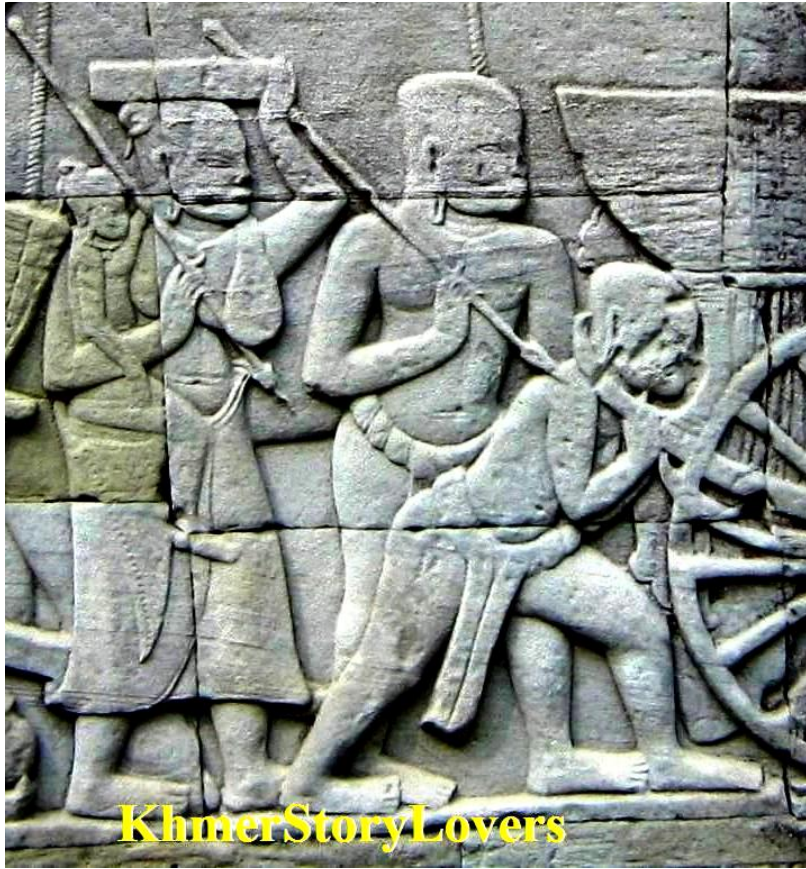


## Women in Cambodian Society

**Text By: Judy Ledgerwood**



KhmerStoryLovers

### *The Status of Women in Society*

Before one begins discussion of the place of women in Cambodia, one needs to understand something of the hierarchical nature of Khmer society. All relations in Khmer society are organized hierarchically. The nature of the language itself reflects this; pronouns are not neutral but express the status of the speaker and the person addressed. Common verbs, particularly the verb "to eat" similarly show the relationship between the person who is speaking and the person who is being addressed or referenced. Where other factors are relatively equal, the markers of place within society that take precedent are age and sex. People usually refer to one another by kinship terminology that reflects the age and sex of the person who is referenced. Thus people call a cyclo driver "uncle" and a waitress "younger sister". In terms of status, age is more important than sex. For example, the common terms for siblings in a family are "older" and "younger", recognizing the

overriding importance of birth order; in contrast to the English terms "brother" and "sister" which place a greater emphasis on sex. Young people must show respect to their elders, both male and female.

Social status is also related to a range of other factors which include: wealth, reputation of the family, political position, employment, the character of the individual and religious piety (see [Ebihara 1968](#) and [Ledgerwood 1990](#)). Where a person falls within the society hierarchy is a combination of all of these different elements. Gender is only one of a range of factors that influences where a person is ranked in Khmer society.

This system of conceptions of status is rooted in Buddhist ideas of merit and karma. A person's level in society is a product of their activities in previous lifetimes and their activities in this life will similarly effect subsequent incarnations. A high ranking person in this life is thus a person full of merit and should demonstrate this meritorious nature by redistributing his goods and interceding on



