Source: the text has been taken from the Human Rights Radio Program on "Lives of Female Politicians in Cambodia" broadcasted in November and December 2013.



“If we want to be in politics, we need to be optimistic, patient and highly committed, and we need to learn that failures are experiences...”

elected as an MP. In the National Assembly Elections of 2013, she stood as a candidate for the CNRP, and once again was elected as an MP in Siem Reap province. Between 2012-2013 she was also a senator.

As a female politician, Sovannroth places value on effective time management skills and self-determination. As Sovannroth has experienced, women are responsible for a variety of tasks: from

domestic duties to running her own business and then later becoming involved in social affair and politics. Without this skill, such tasks would not be able to be performed successfully. Sovannroth has said that “we have to know how to use time managing times between personal work, household care, daily living, and social work.”

Additionally, Sovannroth believes that women should have dreams and ambition. These are essential traits if they are to be successful in work or political life.

H.E. Chou Bun Eng ²

Secretary of State, Ministry of Interior

Born 10 May 1956

Her Excellency Chou Bun Eng is a Secretary of State at the Ministry of Interior. She is the third out of eight children in her family. She entered in an arranged marriage in 1978 during the Pol Pot Regime, from which she has four children.

Before the Pol Pot regime, Bun Eng studied at Battambang High school where she graduated in 1974 with a diploma in Mathematics. After the Pol Pot regime, she continued her studies at Phnom Penh University (now the Royal University of Phnom Penh) in Mathematics. After she graduated in 1991 with a Bachelor's Degree, Bun Eng began her career as mathematics teacher at Sisovath High School. In 2010, she graduated with a Master's Degree in Political Science from Chamroeun University of Poly-Technique.

During two decades of work experience, Bun Eng has filled a number of positions in both government and civil society organizations. After working as a teacher from 1983, she began working at the Secretariat of State of Women's Affairs (now called the Ministry of



Women's Affairs ("MoWA") established in 1996) in 1994. At the Secretariat of State, she was an official in the Department of Information, where she was a writer from 1972 to 1974 and produced many pieces that were recognized by the National Radio and some film companies. After Bun Eng received additional media training, she became a spokeswoman for the department, and she produced a magazine entitled "Moving Forward" of which ten volumes were published. Bun Eng was then appointed Deputy Director of the Department of Information in 1995 and one year later she was promoted to the Director of the Department. In 1998, she was appointed as an Inspector General of the MoWA.

In 1999, Bun Eng was nominated and selected as Secretariat General and Executive Director of the Cambodian Women Association for Peace and Development and as such decided to suspend her work at the MoWA. In 2005

² Source: The text has been taken from the women talk entitled "Dialogue with Women in Leadership Role" on 8 February 2014 at University of Pannasastra, Phnom Penh.

she returned to the MoWA and was appointed as the Director General on Social Development, responsible for the Department of Women and Education, Department of Women and Health and Department of Women and Legal Protection. After the fourth mandate of the National Elections in 2008, she was appointed by the government to be a Secretary of State at the Ministry of Interior and has remained in this position until now. Besides this, Bun Eng has also been a part-time consultant to the Asian Development Bank focusing on HIV/AIDS programs.

Bun Eng has her own life principles. She adheres to making her best effort to overcome obstacles, prefers facing challenges and solving them and she accepts people's differences of opinion. Bun Eng often adapts herself to a situation instead of insisting on her own ideas. In this way, she has gained support from others. She mentioned that while moving from one position to another, and especially in her current position she has often faced obstacles and challenges. She has learned that it is important to be flexible, learn more, and try to overcome those challenges in order to achieve success. Bun Eng believes it was very difficult to earn recognition and honesty from people once she was in her appointed position. But she understood that it was important to gain their respect because;



“Good citizens, good society and a prosperous country”

otherwise we will face criticism and job loss. *“We must depend on ourselves to make people around us realize that we can do our duties in that position”.*

She believes that young people who are the next generation should develop themselves to be good citizens and become good leaders for the country. Even though Cambodia is a matriarchic society, it doesn't mean that women always have high position. However, whether leaders are male or female, the way they should lead should be like a 'mother.'

Ms. Neang Sovathana³

A Young Woman in Politics

Born in 1986

Ms. Neang Sovathana is a young woman in politics. Before she became publicly active in the political sphere, Sovathana had a lot of experience working for NGOs, beginning when she was only 14 years old. Today, she has a career as a freelancer, but she is also the Youth Secretary of the CNRP.

