



**មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលការពារជំងឺទឹកនោមផ្អែម**  
**Diabetes Care Center**



**012 254 772**

**010 254 772**



**dcckohpich@gmail.com**



**www.diabetescarecenter.info**

**N15-17 Street N, Sangkat Tonle Bassac, Khan Chamkarmon, Phnom Penh, Cambodia**



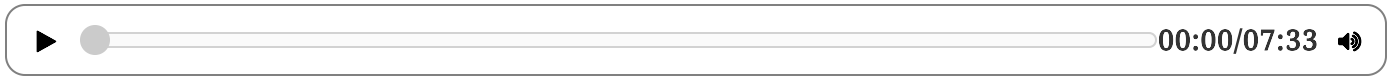
Society

# Women's Rising Influence in Cultural and Creative Industries about to Shape the Future



By: [Teng Yalirozy \(https://Cambodianess.Com/By\\_author?Name=Teng-Yalirozy\)](https://Cambodianess.Com/By_author?Name=Teng-Yalirozy)

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**PHNOM PENH — Throughout the decades, women artists in Cambodia have faced barriers, often received limited recognition and opportunities in a sector filled with men and in which women were often the exceptions. And today, despite their increasing presence in the field, their leadership role remains limited.**

According to So Phina, a writer and director of CICADA—an organization advocating for the cultural and creative industries to develop a sustainable and inclusive infrastructure—women have been actively engaged in the sector since the beginning but have lacked the opportunity to hold leadership positions.

“Those at the decision-making level are mostly men,” she said. “[W]e have especially seen many rising women film directors, for instance, but most directors are men,” she said. “I would say that in recent years, women are more active and showing their artistic work, and are receiving recognition not only nationally but internationally.”

For example, Sao Sreymao—an independent artist whose practice includes painting, photography, digital drawing, sculpture, and performance—said that after the COVID-19 pandemic, women actively participated in creating and exhibiting visual art works, which was a positive sign for the industry in Cambodia.

“Three months into this year, I was surprised to have seen many emerging women artists holding art exhibitions,” she said. “Ten years ago, I think fewer women were seen.”

Yean Reaksmey, director and co-founder of Silapak Trotchaek Pneik, which is a contemporary art space by YK Art House, said the number of contemporary visual artists in Cambodia is relatively small compared to pop culture and performing arts, and the art scene is predominantly male.

“Unlike the performing arts, in terms of numbers, the contemporary art scene is indeed predominately male,” he said. “I am not sure whether the so-called shortage of women artists is an urgent matter to be addressed or if it is in itself a problem to begin with.

“However, I generally want to see more practitioners in the field and more voices and perspectives from women,” Reaksmey added.

Mix-media artist Hul Kanha has observed that Cambodia's art scene has evolved, but society issues like limited women representation persist. “Encouraging more women artists, providing platforms for them, and dismantling the barriers to their success is essential for a more inclusive [field],” she said.

The circus sector also has a smaller number of women performers compared to men due to the intense nature of circus-art performances, observed Mam Senleaphea, a human resource specialist who has been with Phare Performing Social Enterprise circus in Siem Reap for 10 years.

“Women are required to have strong and lasting physical strength,” she said. “Still, women performers at Phare are hard-working, determined and persevering. They break through any barrier to be in a circus performance, which must be highly praised.”

Circus performances demand physical fitness, agility, flexibility, hand-eye coordination, balance, discipline, and complex stunts, often involving acrobatics, aerial arts, tightrope walking, juggling, contortion, and clowning.

According to a [research study \(https://www.cicadakh.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2023/04/EN-CICADA-HR-Mapping-Full-Report-FINAL..pdf\)](https://www.cicadakh.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2023/04/EN-CICADA-HR-Mapping-Full-Report-FINAL..pdf) by CICADA—whose name stands for Creative Industries of Cambodia Association for Development and Advocacy—the informal cultural-industry sector predominantly employs men artists and workers, as women often leave their careers early due to marriage, households to maintain, or child-rearing responsibilities.

The same study found that artists and workers in cultural fields often acquire skills through informal training and do not need university degrees to work in the industry. Most of them specialize in music and performing arts, while others work in crafts, culinary arts, audiovisual fields, visual arts, literature, and the media.

## **Women Shape Society and Culture**

According to Yean Reaksmey of Silapak Trotchaek Pneik, women have played a significant role in shaping society and cultural life for thousands of years in Cambodia. They contribute to maintaining performing art and textile traditions, as they have contributed to the grandeur of Angkor as can be seen in bas-reliefs and sculptures at the temples.

The participation of women in the upholding and strengthening of the cultural sector, including contemporary arts, is essential for the contemporary society to function and the worldview on Cambodia, Reaksmey pointed out.

“It is about carrying on our beautiful Khmer worldview wherein women are not only included, but they were and have been the key players, and without them and their essential role, we would not have the cultural expressions we know of today,” he said.

“Thus, for the contemporary arts to be more dynamic, exciting, vibrant, and kaleidoscopic, we need to have more and more women artists in the field, not just as artists but also as managers, art historians, curators, and so on,” he added.