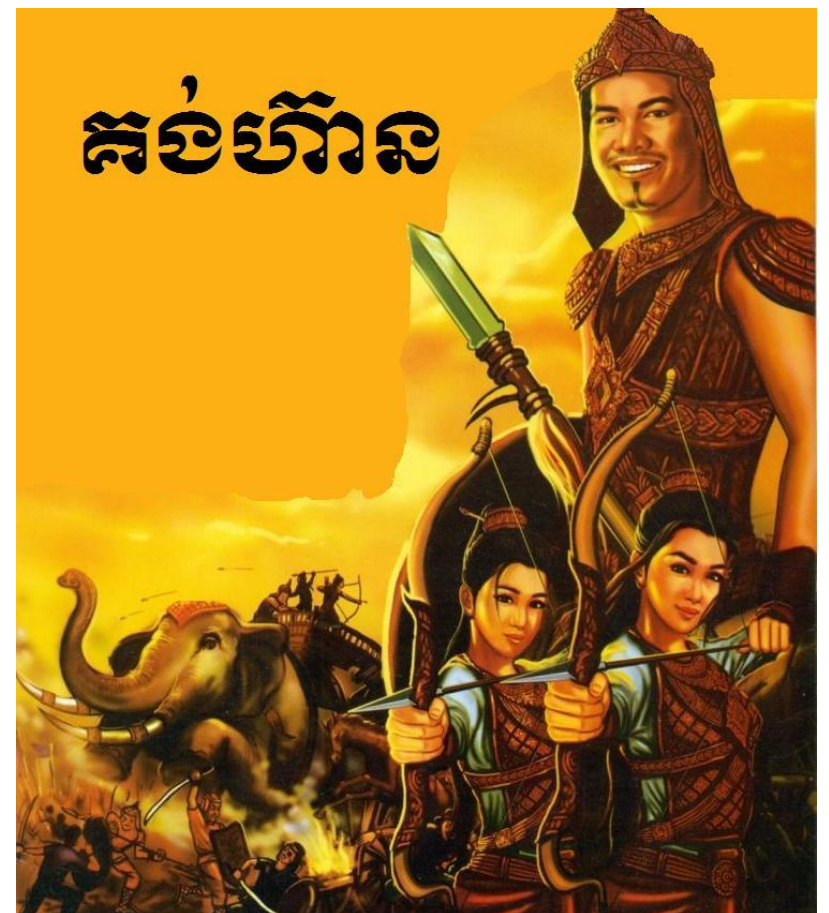
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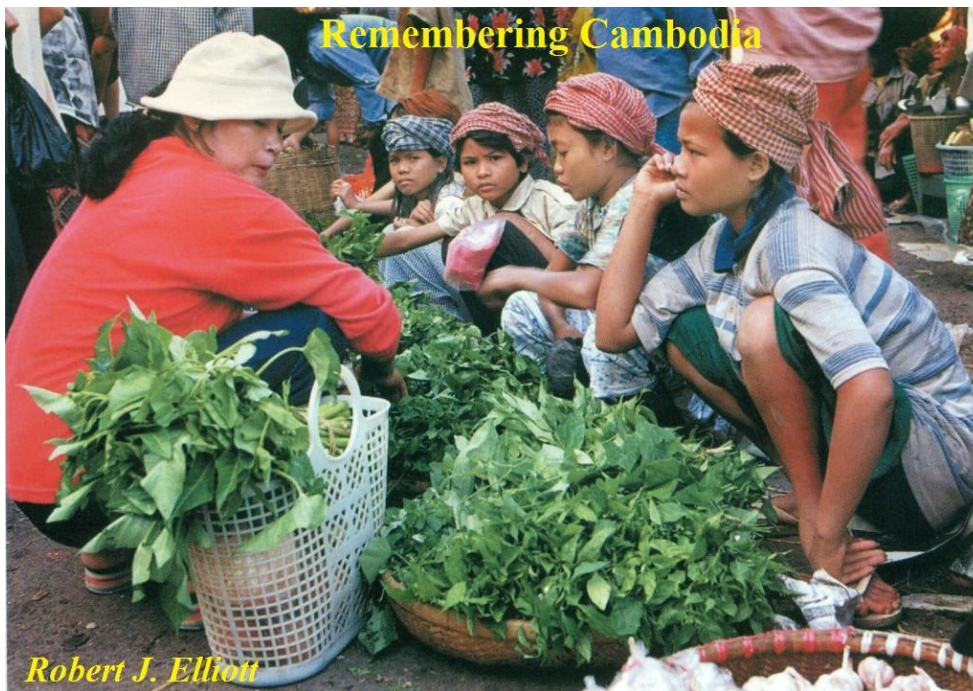
behalf of those who are less fortunate than himself. The social order is thus also a moral order, with implied moral duties. Khmer society is organized around followers attaching themselves to persons of higher status. An extensive literature exists on patron-client relationships in Southeast Asia. Most of these discussions do not discuss the place of women in the social hierarchy. When women are discussed in the literature on Southeast Asian societies, they tend to be talked about as being "relatively equal" to men, though with little discussion of how this equality is related to the larger picture of hierarchical social organization (see [Hanks and Hanks 1963](#), [Ebihara 1974](#)).



