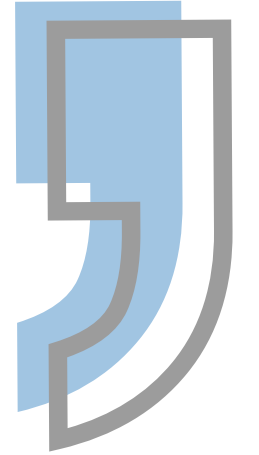


On becoming a frontline land rights defender: Chray Nem's Story

"In the end, I feel happy and proud that I have done what I have done. I was successful in defending my house. I not only joined the movement, but I became the movement and resisted human rights violation with others."
Chray Nem, SoS Community Activist



Despite women being severely underrepresented within most decision-making bodies in Cambodia, there is one forum where women are consistently front and centre: in the fight against land grabs and forced evictions.



Photo credit: Supplied by Ms Chray Nem

Cambodian women are at the forefront of campaigns to protect land and housing rights, whether the affected communities are urban, or rural, indigenous or not. This may be partly explained by the fact that many assume women protestors will be less likely to carry out or to experience violence while contesting with authorities whether at the negotiation table or during protests on the streets.

Perhaps more relevant is Cambodian grassroots women's proven ability to organize, mobilize and lead effective campaigns to end land grabbing and forced eviction around the country. The intersections between the insecurity of land tenure and discriminatory social and cultural norms have placed women in a unique position to lead. But, they have also led to them experience adverse effects on their emotional and physical wellbeing, and in many cases, placed severe strains on familial relationships.

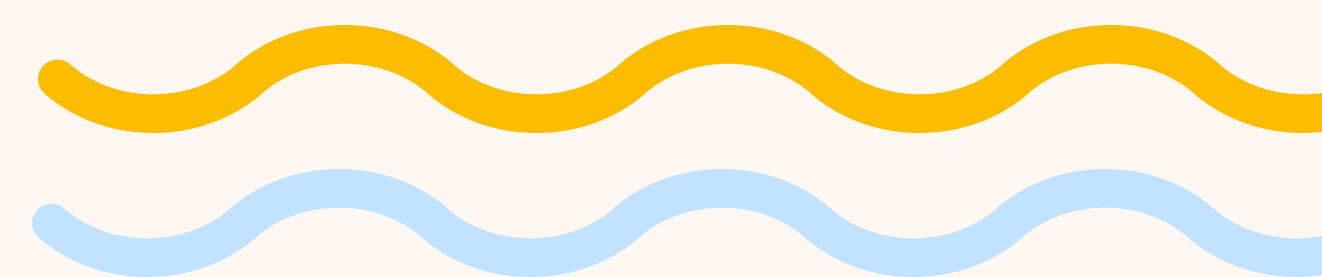
This case study pays special attention to the journey of Chray Nem, a woman land rights defender from the SOS Airport Community, who has led the movement to end forced evictions in her community.

Thmor Kol Village is a well-established village located near the Phnom Penh International Airport. It is where Nem's family, together with other villagers, have resided since the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979. Although they only possess soft titles for their houses and land, their presence has been accepted and recognized by local authorities. Despite this, one day in 2012, villagers received an eviction notice letter from the Phnom Penh Municipality (PPM) ordering them to leave their home within seven days, accusing them of being informal settlers. This happened without any prior consultation with the authorities.

The women were told by district authorities to form a group of representatives to discuss with officials at PPM. Due to the large number of affected people located in Thmor Kol village – they decided to form the Thmor Kol Community, and selected six women as their representatives, including Nem.

"My husband was a government worker. If he went to advocate, or became politically active, he would have faced pressure at work, or even been demoted or dismissed. Hence, I have to stand at the front line in order to protect his job and defend our home."

The women met with officials at PPM and put forward three options: 1) PPM should purchase their land/house at market value price, or 2) PPM should provide an alternative land swap to villagers within five kilometres distance from their current site, or 3) PPM should purchase their land/house at the price of 700\$/square metre. All proposed options were rejected by PPM, claiming the villagers did not have legal rights over their land/houses. Since then, residents have repeatedly sought to clarify their legal status – writing letters, submitting petitions and requesting meetings with government representatives, all to no avail. Affected community members have come to depend on Nem for advice and support, and to organise campaigns. They regularly meet at Nem's home to discuss the latest cases of intimidation by local authorities, and their strategy to keep up the fight.



