

19th WOMEN, MANAGEMENT AND EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS CONFERENCE

Mrs. Nanda Pok
Executive Director
Women for Prosperity

It gives me great pleasure and honor to be part of this important conference entitled “**19th Women, Management and Employment Relations**”.

I would like, first of all, to thank the Macquarie University for sponsoring my trip and give me such a great privilege as Key-note speaker for this evening.

I came from Cambodia, a country which has been ravaged by war, killings and turmoil for more than two decades from 1970 to 1998. During this lapse of time the country has seen five different political regimes succeeding one to the other by means of guns. Under the Khmer Rouge regime alone, more than 1.7 million people have been killed or put to death by starvation or torture. Although relative peace has come back since 1993 following the first democratic elections organized by the United Nations known as UNTAC (United Nations Transitory Authority in Cambodia), but real peace took place until 1998 after complete surrender of the Khmer Rouge to the government.

This long period of war has plunged Cambodia in total destruction, isolation and ruins and made her one of the poorest country in the region. Cambodia is a country rich in natural resource such as oil and gas, bauxite and other minerals but poor in infrastructures both physical and human. At present time, 34% of the people still live under poverty line which defines as 1 US dollar per day. Present government has made a priority the development of social sector and infrastructure. In education, despite recent gains, illiteracy is still high mainly among women aged 15 years old and over (36% women against 15% men). Similarly, child and maternal mortality rates, despite recent gains, also lagged behind the rest of the countries in the region with 66 deaths per 1,000 births.

Allow me to briefly talk about myself, my plight from the killing field, my work in the United States and how I got involved in my current work in Cambodia. I consider myself very fortunate to be able to leave my country just two weeks prior to the takeover by the Khmer Rouge in 1975 at the age of 16. As the collapse of the Republican Regime was imminent, my parents sent me to Paris, France, not so much for study but more for safety reasons. Eight months later, I was reunited with my parents, brothers and sister in Houston, Texas. Life as refugee was tough. We have to face tremendous problems: learn the new language, new culture, new ways of life, new social environment. We needed many things: housing, food, clothing, transportation, education and work. What made it difficult was that all of these problems happened all at the same time. As a family we have to deal with all of them, both collectively and individually.

For me, after high school, I went to college with major in psychology. I moved to California and worked in helping newly arrived refugees to adjust to their new found country. My works spanned from social adjustment to drug abuse and prevention counseling, to teaching of English, to job training and job search and later on to social services management. My personal life along with my early work experiences with the refugees, those who have nothing left, who need everything to start up their new life have profound impact on me. In fact, they helped me to understand the plight of the poor, the needy, the uprooted and the vulnerable.

In addition to social and community works, I realized early on, that for a community to get helped and get heard, we must be politically aware and active. For this reason, my husband and I were involved in many political activities working as volunteers and fund raisers for different levels of political structures such as city council, county board supervisors, state assembly and senate, congress and even presidential campaign. Our work has paid off as our community, although small in numbers, has got the attention of politicians and secured funding for needed social programs for the newly arrived refugees.

Following our first visit to Cambodia in 1991, and having seen so much destructions and poverty in our native country, we felt that we can make a difference in this war torn country. As I point out earlier, the communist regime, known as the Pol Pot regime, has killed more than 1.7 million people mainly the educated, the government officials, the urban people, the military and the police. The country sorely needed skilled workers in all fields. We decided to come back.

In late 1992, my husband and I were back in Cambodia leaving behind the comfortable life that we have worked for during the past 17 years. Our hardest decision, however, was to have to leave our two young children in the care of my parents living in Houston. Back in the old country, life was not easy as we have first thought out. Right away, we experienced certain unexplainable feeling of uneasiness and strain in our relationship and social encounter with members of our extended families, friends, former colleagues, acquaintances and the community at large. There seemed to be a lack of closeness and openness. The true Cambodian ways of life and friendship have disappeared. We believe that all of these behaviors and attitudes were due mainly to radical social, cultural and political life that they have endured under the communist regimes. Once again, we felt like a refugee, only this time, in our own country. It made me remember the saying that says “you can’t go home again”.

