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# URBAN POOR WOMEN'S STORIES

Facts and Figures #38

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## **I. Overview**

Urban poor women often lead the way towards the realisation of land and housing rights for their communities. However, they face many challenges each day, as poor people, mothers, wives, grandmas, workers and students, largely because they are women. This research attempts to uncover some of the issues that everyday urban poor women face in their lives. The report finishes with recommendations that are taken from the women themselves.

Interviews were conducted with eight urban poor women, all of whom live in poor communities that face the threat of eviction. Some women said their environment was part of the reason for their poor health, and others noted it was because of their role as mothers and money-keepers, which led to them putting the health concerns of others before their own.

The women reported abuse by their husbands, neglect from authorities, and discrimination from the wider Phnom Penh community, but overwhelmingly placed their fear of eviction as their biggest challenge. The women continued to feel pride in their communities even when their communities contribute to their poor health through lack of sanitation and regular flooding. All women had a strong belief in their rights as humans to adequate housing and land tenure security. When asked to take pictures of the benefits and problems in their lives, the women mostly took pictures of challenges in their community, rarely finding places of beauty within their communities that they sought to showcase in this research.

## **II. Research Methodology**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight women from six urban poor communities in Phnom Penh. In addition, researchers asked women to take pictures of the things in their community that caused them challenges and the things they loved about their communities or found beautiful within them.

The interview process used questionnaires to discuss key issues faced by women and which allowed flexibility to the researchers to discuss other issues as they arose throughout the interview. In addition, the research process allows the participants to exert some control over the narrative by giving the participants control over cameras, which they used to take pictures of their community and which are included in this research.

Finally, researchers also conducted a literature review and interviewed key CSOs and NGOs working in the field of women’s rights, such as LICADHO, CCHR, and Urban Poor Women’s Development.

**Table 1. Participant Ages.**

Age	Number of respondents
19 - 25	2 women
26 - 40	2 women
41 - 60	4 women



### III. Key Findings

In everyday life, women face many problems, including food insecurity, irregular earnings, illness, mental health problems, lack of basic services, discrimination, harassment, shame, domestic violence (physical violence and mental) and the on-going fear of forced evictions.

#### Irregular earnings and lack of daily food

Most of the women interviewed work at home, as bakery vendors, small-scale sellers and farmers, construction workers and carers (of the elderly or sick). Their incomes range from between USD \$40 per month, to USD \$190 per month. For comparison, the minimum wage of workers in the garment and footwear industry in Cambodia is \$182 per month as of January 2019.<sup>1</sup>

A 59-year-old woman living alone in a dilapidated house on USD \$40 a month often went without electricity, water and food because of her low income. Her electricity is provided privately, as the state has not supplied her household with a connection, and the private provider is more expensive than state electricity. She is currently unwell, and is unable to afford the medications she needs.

In addition, most women faced difficulty in affording enough food. A mother, who was responsible for work both inside and outside the home, said that every day she had to pay USD \$12.50 to support her four children's meals and

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<sup>1</sup> Prakas on the minimum wage determination for garment and textile workers for 2019 of the Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training:  
[http://www.mlvt.gov.kh/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=1011](http://www.mlvt.gov.kh/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=1011)

studying. Her husband, who is employed as a labourer only earns USD \$12.50 a day. She said, “in my household, if my husband was sick, the whole household would be unable to afford food and couldn’t support our children to study”.

### **Physical Health**

Half of all the women’s communities had exit and entrance roads which were regularly inundated with flood waters. Daily flooding was reported to have had a greater impact on women, especially when floods lasted for more than a day or two. Women were more likely to be in contact with contaminated water than men due to their roles as domestic workers who were responsible for cleaning, looking after children, carrying children through contaminated water, and making numerous trips through the flooded water without a motorbike (as opposed to men who only made two trips per day if they worked outside of the community and usually rode the family motorbike). Flood waters often mixed with sewage and other garbage resulting in periods of contaminated water penetrating communities for weeks.

Two women reported regular health and safety issues due to flooding in their communities. The first woman was upset that she had to wade through dirty water four to five times per day to pick her children up from school. In the past, she constructed a small boat from water bottles and floated her children to and from school while she waded through the flood waters. As a result, she developed a disease that made her unable to undertake extended periods at work. However, she did not seek medical care due to its expensiveness to treat and her want to provide for her children’s education.

In another case, a wife and her husband were both frequently sick. But, while the husband usually sought medical care, the wife did not. She explained that she did not care about her own health as much as she did about the health of her husband, who was the primary income earner. In other cases, women described their health concerns as ‘secondary’, ‘unimportant’ and ‘not as important’ as other things, including the health of their husbands. Women regularly did not seek medical care due to financial concerns which prioritized the role of the family over the health of the woman. In many cases, women said that they did not have time to look after themselves, often working numerous jobs and taking care of the children and domestic responsibilities.

### **Mental Health**

Six of the eight women experienced serious mental health problems through daily living challenges and the recurring fear of eviction. Only one woman has received treatment from a mental health program, assisted by the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, which pointed her to treatment with an inter-cultural psychosocial organization.

In one case, a woman's husband did not allow her to participate in advocacy work, describing land rights work as "not productive", and "a way to invite threats from authorities". While the husband sought to wait for better local government resolution, the wife did not agree and dealt with severe stress in being caught between her husband, her community and the authorities.

