

Case Study

Empowering Cambodian Women in Politics: How Training and Telegram Helped Female Candidates Win Elections



Figure 1: Dozens of political candidates in Siem Reap province participated in training and registered on Telegram.

Women in Cambodia face barriers in running for government positions

Although women and girls make up approximately half of Cambodia's population, their representation at all levels of governance is disproportionately low. Before 2022, only 21% of Cambodia's National Assembly members and 20% of commune councillors were women. The country's codification of equality in political participation for men and women and its ratification of the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) haven't yet succeeded in bridging the gap in women's political representation, partly because Cambodian women encounter gender-based violence and stereotypes; disproportionately low levels of education for women and girls; patriarchal norms that encourage women to tend to the household, while men assume leadership roles; and lack of financial and political support when attempting to run for office.

The PMI-WILL project is improving the situation

The [Federation for Canadian Municipalities](#) and local government associations in five countries are working on a transformative project called the [Partnership for Municipal Innovation – Women in Local Leadership](#) (PMI-WILL), one of objective of which is to increase women's participation in local governance in Benin, Cambodia, Ghana, Sri Lanka and Zambia. The PMI-WILL project is funded by [Global Affairs Canada](#).

To increase women's participation in local government elections in Cambodia, the project began in 2021 in partnership with the [National League of the Local Councils of the Kingdom of Cambodia \(NLC\)](#). Together, they addressed barriers to women's participation. Initiatives included awareness creation and community sensitization, capacity building for women candidates, and engagement with political parties, among other initiatives. To implement these, NLC had support from the Gender Technical Working Group on Women in Leadership and Governance, the Women and Children's Committees, the [Cambodian Women for Peace and Development](#), and a network of Cambodia's political parties and youth associations.

The initiatives were a success. In early 2022, 665 women (about a third of them from marginalized groups) participated in 18 training workshops to improve their chances of winning local government elections in June 2022. They focused on leadership skills, public speaking, campaign planning and communication strategies. The women, who were councillors or aspiring to become councillors, had never attended such trainings before, and were enthusiastic to acquire knowledge and improve their skills.

Ms. Vat Raksa was one of the trainees who won her election – as First Deputy Chief of the Lvea commune, in Siem Reap province. She comes from a humble family in Cambodia. Her father is a farmer, and her mother is a housewife. Reflecting on her experience with the training, she said: "I'm so happy to be part of this training. I've never had training like this before. I've learned valuable skills in communication and public speaking. While I had been involved in campaign planning before, this training taught me how to structure a campaign, from setting voter targets to developing budget plans."



Figure 2: Ms. Vat Raksa was elected the First Deputy Chief in the Lvea commune, in Siem Reap province, in Cambodia.

Political candidates start a powerful networking group on Telegram to increase their chances of winning elections

When the training sessions concluded in May 2022, surveys revealed that participants wanted ongoing support to better apply the skills they had learned. In response, a group on Telegram (a popular messaging platform in Cambodia) was created to foster peer-to-peer learning and capacity building. The group, supported by the candidates' provincial secretariats, the PMI-WILL National Project Coordinator, and an NLC-hired consultant, continued the capacity-building efforts and provided further support for the candidates' campaigns. In eight days, approximately 420 of the 665 (63%) of the trainees enrolled in the new Telegram group.

The successes of the women's Telegram group before and during the June 2022 local elections

Over the course of two months, on a daily basis, the NLC consultant provided expertise and monitored engagement on Telegram. Ground rules were established to ensure efficient and focused use of the platform, and members reminded each other to use the group to ask questions and share experiences on issues concerning local governance. Candidates asked about topics covered during training, shared tips and photos about campaign-planning activities, talked about their concerns, and asked how to build confidence for public speaking and how to rally voters' support. Participation spiked at election time, with an average of 137 members active on election day (June 5, 2022).

Tips about public speaking and rallying support were particularly popular. In Cambodia, candidates travel to villages, gather people in homes or public spaces, and use their public-speaking skills to gain supporters. Common concerns on Telegram included, "I'm not good at public speaking," and, "I'm still not confident." To help address these concerns, messages were shared on Telegram reinforcing key points from the earlier training sessions, such as "Nervousness Is Normal," "Practice and Prepare" and "Use gentle eye contact." Posts like these, about nitty-gritty, practical issues, helped many candidates during their campaigns.

The significance of the training sessions and Telegram group was reflected in Cambodia's elections on June 5, 2022, when 498 of the 665 women (75% of them) were victorious in local council elections. Overall, the project had provided a powerful community of incumbents and aspiring female politicians with tools, tips and supports from peers. The results were impressive. Prior to the elections, approximately 20% of commune councillors were women. Following the elections, that increased to 22% (2,562 out of 11,622 councillors).

FCM surveys showed that the majority of women who reported significant benefits from the PMI-WILL project were widowed, divorced, lived in rural areas or were elderly with limited education. This suggests that the project supported female candidates who have historically faced financial, educational and sociocultural barriers.



Figure 3: Women comprise only one fifth of Cambodia's National Assembly and its local governments, but Cambodian women are changing that. In 2022, a workshop with a women's group and local government officials in Takeo Province collects feedback on local issues.

Challenges and recommendations related to using Telegram during candidates' election campaigns

While participants reported that Telegram was helpful, some women reported that they didn't own smartphones, couldn't afford to purchase enough internet data, lived in areas with poor internet connectivity, or faced download glitches on the app when too many photos were accessed at once – all of which limited use of the Telegram group. In future, technical and financial support may have to be provided to overcome hardware, software and connectivity barriers – or participants could be guided on how to mobilize financial support for social media use in general.

During the registration process, provincial secretariats reported that their phones faced technical problems due to the volume of registrations in a short period of time (eight days). Also, some participants didn't join because they were reluctant to publicize their campaign or other strategies, or they were uncomfortable in using Telegram. Recommendations include streamlining the registration process, or starting it earlier, so that devices and staff aren't overwhelmed. Another recommendation is to provide technical training about how to use Telegram and other social media platforms, as well as training about the purpose and usefulness of such platforms.

Skills and solidarity are enhanced with social media groups and is a model for other countries

One major component of the PMI-WILL project has been to boost the participation and performance of women candidates in local elections. In Cambodia, thanks to the training sessions and the Telegram group, candidates reported an increase in capacity for election planning – and many women were successful on June 5, 2022, with a measurable increase in women elected. In particular, Telegram complemented skills and knowledge following the training, and the group fostered a community of peer support. Despite challenges for a few, such as limited access to technology, the Telegram group proved to be an innovative solution for continuing the momentum of the training. The platform became a space for women to share experiences, troubleshoot campaign strategies, and build confidence in their leadership abilities.

An evaluation conducted two years later highlighted significant improvements in their leadership skills, communication, conflict management, and in understanding the responsibilities of an elected official – and they became more proficient in the use of social media and personal branding. Overall, the evaluation noted a positive shift in the environment for women as leaders, and efforts have begun to reshape local administrations, creating a more inclusive environment that supports women.

The PMI-WILL project in Cambodia can serve as a model to improve participation rates of women in governance in other countries.



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