

SPEECH

Remarks by USAID Mission Director Erin Soto, Women's Leadership Caucus - Women Commune Candidates Training of Trainers

Raffles Hotel Le Royal, Phnom Penh

January 23, 2007

Good evening and thank you for inviting me to the kick off dinner for the Women Commune Candidates Training of Trainers workshop. Thank you all for coming. I'd like to give a special welcome to the Secretary Generals:

His Excellency Neck Bun Chai of Funcinpec Party, and
Mu Sochua of Sam Rainsy Party.

Your presence here is a demonstration of the growing recognition of the importance of women in politics and commitment of Cambodia's political parties to increasing women's participation in political leadership roles.

I want to share with you a personal story. I have a daughter who is 13 years old. Five years ago when she was 8, she asked me why don't I become the President of the United States. Before I could respond, my son who was 6 years old at that time said no woman could be President. You could imagine my surprise. It occurred to me that by the age of 6 my son had already been influenced by society norms to believe a woman's role was limited. For me, this is where the development of women political leaders begins – at home, with our sons and daughters.

In April, Cambodia will hold its second set of local elections for Commune Councils. Those elected will have a number of important responsibilities. In addition to the duty to represent the citizens of your Communes and to ensure public services are accessible, newly elected Commune Councilors will be charged with implementing the new organic law currently being drafted. That law is expected to increase the decision making authority of the Commune, enhance financial responsibility of the Commune, and promote a more transparent and accountable Commune level government.

Women political leaders have an important role to play. 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, how likely would you 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 very likely or somewhat 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 Cambodia is ready, willing and able to support women candidates.

Standing for public office is not an easy decision. To be a woman and compete for a political office is even harder. And to be a woman in Cambodia and run for an office, where

only 9% of the elected commune councilors are women, is incredibly difficult. It takes a lot of courage but courage is a fundamental characteristic of all good leaders. Everyone here this evening has already demonstrated a tremendous amount of courage and leadership, you have distinguished yourselves. I salute you all. But more importantly you are making a difference for your children and, in particular, your daughters because you are helping to shift Cambodian societal norms that have such an impact on the self perception of boys and girls.

While women comprise over 50 percent of the world's population, they constitute only 15 percent of the positions in national governments. In Cambodia, women are 52% of population but there are only 983 women out of 11,261 Commune councilors nationwide, representing only 8.72%. This coming Commune election, there are more women standing for election than ever before. I applaud the efforts of Cambodian political parties to promote women's participation in politics. Strategically it is the wise for political parties to run women candidates.

Each political party in Cambodia has taken a different approach to capitalizing on the power of women candidates to attract voters. The CPP has registered at least one, and in some Communes two, women candidates in every Commune. SRP has targeted 300 priority Communes and registered women candidates in the top three spots on their party list. Now it is up to the women to campaign hard for their party and for their position.

This week's training of trainers workshop supported by USAID and carried out by the National Democratic Institute is designed to help women candidates gain the skills and confidence to win in this April's election! This training will allow you the opportunity to strengthen your skills in: leadership, public speaking, campaign organizing, messaging and communication while at the same time build your capacity to train others. I encourage you all to take full advantage, to learn all you can, and help to strengthen each other abilities.

USAID has been proud to support NDI and their efforts to support the Women's Leadership Caucus. I have worked with NDI for over 15 years. I know first hand of their wonderful work and solid commitment to development. In terms of the future of the Caucus, I hope that you will not only build the capacity of women candidates and improve their chances to win elections, but that once elected you will continue to improve the women's ability to govern and to lead. I hope that as a Caucus, you garner the strength you need to be influential in critical national public policy decisions and that you continue to recruit and mentor young women across all parties to lead this nation.

I wish you the best of luck to you all in the April elections. I know that if women candidates prove they can win votes, then all political parties will be more likely to increase the number of women candidates and place them higher on the lists. My hope is that during the elections citizens vote based on candidates merit and not based on their gender. I wish that your children, especially your daughters, grow up in a society where all people are treated equally and with respect.

Thank you again, your excellencies; thank you to NDI for their continued commitment; and to each of you I applaud your leadership.