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CAMBODIA

SUCCESS STORY

Women Take Their Place in Government

Advocacy efforts result in strong gains for women in politics



Photo: USAID

A trainer discusses how participants should talk to potential party members to engage interest in political life.

As a result of the successful legislative initiatives, a new law mandates that women and children's committees be created in local governing councils.

Telling Our Story

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Washington, DC 20523-1000
<http://stories.usaid.gov>

Cambodia's male population was decimated by the violence of the Khmer Rouge regime. Fifty-six percent of the population is female, and 28 percent of those women are widows. Women were forced to assume new roles in business and in the family, yet until a few years ago, they were excluded from participating in any aspect of the governing process.

So what inspires a woman accustomed to an agrarian way of life to forge a new road in politics? Ung Vathana, a vegetable farmer and now chief of her province in Kompong Cham, Cambodia, was one of more than 12,000 women to put her name on the ballot for Cambodia's 2002 communal elections. More than 900 women were elected — an astonishing increase over the previous total of 10 women representatives. Two-thirds of those women had participated in training sessions offered by Women for Prosperity, a USAID-supported organization based in Phnom Penh.

USAID has been a strong supporter of Women for Prosperity's decade-long effort to promote voter education and the participation of women in government. Working with politicians, voters, and the media, USAID helps advocate for greater inclusion of women in all levels of government and encourages women's leadership, democratic reforms and non-violence. Men are encouraged to participate alongside women so they can grow to understand their peers' gender concerns and recognize that women must be involved in the country's decision-making and development.

With USAID support, Women for Prosperity has successfully lobbied the government to ensure that the political party lists for the National Assembly include more women. As a result of the organization's successful legislative initiatives, a new law mandates that women and children's committees be created in local governing councils, changing the way these councils work and influencing the issues, priorities and agendas they address. Women for Prosperity has also established a female commune council network and facilitates dialogues among female councilors from different communes. USAID and Women for Prosperity have now turned their focus to women formerly associated with the Khmer Rouge, integrating their concerns into local civil society initiatives.