

## **SPEECH**

### **Remarks by USAID Mission Director Erin Soto, Women's Public Forum**

Wat Svay Po Pay, Phnom Penh  
March 6, 2007

On behalf of USAID, NDI and KID, I would like to welcome all of you to today's Women's Public Forum. I pay respects to our speakers, H.E. Senator Pum Sichan from the Cambodian People's Party, Minister for Women's Affairs H.E. Dr. Ing Kantha Phavi from FUNCINPEC, and Sam Rainsy Party Madam Secretary General Mu Sochua. Thanks to our organizer, Nay Dina from Khmer Institute for Democracy (KID).

Very quietly, without great fanfare, Cambodia has made history and it is appropriate that we mark it on International Women's Day.

This January, more women decided to seek public office than ever before. The National Election Committee (NEC) has just announced that 20% of registered candidates for the upcoming Commune Council elections are women. That's almost 22,000 -- an astounding accomplishment and an encouraging number! I applaud the efforts of Cambodian political parties to promote women's participation in politics.

Will Cambodians support women candidates? According to a recent survey, Cambodian women are more trusted than their male counterparts on issues of corruption. Women politicians are viewed as being less likely to get involved in corruption than their male counterparts. When asked, "If you could choose between an equally good male and female candidate, would you be likely to vote for a woman," the response was overwhelmingly in favor of women. 78% of the population said that, faced with equally good male and female candidates, they would be likely to vote for the woman candidate. The survey also showed that Cambodian women tend to be more aware of community development priorities: education, healthcare and the impact of corruption. My conclusion is that Cambodia is ready, willing and able to support women candidates.

USAID is proud and pleased to support NDI and KID in featuring and promoting three accomplished women political leaders, each from a different political party. I hope that in sharing their stories you will find that we have much in common. Women tend to be driven by their sense of fairness. We want the best for our countries, our communities and our children. We are passionate and relentless in our pursuit for social justice for all.

So my answer to today's forum question, "Can women lead?" is "Yes! Of course, they are already leading!" -- And in greater numbers every day!

Thank you and enjoy today's forum.