



GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN CAMBODIA: A REVIEW OF NATIONAL POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

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1 Introduction

Cambodia is a signatory of all fundamental international human rights treaties, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women. Based on these commitments, Cambodia has made significant progress in gender equality over the past 25 years (UN in Cambodia 2022). Cambodia actively adopted the Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) and the National Five Year Strategic Plan for Strengthening Gender Mainstreaming and Women’s empowerment called “Neary Ratanak” regularly. Based on a report by the World Economic Forum (WEF), gender gaps in Cambodia had been reduced with a new ranking of 89th in 2019 (out of 153 countries) compared to the previous ranking of 108th in 2014 (out of 142 countries) (MoWA 2020).

2 Policy and regulatory frameworks

2.1 Neary Ratanak V (2019-2023)

The Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MoWA), mandated with guiding/leading the promotion of gender equality and monitoring the implementation of gender mainstreaming and women’s empowerment, formulated and updated the Neary Rattanak Strategic Plan. It builds on the progress of Neary Rattanak IV (2014-2018). It is linked to the principles of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the rule of law, national policies, government reforms and sectoral frameworks, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to confirm that no one is left behind. Moreover, it responds to priority development issues and regional and global development trends. Neary Rattanak V (2019-2023) focuses on promoting gender mainstreaming in policies, strategic plans, and development programs across all sectors and at all levels, especially in critical strategic areas related to the economy, education, health, legal protection, governance and climate change. The five-year strategic plan for strengthening gender mainstreaming and women’s empowerment is supported by an institutional support strategy that concentrates on capacity development and efficiency programs, vital for achieving Neary Rattanak V’s approaches and targets. Capacity development and institutional development programs will need to respond to development trends and transformations, including the 4 Industrial Revolution and Digitalization, and new and changing contexts — globally, regionally, and nationally.

The vision of the Neary Ratanak V states that “All Cambodian citizen enjoys equal rights under the law, in particular women and girls, to have personal safety, fully participate in public life, work, be empowered and make decisions at all levels and in all fields equally with men and boys to ensure self-ownership and harmony in family, community and society” (MoWA 2020, 11).

Neary Rattanak V focuses on gender mainstreaming as the core and cross-cutting strategy with six sectoral strategies and is supported by the Institutional Support Strategy on Capacity Development Efficiency. Gender Mainstreaming Framework covers Legal and Policy Frameworks, National Programmes and Strategic Plans and Pubic Behavior Change. The Institutional Support Strategy (Capacity Development and Efficiency) consist of Implementing Public Administration Reform, Public Financial Management Reform, Deconcentration and Decentralization program, Upgrading the Institution, Human Resource Development, M&E System, Information Management and Cooperation (MoWA 2020).

2.1.1 Gender mainstreaming framework

The Royal Government of Cambodia encourages gender mainstreaming in the policies and plans in all areas, sectors and levels. The Gender Mainstreaming strategy is the core and cross-cutting strategy that emphasises mainstreaming gender-transformative approaches and gender inclusivity into formulating, implementing, and monitoring the implementation of legal and policy frameworks, strategic plans, programs, and sectors at all levels. It encourages changes in public behaviour and social attitudes toward gender equality and eradicates all forms of discrimination against women in the family, community and society. Gender mainstreaming addresses and responds within all the strategic areas of the NRV, including economy, education, health, legal protection, governance and climate change, as well as provides institutional support strategies on capacity development and efficiency of the MoWA in leading the coordination with relevant ministries, institutions and stakeholders.