Mix-media artist Hul Kanha showcases her work entitled “Values” which was exhibited in 2023.  
Photo: STP Cambodia (Bun Chan), 2023.

So Phina of CICADA echoed Reaksmey's comments, saying that women's role is inevitably important in the cultural and creative industries. They have fresh eyes to tackle issues facing women in the industries that tend to fall through the cracks, she said.

“Women have perspectives distinct from men when it comes to creative arts, which are needed to complement the variety of the art scene,” she said. “Women make the arts lively and vibrant.”

Like So Phina, Mam Senleaphea of Phare said that the involvement of women in every sector is indispensable as it ensures gender equality and inclusiveness. “Good or bad is not about gender but about the capacity to perform a certain work,” she said.

Hul Kanha believes that women's unique perspectives, cultural roles and voices add complexity to artistic expressions and to exploring themes such as identity, gender, family, and social justice, many powerful works having been created by women throughout history.

“We have unique perspectives on art that are rooted in our lived experiences, cultural roles, and the diversity of our voices,” she said. “I can see art as a reflection of women, as an integral part of society.”

### **What might be the barrier?**

So Phina of CICADA said that most women artists who face challenges tend to be those in the film and entertainment industry, in which they are at times verbally and sexually harassed. The solutions for them sometimes take place through reconciliation, which makes them feel uncomfortable and unsafe even though they demand transparency, she said.

“Some women are forced to quit the sector due to age or tradition,” said Phina. “For instance, they stop being involved in performances when they get pregnant. Their families might not support them performing when they are pregnant and after giving birth.”

A young woman artist like Hul Kanha faces challenges when applying for grants due to her age and background. “As a young artist, when I apply for grants, people often focus on my experience and background,” she said. Despite this, she means to grow as an artist and believes that hard work and dedication will lead to results.

For Yean Reaksmey, the shortage of women artists in contemporary visual arts also includes factors such as the financial situation of the market, historical issues, lack of education as well as sociocultural factors.

In Europe, as recently as in the 1970s, women artists were often absent from history books and their work was not recognized as art, he said.

In Cambodia, the lack of modern and contemporary art education has led to a lack of great women artists being shown as role models to younger generations, Reaksmey said. Additionally, the sociocultural role of women artists, such as maintaining a family household, has also contributed to the shortage, he said.

“However, to date, I am not aware of any visible discrimination against women artists in Cambodia in terms of opportunity: There have not been any instances where their works were refused for an exhibition because of their gender,” Reaksmey noted.

“However, I must admit that today’s big names from Cambodia remain the men artists, and the same ones since 2011,” he added.

For Sao Sreymao, women artists tend to be viewed as being from the weak gender, leading to them being deemed unable to pursue art. However, she has witnessed women break the rules and proudly showcase their work.

“Despite the barriers, we should ask ourselves how much we want to win and break through everything,” she said.

## **Future Scented as Flowers**

Yean Reaksmey believes that Cambodia should have more grants and platforms for women artists, and needs to diversify its economy by drawing from knowledge-based and creative economies.

Investments in art infrastructure, museums, performing art centers and endowment funds can foster creativity and encourage women to see potential in the field, he said. Additionally, a system ensuring women's safety is crucial, he added.

“All these will encourage more creativity and creative minds; undoubtedly, more women will see the potential in the sphere,” Reaksmey said.

“Alongside, as infrastructure improves, there must also be a system in place that guarantees the safety of women, either in the classroom or professional fields, free from sexual harassment, abuse, or unequal treatment in terms of labor,” he stressed.





Artists perform during the the press conference "Who are Artists? Why Them? Why Now?", held in December, 2024, which is a campaign to mobilize support for artists and cultural professionals by CICADA. Photo: CICADA via Facebook

CICADA's So Phina said that the government should have a long-term plan for the culture and creative industries as they also contribute to the national economy.

Budgets should be allocated to ensure that human resources in the industries can exercise their creative mind to create milestones, she said

“It’s time we act together,” Phina said. “You must have a mindset to invest in the cultural sector. We are doing that. We advocate for ample participation and support.”

Artist Hul Kanha said the vision for Cambodia's future of women contemporary artists is to increase their art pursuits, develop contemporary art museums, galleries, platforms as well as increase opportunities and funding.

“I believe that creating more platforms, building strong networks, fostering collaboration, promoting art among the public, and providing support through grants are all essential steps to ensure growth and sustainability for women artists,” she said.

Sam Tola, who is a self-taught artist involved in pressed-flower art, said that women like her can conquer any obstacle if they are passionate about a certain work.

“I didn't have a teacher,” she said. “I trained and learned by myself how to press flower...I’m self-employed. But, if you ask whether I want to give up, no! I love it, and so I do it.”

Tola’s message to women is to keep pursuing what they really want and gives them peace of mind. As she explained, she has found comfort and harmony in the work of pressing flowers, determined to create the best flower souvenir.

“Women are like flower: we take care of ourselves and create beautiful new ideas,” Tola said. “Flowers might be simple, but with care and polish, they can be something else.”

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