



Cambodian socio-political context

Cambodia's socio-political context leads us to focus on 4 key areas of work:

- Gender-based violence
- Women's leadership and women's representation
- Democratic Rights
- Freedom of expression and a free media

This factsheet outlines the background to these issues.

A young population

Cambodia has one of the youngest populations in Southeast Asia. Out of 16 million, one fifth of the population are aged 15 to 24 and two thirds are under the age of 30. This young, dynamic population is a major contributor to Cambodia's future economic development, provided that the underlying social, political, legal, and economic conditions are supportive, especially for women.

Gender equality in Cambodia

Gender norms remain strongly fixed in Cambodian society, creating inequality between men and women and depriving women of their fundamental rights. Women of all ages continue to face significant disadvantage. In a country where freedom of the press and information availability is limited, women lose out even more due to poor access to accurate social, civic and economic information, restricting them from attaining leadership positions in the public and private spheres.

Education correlates to a woman's power to exercise their rights such as the right to expression, assembly, and other related rights, but today there are still fewer girls than boys completing school in Cambodia. Empowering girls and women to exercise their rights is critical to advancing equality, reducing poverty, improving good governance and advancing sustainable development.

Violence against women and girls

In a culture with unequal power relations between men and women, gender-based violence is common, especially among vulnerable groups including migrant garment factory workers and entertainment workers. One in five women aged 15 to 49 has experienced physical violence since the age of 15.

Family violence is commonly considered justifiable and is viewed as a family issue rather than a legal one. Nearly 60% of married women experience physical violence by their husbands or partners (CDHS 2014). Work in this space must not only transform deep rooted

social norms, but also raise awareness among men about their need to become community role models in preventing violence in their families and communities.

The role of the media in promoting equality

Media today, from traditional legacy media to online media, still hugely influence our perceptions and ideas about the role of girls and women in society. What we have unfortunately seen until now is that media tend to perpetuate gender inequality.

The data shows women make up only 24% of the persons heard, read about or seen in newspaper, television and radio news. Even worse, 46% of news stories reinforce gender stereotypes while only 4% of stories clearly challenge gender stereotypes¹. Only one in five experts interviewed by media are women and 73% of the management jobs are occupied by men². Women are frequently portrayed in stereotypical and hyper-sexualized roles in advertising and the film industry, which has long-term social consequences³.

We strongly believe in the transformative role media can play in achieving gender equality in societies, by creating content that empowers women and breaks gender stereotypes, and by challenging traditional social and cultural norms and attitudes regarding gender perceptions. We use media to show women in leadership roles and as experts on a diverse range of topics.

The safety of female media workers has in recent years developed into a serious concern, as it creates another obstacle to gender equality within the media. There are less than 10% of women working in the media sector. Almost a third of female journalists consider leaving the profession because of the threats, intimidation or attacks they endure. More than a third of female journalists avoided reporting certain stories for the same reason. Almost half of female journalists experience online abuse. Many of them indicate the abuse has led them to become less active or even inactive on social media, a crucial part of the job⁴.

Threats are often of a sexual and racist nature, targeted at the person instead of the content, making the workplace an unsafe environment for women⁵. This leaves the male-dominated field of media with even fewer female voices. Silencing female journalists constitutes an attack on democracy itself as it leads to self-censorship where women retreat from the public sphere because of the harassment.

Democratic Rights and Freedom of Expression

Cambodian citizens find it increasingly difficult to access the variety of independent and evidence-based information they need to form and express their opinions on issues that affect their lives and to participate in the democratic process.

¹ Global Media Monitoring Project 2015. 5th edition, World Association for Christian Communication.

² International Women's Media Foundation report, 2011, Global Report on the Status of Women in News Media.

³ "Beijing +25- The 5th Review of the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in the EU Member States", European Institute for Gender Equality, 22 November 2019, page 111.

⁴ Data derived from "Attack and Harassment. The Impact on Female Journalists and Their Reporting", International Women's Media Foundation and Troll busters, 2018. Similar finding in a global survey on online harassment of women journalists by the International Federation of Journalists in 2018 and a Dutch survey into the safety of female journalists in the Netherlands in 2019 "An unsafe Climate".

