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Briefing Note

Empowering Women and Youth for Socioeconomic Development in Cambodia

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Executive Summary

Cambodia's population is projected to be 17.7 million (2024), with youth making up two-thirds of this demographic. This group represents a vital labor force for economic growth; however, women and youth face significant barriers to participation, including limited access to education, vocational training, and financial resources. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these challenges, causing economic growth to decline sharply.

This review indicates that systemic gender inequality restricts opportunities for women, who earn approximately 80% of what men earn for the same work and hold only 13.6% of parliamentary seats. Despite initiatives like the Cambodian Sustainable Development Goals, entrenched cultural norms continue to hinder progress.

To address these issues, the Cambodian parliament can consider implementing gender-responsive education policies, enhancing legal frameworks for equal pay, and establishing quotas for women's representation in decision-making roles. By adopting these measures, Cambodia can create a more inclusive environment that empowers women and youth, contributing to sustainable socioeconomic development.

1. Introduction

Cambodia's population is estimated to have reached 17.7 million people by 2024, with a youth demographic comprising two-thirds of this population[1]. This demographic represents a substantial potential labor force, offering opportunities for economic growth and innovation. However, women and youth face significant barriers to economic participation, including limited access to education, vocational training, and financial resources [2]. These challenges hinder their ability to contribute effectively to the economy. Despite an average economic growth rate of 7.6% from 1995 to 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a decline to 3.1% in 2020, severely impacting various sectors, particularly tourism and manufacturing. Fortunately, the economy has shown signs of recovery, rebounding to 5.4% in 2023, yet the need for inclusive policies remains critical to harness the full potential of Cambodia's youthful population[3].

2. Research Findings

2.1. Key Barriers to Economic Opportunities

Women and youth in Cambodia encounter numerous challenges, including gender inequality, limited access to education, and financial resources, which significantly hinder their employment opportunities and economic advancement [4]. For instance, only 60% of women have access to formal financial services, compared to 70% of the overall population, which restricts their ability to start businesses or invest in education [5]. Furthermore, women earn approximately 80% of what men earn for the same work, highlighting a persistent wage gap that is particularly pronounced in higher-paying positions, where men dominate [6]. This disparity not only affects individual livelihoods but also stifles overall economic growth. In terms of political representation, women held only 13.6% of parliamentary seats in 2024, indicating a lack of

influence in decision-making processes that could help address these inequalities and promote gender equity in the workforce[7].

2.2. Gaps in Policy Implementation

Despite various initiatives aimed at closing the gender gap, such as the Cambodian Sustainable Development Goals (CSDGs) Framework and the National Strategic Development Plan, deeply entrenched cultural norms continue to hinder meaningful progress [8]. These norms often dictate traditional gender roles, limiting women's opportunities in both the workforce and education. The gender wage gap remains significant at 19%, reflecting systemic inequalities that persist across various sectors, while women's literacy rates lag behind those of men, further perpetuating cycles of disadvantage[9]. Additionally, the absence of quotas for women's representation in political parties can be seen as perpetuating the underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles, thereby limiting diverse perspectives from shaping policies that could promote gender equality and empower women [10].

2.3. Role of Parliament

The Cambodian Parliament plays a crucial role in addressing the empowerment gap through law-making, oversight, and representation [11]. Legislative actions, such as the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Protection of Victims, have been taken to promote gender equality [12]. However, further efforts are needed, such as strengthening gender-responsive budgeting and enhancing civil society engagement [13].

3. Recommendations

3.1. Strategies for Empowerment

To effectively address the barriers to gender equality, it is essential to implement gender-responsive education policies that ensure equal access to quality education for all genders. This should include a focus on vocational training programs tailored for women and youth, as well as supporting mechanisms for women entrepreneurs to access financial resources and mentorship opportunities [14].

3.2. Policy Enhancement

Existing policies can be enhanced to promote the empowerment of women and youth. This includes developing legal frameworks that support equal pay for equal work, ensuring access to vocational training, and providing incentives for businesses that prioritize gender equality in hiring practices[15]. Additionally, policies can be designed to challenge and change cultural norms that perpetuate gender discrimination.

3.3. Parliamentary Actions

The Cambodian Parliament can consider leading in initiating institutional reforms that prioritize youth and gender equality in all government initiatives. This can include implementing quotas for

women's representation in decision-making roles, which would help ensure that diverse perspectives are included in policy-making processes[16]. Furthermore, the parliament can actively engage with civil society organizations to promote accountability and transparency in the implementation of gender equality initiatives.

3.4. Monitoring and Evaluation

Establishing a robust monitoring and evaluation framework is beneficial for assessing the effectiveness of policies aimed at promoting gender equality. This framework can include specific indicators to measure progress in women's economic participation, educational attainment, and political representation. Regular reporting on these indicators will help identify gaps and inform future policy adjustments. By adopting these policy options and parliamentary actions, Cambodia can create a more inclusive environment that empowers women and youth, ultimately contributing to sustainable socioeconomic development.

4. Conclusion

This briefing note provides an overview of the current state of women and youth empowerment in Cambodia, emphasizing the critical role of parliamentary action in addressing systemic challenges. Women and youth are integral to Cambodia's economic growth; however, they face significant obstacles that hinder their potential. Empowering these groups is essential for achieving sustainable development.

To foster an inclusive environment that promotes gender equality and empowers youth, the Cambodian government can consider implementing the optional strategies and was to enhance existing policies. Policymakers can prioritize the establishment of legal frameworks that protect and promote the rights of women and youth, encourage cross-party collaboration, and help ensure access to financial support and inclusive educational opportunities. By taking these steps, the government can contribute to sustainable socioeconomic development in Cambodia.

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