In this context, Neary Rattanak V focuses on the following priorities:

1. Expanding research and assessment programs on gender and formulating and coordinating to implement the first National Policy on Gender Equality and sectoral programs.
2. Promoting and facilitating gender mainstreaming within the sectoral framework of strategic plans and national programs, including the Public Administration Reform (PAR) program, the Decentralisation and Deconcentration (D&D) program, and the Public Financial Management Reform Program (PFMRP).
3. Strengthen the capacity of gender mainstreaming mechanisms at all levels, including the Gender Mainstreaming Action Group (GMAG) in different sectors, the Technical Working Group on Gender (TWG-G), the Women and Children's Consultative Committees at the Capital, Provincial, Municipal, District and Khan (W CCC), the Women and Children Committee at Communes and Sangkats and relevant - stakeholders.
4. Strengthening systems and mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment in the different sectors.
5. Promoting public awareness and support for promoting gender equality, including implementing programs on public behaviour change and overcoming negative gender stereotypes in society that discriminate against women and girls in all forms.
6. Promoting new initiatives, lessons learned, and best practices on implementing gender mainstreaming in policies, programs, and sectors and strengthening the knowledge of management and sharing.

2.1.2 Selected sectoral strategies

The Six sectoral strategies include : (1) Women's Economic Empowerment; (2) Education of Women and Girls; (3) Health of Women and Girls; (4) Legal Protection for Women and Girls; (5) Women Public Leadership and Politics; (6) Gender and Climate Change (MoWA 2020).

Strategy 1: Women's Economic Empowerment focuses on the following six priorities:

1. Strengthen and expand policy frameworks and investment in women's economic empowerment.
2. Expand opportunities and an empowering environment to develop innovative entrepreneurship and women-led businesses with inclusiveness.

3. Expand the environment and the support for women to acquire professional skills, especially in line with the needs of the digital economy and inclusivity.
4. Promote the attention and support of women's activities in the informal economy,
5. Promote work-life balance programs and friendly and safe environments for women in economic activity.
6. Expand economic opportunities in the community, including access to affordable financial services for women, impoverished women, women with disabilities, ethnic minority women, indigenous women, and women who are heads of households (MoWA 2020).

Strategy 3: Health of Women and Girls focuses on the following six priorities

1. Strengthening and expanding gender mainstreaming into policies, strategic plans, health action plans, and os programs, including reproductive health, maternal and child health, sexual health, mental health, eye health, nutrition, food security, and communicable and non-communicable diseases.
2. Empowering women and girls to access quality, safe and effective health services in public health facilities.
3. Continuing to develop the capacity of officials and stakeholders at the national and sub-national levels in terms of gender analysis in health, nutrition and food security.
4. Promoting gender equality and empowering women through the process of implementing a social protection framework.
5. Monitor and evaluate the implementation of the strategic plan for the health of women and girls of NRV and prepare a system of work to collect new data on gender and health (reproductive health, sexual health, communicable and non-communicable diseases, nutrition and food security).

Strategy 5: Women Public Leadership and Politics the following priorities:

1. Expanding the policy that provides an enabling and friendly working environment and support from the stakeholders for women's public leadership and politics at all levels.
2. Strengthening the network and development of women's public leadership and politics at the national and sub-national levels.
3. Promoting public awareness and behaviour change, with both men and women as leaders, and including young people and stakeholders to support gender equality and equity to encourage women's participation in leadership development, governance, and community development.
4. Promoting the participation of young people in gender-responsive leadership and governance.

Unfortunately NGO-CEDAW reported that the Effective M&E for policies by ministry for gender activities was absent and had limited plans. The status of this was little/no progress (Table 1) (NGO-CEDAW 2020).

2.2 The Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5)

The Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) intend to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls". The global SDG 5 comprise nine targets (three targets as means of implementation) and 14 indicators. (UN n.d.) The nine targets are listed below:

- Target 5.1: End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere,

- Target 5.2: Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation,
- Target 5.3: Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation,
- Target 5.4: Recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate,
- Target 5.5: Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life,
- Target 5.6: Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed under the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences,
- Target 5. a: Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, under national laws,
- Target 5. b: Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women,
- Target 5. c: Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation to promote gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.

