

Political Participation of Indigenous Women in Cambodia

Margherita A. Maffii, Sineath Hong

Summary

This article presents the findings of an action research project undertaken in Cambodia's northeastern provinces to highlight indigenous and Khmer women's experiences within the commune councils, and to identify the obstacles impeding their full political participation and their ability to transform political practice and style. The study found that the roles of female commune councillors are in many cases constrained to activities consistent with common gender stereotypes. At the same time, their status is challenged by a male-dominated social and political life. The study showed that women involved in local politics claimed to have a different style of governance. This leadership style can be regarded as an important path to achieving democratic participation, and is very relevant in order to respond to the problems currently encountered by indigenous people, including illegal land sales, land-grabbing, mining, deforestation, and pressure from agro-industrial companies.

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Introduction

Cambodia is a multi-ethnic society that includes, aside from the dominant Khmer ethnic group, Cham, Vietnamese, Chinese, Lao minorities, and indigenous groups. Indigenous ethnic groups are mostly concentrated in the northeastern provinces, in forest-covered areas upon which they rely for their subsistence. Even if numerically less relevant than those of other Southeast Asian countries, Cambodian indigenous people are characterized by a distinctive civilization, whose cultural traits, including languages, are still very much alive. For centuries the Cambodian indigenous groups, part of a larger indigenous cultural area extending beyond Cambodian borders, have been scarcely integrated into Khmer society, with which they do not share substantial cultural, religious, or socio-political traits.¹ The series of events that have affected Cambodia since the fall of Khmer kingdom—such as the rise of other regional powers, French colonization, the Vietnam War, the Cambodian civil

¹ Defined as proto-Indochinese, Cambodian indigenous peoples are Austro-Asiatic and Austronesian and speak languages of the Mon-Khmer family. They are considered representatives of the original inhabitants of Cambodia as they were there before the influence of Indian civilization (Bourdier 1995).