

Cultivating Grassroots Feminist Empowerment

A Case Study of Gender and Development
for Cambodia (GADC)

Eunice B. Santiago



Program on Alternative Development

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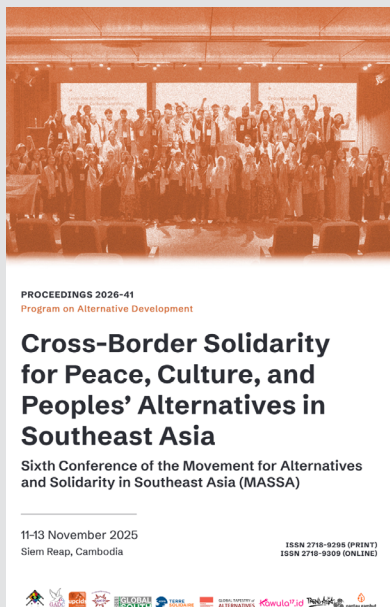
"A woman harvesting chilies. She is a beneficiary of GADC's "Women's Empowerment in Small-Scale Business" project." Used with permission. Taken by Eunice Santiago.

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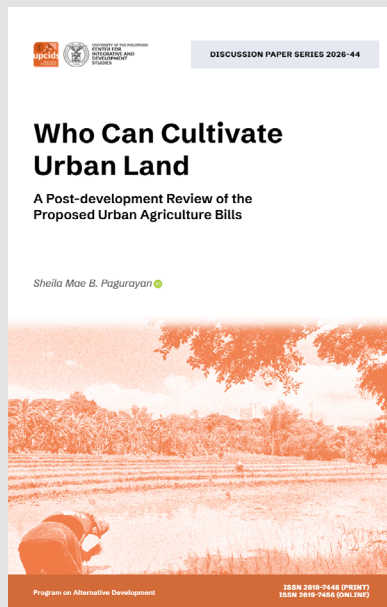
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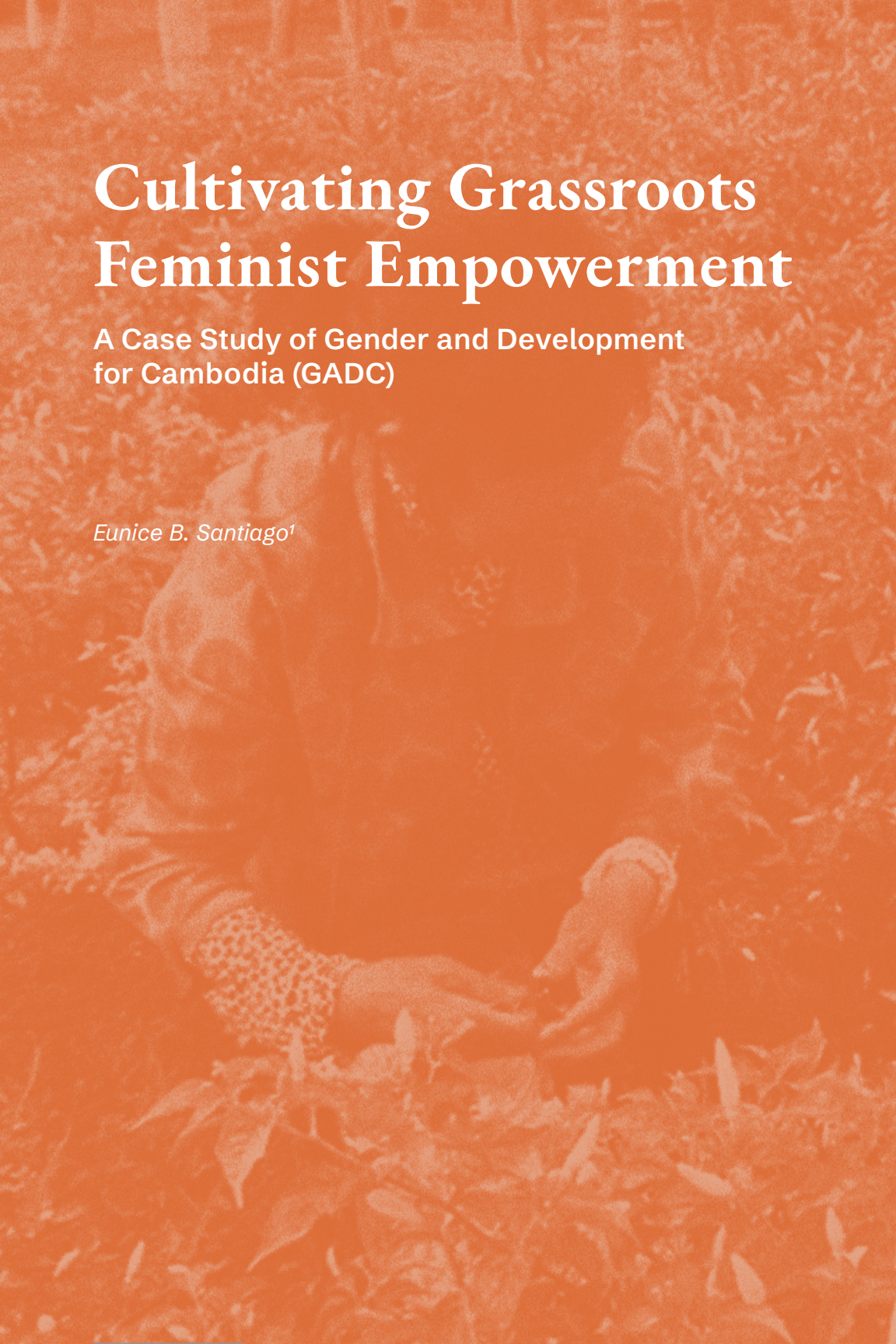
POLICY BRIEF

