

Iconic Women Peacebuilders of Cambodia:

Noices and Legacies





The views expressed in this publication represent those of the authors and the women peacebuilders whose stories are featured. They do not reflect the position of any particular organisation, partner, or funding source involved in the publication of this work.

Front cover photo: (from left to right)

Ms. Dam Chanthy

Ms. Srey Sotheavy

Lieutenant Colonel Mey Vannvinead

Ms. Ros Sopheap

Ms. Khus Thida

Ms. Hoy Mai

Ms. Yim Sotheary

Ms. Keat Bophal fixing her car after a flat tyre during her mission to T-5 Prison in 1998. Personal photo, shared with permission.

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ICONIC WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS OF CAMBODIA: VOICES AND LEGACIES

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Preface

By Kry Suyheang

This story collection initiative was sparked through hundreds of conversations we had with youth peacebuilders and community members who told us, time and again, that they knew little about the role that women have played in shaping peace and security in Cambodia.

Their curiosity revealed something important – a gap in our collective memory. Too often in formal arenas, the contributions of women who facilitated, rebuilt, and led in the aftermath of war and genocide have been left in the shadows. In searching for answers, we turned to the women themselves. Those conversations were deeply moving: there were stories of courage and perseverance, of women who stepped forward when peace was fragile and incomplete, and where insecurity, exclusion, or violence persisted even after weapons were laid down. They reminded us that peace is not only negotiated in conference rooms or written into peace accords. It is nurtured in homes, communities, and movements through acts of care, resistance, and solidarity.

Women have always been peacebuilders in Cambodia. They have negotiated land conflicts, sheltered survivors, challenged violence, held duty bearers to account, and mobilised for equality in families, communities, and policies. Yet their stories remain largely untold, especially those of rural women, Indigenous and ethnic minority women, and those working outside of formal political spaces. This small but powerful collection speaks to that silence, and bridges generations. It honours the lives, leadership, and

legacies of eight iconic women who embody diverse and powerful forms of peace work: from defending land rights and promoting interfaith dialogue, to supporting survivors of sexual violence, advocating for women's leadership, and helping shape Cambodia's response to war and recovery. These women have played vital roles in building peace in their communities, across the country, and beyond. Their stories span from the ruins of conflict to the challenges of today.

This book also recognises the widening gaps in intergenerational memory. As Cambodia's post-conflict and transitional justice era begins to fade from public view, younger people risk losing access to the histories that shaped their present, and in particular, the historic contributions of women. This story collection is for them: for students, community members, emerging researchers and teachers, as well as anyone who believes that women's voices belong at the heart of peacebuilding.

This is also part of a global conversation. For 25 years since the adoption of the UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda has called on governments and societies to recognise women's vital role in peace and security. WPS as a framework urges us to prevent violence, protect rights, ensure women's participation, and support recovery that is inclusive and just. Cambodia is now preparing to develop its first National Action Plan on WPS (NAP-WPS), a milestone that makes these stories more relevant than ever. In documenting the achievements of

Cambodian women peacebuilders, we hope to inspire action and remind readers that the next chapter of Cambodia's peace and security must be written with women's voices at its core.

Each story in this book has been shared with permission, through a respectful process of dialogue and review. The women featured here have agreed to tell their stories publicly, in part as a call to action: to centre women in Cambodia's peacebuilding past, present, and future.

In addition, we would like to make a few heartfelt dedications, honouring those whose presence, influence, and memory have shaped this work. Firstly, to Dr Pung Chhiv Kek Galabru, whose legacy stands at the heart of Cambodia's peace and human rights movements. A living legend and national treasure, Dr Kek's role in brokering dialogue during the civil war, and her decades of work championing justice for survivors, has established an enduring legacy that will continue to inspire generations of peacebuilders.

Secondly, to Mark Channsisitha, who passed away in July 2025 and is deeply missed. A feminist leader, mentor, peacebuilder, and human rights activist, Sitha dedicated her life to advancing justice, peace, equality, and human dignity in Cambodia and beyond. Her legacy is one of transformation; she changed lives, challenged systems, and created pathways for a more just and compassionate world. She will forever embody the spirit of feminist peacebuilding, and her legacy will continue to live on in the hearts of those she touched.

And last but not least, we dedicate this book to all the women peacebuilders across generations past and present, most of whose

stories remain untold. Though their names do not appear in these pages, their contributions live on in families, communities, movements, and moments of resistance. We honour their courage and their enduring work for peace.

We would also like to acknowledge and extend our deepest gratitude to the eight women peacebuilders who generously gave their time and shared their stories with honesty and courage. This book exists because of their willingness to revisit painful memories and celebrate hard-won victories, so that future generations may learn and lead. Our heartfelt thanks go to the Women Peace Makers (WPM) research team for their co-design and co-implementation throughout this process, for every interview, every discussion, and every thoughtful review that shaped this book. Finally, we thank the Amplify Program of The Asia Foundation for making this work possible. The support has enabled us to document these legacies and spark the intergenerational dialogue that Cambodia so urgently needs.

As you turn these pages, we invite you to do more than read. We invite you to listen, truly listen, to the voices of women who have carried the weight of history and the hope of the future. Let their stories ignite conversations across generations. Let them inspire more women to step forward and share their stories, and more young people to lean in with curiosity, humility, and respect. Peace is not an inheritance handed down; it is a living practice we build together, day by day, through conscious choices.

May this book ignite dialogue, courage, and solidarity, so that women's voices shape a future of peace that is inclusive, just, and enduring.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

ACT	Alliance for Conflict Transformation
ADHOC	Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association
APF	ASEAN People's Forum
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BHR	Business and Human Rights
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CMN	Cambodian Men's Network
CPP	Cambodian People's Party
CPWP	Committee to Promote Women in Politics
DV Law	Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and the Protection of Victims
ECCC	Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia
ELC	Economic land concession
FUNCINPEC	National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia
GADC	Gender and Development for Cambodia
HA	Highlander Association
KdK	Kdei Karuna Organisation
NAP	National Action Plan
NAP-WPS	National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NPMEC	National Centre for Peacekeeping Force, Mine and ERW Clearance
NTFP	Non-Timber Forest Products
OHCHR	United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
PRK	People's Republic of Kampuchea
RULE	Royal University of Law and Economics
SPK	State Press Agency (now the Ministry of Information)
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
UNTAC	United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia
WGP	Working Group for Peace
WPS	Women, Peace and Security



A Note on Women, Peace, and Security

For 25 years, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda has served as the primary global framework for recognising the disproportionate impacts of conflict on women and girls, as well as the vital role that they play in building and sustaining peace. Grounded in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, it calls on governments and the international community to prevent violence, protect women's rights, ensure women's participation in peace processes, and support recovery that is inclusive and just.

In Cambodia today, the WPS agenda is taking on increasing significance in the country's peace and development journey. The country is developing its first National Action Plan (NAP) on WPS – a critical step led by the Ministry of Women's Affairs in partnership with the UN, aimed at embedding WPS principles into national policy.

Some feminist civil society organisations are closely involved, working to ensure this Plan is grounded in intersectionality and human security – in other words, that it reflects the diverse realities of Cambodian women and is responsive to their everyday safety and dignity. This book forms part of those efforts: we hope that by documenting

the achievements of Cambodian women in building peace, we can more effectively face the very real peace and security challenges of today and tomorrow.

References to the four key pillars of the WPS agenda – Prevention, Participation, Protection, and Relief & Recovery, are found throughout each chapter in this book. These four pillars are globally recognised elements of the WPS architecture, and serve here as a framework for understanding each story in relation to women, peace and security.

For readers who would like a fuller introduction to the history and significance of the WPS agenda, we encourage you to consult the recent introductory handbook developed in 2025 by WPM: *"Foundations of Women, Peace & Security: Lessons and opportunities for transformative peace in Cambodia."*





What follows here is a short note offering a concise overview of the WPS agenda and its four pillars, so that those less familiar with the agenda can situate the stories in this book within a wider global and national framework.

Origins of the WPS Agenda

The WPS agenda emerged from decades of grassroots activism by women who witnessed conflict firsthand and demanded a greater say in peace efforts. These efforts culminated in October 2000 with the landmark adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 – the first UN resolution to explicitly acknowledge both the gendered impacts of war and the crucial role that women play in peace and security.

UNSCR 1325 called for protecting women and girls from conflict-related violence, integrating a gender perspective in peacekeeping and recovery, and involving women fully in peace processes. It also laid out a framework of four key pillars to guide action: **Prevention, Participation, Protection, and Relief & Recovery.**

In the years since, this agenda has been strengthened by nine additional UN resolutions, collectively forming what is now known as the WPS framework or architecture. Over 100 countries have adopted National Action Plans to put WPS commitments into practice at the national level. The WPS agenda also ushered in a broader shift in thinking about peace and security.

Traditionally, security was viewed in narrow, military terms – centred almost exclusively on state sovereignty and armed forces. WPS has increasingly challenged this notion, advocating instead for a human security approach that focuses on the wellbeing and rights of individuals and communities. It recognises that true peace is about the presence of safety, justice and equality in people's daily lives, with a particular focus on the rights, needs, and strengths of women, girls, and gender-diverse people.

This means addressing the root causes of conflict – issues like gender inequality, land and food insecurity, and discrimination – through comprehensive, intersectional solutions. In short, WPS has been dynamically shaped and reshaped by feminists into an inclusive, people-centred agenda for peace and security. This perspective is highly relevant to Cambodia's own peacebuilding efforts today, as the country works to ensure that women's experiences and leadership inform its responses to ongoing and emerging challenges.



The four pillars of **Women, Peace and Security**

PREVENTION:

The prevention pillar is about addressing conflict before violence erupts by tackling its root causes. It emphasises proactive, inclusive measures to reduce tensions and stop the outbreak of violence. This means looking at factors that fuel conflict, such as systemic gender discrimination, exclusion from decision-making, or economic marginalisation, and taking action to remedy them. Efforts under prevention can range from promoting gender equality and legal protections, to community programs that build dialogue and trust over time. At its heart is the belief that in creating a fairer, more inclusive society, we remove the kindling of conflict. Through a human security lens, prevention focuses on improving everyday conditions and justice for people, so that grievances don't escalate into violence. It is essentially about building a peace that is sustainable because it is built on equality and opportunity for all.

PARTICIPATION:

The participation pillar seeks to amplify women's voice and leadership in all peace and security decision-making. It calls for women to be actively involved at every level – from negotiating peace agreements and serving as mediators, to taking roles in government, security forces, and peacekeeping missions. The idea is that peace processes and policies will be more effective and equitable when women – who make up half the population and often experience conflict differently – have a seat at the table. Notably, evidence shows that peace agreements are more likely to endure when women play a meaningful role in shaping them. Whether through formal peace talks or grassroots reconciliation efforts, women's participation brings perspectives and solutions that might otherwise be overlooked. Interpreted through a human security lens, participation means those most affected by insecurity get to help define what peace looks like in their own lives. It ensures that peacebuilding isn't left only to political or military elites, but includes the wisdom and needs of women in communities who know the human costs of conflict and the foundations of genuine peace.

PROTECTION:

The protection pillar centres on safeguarding the safety, dignity, and rights of women and girls, particularly during conflict and crises. In war and its aftermath, women and children are among the most vulnerable – facing threats like sexual violence, human trafficking, domestic abuse, and exploitation. Protection under WPS means taking measures to prevent these harms and to support those who have experienced them. This can include training peacekeepers and police to prevent gender-based violence, setting up safe spaces for women in refugee camps, facilitating access to justice for survivors, and providing medical and psychological support for trauma recovery. Crucially, protection is not only about reacting to violence as it occurs, but also about creating an environment where women do not have to live in fear. Through a human security approach, the protection pillar expands the notion of security beyond military terms to encompass freedom from violence in homes and communities. It insists that peace is not real if women and girls are not secure from violence and if their rights are not upheld. In practical terms, this pillar works to ensure that laws, institutions, and peacekeeping operations all prioritise the safety and well-being of women and girls during and after conflict.

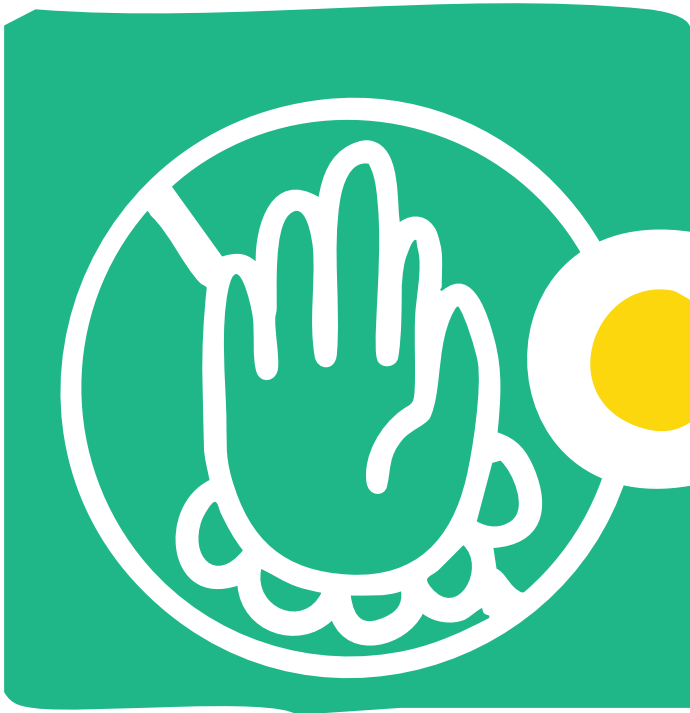
RELIEF AND RECOVERY:

The relief and recovery pillar generally focuses on what happens after conflict, unrest, or disaster, making sure that women's needs are met and their strengths engaged as communities rebuild. Women and girls often face unique hardships in post-conflict situations: they may be widowed single heads of households, survivors of violence, or displaced with few resources. Relief and recovery efforts under WPS aim to address these immediate and long-term needs, from food, shelter, and healthcare to education, jobs, and legal assistance. Importantly, this pillar is not only about delivering aid to women – it's also about empowering women to lead and shape the recovery of their families and communities. As the stories in this book show, women frequently step up in the aftermath of conflict to organise aid distribution, care for the wounded, and rebuild social bonds. WPS calls for recognising and supporting these roles, whether through including women in planning post-war reconstruction, or ensuring relief programs are accessible to women and girls (for example, that women health workers are available, or that aid distribution is safe for women to access). In a human security frame, relief and recovery is about restoring the fabric of society in a way that benefits everyone. This pillar acknowledges that when women are fully involved as agents of recovery, communities can recover faster and more fully, and the peace that follows is more likely to be durable.

The four pillars of WPS

Taken together, these four pillars provide a framework for building peace that is inclusive, sustainable, and centred on human dignity. They remind us that peace is as much about ceasefires as about preventing the causes of conflict, protecting people from harm, ensuring participation for all, and supporting recovery in ways that strengthen communities.

Prevention



Protection

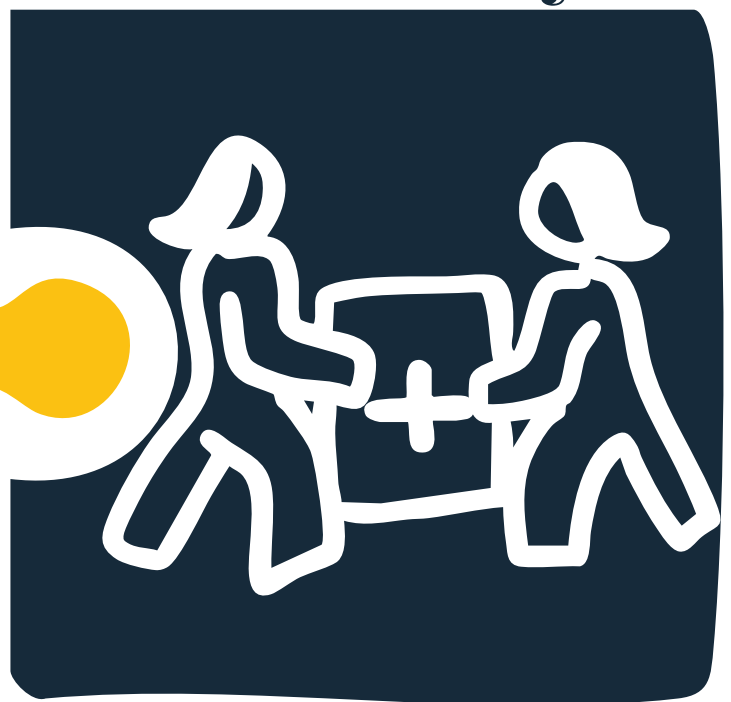


As Cambodia develops its first National Action Plan on WPS, these principles are especially timely. We hope that by exploring the groundbreaking contributions of women peacebuilders in this book, we can gain lessons and inspiration to guide current efforts, and promote the idea that the next chapter of Cambodia's peace should be written with women's voices at its core.



