

Lending a Voice to the Most Vulnerable: Mainstreaming Gender Issues in the Flood Preparedness Programs

1. INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that 29.2 % of the households in Cambodia are headed by women. The percentage of women-headed households is higher in rural areas (29.3%) than in urban areas (28.4%). Some are widows, a result of decades of civil violence. Others are divorced or have been abandoned by their husbands.

Though not all women-headed households can be labeled poor many of them tend to have smaller land holdings, are more vulnerable to losing their land in the event of economic shocks and have higher rates of child labor than male-headed households. They are likely to have less benefit from development or any humanitarian related interventions due to two causes: (1) the customary linkages to official government hierarchies, which are, in turn, linked to male-dominated status hierarchies, and (2) if the community consultation is performed, male as the decision making figure in the community prevents women from actively participating. Those obstacles deprive women-headed households from direct assistance as well as critical information with regards to development and other humanitarian activities.

Kandal and Prey Veng provinces in Cambodia have played host to a growing numbers of flood risk reduction projects by non-government associations in partnership with the local disaster management authorities, with the aim of reducing the risks posed by the annual Mekong floods. Many of them are targeted at the local community in general and a few of them at specific groups of the community who are considered substantially vulnerable such as elderly, ethnic minorities, children and women.

“Women-headed households are discriminated and isolated within the community and, many times, have to rely on their relatives for support in times of crisis because they have limited recovery options such as access to both economic and humanitarian aids. In terms of social standing, they are at a very low level and have very little rights in the society.”

Mrs. Hoy Sochivanny, Director, Positive Change for Cambodia (PCC)

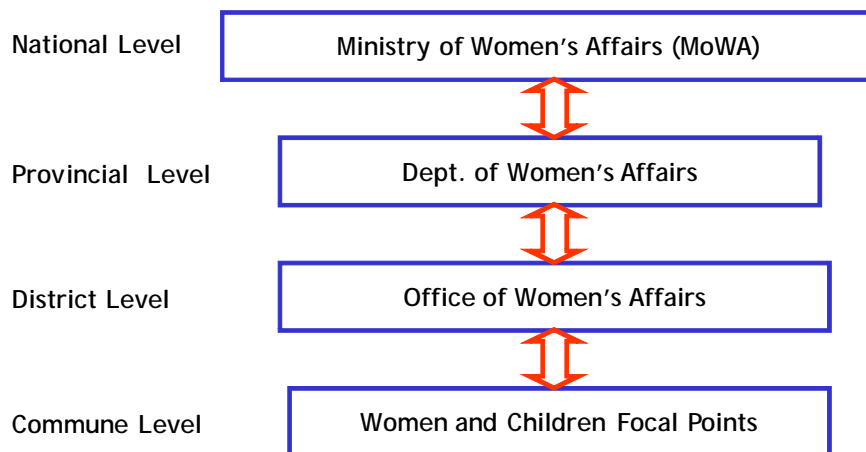
In Cambodia, the Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MoWA) is the primary entity charged with developing policies for the advancement of women. However, it has been diagnosed that implementing gender sensitive programs in Cambodia is challenging since the available local capacity to maintain such programs is limited, particularly at the local levels. Therefore, one of the pre-requisites and an essential integral part of the programs become the capacity building of MoWA structure at the ground level, especially the commune women and children focal points as the ideal agents of change,

who are themselves part of the community possessing extensive knowledge of the local conditions.

In the second year of the Flood Emergency Management Strengthening (FEMS) project, the provincial and district Committees on Disaster Management (PCDM and DCDM) of the project target areas, Lvea Em and Leuk Dek districts in Kandal province and Peam Chor and Sithor Kandal districts in Prey Veng province, identified and initiated gender sensitive activities as part of the priority sub-projects under the implementation of provincial and district flood preparedness programs. The provincial and district Departments of Women’s Affairs (DWA) in the target areas took the lead with two major target groups identified as the beneficiaries: the women and children focal points at the commune level and poor women-headed households.

2. GENDER SENSITIVE FLOOD RISK REDUCTION PROGRAMMING FOR WOMEN-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS

The MoWA structure is represented at the provincial and district levels by Department and the Office of Women’s Affairs and at the commune level by the women and children focal points. The commune women and children focal points are mainly responsible for executing the mandate of the MoWA at the commune level focusing on four areas of education, health, empowerment of women in the economic sector, and legal protection of women (domestic violence). While MoWA is a member of the National Committee for Disaster Management (NCDM-Cambodia) at the national level, the representative bodies of MoWA at the provincial, district and commune also serve as the members of disaster management committees at their respective levels.