2.3 CEDAW monitoring report

2020 brought Cambodia many challenges in the field of women’s rights and several opportunities to engage in dialogue with government and community representatives in seeking solutions to those challenges. Most prominent were health, education, and economic difficulties brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic that women and LGBTIQ faced at disproportionate rates. Additionally, the Royal Government of Cambodia drafted and enacted numerous new policies related to gender, to which CSOs (including NGO-CEDAW and its network) contributed inputs. Yet, there were innumerable instances where freedom of sexual expression and freedom of speech were restricted (NGO-CEDAW 2020).

NGO-CEDAW reported that the Effective M&E for policies by ministry gender activities was None for ministries and had limited plans. The status of this was little/no progress. Table 1 shows the progress of implementation of 2019 and CEDAW concluding observations for some selected gender themes (NGO-CEDAW 2020).

Table 1 Progress of Implementation of 2019 and CEDAW Concluding Observations

<i>THEME</i>	<i>SUMMARY</i>	<i>PROGRESS MADE SINCE 2019</i>	<i>STATUS</i>
SDGS	Recognise women as the driving force of the sustainable development	Women identified as the “backbone” of economy	significant progress
NATIONAL MACHINERY	Autonomy for CNCW	No financial or political autonomy	little/no progress
NATIONAL MACHINERY	National budget for full gender policy implementation	Limited funding	little/no progress

NATIONAL MACHINERY	CSO participation in NPGE	Extension of time for CSO participation and revision of the draft	some progress
NATIONAL MACHINERY	Effective M&E for policies, ministry gender activities	None for ministries; limited for plans	little/no progress
CIVIL SOCIETY	Guarantee freedom of expression, assembly and association	Guarantee freedom of expression, assembly and association	little/no progress
TEMPORARY SPECIAL MEASURES	Land reallocation for equal women's ownership	None	little/no progress
TEMPORARY SPECIAL MEASURES	Housing security for women	None	little/no progress
TEMPORARY SPECIAL MEASURES	Improved economic opportunities with quotas	Limited loans, vocational training	little/no progress
STEREOTYPES	Comprehensive strategy to eliminate patriarchal attitudes	Government still promotes stereotypes as Khmer culture	little/no progress
STEREOTYPES	Alternate ways to teach gender without Chbab Srey	No real change	little/no progress
STEREOTYPES	Promote positive attitudes toward gender equality in youth	No real change; over-reliance on CSOs to do work	some progress
PUBLIC LIFE	Adopt temporary special measures, such as quotas	No official measures	little/no progress
PUBLIC LIFE	Create an enabling environment for women	No significant effort	little/no progress
EDUCATION	Increase secondary school access; eliminate barriers to girls	Some effort. In K.Thom, girls are still only 35% of secondary students.	some progress
EDUCATION	Encourage girls in STEAM	Some effort	some progress
EDUCATION	Comprehensive gender training for teachers	No significant effort	little/no progress
EMPLOYMENT	Workers on FDC enjoy the freedom to unionise and maternity benefits; restore AC 2-year cap on FDCs	No significant effort	little/no progress
EMPLOYMENT	Protecting the informal sector, including domestic workers, in Labor Law	No significant effort	little/no progress
EMPLOYMENT	Promote sharing of parental duties, paternity leave	No effort	little/no progress
EMPLOYMENT	Comprehensive legislation on sexual harassment with remedies	NAPVAW ₃ includes a plan to spend more than five years developing guidelines on preventing sexual harassment	little/no progress
EMPLOYMENT	Ensure equal pay for work of equal value per ILO C100	No effort	little/no progress
EMPLOYMENT	Protect migrant workers abroad	Some effort	some progress

EMPLOYMENT	Ratify ILO Conventions 183, 189, 190	No effort	little/no progress
RURAL WOMEN	Regulate microfinancing institutions and improve access to low-interest loans, support large women-owned businesses	Limited effort	little/no progress

Source: NGO-CEDAW (2020, 12–18)

3 Status of gender equality and women’s empowerment in Cambodia

3.1 Norms and belief

In Cambodia, social norms and beliefs still constrain what women can do and be and provide higher value and power to men. Social expectancies of women and men are apparent in daily relations in workplaces and communities and are often quoted as obstructions to women taking leadership.