Participation

Relief & Recovery



Chapter 1 –

DAM CHANTHY:

An Indigenous woman leading
post-conflict renewal



Photo: Chanthy at her homeland in Ratanakiri Province, 2025. Photo by Khleang Molynin, WPM.

REBUILDING IN THE AFTERMATH OF ATROCITY: RATANAKIRI'S POST-KHMER ROUGE LANDSCAPE

In 1979, Cambodia emerged from the devastation of the Khmer Rouge regime, a period that had left deep scars on its people and shattered the country's social fabric. In the remote northeastern province of Ratanakiri, home to diverse Indigenous highland communities, the aftermath was particularly stark. The Khmer Rouge had brutally persecuted the highlanders, forcing them to abandon their semi-nomadic livelihoods and cultural practices in favour of lowland-style agricultural labour.¹ Traditional gongs were confiscated, spiritual ceremonies banned, and entire villages uprooted. Many fled into the forests or across borders to Laos and Vietnam to survive. By the regime's collapse, at least 15% of Ratanakiri's Indigenous population had perished, and those who survived were scattered and traumatised.²

With the Khmer Rouge defeated and a new People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) established, Ratanakiri entered the 1980s largely cut off from the rest of Cambodia.³ This isolation proved to be a mixed blessing. On the one hand, support from the state barely reached these highlands – infrastructure was ruined and formal support minimal. On the other hand, the highlanders were initially left largely in peace to try and revive their way of life. The new authorities, preoccupied elsewhere and lacking any coordinated policy for Indigenous peoples, allowed communities to resume speaking their languages, practicing their animist faiths, and returning to swidden farming on ancestral lands. Elders who had spent years hiding in Laos recalled coming home after 1979 and finding life “relatively calm,” as families reclaimed their fields and forests

without significant outside interference.⁴ For Ratanakiri's Indigenous groups, including the Tumpoun, Jarai, Kreung, Brao and others, this was the start of a long journey of post-conflict recovery rooted in their own traditions.

Yet rebuilding presented a monumental challenge. Decades of war had left communities without basic services, their homes destroyed, and with drastically skewed demographics. Across Cambodia, women now formed a disproportionate majority of the population – in some areas up to two-thirds of adults – due to the high death toll among men.⁵ In Ratanakiri's villages, as in the rest of the country, women stepped into roles that had never been open to them prior to the conflict. Observers noted the “centrality of women in the survival and reconstruction of Cambodian society” in the 1980s.⁶ Widows became what some described as “the backbone of the family,” tilling fields, raising children, and healing communities in the absence of husbands, fathers, and brothers. The immediate post-genocide era broke many patriarchal norms: women's strength and skills were called upon in unprecedented ways to piece society back together.⁷

Under the aegis of the newly formed nationwide Women's Association of Cambodia, women organised and led practical recovery efforts at the grassroots. Women leaders spearheaded a national literacy campaign to address the education gap left by the Khmer Rouge's destruction of schools.⁸ They cared for thousands of war orphans, effectively becoming guardians of a so-called lost generation. In rural areas throughout the country, women helped set up or revive cooperatives and rice banks to regenerate local economies and food security.

Ratanakiri's Indigenous women were part and parcel of this quiet revolution. Despite the isolation of their villages, they too joined in rebuilding community life, including by clearing fields, reconstructing homes and granaries, and re-establishing cultural rituals that the conflict had interrupted. In the 1980s, Cambodian women's participation in public life expanded out of sheer necessity, and Ratanakiri was no exception. Women community members who barely a decade prior would have been confined to domestic roles found themselves de facto leaders in development and peace at the village level.⁹ However, even from this time, private actors began cutting down forests and building plantations and roads, damaging the land and water that Indigenous people relied on for food, medicine, and spiritual practices. Healthcare was poor, and Indigenous people fell ill at much higher rates compared to the broader population. Schools were hard to access, and because classes were in a different language, Indigenous children struggled to learn. This was the context in which Dam Chanthy – an Indigenous Tumpoun woman born and raised in Ratanakiri – came of age as a community leader.

FROM TRAGEDY TO LEADERSHIP: CHANTHY'S EARLY JOURNEY

Dam Chanthy was born in 1955 in Baloy, a Tumpoun village nestled in Ratanakiri's forested hills. Her early life reflected the deep marginalisation faced by Indigenous communities long before the Khmer Rouge era. Raised in a poor upland farming family, she experienced acute hardship from an early age. *"Our family was among the poorest in the village,"* she recalled. *"My parents were illiterate and didn't speak Khmer... I didn't attend school when I was young."*

Despite her limited access to formal education, Chanthy began learning informally. *"My sister went to school and had a textbook. She used that old book to teach us the Khmer alphabet. We wrote on paper and stored it in bamboo tubes to protect it from rain."*

Chanthy's childhood and teenage years coincided with the intense US secret aerial bombing campaign of the mid-1960s and early 1970s, and she recalls living in terror during that time, frequently hiding with her siblings to escape the incessant bombing.¹⁰ When the Khmer Rouge seized power in 1975, Chanthy – then in her late teens – fled with her family into the forest. *"We had nothing to eat. I didn't know it was Pol Pot or anything like that, we just heard people talking about a revolution. We had no rice, we survived on wild cassava and bamboo shoots,"* she said.

She was later forcibly separated from her parents and placed into a youth labour group. The majority of her siblings were killed during these years.

**“ We were forced
to live far away
from my parents.
Whenever I talk
about the past, I
feel overwhelmed
with emotion...
Sometimes, I can't
even speak. ”**



Photos: Chanthy at her homeland in Ratanakiri Province, 2025.
Photo by Khleang Molylin, WPM.

Towards the end of the Khmer Rouge regime, she was assigned to be a medic, but her role was short-lived. *"They said my family background was not acceptable... [so] I was sent to a prison in Stung Treng, where I was meant to be executed."* She survived only because of what she described as luck: Vietnamese troops arrived before she could be killed. *"I began to notice people were disappearing, a few each day. The transportations were increasing and I didn't realise it but they were being taken to be killed. Then, the Vietnamese arrived, and I survived."*

After the fall of the regime in 1979, Chanthy returned to her home province, *"following others until we reached the Dongrek Mountains,"* and began to rebuild. Chanthy volunteered to cook rice for Vietnamese soldiers and sew their uniforms, and later joined the newly established Women's Association in Ratanakiri, part of a national post-war mobilisation effort.

Through this role, Chanthy was sent by the government to Vietnam to gain Khmer and Vietnamese literacy: *"Because they saw that I could read well, they placed me in a higher grade,"* she said of her early studies. This investment in her education became the foundation for her community leadership.

Though formal records from rural Ratanakiri in the 1980s are scarce, Women's Association members across Cambodia played vital roles in recovery. They led literacy classes, promoted basic healthcare and hygiene, and managed community support services.¹¹ Chanthy undertook similar activities within her Indigenous context, especially as a woman with skills in multiple languages. *"I helped form women's groups and supported Indigenous women... I worked closely with them, providing training on health, women's roles, and other related topics,"* she explained to us.

While Chanthy never held formal office during this period, she became known as someone who got things done. Her work embodied the "participation" and "relief and recovery" pillars of what we now call the WPS agenda: she was a woman taking part in peacebuilding and reconstruction at the local level, long before the agenda formally existed at a global level. And, as she explained, she was not alone in these efforts:

"During the recovery period, women played a very important role, even though people didn't always recognise it. We helped rebuild communities after the Khmer Rouge era. Women kept traditional knowledge alive, especially in healing, midwifery, and spiritual practices."

"We worked hard to take care of families, growing food through traditional farming and gathering from the forest. We looked after children, elders, and managed the household, even when there was little access to clean water or healthcare."

"In the village, women helped solve problems and keep peace. We weren't always seen as leaders, but we were the ones who helped settle disputes and keep harmony, using wisdom passed down through generations."



INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN TRANSITION: CHALLENGES OF THE 1990S

As Cambodia entered the 1990s, the country underwent profound political shifts that rippled into remote Ratanakiri. The 1991 Paris Peace Agreements aimed to bring a formal end to the civil war between the Phnom Penh government and rebel factions, and the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) arrived to supervise a transition to democracy. For highland communities, the early 1990s were a time of hope, uncertainty, and disruption, as new challenges loomed on the horizon.

With peace and improved roads, Ratanakiri was gradually opened up to the rest of the country – and to outside economic interests. The brand new Royal Government of Cambodia, following the 1993 elections, adopted free-market policies that viewed remote, resource-rich regions as ripe for development. For Ratanakiri's Indigenous people, who had just begun recovering, this introduced a different kind of conflict. Suddenly their lands and forests were seen as exploitable commodities by powerful outsiders. In the mid-1990s, the Cambodian military and politically connected companies launched large-scale logging operations in Ratanakiri's dense forests.¹² By 1996, vast swathes of the province had been parcelled out into logging concessions. Timber was trucked out in massive quantities, mainly across the border to Vietnam, with little benefit to local communities.¹³ Villagers, who had no say in these deals, watched as strangers with chainsaws and bulldozers encroached on ancestral sacred groves and foraging grounds.

As such, the highlanders soon experienced the downside of 'development.' As forests vanished, they lost access to wild foods,

medicinal plants, and materials essential to their livelihoods. The spiritual harm was equally severe: logging crews violated sacred sites – for example, felling revered old-growth trees in areas off-limits under Indigenous cosmologies.¹⁴ Community resentment simmered, but direct protest was risky; the loggers were backed by armed soldiers, and villagers feared violent retribution if they resisted ¹⁵.

During these years, Dam Chanthy's protective instincts for her people were further sharpening. She had seen her community survive genocide and rebuild, and now she saw them facing a new threat of exploitation and marginalisation. As Indigenous communities struggled with displacement and encroachment, Chanthy's local knowledge and seasoned activism made her a vital bridge between villagers and state actors. "When Indigenous communities returned... their homes and traditions had been destroyed. And now big companies [were coming] in to cut down forests... health care was poor... schools were hard to access."

FOUNDING THE HIGHLANDER ASSOCIATION: A WOMAN AT THE FOREFRONT OF RIGHTS ADVOCACY

It was amid these gathering storms that Chanthy began a new chapter in her journey from survivor to rights advocate. After leaving the Women's Association due to domestic violence in her marriage, she found short-term work as an interpreter with the NGO Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP) in 1996. "*I was not a full-time staff member,*" she recalled. "*I was only paid when I provided interpretation services. Life was very difficult – sometimes we had nothing to eat, especially since I had six children to care for.*" Still, the role offered new connections



Photo: Chanthy sharing ideas during a workshop. Photo by Oxfam in Cambodia, shared with permission.



Photo: Chanthy at her homeland in Ratanakiri province. Photo by Oxfam in Cambodia, shared with permission.

and knowledge, bringing her into contact with development professionals and exposing her to new ideas on sustainable resource use, gender, and health. Through interpreting for community research and development work, she built confidence in navigating between Indigenous villagers and outsiders, deepening her understanding of both worlds.

By the late 1990s, Chanthy and a network of Indigenous activists and elders recognised that highlanders needed their own platform to defend their rights in the face of rampant land grabs. The result was the founding of the Highlander Association (HA) in 2000, representing a milestone in Cambodia's post-conflict civil society development. Uniquely, this was an Indigenous-run organisation in a country where Indigenous peoples had long been voiceless in policy-making. As one source noted at the time, *"The Highlander's Association, a local group in Ratanakiri Province, has been created by indigenous people to represent their interests."*¹⁶ It was established by highlanders as well as for highlanders, signaling a new assertiveness among Cambodia's ethnic minorities who until then had little formal representation.

"We started as a small group with no salaries, travelling from village to village," Chanthy told us. Under her guidance, the organisation dedicated itself to peaceful advocacy for the protection of Indigenous land, natural resources, traditional leadership, and women's rights. *"We worked on advocacy from the beginning,"* Chanthy explained, *"focusing on the protection of Indigenous culture, land, natural resources, and the promotion of women's rights. For cultural preservation, we supported Indigenous arts such as weaving, and promoted traditional leadership and management practices."*

The timing was critical: the Highlander Association emerged just as a new Land

Law was passed in 2001 and began opening pathways for Indigenous communities to claim collective land rights. Chanthy and her team undertook land research and supported villagers in navigating the complex process of applying for Communal Land Titles, critical legal protections against land grabbing.¹⁷ *"Based on our research, we found that land is the lifeblood of Indigenous people,"* she said.

**“Without land,
Indigenous
communities
cannot survive.
Our lives depend
entirely on the
land.”**

Amid rising land speculation, Chanthy's advocacy expanded across dozens of communes in Ratanakiri. She became a trusted voice, urging communities not to sell their land. *"We worked to protect our land for future generations."* The stakes were high: Chanthy explained how she was once accused of incitement by authorities and, in another incident, narrowly escaped a targeted assassination attempt by would-be killers waiting at her farm. *"That moment made me realise how precious life is. If I had gone to the farm, I would have been killed,"* she said. She fled to Phnom Penh for three months before it was safe to return.

Despite the risks, her efforts have borne fruit, with multiple significant land title victories for local communities. The work,

however, continues to this day. With a strong emphasis on transparency and rootedness in Indigenous values, she has shaped the Highlander Association into a respected model of community-led development. *"From the beginning, I have focused on these two priorities: promoting the rights of Indigenous people to protect their land and natural resources, and preserving our culture, including traditional arts, performances, and weaving. These two achievements are the most meaningful aspects of my life."*



A LEGACY FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

When asked what message she would give to future peacebuilders, Dam Chanthy did not dwell on her many accomplishments. Instead, she spoke to the heart of Indigenous identity and collective resilience. *"Never forget your culture and your dialect,"* she urged. *"Even if you can speak Khmer, English or other languages, continue communicating with your peers in your native dialect. Secondly, actively promote our Indigenous cultures so that others can learn about our identity, our way of life, our traditions, performances, and traditional clothing."*

For Chanthy, peace is more than the absence of war. It is about dignity, safety, and mutual respect. *"To me, peace means living with happiness – being able to go anywhere without disturbance or threats, and valuing one another,"* she explained. *"It means living without danger, without being insulted or looked down upon... Security also means, as women, having the freedom to travel wherever we wish. That is true security – both physical and mental."*

Chanthy's story is rooted in a painful past, yet her vision is future-focused. *"I hope to see Indigenous people working in government positions, NGOs, INGOs, and even abroad,"* she said, reflecting on the many young people she has supported to stay in school and continue their education. *"We want to see future leaders emerge from the next generation of Indigenous communities."* Her words and example continue to inspire a new generation of Indigenous women and men to protect their land, preserve their cultures, and define peace and security on their own terms.

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Chapter 2 – **ROS SOPHEAP:**

**A voice for women,
a force for change**



Photo: Sopheap at her home during an interview in 2025. Photo by Khleang Molynin, WPM.

In December 2021, after more than two decades pushing for women's empowerment and gender inclusivity in Cambodia, the veteran activist Ros Sopheap decided it was time to retire as Executive Director of the organisation she founded – ready, at last, to take a step back from public life.

Just under four years later, we were honoured to visit her at the home she and her husband have built for themselves in Ponhea Lueu district, Kandal Province, around an hour outside Phnom Penh. Seated at her kitchen table and shaded by her growing garden, Sopheap shared tea and homegrown vegetables as she reflected on a lifetime spent confronting violence and discrimination. To understand how Sopheap became one of Cambodia's most iconic feminist peacebuilders, it is necessary to trace her journey from a childhood marked by war, to a career devoted to forging peace through gender justice.

IN THE SHADOW OF WAR

Sopheap was born in 1962 to a farming family in rural Svay Rieng, a province near Cambodia's border with Vietnam. Losing her father when she was 18 months old and her mother at age six, Sopheap was then raised by her aunt. As a girl, she remembers walking over a kilometre each way to school, though she was only able to attend for around a year before the threat posed by the US secret bombing campaign made it impossible: *"The bombs disturbed our lives – every night, and every morning."* Eventually the family was forced to migrate, first to Svay Rieng Town and then to the capital: *"Life was extremely challenging in Phnom Penh. Finances were a constant challenge – we didn't even have anywhere to live."*

Sopheap's aunt was one of the few who managed to secure temporary housing for the family, first staying with relatives

and eventually registering with UNICEF for basic meals in a camp for internally displaced families. The children were also able to continue basic schooling in the city, through a mobile school for families who had migrated from the provinces, until the bombing intensified in 1974.

While Sopheap recalls this period as profoundly difficult, with her family impoverished and their future uncertain, she also recognises an irony: their destitution would soon save their lives. *"We were kind of lucky, because we were so poor that the Khmer Rouge didn't focus on us – they focused on the wealthy families who they suspected of being educated or having ties to the government,"* she explained.

In April 1975, when Phnom Penh fell, 13-year-old Sopheap was among the masses forced to evacuate the capital. Alongside her aunt, grandmother, and young cousins, she endured a harrowing exodus: trekking for days in the blistering heat, with melted asphalt sticking to the soles of her bare feet, and sometimes walking past or waking up beside the bodies of those who had died on the road.