Sovathana is the eldest daughter of four siblings in a family from Kampong Cham province. Her father works for a human rights NGO and her mother runs her own small business. In order to continue her high school studies, Sovathana moved to live with her father who was working as a human rights defender in Kampong Cham town. Between the ages of 14 and 15, Sovathana assisted her father in administration tasks such as typing documents and organizing events like the International Human Right Day on 10 December. After she finished high school in 2004, Sovathana moved to Phnom Penh to continue her work and studies. During this time, she was actively involved in civil society organizations including the Khmer Youth Organization and a German political



foundation, the Friedric Naumann Foundation. She has recently graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in International Relations. Having worked with NGOs for 11 years, Sovathana decided in 2011 to change her career by setting herself up as a freelance interpreter, event organizer and freelance Master of Ceremony. Additionally, Sovathana opened her own small business.

There are many reasons that Sovathana wants to participate in politics and she is particularly motivated by a desire to be Prime Minister. Living with her human rights defender father, Sovathana was exposed to many of society's problems as a child. The cases submitted to her father's organization, which included issues of domestic violence, divorces, land grabbing and the loss of property, inspired Sovathana to participate in social work. Sovathana has spoken of her move to politics by comparing the work of CSO staff and politicians. She

³ Source: The text has been taken from the women talk entitled "Dialogue with Women in Leadership Role" on 8 February 2014 at University of Pannasastra, Phnom Penh.



***“Being a woman is not a burden
but a great opportunity”***

points to the fact that CSO staff can help only a small number of citizens, while the decisions made by a politician can affect 14 million people. Therefore, it is politicians, she believes, who have the power to change the direction of the country. Sovathana has also pointed out that the risk associated with being involved in politics is not enough to discourage her participation. She stated that for her, *“it’s not true that we are unable to join in politics due to the danger, it’s about our interests, knowledge and motivation.”* When she decided to stand as a political party candidate, Sovathana promoted herself by stating *“I can guarantee that I will not have money to pay for candidacy, but my ability, braveness and popularity will*

be attractive to political parties who will offer me candidacy.”

Sovathana has learned braveness from her family and it is this that gives her the strength to be involved in politics. When we see something as too big to accomplish, Sovathana has explained, it doesn’t mean that we cannot do it; we just need to be better prepared and organize protection in advance.

Sovathana has also discussed the lack of women in politics. She believes however, that women have a lot of opportunities, especially young women born in the present time and that being a woman or having a daughter should not be viewed as a burden. If women are nurtured and given the right support she believes they can become serious political contenders.

H.E. Mu Sochua ⁴

CNRP Elected MP

in Battambang Province

Born 15 June 1954

Her Excellency Mu Sochua first started working as a staff member for a civil society organization. Later, she became a prominent figure in Cambodian politics – as the former Minister of Women’s Affairs, and a Member of Parliament (“MP”) in Kampot province – and is one of the most active female politicians in Cambodia on using social media using Facebook⁵, Blog⁶ and Twitter. In the 5th National Assembly Elections held in 2013, she was elected as a CNRP MP for Battambang Province.

The daughter of a middle class family, Sochua finished her high school education in Cambodia and in 1972 continued her studies in France. In 1974, she moved to the United States of America. Unfortunately, in 1975, with the Pol Pot Regimes and subsequent civil war in Cambodia, Sochua lost contact with her parents and was cut off from any support from Cambodia. As a twenty-one year old immigrant living without parental or financial support,



Sochua faced many challenges. Despite these challenges, Sochua studied hard. Her hard work and perseverance paid off and she was awarded a scholarship that enabled her to earn both a Bachelors and Master’s degree in social work. In 1989 she returned to Cambodia and in 1991, she took a job as a social worker in a refugee camp on the Cambodian-Thai border.

In Cambodia, Sochua committed herself to rectifying injustices. She wanted to change society and take part in the country’s decision making process. Largely motivated by the issues she had seen when working for Civil Society Organizations, in 1995 Sochua joined a political party and became involved in Cambodian politics. Her other inspiration came from a message delivered by the former US First Lady (1993-2001), Hillary Clinton, in which she encouraged women to enter politics: *“If we want justice for the whole nation and family, we, women, should*

⁴ Source: the text has been taken from the Human Rights Radio Program on “Lives of Female Politicians in Cambodia” broadcasted in November and December 2013.

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/sochua>

⁶ <http://sochua.wordpress.com/>

participate in a political party and stand as representatives in the elections, therefore, we are able to conduct decision making for the nation..."

