



អង្គការសហគមន៍បាងកក

Sahmakum Teang Tnaut Organization • a Cambodian Urban NGO

Facts and Figures #47

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**Women in poor communities,
social media, and threats**



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Sahmakum Teang Tnaut (STT) was founded in 2005 and officially registered in 2006 as a local NGO supporting urban poor communities. STT started as a small NGO that focused on technical upgrades in poor communities and has since grown to produce community maps, research and advocacy in order to achieve its goal of helping urban poor and vulnerable communities realize their rights to land and housing.

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I. Introduction

This study aims to understand the experience of using social media platforms, including Facebook, WhatsApp and Telegram, by women living in urban poor communities especially during COVID-19.

This Facts and Figures focuses on women activists or community representatives and their experience using social media accounts to advocate, seek and share information, manage data and ask for help during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. Information shared includes information about land issues, rights to land titles, infrastructure, drug use, and other issues occurring in their communities. The findings of the report are as follows:

1. Advocacy by urban poor women led to the receipt of donations from partner organizations and individual donors during the COVID-19 lockdowns, as well as other solutions to communities' issues.
2. Right to and freedom of expression is restricted for urban female activists via intimidation and threats by local authorities.
3. There is a widespread fear or lack of willingness to advocate or post about their community's concerns over social media accounts. Fear of harassment from their local authorities is recorded.
4. Incitement, political smearing, and discrimination against communities by withholding public services by local authorities.

II. Purpose and Methodology

Overall Objective

This study was conducted through interviews with 6 women who are community representatives and community leaders. Interviews were conducted via phone calls to ensure the security and safety of participants. The research was conducted in May 2022 in six urban poor communities in four of Phnom Penh's districts: Russey Keo, Meanchey, Sen Sok, and Chbar Ampov. This research is a qualitative study conducted with an open-ended questionnaire. Each interview lasted 20 to 30 minutes, was recorded and transcribed in written form. The researchers explained the purpose of the study and received verbal consent from interviewees prior to interviewing and recording. The researchers also informed interviewees in advance about the publication of the interview. Identities and names of the women interviewees will not be made public. The results of the study are not statistically representative of experiences, consequences and challenges of all women living in the urban poor communities. However, the experiences presented highlight the issues currently faced by some women living in those areas in Phnom Penh.

Further research should be conducted to understand the extent to which other women are facing similar issues related to advocacy and freedom of expression on social media in Cambodia.

III. National laws and International Conventions on Rights and Freedom of Expression

National laws

The Constitution, Article 41 -

Khmer citizens shall have freedom of expression of their opinions, freedom of information, freedom of publication and freedom of assembly. No one shall exercise these rights to infringe upon the honor of others, or to affect the good customs of society, public order and national security. The regime of the media shall be determined by law¹.

The Constitution, Article 35 -

Khmer citizens of either sex shall have the right to participate actively in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the nation. Any suggestions from the people shall be given full consideration by the grant of the State².

International Convention

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Article 19

1. Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference.
2. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.
3. The exercise of the rights provided for in paragraph 2 of this article carries with it special duties and responsibilities. It may therefore be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:
 - (a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others;
 - (b) For the protection of national security or of public order, or of public health or morals³.

¹Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia [art. 41], 21 September 1993, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b5428.html> [accessed 10 July 2022]

²Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia [art. 35], 21 September 1993, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b5428.html> [accessed 10 July 2022]

³UN General Assembly, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 16 December 1966, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 999, art. 19, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3aa0.html> [accessed 10 July 2022]

IV. Key Findings

1. Advocacy by urban poor women led to the delivery of donations from partner organizations and individual donors during the COVID-19 lockdowns, as well as other proposed solutions and promises to solve community land issues.

2 out of 6 women interviewed said that as a result of disseminating their community's issues online during COVID-19, they received food and preventive supplies during the lockdowns from district authorities, partner organizations and individuals. They were also offered potential solutions to conflicts arising in their communities. One of the 6 women reported that as a result of her online advocacy, local authorities promised to address and resolve land issues in her community to the best of their abilities.

2. Rights and freedom of expression are restricted via intimidation and threats

All respondents said that sharing information about their communities' issues and posting their communities' activities led to intimidation and threats from local authorities. This was the case with information about community meetings, public celebrations of World Habitat Day, land and environmental issues, demand for land titles, and infrastructure issues. Restrictive measures can be enacted in many ways, notably deploying security forces to monitor, threaten and take away community people for questioning and distributing fines at the Sangkat office.