Many of the norms that still shape the lives of Cambodians today are codified in the Chbab Srey and Proh codes of conduct for women and men that were developed over several centuries. These codes identify women as ‘head of the household’ and advise them “to maintain peace within the home, walk and talk softly, and obey and respect her husband” (Anderson and Grace 2018, 16). In contrast, men are identified as heads of the family, breadwinners, and responsible for protecting women and making decisions. It creates a hierarchical relationship with men positioned above women (Lamb et al. 2017).

Expectations of the ideal Khmer woman are also reinforced and negotiated in day-to-day interactions in households, communities and workplaces. Women entrepreneurs face negative judgements by their families (54%) and community (71%) when starting their businesses (UNIDO and UN Women 2020). And others report limiting their sales because they cannot travel far from home due to reputational and safety concerns (Soeters et al. 2020).

Men tend to be seen as more strategic and suitable for leadership roles. This gendered view affects women across sectors. Women managers in the health system, for instance, report that their voices are less respected, and they have to work extra hard and achieve a higher standard than men to gain the trust they need to do their job (Vong et al. 2019).

Gender norms are also implanted in government policies, such as the National Childcare Policy, which supports the idea that women are liable for children and household care instead of redistributing care labour and costs from the family to the public sphere or between genders in the family (My 2021). Another example of a policy that explicitly contributes to norms of women as subordinate to men is the Civil Code Article 950, which prevents women (but not men) from marrying for 120 days after divorce (UN in Cambodia 2022).

3.2 Education and school curriculum

Despite good progress in primary and secondary level enrollment, gender disparity still exists in Cambodia by geographical areas, adult literacy, higher education and TVET. Compared to other ASEAN

countries, women's involvement in education in Cambodia still lagged behind other countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, including the students' capacity in science and mathematics (Khoun 2019). Factors impeding gender equality in education in Cambodia are:

- Social and gender norms: Cambodian women are still restricted from pursuing their studies at a higher level by social and gender norms. It also partly stems from illiteracy and low level of parents' education, and their limited awareness of the long-term benefits of education for girls, especially in ethnic minority families (MoWA 2014b),
- Poverty (MoWA 2014b),
- Lack of parent and community engagement in children's education (Eng, Szmodis, and Mulsow 2014),
- Limited child protection at school and safety for girls (ICRW 2014),
- Poor perception of TVET and the perception that TVET is inappropriate for women (MLVT 2016);
- Women lack information, resources and educational background regarding the benefits of TVET. Women are not fully aware of job and business opportunities provided by TVET programs. They also lack supporting resources such as safe accommodation and living costs to stay and study at TVET institutions. Some do not receive enough encouragement to work in technical fields in the industry and business sectors. It is partly because women and their families did not receive enough education to allow them to think about seeking jobs or undertaking businesses in non-traditional fields (MLVT 2016), and
- Policy implementation and institutional capacity for gender mainstreaming remain weak (see above). Several policies and plans are being established to support girls going to school, but there remain gaps in the implementation. While primary education is free of charge, there remain issues related to informal costs of children's education. The institutional and human capacity to support and mainstream gender in the education sector is limited at the sub-national level (MoWA 2014b).

The approved school curriculum was reformed to improve more equal gender customs. The Chbab Srei and Chbab Proh, ancient texts that prescribe the expectancy of women and men, are not taught anymore. In addition, lessons on gender and women's rights were added. Nevertheless, other school materials and teaching methods remain to encourage the 'virtuous Khmer woman' ideals (UN in Cambodia 2022).

