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Forging New Media Representation Of Women Affairs In Cambodia

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The Women's Media Centre of Cambodia (WMC), a local non-government organisation (NGO), is a public interest media centre which offers media services to other NGOs. It is the only NGO in Cambodia that produces radio and television broadcasts and audio-visual training material on social issues. WMC enjoys a unique and excellent working relationship with other NGOs, the mainstream Cambodian media, and Ministries of Information and Women's Affairs. Its political neutrality is fundamental to its work.

WMC is run by five Cambodian women co-directors - two video producers, one radio producer and one ex-journalist. The five directors first worked together as part of a coalition of women using video and radio to educate and assist women voters in the democratic elections in Cambodia in 1993. They also made a video to document the elections from a non-partisan point of view. The turnout of women voters was extremely high by all accounts. As the next elections in 1998 draw near, WMC is again committed to producing TV and radio programmes to assist and encourage women to participate at all levels.

The experience of the early 1990s showed the five directors saw how the electronic media could be an effective tool for the development of Cambodia in general and for the advancement of women in particular. The majority of the population resides in agricultural areas. Due to difficulties of transportation, newspapers are not widely popular as a source of information and entertainment. Entire villages often gather around one television set which may be powered by a car battery, and most families own at least one small transistor radio. In urban areas most households own a television and radio. Televisions in restaurants are also very popular.

WMC was officially formed in January 1995. Growth has

been rapid. The five co-directors who began work from one room provided by The Asia Foundation in Phnom Penh are now directors of their own highly productive departments each with trained staff and facilities. Today the all-female staff totals 21.

Demand from NGOs for WMC's production and equipment lending services is constant and high. Its programmes are broadcast on all five TV stations and on most of the radio stations in Cambodia. They are sent to TV and radio stations in the provinces where Phnom Penh signals do not reach for re-broadcast. WMC productions are also used by NGOs in their education programmes. Organisers of this year's annual Peace Walk in Cambodia which enters some of the most dangerous parts of Cambodia chose to show WMC programmes each night of the walk which passes through areas which were controlled by the Khmer Rouge until very recently and were therefore isolated from most mainstream media in Cambodia. Audience feedback, particularly to the radio department's new phone-in talkback programmes is very positive.

In 1997, WMC moved to its new premises to accommodate a new radio studio which augments WMC's ability to make quality independent productions and to train more women to use radio.

WMC's original aim was to improve the generally low status of women in Cambodia, through the use of electronic media. Its aims have grown to include raising awareness about social issues by producing programs for broadcast and training, in association with other NGOs and improving the participation and portrayal of women in the mainstream media through training and media monitoring.

The Centre receives core funding from The Asia Foundation (USA) but each department conducts different projects with the support of other international donors and local clients. Its long-term plan is to become a self-sustainable, independent production house which also provides services to other organisations working for the development of Cambodia.

Evaluation of its programmes and strengthening the organisation's structure are new priorities for WMC in the near future. The Centre recently commissioned a local market research organisation to assess the popularity and effect of its TV and radio broadcasts.

The five departments of WMC currently consist of the following:

The Network Program - Director, Tive Sarayeth

This program conducts and promotes research into the portrayal of women in the Khmer mainstream media, with the aim of reducing negative stereotypes, particularly pornographic

images, and increasing positive coverage of women. It also aims to increase the number of women working in the media and to strengthen their abilities by running workshops on skills-training and issue awareness. These workshops bring together women working in the media, NGOs and the Ministries of Information and Women's Affairs so that they can cooperate to improve the status of women in Cambodia. The Network Program develops contacts with the media in the provinces and provides them with WMC productions for local broadcast. The Network Program is invited to contribute to many meetings concerning media ethics and regulation by various groups including the Ministry of Information, journalists' associations and a coalition of organisations preparing for the elections in 1998.

Media Campaigns - Director, Yim Chandavy

This department produces awareness campaigns for radio, television and video on a variety of social and women's issues, usually on behalf of a client NGO. It also produces campaigns on topics of its own choice, using donor funding. One campaign can comprise of a variety of program types. For example one issue could be raised in a combined package of a documentary, a comedy and twice-weekly TV and radio spots over a three month period. Upcoming themes include the Elections, Human Rights and Women, Domestic Violence, the Role of Law, Mother Healthcare. All these programmes will be produced with NGO clients.

TV Program - Director, Som Khemra

This department produces a weekly television program which is broadcast on all television stations in Cambodia. The series focuses on the contribution that Cambodian women make to society, recognizes their problems, offers solutions with advice from government ministries, NGOs, and generally inspires women to pursue their own personal and professional development. TV Program recently produced a very successful TV talkshow for the first time. Panelists from business, government and NGOs answered many questions from a very vocal, mostly female audience. The current themes are: Women and Health, Women and the Family, Women and Business, Women and Politics.

Radio Program - Director, Chea Sundaneth

This department reproduces versions of the TV programs and campaigns which are produced by TV Program and Media Campaign for greater public saturation. It also produces radio programs on separate topics and recently began 'phone-in

discussion programs on national radio to inspire audience participation. Early indications are that these programs have already proved very popular, and will be a valuable asset in regard to provoking discussion about a wide range of women's and social issues. Upcoming themes are: Women and Politics, Women and the Law and Women and Society.

Audio-Visual Centre - Director, Nuth Rasy

The Audio-Visual Centre produces a range of educational videos; some for public consumption on national television while others are commissioned by NGOs for training purposes. This Centre also provides translations for existing videos to be used nationally or overseas, and it has recently established links with TVE, an English environment, health and development media network organisation, to provide Khmer versions for foreign environmental and other videos to be broadcast in Cambodia. The Audio-Visual Centre also has equipment and trained staff for hire to other organisations and individuals involved in development for their own use. Current projects include a series of comedies on appropriate drug use for use in training by an international pharmaceutical NGO; an instructional video on contraception for another international NGO; a series of election programmes for an international NGO; a documentary on the importance of sending girls to school for an international NGO. ■

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