Official Women’s Affairs representatives at various levels

Designing a Suitable Program: Identifying the Needs of Women-Headed Households

To design a gender focused program to benefit the poor women-headed households living in the flood prone areas, a study was commissioned under the FEMS project. The study, conducted by a Khmer Consultant, was carried out in two phases:

- **Phase I:** Conducting a desk research, compiling data from the secondary sources on the problems the women-headed households usually faced during the flood season.
- **Phase II:** Holding consultative meetings with selected commune women and children focal points, provincial and district Department of Women Affairs and PCDM and DCDM focal points in Prey Veng and Kandal Provinces. At the meetings, the results of the desk research were shared with the attendees to receive confirmations, corrections and suggestions based on the attendees' real life experiences.

General problems faced by women-headed households

- *Losing out on lands:* selling or having to abandon the lands due to low yields, leading to more debts.
- *Migration of male family members:* resulting in slow or no recovery from floods and droughts and women are forced to find jobs with minimal pay.
- *Handling more than one jobs to make ends meet* increases work load and negatively affect children's educations (they get pulled out of schools to help out or neglected. The effects are greater on girls than on boys).
- *Large household with small living space* affect their health, nutrition and sanitation.
- *Lack of access to formal and informal credit services* due to lack of household assets to be eligible for loans.

Specific Problems faced by women-headed households during floods

- *Increased burden of work:* on top of usual chores, have to ensure the family safety, foods, water, etc.
- *Low education and lack of skills* prevent poor women-headed households from obtaining steady jobs.
- *Food/water shortage resulting in malnutrition and poor health* due to lack of income and limited choice of work.
- *Low physical mobility:* most do not own boats or other means of transportation.
- *Limited access to health services* caused by their remote locations, in addition, have to keep on working be in sickness or in health.
- *Inability to provide continuous education to children:* the children have to miss the schools or leave the school to get odd jobs during flood season to contribute to already limited family income.

The three main causes increasing the flood vulnerability of women-headed households are:

- Lack of resources, hampering the ability to respond and recover from the impacts of hazardous events.
- Lack of knowledge with regards to flood risk reduction measures
- Limited access to information (not knowing where and how to find the right information), preventing them to prepare for any hazards on time.

The study, when concluded in early September 2006, was shared with a wider audience at the Provincial Consultative Workshops. In Prey Veng, the workshop was attended by 14 representatives from provincial and district levels¹ and 20 women and children focal points from the commune level. In Kandal province, 14 provincial and district representatives and 22 women and children focal points took part in the workshop. In both workshops, the FEMS focal points from NCDM-Cambodia and PCDMs of Prey Veng and Kandal played the crucial roles as resource persons and facilitators alongside the National Consultant and the FEMS-ADPC project team.

¹ From Provincial and District Committees on Disaster Management (PCDM and DCDM) as well as from the provincial and district Departments of Women Affairs.

The workshop featured two discussion sessions:

- **Sessions 1:** Prioritization of the needs of the women-headed households with regards to four major areas: livelihood sustainability during floods, health, awareness raising and participation in community decision making process.
- **Session 2:** Development of possible interventions that can be implemented at the commune levels to fulfill the needs and counter the difficulties of women-headed households.

**Pictures from the
workshop**

One common recommendation that came up from both the workshops was that in order for the women and children focal points at the commune levels to take the lead, their capacity needs to be built first in two major areas: enhanced knowledge on flood risk reduction, mainly the community based flood risk reduction, and planning on how to disseminate the flood risk reduction information to the target groups of poor women-headed households.

Finalization of Specific Activities

Based on the suggestions and recommendations arose from the Consultative Workshops, two fundamental activities were unanimously endorsed by all concerned agencies:

1. To build the capacity of women and children focal points at the Commune Level.
2. To raise the awareness of the women-headed households on flood risk reduction by the women and children focal points.

The activities were put together with the aim of enabling the women-headed households to adopt proper and inexpensive measures to counter the flood impacts, to reduce the cost of recovery and stress thereby helping them to invest more time, money and efforts to concentrate on income generation activities during or outside flood season.