My thesis ([Ledgerwood 1990](#)) discusses the ways that women are also ranked within the social hierarchy based upon their fulfilment of cultural ideals. These ideals about the proper behaviour for women are elaborated in great detail through codes of moral conduct. Women demonstrate their high status through proper behaviour. This includes both proper comportment and correct actions. Women are to walk slowly and softly, be so quiet in their movements that one cannot hear the sound of their silk skirt rustling. While she is shy and must be protected, before marriage ideally never leaving the company of her relatives, she is also industrious. Women must know how to run a household and control its finances. She must act as an advisor to her husband as well as be his servant.

There are, as is generally the case in gender ideologies, inherent contradictions in these demands on women. In some respects this changes with the passage of time. It is the young unmarried woman who is shy and must be constantly observed, while a woman who is married and has children has more freedom of movement and more authority. But in another sense this reflects not just age but contradictions in the system of ideas. Women are supposed to be many things, the dominating woman who is competent in the marketplace and in the fields, and the woman who defers to her husband in all public conversations. Because of these conflicting ideals, all of which are "traditional," Khmer gender ideals can be used in a variety of situations to justify new patterns of behaviour (see [Ledgerwood 1994b](#), 1996). For example, Khmer women in the United States who are living in totally new environments may stress the role of the woman as advisor to their husband and as an industrious woman out earning money.





Remembering Cambodia

Robert J. Elliott

In Cambodia today these conflicts are evident as well. On the one hand daughters are suppose to be protected, on the other, a teenage daughter might bicycle daily to the city to sell vegetables to help support the family; or a young woman might move into the city to work in a garment factory. Orphans and widows must live with little or no male supervision, because there are no surviving family members. This can cause their neighbours to "look down on them," they lose status in society because they have no men to protect them. Women in Cambodia today must undertake all sorts of employment that involve being in office, factory or other situations alone with men. These kinds of

circumstances lead to accusations regarding the virtue of individual women and to the general idea that "women just don't have the value that they used to."

This concern about status expressed in terms of cultural ideals about proper behaviour for women was of critical importance to the Khmer women that I interviewed about gender roles in the United States in the late 1980s.

However, when I interviewed women in Cambodia about ways that their lives were different from their mother's time, the women did not talk about these types of gender ideals. Women talked about immediate economic realities and the ways to make ends meet. In Cambodia today, although the ideals are maintained as ideals, circumstances require that women act in bold ways, like coming to Phnom Penh to work as construction labourers or factory workers on their own.



In summary, it is difficult to discuss the status of women in Cambodia.

There are many different categories of women who have different statuses. Sex is

one characteristic that affects the ranking of individuals in society. The ranking of women in particular is linked to cultural ideals about proper behaviour for women. Women's status is also linked with the status of their family, and after marriage particularly with that of their husband. Women and men exist at virtually every station within Khmer society from the poorest beggar to high-ranking officials in the government.