Cross-Border Solidarity for
Peace, Culture, and Peoples'
Alternatives in Southeast
Asia: Sixth Conference of the
Movement for Alternatives and
Solidarity in Southeast Asia
(MASSA)



DISCUSSION PAPER

Who Can Cultivate Urban
Land: A Post-development
Review of the Proposed Urban
Agriculture Bills

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a person, likely a woman, working in a field. She is wearing a patterned long-sleeved shirt and is bent over, tending to plants. The image is covered with a solid orange tint.

Cultivating Grassroots Feminist Empowerment

A Case Study of Gender and Development
for Cambodia (GADC)

Eunice B. Santiago¹

Executive Summary

Cambodia has made significant policy commitments to advancing gender equality through international treaties and national frameworks, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), SDG 5, and the Neary Ratanak V and VI strategies.² However, these progressive policy commitments coexist with entrenched sociocultural norms, for instance, those reflected in the *Chbab Srey* and *Chbab Proh*. Within this broader context, gender-based violence, unequal care burdens, and women's underrepresentation in political decision-making also persist. Where state commitments and budgets remain limited to transform these gender inequalities, civil society organizations (CSOs) offer alternative conceptualizations and practices of empowerment that challenge the unequal power relations sustaining gender inequality within communities.

This qualitative case study examines how Gender and Development for Cambodia (GADC) conceptualizes and operationalizes empowerment, as well as how its target communities experience and enact these initiatives. The research was conducted in Rolea B'ea District, Kampong Chhnang Province, and involved interviews with three GADC staff members and two groups of target communities: five youth leaders known as FemLeaders and members of the community Core Groups. The findings identify six interrelated strategies through which GADC fosters empowerment: (1) treating empowerment as an ongoing process rather than a fixed outcome; (2) grounding its interventions in an intersectional feminist framework; (3) building capacities through feminist education; (4) creating safe spaces for critical reflection, such as Gender Cafés and Men's Dialogues; (5) strengthening community organizing and engagement with local authorities; and (6) connecting grassroots experiences to advocacy across multiple levels of policymaking.