She vividly recalled the moment they were diverted:

"We wanted to go back home to Svay Rieng, but road number one was so crowded we couldn't even turn. So we ended up on road number two, on the way to Prey Sar. The child soldiers – so small that their guns dragged along the road – told us to pass, saying 'just go.' Because we didn't look wealthy."

They abandoned their belongings piece by piece until they had nothing left. Arriving in a rural village where they were stationed with a local family, life became increasingly difficult and repressive. Sopheap recalled

how early on, at a community meeting in the middle of the night, a Khmer Rouge cadre ordered her to cut her long hair by morning – if she didn't, they warned, "Angkar" (the Organisation) would cut it for her. *"My grandma kept the hair, at that time, because it was something precious to us both. But, eventually, it would be cast aside somewhere along the way as our situation became more desperate and there was no sense in keeping hold of such things."*

The family were eventually transported again to Battambang, moved on trucks that rumbled through the centre of an eerily silent Phnom Penh. Peering through small holes in the canvas, Sopheap and her cousins saw no civilians at all – only a few scattered soldiers.

She recalled, with tears in her eyes, the final stage of their journey: a five-kilometre walk through dense forest. Her aunt, weakened by exhaustion and hunger, struggled to clear space and build a makeshift shelter where the children could sleep. *"She struggled so much – and I didn't help her. I was so young, I was just a child. But I truly have so much regret about this moment."*

Once in Battambang, the family were forced into hard labour, transplanting rice seedlings under the burning sun with barely enough food to survive. Near the time of the

regime's collapse, Sopheap was so weak on the journey back toward the capital that she collapsed and was taken in by a family along the roadside. Too exhausted to continue, she soon faced further danger when a man in the household tried to grab her in bed. Once again, it was her aunt who intervened and got her to safety.

Her aunt also shielded the family from other threats. She refused offers of food and transport from passing convoys of Vietnamese soldiers when it became clear these came with demands for sexual favours from the young women. Instead, she tried to catch fish to provide enough sustenance for them all. By the time the Vietnamese army drove out the Khmer Rouge in 1979, Sopheap was a teenager who had witnessed famine, violence, and the depths of human cruelty. Her first days and weeks in the capital were spent sheltering from the rain under Chroy Changvar bridge, until her aunt managed to trace some relatives who were able to help her to find work at the Soviet hospital.

While now behind her, Sopheap explained to us how those formative years of upheaval instilled in her a visceral understanding of insecurity and injustice. This understanding would later fuel her conviction that peace is only realised alongside the presence of safety and dignity in daily life.





Photo: Sopheap during her self-access learning session at RUPP in Year 2, 1992.
Personal photo, shared with permission.



Photo: Sopheap at her home during an interview in 2025. Photo by Khleang Molynin, WPM.



Photo: Sopheap speaking at a CSO workshop on Advancing the WPS Agenda, 2025.
Photo by Khleang Molynin, WPM.

FROM SURVIVAL TO OPPORTUNITY

In the 1980s, as Cambodia began rebuilding under a new Vietnam-backed socialist government, Sopheap fought against the odds to pursue her education. She earned a place in a government training program and moved to central Phnom Penh, where she studied a Vietnamese-taught course in socialist and communist political theory at what is now the Institute of Foreign Languages.

She was one of only three young women in a cohort of two dozen students. “We were so hungry,” she remembered of those years, “we all had to eat communally from the same dish, but I could never eat my fill because I was surrounded by men... dipping their rice and soup bowls until there was no more” – a vivid illustration of how even daily survival was shaped by gender dynamics. “The community where we were staying during the early reconstruction period, [now the site of a large golden tower on Sihanouk and Monivong Boulevard] was not safe for young women. But we were lucky.”

After completing her studies, Sopheap was assigned to the state press agency SPK (now the Ministry of Information). There she trained as a photojournalist, even traveling to Ho Chi Minh City to learn darkroom techniques. By the mid-1980s she was a rare female technician in a male-dominated field, developing photographs in a Soviet-built lab and bringing the skills of colour photography back to Cambodia. Yet as the country transitioned in the early 1990s, influenced by the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements and the United Nations mission that followed, Sopheap found herself drawn away from government service and toward the emerging civil society movement.

FINDING HER VOICE

Sopheap’s turning point came in the mid-1990s, when she took part in a pioneering study on domestic violence. In 1995, a time when few dared to even acknowledge the issue, she joined a small team of researchers conducting Cambodia’s first-ever national survey on domestic abuse.¹

“I stayed with communities for six months and spoke to many women,” she later explained. “Then I got to understand the situation of women in abusive families. Before, I had asked myself why women and children stayed with violent husbands or fathers. There are many factors, including social norms and the inequality between men and women.”²

Travelling to remote villages – sometimes wading through knee-deep water or walking along dirt paths at night – Sopheap slowly gained the trust of rural women. However, her determination in carrying out this work often put her at risk. “I went to Battambang, and the journey from Phnom Penh was not safe. There was widespread illegal smuggling at that time, of timber and ancient relics.”

Sopheap explained to us how this environment made men challenge her, questioning her decision: “They would ask me, ‘why are you so daring, coming here? This is dangerous.’” But her reply to them was resolute: “I said, ‘Look, I have the same skin colour as you. Cambodia is not just Phnom Penh – it is also Battambang and other places.’ I said, ‘Look at the foreigners: they come alone, they don’t speak the language, they don’t have the same culture or food. But they come here and work with us. So why not me?’”

What she uncovered was an epidemic of gender-based violence hidden behind cultural silence. Sopheap saw how Cambodian women and girls were systematically treated as second-class citizens – denied schooling, healthcare, and legal protection – and how those inequalities perpetuated cycles of abuse. *“For women far from towns and villages, the problem was so much worse, and they were left to try and survive without support.”*

Her determination and resolve to reach the most vulnerable women was evident in the conditions of her fieldwork: *“We just walked there. We walked through water, we walked at night. I don’t know how I was so brave doing all these things,”* she laughed. *“I stayed in a very basic guesthouse, without even a lock. But I didn’t feel scared at all. I felt like this is my world.”*

Through this work, it became clear to her that true peace in Cambodia would never be achieved as long as women were unsafe in their own homes. Armed with this insight, she resolved to devote herself to advancing women’s rights.

THE GENDER AGENDA

In 2000, Sopheap turned that resolve into action by founding Gender and Development for Cambodia (GADC), the non-governmental and non-political organisation that would become her life’s work. GADC began as a small project focused on gender training, growing out of the pilot initiatives where Sopheap had been a coordinator since 1997.³ She, along with her husband and a few like-minded colleagues set up the NGO at a time when the term “gender” was still new in the Cambodian lexicon.

“Before GADC, no one talked about gender. [There were] no documents about gender in Khmer,” Sopheap later recalled. “And when

people talked about gender, GADC would be the first to come into their minds.”^[4] In those early years, her goals were ambitious but urgent: to break the silence around domestic violence, to press for legal protections for women, and to challenge deep-seated norms like the *Chbab Srey*, the traditional code of conduct for women that for generations had taught wives to obey and endure in silence. GADC’s mission crystallised around preventing violence against women and empowering women to take on leadership roles – especially young women who could carry the movement forward.⁵

Under Sopheap’s leadership, the organisation provided some of the first Khmer-language resources on gender equality, trained local officials and police on women’s rights, and worked directly with communities to shift attitudes. GADC staff and volunteers travelled village to village holding workshops, public forums, and even informal ‘gender cafes’ – safe spaces where women could gather to discuss challenges like domestic abuse, sexual harassment, or the pressures of migration for work.⁶ These meetings gave women a rare chance to share experiences and collectively seek solutions, planting the seeds of a grassroots sisterhood.

Sopheap quickly realised that achieving gender justice meant enlisting not only women and girls, but men and boys as allies. In the early 2000s, GADC helped establish the Cambodian Men’s Network (CMN) – a coalition of male volunteers, from tuk-tuk drivers to monks – who pledged to speak out against violence in their families and communities.⁷ Over time, this network grew to include hundreds of men across different provinces. They facilitated dialogues with other men about healthy masculinity, respect for women’s rights, and the harm caused by patriarchal norms.



Photo: Sopheap reflects on her 1994 graduation ceremony from the Institute of Foreign Languages, Royal University of Phnom Penh. Personal photo, shared with permission.



Photo: Sopheap at her home during an interview in 2025. Photo by Khleang Molynin, WPM.

At the same time, Sopheap's team worked to bring together survivors of violence to support one another and advocate for better enforcement of laws. By creating these networks, Sopheap was nurturing a broader movement – one that went beyond a single organisation and toward a whole-of-society change. *"We've been involved in changing people's attitudes and perceptions so that they understand the potential of women in contributing to social development,"* she explained of GADC's role.⁸

This movement-building paid off in tangible victories. In 2005, Cambodia enacted its first Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and the Protection of Victims ('DV Law'), a milestone that women's rights groups had long pushed for.⁹ Sopheap and GADC were among the civil society voices that consulted on and advocated for the law's passage, presenting it as a crucial step toward fostering a culture of non-violence and harmony within households. She recalled with a laugh how, at the time, she was busily lobbying decision-makers while also juggling the practical challenges of caring for a newborn baby.

In the years that followed, GADC also contributed to the development of the National Action Plans to End Violence Against Women, and dozens of campaigns to change public attitudes and behaviours. Leading an NGO in Cambodia, however, was never without challenges. As the political environment grew more restrictive in the 2010s, activists had to learn to navigate carefully. Sopheap became known for her principled yet pragmatic approach. *"We have to be flexible and work according to the political situation, but we are not partisan,"* she explained, noting that GADC always grounded its advocacy in Cambodia's international commitments.¹⁰ Local authorities did not always welcome women's rights work – GADC field teams

sometimes faced suspicion or bureaucratic obstacles when trying to hold forums in provincial towns – but Sopheap persisted by building relationships. She engaged Ministry of Women's Affairs officials as partners and routinely invited police and commune chiefs to GADC training, rather than casting them as adversaries.

Over the years, this steady engagement earned her a reputation as a bridge-builder. *"Tactical openness can be strategic,"* she told us, reflecting on her leadership philosophy. *"Building relationships with decision-makers is a form of peacebuilding."* In other words, by keeping dialogue open even with those in power, Sopheap believed she could slowly chip away at resistance and secure incremental gains for women.

CHANGING THE RULES

Her willingness to engage with the establishment did not mean shying away from sensitive issues. Sopheap has consistently spoken out against harmful social norms. A notable example was her outspoken critique of the Chbab Srey. This centuries-old code of conduct for women was officially removed from the school curriculum in 2007, but continues to be informally taught and remains culturally influential.¹¹ Sopheap, who had been made to memorise the Chbab Srey as a girl, has long argued that such proverbs belong in a museum, not modern society. *"It's out of date. We need to redefine these rules and practices,"* she told VOA Khmer in 2021.¹²

In her view, dismantling these outdated gender rules is essential to ending violence. She often points out that Cambodian women internalise these lessons of submissiveness from a young age, which makes it harder for them to recognise abuse or demand better treatment. True peace, Sopheap argues, requires unlearning the idea that women

must 'endure' for the sake of family honor. As she put it plainly: *"Societies that treat women unequally to men are unable to develop and flourish."*¹³

Under Sopheap's stewardship, GADC also championed women's participation in public decision-making – another front in the struggle for a just peace. *"If [women] are in leadership positions, they can bring the voice of women into decisions,"* Sopheap contends.¹⁴ At the community level, having women on commune councils or as village chiefs makes a concrete difference: issues like domestic violence or sexual assault, which might be ignored by all-male leadership, are more likely to be addressed when a woman has a seat at the table.

Sopheap has tirelessly encouraged women to take up these roles and has run programs to train young women in leadership and public speaking. She is particularly passionate about mentoring the next generation. *"For me, I don't look at famous or high-level [figures] for inspiration. I am inspired by female leaders at the grassroots,"* she once told the World Bank on International Women's Day. *"Young women...are another inspiration. We need to pay more attention, give more support, and open space for them to exercise their talent."*¹⁵ This faith in youth is evident in GADC's initiatives to form youth clubs and include university students in advocacy campaigns. Many of Cambodia's emerging women activists have crossed paths with Sopheap or been trained by GADC at some point – a testament to her movement-building legacy.

A PEACE BUILT AT HOME

After more than 20 years at the helm of GADC, Sopheap stepped down as executive director in 2021. In a symbolic passing of the torch, she was succeeded by a younger feminist activist, Eng Chandy, whom Sopheap had mentored for leadership. Stepping away from day-to-day management has allowed Sopheap to reflect on both the progress and remaining challenges in her lifelong cause. For instance, topics once taboo – marital rape, sexual harassment, women's political rights – are now part of the national conversation, thanks in no small part to her and her peers' advocacy. Women in Cambodia today are far more likely to know their rights and to speak out.

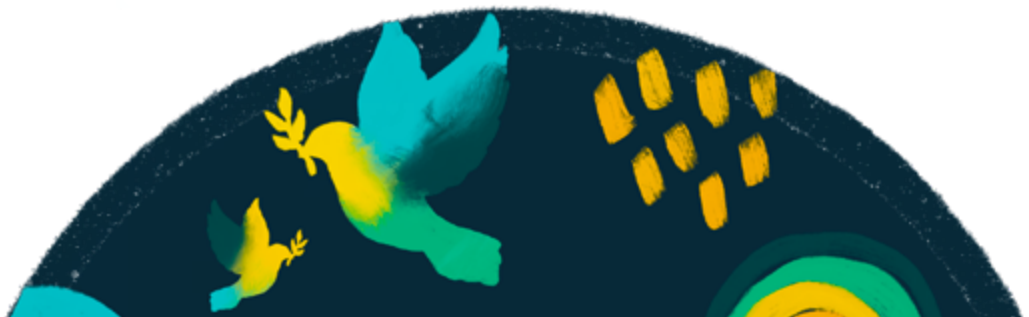
Towards the end of our conversation, Sopheap shared with us a story from a rural village in Kampong Chhnang, where GADC had run a gender programme. One evening, tensions flared between a woman and her husband over cooking dinner. Upon confronting her husband, who was drinking with neighbours, the wife was slapped hard by her brother who was also present. Witnessing this, her six-year-old daughter ran to a nearby home where women from the programme's core group lived, and called for help. *"Om, Om! Aunty! Aunty!"* she yelled to them, *"Come quick!"* The women intervened and facilitated a group discussion. Sopheap reflected that in her generation, children witnessing violence felt powerless and remained silent, but she was certain that this young girl had learned from sitting with her mother in village meetings – showing how even children, especially girls, can play a role in peacebuilding.

Sopheap's decades of activism have left an indelible mark. In recognition of her contributions, she has been invited to serve on advisory boards (in 2021, she joined the board of the Harpswell Foundation,

which educates young women leaders) and she continues to share her expertise informally with Cambodia's women's rights community. Sopheap's work with GADC was so significant that in 2019, she recognised as one of the world's 100 most influential people working in gender policy.¹⁶

Ask her what true peace looks like, and Sopheap does not speak of high-level treaties or ceasefires. She speaks of families and villages where women are safe, respected, and free to reach their potential: *"When violence is eradicated, the family will be in harmony, the community will be at peace, and the society will be prosperous,"* she says simply.¹⁷ For Sopheap, peace is profoundly personal. Never forgetting the forced labour and rice fields of her war-torn childhood, she explained to us how peace is woven into the everyday lives of women and girls. And through her unwavering commitment to gender equality, she has helped countless Cambodians move closer to that vision of transformative peace, grounded in human security.





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Chapter 3 – **KHUS THIDA:** Cambodia's trailblazing feminist peacebuilder



Photo: Thida captured in 2015, by UN Women Asia-Pacific, Creative Commons licence: CC-BY-NC-ND 2.0

EARLY LIFE IN TURBULENT TIMES

Thida Khus's journey began amidst the upheaval of Cambodia's civil war and genocide, experiences that would later fuel her passion for peace. In April 1975, as the Khmer Rouge seized control of the capital, Thida was in neighboring Thailand – a twist of fate that spared her from the atrocities unfolding back home. Cut off from her country and family when the borders were sealed, she spent agonising years with no news, unable to learn the full extent of the suffering her loved ones endured.

When the Khmer Rouge regime was ousted in 1979, Thida immediately sprang into action to help her people. She took a job with the refugee service at the American Embassy in Bangkok, hoping it might lead her to her missing family. In this role, she witnessed the dire conditions Cambodian refugees faced – malnourished, traumatised survivors of the genocide crowding the camps. Thida vividly recalled the shock of recognising her own relatives among the displaced: *“all had big stomachs, dirty clothes, red hair from malnourishment, and were very skinny.”*¹ Seeing her family in such a state was a life-changing moment. Years later, Thida explained, *“My mother and my sisters all came across the border, and we helped them settle in France as refugees,”* reuniting her own family even as she worked to assist others. The refugees in the camps became her extended family, and in helping them she found a new sense of purpose.