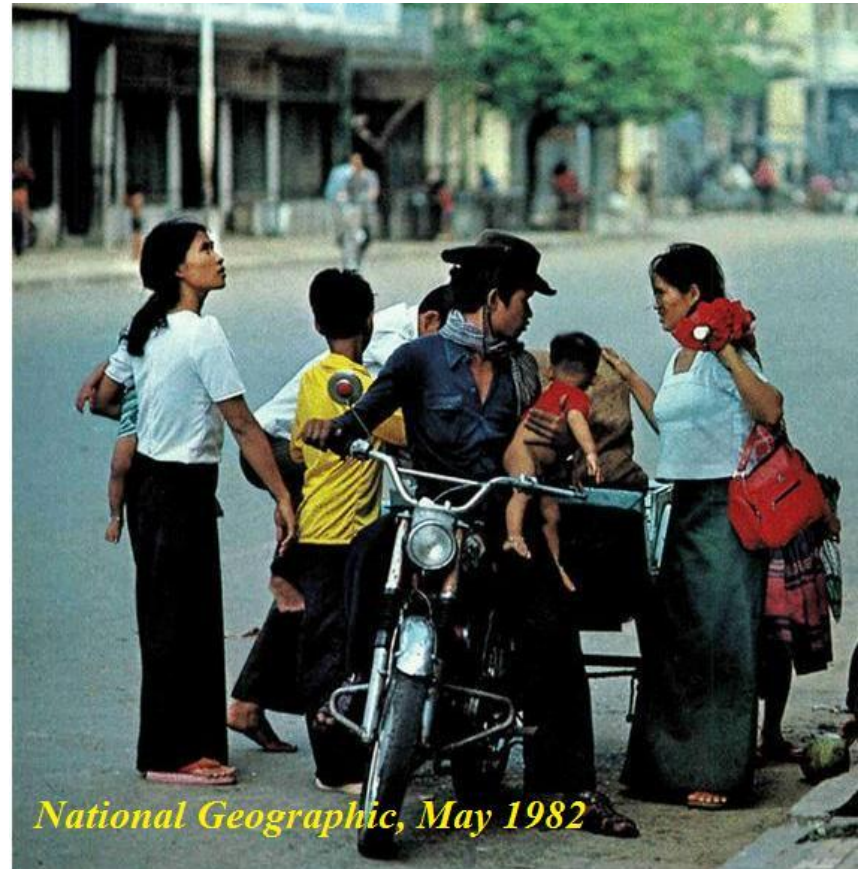
What is of critical importance to Khmer women during interviews about their concerns, was not this particular concern with social status or gender ideals, but hard economic realities and the difficulties that they face trying to feed their families.

## *The Uniqueness of the Khmer Situation: Demographics and History*

Between 1.7 and two million Cambodian died during the war years in the early 1970s and during the years of Democratic Kampuchea, from 1975 to 1979. During the Khmer Rouge period, people died of starvation and disease as well as from execution. More women than men survived the traumas of this period. Women are better able to survive conditions of severe malnutrition, fewer women were targeted for execution because of connections to the old regime, and fewer women were killed in battles. Many women told me that they survived those years of horror because they had to care for their children (see [Ebihara and Ledgerwood 2002](#)).

During the 1980s and early 90s, men continued to be drained off from society to go to serve as soldiers. This was particularly evident in rural areas where one could enter a village and find no men between the ages of about 15 and 50. Many men were killed or disabled, others might still have been alive but were off with their military units, with resistance factions at the border, or hiding from conscription. What this meant was large numbers of widows and older women who had not married before the Khmer Rouge period who subsequently never married. There were significantly higher numbers of women than men in the adult population. The most commonly cited figures in the early 1990s were that 64% of the adult population was female and women head 35% of the households nationwide. [Ledgerwood \(1992\)](#), found a figure of 25% female-headed households in certain areas. Other parts of the country that were particularly devastated by fighting, on the other hand, ratios were higher. In the wet-rice growing area where we conducted research, widows headed 41% of the households. Other studies have noted that it was not rare to find villages where the figure was 50% ([UNICEF 1990:111](#)).

What this meant was a severe shortage of male labour power. Women were forced to take on various tasks that were previously performed primarily by men. This included tasks in the countryside such a plowing and other preparations for cultivation. It also included work in urban areas, particularly employment within the state bureaucracy. According to Boserup, in 1962, less than 1% of Khmer women were employed in "clerical" or "administrative" positions (1970:241?) In 1990 one third of the Khmer state employees were women (UNICEF 1990), though the higher in rank, the lower the female to male



ratio. It is not clear the degree to which the sex ratio within the state bureaucracy is returning to pre-war patterns now that the national sex ratio is returning to normal.

