

“Religion, Women and Family in Cambodia”

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Dear Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all please allow me to express my deep gratitude to the Brigham Young University for the invitation to participate at this important international law and religion conference as well as for the excellent organization of event.

I sincerely hope that my inputs here today are useful for further discussions and can somehow contribute to the good outcomes of this symposium, even though I am the Minister of Women’s Affairs of Cambodia and not a scholar on religion and law neither on religious rights.

1) Overview of Religions in Cambodia

Cambodia is a South-East Asian country with over 15 million inhabitants and whose political system is a parliamentarian constitutional monarchy. In terms of religion, an estimated 95 percent of the population is **Theravada Buddhist**. The Theravada Buddhist tradition is widespread and strong in all provinces, with an estimated 4,400 pagodas throughout the country. On the other side, the **Mahayana** school of Buddhism is estimated to have around 34,000 followers and 105 temples.

On the other hand, between 2 and 3 percent of the Cambodian population is **Muslim** and typically lives in towns and rural fishing villages on the banks of the Tonle Sap Lake and the Mekong River, as well as in Kampot Province.

The **Christian community** constitutes 2 percent of the Cambodian population. There are around 100 Christian organizations or denominations that operate freely throughout the country. There are 1,292 Christian churches, of which 1,224 are Protestant and 68 are Catholic. In addition, there are 883 offices of prayer and 248 Christian schools.

The **Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints** is also present in Cambodia. The church's fifteenth Prophet and President, Gordon B. Hinckley, officially introduced missionary work to Cambodia in May 1996. The estimated number of followers of the Church in Cambodia is 13,594, with a total of 8 churches (half of them located in Phnom Penh, the capital) and 31

congregations: 27 congregations in Khmer language, 3 in Vietnamese language, and one international.

2) Enforcement of freedom of religion and prohibition of religious-based discrimination

Buddhism is the state religion of Cambodia according to our Constitution, adopted in 1993. Consequently, the Royal Government of Cambodia promotes Buddhist public holidays, provides Buddhist training and education to monks and others in pagodas, and –under the leadership of the Ministry of Cults and Religion- supports publication of materials on Khmer culture and Buddhist traditions.

The Royal Government of Cambodia strictly adheres to these constitutional principles and enforces religious freedom in both law and in practice. For example, the Ministry of Cults and Religions of Cambodia is also working to ensure that Muslim and Christian religions are respected and protected.

As a result, reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice are extremely rare in Cambodia. We do not tolerate religious-based discrimination neither hate speeches against minority religions.

However I can say that this has not been always the case. For example, during the Khmer Rouge regime, a very dark and sad period of our Cambodian history between 1975 and 1979, all religions were forbidden and supplanted by an extremist communist ideology from the State. The population was forced to stop practicing religion, and threatened and even killed in the case of the Muslim community.

3) Family Structure in Cambodia

In Cambodia, 32 percent of population aged 15 and over are single, while 58 percent are married, 8 percent widow and 2 percent divorced or separated. Mean age at marriage is 25.6 years for men and 23.3 for women. In addition, the median age of women at first birth is 22.3 years.

The total fertility rate in Cambodia is almost three children per woman and this number has significantly decreased over the years. There are over three million households in Cambodia. The average household size is 4.6 people. And 17 percent of households include foster and/or orphaned children.

In Cambodia the **extended family** is more common than the nuclear family. In fact, the extended family plays an important social role, as it provides financial sustainability, nurtures emotional support and enhances resilience of families and their members. In the extended families, three different generations are living together under the same roof and therefore family values are more easily transmitted from the older to the younger generations.

4) Institutional Framework to Protect Family and Women in Cambodia

After nearly 3 decades of traumas and war, the Royal Government of Cambodia –and especially the **Ministry of Women’s Affairs**- have put a lot of efforts in rebuilding the country and promote the role of women in family and society.

My Government recognizes the need of protecting and strengthening healthy families as the basis of prosperous communities and society as a whole. The Cambodian **National Strategic Development Plan** calls on families and women to play a central role in building the social fabric of society. The **Rectangular Strategy** states that “Women are the backbone of the economy and society”. And the **National Strategic Plan for Gender Equality** –known as Neary Rattanak- defines women as “precious gems”.

The **Constitution of Cambodia** stipulates that men and women have equal rights before the law and enjoy equal participation in all spheres; equality in marriage and family; employment and equal pay for the same work. Furthermore, other laws in Cambodia protect women and acknowledge their role as benefactors of families’ wellbeing. Two good examples are the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and the Protection of Victims (passed in 2005) and the Law on Monogamy (endorsed in 2006).

On the other hand, the **Ministry of Women’s Affairs** is not the only government institution to promote the status of women in family and society in Cambodia. The **National Committee to Uphold Social Ethics and Women’s and Khmer Family’s Values** was established in 2006 under the First Lady’s Honorary Presidency. The goal of this important Committee is to protect national culture, Cambodian family’s values and the dignity and role of Cambodian women in family and society. The Minister of Women’s Affairs (myself) is the chair of this Committee while the rest of its members are secretaries of state from relevant line ministries. Currently, we are working in the Committee to prevent the misuse of new technologies and to stop pornography and other heinous contents in the Internet which damage our national values and disrupt the image of women and families.

In addition, I truly believe that practitioners from different religions can and must achieve together the common goals of tolerance, compassion, understanding and harmony for stability and peace within societies and between peoples.

I would like to conclude my statement by emphasizing the linkages that, in my understanding, exist between Buddhism and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, especially when it comes to the genuine acknowledgment of both religions to women and mothers for their valuable contributions to societies all over the world. I have selected one verse of the Bible which also captures the family values upheld by Buddhism: “Hear, my son, your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching; Indeed, they are a crown of grace for your head and ornaments about your neck.” (Proverbs 1:8-9)

Thank you very much!