3.3 Economic opportunities and economic empowerment for women

Women play a significant role in Cambodia's economy as owners of 62% of micro- and 26% of small- and medium enterprises. Nonetheless, they continue to face obstructions to funding and registration. The barriers to funding are the lack of collateral and formal registration. The obstacle to formal registration is that the registration procedure is too complicated and demanding for micro and small entrepreneurs. After registration, the entrepreneur must comply with various regulations, requiring complex administrative tasks. Unregistered businesses (informal economy) could not access assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overviews of the labour market display structural disparities, with women over-represented in lower paid, less valued jobs and under-represented in more senior and higher-paying occupations. This trend is worst in male-dominated sectors, such as construction and agriculture, in which women comprise more than 40% of waged workforces but are almost absent from managerial or professional positions (UN in Cambodia 2022).

The skill and capacity of women's participation in economic activities remain limited. The opportunities and resource management open to women remain lower than men, with barriers to access including time availability and access to information, production resources, finances and technology (MoWA 2020).

Due to women's responsibility for the child and household care, they have little time left to expand their business or take a leadership role. Although women-owned businesses are less likely to be registered, are under-served by banks, and lack collateral and gender stereotypes lead to barriers to financing (International Finance Corporation 2019). However, the barrier to loans may not be an issue anymore. Women borrowers reached nearly 1,006,700, or 80% of the total clients of 37 microfinance institutions and five organisations in 2013, according to the Network Information Exchange, which collects data from those microfinance institutions and organisations (ADB 2015).

Women's lack of access to production resources and technology is evident in the agricultural sector. ADB (2015) pointed out women's lower access to land, extension services, financial services, markets, and technology. Households headed by women comprised 20% of agricultural households in 2008, and compared with households headed by men, they had smaller amounts of land: 1.1 hectares compared with 1.5 hectares.

The FAO asserted that women obtain only 10% of extension services. Both households headed by men and women suffer from substantial postharvest losses and need a gender-neutral extension (FAO and NIS, MOP 2010).

Households headed by women have less access to farm equipment, tools, and communication devices. For example, 31% of households headed by women had access to ploughs compared with 48% of households headed by men, and the gender gap was over 23 percentage points in the plateau and mountain areas of the northeast. Only 15% of households headed by women, compared with 27% of households headed by men, had access to a telephone (FAO and NIS, MOP 2010). Women also have less access to technology, and activities in which women could utilise increased technology, such as fish storage and processing, remain underexamined (ADB 2015).

3.3.1 Unpaid work

Gender norms are echoed in the unequal division of unpaid domestic and care responsibilities, with women doing 90% of that work on average. Without other supports [such as men], unpaid work may be shifted to older women in the family or girls, often with an undesirable effect on their education. They can not go to schools or TVET because they have to do domestic care.

Balancing livelihoods with unpaid errands leads many women to have vulnerable work. It is an obstacle to women growing businesses, forward-moving in their careers, or taking leadership positions.

Public policies or development efforts rarely address the pressure of unpaid care and domestic errands, even though it is one of Cambodia's biggest hindrances to gender equality. (UN in Cambodia 2022).

3.3.2 Gender wage gap

The gender wage gap is also the biggest in male-dominated industries; in some sectors, the gap is small at the lowest paid levels, nevertheless tends to increase at higher salary levels. Differences in education

and experience account for a minimal gender wage gap, with discrimination as the main factor (UN in Cambodia 2022).

In 2016, women and men earned almost the same in the lowest-paid positions, but the adjusted wage gap increased at higher salaries. Women are being paid less than men with similar demographic profiles, equal qualifications and occupations in the same sector. In the upper quintile of wages, women earned 12 percent less than similarly qualified men. In 2016, the unadjusted hourly gender wage gap was the highest in men-dominated industries. Men were paid 29% more than women in construction and 25% more in trade. The hourly earnings gap was 18% in agriculture, where women have a higher share of employment (Gavaluyugova and Cunningham 2020).

