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First Lady Bun Rany doesn't feature on Khmer Wikipedia. © Hong Menea

Wiki activists help to write Cambodian women's history

Sat, 7 March 2015 Bennett Murray

Wikipedia's Khmer language coverage is patchy at best, and almost non-existent when it comes to profiling the country's most important women. This weekend, online activists are joining forces to flood the site with new entries

Browsing the Khmer-language version of Wikipedia, knowledge seekers can find entries for many prominent Cambodians. Prime Minister Hun Sen, opposition leader Sam Rainsy and architect Vann Molyvann all feature. Even the late National Police Commissioner Hok Lundy has an extensive biography. But almost all the entries are for men.

While Mu Sochua, arguably Cambodia's most influential female opposition lawmaker, has a 713 word article on English Wikipedia, she doesn't have an entry at all on the Khmer site. Nor does Bun Rany, wife of Prime Minister Hun Sen, nor Somaly Mam, the disgraced celebrity human rights activist. The late 1960s and 1970s singer Ros Sereysothea is one of only a handful of female profiles on the site.

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Blogger Kounila Keo. ALEXANDER CROOK

"I think women's voices are underrepresented – there are many issues that are strongly concerned with women, and they lack the opportunity to raise their voice," said Oum Vannarith, public relations director at Zaman University and prolific Wikipedia editor.

Vannarith said he had no specific data on the number of women on the site's Khmer edition, but it was much less than the 55 entries on English Wikipedia's Khmer women category page.

To mark International Women's Day tomorrow, Vannarith is planning to host a gathering of Wikipedia editors at the 5D Lab Cambodia community centre to add new entries about Cambodian women to the Khmer language version of the site. About 10 Cambodians in other parts of the world are also expected to chip in at the same time.

"We will ask participants who they get inspiration from, who they admire, and then we will identify key people ... and then we will teach them how to research and add to Khmer Wikipedia," he said.

According to Vannarith, Khmer Wikipedia had 4,655 articles as of Thursday. This places it ahead Kashubian, a Slavic language spoken in parts of Poland, and behind Sardinian in rankings.

While the approach of the 5,000-article-in-Khmer mark is a significant milestone for Wiki since the local language pages launched in 2013, Vannarith said that the lack of female editors was among his biggest concerns as an editor.

However, he added that the gender imbalance was not unique to Khmer Wikipedia.



Oum Vannarith hopes that Cambodians from abroad will join in with the campaign remotely. © Eli Meixler

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"The general issue is the common issue of the Wikipedia movement, even in well developed countries – not many participants are women," said Vannarith.

According to Wikipedia's own article on the site's gender bias, between 84 and 91 per cent of Wikipedia editors are male which leads to "systematic bias". In an interview with the BBC last August, Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales admitted that the site had "completely failed" to fix the imbalance.

Web media consultant and blogger, Kounila Keo, who will address Sunday's workshop via Skype, said the efforts were part of an international campaign to enlist female editors.

Kounila said via Skype from Singapore that she though female participation in the Wikipedia community was as important as male participation, adding that she was personally behind much of the editing of Cambodian women on English Wikipedia.

"If you're a female Wikipedia editor, you tend to think more about entries about women," she said.

"There have been complaints that some male Wikipedia editors are not sensible enough when they write articles about women."

While a range of possible reasons have been suggested for the disparity, ranging from a male-dominated, aggressive atmosphere on the site's "talk" pages to women's under-representation in the tech world in general, Kounila said it was up to Cambodian women themselves to get involved

The key to decreasing the male bias, said the blogger, who has attended Wikimedia Foundation meetings across the world, is to keep up the outreach. She said that a few encouraging signs have popped up in Cambodia.

"At all the events I've organised in the past [in Cambodia], there were more female volunteers than male," she said, adding that she wished more would actually edit.

"I try to engage them – they seem to not be able to understand the objective or the real purpose of Wikipedia articles," said Kounila.

But she said it was hard to get people to write content for which they would not directly get credit.

"Mostly young women female volunteers, in Cambodia especially, they might have other priorities."

The "#WikiMeetup: Cambodia's Prominent Women" will take place from 2pm on Sunday at 5D Lab Cambodia, #296, Street 271 (Yothapol Khemarak Phoum Boulevard). Check [facebook.com/kmwp.fb](https://www.facebook.com/kmwp.fb) for more details.

THE POST CELEBRATES WOMEN'S DAY WITH A LADIES-ONLY LUNCH

To celebrate International Women's Day, The Phnom Penh Post yesterday hosted a relaxed luncheon for 50 of Phnom Penh's leading women, who chatted over drinks and a selection of local and international hot dishes at the Cabaret Restaurant. The event celebrated successful women in all fields, with guests including Her Excellency Tep Rainsy and Noun Phymean, who was featured on CNN Heroes for establishing The People's Improvement Organisation and nominated this year for The World's Children's Prize for her charitable work. Women in business were also well represented at the event, including Nov Sok Heang from Kulara Water and Chan Phally from Champagne Communications. On the terrace outside, invitees were able to purchase paintings supplied by Romeet Gallery and whiskey from Jack Daniel's. Everyone left laden down with goodie bags containing gifts from L'Oreal, DHC Cosmetics and – for anyone looking to continue the celebrations – mini bottles of Jack Daniels.



Guests at the Post's lunch celebrate Women's Day. Chhim Sreyneang

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