Community members described empowerment as a transformative process through which they developed feminist critical consciousness, greater self-confidence, and stronger collective capacities. Among the FemLeaders, this translated into active civic engagement, including mobilizing their

1 Eunice Santiago is a researcher of the Program on Alternative Development. She is currently a graduate student at the UP Department of Sociology, where she also earned her Bachelor of Arts in Sociology. The data collection for this case study was conducted in 2025.

2 Neary Rattanak is a Five-Year Gender Strategic Plan led by Cambodia's Ministry of Women's Affairs.

communities, advocating for issues affecting women and girls, and negotiating policy proposals with local authorities. Meanwhile, members of the Core Groups established community support systems for survivors of domestic violence and facilitated access to healthcare services, particularly for pregnant women and children in underserved communities.

These experiences illustrate that empowerment is lived and enacted through the interconnected dimensions of *power from within*, *power to*, and *power with*: this shows that feminist empowerment is both an individual and collective process of transforming unequal power relations through leadership, advocacy, and community-based action. These findings also align with the feminist conceptualizations of empowerment by Rowlands (1997b) and Batliwala (2007), which emphasize the process of transforming unequal gender power relations rather than merely expanding access to resources.

Given the study's three-day field engagement and its focus on one target community (specifically in Kampong Chhnang), the findings should be understood as context-specific rather than representative of all GADC target communities. Nevertheless, they offer valuable insights into how grassroots feminist initiatives interact with (and contribute to) the broader landscape of gender equality governance in Cambodia.

Acknowledgements

The author sincerely thanks Gender and Development for Cambodia (GADC) for hosting the research team and supporting the conduct of this case study as part of the broader initiative to document alternative practices across Southeast Asia. The author extends special appreciation to Seavmey Ngorn, GADC's Feminist Education Program Coordinator, and Chandy Eng, Executive Director of GADC, for their guidance, generous support, and thoughtful validation of this case study. The author also expresses sincere gratitude to the FemLeaders and Core Group members for generously sharing their time, experiences, and insights, which form the heart of this research. Appreciation is likewise extended to Junah Amor C. Delfinado for her collaboration during the fieldwork and data collection. Finally, the author also acknowledges CCFD-Terre Solidaire for its unwavering support of the broader initiative to document and strengthen alternative practices across Southeast Asia.

Background of the Study

Cambodia has made significant commitments in advancing gender equality both through international and national policy frameworks. It is a signatory to major international human rights treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and has made notable progress over the past 25 years (Ven and Pham 2022). These commitments have been translated into national initiatives aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), which seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, and the five-year gender mainstreaming strategy called Neary Ratanak V (2019-2023).

Understanding these policy and regulatory frameworks is important in situating women's empowerment in Cambodia. Central to this is the Neary Ratanak V (2019–2023), Cambodia's National Five-Year Strategic Plan for Strengthening Gender Mainstreaming and Women's Empowerment, with the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) serving as the lead government institution responsible for advancing and coordinating these efforts across sectors. Neary Ratanak V seeks to institutionalize gender mainstreaming across government policies, programs, and development initiatives. Its vision is that *all Cambodian citizens, particularly women and girls, enjoy equal rights under the law; live free from violence and insecurity; participate fully in public life and employment; and are empowered to make decisions at all levels and in all fields alongside men and boys, thereby promoting self-determination and social harmony within families, communities, and society* (Ministry of Women's Affairs 2020b, 11). Within this policy framework, women's empowerment is operationalized through women's and girls' ability to access economic opportunities, exercise their rights, participate in decision-making processes, and obtain quality, safe, and effective health services. The strategy also explicitly recognizes the diverse circumstances of women, including impoverished women, women with disabilities, ethnic minority and Indigenous women, and women-headed households. Empowerment, thus, is conceptualized as ensuring women's equal access to development opportunities and outcomes across multiple sectors.