⁵ "Beijing +25- The 5th Review of the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in the EU Member States", European Institute for Gender Equality, 22 November 2019, page 111.

Freedom of expression has been increasingly challenged in Cambodia, where the vast majority of Cambodia's media is controlled by the government. Since the 2018 national election, the number of independent media outlets has reduced to just a few, with WMC being one of them.

Seven media licenses have been revoked, including those of Angkor Today and Live Daily News. More senior reporters are leaving the profession.

The Cambodian Daily, Radio Free Asia and others were closed or sold to businessmen who align with the government. Experts at the Center for Strategic and International Studies said there was a risk that momentum for real democratic development and human rights would be lost, which would have a lasting, negative impact (CSIS, 2018).

Despite the challenges for media and freedom of expression in Cambodia, it is important to reinforce citizens' knowledge and understanding of how Cambodia's governing structures function and how to more effectively participate.

Media Censorship

In March 2020 the Ministry of Information established a Fake News Monitoring Committee to monitor the spread of fake news and misinformation on social media, to respond to the public, and to block websites, accounts, or pages that promote false information or causes social unrest. This includes both journalists and community members, such as social media users. The committee can revoke the licenses of journalists and their agencies. An example is Kouv Piseth, a correspondent for the news website Reap Tannhektar. He was arrested in July 2021 in Battambang because he published a Facebook post questioning the government's choice to use the Chinese-made Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines. He faced five years in jail if convicted.⁶

In February 2021, Cambodia adopted a China-style Internet Gateway, which allows for the controlling and monitoring of online traffic, prompting local concern that democratic freedoms were under threat. While the rollout of the new Internet Gateway has been delayed, it is widely seen as a tool to repress freedom of expression that poses significant threats for Cambodia's media sector in the coming years.

There are increasing cases of media censorship and arrests of journalists. Camboja's 2021 report listed a number of concerning trends in the media sector in Cambodia. There are increasing restrictions on freedom within the sector, increasing use of criminal prosecution against journalists and an increasing trend towards journalists and independent media organizations being discredited with claims of disinformation.

During Cambodia's most recent national election, we reported on the counting of the ballots, only to have our radio signals blocked. In future, we intend to conduct exit polls and quick counts, livestreamed on digital radio.

⁶ <https://rsf.org/en/cambodian-reporter-facing-five-years-prison-comment-about-vaccines>

Arrests of Social Media Users

Cambodia's digital development has been rapid and social media has become the primary source for domestic news as well as youth participation. Despite this, the country's youth is barely afforded a voice in public discussion. The government's declaration in 2018 that it would monitor social media has further limited the space for free expression and introduced obstacles for providing news on time when it is blocked.

Self-censorship is increasingly common on social media platforms. Those expressing opinions that go against the authorities and official policies have been arrested and imprisoned, with more than 80 arrested during the recent COVID-19 lockdowns.

Both journalists and members of the public, including social media users, have been impacted. For example, a farmer in financial distress after Thailand's border closure was arrested after voicing his views on how unjust economic policy and corruption had impacted his business.

As a result, Cambodians increasingly share their opinions through private channels such as Telegram groups, rather than in public forums such as Facebook.

While many Cambodians use social media, media literacy remains low, especially in rural areas. Participants in a Cambodia Center for Independent Media program in February 2020 recommended that "Citizens need to be empowered through media and information literacy and to be equipped with the skills and knowledge to verify news they encounter." We directly address this challenge through online fact check training, which allows citizens from across the country to learn how to verify the news.

Impact of COVID-19

As a result of strict COVID-19 lockdowns, the government enforced restrictions on freedom of movement, curfews, and restrictions on business operations caused increased social and economic stress.

Tourism was hard hit by the introduction of travel bans and border closures. In 2020, tourism declined by 80% compared to the same period in 2019. Around 100,000 workers in the tourism sector lost their jobs completely, while another 10,000 workers lost part of their work, and about 300,000 people indirectly involved in tourism were negatively affected.

Lockdowns forced some factories and industries, both formal and informal, to close their operations, resulting in loss of jobs and livelihoods for many Cambodians.

While there had been consistently declining poverty rates over the past decade, rising unemployment due to COVID-19 further increased poverty and inequality, and the poverty rate remains higher than before the pandemic. Employment rates have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels.