

The Progress of Cambodian Millennium Development Goals

The civil population of the Kingdom of Cambodia has undergone tremendous and intense trials and tribulations throughout its existence but especially within its contemporary history, and not only for the women but for all of humanity. Having endured nearly three decades of civil war, the Kingdom of Cambodia strives to take care of its citizens and to improve their conditions of life with the assistance and support of the United Nations. The United Nations Development Program for the Kingdom of Cambodia spells out the government's mission in straight-forward and simple terms although it has been proven to be a difficult task to make advancements in, let alone accomplish: "...to build a Cambodian society that is socially cohesive, educationally advanced, culturally vibrant and free from hunger, inequality, exclusion and vulnerability." In order to achieve these goals, the Kingdom of Cambodia has accepted and incorporated the Millennium Development Goals that were stated within the Millennium Declaration of 2000 into its legislation. To overcome and reverse the immense amount of residual pain (physical and psychological wounds), poverty, and mass disruption of general human ethics that the Kingdom of Cambodia has experienced in recent years is no simple feat. Yet with the inclusion of the Millennium Development Goals and a keen awareness to societal disturbances, the future could be a bright one for this specific South East Asian population.

To discuss the Kingdom of Cambodia's current position, one must first understand the gruesome path this country has had to walk and, ultimately, survive from. Although there is a

long history of foreign domination and civil unrest, for the direct purpose of this essay its content will only analyze the last fifty years. The Khmer Rouge is a radical communist group that originated with the foundation of the Communist Party of Cambodia and its establishment of Pol Pot as the general secretary in the year, 1963. At this time, the Vietnam War was in full swing and it was inevitable that Cambodia could not remain neutral because of the extreme pressures it received from both sides of the conflict simply due to its proximity to the action. With the encouragement and weaponry aid it received from the North Vietnamese, the Khmer Rouge began its civil war with the government. However, the United States became interested and imposed a coup to oust the Cambodian king, Sihanouk, to replace him with the pro-American, Lon Nol. This resulted in an alliance with Sihanouk, a royalist, and the Khmer Rouge, a militant communist group, which worked together in a stubborn fight for power that would last for decades and be based around guerilla tactics that took place predominately within the jungles and the countryside.

Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge regime ruled Cambodia for three years, eight months, and twenty days yet resulted in the deaths of nearly two million Cambodians: 750,000 people from the brutal practices of the civil war, one million from genocide, and over three million people were forced to become refugees. (The numbers and statistics provided for the total of deaths caused by the Khmer Rouge regime are controversial due to the lack of a reliable and accurate record-keeping system. External investigations that have provided information and numbers for the total amount of deaths range anywhere from one million to three million people.) Pol Pot's authoritarian vision included the disbanding of cities to force the Cambodian people into agricultural work, the abolishment of currency to rekindle a traditional bartering system, and an

overall destruction and, therefore, lack of recognition of educational and societal status. The Khmer Rouge systematically executed the social elites, the educated population (engineers, teachers, doctors, etc.), and all others who did not seem to be supportive of Pol Pot's new order. Those people who did not face out-right execution were sent to agricultural communes where the conditions were so poor that hundreds of thousands more people died from famine and diseases such as malaria and dysentery. The Khmer Rouge regime was quite effective in their goal to sever the Cambodian people from the things they traditionally valued: family, faith, and food. In early 1979, the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia after receiving aggressive provocation from the Khmer Rouge at their borders and toppled the Pol Pot government which forced them to once again retreat to the jungles. Yet with the Western world's deep-seated fear of Communism and with the Vietnamese establishing a communist government in Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge (officially known as "the Party of Democratic Kampuchea") and their coalition with the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC) and the Khmer People's National Liberation Front began to receive funding and support from the Western world. In 1989, the Vietnamese withdrew themselves from Cambodia which left the country's government vulnerable, exposed, and up for the taking. In 1990, the United Nations stepped in to help resolve tensions and introduce a peace plan that was agreed upon by both the Phnom Penh government and the tripartite resistance coalition. Also, it created the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) which would "supervise" the country's government for two years in hopes of promoting democracy. The UNTAC proved to be a failure and did not help produce any significant changes to the Cambodian political system's chronic instability. The Khmer Rouge continued to demonstrate their influence on the civil population

via their guerilla warfare tactics, and it was not until the death of Pol Pot in 1998, which followed the gradual disembodiment of prominent sections of the Khmer Rouge regime, were the Cambodian people finally freed from Pol Pot's "reign of terror".

At the end of the twentieth century, the Kingdom of Cambodia's physical, social and human capital was devastated from the decades of conflict it had endured. The Royal Government of Cambodia and its depleted population were anxious to improve the general public's morale and their quality of life yet have had a complicated time in achieving these ambitious goals. Primarily, the Cambodian people did not readily forget that it was the United Nations and the Western world that had provided essential financial and weaponry donations to help the Khmer Rouge regime maintain its power while exiled in the jungles. It was very difficult for the Royal Government of Cambodia to squash their suspicions of anything that was presented to them as "United Nations-administered". However, the government recognized its amount of limited options as well as the dire state its nation was in and thus, with the aid of a few compromised solutions, began to welcome and incorporate the influences of the international community within their legislation and practices.

In addition to the Kingdom of Cambodia's acceptance of the eight, defined Millennium Development Goals, it also felt the need to establish a ninth goal to meet the specific needs of its nation and its people. The ninth Cambodian Millennium Development Goal is de-mining, unexploded ordinance and victim assistance. According to the United Nations Development Program in the Kingdom of Cambodia, "Cambodia remains one of the worst landmine and unexploded ordinance countries in the world with approximately twelve percent of Cambodian villages having to cope with high contamination." Landmines and unexploded ordinance

endanger hundreds of lives each year and have already claimed 50,000 victims. According to the United Nations Works website, last year alone there were 841 landmine induced casualties, of which thirty-three percent happened to be children. The Royal Government of Cambodia has recognized these facts as huge obstacles to its country's development and rehabilitation, and thus has prioritized it along with the other eight Millennium Development Goals in its attempts to improve the Cambodian people's way of life. The Kingdom of Cambodia's specific target is to be at zero impact from landmines and unexploded ordnance in the year, 2012. This is a lofty goal considering that the Cambodian Mine Action Center estimated that there still "may be as many as four to six million mines and unexploded ordnances" throughout the rural countryside of Cambodia and that proper and safe mine extraction is an extremely risky and expensive task.

Although Cambodia's grim history negatively impacted every citizen, women and children were far more marginalized due to the events surrounding the Khmer Rouge regime than men were. Legislatively and on paper, the Royal Government of Cambodia has done an excellent job at highlighting these discrepancies between its gendered citizens. Its implementation of key policy documents, such as the Rectangular Strategy of 2004 and the National Strategic Development Plan 2006-2010, are formal steps that demonstrate the Royal Government of Cambodia's interest and efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. However the application and enforcement of these inspiring, new bills and documents within Cambodian society has yet to be noticed. These facts are awfully unsettling considering that in the years immediately following the war and through the 1980's, women encompassed the majority of the Cambodian population (sixty to sixty-five percent) which resulted in an estimated twenty-five percent of all Cambodian households were in fact solely headed by a female.

Without proper dispersal of resources and agency to this large segment of the Cambodian people, many Cambodian households remain vulnerable to poverty and to a poor standard of life.

The third Millennium Development Goal is to promote gender equality and to empower women, which are characterized through the elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary education by 2005 and within all forms of education by 2015. There are three, provided areas that should be used to measure the success of this goal's target: 1. ratios of girls to boys in primary, secondary, and tertiary education, 2. share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector, 3. proportion of seats held by women in national parliament. The Kingdom of Cambodia has made so little headway in all of these fields that no individual would assume that Cambodia will meet this goal at its target date.

However, there have been some alterations in national statistics that are worth mentioning and investigating further. The expansion of primary education made available to more children throughout Cambodia is an improvement (now eighty percent of children are going to primary school), but according to Seager's Atlas of Women in the World, fewer than seventy-five percent of girls who start primary education actually complete it. Also, the combined primary, secondary and tertiary gross enrollment ratio of women's as a percentage of men's was only at eighty-seven point seven percent in 2006. That is a blatant reminder that the existence of gender disparity within education continues in the Kingdom of Cambodia. This disparity persists due to many reasons. Young girls are more likely to be removed from the education system by their parents in order for them to pursue some form of child labor. The labor is seen as directly beneficial to the family who more than likely resides in a rural location

whereas schooling is seen as a “waste” for girls. (Female child labor for ages 14-17 is at fifty percent compared to that of male child labor which is at thirty-six percent.) Statistics show that a strong educational foundation provides a child, regardless of gender, with the skills needed to increase her/his likelihood of being able to break the cycle of poverty once they grow up.

Another hindrance to girls’ schooling is location. In many Cambodian rural communities the school is located very far away and without a provided means of transportation, the students must commute via walking. Parents are more concerned for the safety and well-being of young girls versus that of young boys, and therefore are less willing to let their daughters travel the required distance to go to school. The parents fear abduction, trafficking, and prostitution among other terrible things that are commonly forced upon unaccompanied young girls. Also attached to this notion of school location arises another obstacle for young girls interested in secondary schooling. Traditionally, Cambodian secondary schools provide housing and bathroom facilities for their students yet they are truly only suitable for boys. Since the school is usually located far away from their homes, the boys are allowed to live in wats or monasteries which are not even an option for the girls due to religious stipulations. Also, there very often is only one bathroom facility available to both sexes and most parents are uncomfortable, again due to safety for their daughters, with this fact especially when these young girls reach puberty.

According to Seager’s 2005 survey, fewer than forty-nine percent of secondary school students and only thirty-two percent of university students are female. Lastly but not insignificantly, school is expensive. Enrollment in school usually involves uniform and textbook expenses on top of a pre-determined user fee. With one in three Cambodian families living on less than fifty

American cents a day and the majority of which residing within rural locations, schooling is not a feasible option for a family to consider when survival is the main concern.

