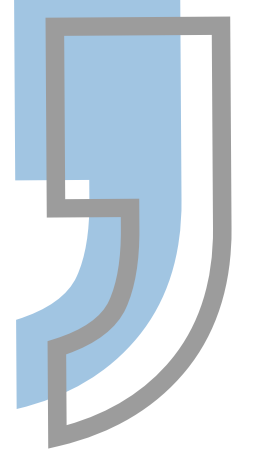


# The journey of an indigenous woman fighting to defend her housing and land rights

"I believe that every problem has solutions. As women, we should have self-determination. We need to know what we are doing and the reasons why we are taking action. Otherwise, we could get lost in the middle of the process. I have conquered my internal fears and stopped being a perfectionist – I started to take small step[s] forward, one step at a time, regardless of the result."



In 2012, the Cambodian government granted large swathes of land that were home to around 140 local indigenous families to a number of local and international actors for two projects: An economic land concession (ELC) and the Lower Sesan II Hydropower Dam (LS2). The land deals were struck without obtaining prior informed consent from the local indigenous communities, or engaging in meaningful consultation with those who would be affected. For the communities living in Kbal Romeas Village, located within the Sesan Commune of Steung Treng province, this marked the beginning of what was to be a years-long advocacy journey.

Construction on the LS2 began in 2014. Despite the efforts of the communities to halt or slow the process of construction, the dam was completed in September 2018. Costing up to USD 1 billion, the LS2 was expected to generate 400 Megawatts of electricity and provide power for consumption in five Cambodian provinces.

Circumstances remain dire for those on the ground who were either forcibly resettled to make way for the project, or who have since faced increasing concerns about their livelihoods due to lower fish yields. Non-profit environmental and human rights organisation International Rivers has said that the dam will have an increasingly "costly catastrophic impact on the Mekong River's fisheries and biodiversity".<sup>2</sup>



For Sreymom, her first experience with advocacy came at a young age when her parents wanted her to drop out of school, after she finished her secondary education. According to her, this was not an easy challenge to overcome, because her parents at the time believed that education was a privilege for boys rather than girls to enjoy. She had to advocate again and again to convince them that she would be worth the investment and assure them that she would not get romantically involved with any boy at school. Eventually, Sreymom's conviction won and she was permitted to travel to Phnom Penh to further her education. It was while at university, however, that her community came under threat of forced eviction.

Sreymom felt that she could not ignore the adverse effects caused by the LS2 project on her family and community, and became determined to find solutions to halt the planned forced evictions. She had to travel back and forth between Steung Treng province and Phnom Penh almost every weekend to organize and mobilize a youth group, and became involved in advocacy activities while back in the capital. She reached out to CSO allies and environmental activists to build support and undertake collective actions.

Despite the odds, some 52 families managed to remain on their land in Kbal Romeas. One of those families is Sreymom's, a member of the Pho-Norng indigenous community and one of many young women in Cambodia who have experienced the impacts of land grabbing and forced eviction first hand. She refuses to become a passive victim, and is determined and courageous in defending her community's rights to housing and their ability to cultivate land, as well as to take care of their communal spiritual and burial sites. Indeed, to protect their entire way of life, put under grave threat by this encroaching mega-project.

Photo credit: The Cambodia Indigenous Women Working Group (CIWWG)

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFTmz86p9Hs>

<sup>2</sup> Ariffin, E., 'Are Cambodia's hydropower plans risky?' *The ASEAN Post*, 5 February 2019, <https://theaseanpost.com/article/are-cambodias-hydropower-plans-risky>

Sreymom took charge as the lead figure from the community to submit petitions from her community to relevant government institutions at the national level and follow up on the progress. Unfortunately, Sreymom's activism came at a high price for herself and her family.

"I suffered so much, and there were times that I felt I was emotionally abused by my own father. He forced me to stop doing advocacy and campaigning activities after my mother, my uncle and I were charged with incitement to commit a crime and disruption of civil servants' work by provincial authorities. My father feared that all of us would be arrested and thrown in jail. It was a depressing time for me. However, I knew I hadn't done anything wrong, or against the law. I was simply protecting our land. I also knew that everything I did, I did it for the sake of my family, communities and country. It was not a selfish act or decision, so I continued my activism."



Photo credit: The Cambodia Indigenous Women Working Group (CIWWG)

This is due to various factors, the most important of which are the physical risks that come with advocacy work. For instance, the requirement to actively engage in forest patrolling and/or peaceful assembly in the public and private space can be dangerous, and can expose women to physical and/or sexual harassment.

Another hindering factor, according to Sreymom, are gendered social perceptions and norms. She has noticed that young women activists tend to have difficulties in finding a life-long partner, as most men prefer to be with those who are docile and "soft". Fortunately, Sreymom has found a supportive and progressive partner – he also is an indigenous person, from Ratanakiri province. He appreciates her activism and provides a helping hand when needed, whether for emotional support and/or technical assistance to prepare advocacy strategies and documentation.

As for her advice to other young women activists fighting the same battles, she reminds everyone to support each other by checking in via phone call or face to face to talk about their feelings and challenges, rather than just to bounce ideas off one another. She further advises that young women activists should try to find ways to engage men in their advocacy journeys.

Sreymom believes that the situation of women activists in all sectors would improve if the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) started to work more closely with women activists: "To genuinely respect and promote women's empowerment, MoWA has to directly engage with disadvantaged groups and amplify their voices in both policy and implementation – this will be of great help to women activists."

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Sreymom now works full-time as a campaigner for indigenous land rights. In her reflections, she took pride in her achievements: "Some people say our community wasn't successful in stopping forced eviction, but for me it was and is a successful case. Of course some of us were moved to a new resettlement site, but 52 families were able to stay. We have submitted an application to register for recognition as a formal indigenous community with the relevant government ministries. This process is nearly completed and soon we will be formally recognized as a legal entity and thus fully protected by law. Furthermore, the local authorities have started to reconnect public services for our community."

She shared an observation that there is a noticeable number of young women who have spoken up and engaged in advocacy and governance concerning land and natural resources. However, this number is still small if compared to the number of young men.



Photo credit: The Cambodia Indigenous Women Working Group (CIWWG)