Since the completion of Neary Ratanak V, Cambodia has adopted Neary Ratanak VI (2024–2028). It builds on the previous strategies of Neary Rattanaks while expanding its priorities to address emerging development challenges, including post-pandemic recovery, digital transformation, climate resilience, social protection, and technology-enabled forms of gender-based violence. While these newer priorities signal the evolving direction of Cambodia's gender

equality agenda, the study is situated within the implementation period of Neary Ratanak V (2019–2023). As such, Neary Ratanak V provides the appropriate policy context for interpreting the experiences and practices documented in this case study, whereas Neary Ratanak VI serves primarily as an indication of the country's subsequent policy trajectory. Although Neary Ratanak VI continues the gender mainstreaming agenda established under Neary Ratanak V, it broadens the conceptualization of women's empowerment by recognizing that gender equality requires not only improving women's access to resources and opportunities, but also transforming the social norms, institutions, and power relations that sustain gender inequality—hence what the policy notes as “gender transformative” in its approach.

This expanded conceptualization of empowerment is particularly significant given that gender inequality in Cambodia remains deeply embedded within the country's sociocultural landscape. Women's experiences of inequality extend beyond formal institutions, and are reflected in their everyday lives: in their households, religious practices, education, labor market, political participation, and even within state policies themselves. Thus, while Cambodia's policy commitments represent important progress toward gender equality, their realization continues to be mediated by structural and sociocultural conditions that shape women's opportunities, agency, and lived experiences.

One of the most enduring sources of these inequalities is the persistence of normative gender norms. According to NGO-CEDAW (2024), persistent gender disparities are reinforced by social norms and cultural traditions that shape expectations of femininity and masculinity. Central among these are the *Chbab Srey* (Code of Conduct for Women) and *Chbab Proh* (Code of Conduct for Men), which prescribe gender-specific roles and behaviors for women and men (Klaahan 2023; Ven and Pham 2022). The *Chbab Srey*, in particular, instructs women and girls to embody the qualities of a “proper woman” by prioritizing domestic responsibilities, maintaining harmony within the household, speaking softly, and demonstrating obedience and respect toward their husbands (Ven and Pham 2022). In contrast, men are positioned as heads of households, primary breadwinners, protectors, and decision-makers (Ven and Pham 2022). Although the Ministry of Women's Affairs has issued directives to remove these codes from formal school curricula, their influence persists. As of 2023, elements of the *Chbab Srey* and *Chbab Proh* continued to be taught in secondary schools and transmitted informally to young boys and girls (Klaahan 2023). More importantly, the *Chbab Srey* remains deeply embedded in Khmer culture as a moral framework that continues to shape social expectations regarding women's roles, behavior, and place within the family and

society (Klaahaan 2023). It creates a hierarchical relation with men positioned as superior to women (Lamb et al. 2017 as cited by Ven and Pham 2022).

The implications of these traditional gender roles are profound as they manifest in the patterns of gender-based violence in Cambodia. According to documentation from the Royal Government of Cambodia (2020), violence targeting women and girls remains a critical, ongoing issue; individuals face physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse regardless of their socioeconomic status, culture, or income level. This violence manifests not only within domestic environments but also across workplaces and public communities (Ministry of Women's Affairs 2020a). Although the government achieved positive outcomes during the NAPVAW 2014–2018 implementation period, the subsequent 2020 report highlights major gaps in preventative action (Ministry of Women's Affairs 2020a, 5): primary challenges include insufficient funding, a lack of institutional coordination, and initiatives that are overly restricted in scope. Furthermore, essential support services remain largely out of reach for victims, while mediation and formal legal mechanisms fail to adopt a survivor-centered approach (Ministry of Women's Affairs 2020a). Additionally, Neary Ratanak VI also states that in the context of globalization and the misuse of digital technologies contribute to new forms of gender-based violence and exploitation of women and girls, while also posing risks to Cambodian "social morality and values."