3.3.3 Gender and the COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, men and women spent increased time on domestic and care work. However, almost 30% of employed women reported that their partners did not provide additional assistance (UN Women 2020). The stress from the COVID-19 pandemic and the isolation formed through public health actions lead to rising intimate companion violence, increased violence against women with disabilities from family members, and increased vulnerability to violence for women migrant workers (UN in Cambodia 2022).

3.4 Gender-based violence and sexual harassment

Destructive gender norms lead to gender-based violence (GBV) and human rights violations. The percentage of families experiencing domestic violence (DV) has fallen from year to year by almost half, from 1 percent in 2010 to 0.5 percent in 2017 (Khoun 2019). Around half of the women said that a husband's violence against his wife may be justified if his wife was argumentative, rude, or disobedient. (MoWA 2014a).

3.5 Under-representation of women in decision-making

The under-representation of women in decision-making is one more product of fundamental gender inequalities. Improving women's impact on the decisions that affect their lives and communities is also a means for women's interests to be reflected in development outcomes. Women remain underrepresented in management positions across sectors, trade unions, political parties, and government levels (UN in Cambodia 2022). For example, women head only 21.5% of all households in 2019/20. Women's labour force participation rate was only 84.1 percent, while that of men was 91.0 percent in 2019/20, although women's participation rate had been steadily increasing (NIS, MOP 2020).

On national averages in Cambodia, women have a moderate say over their earnings and participate in most household decisions. However, Women have the least control over visiting their family, with less than one-quarter able to decide independently. Women with disabilities tended to be controlled by partners and other family members (UN in Cambodia 2022).

3.5.1 Political representation and participation

Although Mith et al. (2020) note that there has been some improvement in women's representation at different levels of governance, much more is needed. Women's representation in the National Assembly increased to 21 percent, while female senators remained stagnant at 16 percent.

Women's share of senior positions in the government is still tiny. Women accounted for only 10 percent of all the deputy prime ministers, 0 percent of senior ministers, 10.3 percent of secretaries of state, and 17.2 percent of undersecretaries of state, according to the Royal Decree in 2019. Women's share of civil servants is growing, but more than 50 percent of civil servants are men. The percentage of women of the number of civil servants was 32.4 in 2017, 40.5 percent in 2017, and 41.0 percent in 2020. Women's share of managerial positions as civil servants at the national level is still small. Women made up only 10 percent of general directors, 14.0 percent of deputy general directors, 13.0 of directors of departments, 21 percent of deputy directors of department, 24 percent of the chief bureau or equivalent position, 32 percent in vice chief of bureau or equivalent position (MoWA 2022).

Women's leadership in land conflicts and forced displacement was high profile and frequently held up as an example of women deviating from traditional gender norms. (Hennings 2019, 5). Women's leadership during land struggles were not interpreted as better access to decision-making power when the conflict was solved (Hennings 2019; Lamb et al. 2017).

Women tended to be more prominent than men as partakers managing local resources, such as fisheries or forests. Still, few of them had paid roles (e.g. 42 out of 1200 park rangers³¹), and their representation in decision-making was still weak (Schröder and Young 2019).

In Cambodia's proportional representation system, political parties were gatekeepers to chosen offices. Women's representation would enhance when more women were assigned to higher roles on the party lists. There was no quota requiring parties to include a minimum of women's representation. While political parties have internal rules, 'equality' appears to be interpreted as 25 or 30% representation, and those targets are seldom met. The most common reasons were that there were no 'capable' women who were adequately dedicated and without household responsibility. (Sedara et al. 2014)

3.6 The role of women's organisations

The mission of Neary Ratanak V states that The Ministry of Women's Affairs' mission is to lead, partner, cooperate with line ministries and partners to lead the way for gender equality and eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and girls in society through:

- Mainstreaming gender through the process of formulating and implementing laws, policies, royal
- government reform programs, national strategic plans and sectoral policies.
- Leading cooperation and partnerships with line ministries and partners, including civil society, development partners, the private sector and sub-national administrations in designing, implementing and monitoring the implementation of national programs, action plans and policies to promote gender equality and women's empowerment.
- Strengthening the capacity and effectiveness in performing the functions of the mechanism at national and sub-national levels to promote gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment.
- Promoting and encouraging the implementation of specific measures and initiatives to promote gender equity, women's empowerment and inclusion via economic growth, social protection and good governance.