Involvement of a National NGO

The activities took into consideration nurturing the local talents and capacities for the sake of the sustainability of such initiative. In April 2007, Positive Change for Cambodia (PCC)², a local non-government and non-profit organization, was engaged to oversee the implementation of the activities. The key responsibilities specifically were spelled out as working closely with women and children focal points in advancing their capacities and collaborating with provincial and district Departments of Women's affairs in facilitating and

² PCC was established to address the Right Based Need of Women in Cambodia. It works to ensure incorporation of Human/ Women/ Children Rights and the Gender Concept in Community Development projects and to build the capacity of community based organization (CBOs) and Commune councils (CCs) in partnership with local NGOs and Government at all level. PCC is a member of the NGO Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (NGO CEDAW).

creating a conducive environment for the women and children focal points to undertake the activities aimed at poor women-headed households.

3. A COLLECTIVE PROBLEM SOLVING – WOMEN LEADING THE WOMEN

The impact of minimal understanding of disaster risk reduction in gender sector is apparent in the poor participation of women in risk management initiatives at all levels. In the months of July and August 2007, PCC facilitated the capacity building of the women and children focal points, making the most of the other on-going FEMS project activities – specifically the consultative district level action planning and the Community Based Flood Preparedness (CBFM) Orientation Sessions conducted for the Commune Council for Disaster Management (CCDM).

Facilitating the Participation of Women and Children Focal Points in the Action Planning Workshops

Undertaken as part of the monitoring process, four district level workshops were held one in each FEMS project target district under the leadership of DCDMs of Lvea Em and Leuk Dek districts of Kandal province and Peam Chor and Sithor Kandal districts of Prey Veng province, with technical support from ADPC. The representatives from DCDM line agencies and CCDM, particularly the commune chiefs, participated at the workshops. With support from PCC, 11 women and children focal points³ also took part.

The workshop oversaw preparation of district action plans for FPP implementation before the 2007 flood season and the involvement of the women and children focal points in the various discussions provides an opportunity for inclusion of WHH issues in both the revised district FPP as well as the 2007 action plans which were recommended to be incorporated into the commune development/investment plans (CDP/CIP) in the upcoming planning cycles.

Facilitating the Participation of Women and Children Focal Points in the Community Based Flood Management (CBFM) Orientation Sessions

In August 2007, four Community Based Flood Management (CBFM) orientation sessions were held in all four target districts of FEMS project. The sessions were jointly organized by Srer Khmer, a Cambodia NGO, in association with DCDMs of target districts and the CCDM members who were trained under FEMS project in 2006. The trained CCDM members served as the lead trainers to further disseminate and introduce CBFM concepts to the remaining CCDM members and commune women and children focal points. Facilitated by the PCC, altogether 19 women and children focal points⁴ participated in the orientation sessions. The sessions aim at producing more trainers/facilitators on CBFM at the commune levels, who can relay the knowledge to wider audiences in the community, especially the basic concepts of CBFM and the household level practical measures.

³ 4 from Peam Chor, 2 from Sithor Kandal, 3 from Lvea Em, 2 from Leuk Dek.

⁴ 7 from Sithor Kandal, 1 from Peam Chor, 6 from Lvea Em and 5 from Leuk Dek.

Formulation of Information Dissemination Action Plans

Following the CBFM orientation, district level action planning meetings were organized with the District Department of Women's Affairs and trained women and children focal points in the presence of provincial representatives from the Department of Women's Affairs. Altogether four meetings were conducted, one in each district. The meetings finalized the selections of target villages for conducting awareness raising activities for women-headed households as follows.

- Prek Changkran commune, Sithor Kandal district, Prey Veng province
 - 1. Praek Pnov village
 - 2. Ba Prey village
 - 3. Praek Changkran-Krom village
- Angkor Ang commune, Peam Chor district, Prey Veng province
 - 1. Angkor Ang village
 - 2. Veal Robang-Leu village
 - 3. Veal Robang-Krom village
 - 4. Prek Trong village
- Koh Ras commune, Lvea Em district, Kandal province
 - 1. Koh Ras-Krom village
 - 2. Koh Ras-Leu village
- Peam Raing commune, Leuk Dek district, Kandal province
 - 1. Peam Raing Leu village
 - 2. Peam Raing Kram village
 - 3. Thmei village

During the district level orientation meetings, the "Information Dissemination Action Plans" were prepared by the women and children focal points to be undertaken at the commune levels. The core activity of the Information Dissemination Action Plans was limited to arranging and organizing awareness raising campaigns exclusively for poor women-headed households in the selected target villages.