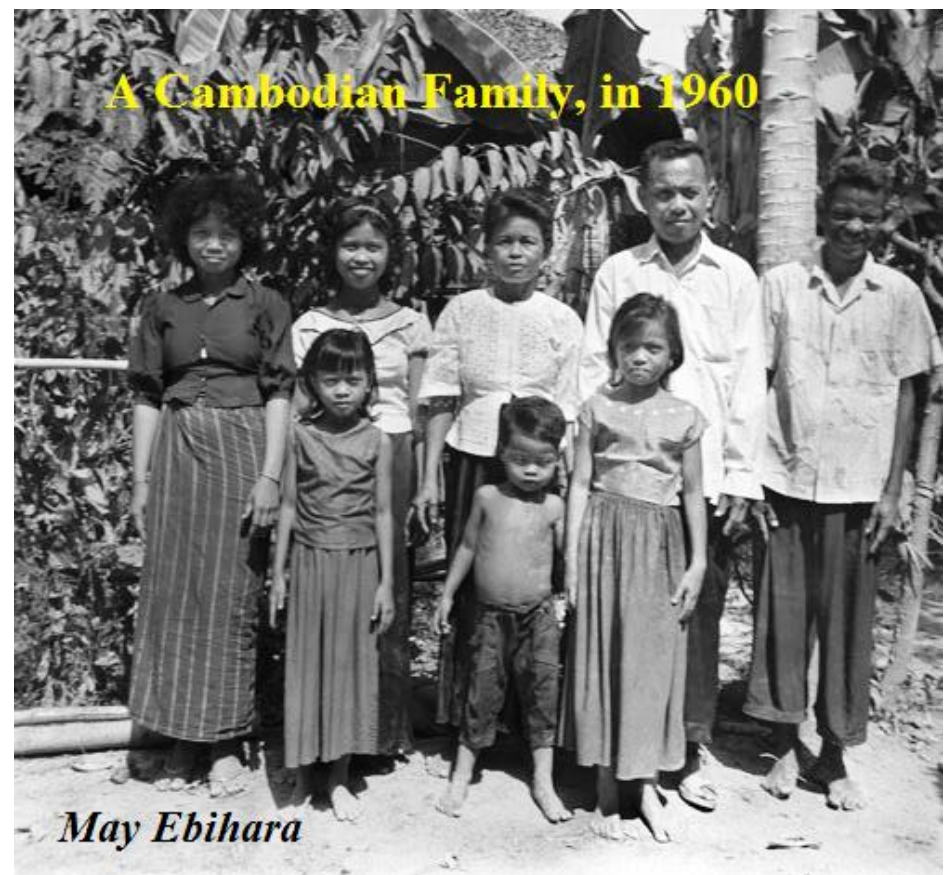
Throughout the 1990s, the gender ratio evened out dramatically. Nationwide statistics for 1995 showed a population over twenty years of age that was 48 percent male and 52 percent female; the 1998 census showed a total population that was 51.8 percent female (UNFPA 1995: 5-7, National Institute of Statistics 1999). In part this reflects the extremely high birth rate during the 1980s and 90s, 2.5 to 3 percent annually. Ebihara and Ledgerwood have also argued that the rapid correction of these statistics must reflect in part the undercounting of men during the 1980s and early 90s. After the Paris Peace Agreement and the 1993 UN sponsored elections, many men returned home from military service (whether or not they were recorded as formally having left their posts). Men also returned from the resistance factions on the border. And men were also free to live openly in rural villages again because of the end of conscription (see Ebihara and Ledgerwood 2002:279-280).

### ***Women and Family***

One reason women in Southeast Asia are often judged to be treated within their societies as "relatively equal" to men, is that most societies in the region have kinship systems that are organized bilaterally. People who are related to either the bride or the groom are considered to be relatives (this is in contrast to patrilineal or matrilineal where the couple after marriage are considered to be related only to the husband's or to the wife's side respectively). Bilateral kinship is the most familiar system to western observers, since our own family organization is also structured in this way. In a bilateral system there exists a large body of people to whom one is related, and whom one can call on for support. This body of people constitute a large pool of relatives called "*bang p'aun*" in Khmer, meaning literally "the elders and the youngers." Khmer often do not know the exact relationship of an individual to them, only that they are somehow "*bang p'aun*". This category can also be extended through the establishment of fictive kin relationships where people "become" relatives by promising their allegiance to one another.

After marriage, Khmer express a stated preference for going to live with the family of the bride (uxorilocality). Traditionally a man would have had to do brideservice of two or three years for the bride's family before the wedding.

The young man would have lived with and worked for the girl's family, so they would have known him well. Khmer say that this pattern is safer for the girl who is afraid to leave her family. Although uxorilocality is the ideal, research shows that Khmer in fact are very pragmatic and go to live where the conditions are most favourable for the couple. According to Ebihara (1977), Khmer residency patterns are more likely to be the



result of a process over time, rather than a single decision. Immediately after the wedding the couple will live with either the family of the groom or the bride, with slightly more choosing the bride's family. Whether or not they stay in that household will depend in part on where they are likely to inherit a house and land and where elderly parents need to be cared for. Over time many young couples will move out and establish their own separate residences.



