

Eye on Cambodia: Women



Location

Siem Bouk is a small village on the banks of the mighty Mekong River, about 2 hours boat journey from Strung Treng town.



Background Issues

Traditional roles in Cambodian society put women in charge of household management and family care, along with the income generating roles performed during the day alongside the men, whom enjoy a higher status across most of Cambodian society than women. More often than not the man of the household will set the family priorities and distribute funds as he sees fit.

Women make up the vast majority of the economically active population with 83% over 15 years old and 68% of the age range 15-19 working. They often end up in unwaged or low skilled family employment such as farming. The number of woman working on the land increased by almost 20% between 1998 and 2004.

Due to a largely patriarchic and hierarchical society, many women have been exploited at the hands of men, and have suffered domestic violence or have been victims of human trafficking since the early 1990s. Further, a culture of impunity tends to protect perpetrators rather than victims of violence and abuse.

In the political arena women are still underrepresented and tokenistic in terms of influencing and implementing state policy. 19% of the representatives in the national assembly and 15% in the senate are women. Female representation on the local level is slowly getting better: 15% of the commune councilors elected in 2007 were women. Compared to the last elections in 2002, the number of female local representatives has almost doubled.

Family History

The subject interviewed was **Mrs. Chi Sainla**. She is 55 years young and since her birth in Siem Bouk village has mothered "many children", in her own words, which have gone on to have families of their own. Her current family numbers just 3, her, her husband the commune chief and the youngest child.



As well as being the commune chief, her husband is also a farmer. She stays at home and sells groceries and what looks to be a fine line in Khmer music CDs, as well as farming herself. The youngest child is at school, grade 11, in Strung Treng town.

She was married in 1976 during the Khmer Rouge rule, during which she was moved to another area to work. But after the collapse of Pol Pot's regime she came back to live here in Siem Bouk village. "It was very hard, I was moved from my home to Siem Reap, we all worked very hard, and didn't eat enough, just like everyone else. Most people died of starvation".

What has CRDT done?

Mrs. Chi Sainla seemed very genuine and gentle, and touched my arm with a warm humor when I clumsily attempted to speak some Khmer: "Ot Pannyaha". She brushed my poor attempt to pronounce the language off with a nod to the good work CRDT has been doing in her village: "The living situation was not as good as things are now, there was no rainwater storage or toilets, no chickens, ducks or pigs to raise, we now have the vegetable gardens, the fish ponds..." She mentioned that once upon a time they grew the rice in the traditional manner, but since CRDT introduced the SRI method of increasing the yield of rice, they have seen an increase in production. "These are new things for the villagers" she says, speaking of SRI and the biodigesters. "CRDT can see that this is a remote area with less development and that these are the areas which the dolphins live".

When asking to take pictures, she seemed shy and reluctant... But this was because she wanted time to comb her hair with her hair grip first.

What has changed?

For Mrs. Chi Sainla being on a CBO council means having a voice in her community. "Although I am not supported by a salary in my CBO role, CRDT has a good project here to help development in the area. I have ability, and want to share it to help the other villagers. Being on a CBO council means I have a better living standard, and I get all the new livelihoods CRDT brings to the village". She goes on: "If there is problem, we call a meeting to raise and discuss ideas. Mostly my ideas are accepted and we are able to find a good solution for the problems". She was very clear in her message about discrimination; she said that there is no prejudice against good ideas, if the members of the council agree with her, men and women, the idea goes ahead. No gender discrimination in *their* CBO.



When being asked about how it felt to be in a position of authority above other men in the village Mrs. Chi Sainla would look vigilantly round at her husband, the commune chief, who was resting in the main room, and whisper her opinions... "I don't have any problems being in charge of the men, when CRDT give us livelihood activities that benefit the villagers they are quick to accept the ideas. I do not have any problems with the men opposing me. The men support my ideas and encourage me to work. There is no discouragement". Her answer left little room for doubt.

But what sort of work is expected of the women of Siem Bouk? And how does it differ from the work expected of men? "Both men and women can do most of the jobs around the village, we all

go to the rice paddy during rice production, and if our pigs or chickens need feeding after the farming is done for the day, either men or women will do this as well. The biggest different is the heavy work, like ploughing the fields, cutting the trees and bamboo down in the forest. These are jobs for the men. Women stay at home and make the food, look after the children and clean". After checking once again that her husband was still asleep, she was happy to talk about the opposing workloads of men and women. "The women work harder than the men. If I go to the rice paddy all day and the men to the forest, they can rest afterwards. But I have to do the washing, feed the animals, look after the children and cook the food. So the women work harder than the men". Mrs. Chi Sainla's words recall the phrase 'Housework is still work...'

In the future she wants her daughter to be well educated, and says: "If she is a housekeeper she will be a clever housekeeper, if she is a farmer she will be good farmer and know all the techniques".

After thanking her for her time and patience she said: "these are just my ideas, I don't know if my answers to these questions are any good". How very modest.