- Expanding the research programs on gender impact by sectors and target groups to promote inclusivity development and the new social contexts, and to explore responsive measures (MoWA 2020).

Besides the governmental organisations, international and local non-governmental organisations also play essential roles in promoting gender equality and women empowerment, such as UN Women, NGO-CEDAW and many other NGOs.

UN Women’s effort is driven by an emphasis on increasing women’s participation—in politics, decision-making processes, and economic and livelihood opportunities—and empowering them to recognise and claim their rights. Efforts have included:

- Strengthening the economic empowerment of marginalised rural women through the Fund for Gender Equality (FGE) Programme
- Expanding democratic governance via increased participation of women in both formal and informal decision-making processes
- Engendering national planning and policy-making
- Promoting the economic empowerment of the most left out women who are ethnic minority women, HIV-positive women, and women with disabilities
- Promoting the leadership and involvement of HIV-positive women’s organisations and women affected by HIV/AIDS
- Mapping the status quo of women with disabilities in Cambodia using the framework of CEDAW
- Addressing violence against women (UN Women in Cambodia 2022)

NGO-CEDAW is Cambodia’s leading coalition dedicated to monitoring and promoting the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). It was founded in 1995 by Cambodian women activists energised by their participation in the Beijing World Conference on Women. NGO-CEDAW has grown from 9 founding organisational members to a coalition of 35 local CSOs. Working with a broader network of 30 other organisations, NGO-CEDAW gives voice to otherwise underrepresented groups of women and LGBTIQ. The work of NGO-CEDAW includes research, advocacy and lobbying, awareness-raising and capacity-building, and information exchange among its members. Specific activities include an annual university debate, original art exhibitions, in-person advocacy at the UN, and workshops for local officials and community groups (NGO-CEDAW 2020).

4 Gender equality and women’s empowerment in Cambodia’s WASH sector

Women are involved in many economic opportunities in rural WASH enterprises in Cambodia, including WASH product retailers, Sanitation Marketing (SanMark) sales agents, masons, latrine business owners, and piped water entrepreneurs. Based on recent studies, many factors hinder gender equality and women’s empowerment in Cambodia’s WASH sector, including the double burden of work, limited mobility and its impact, financial obstacles, the pressure between perceived capabilities and gendered capabilities, and regulatory obstructions, and limited social and professional networks. On the other hand, the factors enabling gender equality and women’s empowerment in Cambodia’s WASH sector

include family support, training and networking, involving male family members, and Capital investment (Soeters et al. 2020).

4.1 Hindering factors

The “double burden” of household and care errands with income-generating activities restricted women’s capability to manage their WASH business or achieve compulsory sales outcomes, mainly because of time limitations (Grant et al. 2018; WaterSHED 2020).

Female entrepreneurs and sales agents experience challenges concerning their ability to travel safely and confidently. Recent studies by Grant et al. (2018) and WaterSHED (2020) reported that women could not travel far from home because of safety and reputation concerns and limited access to sanitation facilities. Regarding this, studies found that the home-based nature of some WASH income-generating activities, such as managing the accounts of a piped water scheme (Grant et al. 2018), matched women well.

Financial obstacles limited female businesspersons’ ability to manage their businesses. Limited access to low-interest loans/finance and customers not paying on time were concerns experienced by women in the studies by Grant et al. (2018) and WaterSHED (2020). They resulted in negative impacts on their businesses and reduced economic empowerment.