Residence with or near the relatives of the woman's side can reinforce her position within the marriage and put the couple on more equal footing. If, for example, there is a problem of domestic violence, the woman will have relatives close by on whom she can call for protection. In a less extreme example, a woman can influence family decisions by having relatives nearby who can help to accomplish a particular task in the way that she prefers. The parents of the couple traditionally arranged marriages. The Khmer say "*num min thom cheang nil*," the cake is not bigger than the scale; meaning that children do not know better than their parents how to make such judgements.

Today young people are generally given a say in the matter, at least the right to refuse someone they find unacceptable. The young couple may know each other, in which case the proper procedure is for the young man to ask his parents to approach the parents of the woman. Marriages are not seen as the joining of two individuals, but as the linking of two families -- and their extended family networks. Marriage arrangements are often openly strategic; people hope to marry into families that are wealthy and/or well connected.

Bride-service was replaced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by bride-wealth, money paid from the family of the groom to the family of the bride. The money is used for the wedding arrangements, and often the balance is given to the couple as money to establish a household. This money was sometimes referred to as "the price of the mother's milk" or "the worth of a house" ([Ebihara 1968](#): 471-472).

Given the demographic situation discussed above, recently there were opportunities for young men to improve their social status and that of their family by marrying wisely. The range of choices open to men was greater than that for women, particularly over the age of 25 or so, when it becomes almost certain that the woman will never marry. In the 1990s, some weddings involved waiving the bride-wealth, or allowing the bride's family quietly to slip a portion

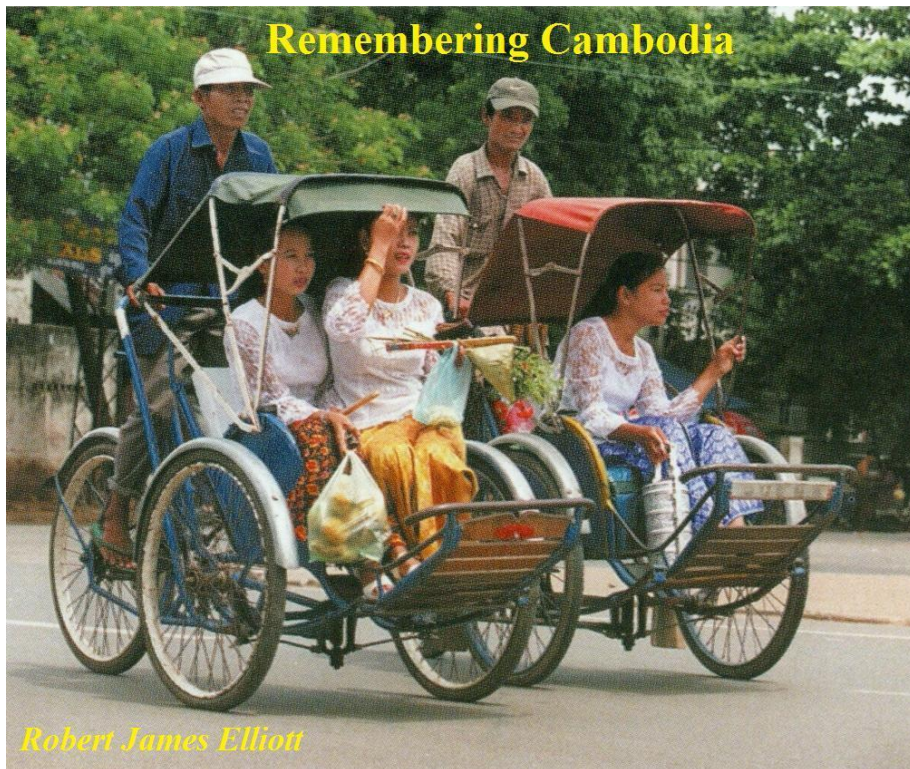


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of the payment to the groom's family in advance, only to have it ceremoniously returned during the course of the marriage negotiations.