Ming Chan

*"Around the twentieth of September 2018, while my community was celebrating World Habitat Day, I was called in and **transported away from the community by the authorities for questioning** regarding the celebration. When I arrived at the Sangkat office, those authorities, all of whom are men, threatened and accused me of celebrating World Habitat Day.*

*Each of their actions exhibited threats, **such as yelling and slamming the table**. They yelled at me saying that all of my [Facebook] posts were wrong and that I should delete them as I made accusations against the government, **and then slammed the table**. They prohibited me from continuing any activities tarnishing the government's reputation. They didn't explain to me in a peaceful manner or offer any reasonable solutions. All their actions were nothing but violations of my rights and dignity."*

Ming Bo

*"Regarding experiences of using social media accounts, in short, we can't use them for any activities. It's heavily restricted within my community (on sharing information or posting about community meetings such as money-saving group meetings and so on). I can't do anything on social media because **I am being monitored**, some community members are commune officials. I know they follow me on social media because whenever I posted on my social media account, I would receive advice from the authorities for me not to do this, not to do that..."*

Ming Na

*"I posted on my social media account about community meetings. Now I rarely post them because of **too much interference by the authorities**."*

Ming Srey

*"I used to use my personal social media account to share information relating to community development because **I thought that it wasn't just a matter for a particular family; it's a matter for every member within the community**. We should unite and find solutions altogether. After that, I was questioned by authorities, why I posted them, for what purpose? **I was told I couldn't just post anything, and that I should avoid posting any information affecting authorities and the government**. The authorities said that before doing any activities in the community, I had to inform them, so that unexpected problems could be avoided."*

Ming Sok

*"The issues currently facing our community concern land titles and difficulty in organizing meetings. What we usually post are just surface issues. We dare not post anything affecting authorities because **they are always monitoring and warning us not to post anything that tarnishes the government**."*

Ming Yen

*"Because of the post, **an authority living near our community reported us to a Sangkat chief**. We were visited and warned (regarding our post on what is going on in our community). They do not want us to do anything, which is why it is hard for our community."*

3. Fear to take action

At least 5 out of 6 women either feel fear and worry because of harassment by their local authorities. This pushes them to stop expressing their views or share issues that their communities are facing.

Ming Yen

"As a woman, I was very frightened when male authorities took me away. I had previously heard that activists in other communities who were affected by land issues had been taken away, and they couldn't return home, likely because they were detained for a while. Luckily, I was allowed to return home."

Ming Chan

"...when they brought me in for questioning at Sangkat office in September 2018 – like what I have told earlier that I would always share information that could be of benefits to our community, but the problem for me was when Sangkat authorities calling me in for questioning (what is the community trying to do? For what purpose? Why have the authorities not been informed and invited to the meeting?) in an intimidating manner – I was frightened at that time, but I tried to keep calm even in such a tense situation."

Ming Sok

"I don't usually post my views – I use it for group discussions to plan actions – because the authorities always threaten to not keep their promises and address issues in the community if people do something wrong or out of ordinary."

Ming Bo

"Other community people with smart phones always get threatened by authorities who warn them not to post information or share community issues, or else they will be arrested and imprisoned just like others. Due to the pressure from the authorities, they have ceased all their activities on social media."

Ming Srey

"The same authority went on, 'if you were to continue doing it, you might be detained or imprisoned.'" After hearing what he said, I felt so frightened and stopped posting pictures on my social media account. Likewise, other community members of mine might have been intimidated by the authorities. All the members seem to have been inactive in the community. They dare not even attend a small community gathering. When asked, they told me that they didn't want to do anything for fear of being taken away for questioning or detained by the authorities."

4. Incitement and political smearing by Local Authorities

One of the 6 interviewed women stated that an authority told her assistance offered by non-governmental organizations to communities is a political maneuver.

Ming Srey

"I will never forget it. During the COVID-19 pandemic, an organization offered assistance and food to help alleviate hardships in our community because all the community members could not get out and make a living. When receiving their assistance, I took pictures of the activity and posted them on my social media account. One day an official prohibited me from posting these kinds of pictures on social media. He added that I should not post just any pictures on Facebook because such support provided to communities like mine weren't considered as assistance but a political maneuver, and that there was no way they would help my community of their own free will."

V. Conclusion

Women leaders and representatives of poor communities use social media platforms to advocate for their rights and to find solutions to their problems. As a result, they have received support from their local authorities, civil society organizations, and the general public during COVID-19.

However, voicing their views and sharing issues that they are facing on social media have also attracted unwanted attention from local authorities. Authorities, as seen in this report, tend to view advocacy, and any kind of awareness-raising on community and women's issues, to be anti-government. All the women interviewed for this study reported having experienced a violation of their freedom to express their views and to use social media to express their frustration. Some women reported having lost the will to use social media as a tool to highlight issues affecting them, out of fear.

VI. Recommendations

- Protect, respect, and guarantee the right to freedom of expression in accordance with the Cambodian Constitution and the obligations as a signatory and party to the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights. Local authorities should encourage people to express their opinions and bring up problems their communities have been facing and should jointly address the problems or concerns without tradeoffs. They should not view opinions expressed on social media as opposing the government.
- Administrations at the national level should review the enforcement of protection of human rights and ensure that their protection is observed and guaranteed to citizens by their sub-national administrations. Authorities must stop all forms of intimidation when citizens voice their opinions and share issues about their communities.
- Implement policies to “promote effectiveness of policies on social harmonization against all forms of discrimination and social division” as stipulated in the commune/Sangkat council election policy dated June 2022⁴.

⁴Commune/Sangkat council election policy, promote effectiveness of policies on social harmonization against all forms of discrimination and social division, dated June 2024 (community posted during commune/Sangkat council election in Wat Phnom Commune, Daun Penh District in June 2022)



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