Implementation of Information Dissemination Action Plans in Selected Villages

The implementation of the Plans kicked off immediately afterwards with the convening of the very first public awareness raising activity in August 2007 in the village of Praek Pnov in Sithor Kandal district, Prey Veng Province. 25 women-headed households took part in the participatory event, facilitated by the district Office of Women's Affairs and the women and children focal points together with PCC. The activity included a video show on "Living with Floods" produced by OXFAM-Cambodia. The show focused on the general dos and don'ts at the household level before, during and after floods.

Immediately after the video, a Group Discussion was facilitated to bring out solutions for the difficulties faced by the poor women-headed households during the flood season. The participants were separated into 3 groups to look at before, during and after scenarios of the floods. It elicited the preparedness sense of the participants by encouraging them to list down various measures that could be undertaken at the household level during various phases of floods. Especially after watching the video, it was found that the participants developed a better understanding of these measures by discussing them in details. Moreover, the session afforded an opportunity for the

women-headed households to share and express their real life experiences and at the same time, made possible women and children focal points to apply the knowledge and skills they gained from their participation in CBFM orientation and FPP consultative process through active facilitation of discussions.

“Many of the participants (women-headed households) are illiterate so the video viewing was very effective with its visual messages. I was surprised and also satisfied with the Group Discussion specifically as the participants were able to deliberate and apply the concepts in view of their day-to-day situations.”

Mrs.Chheun Horn, Chief, Office of Women’s Affairs, Peam Chor District, Prey Veng Province

At the event, IEC materials produced under FEMS project were distributed to all the participants such as 3 posters on “Household Safety Measures” and 2 posters on “Prevention of Child Drowning”.

Specific Household Level Flood Risk Reduction Activities Identified by women-headed households

Before Flood

- Use woods for constructing railing around the house;
- Prepare boats or motorboats or rafts;
- Planting vegetables for food at home (vegetable garden);
- Stockpile food (for both people and livestock), fuel, medicine;
- Know all the safe areas in the vicinity and the routes to them;
- Follow the weather and water level information on radios and TV;
- Keep important documents in safe places (away from water);
- Prepare clean water for drinking (acquisition of pills, etc.).

During flood

- Take care of children so that they do not play in water and arrange for their send of and pick up from the school;
- Equip boats with life saving materials such as life jackets or any other cheap floatable materials such as rubber tubes and car tyres;
- Evacuate to safe areas if necessary;
- Remove electric cable immersed in water with bamboo pole and avoid that area;
- Be careful of poisonous animals carried by water such as snakes;
- Drink boiled water and clean using soaps/powders.

After flood

- Clean and repair the house and the surrounding area;
- Seek rice seeds and vegetable crops for re-planting;
- Record all damages;
- Use pills and other methods to make sure the water is clean for drinking and other usages;
- Repair and rehabilitate critical infrastructure such as roads, bridges, etc.

Subsequently, similar half-day events were held in the remaining villages between September and August 2007. Totally around 344 women-headed households benefited from the public awareness raising events in eleven villages.

Spreading the Words: Designing a Brochure on Poor Women-headed Households and Floods

It is accepted that the causes of the issues of poor women-headed households and their needs/problems with regards to flooding not getting addressed in any of the development or disaster management plans were because of:

- *Lack of relevant data on women-headed households:* The inconsistent and insufficient data/information on women (no. of women headed households, how many women in the village own farmland, etc.) hampers the development of an efficient strategy to reach out to the women population at the grassroots level.
- *Lack of knowledge with regards to women-headed household issues:* In Cambodia, gender mainstreaming has gained momentum but it is not being fully integrated into disaster management sector. Many ministries, active in disaster management, have not developed gender-mainstreaming strategies and do not understand or take seriously the need to address gender disparities in policy development and implementation, hindering the access of women to available disaster management resources within the country. Many in Cambodia perceived the gender concept as 'a women's problem'.