In the countryside, households are often multigenerational. In the past, a couple might live with their children and a surviving parent or parents. After the Khmer Rouge regime, there were more variations on this form of extended household, with people taking in kinsmen in need, siblings, aunts, and so on – particularly widows (see Ebihara and Ledgerwood 2002).

## *Women and Religion*



Many women go to the temple on holy days, "*thngai sil*." Primarily older women today, as before the revolution, attend these worship ceremonies. Some old men also attend, but many more women are present, including some younger women.

One important factor with regard to Buddhism and post-war Khmer society is the role that the temple is performing in providing shelter and a role in society for the thousands of widows who have no one to care for them. Many women who lost their husbands and/or their children have entered the temples as nuns (*iyay chi*). There were such women in Khmer temples before, people who, as they draw near the end of their lives, withdraw from society. But the numbers are higher now, and will remain high until this generation of adults is gone. These women include not only very old women, as would traditionally have been the

case, but also some younger women, particularly widows (see Uimonen 1994).

## *Education*

Cambodia seems to have returned to the pre-war pattern of young girls stopping their education after only a few years, at or before puberty. Girls make up roughly half of the students in primary school, but only about a third of students in secondary school and only about 15 percent of the students in higher education (see Fiske 1994, Secretariat of State for Women's Affairs 1995). The reasons for this seems to be a combination of factors including the fact that the older girl's labor is needed at home, especially to help care for younger





siblings and do household labour. This is particularly true where a woman who must work to support the family heads the household. The girl then often virtually takes over the day-to-day operations of the household. A second reason is that if a family is just too poor to educate all of their children, they choose to educate their sons. Although education is theoretically free in Cambodia, research shows that paying for school fees, books, clothes and giving the child a bit of spending money, is one of the main yearly expenses for a rural family. Another reason is that lower secondary schools are often some distance from the family's home and young girls are not allowed to make such a journey

alone. But I think that this is probably less of a concern now than it was traditionally, as young women are often outside the home engaged in income earning tasks.

### *Political Participation and Legal Status*

Curtis (1989) points out that the numbers of women at the highest levels of the PRK government were quite low given their high numbers in society as a whole. He writes, "within the ranks of the People's Revolutionary Party of Kampuchea (PRPK), there is one woman member of the Polituro, and five women in the 31 member Party Central Committee. In 1988 there were only 21 women members of the National Assembly. Women similarly are under-represented on the provincial Party Committees. Of the estimated 10,000 Party members, only 528 of them are women, a very low 5 per cent" (1989:160).

After the 1993 elections, things seem to have gotten worse. Although women were 58 percent of voters, they were only 5 percent of the candidates put forward by political parties. Only five women won seats in the National Assembly. There were no women initially assigned the rank of minister (though there is now a woman in charge of Women's and Veterans' Affairs). There were only five female under-secretaries of state and no female provincial governors (Ledgerwood 1996:6).

While it is true that these numbers are low, they must also be considered with reference to a larger historical and regional context. The numbers are not unusual when compared with other countries of the world, where numbers of women are still quite low in political organizations. More importantly for our discussion here, the numbers are quite high compared to political participation of women in Cambodia historically.





While there are individual cases of women rising in the ranks at the central level, women do not seem to be participating in politics at the local level. Sonnois (1990) has pointed out that during the PRK/SOC years some "solidarity group" leaders at the local level, particularly vice-chiefs of such groups, were women. These groups have now ceased to function, so this could be seen as a loss in authority for women. One study of the "*Krom Samaki*" system, however, argues that the main reason that women were in such positions is that the positions were not paid and provided no benefits and therefore men had refused to take them (Frings 1993, 1997).

The issue of legal status is more clear. Women have equal rights with men under the law in Cambodia today, as they have had under previous constitutions. Khmer legal systems historically have been relatively fair to women when compared with many legal systems of the world. Inheritance laws, following bilateral kinship conceptions, allow for property to be divided equally between men and women. Women bring property into a marriage, and if the marriage ends, can take property away from the marriage as well. Divorce was relatively easy to obtain and could be initiated by either party.

Women under the laws of the Kingdom of Cambodia are also guaranteed equal pay for equal work. However, salary scales for men and women were different. In research conducted in 1992 (Ledgerwood 1992), the only women who said that they had the same salaries as men were a soldier, a doctor and a teacher. At other worksites, including private construction work, private factories and state factories, we were told that the salaries for men were higher because they did different kinds of work.