Normative gender norms are likewise embedded within state policies. For instance, the National Childcare Policy reinforces the assumption that women are liable for children and household care instead of redistributing care labour and costs from the family to the public sphere or between genders in the family (NGO CEDAW 2024). Another example of a policy that explicitly contributes to norms subordinating women to men is the Civil Code Article 950, which requires women (but not men) to wait 120 days after divorce before remarrying, reinforcing, again, the unequal gender standards (UN in Cambodia 2022, as cited in Ven and Pham 2022). What also underpins these policies is the notion that women and girls are expected to perform unpaid domestic and care work, undertaking approximately 90 percent of unpaid care responsibilities on average (UN in Cambodia 2022, as cited in Ven and Pham 2022).

The consequences of these inequalities are also evident in women's limited political representation. The CEDAW Monitoring Report of 2024 notes that women remained underrepresented in all spheres of political leadership—from the national and local levels. Following the May 2024 elections, only 11 of Cambodia's 62 senators were women, while women occupied just 17 percent of leadership positions at provincial and municipal levels.

Given these data, it is apparent that the issues experienced by women and girls not only stem from the lack of policies; rather, their root causes are cultural and social, which continue to shape institutions, social practices, and everyday life. These also continue to limit and constrain the transformative potential of the said policy commitments and framework.

Research problem and objectives

Against this backdrop, civil society organizations such as Gender and Development for Cambodia (GADC) have emerged as important actors in advancing women's empowerment where state efforts remain constrained. While Cambodia's national gender strategies increasingly recognize that women's empowerment requires addressing structural barriers alongside expanding women's access to resources, rights, and opportunities, translating these commitments into meaningful social change and effective implementation remains a challenge. It is within this context that GADC's work becomes significant. GADC operationalizes empowerment through a feminist approach grounded in grassroots realities extending beyond the acquisition of resources and formal inclusion by challenging the gender norms and unequal power relations that perpetuate inequality. Through its programs, GADC fosters feminist critical consciousness and creates enabling environments where women, girls, and gender-diverse individuals can exercise their rights, strengthen their agency, build collective power, and address issues affecting their communities.

It is also in this approach that the principle of alternative development lies: it is built on the spirit of collectivism, cooperation, and participatory approaches that prioritize the empowerment and agency of marginalized communities in shaping development outcomes (Tadem et al. 2020). Development and empowerment here are not simply something delivered to communities by states or external actors. Rather, it is an ongoing process through which people and communities collectively participate in shaping the conditions of their own lives (Tadem et al. 2020). Although these efforts often take place on a localized scale, they suggest alternative ways of organizing social life and addressing persistent forms of inequality and marginalization. In the context of Cambodia, these include gender-based violence, barriers to women's political participation, and broader social and cultural norms that continue to constrain women's opportunities and agency.

This discussion paper aims to document the strategies and ways GADC fosters empowerment through feminism in their target communities. In this paper, I pose the questions:

- How does GADC cultivate empowerment among its target communities? What strategies and practices does it employ?
- How do community members experience and enact empowerment through their participation in GADC's programs or projects?

About Gender and Development for Cambodia

Gender and Development for Cambodia (GADC)³ is a local, non-profit, and non-political organization based in Cambodia. It works in partnership with the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) and civil society organizations to advance gender-sensitive programs and advocate for gender-responsive laws and policies. GADC envisions a just Cambodia where women and men in all their diversity are equally empowered to participate in and benefit from development while fully enjoying their human rights. Its mission is to advance gender equality as a fundamental human right. Among its various programs, GADC works with partner communities in the provinces of Prey Veng, Kampong Chhnang, and Pursat, where it facilitates safe and non-threatening spaces to discuss sensitive issues such as gender-based violence (GBV), the limited participation of women and girls in local decision-making processes, and inadequate access to health facilities, among others. This study was conducted in Kampong Chhnang Province.