The population imbalances caused by the Khmer Rouge massacres provided women with an opportunity to enter the work world. However Cambodian women never have received equal pay or opportunity compared to their male counterparts and have always had a high level of household obligations to maintain which makes seeking work out of the home that much more burdensome. Seventy-four percent of Cambodian women work for pay and seventy-five percent of those women are involved in the agricultural sectors. Other working women are involved in small informal enterprises such as self-employed retail traders or are involved in the industrial sector, such as the garment industry. (There are ten percent of women receiving a salary working within industries and fifteen percent that are involved in services.) From simply glancing at these statistics one can see that women are not being provided with the opportunities to transfer from the agricultural sectors to that of the industries which would provide them with a higher salary and therefore more security and independence.

The Cambodian political system is even more biased than both the educational and vocational systems. According to another Seager survey which was taken in 2008, only twenty percent of the members of a lower or single House in Cambodia are female. There is a drastic misrepresentation of the Cambodian population within its Royal Government. According to the gender empowerment measure, Cambodia ranks ninety-three out of a hundred and eight countries. The gender empowerment measure calculates the share of seats in parliament held by women; of female legislators, senior officials and managers; and of female professional and technical workers, as well as the gender disparity in earned income. This measurement (a value

of 0.409) clearly indicates that Cambodian women for the vast majority are being denied an active role in the economic and political spheres. Women are under-represented in both elected and appointed governmental positions, and therefore there does not seem to be enough influence on key decisions that affect Cambodian women's economic and social well-being. Although constitutionally women are guaranteed the same rights as men, many women simply are unaware of their rights due to a lack of information and also do not have a convenient nor reliable access to legal aid or advice. With little legal protection available to them and the general weaknesses of Cambodia's judicial system, women are extremely vulnerable. There has been an increase in female representation since it hit its lowest level in 1993 but improvements are extremely gradual since most women are not provided with the necessary resources (education, money, etc.) to become involved in politics themselves. Gender mainstreaming may be a common rhetoric within the Royal Government of Cambodia but the policies are extremely weak due to a lack of political will.

The fifth Millennium Development Goal aims to improve maternal health which is characterized by a three quarters reduction in the maternal mortality ratio and an increase in the proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel. The Kingdom of Cambodia will not meet these goals by 2015 and has not made progress in either. A survey conducted in 2000 revealed that 450 mothers out of 100,000 live births die in childbirth within the Kingdom of Cambodia and fifty to seventy-four percent of births occur without the help or attendance of a doctor, nurse, or even a midwife. The Royal Government of Cambodia needs to focus upon its health care administration in particular to women because such devastating numbers like this

cannot be altered without the government's implication and follow-up of the policies they commit to.

The Kingdom of Cambodia has been successful in the implementation of non-governmental organizations that focus upon the needs of women and the promotion of women's rights. The Cambodian Women's Association, the Cambodian Women's Crisis Center, and the Cambodian Women's Development Agency are all great examples of positive progress in the form of the establishment of social organizations whose sole purpose is to speak out for the Cambodian woman. Through the works of NGOs like these, key issues are being vocalized and made aware that are not included within the Millennium Development Goals. Domestic violence and human trafficking are huge factors of a Cambodian woman's daily life. There is a national law against domestic violence but it has not been enforced in the judicial system even once. Also the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women's report emphasized the Kingdom of Cambodia's need to establish a law that identifies the offenses and punishments imposed on acts of discrimination against women for there currently is not one. Although twenty-two percent of women in a relationship have experienced physical violence, spousal abuse incidents are hardly ever reported. Domestic violence plays into and influences every other aspect of life (socially, economically, politically...) and needs to be discussed openly in order to discover an effective political tactic to stop it. Human trafficking is another prominent social issue for Cambodian women since they are powerless to their captors and aggressors and voiceless within the community due to a lack of legislation and enforcement on the behalf of their safety. NGOs, like the ones mentioned above, are the only current sources Cambodian women have to find assistance once they have been induced to battery, rape,

abduction, or prostitution. The Royal Government of Cambodia needs to recognize the severity of these issues and to take a more involved position on such social matters.

The Kingdom of Cambodia has done a lot of paperwork in regard to demonstrating its commitment to social improvement and to fulfilling the Millennium Development Goals. However, research shows that that is the extent of its influence and involvement in the matter: just paperwork. The Royal Government of Cambodia needs to focus upon decentralization in order to empower the local voice, including that of vulnerable women and men. The promotion and encouragement of non-governmental organizations with a feminist focus are also key to continue its progress for Cambodian women need a safe haven until the government can catch up with its social problems and finally implement and enforce its new legislation. Infrastructure and the proper dispersal of governmental money to go to social services such as health care and education will be prominent factors in the improvement of women's lives. The Kingdom of Cambodia has a lot of work to do, but with the right amount of personal and political will, the Cambodian people (specifically its women) could have a better standard of living, and they deserve one.

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