Since the 1993 elections, there are also new forms of political participation of women in the form of Non-governmental organizations. There are several NGOs that focus specifically on "women's issues" including domestic violence, employment training for women, birth control and women's health, prostitution and education. Women head many of these organizations focused on women, and are active as well in other kinds of NGOs.

### ***Economics - Patterns of Economic Participation***

Khmer women have always been co-workers with men in the production of rice. Because their days are filled with agricultural labor, women often rise at very early hours to do household duties before they leave for the fields. Women in the vegetable growing areas report getting up at 3 or 4 am in order to clean the house before beginning to carry water to their fields for several hours before the heat of the day. Women in the city report getting up at 5 or 5:30 and doing their laundry, house cleaning and other household tasks before going to their workplaces. They do the shopping on the way home from work late morning, cook the mid-day meal, work in the afternoon, cook again, and do household tasks again before retiring. The image from all of my research over the years is of women in constant motion.



The literature on women in development around the world presents similar pictures of women doing "double duty," engaging in agricultural labor or wage employment, and taking care of the household tasks. There are however some unique characteristics of the Khmer situation.

Because women are the only wage earners in many families, children, especially girl children, end up taking on many of the household tasks, which means that more girls do not receive an education. The dramatic success of Khmer women in business has meant that in many families the income from the woman's trade is far higher than the husband's income from government service. Many officials will admit that they live on their wife's income from some form of market selling.

### *Sexual Division of Labour*

Sexual division of labour patterns are similar in Khmer society now to what they were in pre-revolutionary days, but with increased flexibility. Men and women both engaged in a broad spectrum of tasks in pre-war society, though men or women may have tended to do one task more than the other. Now women do more of all sorts of tasks, while male labour tends to be concentrated in the areas that he traditionally performed.

One of the major changes is the emergence of an urban mercantile class of ethnic Khmer women. In the 1980 and early 90s Khmer women dominated in market selling in areas that were previously completely operated by ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese. While Khmer women had controlled small markets in the countryside in former times, they now dominated in the central markets and in many kinds of shops, from selling gold to importing household appliances. It is unclear whether or not this is still the case in Phnom Penh markets and shops since there has been a re-emergence of ethnic Chinese traders in the mid and late-1990s.



Women interviewed said that they usually hold the money in the household, letting their husbands keep small amounts of pocket money. They further said that economic decision making in the family was usually mutual, that is most decisions are made after discussion between the wife and the husband.

## *Garment Factories*

One dramatic change in employment opportunities for women has come with the opening of garment factories in the 1990s. In 2000, 70 percent of Cambodia's exports were garments, valued at \$980 million. This sector provided jobs to some 160,000 workers, the vast majority young women (Cambodian Development Resource Institute [CDRI] 2001:1-2). Most of these workers are uneducated, young women who have come to the city from rural areas. CDRI found that with extensive overtime the women can make about \$61 per month, half of which they spend on subsistence. In order to send money back home, they minimize their own spending. They suffer from frequent illnesses due to inadequate diet and long hours of overtime work (CDRI 2001:4). These circumstances seem to open dramatic possibilities for change from traditional gender roles. With these women living mainly with each other, there are no male relatives to "watch over" them. With their own limited earnings they may be making decisions on their own about the course of their lives in a way impossible in the past.

## *Prostitution*

It is sometimes reported that prostitution came to Cambodia with the UNTAC mission in 1992-93. This is certainly untrue. As in neighboring Thailand, it was considered acceptable for men to visit prostitutes as their budget allowed; just as it was crucial for a woman to remain a virgin until married and thereafter be loyal only to her husband. In 1989-90, when I first lived in Cambodia, there were certain areas of the city that were the domain of prostitution, including the famous dike area in Tuol Kork. The prostitutes included both ethnic Khmer and many women from Vietnam.

But in 1992-93, during the UNTAC mission, prostitution expanded dramatically. UN staff had very high salaries and few places to spend their money. After the UN mission, the high levels of prostitution continued, in part because of a new demand for international sex tourism (in part related to the Thai sex industry), and in part because rising incomes among urban Khmer meant men had more cash to spend. With this explosion in sexual activity, and with newly opened borders -- including the border to Thailand, which was in the grips of an epidemic -- HIV/AIDS also burst on the Cambodian scene. Today Cambodia has one of the highest infection rates in Asia, 2.8 percent of the population.