Significance of the study

This study contributes to the Program on Alternative Development's ongoing efforts to research and document grassroots- and NGO-led alternative development practices, to support the dissemination of such initiatives, and to be able to link them with similar developments in neighboring communities (Tadem et al. 2020). Moreover, this case study of GADC's grassroots feminist

3 From: <https://gadc.org.kh/who-we-are/about-us/>

empowerment offers a modest contribution to broader scholarship on alternative development and empowerment discourse by highlighting the gendered dimensions of empowerment as situated within GADC's programs and community experiences.

Additionally, this study aims to complement existing state-level efforts by examining how community-based initiatives happen alongside broader gender equality policies. While national frameworks like Neary Ratanak have opened space in advancing gender equality and empowerment, particularly regarding access to opportunities, services, and formal participation, addressing deep-seated sociocultural norms remains a complex, ongoing challenge (NGO-CEDAW 2024). Normative gender expectations, such as those reflected in the *Chbbab Srey* and *Chbbab Proh*, continue to shape the everyday social relations and gendered experiences of Khmer people. In this context, GADC provides a helpful learning case. GADC provides spaces and toolkits to support women through its programs, where women, girls, and gender-diverse people are not only beneficiaries but also active participants in addressing and navigating their community's challenges.

Empowerment here refers to the 'process' through which people develop critical consciousness and self-confidence ("power from within"), translating that awareness into the capacity to act and realize one's potential ("power to"), and being able to work together and have that collective capacity to actively challenge and transform unequal power relations ("power with") (Rowlands 1997b). Rowlands also notes that these three dimensions are interconnected. This framing and sensemaking of the data are theoretically resonant in the experiences and testimonies of participants, as well as in the strategies employed by GADC to cultivate empowerment within target communities. Moreso, this study is not only concerned with empowerment as a fixed end state: it is concerned with the process through which empowerment is realized— this aligns with a feminist approach to empowerment. GADC Officers' own understanding of feminism also serves as an important analytical lens for interpreting the findings. As the organization grounds its empowerment work in feminist principles, examining how GADC conceptualizes feminism helps elucidate the specific ways empowerment is fostered, experienced, and enacted by their community partners.

Methodology

To address these questions, we employed a qualitative case study, utilizing group interviews and key informant interviews. Data were collected in Rolea B'ear district, Kampong Chhnang Province, Cambodia. Participants included five (5) young feminist leaders who participated in the FemLeading program of GADC, four (4) members of the community "core group," and one (1) GADC community facilitator. In addition, key informant interviews were conducted with two (2) GADC Program Officers to gain insights into their organization's approaches, strategies, and program implementation. Drawing on multiple data sources enabled the study to capture the perspectives of community members, facilitators, and program staff, thereby providing a nuanced understanding of GADC's feminist approach to community empowerment.

This study employed purposive sampling through two recruitment strategies. Community participants were recruited through gatekeeper-assisted purposive sampling, wherein GADC's Feminist Education Program Coordinator, Seavmey Ngorn, facilitated the identification of and access to community members with direct experience in GADC's programs and activities, such as FemLeading, gender sensitization trainings, Gender Cafés, and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) trainings. She also coordinated interviews and field visits, translated interview questions and interactions, and assisted in the administration and securing of informed consent. Meanwhile, the three GADC Program Officers were selected through key informant sampling due to their long-term involvement in and knowledge of the organization's feminist empowerment initiatives.

Ethical considerations and the study limitations

Several ethical and methodological considerations should be acknowledged in this study. The researchers' stay in Cambodia lasted only three days, which necessarily constrained the depth of engagement with GADC staff and target communities. As a result, the study does not seek to provide a comprehensive evaluation of all GADC programs or the long-term impacts of its interventions. Rather, it offers a focused examination of how empowerment is cultivated, experienced, and understood within the specific contexts encountered during the period of fieldwork. The acknowledgement of this limitation is relevant given that empowerment, as a concept, means a dynamic

and ongoing process: it unfolds over time through experiences of countless (critical) reflection, reiterative capacity building, and years of collective action before social transformation happens. Hence, if one wants to fully capture the complexity and trajectory of these processes would require sustained engagement and longitudinal fieldwork extending over months or even years. Despite the limited duration of the fieldwork, the findings do not diminish in value. Through key informant interviews with GADC program officers who have been in the organization for years, as well as community participants who have been partners of the organization for years, the study was able to document important insights into the strategies, practices, and feminist principles through which empowerment is fostered. It contributes to how empowerment is realized in community-based development work and opens a good discussion point for future research employing longer-term engagement with target communities.

Second, the researcher occupied the position of an outsider to both the organization and the communities involved in the study. As a foreign researcher with no prior relationship with GADC participants or its target communities, there is a possibility that cultural nuances, local meanings, and contextual factors may not have been fully understood or interpreted. This positionality may influence how participants' narratives and experiences are analyzed and represented. To mitigate these limitations, the analysis was guided by a conceptual framework grounded in feminist theories of empowerment and GADC's understanding of feminism. Findings were interpreted in relation to these frameworks, while all interview and field data were systematically coded based on the research questions and relevant literature. This helped ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the data and minimized the influence of personal assumptions or biases.

Furthermore, participants' confidentiality and anonymity were protected throughout the research process. Although the participants gave their consent to publish their names, the researcher chose to keep them anonymous for safety purposes. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, and respondents were informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. The informed consent form was explained in English and translated into Khmer by Seavmey. All participants signed the consent form before participating in the study. Any identifying information was removed or anonymized in the presentation of findings to safeguard participants and their communities.

Unpacking The Concept of Empowerment

Rowlands (1997a) argues that understanding empowerment requires first examining the concept of power, which has long been debated in the social sciences. A common understanding is "power over"—the ability of one person or group to compel another to act against their will. This view treats power as a zero-sum resource: the more power one person has, the less another possesses (Rowlands 1997b, 11). From a gender perspective, this often manifests as men's power over women and other men, while more broadly, dominant social groups exercise power over marginalized groups (Rowlands 1997b, 11). Under this framework, women's empowerment is often perceived as threatening because gains in women's power are assumed to come at men's expense, raising fears of a reversal in existing power relations.

Rowlands (1997b) argues that power can also be understood as "power to," "power with," and "power from within," shifting attention from domination to processes of agency, collective action, and self-realization. This understanding is central to the present study's conceptualization of empowerment. Drawing from feminist perspectives, empowerment goes beyond the mainstream framework of inclusion in formal economic or political decision-making – while these are important, feminist frameworks press on the 'process' through which people develop critical consciousness and self-confidence ("power from within"), translating that awareness into the capacity to act and realize one's potential ("power to"), and fostering the collective capacity to actively challenge and transform unequal power relations ("power with") (Rowlands 1997). It comes from the recognition that societies ascribe particular sets of abilities to social categories of people, and that empowerment must involve undoing negative social constructs (Rowlands 1997).

Batliwala (2007) further historicizes the concept of empowerment. She critiques the notion that empowerment is simply about "feeling good." Rather, it has its historical roots in social movements that resisted inequality, such as liberation theology, the Black Power movement, and feminist struggles. She also points to earlier examples, such as the Veerashaiva movement in Southern India, which resisted both the caste system and gender oppression. By the late twentieth century, liberation theology, the Black Power movement, and feminist movements had popularized the framing of empowerment as a political struggle for more equitable and democratic forms of social change. This means that the goal of empowerment is to transform unjust power relations and the dominant ideologies that underpin oppressive structures that have subjugated women for so long, rather than simply building individual confidence. In the 1980s,

feminists from the Global South fundamentally disrupted the development landscape by critiquing the apolitical and economic biases of early Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD), and Gender and Development (GAD) models. They argued that simply integrating women into existing economic structures overlooks the root causes of their subordination. Influenced by Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony (how dominant classes maintain power through culture and consent) and Freirean conscientization (the development of critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action), these activists reframed empowerment as an inherently political project (Batliwala 2007). They positioned women not as passive beneficiaries of aid but as subaltern agents: individuals from marginalized groups capable of recognizing, resisting, and dismantling both localized forms of gender subordination and broader postcolonial power structures.