During this period, Thida says she learned a profound lesson about humanity and empathy. She once admitted that she had previously thought that poverty was due to personal failings; now she understood that far greater forces shape people's lives. Determined to make a difference, she threw

herself into advocacy on behalf of the refugees. She worked tirelessly to stop the forced repatriation of Cambodians from Thai camps back into unsafe conditions, lobbying Thai authorities to treat refugees humanely. She and her team compiled names of refugees who had family abroad and pressed foreign embassies to acknowledge the crisis and offer resettlement, saving lives in the process.

These early acts of courage and compassion earned Thida the trust of her fellow Cambodians in exile – they began to look to the young woman as a leader, even as she initially doubted herself. In traditional Khmer culture, women of Thida's generation were taught to be quiet and deferential. Yet the harrowing sights of the camps compelled her to defy cultural norms and step forward as an activist. Against the expectations of her upbringing, she embraced the mantle of leadership, driven by the belief that even in the face of immense suffering, Cambodians could rebuild their nation through peace and justice.

Throughout the 1980s, Thida took this mission to the United States, where she had resettled with her young children as refugees. During more than a decade abroad, she organised refugee resettlement services and led community and coalition-building work for diaspora communities. She also pursued her education and gained exposure to democratic processes during this time, but never lost sight of her homeland's plight.² By the early 1990s, as Cambodia's civil war drew to a close, Thida felt called to return and contribute to her country's healing. *“Whether or not I was involved, the decisions of policy makers affected my life. I was not exempt,”* she later reflected, underscoring why she chose to engage in public life.³ In 1992, just as a United Nations peacekeeping mission began overseeing Cambodia's transition, Thida came back to

Cambodia, armed with skills, education, and an unshakeable resolve to help rebuild a peaceful society.

REBUILDING A NATION AND A VOICE FOR WOMEN

Returning to a homeland still recovering from years of conflict, Thida immediately recognised that Cambodia was in need not only of physical reconstruction, but also of human capacity. The Khmer Rouge genocide and subsequent turmoil had decimated Cambodia's institutions and wiped out much of its educated class. In response, Thida spearheaded a volunteer initiative to fill the country's knowledge gap. She rallied Cambodian-American professionals and other members of the diaspora to return and serve, launching a program that placed volunteer teachers and advisors in universities, government ministries, and nascent civil society groups.

These volunteers trained local people in everything from public administration to curriculum development, helping lay the groundwork for Cambodia's post-war recovery. Thida's effort was among the first to bridge the Cambodian diaspora's expertise with on-the-ground needs, demonstrating her knack for innovative, people-centred peacebuilding. Through sharing skills and empowering others, she planted the seeds for a stronger civil society that could advocate for peace and good governance.

Crucially, Thida understood that a durable peace in Cambodia required ordinary citizens – especially women – to have a voice in shaping the country's future. In 1993, as Cambodia prepared for its first democratic elections in decades, tensions ran high. Political violence and intimidation were rampant, threatening to derail the fragile

peace process. Thida joined a coalition of peace activists and Buddhist leaders determined to ensure the elections would be free of bloodshed.

Operating out of the simplest of makeshift offices – “we started with only one computer at my house,” she later recalled – Thida helped organise activities around the now-famous Dhammayietra peace marches.⁴ Under the guidance of revered monk Samdech Maha Ghosananda, these ‘pilgrimages of truth’ saw monks, nuns, and laypeople walking across Cambodia carrying banners of peace. Thida and a network of mainly women activists handled the logistics behind the scenes for a range of activities in support of the marches, galvanising thousands of citizens to join the marches and demand non-violence. As she told us:

“The marches were initiated to help bring about calm before the election. People everywhere were very worried there would be conflict, as there were so many [political] contenders. It was about trying to help people overcome their fears, and the marches helped to bring about hope.”

Many people who had stored food at home to prepare for war, instead offered it to monks.”

Their efforts had an extraordinary impact. The sight of multitudes walking for peace helped dispel the climate of fear that hung over the election. Despite over 100 political killings during the campaign period, polling days unfolded with relatively little violence – a testament to the grassroots pressure for a

peaceful process.^{5,6} The presence of the UN peacekeepers (UNTAC) gave civil society some breathing room to mobilise, and, in the end, the 1993 elections proceeded and Cambodia began a new chapter, partly thanks to these women-led peace actions that emboldened people to stand up against violence.

Thida, however, soon realised that creating lasting change would require more than protests and short-term mobilisation. *“When I came back to Cambodia I had to think about not just marching and mobilising – how can we create change in the long term?”* she reflected. Peace promotion alone was not enough. She and her colleagues began investing in youth training, education, and awareness-raising about the importance of promoting women in decision-making.

Building alliances was key. Thida explained, *“We made alliances with women’s groups in the CPP [Cambodian People’s Party] branch, and with women’s leaders at the commune, district, provincial level. Cross-party.”* The work was difficult. Men were unwilling to give up their positions, often expecting women to do community outreach and social work while keeping decision-making power to themselves. As she put it, *“Men like to have women do the dirty work for them... But when it came to actual decision-making, they did not want women to occupy this role.”*



For Thida, ensuring women’s political participation was a vital part of peacebuilding:

“We believed that

women taking up these roles is one form of building peace.”

Women bear the burden, they are much more connected with the community, and they are more emotionally attuned to women facing abuse or weighed down by unpaid care work.”

Her approach to increasing women’s representation was methodical. *“We approached it as a project plan – so women could compete with the men getting money to use in their own projects,”* she recalled. She and her colleagues pressured political parties to ensure women were placed high enough on candidate lists to win seats. *“It was a huge challenge, getting women put higher up on lists,”* she explained.

This long-term strategy extended beyond party lists. Thida and her networks trained women inside political parties, supported them in confronting struggles, and engaged youth in political and social arenas. They also worked on election monitoring and organised a women’s congress that brought grassroots women together with national leaders to share the issues confronting them directly.

Through this deep and prolonged effort, Thida helped to carve out space for women in Cambodian political life, laying the foundations for a more inclusive vision of peace. Her leadership in the 1993 peace

movement and her work to enhance women's early political representation also segued into a historic push for women's rights and democratic freedoms in the new Cambodia. After the elections, as a new constitution was being drafted by the elected National Assembly, Thida and other women activists saw a once-in-a-lifetime chance to enshrine human rights and gender equality into the nation's fundamental law.

Thida became an active member of an ad-hoc women's coalition that lobbied the National Assembly to adopt a liberal, inclusive constitution. They held public forums, drafted proposals, and met with sympathetic parliamentarians daily. *"We would gather... and discuss what we wanted to see in the constitution... then meet with members of parliament every day and talk with them about our ideas,"* Thida recalled.⁶ The activists focused on guaranteeing equal rights and fundamental freedoms – freedom of expression, association, and assembly – and they did not relent until these principles were included:

"I facilitated and supported many Cambodians to provide input, and we did a lot of activities at that time trying to influence the way that the Constitution was drafted. We wanted to see a wide range of Cambodians involved in its making, and so we held a lot of demonstrations and other activities to try to influence the Constitutional Council at that time."

Their persistence paid off. When Cambodia's new Constitution was promulgated, it was heralded as one of the most progressive in Asia, guaranteeing a broad range of rights for all citizens. Their small civil society group had studied different nations' charters, organised community dialogues in the provinces, and staged demonstrations – and the result was a charter that enshrined

gender equality and human rights in line with Cambodia's aspirations for peace. This was a seminal achievement for the feminist peacebuilders: it created a legal foundation on which future struggles for justice could stand. Thida's role in this process cemented her reputation as a bridge-builder between grassroots voices and national policy. It also taught her an invaluable lesson: with solidarity, strategy, and courage, even those traditionally excluded from power, such as women in a patriarchal society, can shape the destiny of their country.

“Before, men saw women only as people who cook and feed and serve them. But now they could see that women have the capacity to work for the benefit of society. We were the ones who planted those seeds.”



Photo: Thida captured by the media in Phnom Penh in 2016. Photo by Siv Channa for the Cambodia Daily, shared with permission.



Photo: Thida speaking at a workshop on increasing women's political participation in 2014. Photo by SILAKA, shared with permission.



Photo: Thida speaking at a press conference on gender and food security, in 2005. Photo by SILAKA, shared with permission.



Photo: Thida featuring in a photography exhibition celebrating the lives of Cambodian peacebuilders. Photo by Cambodia Peace Gallery, shared with permission.

BEIJING 1995: A GLOBAL STAGE FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

By the mid-1990s, Thida had emerged as one of Cambodia's most dynamic leaders of the burgeoning women's rights movement. When the United Nations convened the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 – a landmark gathering that brought together over 17,000 participants and 30,000 activists – it became a watershed moment for the international feminist movement. The resulting Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the most ambitious global blueprint for women's rights ever adopted, resonated deeply with women activists across Cambodia, including Thida. For Thida, the Platform's recognition of the links between peace and gender justice affirmed the work she had long been advancing in Cambodia. It outlined 12 critical areas – from women's participation in decision-making to education, violence, and armed conflict – where governments around the world committed to act. While inspired by the global momentum, Thida also recognised the challenges of turning international frameworks into meaningful change on the ground.

"It was amazing to me that the world had set up a mechanism like Beijing. And also, CEDAW meetings in New York at the UN. It was amazing that the world organisation has put a system in place, a framework for us to work within and advocate for women's rights."

Ever pragmatic, she spoke publicly about the need to translate these frameworks into Cambodian reality. *"I was thrilled to have this framework that we can work with,"* she said of the Beijing Declaration, *"but then at the local level, making these links from global to local was very challenging... especially when we had to work with so many actors*

from different parts of society." This only strengthened Thida's resolve to keep the momentum alive at the grassroots level. She would go on to organise workshops and dissemination campaigns about the Beijing commitments, encouraging Cambodian women's groups to use this global framework to hold their leaders accountable.

BUILDING INSTITUTIONS FOR PEACE AND GENDER JUSTICE

Throughout the late 1990s, Thida entered an incredibly productive phase of institution-building and advocacy in Cambodia. In 1997, she co-founded SILAKA, a non-profit organisation that would become a cornerstone of Cambodia's civil society. SILAKA (a Khmer word meaning 'stone foundation') was established as a training and capacity-building centre to strengthen other NGOs, government agencies, and community groups. Thida's vision was to empower Cambodian women and men with the skills and knowledge to sustain peace and development themselves.

Under her leadership as Executive Director, SILAKA offered courses in strategic planning, project management, leadership, and gender mainstreaming.⁶ Importantly, SILAKA put women at the heart of its mission, focusing on gender equity and accountability in every program. Through SILAKA, Thida helped professionalise the NGO sector in the late 1990s and early 2000s, training a generation of civic leaders (many of them women) in effective advocacy. This work quietly amplified the impact of countless grassroots initiatives – from community peacebuilding projects to anti-corruption efforts – thereby fortifying Cambodia's social fabric for peace.

At the same time, Thida was a driving force behind new coalitions pushing for women's leadership in politics. In the early 2000s, she

helped establish the Committee to Promote Women in Politics (CPWP), a multi-NGO alliance dedicated to boosting women's representation at all levels of government.⁷ As CPWP's Secretary-General (and at times Chair), Thida spearheaded campaigns to recruit, train, and support women candidates in elections. This was no easy task in a society where, as she recounted, *"men used scare tactics to convince us that politics was not for women"*.⁸ Many women themselves internalised the idea that their role was only behind the scenes.

Thida and CPWP tackled these barriers through nationwide workshops and public forums, directly challenging gender stereotypes. They emphasised that having more women in office would lead to policies prioritising social welfare – a compelling argument in a post-conflict nation where high numbers of widows and single mothers struggled to raise families.

More important than the numbers, she insists, is that those women who do get elected truly use their voice: *"A key reason to have more women in politics is so that they can be models for others"* she explained. *"We have to make women politicians and decision makers see that they are doing things not just for themselves, but for other women, and for the good of society."*

To that end, CPWP under Thida's leadership invested heavily in mentoring female officials and building their capacity to influence policy. She built solidarity among women across party lines and sectors, convening them to articulate shared agendas for gender equality.

Thida's advocacy extended to combating violence against women and challenging deep-seated cultural norms. She worked with other women's NGOs – like Gender and Development for Cambodia (GADC) and

NGO CEDAW – to push for stronger laws and services to protect women, while also supporting community education to end the culture of silence around gender-based violence. She became a mentor to a younger generation of feminist activists, sharing her journey and encouraging them to question harmful traditions like the Chbab Srey (the traditional code of conduct for women). Always, Thida has led by example: proudly declaring herself a feminist in a society where that term is often misunderstood, and standing tall in the face of backlash.

A LASTING LEGACY OF PEACE AND EQUALITY

Today, Thida Khus is widely revered as an icon of peacebuilding and women's empowerment in Cambodia. Over more than three decades, she has worn many hats – refugee advocate, volunteer coordinator, peace marcher, NGO founder, political mentor, and global ambassador for equality – yet her mission has remained constant: to restore the voice and agency of those silenced by violence and oppression. Her impact can be seen in the stronger female leadership that exists in Cambodia today. In recognition of her work, she was named one of the *"1000 Peace Women"* nominated collectively for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005.⁹

Alongside her leadership of SILAKA, Thida also played a broader regional role. As Cambodian President of the ASEAN People's Forum (APF), Southeast Asia's largest civil society conference, she worked to elevate grassroots voices – especially those of women and youth – into ASEAN-level discussions on peace, rights, and security.¹⁰ Whether in a village meeting or on the global stage, she has brought the same qualities to the table: integrity, determination, and a collaborative spirit.

When we interviewed Thida, border tensions between Cambodia and Thailand were at their height. A full-scale war was threatening to break out, and thousands of people were displaced in search of safety. Reflecting on the crisis, she said: *"This current crisis is an opportunity for women to show how we can bring a culture of care for one another. Together, we can show that the majority of people do not like violence. It is only the decision of a few."*

For Thida, reflecting on the legacy and devastation of past wars, moments of crisis reveal both risks and possibilities. *"While there is a crisis like this, there is an opportunity. But work to build trust between people across borders, and the building of a peaceful mind, needs to be done in advance. [In the 1970s, the] Khmer Rouge destroyed not only social structures, but the belief in society, morality, and trust between people. Trust is what is most important, especially for young people"*

She emphasised that women's insecurity was heightened in contexts of displacement and land loss, invoking the Protection pillar of the WPS Agenda: *"Women who are displaced now are vulnerable, and more at risk of rape and violence. And*

"if women lose their land tenure, then they lose all sense of security. That's why justice is fundamental, foundational to peace."

Looking to the future, Thida remains both optimistic and realistic. She knows the path to equality and peace is long and uneven, yet her life proves that change is possible even in the most difficult circumstances. She places her faith in the next generation: *"Everything must come from the youth. We must believe that young people will have the drive and the skills and see that it's in everyone's benefit to share the power."* She often urges young Cambodians to be self-critical, reflective, and unafraid of questioning assumptions, seeing this as the foundation for building a more just future.

When asked what she is proudest of in her journey, Thida replied: *"I was proud that I mobilised people to believe in themselves, and to start doing things together, to walk across party lines."* That simple reflection captures the essence of her legacy: uniting Cambodians beyond political divides to build a more peaceful, equal future.



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Chapter 4 – **KEAT BOPHAL**

**Building peace through justice
and rights**



Photo: Bophal pictured during an interview at the WPM office in Phnom Penh, 2025. Photo by Khleang Molyrith, WPM.

Keat Bophal's journey as a peacebuilder began in the tumultuous aftermath of Cambodia's conflicts. Like many Cambodians of her generation, she grew up under the long shadows of the Khmer Rouge era and its violent legacy. *"Even after the Khmer Rouge time, there was a civil war. The conflict was ongoing and so my parents were living in fear – we all were. My childhood was full of fear and insecurity,"* she recalled of her early years.

Yet, even amid the fear, Bophal found purpose. She had always dreamed of being a journalist and longed to go to university, but opportunities were scarce. *"There were no universities in the province,"* she recalled. *"And my parents couldn't afford to send me."* Her mother hoped she would follow in her footsteps and learn tailoring: *"She wanted me to learn to sew, so I could become a tailor like her,"* Bophal explained.

On top of financial hardship, there were powerful social norms that limited young women's paths. *"Men who travelled to the city to study could stay at the pagoda,"* she noted, *"but for women there needed to be a trusted relative. There were so many barriers for rural young women at that time."* While the opportunity to study remained closed to Bophal during these years, when the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) arrived in the country in the early 1990s, Bophal jumped at the chance to work on the UN-sponsored elections that were part of Cambodia's peace process.

By then in her late teens, she travelled across rural villages throughout the country as a voter registration worker, and recalls witnessing a nation yearning for democracy. *"It was amazing to see people come and vote. Everyone was struggling, yes, but we saw a lot of hope from people..."* she said of that time. *"I had wanted to make a living to support my parents, but now I also wanted to be engaged in something meaningful."*

That sense of mission set her on the path of law and human rights. Determined to help rebuild her country on a foundation of justice, by the mid-1990s Bophal joined what is now the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Cambodia – making her one of the few Cambodians at that time to work for the UN in a human rights capacity. Originally hired as a receptionist, her role quickly expanded significantly in scope and responsibilities, in ways that would challenge and define her.

