

**PRESS RELEASE**

Phnom Penh, March 8, 2021

Dear API partners and friends,

Today we are all celebrating the International Women's Day, no doubt a day of joy and pride, but also a day of struggle. The 8<sup>th</sup> of March was first marked as a special day in 1914, as German women took to the streets and demanded the same right to vote men were enjoying. It took only four years to get it, but it took more than half a century of protest and advocacy for women all over Europe to gain full legal equality to their male counterparts. And in our own country and region, things went even slower. In 1977, while the United Nations were first declaring March 8 a day dedicated to women worldwide, Cambodia was in the grip of a brutal dictatorship that practiced not only indiscriminate, systematic murder, but also made use of sexual violence against women as a common means of exercising power. The extent and details of that abuse have not been fully examined until today.

For our post-Khmer-Rouge generation, challenges are of course less dramatic, but that doesn't mean they don't exist anymore. The persistence of traditional gender roles, assigning women to the sphere of the family, is curtailing their chances for certain careers, and in many cases barring them from fully participating in public life. Virtually all recent studies show that there is still a slight gap between the literacy rate of Cambodian women and that of Cambodian men, while, if we focus on vulnerable groups such as indigenous people or persons with disabilities, the gap becomes considerable. Access to education and general knowledge, and especially access to public information remain more of a matter of concern for women, given the widespread paternalistic culture allowing elderly men in positions of power to patronize their female fellow citizens, withhold information from them, and make decisions on their behalf, oftentimes without even giving them a real chance to speak for themselves.

At API, we are taking all these challenges very seriously. Women's rights are one of our strategic priorities in our current planning cycle, and advocacy for women's rights is a key component of our programmes. Building women's capacity to voice their views without fear, to convincingly argue for their opinions, is extremely important to us. Many of our projects are chiefly focusing on a more meaningful realisation of women's rights, targeting various, often vulnerable women sub-groups. Thus, for example, we are addressing the concerns of indigenous women in a number of provinces, enabling them to gain better access to public information and advocate for their causes in a more qualified way. We are striving to engage women with disabilities in a dialogue with local authorities and public service providers, in an effort to render public decision-making processes more inclusive and enhance social accountability. We are supporting young women entrepreneurs in their struggle to raise public awareness on the need for more transparency and more social protection, which is especially important in the Covid crisis. And these are only a few

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of our current endeavours dedicated to this strategic focal point. There is much more to it, and our fight for women's rights will continue beyond mere celebrations, on a daily basis.

Ladies and Gentlemen, on behalf of API, we would like to express our gratitude to all women representatives of our international development partners, of governmental institutions, and of local civil society organisations. Without their relentless work and precious cooperation, none of our projects would be possible. A special word of thanks goes to our women volunteers and community facilitators, whose commitment is beyond imagination. We wish you all, and all women in Cambodia and abroad, a joyful, fruitful and rewarding International Women's Day!

In the name of API's Executive Committee:

Yours sincerely,

Socheat LAM  
Executive Director