The motivation and understanding Sochua receives from her family is undoubtedly a huge factor in her political success. In 2008, while presenting on stage during the National Assembly Election campaign in Kampot, Sochua learnt that her daughter had been in a traffic accident and had been admitted to hospital. She left the campaign to be with her daughter who told her *"Mom! I was alright, I was still alive, BUT mom [you] had to take care of others' children."* This message was a huge inspiration for Sochua. Not only did it motivate her to continue her work in politics, it inspired her to do more work regarding education for the children of Cambodia. She hopes that other people's children will have the same opportunity to access education as hers.

Sochua believes that courage and learning from the challenges and obstacles they face are essential for female politicians. To her, challenges and obstacles are opportunities. After facing a lawsuit filed by Prime Minister Hun Sen for defamation, she affirmed that *"Obstacle is an opportunity to learn and seek for justice... Being a politician should not fear of facing with challenges, law... we have to be a strong*



"All Challenges are the opportunities to seek for justice... being a politician should not fear of facing challenges and laws... we have to be a strong persistence..."

persistence..." Moreover, she believes that courage does not come naturally. Thus, she believes it is essential for women, especially those who wish to become leaders and politicians, to dare to speak, to dare to challenge problems, seek and understand international news and to have a strong educational foundation.

It was noted that, from 2005 till present, Sochua has received 5 awards. In 2005, Sochua was one of 1,000 women nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for her work against sex trafficking of

women in Cambodia and Thailand, and in 2006 she was awarded an Honorary PhD in Law from the University of Guelph, Canada, and the most recent being is the People's Choice Human Rights Award in 2010.

H.E. Hou Samith⁷

Secretary of State, Ministry of

Women's Affairs

Born 1 January 1958

Her Excellency Hou Samith first started working as a volunteer at the Prek Phnouv commune health center, Ponhea Leu Kandal. Today, she is a Secretary of State at the Ministry of Women's Affairs ("MoWA") for the 5th mandate of the Royal Government of Cambodia starting in 2013.

Samith is the eldest daughter of eight children born to a middle class family living in Phnom Penh. Samith's father was an official at the Ministry of Post and Telecommunication while her mother was a housewife. Unfortunately, her father passed away during the Pol Pot regime. Prior to the regime, Samith had attained a high school education. However, afterwards, her family's living standard was so poor that they could not afford for her to continue schooling.

From 1981 to 2013, Samith gained experience in a number of positions at both the sub-national and national level. After the Pol Pot regime fell in 1979, Samith served as a volunteer for the Prek Phnouv commune health center. During her work she was recognized for



her hard work and persistence. In 1980, she was promoted to be a deputy chief of the center. In 1981 Samith was successfully elected as a member for the People's Revolution Committee of the Prek Phnouv commune, in charge of social affairs and culture. Later on, she was appointed as an official for the Central Women's Association Cambodia Revolution in 1984. In 1998, she was appointed as the General Director of the Department of Technical Affairs at the MoWA. From this role she was promoted to become the Secretary General of the Permanent General Secretariat of the Cambodian National Council for Women in 2001. More recently, in September 2013, she was appointed as the Secretary of State in the MoWA. Her commitment to her work and her high level of performance has seen Samith rise from the bottom of the political spectrum to the top.

⁷ Source: the text has been taken from the Human Rights Radio Program on "Lives of Female Politicians in Cambodia" broadcasted in November and December 2013.



“Whatever works we do, we are taught by those works. If we face difficulties while working, we need to question how can we solve it?”

Samith’s decision to become involved in politics and the commitment she has put into her work are motivated by two factors. The first was a message that came from a supervisor at district level who told her that *“No one is born with knowledge, but [they] need to learn and do at the same time.”* It was this message that encouraged her to overcome her fears and stand as a candidate in the election for the People’s Revolution Committee. The second factor was her father’s wish to see his daughter working in an office

equipped with technologies such as a telephone...etc. The words of her district level supervisor and the wishes of her late father motivated Samith to perform successfully in all her roles.

Samith believes that if women are to be leaders at any level then they should have appropriate education and skills. What is most important for women, particularly young women, is to seize all opportunities to learn. Samith recommends participating workshops, short or long trainings, and meetings claiming that these events provide new information, knowledge, and experiences are added resources for their responsible works. It is not necessary to only study abroad. She puts particular emphasis on the importance of women being brave and daring to express their opinions by showing their ability and capacity to work in their role.