Indeed, Bophal's early human rights work was intense and wide-ranging. She told us how she regularly received complaints of rights violations – the majority committed by armed officials. *"At that time, there were still a lot of guns and other arms,"* she recalled. *"Most complaints were against people in uniform, especially the armed forces."* In response, she helped deliver human rights training to prison guards and law enforcement, often acting as translator for the foreign human rights advisor Christophe Peschoux, who – seeing her clear potential – would go on to become her friend and mentor. *"It wasn't in my job description, but I did it because it needed to be done,"* she said.

Concerns about detention practices and reports of unlawful deaths were significant issues at that time, and she soon found herself involved in monitoring detention conditions in remote prisons, as well as supporting investigations into human rights concerns. Before long, her colleagues promoted her to an assistant, recognising her initiative and skill. Because she could drive, she travelled widely across the province in a UN pickup truck. *"The roads weren't yet repaired,"* she explained. *"I had to drive through mud and debris from Kampong Cham to the Vietnamese border, to a T5 prison... it would take four to five hours."*

The mid-1990s were a volatile time, marked by land conflict and episodes of political violence. In 1997, incidents involving FUNCINPEC officials were reported, including accounts of bodies being found in rubber plantations.¹ Bophal wasn't deterred. *"I wasn't afraid. I liked this kind of investigation work,"* she said. On one mission with a BBC crew, she drove Christophe, who would later lead OHCHR's Cambodia office, to suspected burial sites in the plantations. Impressed again by her capability, he later asked her to join the investigations team in Phnom Penh.

"I said yes right away," Bophal recalled. *"There were hardly any women, especially Khmer women, in human rights work. I wanted to continue learning – and I wanted to study."* In 1999, once the Phnom Penh team was formalised, she took the job and enrolled in law school at the Royal University of Law and Economics (RULE). *"I studied at night, and worked during the day,"* she said. *"My colleagues mentored me, and they became like my best friends. They saw something in me. I had never had encouragement like that before."*

In a deeply patriarchal society, she knew how rare it was to be recognised as a woman in the field. *"People didn't want to see a woman doing this kind of work. It wasn't valued,"* she said. Still, she thrived. With strong on-the-job training, she gained experience monitoring civil and political rights, from protest crackdowns to prison conditions. Studying international human rights law while applying it daily gave her the tools and confidence to chart her own path forward.

During roughly a decade with OHCHR, Bophal immersed herself in efforts to promote and protect fundamental rights across the country. She worked on initiatives to combat human trafficking and gender-

based violence, helped monitor elections, and supported grassroots human rights defenders. It was a broad portfolio that exposed her to Cambodia's toughest social challenges – from protecting vulnerable women and children to assisting in fair election processes – all under a framework of strengthening the rule of law.

This experience grounded Bophal in a human-security approach to peacebuilding: she came to see that true peace requires safety and dignity in daily life. Much of her work in those years was behind the scenes: training local NGOs, advising on new laws, and coordinating with government officials on reforms. In a 2002 briefing, for instance, Bophal was noted among experts highlighting threats faced by community activists and pushing for stronger protections.² Through these efforts, she earned a reputation for diligence and empathy – someone equally comfortable speaking at a high-level meeting or sitting in a rural community listening to villagers' concerns.

Even as a young professional, however, Bophal had to constantly overcome skepticism in a male-dominated arena. *"I knew how people perceived me... I was being undermined,"* she remembered, noting that some colleagues *"looked at me like I knew nothing at all."* But she refused to be deterred. *"I just kept going along my own path and taking the support where I could,"* Bophal said of those early OHCHR years. Encouraged by a few mentors – including a woman OHCHR director who sent her abroad for training – she steadily rose through the ranks.

By the early 2000s, Cambodia was at a crossroads: the wounds of the past were still unhealed even as new human rights challenges emerged. Bophal understood that peace demanded both remembering



Photo: Bhopal in 2000, meeting representatives from an Indigenous community engaged in a land dispute in Bokeo district, Rattanakiri province. Personal photo, shared with permission.



Photo: Bhopal speaking at an OHCHR human rights awareness training conducted for military personnel in Kampong Cham province, 1999. Personal photo, shared with permission.



Photo: Bhopal and a colleague pictured in 2002 with the late King Norodom Sihanouk and Queen Mother Norodom Monineath, during an audience granted to representatives of an Indigenous community affected by a land dispute. Personal photo, shared with permission.

the past and improving the present. This understanding set the stage for the role that would make her an icon of peacebuilding in Cambodia – bridging her human rights expertise with the country’s quest for justice after genocide.

GIVING KHMER ROUGE VICTIMS A VOICE

In 2006, the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) – commonly known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal – was established to try senior leaders of the 1975-79 regime for atrocities.³ From the outset, the tribunal was envisioned not only as a mechanism of justice but also as a means for national healing. A unique feature of the ECCC was that it allowed victims of Khmer Rouge crimes to participate directly in the proceedings as civil parties.⁴ Bophal was tapped to head the new Victims Unit of the ECCC, becoming the lead Cambodian official responsible for making this unprecedented victim participation scheme a reality.

Taking on this role in 2007, Bophal faced the daunting task of reaching out to thousands of survivors scattered across Cambodia – many in remote villages – and informing them that they had the right to be part of these landmark trials. She approached the mission with characteristic humility and determination. Bophal and her team coordinated with civil society groups and local authorities, holding community forums to explain how to file complaints and applications to the tribunal.

Often traveling across dusty roads to remote provinces, she listened as elderly survivors recounted deeply painful memories. She emphasised that justice was not only about punishing perpetrators but also about acknowledging victims’ suffering and restoring their dignity, telling

us: *“The tribunal was a groundbreaking legal innovation that was designed to help facilitate reconciliation... by providing a means through which victims of the regime could file [complaints] against defendants.”*

Her efforts soon bore fruit. By August 2008, with the support of established civil society organisations like ADHOC, the Victims Unit had already received around 1,800 victim complaints and applications – an early sign of Cambodians’ desire for justice.⁵ It was groundbreaking – for the first time, ordinary survivors could actively participate in a legal process against those accused of the Khmer Rouge’s worst crimes.

When the tribunal’s first trial – of infamous prison chief Kaing Guek Eav, alias “Duch” – approached in 2009, Bophal’s work culminated in an unprecedented inclusion of victims.⁶ Nearly 100 survivors and bereaved family members of prisoners tortured at the S-21 prison (Tuol Sleng) applied to become civil parties in Duch’s trial. These included brothers, sisters and children of people who had been killed at the regime’s Choeung Ek killing fields, Bophal told the press at that time.⁷ In other words, entire families of victims were seeking a voice in court.

Bophal coordinated with lawyers and human rights NGOs (such as the Documentation Center of Cambodia) to ensure each applicant received legal assistance; by the time the trial started, almost all had a lawyer to guide them.⁸ This was a dramatic innovation in international justice – never before had victims been recognised as full parties to a genocide trial in this way. It meant survivors could testify not just about the facts of the crimes, but also about the personal impact those crimes had on their lives.

Inside the courtroom, the moral weight of the survivors’ presence was palpable. As Duch’s trial unfolded, civil party participants

sat in the gallery or took the stand to tell their stories. Bophal's behind-the-scenes coordination helped these brave individuals navigate what was for many an intimidating legal process. While prosecutors and defense attorneys sparred over evidence, Bophal's priority was ensuring that the victims – often farmers or former schoolteachers with little formal education – were treated with respect and sensitivity.

In one instance, a survivor who barely escaped execution at S-21 was able to testify about his experience, adding a powerful human dimension to the trial record.⁹ Such moments underscored what Bophal later stressed was a “*victim-centric*” approach to justice: giving those who suffered a chance to be heard, thereby restoring a measure of agency to people long silenced by trauma.

While her time at the ECCC was relatively brief, Bophal left a lasting mark on the tribunal's legacy. “*She was the first and best possible chief*” of the Victims Support Section, one prominent victims' advocate later wrote, lauding Bophal's dedication and “*caring personality*.”¹⁰ Indeed, the robust victim participation at the ECCC – now hailed as a model for other countries – owes much to the quiet groundwork laid by Bophal. Thanks to her and advocates like her, the pursuit of justice in Cambodia was geared towards integrating survivor healing and reclaiming victims' voices.

For Bophal, the true measure of the ECCC was in how it empowered ordinary people. “*I felt excited to see these older women and men coming to fill out the complaint forms... They'd suffered in silence for many years, so it was good that the process was open to them,*” she told us, reflecting on the tribunal's early outreach. The Khmer Rouge trials, she observed, offered a chance for acknowledgment and healing: “*It wasn't perfect, but at least they fulfilled this*

recognition of the dignity of the victims and survivors, acknowledging their suffering.”

Still, she knew the work of reconciliation would need to extend beyond the courtroom. “*The tribunal was not enough in itself... there is a role for civil society to keep doing this work,*” she cautioned, underscoring the need for ongoing support to victims even after the verdicts.

BROADENING THE PEACEBUILDING LENS

After leaving the tribunal, Bophal did not slow down. She returned to her roots in the human rights field, bringing with her the hard-won lessons of the ECCC. In the following years, she rejoined OHCHR-Cambodia as a Human Rights Officer, focusing on issues that kept people's security and dignity at the forefront. Bophal's passion for justice continued to expand, addressing the interlinked needs of women, communities, and society for lasting peace. This meant tackling everyday injustices that can fuel conflict or dispossession if left unaddressed. One critical area Bophal engaged in was women's access to land and property rights. In Cambodia's post-war development boom, land disputes and forced evictions became a major source of social tension. Women often suffered the worst impacts when communities were displaced – losing not only homes but support networks and safety.¹¹

Bophal spoke out on these issues, appearing at public forums and on radio programs to advocate for gender-equitable land rights. In 2014, for example, she was a panelist alongside grassroots women activists discussing how land grabs were putting women at risk and what could be done to protect women's legal rights to property and housing.¹² She emphasises that empowering



Photos: Bophal pictured during an interview at the WPM office in Phnom Penh, 2025.
Photo by Khleang Molynin, WPM.

women with legal title and a voice in land decisions wasn't just a 'women's issue,' but a peace issue: families and communities are more stable and secure when women are not marginalised.

Echoing the words of grassroots land rights champion Hoy Mai in Chapter 6, Bhopal's consistent message is that peace is built at home and in the community; when a mother can feed her children and live without fear of violence or eviction, the whole society is more stable. In other words, the fight for women's rights to land was also a fight for peace at the most local level:

"In Cambodia, secure land rights are vital for women. For rural and indigenous women, they protect culture and livelihoods; for urban poor women, they provide stability against eviction. Without them, women risk dispossession and exclusion. With secure rights, women gain mobility for education, work, and leadership, enabling them to contribute more fully to development, community well-being. Women's land security is therefore both a gender equality issue and a foundation for social stability and resilience."

Relatedly, Bhopal has become a leading voice on business and human rights (BHR), a relatively new field in Cambodia. As foreign investment and economic growth have brought new opportunities alongside new abuses, she has worked to ensure that development does not trample on human rights. She has conducted research and training on the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and advised on corporate social responsibility standards. This work again reflects her holistic view of peace: economic progress means little if it comes at the cost of exploitation or deepens inequality:

“ To me, human rights are at the core of peace – they are the only foundation for peacebuilding. ”

VOICES AND LEGACIES

Today, Bhopal's influence is woven into the fabric of Cambodia's peace and justice initiatives. After 25 years in national and international service, she continues to contribute as an independent expert and as a mentor to young advocates.

In recent times, she has worked with a range of organisations – including WPM, where she co-authored a groundbreaking 2024 study on statelessness in Cambodia.¹³ That research shed light on people with no citizenship or legal identity – such as ethnic minorities and displaced families – who are often invisible in society. In mapping these hidden populations and recommending reforms, Bhopal has extended her peacebuilding vision to those living at the margins of Cambodian society.

True to form, Bhopal goes about this work with a humility that belies the significance of her contributions. Those who know her describe a steady flame of dedication that has inspired countless others in Cambodia's civil society. But Bhopal is quick to note that she is not unique: *"Many women have played a key role in peacebuilding, but it's rarely recognised,"* she said, emphasising

that women from all walks of life – from land rights defenders to caregivers – have been crucial peacebuilders in Cambodia, even if their efforts remain almost always unsung. In combining legal knowledge, empathy, and quiet resolve, Bophal exemplifies a new kind of leadership born from Cambodia's early peace process in the 1990s.

Her career also carries lessons for the next generation, showing that peace is not achieved only by famous diplomats signing accords, but also by ordinary citizens – especially women – working patiently to change systems and minds over years. It also shows that seeking justice for past crimes can go hand-in-hand with advocating for the living.

Bophal approaches peacebuilding as a continuous spectrum of actions large and small, and always one rooted in human rights and fundamental freedoms:

“Women, caregivers, people with disabilities, and other marginalised groups need to be supported through access to safe and dignified living conditions.”

**Without dignity
and security, it is
impossible for them
to fully enjoy other
rights, such as
access to
education.**

And without tenure security and property rights, there can be no real peace – whether within the family or at the community level.”

As Cambodia continues to face social and political changes, Bophal's voice remains one of reflection and hope. Her journey has taken her from UN field offices, to Geneva, and back into villages – always guided by a deep belief in justice. Through her work, she has consistently demanded that survivors are heard, that justice is meaningful, and that dignity is non-negotiable in Cambodia's path forward.



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Chapter 5 –

YIM SOTHEARY

A trauma-informed peacebuilder



SOTHEARY'S JOURNEY TO HEALING

Yim Sotheary is an accomplished Cambodian psychologist, psychotherapist, leadership coach, and peacebuilder who has devoted two decades to helping her country recover from its darkest chapters. Born in the mid-1980s, she grew up in a society struggling with unspoken grief and shadowy memories. Her own family's experiences – with a father who fought in the post-genocide civil conflict and a mother who raised five children amid hardship – instilled in her a deep understanding of resilience. As Sotheary recalled to us, even though life was extremely difficult for her mother, “I never heard her say ‘I’m stressed’ or ‘it’s too much work.’” Witnessing her mother’s quiet strength, Sotheary says, taught her the value of endurance and hope.

Initially, Sotheary pursued a career in education as a secondary school teacher. But she soon felt a calling to address the emotional wounds left by war. In her early twenties, defying traditional expectations that young women should stay close to home, she took a leap: she joined a trauma counselling project, even convincing her cautious mother that women could travel and work independently. “I’m so proud I was able to push back against social norms, and to prove that young girls can also work far from home,” she said of that time. It was the first of many instances where Sotheary would challenge conventions in order to serve others.

Sotheary went on to become one of the first Cambodians to earn a master’s degree in psychology. From there, she helped pioneer trauma therapy in a country where the concept was still new – a mission greatly accelerated by the opening of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, which brought issues of justice and mental health to the fore.

HEALING TRAUMA AND EMPOWERING SURVIVORS

One of Sotheary’s most significant contributions has been her work with survivors of Khmer Rouge atrocities, particularly women who endured forced marriage and other gender-based violence during the regime. As a clinical psychologist with extensive experience counselling Khmer Rouge survivors, she spent 15 years facilitating self-help groups and therapy for women who were forced into marriages under the regime, creating spaces where painful memories could be spoken aloud after decades of silence.

In 2012, she authored *The Past and the Present of Forced Marriage Survivors: Experience Toward Healing*, documenting these survivors’ experiences and their long journey toward healing.¹ This work preserved survivors’ testimonies and explored their long journeys toward recovery. Through recording testimonies that had long been taboo in Cambodian society, Sotheary helped validate survivors’ suffering and break the silence around a crime that few had acknowledged.²

This survivor-centred storytelling, in many ways, became a form of transitional justice – a way to restore dignity and voice to those harmed: “*Justice and healing are things that can’t be brought from outside,*” she emphasised. “*I can be here with you, but I can’t do the healing for you. It has to come from within the person who experienced the trauma.*” Through gentle facilitation, she guides survivors to take an active role in their own healing – a process she describes as transformative for both the individual and the community.

Sotheary also played an active role in Cambodia’s formal transitional justice process through the Extraordinary

Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), the tribunal that prosecuted senior Khmer Rouge leaders. As a psychosocial consultant supporting the ECCC's Civil Party scheme, she worked directly with victim survivors participating in the trials. She focused especially on survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, whose needs had often been marginalised in early tribunal proceedings.³

Notably, Sotheary was involved in designing and implementing Phka Sla, one of the first official projects linked to the ECCC that addressed forced marriage survivors. Phka Sla was an innovative dance-drama created from survivors' testimonies – a culturally resonant form of reparation that helped both survivors and the broader public confront the trauma of forced marriage. During performances, Sotheary served as a trauma-informed facilitator, on hand to provide emotional support to performers and audience members as painful memories surfaced.⁴

Her involvement ensured that this creative approach to justice remained sensitive to survivors' well-being, turning a courtroom outcome into a living, communal healing process. In essence, she helped shape a notion of justice that integrated psychosocial recovery and acknowledgement. This emphasis on healing and empowerment reflects the Women, Peace and Security framework's fourth pillar of Relief and Recovery – addressing the rights and needs of women affected by conflict – in a very tangible way.