My decision to come back was to be part of the Liberal Democratic Party, running for national assembly seat during the first ever democratic elections organized by UNTAC in 1993. This decision stems from my belief that good politician can ensure social justice, equality, equity, respect of human rights and other democratic values for the people and thus bring harmony, development and prosperity to the country. My real agenda, however, was to be part of the decision making at the highest level of the legislation. And I wanted to see more women involved in this effort as well. In my quality as member of the Candidate

Selection Committee, the only woman represented in that committee, I was instrumental in having fielded a number of other women in decent ranking position on my party lists in many provinces. It was for me a very challenging job as I have to always bring up the issue of women representation at every level of the party. I should mention that Cambodian electoral system is a proportional system based on party list at each province.

My campaign team made great effort. We crisscrossed every corner of Kompong Speu province, meeting so many people at different villages. It was through this campaign that I knew and understood the real living condition of the people in the countryside. In fact poverty is everywhere, from the lapidated housing that they lived in, to the clothes that they worn, their poor health and poor hygiene all visible on their face and body. Women took a real brunt from this poverty. In addition to their hard work in the farm, they have to take care of the house and the children. The majority of them were illiterate. They were in dire need of help. Many times, during my campaign, instead of talking about my party platform, I was involved more with listening to their plight, their life stories, and I felt frustrated thinking how could I do to help them. Often times, my social work backgrounds played out and took over my political agenda.

I should mention that these campaigns were conducted at great personal risk because the Khmer Rouge elements were everywhere in the countryside and they boycotted the elections. In some remote places, the UNTAC personnel, with armored equipments, accompanied us to the campaign locations. A number of times, late in the afternoon, our car brook down in the middle of nowhere giving us a great deal of apprehension and fear.

I was not elected. I was sad. But as they used to say “there is life after politic”. The main reason of our defeat was that our party, despite having the greatest number of intellectuals and educated people from abroad on the lists, was very much under funded, under resourced and lacking name recognition and visibility.

The desire to help women is always on my mind. I resigned from the Liberal Democratic Party, and soon thereafter, on July 1st 1994, I established, along with two other women, “Women for Prosperity” (WfP), a local non profit organization, with the goal to promote gender equality and equity. At the same time, I realized that for Cambodia to fully develop and prosper, empowerment of women is a priority. This rationale is simple. As long as decisions will be made by men, women issues and needs won’t be met.

WfP first training program was on Women and Leadership, followed by other two programs: Women Legal Rights and Empowerment of Women in Politics. Since then, our training programs have expanded to include Women Economic and Legal Rights, Forum for Female Commune Councilor Network, Publication and Media Advocacy. To conduct these programs, I have spent much time designing relevant curriculum that suited to the trainees’ level of education and, at the same time, responded to their needs. On the other hand, trainees’ recruitment is, in itself, a real challenge. It’s not like you open a class and expect

students to flock in, despite the fact that those classes are not only free of charge, but students also received stipend for attendance. In a way, you need to convince them, to persuade them that this is for their own interest, for their future and the future of their family. Traditionally, Cambodian culture values highly education but specifically education of male children. Women's place was reserved at home. Despite the fact that female population represents 52% of the total population, only 35.8% are represented in upper secondary school (Education Indicators Performance and Target, 2001-2005, MoEYS). Female representation at higher education is even smaller at around 34%.

The nature of my work is challenging and dangerous, as I have to travel extensively to remote areas, sometimes by boat. At one specific time, I took a risk leading protest when 4 of our trainee's were killed before the 2002 local elections. Actually, it is not an easy task to get Cambodian women to run for office, to enter a new world of work dominated by men, to leave home at odd hours and, at times, to leave their children alone at home or in the care of their husband. Traditionally, this is not only unacceptable but also not well regarded. However, with great effort and patience, we have made some inroads. In addition, WfP has also established good working relationship with all political parties requesting them to send female members to attend its training on equal share of available slots. Consider the following statistics: For national elections, in 1993, we have 7 female members of the National Assembly equal to 5.8% of the total numbers of Assembly members, in 1998, this number increased to 15 equivalents to 12.30% and in 2003, the number of female National Assembly members increased to 24 or 18.70%. Substantial gains are seen in the local commune elections. In 2002, we recorded, for the first time, a total number of commune councilors at 983 or 8% of total commune councilors in the whole country. In 2007, the number of female commune councilors has increased almost two folds with 1663 members or 15% of total number. This increase of female candidates running for political offices does not come by easily. First, there was an awareness among many women leaders, coming from civil society as well from political parties, to work together to put pressure on the government to set quotas for female candidates. Our request was 30% of the total number. Next, we lobbied each political party to increase women representation to 30% also. It is remarkable to note that no party has rejected our request outright. They said they agreed in principle. But, they added, that they have to look at the real fact. The real fact for them was, at election times, there were not enough good female candidates. Year after year, election after election, my organization has taken a major role in this endless fight. To be honest, we have made some gain, but the journey is still long. At the end of the day, I said to my self: I was only paving the way, it is up to them to make the decision.