In an attempt to eliminate that weakness, the provincial Departments of Women's Affairs in Kandal and Prey Veng provinces, with technical support from PCC, jointly organized a technical meeting to design a brochure. The main contents of the brochure would address special issues and needs of women-headed households in the context of floods and how the recurring annual floods of the Mekong are affecting various aspects of their lives. The target audiences for this material are the government line departments, who are members of Committees for Disaster Management, to raise their awareness on the subject. It is envisaged that with the improved understanding of the issues, more attention will be paid towards meeting the needs of women-headed households in the departmental plan as well as in the overall comprehensive development and disaster programs.

In late September 2007, PCC organized four district level consultative meetings with the provincial and district Departments of Women's Affairs. The objectives of these meetings were multi-fold; to present the women-headed household problems identified so far for the inclusion in the brochure, to look at the potential access to local financial services to be presented for incorporation in the CDP process and also to orient the personal from Women's Affairs departments on the preparation of proposals to seek additional external resources for the implementation of more gender sensitive activities. The meetings endorsed the production of brochure and realizing the need to consult the key beneficiaries of WHH on the activity, the meetings recommended undertaking of a short field mission. The missions took place in the seven selected villages in Sithor Kandal and Peam Chor districts of Prey Veng province. Though the coverage was limited to Prey Veng province, the Kandal provincial Department of Women's Affairs also actively took part in the mission. The final draft of the brochure was prepared at the end of the mission, making use of not just the mission findings but also based on the outcomes of the WHH related events.

Lesson Learned

- Provincial and district Department of Women's Affairs and Veterans have extensive experiences in implementing such activities related to domestic violence and health issues but not in disaster risk reduction. But their existing capacity and experiences can be of great benefits in implementing disaster risk reduction programs. Therefore, strengthening the capacity of existing women's affairs networks at all levels on disaster risk reduction should be a top priority initiative.
- Designing and executing programs targeting a specific vulnerable group of the community can generate new found interest and draw attention to the needs of such group.
- Enhancing the capacity of women and children focal points at the commune levels can ensure sustainability of disaster risk reduction initiatives and increase the potential replications of such practices in areas with similar problems.
- Facilitating close cooperation of disaster management committees and the existing women's affairs networks at all levels helps improve both the vertical and horizontal collaboration between the member line agencies of these committees.
- Engaging a local NGO in the role of facilitator sows the seeds for the development and implementation of more innovative program and support the local capacity building.

4. THE NEXT STEP

The provincial and district Departments of Women's Affairs in Kandal and Prey Veng appreciate the WHH-focused flood risk reduction activities, acknowledging the creation of knowledge base at the commune level through capacity building of the commune women and children focal points. However, they also express frustration in not being able to contribute to the hardships of the women-headed households with regards to their livelihoods. They realize that trainings alone cannot perform miracles for these poor women.

One key concern the facilitators of the awareness raising activities have is the mediocre attendance of the poor women-headed households at the awareness raising functions. Attentions should be given in organizing such activities to ensure that the community be provided with ample time to prepare for participation. This is even more important for poor women-headed families. For them to be able to set aside half-day or one-day of their time without any income generating activities is difficult.

At the same time, a high level of interest has already been stimulated on the flood risk reduction information sharing and this momentum should be maintained. Therefore, the lead agencies, provincial and district Departments of Women's Affairs, hope to be able to mobilize additional funding to carry on the flood risk reduction activities as well as complementary skill building trainings with the support of basic capital for the poor women-headed households to be able to make decent livings all year round.

Moreover, through the implementation of WHH-focused activities, the Women's Affairs departments at the provincial and district levels have improved their collaboration with the respective PCDM and DCDM secretariats. Nevertheless, this is still a far cry from ensuring a permanent partnership between the agencies. At the national level, there is not much cooperation between MoWA and the NCDM-Cambodia.

It has to be taken into account that the gender focused programs can sometimes unintentionally create misunderstanding and alienate potential partner institutions. To avoid such trap and also to live up to the expectation of the Women's Affairs structure to take the lead in gender focused programs in Cambodia, particularly in a sector like disaster risk reduction where resources are limited, assistance and understanding of the fellow members of committees on disaster management at various levels are imperative. Hence, over and above the continuous capacity building of the Women's Affairs institutions at all levels, the awareness raising of all disaster risk reduction stakeholders on the gender issues should be seen as a continuous process integral to MOWA's responsibilities.