HEALING THROUGH DIALOGUE AND RECONCILIATION

Central to Sotheary's peacebuilding approach is the belief that trauma must be healed for genuine reconciliation to take root. She argues that Cambodia's social fabric, torn by years of violence, cannot be mended by silencing the past. Sotheary acknowledges, however, that in many Cambodian families there is a tendency not to talk about painful history. *"They don't talk... they think talking is useless – it's just going to escalate the problem,"* she explained. Part of her mission has been to flip that script: to encourage open dialogue, especially for women who are traditionally taught to be quiet and endure suffering, and to train other peace workers in trauma-informed communication so that shame and stigma no longer impede healing.⁵

Working with the Cambodian NGO Kdei Karuna (KdK), Sotheary helped organise dialogue programs that brought together Khmer Rouge survivors, former low-level perpetrators, and younger generations in the same circle. These community dialogues were unprecedented and emotionally fraught – as she recalls of the early sessions in the late 2000s: *"it's like we're there opening the wounds for the first time."* A great deal of groundwork and trust-building had to happen before victims and ex-cadres could sit face-to-face. During these encounters, Sotheary and her colleagues wove in familiar cultural practices to ease the process: these included Buddhist remembrance ceremonies, shared meals, and therapeutic art exercises that allowed people to express feelings non-verbally. Sotheary firmly believes that this kind of truth-telling is the first step toward healing and peace. *"We believe reconciliation starts from talking... a dialogue is one of the tools for reconciliation,"* she affirmed.



Photo: Sotheary pictured with her son, showcasing life as a working single mom during Covid.



Photo: Sotheary pictured at home with her beloved pet dog. Photo by Khleang Molynin, WPM.



Photo: Sotheary pictured while facilitating WPM's Feminist Transformative Leadership training in 2023. Photo by Khleang Molynin, WPM.



Photo: The interior of Sneha Center, designed to uplift, heal, and inspire.
Photo by Khleang Molynin, WPM.

Through such methods, participants could begin to see each other's humanity beyond the labels of "victim" or "perpetrator." Healing, in her view, must extend to *"all parties: victims and perpetrators, as well as the people who work with them,"* meaning that everyone touched by the conflict's legacy needs space to recover.⁶ By showing compassion even to former adversaries, Sotheary helps communities cultivate what she calls a *"culture of the heart,"* replacing fear and hatred with empathy. Such grassroots peacebuilding contributes to long-term prevention of violence by addressing its root causes – trauma, grievances, and mutual mistrust – in a gender-sensitive way.

Yet Sotheary also recognises that unhealed trauma can perpetuate cycles of violence in peacetime if left unaddressed. In her psychotherapy practice, she often draws connections between the sexual violence experienced by women during the Khmer Rouge and contemporary issues like domestic abuse and rape in Cambodian society. The same stigma that once silenced wartime rape survivors, she warns, continues to haunt victims of gender-based violence today – and even affects their children through intergenerational trauma. She finds that post-traumatic stress from sexual abuse is one of the most difficult challenges for therapists to treat, because many victims are reluctant to seek help in a culture that tends to blame or shun them. This is why Sotheary strongly advocates for public education campaigns and other initiatives to combat this stigma.

She has facilitated many candid round-table discussions between survivors and youth, believing that if younger generations understand the truth of what happened, they are more likely to empathise with survivors rather than ostracise them. In one instance, she comforted an elderly survivor whose own children had begged her not to "waste time" attending the Khmer Rouge

tribunal's final verdict – the children simply could not see what their mother stood to gain by participating throughout the process.⁷ Sotheary gently reassured the survivor that her participation was deeply significant, and later reflected how vital it is to bridge the generational gap so that the value of speaking out and seeking justice is not lost on the youth. In the process of opening up dialogue across age groups, she hopes to ensure that the pain of the past is acknowledged and learned from, rather than buried only to fester in harmful ways. This preventative work – changing mindsets and social attitudes – aligns with the Prevention pillar of the WPS Agenda, which calls for integrating gender perspectives and historical awareness into efforts to avert future conflict and violence.

ADVANCING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP AND GENDER JUSTICE

Sotheary's role as a peacebuilder also exemplifies the importance of women's leadership in domains where women's voices have often been marginalised. Whether at community forums or international conferences, she insists that women must have an equal say in shaping peace and justice. For example, Sotheary has appeared on panels alongside lawyers and international experts to discuss prosecuting Khmer Rouge-era sexual violence. There, she has provided crucial insight on survivor-centred approaches and trauma's lingering impacts – perspectives that traditional legal experts sometimes overlook. Her contributions, respected on an equal footing with those of judges and scholars, demonstrate the value of bringing women's lived experiences into policy and justice discussions. In Cambodia and beyond, ensuring women's meaningful participation in these processes is a key aspect of achieving gender justice.

Beyond her formal roles, Sotheary actively challenges social norms that hold women back. *"I believe [girls] need to grow, they need to push through the walls and social norms,"* she once told an interviewer who asked why she works to empower young women.⁸ She often takes on tasks and paths that few others dare to. *"I like to take on something that not many people are doing... the right thing is always hard to do,"* she said, explaining why she has continually ventured into new territory in her career. She leads by example in every aspect of her life.

As a single mother of two sons, she has spoken publicly about how she is raising her boys to respect women and treat them as equals. *"I teach them to also cook... they also clean... they're not saying 'this is a boy thing, this is a girl thing' – no,"* she told us of her parenting style. If her sons ever come home parroting the idea that certain tasks or toys are *"for girls,"* Sotheary patiently corrects them – showing that a woman can be strong and gentle, a breadwinner and a caregiver, all at once. *"I am teaching by doing,"* she explained happily. By instilling these values at home, she hopes to chip away at the patriarchal attitudes that persist in Cambodian society. Sotheary also speaks openly, even proudly, of her divorce, and described to us with a broad smile how it brought her a sense of renewal and an inner peace that she had lacked within her marriage. She now often encourages other women in broken relationships to make the best decisions for themselves – whether that means staying or leaving – without being constrained by the shame and stigma still associated with Cambodian women whose marriages are said to have 'failed.'

In her professional sphere, Sotheary also mentors young women activists and encourages feminist solidarity. She understands that women human rights defenders in Cambodia face unique stress,

harassment, and even trauma from their work. Through workshops and one-on-one coaching, she urges her fellow activists to prioritise self-care and mental health – to treat psychological well-being as part and parcel of the struggle for justice.⁹ This concern for the nation's caregivers and changemakers led her to found the Sneha Center in Phnom Penh.

At Sneha, she and a professional team provide counseling, support groups, and life coaching to individuals in need, especially women and youth on the frontlines of social change. In doing so, Sotheary addresses an often overlooked aspect of peacebuilding: the emotional toll on those who champion others' rights. She sees creating a refuge for healers and activists to heal themselves, as important work to ensure that women can continue their advocacy without burning out or succumbing to despair. *"My own journey of healing has shaped me into who I am today,"* Sotheary reflected.

This is very much in harmony with the Protection pillar of WPS – safeguarding women's rights and safety – because it strengthens the resilience of women leaders and protects their ability to participate in public life. *"Empowering women as agents of change is essential to building lasting peace,"* Sotheary emphasised. In her view, sustainable peace requires not only that women and girls are safe from violence, but also that they are supported, confident, and equipped to lead. Her feminist practice, from the personal to the political, strives to create that reality.



Photo: Sotheary pictured at her home, preparing food for herself and her two sons.
Photo by Khleang Molynin, WPM.

FROM TRAUMA TO TRANSFORMATION

Sotheary's work continues to unfold, at a time when Cambodia is beginning to officially recognise the importance of women's roles in peace and security. The government has started developing its first National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, aiming to implement the very principles that activists like Sotheary have long championed. But long before any formal policy, local peacebuilders such as Sotheary were already putting WPS ideals into practice on the ground. Her work has effectively bridged survivors' needs with national justice processes, and by making sure that women's voices are heard in community dialogues, she has also begun to localise the global WPS agenda in Cambodia's context.

In fact, Cambodia has been noted as something of a regional pioneer in this regard – its creative initiatives like the Phka Sla reparations project are held up as models of gender-sensitive transitional justice and reconciliation.¹⁰ Sotheary's leadership in these efforts has not only helped to heal individual lives, but has also shaped a more inclusive narrative of peace. This is a narrative in which women's experiences of conflict are acknowledged rather than hidden, and their contributions to rebuilding society are celebrated rather than overlooked.

In reflecting on her journey, Sotheary often returns to the idea that true peace is more than the absence of war – it is the presence of healing and justice. Thanks in large part to her efforts, many survivors who once suffered in silence have found a path to personal peace and shared understanding. She has helped turn private pain into collective strength, and lingering resentment into reconciliation.

Perhaps most importantly, Sotheary is ensuring that the next generation carries forward this work of the heart. To young Cambodians who want to promote peace and equality, she stresses the importance of paying it forward:

"I volunteer to go through the pain of hearing survivors' traumatic stories year after year, because I can envision the future generation of girls, who can live a different life."

"I'm a bit emotional about this, because I believe that my mother's generation, my aunt's generation, did something for us. And we also need to do something for the next generation of girls,"

In other words, healing and social change are collective tasks – and no one has to shoulder them alone. Sotheary's story shows the power of that principle. She has worked tirelessly to centre trauma-informed care and women's leadership in peacebuilding, and in doing so, is helping Cambodia move from the scars of its past toward a future of compassion, equality, and enduring peace.



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Chapter 6 – HOY MAI

Women, peace, and tenure security

Photo: Mai pictured near her home in Oddar Meanchey in 2022. Photo by Jack Brook for the Southeast Asia Globe, shared with permission.

“It’s very
important for
me to have
security
of tenure
on my
land, in
order
to feel
peace.”



These understated words describe the profound connection between Hoy Mai and her land, and form the foundation of her story of resistance and determination to find justice for her community. This story is one of defiance in the face of dispossession, and of how an ordinary farmer became an unlikely defender of land rights and community security.

In 2008, vast swathes of community farmland in Oddar Meanchey was leased through an economic land concession (ELC) to subsidiaries of a Thai sugar company, Mitr Phol, displacing over 2,000 farming families across 26 villages.¹ For villagers like Mai, the land was “*everything*,” relying upon it for their livelihoods and subsistence. Many people peacefully and legally occupied plots that had been provided by the state, intended to help them recover their lives after years of war and displacement.

As such, the land represented hard-won stability, while its loss brought renewed dispossession and hardship. “*When they took our land,*” Mai told Al Jazeera. “*I lost everything. My children did not go to school and I had no farming land... I survived by the day.*”² She would not consent to give up her rice fields and orchards, and recalls the pressure she faced at the time: “*The first challenge was with the local authorities – they threatened me and even tried to make me sign a contract to hand over my land.*” This was just the beginning of the challenges Mai would face, but also emblematic of her refusal to give up in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds.

In October 2009, the evictions, by then well underway, turned violent. More than 100 homes were set ablaze during clearances carried out by company staff and armed security forces.^{3,4} Mai’s house was among them. From that point, she emerged as a community defender almost

by necessity: the promised compensation never materialised, leaving many families destitute and homeless.⁵

As the Cambodian authorities shut down initial requests for assistance from villagers, community representatives sought interventions at a higher level. Finding no relief from the provincial authorities in the aftermath of the evictions, Mai joined others in an extraordinary act of protest – walking more than 400 kilometres (248 miles) to Phnom Penh while pregnant to appeal directly to the Prime Minister. Instead, Mai was arrested, spending months incarcerated and nursing her baby behind bars.⁶

PRISON WALLS AND PERSEVERANCE

While Mai’s resistance was entirely nonviolent, it was nonetheless met with harsh punishment. Throughout eight months of detention, she endured appalling conditions. The provincial prison cell where she was held was overcrowded and sweltering, with no special consideration given for her pregnancy. “*I delivered the baby in a hospital. As soon as I delivered, I was sent back to prison with my baby – I was not even given a day to rest,*” she later recalled of the ordeal.⁷

Despite the trauma of her ordeal, Mai remained defiant: “*My experience was horrible. My life has been difficult, and I have made sacrifices up until today. But everyone has the right to seek justice, and that’s what keeps motivating me,*” she later reflected.⁸

Mai’s trials did not end with her release. Finally freed in mid-2010, she returned to Oddar Meanchey where the land that she had refused to sign away was now gone, absorbed into an industrial sugarcane concession. Likewise, there was no home

to return to. During Mai's imprisonment, her husband had taken their older children across the border to Thailand. Suddenly landless, he and dozens of other families from the affected communities had been forced to migrate in a desperate search for work. Hearing of Mai's release, he rushed back to Cambodia. But the stress and heartbreak had taken their toll. Within a month of coming home, he collapsed and died. Mai remains certain that the trauma inflicted on her family and the stress caused by the land dispute led to his death.⁹

In the span of a year, Mai had lost nearly everything: her land, her home, her livelihood, and her husband. She was now a widow and the sole provider for her children, including her newborn son. But Mai's ordeal only steeled her resolve. She vowed to seek justice not only for her own family, but for all those who had been violently dispossessed. Over the ensuing years, Mai emerged as one of the foremost defenders of land rights in her region, and, by extension, a defender of peace and human security for her people. She worked closely with Cambodian human rights organisations, learning about legal avenues for redress and how to file formal complaints.

Mai travelled to Phnom Penh multiple times to share her story at public forums and with civil society groups, shining a light on the plight of rural women facing forced eviction. Each journey carried risks: surveillance, harassment, and the constant threat of re-arrest shadowed her efforts. Cambodia's environment for land and natural resource defenders was (and remains) perilous – especially for women. But Mai persisted, emboldened by the belief that speaking the truth was her best protection. Her leadership within the community became undeniable, as villagers increasingly looked to her for guidance. Mai emphasised that she was never alone on

her journey, as she had consistent *“support from the other [community] representatives.”* However, she explained, *“while we all faced shared problems, for women, there are particular challenges.”* This is because *“as women, we are under more pressure from the authorities, and the power dynamics make it more difficult to push back against demands to hand over the land.”*

By 2014, with local avenues exhausted, Mai and fellow representatives sought justice beyond Cambodia's borders. With the help of NGOs, they submitted testimony to the Thai National Human Rights Commission, on the basis that Mitr Phol is a Thai company. In a landmark October 2015 report, the Thai Commission found Mitr Phol directly responsible for the forced evictions and associated human rights violations, even noting that the land grabs led to the *“collapse of the community.”*¹⁰ It was a moral victory, but Mitr Phol still refused to compensate the victims or return the land, despite the Commission's recommendations.¹¹ Undeterred, Mai pressed on. She understood that defending her land was part of defending her community's future peace.

THE ROAD TO BANGKOK

Mai's fight for justice culminated in a courtroom far from home. In March 2018, with support from NGOs Equitable Cambodia and Inclusive Development International, she became the lead plaintiff in a groundbreaking class-action lawsuit against Mitr Phol in Thailand.

The case, formally titled *Hoy Mai & Others vs. Mitr Phol Sugar Corporation Limited*, was the first transboundary human rights class-action lawsuit of its kind in Southeast Asia.¹² It gathered testimony from more than 700 Cambodian families – representing roughly 3,000 individuals – who had been uprooted



Photo: Community representatives pictured meeting to discuss updates on the case in 2022.
Photo by Jack Brook for the Southeast Asia Globe, shared with permission.



Photo: Mai pictured attending a community meeting in Oddar Meanchey led by NGO Equitable Cambodia.
Photo by Jack Brook for the Southeast Asia Globe, shared with permission.



Photo: The road near Mai's home in Oddar Meanchey, that was impacted by land concessions. Photo by Lay Sophanna for The World, shared under Creative Commons license: CC BY-NC-ND 2.0



Photo: Mai pictured in her field of cassava plants, where she was making less than half of what she was able to earn on her original five hectares of land.

Photo by Lay Sophanna for The World, shared under Creative Commons license: CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

by one of the sugar concessions.¹³ For Mai, leading this legal battle was an immense responsibility. Not only was she now a voice for her village, but for hundreds of families across Oddar Meanchey. It was a historic assertion of participation: Cambodian farmers, led by a woman, standing up in a Thai court to demand accountability from a powerful corporation.

In late 2019, Mai and other community elders travelled to Bangkok to testify in person. Speaking through interpreters, Mai recounted to the Thai judges the same harrowing story she had by now told countless times: of the day her house was burned down, the intimidation by armed forces, her arrest and the baby born behind bars, and the years of hardship that followed. She made it clear that her own experiences were emblematic of the ongoing suffering faced by all community members. Despite this compelling testimony, the court of first instance decided to deny the class action. Mai and the communities, remaining committed to their pursuit of justice, immediately filed an appeal.

Mai's testimony, and that of her fellow plaintiffs, supported by amicus curiae briefs submitted by international NGOs, helped convince the Court of Appeal to overturn the rejection of the case. The communities were granted legal status as a class in July 2020. It was a precedent-setting decision; with it, Thailand became the first country in the region to allow such a transboundary human rights class action. This was an extremely significant step for corporate accountability in Southeast Asia, a region where mass dispossession by corporate actors is increasingly commonplace. It was also a groundbreaking example of communities standing against a major global corporation and making an impact.

The class-action lawsuit in Thailand garnered international attention as a test of corporate accountability and an emblem of hope for victims of land dispossession globally. One legal expert in the US described it as “*extremely significant, if not historic.*”¹⁴ In the course of proceedings, evidence emerged that international brands buying from Mitr Phol had long been aware of the abuses in the company's Cambodian operations.

A US court ordered the Coca-Cola Company – one of Mitr Phol's major buyers – to hand over internal documents about what it knew of the land grab, determining this information “*essential to the full and fair adjudication*” of the Thai proceedings.¹⁵ With each legal hurdle overcome, Mai's confidence grew. After more than a decade of struggle, she began to believe that justice was finally within reach. “*I won't stop... I will keep fighting to help my people,*” she told the media in 2022.¹⁶ The mere prospect of a fair hearing gave Mai's community something they had nearly lost: hope that justice would prevail.

RESOLUTION AND LEGACY

After nearly 17 years of struggle, Mai's quest for justice finally achieved a momentous breakthrough in early 2025. Just as the long-awaited trial was about to commence in Bangkok, Mitr Phol agreed to enter a court-mediated negotiation. Alongside her peers, Mai played a crucial role representing her communities in those face-to-face meetings at the court, speaking firsthand about her experiences and those of the entire community. The result was an unprecedented settlement: in February 2025, the company reached a resolution with the Cambodian families.¹⁷ The terms of the settlement remain confidential, but it is publicly known that Mitr Phol provided a

significant financial package to support the affected communities.¹⁸

This outcome was a vindication – a hard-won measure of justice after years of advocacy. Mai emphasised to us that this was not a personal triumph, but a shared one: *“It’s not one person’s victory – it’s a huge collective and sustained effort. I feel so appreciative for the shared outcome that everyone worked towards for so long.”*

Her fight was not only personal; it carried national and even global significance. Mai demonstrated that corporate impunity can be challenged, and that rural communities – led by both women and men – can seek accountability through peaceful means. In Cambodia, land conflicts have long been a source of unrest and violence. In this context, Mai insists that ‘peace’ carries particular significance to women, and that land and family are inextricably bound up with this concept. As she told us: *“It’s most important for women to have their property and house on secure land, so they can raise their children there. When women have a safe shelter, where children can grow up hearing good advice from their parents, this ensures the family can have peace and stability.”*

When asked what peace at the community level means to her, she similarly explained: *“Peace in the community is where people can work together, and cooperate with each other, and have a strong sense of solidarity with one another.”* For Mai, peace is woven from everyday acts of harmony. When looking ahead, her hopes rest with the next generation: *“They have knowledge, they can read and write, so I feel optimistic for their future – but it’s so important for them to learn to work together.”* She also hopes that she will have many opportunities to share her experiences *“with the young generation of women leaders, and to encourage them.”*

Her message for women land rights defenders in Cambodia and beyond is clear:

“As women, we must advocate, struggle and work together – we must be brave in order to protect the land and to get fair compensation. Most of all, we must work together with others at the local level. We can’t work alone.”

Mai’s life story is a powerful reminder that ordinary women can drive extraordinary change, advancing peace and justice through non-violent means and against towering odds. In Cambodia’s post-conflict context, women like her are often the invisible threads holding communities together. Her work protecting livelihoods, insisting on accountability, and building solidarity in her community, has shown what ‘women, peace and security’ means in practice on the ground.

Asked to look back on her journey, Mai first reflected on her own sense of security, and what peace has come to mean to her:

“Having security of tenure is very important for me to feel at peace at the end of this journey. Receiving land title gives me the confidence to know that I can be safe on the land without the risk of anyone confiscating my land and home from me. I know now that I can stay for a long time, and this gives me a sense of peace.”

But for Mai, tenure security is not only a personal matter – it is a foundation for women’s collective strength as she went on to explain:

“[Tenure security] is so important for all women. So they can have this confidence, and can feel brave and protect their land from anyone who would try to take it. They can say to the public authorities – ‘you don’t have the right to take my land, and the law will protect me.’”

Her reflections capture a broader truth: that peace at the local level is often built through the courageous acts of women who address land conflict in order to defend their rights and communities. Mai’s journey – from a small cassava farm to the halls of justice in Bangkok – teaches us that peace grows from the ground up. It is nurtured by those willing to stand up, speak out, and sacrifice for a more just and equitable society.





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Chapter 7 – MEY VANNVINEAD

A pioneer woman peacekeeper

Photo: Lieutenant Colonel Mey Vannvinead of the National Peacekeeping Force for Mine and Explosive Remnants of War Clearance. Photo by Khleang Molyhin, WPM.



GROWING UP IN THE SHADOW OF WAR

Mey Vannvinead's journey toward international peacekeeping began throughout the turmoil of Cambodia's post-conflict recovery. Born in 1976, her early years were shaped by the civil strife of the 1980s – a time of pervasive violence: *"Sometimes, we had to hide in bunkers during fighting,"* she recalled of her childhood. Tanks still rolled past her village, and gunfire echoed as clashes with Khmer Rouge remnants continued. Vannvinead explained how those early years in her village were full of fear, marked by illegal checkpoints on the roads and a sense of constant uncertainty.

In 1992-93, something transformative happened: the United Nations sent a peacekeeping mission (UNTAC) to Cambodia as part of the peace process. For Vannvinead, seeing the blue-helmeted UN troops was eye-opening. She noticed an almost immediate change in daily life. *"I am very grateful to UNTAC because after their arrival, we no longer heard gunfire or artillery... When we saw UNTAC's presence, we felt safe and supported,"* she said, crediting those peacekeepers (along with Cambodia's own peace efforts) with bringing a sense of security for the first time. The experience planted a seed of curiosity in the teenage Vannvinead. What exactly were these peacekeepers doing, and how were they able to help calm a country long engulfed in conflict? Even as a young woman, she began to imagine herself in that role – helping to build peace and safety for others.

As the eldest of seven daughters, Vannvinead also learned responsibility from a young age. Her parents were both schoolteachers, and the family struggled to get by. When she finished high school

in the early 1990s, Cambodia had few opportunities for rural youth to pursue higher education. Vannvinead's father urged her to stay close to home in Pursat to help care for her younger siblings.

Dutifully, she set aside dreams of immediate university study and trained as a teacher instead. By 1994, she was a primary school teacher – a respectable, stable job in a country rebuilding from war. *"I chose to become a teacher because my mother had just given birth to my youngest sister... my father preferred that I stay close to home to help care for my younger sisters,"* she explained. Over the next decade, Vannvinead educated children in her community, teaching at the primary and junior high levels. She once left the classroom to work with a child rights NGO in rural areas – traveling to remote villages to run educational initiatives and lead youth activities – but eventually returned to teaching. In those roles she developed a service-oriented mindset and became accustomed to working at odd hours and under challenging conditions. She didn't know it then, but these experiences were quietly preparing her for a very different kind of service to come.

FROM TEACHER TO TRAILBLAZER

In 2008, an announcement went out that would change Vannvinead's life: the Cambodian military was recruiting soldiers for UN peacekeeping missions. Cambodia, once a conflict-affected aid recipient, was now contributing troops to conflicts abroad – and for the first time, women were explicitly encouraged to apply. By then in her early 30s, Vannvinead was an experienced teacher with a steady government job. But the opportunity resonated with her deeply. It appealed to her sense of service and adventure, and it reminded her of the blue

helmets who had made such a difference in her youth. She chose to seize the moment: *"I decided then to apply to become a peacekeeper,"* she said.

Making the switch was not without obstacles. Vannvinead's father initially disapproved of his daughter swapping the classroom for a conflict zone, fearing for her safety. Her mother, however, supported her ambitions and trusted her judgment. Vannvinead later reflected on this familial push-and-pull: *"At first, my father did not agree with my decision to become a peacekeeper... [but] I lived with my mother, who supported me and allowed me to make my own choices."* With maternal encouragement, Vannvinead pressed on. In preparation, she drew on skills from her teaching career – discipline, patience, and some English proficiency – to navigate the military selection process. She passed the entry exams and underwent intensive training, determined to prove herself capable.

Joining the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces as a novice soldier in her 30s was daunting – especially as a woman in a male-dominated environment – but she adapted quickly. She found that her background as a teacher from a *"large, disciplined family"* gave her an edge. She was used to structure, endurance and juggling responsibilities. *"I noticed there were very few female soldiers... however, after undergoing many training sessions... I never backed down from any challenges,"* she said of those early days.

Vannvinead's outgoing nature also helped; she made friends easily among her fellow recruits, who *"became like siblings"* and boosted her confidence. Before long, she was participating in intensive peacekeeping exercises both at home and abroad. In 2009, Cambodia hosted a major international drill with many countries' forces, and Vannvinead also took part in additional

training in Indonesia and Mongolia as her skills grew. She describes participating in drills with foreign forces as experiences that broadened her horizons and confidence. *"I was curious and saw [peacekeeping] as a way to serve society while holding a government position,"* she said, noting that her curiosity to see new places went hand-in-hand with a desire to help bring peace.

Finally, in late 2010, Cambodia deployed its first-ever female peacekeepers – and Vannvinead was among them. *"At the end of 2010, I was deployed, along with three other female peacekeepers, on a mission to Lebanon,"* she recounted, proud that their small group were Cambodia's pioneer women to serve in a UN mission overseas.

BREAKING GROUND ON UN MISSIONS

Stationed in conflict zones far from home – from the Middle East to Africa – Vannvinead faced everything from harsh climates to complex local conflicts. Yet with each deployment, she demonstrated that Cambodian women could not only meet the challenges of peacekeeping, but excel at them. She earned the respect of commanders and colleagues through her hard work and adaptability.

In one mission, she served as a Military Observer, observing the security situation in active conflict zones, and negotiating with parties during intense situations – including an Ebola outbreak in South Sudan, where *"we had to apply negotiation skills and remain calm under pressure."* Every role she assumed on a new mission underscored the value of having women on the team: *"I had the opportunity to engage with local communities, visit schools, and interact – especially with women and children."* Her experiences mirrored a wider truth



Photo: Vannvinead pictured during a peacekeeping mission in South Sudan.
Personal photo, shared with permission.



Photo: Vannvinead salutes. Photo by Khleang Molynin, WPM.





Photo: Rough terrain on a mission in the field. Personal photo, shared with permission.



Photo: Vannvinead during a long-range patrol mission in South Sudan. Personal photo, shared with permission.

recognised by the UN: women peacekeepers often access and assist communities in ways their male counterparts cannot.¹

Indeed, on the ground, Vannvinead saw how having women in uniform could make peace efforts more inclusive. In rural villages, women would approach her to voice concerns they might have been too shy or fearful to share with male soldiers: *“...having women in all sectors improves communication and peacekeeping in all corners and places. Sometimes, being women, we can talk more openly with each other.”* She also highlighted the practical advantages of having women in peacekeeping roles. For example, female medics were often better able to reach and treat female patients who might otherwise avoid care due to cultural norms. *“When a female doctor treats patients, the patients feel warmer than with male doctors,”* Vannvinead reflected. Drawing on her deployment experiences, she emphasised the unique trust and comfort women personnel can offer, adding that *“issues involving women should be led and supported by women.”*

Vannvinead's experiences reaffirmed her belief that women are not merely beneficiaries of peace, but essential agents in building and sustaining it. As her deployments continued, Vannvinead took on mentoring roles informally, helping newer female recruits navigate the difficulties of mission life. She led by example in some very difficult situations, and through it all, broke stereotypes simply by doing her job well.

Her deployments were not without challenges, particularly when it came to navigating persistent gender stereotypes. As she recalled:

“One challenge I faced was when team members from other countries sometimes didn't want women to drive. Still, I insisted on it. When I drove, some would comment, ‘The road is rough, why are you driving so fast?’ But they themselves drove the same way. I simply smiled at them and they understood what that meant.”

Vannvinead went on: *“There were also reports of sexual harassment and bullying, but I continued my work and stayed committed.”*

THE HEART OF A PEACEKEEPER

Through all these experiences, Vannvinead has developed a distinct leadership style. A self-described “talkative” person, Vannvinead emphasises communication and camaraderie in her approach to peacebuilding. She firmly believes that having women in the ranks improves the mission as a whole. In peacekeeping operations, *“when women are involved, it is easier to engage in negotiations in different contexts of conflict. It opens more doors... we are often more patient and thoughtful”* she explained. She has seen firsthand how female peacekeepers can defuse tense situations by listening and building trust.

Through her presence and professionalism, Vannvinead quietly challenged assumptions about women in uniform and expanded perceptions of who belongs in peacekeeping roles: *“As a woman serving as a civil officer, I can wear a uniform just like my male colleagues. I am capable of fulfilling the tasks assigned to me, and I take pride in representing Cambodia, a country that has experienced conflict,”* she said, highlighting that women can perform in the field every bit as capably as men. *“I am excited to showcase my Cambodian flag and share my*

work with the local community, especially to inspire girls by demonstrating that I can wear a uniform too."

Her pride in carrying the Cambodian flag on her shoulder is evident. Those who have worked with her note that she balances assertiveness with empathy, and leads with both heart and discipline. This combination has made her an invaluable asset in peacekeeping units. It also reflects a core tenet of the Women, Peace and Security agenda: that women's equal participation in peace efforts can broaden the approaches and solutions available. Vannvinead's career has been living proof of this principle.

BALANCING DUTY AND CARE

As rewarding as her deployments have been, Vannvinead is candid about the personal sacrifices involved. She is the eldest of seven, and a caregiver to her mother. *"I have my mother to take care of,"* Vannvinead said, explaining that when she left for missions, her siblings stepped in to help at home.

Vannvinead has tried not to be worried about family matters while she was stationed thousands of miles away in a conflict zone. Her sisters, most of them teachers like she once was, have gone above and beyond to fill her shoes at home. In this way, Vannvinead says, peacekeeping has become a family effort, a common experience for those in the sector: *"All personnel also need to receive support from family... in my case, my sisters helped take care of everything so I could focus on the mission,"* she shared.

Within her units abroad, Vannvinead also found a kind of family. Fellow peacekeepers became close friends who looked out for one another. This camaraderie helped her and others to feel mentally and physically well. Still, there is an emotional toll inherent in undertaking deployments. She

acknowledges that for many women, one of the hardest parts of peacekeeping is balancing traditional expectations – such as caring for parents or children – with the demands of an international military career.

"In the past, there was no discussion about support for those with caregiving roles and mission responsibilities... when going on missions, which take a long time, it becomes very difficult for women. They need someone in the family to take care of their child."

Her openness about these challenges helps to normalise the conversation about work-life balance in Cambodia's military circles. She highlights cooperation and shared responsibility as strengths, much as the WPS agenda emphasises the importance of community and family in sustaining peace efforts.

A ROLE MODEL IN UNIFORM

Lieutenant Colonel Mey Vannvinead's story is, at its core, about breaking barriers – and then reaching back to help others over them. After serving on multiple UN missions, she returned to Cambodia and rose to a leadership role at the National Peacekeeping Center. Today she is Deputy Chief of the Public Relations Office in the National Centre for Peacekeeping Force, Mine and ERW Clearance (NPMEC), helping to train and deploy a new generation of peacekeepers. In this capacity, Vannvinead actively encourages more Cambodian women to don the blue helmet.

She often shares her personal journey in workshops and training courses, hoping to inspire young women to follow in her footsteps. *"I often shared my experiences during activities and on media... to encourage other women to get involved,"* she said of her mentorship approach. She feels that her very presence in a senior position sends

a message: women belong in peace and security roles, from the grassroots to the highest ranks.

Vannvinead also understands that systemic change is needed to sustain women's participation. She hopes to see increased policies that make peacekeeping a more viable option for women – for instance, equal training opportunities, support with caregiving, and adequate facilities for women on bases. International frameworks like the WPS Agenda and the CEDAW Convention have underscored the importance of these steps. In 2019, the CEDAW Committee urged Cambodia to adopt a National Action Plan on WPS and to ensure women are fully involved at all stages of peacebuilding, conflict resolution and peacekeeping. Vannvinead's career has been a shining example of this involvement in action. She has shown that when given the chance, Cambodian women will serve with distinction and help broaden what peace and security mean on the ground.

As she reflects on her journey, Vannvinead takes great pride in how far women have come in a field once closed to them. *"I am happy I was born into a family that supports me... I can wear the uniform and go to work in unstable countries,"* she said, noting that her success is rooted in both personal determination and community backing. Her message to the next generation of Cambodian women is one of empowerment and perseverance: *"Young women must strengthen themselves in health, capacity, knowledge, and skills,"* she urges.