Another strategy that I have used to increase the number of women in decision making positions is that I closely monitor the government's policy on Gender Equality and the Promotion of Women in Decision Making and work in close partnership with two governmental ministries namely the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Women Affairs to design programs that would complement each other. This close working collaboration helped build trust, credibility, and promotes transparency between WfP and the government

agencies. We not only get the support of our programs from the government, but we also succeed in advocating with the Ministry of Interior to set out policies to appoint women in charge of Women and Children's Committee in commune that has no elected women and to insure women's representation in the selection of Village Committee members.

At the same time, we fully realized that number alone is not sufficient. Women need first to have self-confidence, to believe that they can do it, that regardless of how oppressive the tradition is on them, they need to free themselves from it. My organization has not only train and support thousands of women to become decision maker and/or to run for political office, but we have also assisted the elected women at the local level formed a national network and attend on going training to promote their self-confidence and self-esteem to become effective leaders. The women who are members of the network have diverse background and experience, but all are sincere and committed to women and children's causes. They come to meet on a regular basis in a forum, three times per year, for self-organization and self-learning in which they can identify their own issues for discussion and for development of strategies for solutions. They became advocate for promoting gender equality, integrate gender projects in local planning an budget, initiated activities/projects that response to the need of women and children, promote transparency in commune expenditures, solve domestic violence cases, expert in collecting contribution and mobilize people to attend community meeting etc...This network became recognized of its effectiveness, therefore, for it sustainability, the government, namely the Ministry of Interior has agreed to integrate the network into the decentralization system, and instructed the provincial governor to provide venue for the women to meet, for the provincial local administration unit to act as resource person during the forum, and to have budget allocate for the women. To project good image of women in decision making at the local level, WfP produced video spots, radio spots, Karaoke songs, of women leading the local affairs. Representative from the network often got invited to give presentation and/or speech in conferences, workshop, forums and radio talk show or call in show. They also used their strong solidarity in lobbying with their political party leaders to place more women on the candidate list at every election.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I can go on and on telling every one of you what I have been doing in my country, but let me stop here by sharing with you some of my thoughts or quotations that I took from other women leaders and used to tell my trainees and colleagues back home.

- . Be proud of your identity as a woman;
- . Singly, we cannot do anything, but as a group, we can show our strength, we can make our voices heard, we can express our capabilities, and we can take pride in our personhood;
- . As women's leader, we need to share our experiences. This in itself will inspire women. We will not feel that we are alone in this game, and other women will not feel isolated from the process. At every opportunity, at every forum, each

and every time we must share information, ideas, knowledge. We must make sure that women are the most informed people within society;

. Women believe that entering political position means choosing between a private life or a public life. This is not the case. Instead, women should view their life as a continuum. They should decide what they want to achieve in life and prioritize these goals in chronological order. There is a certain right time to achieve each of these goals, whether it is becoming a wife, mother, professional or an elected official. Life is long and women can achieve many things;

. Some women have tried to enter politics trying to look and be like men. This will not work. We have to bring our differences, our emotions, our way of seeing things, even our tears to the process;

. Once we are in decision making position, we should not give the impression that we are very special, gifted women, especially created by God to serve as special preachers. No, we should tell other women that you are just like us, and you can also reach that place, with some struggle, with some education, with some talent;

. Women's experiences in a variety of decision making roles will build up political capital/policies which can be used to secure further advancement, to help change existing rules and structures, and to assist new generation of women leaders;

. To succeed, women's leaders must possess two qualities: Good health, and an unwavering commitment to achieve our goals. We need to be sure of our objectives, and be single-minded in our determination to reach these goals. If we hesitate, we lose.

Before closing, I would like to congratulate the Macquarie University for having such a great program for women and for all the women attending this conference for bringing together diverse skills and talents to share with each other. I am convinced that when we have established and are working with a system based on real equality, then the quality of women's participation will be raised.

Thank you very much for your kind attention



Women for Prosperity (WfP) is a non-profit & non-political organisation. Women for Prosperity's goals and objectives are to empower Cambodian women to exercise their rights on equal terms with men.

For more information - <http://www.gocdf.org/wfp>