They work together and stick together through difficulties and happiness, and they have drawn local and international public attention to their case. As part of one tactic, Nem led her community members to spray-paint an “SOS” message on their roofs to bring attention to their plight, in the hopes that dignitaries visiting Phnom Penh for the 2012 ASEAN Summit would hear their message. Instead, they were arrested and detained.



Photo credit: Photo supplied by Ms Chray Nem

The arrest and detention brought significant public attention to the community, and since then, they have been referred to as the “SOS Airport Community” instead of “Thmor Kol Community”. Nem has also been invited to join the resistance and support the plight of other communities, including the Beung Kak Lake and Borey Keila communities. According to Nem, without knowing when and how, she became a full-time campaigner.

Physical and emotional abuse and violence

“You can be stubborn and strong as much as you want on the street, or in front of authorities, but you cannot oppose my advice. In this house, I am your husband. You have to listen to me.” Nem, recalling her ex-husband’s words.

The more public attention that Nem harnessed for her community, the more time and energy were required of her. There was little time for her family or for income generation. Nem’s husband became frustrated with her activism and feared that she would harm his job security. Thus, he ordered Nem to cease all activities and forbade her from going to any meetings or leading any street protests. When Nem resisted his repeated orders, she suffered physical and emotional abuse and violence at home. Every time that Nem went out for a meeting, or joined a street protest, she knew she would be beaten when she returned home.

After months of emotional abuse and physical violence, her husband eventually gave her an ultimatum – to choose between their marriage and her activism. Nem was torn between the choices forced upon her, and wanted to save her marriage. However, when she was approached by activist friends at Beung Kak Lake community for peer support, Nem could not ignore the call and mobilized members to help them, despite the potential risks to her marriage.

Nem’s husband was furious at his perceived disobedience, and launched a serious physical assault against her when she arrived home, knocking her unconscious. When she awoke, she decided ‘enough is enough’ and divorced her husband.

Economic insecurity and impact on familial relationships

From the beginning, Nem had turned her house into the community office, and she stopped selling fruits at Neak Meas Market. She lost her source of income and had become economically dependent on her husband. When Nem divorced her husband, he cut off all financial support for household expenses. She then turned to her relatives and mother for assistance, but this had its own challenges – everyone had distanced themselves from her fearing an economic burden. Land conflict and threats of forced eviction have not just destroyed Nem’s 20-year marriage, but also her relationship with her relatives in-law, her siblings and biological mother. All she did was protect her house for her daughter and make sure that her daughter had a roof over her head. However, she has often been labelled as an irresponsible wife and mother, and a selfish relative who puts family at risk.

Nem grew tearful when speaking about her daughter, explaining that she felt very guilty that her activism had put her daughter in so much physical and emotional pain throughout the years. She recalled that when her daughter was sick, she did not have money to pay for transportation to take her daughter to the Kantha Bopha Children’s Hospital, and to pay for the essential medicine. Worse still, Nem’s daughter had to drop out of school for two years because she was also unable to pay school fees.

“My daughter [was only] about 9 years old then, but she had witnessed so much pain. She saw her dad beating me several times. She saw police hand-cuff me, drag me and throw me into their car. There was a time that she locked herself inside her bedroom in fear of her paternal grandmother and uncle taking her away.”

Sadly, Nem’s case is not unique among Cambodian women human rights defenders. There are many women’s land rights defenders and human rights activists who have experienced similar situations to Nem. The report “Good Wives” from the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights¹ and the research report on “Cambodian’s Women in Land Conflict” published in 2016 by the Cambodian Center for Human Rights,² both suggest that cases of domestic violence have increased in the wake of land conflict, because women most often have to abandon their long-established housewife role in order to start campaigning for greater land tenure security. For Nem, however, the struggle for equal land and housing rights continues, alongside those women who now rely on her for support and leadership.

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¹ LICADHO (2014) “Good Wives”: Women Land Campaigners and the Impact of Human Rights Activism

² CCHR, (2016) ‘Cambodia’s Women in Land Conflict’