Opportunities are opening, Vannvinead said, and she wants women to be ready to grasp them. Her own life – from a young girl who frequently sheltered in a bunker, to a Lieutenant Colonel forging peace abroad – is testament to what is possible when those opportunities arise. *"Each person only has one life, and we all will die someday, so whatever we do, we should at least be happy and proud to have fulfilled our role,"* she said.

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Chapter 8 – **SREY SOTHEAVY**

**Promoting peace through
interfaith community dialogue**



Photo: Sotheavy at the ACT office in central Phnom Penh in 2025. Photo by Khleang Molymin, WPM.

Cambodia's turbulent journey to a fragile peace and nascent democracy spurred a new generation of peacebuilders committed to healing their society. Among them is Srey Sotheavy, Executive Director of the Alliance for Conflict Transformation (ACT), who stands out as a pioneering woman leading these efforts. She is widely recognised as a key figure in Cambodia's locally-led peacebuilding movement, contributing to long-term conflict transformation, social healing, and reconciliation in the post-war era.

In a country where women's voices were long marginalised in peace processes, Sotheavy emerged in the late 2000s as a powerful advocate for interfaith dialogue, community reconciliation, and the inclusion of women and youth in building a durable peace. Her story, firmly grounded in the WPS framework's four pillars of participation, prevention, protection, and relief & recovery, exemplifies how patience, humility, and grassroots leadership can transform post-conflict communities.

EARLY JOURNEY INTO PEACEBUILDING

Born just a few years after the Khmer Rouge genocide (1975–1979), Sotheavy grew up in a society recovering from the devastation of conflict. Her first inspiration came from her mother, a survivor of the genocide who was active in Cambodian Christian volunteer groups and introduced her to voluntary service at a young age. Sotheavy often helped as an interpreter during her mother's community activities, an experience that she says grounded her in both her Christian faith and a sense of responsibility to others.

Those early encounters with grassroots activism shaped her conviction that faith and dialogue could be powerful tools for peace,

and set her on the path toward professional peacebuilding. As a young professional, she entered the sector in 2009 when she joined ACT as an interfaith project manager and researcher, and she eventually rose to become its Executive Director. Alongside her core duties at ACT, she also volunteered with the Working Group for Peace (WGP), a volunteer peace network promoting conflict prevention.

These early experiences in community-level peace efforts shaped her conviction that dialogue and understanding must start at the grassroots. During this time, she also earned a Master's in Business Administration in 2010 and later a Master's in Peace and Conflict Studies, while taking short peacebuilding courses in the Philippines and Thailand to further hone her skills.

A defining moment early in her career came in 2009, when simmering tensions on the Cambodian–Thai border near Preah Vihear Temple flared into a military skirmish. The young Sotheavy joined a multi-faith and multi-ethnic peace delegation that ventured into the conflict zone to help de-escalate the crisis:

"We had developed Thai-Khmer exchange programmes and dialogues among youth and rural communities along the border, to foster understanding and wellbeing among people. So when tensions were mounting, we went to the border, and tried to engage in peacebuilding from a religious perspective." Amid artillery fire – "we could hear bombing and shooting, so it really wasn't secure. We could feel the ground vibrate with every explosion," she recalled – her team led interfaith prayers along the border, bringing Buddhist monks and other faith leaders from both sides to pray together for peace. Despite the risks, Sotheavy described how the peacebuilders connected with all parties to manage risks and to strategise effectively:

"We kept in contact with the military and local authorities on both sides. They didn't support us, necessarily, but they understood what we were trying to do."

This creative act sought to provide enough space for dialogue amid the hostility, calming fears and reminding everyone of their shared humanity across divides. For Sotheavy, the role of religion was crucial. When we asked Sotheavy whether religious dialogue offered a less inflammatory way to reach conflicting parties, she explained that it did: in her view, religion could act as *"a form of mindfulness, helping people to pause and reflect on what is right."* She went on, explaining that in her experience, *"religion can control people's impulses and make them think about the right thing to do."* She also pointed to the absurdity of armed conflict when framed in religious terms: *"We should ask them to stop and think – why are Thais and Cambodians fighting, if we are both Buddhists? And why are Christians and Muslims fighting, if we follow the same God?"*

The experience at Preah Vihear taught Sotheavy that conflict prevention often begins at the community level, with cultural sensitivity and solidarity. It cemented her belief that faith can be a powerful connector in times of crisis, a theme that would continue to define much of her work.

After the border incident, Sotheavy continued to deepen her involvement in civil society peace efforts. Through WGP, she joined a cohort of young Cambodians passionate about mediation and peace education. That grassroots work, alongside her expanding roles at ACT, gave her a strong foundation in facilitation and community engagement. Even as her responsibilities grew, she remained present in villages – listening to elders and youth to understand local perspectives. *"We must go to the people, we need to understand their problems on*

the ground," she emphasised, reflecting the participatory ethos underlying her work.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND COMMUNITY RECONCILIATION

One of Sotheavy's hallmark contributions has been her leadership in interfaith dialogue as a tool for peacebuilding. ACT – the organisation she now leads – has long promoted cooperation across religious and ethnic lines, and Sotheavy was at the forefront of these efforts from the start.

Early on, she managed ACT's Interfaith Peacebuilding project, which formed local networks of Buddhist monks, Muslim imams, Christian pastors, and government religious officials to mediate community disputes. The approach was simple yet powerful: bring diverse faith representatives together to address communal problems and model solidarity.

These networks facilitated dialogues in conflict-prone villages, organised joint activities like tree-planting in deforested areas, and celebrated key milestones and events. In 2018, for example, ACT celebrated the observance of UN World Interfaith Harmony Week by organising interfaith activities in Oddar Meanchey province under the theme of: *"Protect Forest, Protect Life,"* integrating spiritual collaboration with environmental peacebuilding. This initiative demonstrates how Sotheavy and her organisation have leveraged faith-based platforms to promote harmony and sustainable community development.¹ Such efforts also build trust across faith and ethnic divides – a critical step toward social cohesion after conflict.

Another vivid example of Sotheavy's peacebuilding work comes from another part of Cambodia's borderlands. In the



Photo: Sotheavy during the Interfaith and Inter-ethnic Peacebuilding Project related to Natural Resources Management, between 2014–2019. Photos taken by ACT staff, shared with permission.



Photo: Sotheavy pictured with participants during the Interfaith and Indigenous day campaign in Kampong Speu, in 2017. Photo taken by ACT staff, shared with permission.



Photo: Sotheavy at the ACT office in central Phnom Penh in 2025. Photo by Khleang Molynin, WPM.

remote northeast province of Monduliri, she dedicated herself to working with and empowering women and youth from the Bunong Indigenous minority, a group long affected by land grabs and displacement.²

Over time, she witnessed a profound transformation. Women who had once remained silent during negotiations began speaking up about their rights – particularly in land-grabbing cases, which had become widespread in their area and across Cambodia. *“As a result of continuous engagement, the women now have the courage to raise their voices in the community on issues related to conflict and peace,”* she reported proudly. By creating space for these women to speak and be heard, she has supported villagers to become more active agents in resolving disputes. This inclusive approach was more effective in addressing specific grievances (such as unjust land encroachments), and also worked to mend historical mistrust between Indigenous families, local authorities, and the Khmer majority population.

Sotheavy explained how her method of reconciliation goes beyond convening meetings – it involves nurturing healing and empathy. Whether mediating a land dispute or an issue flaring inter-ethnic tensions, she begins by creating a safe space for all sides to share their grievances and perspectives. She often helps individuals from opposing sides process trauma and truly listen to one another’s stories. *“I am eager to bring different people together, whether they are of different religions or traditions, and help them reconcile with one another,”* Sotheavy said.

She argues that treating everyone with humility and compassion creates conditions for mutual understanding. Communities that once saw each other as enemies or as ‘others,’ can gradually find common ground

through these facilitated conversations. This grassroots reconciliation rebuilds trust, reduces prejudice, and lays the groundwork for collaborative problem-solving in the future. In applying an interfaith lens, she explains that: *“As an interfaith person, I’m not there representing any religion. I’m representing all faiths, and trying to get people to break down their perceptions of hierarchies within and across religions.”*

However, Sotheavy acknowledges that interfaith peacebuilding is not always easy – particularly for women. *“It’s challenging because across all major religions, leadership is largely reserved for men,”* she told us. *“Buddhism, Islam and Christianity all have restrictive ideas about women’s roles.”*

Over time, Sotheavy has found that respect and persistence can shift mindsets. *“Once they engage in training with me, they can see for example that I do have a lot of respect for monks. Then they start to understand the interfaith approach as a mechanism for listening, for understanding, and for accepting one another – as well as for avoiding judgement or discrimination based on faith,”* she explained. Through dialogue and patient practice, her work has shown that interfaith work is not about diminishing any one tradition but about creating space for all. This approach has enabled her to build alliances even with initially sceptical religious leaders and laypeople, opening doors for women peacebuilders to be recognised as legitimate actors in a field long dominated by men.

Sotheavy was also candid about the broader challenges that peacebuilders face in Cambodia, where deeply-rooted power imbalances and a legacy of impunity often hamper local conflict resolution. Many conflicts – over land, forests, fisheries, or development projects – pit impoverished communities against powerful business

or political interests. In such cases, “*less powerful people cannot take any further action, or it takes a much longer time*” to get justice, she noted, with disputes sometimes dragging on for decades while communities suffer.³ Corruption and a weak rule of law often allow powerful groups to act with impunity, so even well-intentioned peace efforts can stall.

Aware that unresolved grievances may fester into future violence, Sotheavy continues to focus on prevention. She works with civil society coalitions to tackle root causes – pushing for fairer land policies, accountability from authorities, and dialogue between citizens and officials. Progress is often slow and frustrating, but she believes it is the only way to break the cycle of conflict. Each small success – a mediated agreement here, a community petition that averts an eviction there – becomes a building block toward peace. Sotheavy explained that the process of inclusive problem-solving is as important as the outcome, because it strengthens communities’ ability to handle disputes peacefully going forward.

WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP AND THE WPS AGENDA

As a woman leader in a field largely dominated by men, Sotheavy personifies the Participation pillar of the WPS agenda. She not only holds a leadership role herself, but also advocates for other women to have a voice in peace and reconciliation processes. She pointed out that many Cambodian women already quietly mediate family and neighbour disputes behind the scenes, but that “*there needs to be more acceptance and recognition of women’s role in peacebuilding,*” since they face “*so many challenges and barriers*” to public participation.

Sotheavy works to amplify these informal efforts into formal roles. She has organised women’s forums to discuss community issues and pushed for women to be included in village mediation committees, striving to make their contributions visible in public decision-making. Over the years, she has mentored young women activists and volunteers, helping them build the confidence to speak up in meetings typically led by men.

In practice, Sotheavy’s commitment to women’s participation often overlaps with her interfaith and community work. She explained to us some of the complex dynamics of identity and exclusion in Cambodia, where gender intersects with religion and ethnicity to shape women’s experiences. In particular, Sotheavy reflected on the triple discrimination faced by women from minority communities – for instance, Cham Muslim women, who are marginalised simultaneously on the basis of their sex, their ethnicity, and their religious identity.

She noted with pride that many of the women and young people she has worked with over the years have become more vocal about human rights and social protection issues, and that local authorities have had to become more responsive as a result. In a country where rural women often lack formal power, such victories show the WPS agenda in action at the grassroots.

Beyond the community level, Sotheavy has also engaged in policy advocacy to advance the WPS agenda in Cambodia. She has been a key civil society voice in national discussions on developing a National Action Plan (NAP) for WPS – the country’s first framework for integrating women into peace and security efforts.

In late 2024, she spoke at a workshop on WPS where she underscored that peace in Cambodia hinges on tackling structural inequalities. *“When we talk about peace and violence, we must confront the structural issues that perpetuate harm within our society. Tackling these issues at their root is essential, and the WPS Agenda must be widely understood and put into action,”* she urged.⁴

She also stressed that issues like gender-based violence, corruption, and the marginalisation of minority groups are interlinked – and that a holistic WPS approach is needed to address them. As she told us, *“It’s slowly getting better for the younger generations of women, but there is still work to be done. There have been many years of women’s empowerment and gender work now, but we need to see a lot more change.”* Through her advocacy for an inclusive NAP, Sotheavy is helping turn grassroots gains into national commitments, ensuring that policies better support local gender empowerment initiatives and women’s security.

Under Sotheavy’s leadership, ACT itself has been recognised for putting WPS principles into practice. In 2024, ACT was among nine organisations in Southeast Asia honored in a Women, Peace & Security good practices competition organised by UN Women and ASEAN.^[5] The award highlighted ACT’s innovative *“Media for Peace”* initiative, which trains journalists and community reporters to promote peace and inclusion through the media. This project – often championed by Sotheavy – has reached some of Cambodia’s most remote communities, with little access to information.

Producing radio programs, videos, and articles in local languages, the initiative bridges communication gaps and spreads awareness of peaceful conflict resolution.

“We want the media to play their role as activists – to educate people and provide information on peace-related issues,” Sotheavy explained. The impact has been tangible: in remote provinces, women who had never engaged with the media began hearing stories of other women mediating conflicts or defending their land rights, and felt inspired to do the same.

Women in these remote areas are now more confident to discuss issues of conflict and peace,⁶ an outcome encapsulating the essence of WPS – empowering women at the grassroots to participate in peacebuilding and strengthening community resilience.

TOWARDS A VISION OF PEACE AND SOCIAL COHESION

Across all aspects of her work, Sotheavy’s goal is to nurture social cohesion in a society still scarred in many ways by war and division. She understands that peace is more than the absence of violence. As she put it, *“Peace is everything... freedom, social justice, mental health, well-being... it’s a holistic concept”* – one that also requires transparency and accountability from leaders.

In each dialogue she facilitates and each project she leads, Sotheavy strives to bridge divides, whether religious, ethnic, gender-based, or generational. She has brought former adversaries together to find common ground – from Khmer Rouge survivors and ex-cadres seeking reconciliation, to Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian neighbours jointly addressing community problems. By uniting people around shared values of compassion and respect, her initiatives reduce the risk of future conflicts and lay a foundation for inclusive development.

Sotheavy often notes that building peace in Cambodia means overcoming both the

legacy of past violence as well as present-day social fractures – between urban and rural communities, majority and minority groups, rich and poor. Every relationship repaired and every group brought into dialogue is a step toward healing the broader society.

Even as she has gained prominence, Sotheavy remains grounded. Colleagues describe her as a leader whose humility and closeness to the people she works with have earned her widespread respect. She takes pride in being alongside the communities she serves, learning from their struggles and helping them to find solutions. Reflecting on her years of engagement, she said: *“It’s been my privilege to work at the community level. I think we’ve been able to bring people together to understand one another.”* For her, this process of building understanding is as important as any formal agreement.

She continued: *“We can help people reflect on the peace process of the 1990s – bringing those lessons into their lives today so they can find their own solutions to conflict and tension.”* In this way, she connects Cambodia’s history of national reconciliation to the everyday challenges of local disputes, showing how past lessons can inspire communities to chart their own peaceful paths forward.

For Sotheavy, this perspective has particular urgency in 2025, as border tensions between Cambodia and Thailand have once again escalated at the time of writing. She stresses that the ability of communities to draw on past experiences of peacebuilding is vital in navigating present-day disputes, reminding us that reconciliation is not a one-time achievement but an ongoing practice.

Sotheavy also emphasised that true peace requires addressing a web of interconnected factors—from historical injustices and poverty

to public health crises and governance issues – that affect people’s sense of security. Her ability to connect these big-picture issues with grassroots action makes her a unique bridge between policy and community, faith and development, past and future.

Looking ahead, Sotheavy remains cautiously optimistic, and convinced that progress is possible if enough people join hands. In her vision, every Cambodian – regardless of religion, gender, or background – has a role to play: *“Peacebuilding is a long road that we must patiently walk together, with humility and forgiveness, in order to transform our communities.”*⁶



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This powerful collection brings to light the stories of eight remarkable Cambodian women who have shaped peace and justice in their communities and beyond. From women's rights advocates and land rights defenders, to interfaith leaders and international peacekeepers, each woman profiled in these pages offers a unique perspective on what peacebuilding means in practice, grounded in daily acts of nonviolent, courage, care, and solidarity.

Through deeply personal accounts, the book honours the legacies of women who have navigated post-conflict recovery, challenged systemic injustice, and championed women's leadership in the face of adversity. It aims to address a widening gap in Cambodia's intergenerational memory, and invites readers to reflect on how peace is made: not only in public institutions, but in homes, communities, and society.

Created as a tribute to Cambodia's unsung heroines of peace, this collection contributes to the global dialogue on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda and amplifies voices that have too often been overlooked. Through their stories, these iconic women peacebuilders issue a collective call to action that urges us to recognise women not as passive recipients of peace, but as its architects and transformative change makers.