H.E. Lork Kheng⁸

**Member of Parliament in Phnom Penh
Cambodian People's Party
Born 25 March 1955**

Her Excellency Lork Kheng began her career running her own business. Currently she is a Member of Parliament (“MP”) in Phnom Penh. She is the sixth among ten siblings in a rural family from Kampong Cham province. Kheng married during the Pol Pot regime and has three children. In 1975, she finished a one-year preparation course at the Faculty of Business.

After the Pol Pot regime, Kheng began her own business while her husband worked as a police officer. In 1997, she opened a financial foundation (with her own capital one hundred thousand US dollars) where she offered loans without interest to those from poor communities. In helping the poor, Kheng has gained popularity and political support. Between 1997 and 2008, Kheng was a Deputy Director of Cabinet for Samdech Chea Sim. During her time in this role, she completed a one year course on General Administration at the Royal Administration School. In 2008, she stood as a candidate for the National



Assembly Elections (the “NA Elections”) and she was then elected as an MP in Phnom Penh. In the 5th mandate NA Elections 2013, Her Excellency Lork Kheng was re-elected for the Phnom Penh constituency.

Alongside her role as an MP, Kheng has been a member of the Cambodian Red Cross’ Phnom Penh Branch since 2003. She was previously the Finance Director for the organization and is now the Deputy Director.

Originally, Kheng had no ambition to participate in politics thinking that she was unable to do so. Consequently, she rejected a proposal to stand as a candidate in the 2003 NA Elections. However, due to her willingness to help society, in 2008, she stood as a candidate in the NA Elections for the Cambodian People’s Party. She added that the opportunity to hold her current position was dependent on the party because the candidate must be

⁸ Source: The text has been taken from the women talk entitled “Dialogue with Women in Leadership Role” on 8 February 2014 at University of Pannasastra, Phnom Penh.



“For me, as a Cambodian woman in Cambodia, my success was due to the support from my husband and family.”

appointed through the party and not as an individual – the electoral system in Cambodia is a proportional system. After she was elected as an MP in 2008, she spent two years to learning about the NA’s work, social affairs and issues faced by the Cambodian people. She speaks of the support from her husband as one of the reasons of her success: *“the success of a husband is dependent on the support from his wife and for me – a Cambodian woman – I have support from my husband and family.”*

Kheng mentioned the need to engage women’s voices for the development of democracy. If there are women

participating in decision making at all levels, Cambodia will have greater gender and social equality, and democracy will be strengthened. She also said that women should build their capacity and participate in social work. Women should improve their knowledge if they want to find support from their husbands and family. Women especially young women should be self-confident and patient and should express their opinions outwardly.

Ms. Em Phallamony

Provincial Deputy Governor of

Siem Reap Province

Born in 1954

Em Phallamony is a Deputy Governor in Siem Reap province. She was born and still lives in Treang Village, Sangkat Sla kram, Siem Reap district, Siem Reap province. Recently, Phallamony graduated with a Master Degree in Public Administration. From 1980 to 1990, before she became a deputy governor, Phallamony worked in administration at the Women's Provincial Association. She then worked in the provincial Department of Women's Affairs from 1990 until 1998. Phallamony became a deputy in the women provincial department in 1998 and maintained this position until 2007. Since 2007, Phallamony has been one of the Siem Reap deputy governors.

A number of factors have contributed to Phallamony's success in politics: Phallamony is highly committed to the work she does and is determined to achieve her goals despite the obstacles she encounters. She has gained extensive experience through on the job training, including through cleaning, office guarding, assisting in the organization of events and participating in national events. Phallamony believes that her persistence and positive approach to both big and small tasks has helped her reach this position. Another



factor is her ability to communicate well with both her subordinates and supervisors within government institutions, as well as her good cooperation with both local and international non-governmental organizations. These are very important factors which contribute even more to her success. Moreover, she has learnt many lessons that apply to the work she undertakes; Phallamony believes that her positive attitude has also played a vital role to her political success, because it leads people around her to support and trust her. To maintain this trust, she behaves as a positive example, applying the ethic and values of her position in daily life. Her way to speak, walk, sit and sleep reflects the proper behavior of a leader, because the public is constantly aware of her performance. Phallamony also believes that her family's and her friends' continuous support and encouragement has contributed to her success today.



“Never saying no to small or big tasks helps her to succeed in politics”

In the future, if she remains healthy, she will continue to serve the government. She also wishes to operate her own business, while continuing to work with the government.