WASH business women reported having the same perceived capabilities as men and being able to “do any job men can do”, yet, social gender norms and prejudgments promoting men as more mobile and stronger were also expressed (WaterSHED 2019; Grant et al. 2018). Due to gender norms, women were less likely to travel alone for work away from home due to worries about damaging their reputation, lack of access to sanitation facilities and fear of physical and sexual violence. One of the female entrepreneurs interviewed by Grant et al. (2018) stated that men work faster, and it is easier for them to go out and work at night, for example, if pipes leak.

Moreover, ISF-UTS conducted a literature review on barriers and opportunities for entrepreneurship in Cambodia, Indonesia, and Lao PDR. It found eight key barriers to entrepreneurship across the three-country contexts: Regulatory barriers, Corruption, Education and training barriers, Limited access to business, development services, Religion, Networks and networking. The regulatory barriers refer to the ease of doing business and understanding the requirements for establishing a business. Limited access to finance includes the following facts: women’s reduced access to finance due to the need to have documented credit histories – which men tend to have more than women – and bias against women from financial institutions. Limited access to business development services is that vocational training often reflects traditional gender norms, and membership fees can be prohibitive for some women, especially those in rural areas. Cultural values are related to the traditional code of women in Cambodia (Chbab Srey), limiting women’s educational and economic independence. Networks and networking cover some forms of networking that support business development and are less accessible to women because these networks are male-orientated and because travel may be involved. Lack of education and training refers to the lower levels of education and literacy that can impact the success of entrepreneurs, and women’s domestic responsibilities can prevent them from participating in training that can help develop successful businesses. Informal fees/taxes are related to businesswomen reporting paying considerable amounts in informal taxes and fees to government inspectors (Grant et al. 2018).

4.2 Enabling factors

Help for women with household responsibilities and consent with/support for their income-generating activity was essential in retaining income-generating activities in WASH (WaterSHED 2019; iDE 2019). Grant et al.(2018) found that women articulated the importance of family support in women's decision and ability to found and manage a piped water scheme. Family support can be in the form of the family members agreeing with the women's ideas and helping with setting up and managing their water supply schemes (Grant et al. 2018).

Training and networking opportunities for female entrepreneurs increased female businesspersons' decision-making capacity, sense of community and self-confidence through the best practice, ideas, and information sharing (iDE 2019; Grant et al. 2018; WaterSHED 2020). For example, to facilitate market mechanisms and build local capacity, WaterSHED has focused on building capacity for local small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that make and sell latrines, training independent sales agents in rural communities to stimulate demand, and engaging local government to ensure the market remains sustainable after their exit. Women in Grant et al. (2018)'s study need technical training and smoother facilitation of the processing of licences and required documentation for entrepreneurs. These women also request finance and business management skills training (including billing advice).

It was beneficial for CSOs, associations, and governments to include men (mainly husbands) and family members in promoting and socialising women's participation in WASH enterprises. It would minimise criticism and permit women to continue in their positions as they want (WaterSHED 2019; iDE 2019; Grant et al. 2018). WaterSHED (2020) reported that female sales agents in the Hands-Off program often brought male counterparts or family members to other villages to sell latrines.

iDE (2014) did not identify the same restrictions to mobility as the Grant et al. (2018) and WaterSHED (2020) studies. They found that the female sales agents, primarily young university students, could travel to remote villages and even stay overnight to achieve higher sales outcomes.

Grant et al. (2018) study found that women sought training as a critical need, while the WaterSHED (2019) study revealed that family support was of much greater importance in enabling WASH income-generating activity (as did Grant et al. (2018) study). Both studies emphasised the necessity to contextualise women's perceived and actual demand for technical training within the country and market context. And Grant et al. (2018) suggested further research be carried out to ascertain precisely what training was needed by piped water entrepreneurs.

Other enabling factors were witnessing other women prosper in managing a water supply scheme and capital investments such as a loan from the bank, micro-credit institutions, family or private savings (Soeters et al. 2020)

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