In another case, a woman suffered mental health problems after receiving a notice to evict from her house. She began to participate in advocacy with her community. Since her husband was

busy in his career as a military officer, he did not have time to be involved in the advocacy or eviction processes. The entire responsibility of her family's fight against eviction became focused upon the woman. She gave up her work to take care of the home and became an activist. She encountered many problems, including conflict in the household which resulted in emotional violence from her husband who controlled where she could go, when she could go and what she could and could not do. She was threatened by authorities and seen with jealousy from community members because she received NGO training. The experience left her traumatised and reluctant to continue her advocacy work.

### **Discrimination**

All of the interviewed women reported that they were often discriminated against from authorities, noting that authorities didn't even have a presence in their communities. A woman said "I have never seen the local authorities come to the communities, except for during the election<sup>2</sup>, but after that, I have never seen them."

In addition, people living outside the community also discriminated against the community members. Women reported that they often showed signs of disgust when talking or being near the women's communities and did not try to establish relationships with the community. The women said that outside women did not allow their children to visit with the children in the community, one woman noted that "outsiders think the community is full of drug users and criminals".

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<sup>2</sup>An STT research report found that only 62% of eligible voters were aware of how to participate in commune elections in 2017, despite increased authority presence in communities during this period.

Sahmakum Teang Tnaut (2016), 'The urban poor community's knowledge on the 2017 Commune election', STT:

<https://teangtnaut.org/facts-figures-urban-poor-communitys-knowledge-2017-commune-election/?lang=en>

Women said they felt more discriminated against than men because women spent more time in the communities and were responsible for taking care of the house. When discussing whether men felt discriminated against as well, women reported that it was different. One woman said "men leave the community to work or work from morning to evening". A woman who became a community representative through the community's own democratic processes said she was discriminated against by local authorities in a public forum organized by local authorities. The Commune Chief reportedly said "I do not recognize this woman as a representative or community leader, I have selected a community leader as a man from this community, and I do not want to work with a woman who is messy". After this conflict, her husband began to hinder all social activity both outside and inside the community, due to fear of what might happen to their family.

A magazine produced by the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training notes that "[w]omen are key actors of national development in all sector [unofficial translation]."<sup>3</sup>

Finally, all of the women's communities lacked basic infrastructure such as streetlighting. According to STT's database, out of the 277 urban poor communities surveyed in 2018, 243 (88%) did not have functioning streetlights. The lack of streetlighting has created a fear of violence especially as many of the women from the communities' work hours that require them to return home after dark. Fear of rape, harassment and robbery were reported amongst the women interviewed as a result of lack of streetlighting.

### **Domestic Violence**

Two women faced, or had faced, domestic violence over a sustained period of months or years. After becoming pregnant, a young woman endured serious physical and psychological distress, almost losing her baby as a result. She divorced her then husband after giving birth.

The second woman said that her domestic violence was caused by a series of clashes about family income.

The woman reported that her husband likes to drink alcohol and beat her up regularly. A situation made much more devastating by living at her brother-in-law's house, meaning she has no support or help when her husband is violent.

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<sup>3</sup>Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (2015), a magazine of jobs in Cambodia [unofficial translation], published by MLVT Source: [http://www.mlvt.gov.kh/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=246B6&Itemid=203&lang=en](http://www.mlvt.gov.kh/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=246B6&Itemid=203&lang=en)

## Concerns about eviction



Most communities where women were interviewed were living on state-public land and were in conflict with authorities about their right to housing and land. In all cases researched women were at the forefront of the housing and land rights campaigns run by their communities, which is a longstanding trend in Cambodia.<sup>4</sup> When asked what was their biggest concern, women reported their fear of eviction as the most serious and most in need of solving.

## IV. Conclusions

The findings have provided the following conclusions:

- Women may face intensified effects as a result of poverty in comparison to men largely due to their status as women, a status which keeps them located primarily in the community and at greater risk to illness, the effects of everyday discrimination, and removes them from work and school.
- Women are more likely to be the leaders in their communities when the issues are housing and land rights related.
- Women devalue their own worth when deciding whether a husband or a wife should be taking medicine based largely on economic concerns over a husband's salary versus a wife's child-care, cooking, cleaning and other domestic responsibilities.
- Many issues that the women face, such as poor infrastructure and lack of representation in politics, are the direct responsibility of the State, and are human rights issues that have a greater effect on women.

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<sup>4</sup> Cambodian Center for Human Rights (2016), 'Women in Land Disputes in 2016', CCHR: [https://cchrcambodia.org/index\\_old.php?url=media/media.php&p=report\\_detail.php&reid=116&id=5&lang=khm](https://cchrcambodia.org/index_old.php?url=media/media.php&p=report_detail.php&reid=116&id=5&lang=khm)

## **V. Recommendations**

- The authorities should examine all basic needs in urban poor communities and provide support to these communities, as is their responsibility as the government.
- The authorities should provide land titling to urban poor communities to increase safety and in support of the right to adequate housing.
- The community should promote and encourage women to participate in decisions to promote equal rights for women and men.
- Reduction of domestic violence can only be achieved with the support of police.
- Provide infrastructure upgrades to protect women from violence, especially the provisioning of street-lighting.

# Challenges



Flooding



A kitchen



Bedroom

# Things of beauty



A garden outside a home (the number '3' was spray-painted by authorities and is a sign that communities may be evicted soon)



Bridge over flood waters



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