Then came the 1990s, when empowerment was hijacked (Batliwala 2007). The concept of empowerment during this period became a popular development buzzword. Prompted by the 1995 Beijing Conference, development agencies and governments embraced the term because it signaled progressiveness, replacing earlier notions such as "people's participation," "women's welfare," and "women's development" with the popular rhetoric of "women's empowerment." As Batliwala (2007) illustrates, this introduction of the "e-word" enabled actors and governments to present themselves as progressive. Similarly, the language of empowerment increasingly overshadowed the WID, WAD, and early GAD approaches used by donor agencies and NGOs. However, this widespread adoption generated ambiguity regarding what "empowerment" actually meant, which enabled diverse actors to appropriate or redefine empowerment according to their own institutional interests. In this sense, it transformed the term from a collective struggle for redistributing power into an individualistic self-empowerment or self-sufficient communities in managing their own affairs. Such framings resonated with neoliberal and conservative agendas that emphasized self-reliance and reduced state responsibility for welfare. Corporate management, neo-conservative movements, and consumer rights advocates adopted the term to advance profit-making, competitiveness, and market-oriented "self-empowerment" (Batliwala 2007). As Cornwall (2018) notes, this neoliberal appropriation produced an "empowerment lite" discourse that cuts empowerment to economic participation and market inclusion, instrumentalizing women as untapped resources and agents of economic growth rather than recognizing them as political subjects seeking fundamental social transformation.

However, despite the ambiguity in the usage of the term and its neoliberal underpinnings, it does not exhaust its meanings or historical origins. Before it became a development buzzword (as emphasized by Batliwala 2007), empowerment emerged from grassroots struggles, particularly within feminist and women's movements, as a language for challenging unequal power relations and asserting collective agency. Kabeer's (1994) argument that empowerment is "a grassroots contribution to development" underscores the significance of examining how the concept is understood and practiced by organizations working closely with communities. If empowerment is shaped in the "crucible of everyday practice", then its meanings cannot be assumed or derived solely from dominant development discourses and institutional definitions. This study, therefore, seeks to document what empowerment means within the dynamic between GADC and its community partners. It examines how GADC perceives and cultivates "empowerment," and how their community members, who participate in their programs, understand and experience the concept in matters concerning their communities and lived experiences.

Data Discussion and Analysis

Before discussing the study's findings, it is important to first describe the characteristics of the participants, particularly those from GADC's target communities. The two groups engaged with GADC's programs and training through different pathways and come from distinct community contexts.

- **FemLeaders.** For this group, we interviewed five young women leaders who participated in the FemLeading Project. The project aims to equip young women with knowledge and skills on ethical leadership, power and influence, and negotiation (GADC 2024)⁴. As part of the project, each participant developed a community proposal by identifying key issues in their respective communities and mobilizing community members to advocate for these concerns with local authorities. The issues identified by this group include the following: the lack of common spaces for women to participate in religious life, particularly in Muslim communities where women are not allowed to enter mosques and instead practice rituals privately; the absence of shared spaces where Buddhist and Muslim women

4 From: <https://gadc.org.kh/femleading/>

and community members can gather; increasing school dropouts among children due to challenging living conditions, including orphanhood, parental gambling and alcohol use, and (underage) labor migration to sectors such as construction, agriculture, and garment factories; and the lack of solar lighting in communities, contributing to insecurity and vulnerability to theft.

- **Core Group.** This core group comes from Kampong Chhnang province, consisting of men and women. We interviewed two women and two men from different villages, all in their mid- to late-30s. The core groups function as community facilitators that collect information directly from villagers regarding local issues and relay these concerns to local authorities. They play a key role in identifying and articulating community needs and advocating for responses. The issues they highlighted include the lack of accessible healthcare services in their villages, which places pregnant women at risk, and the prevalence of gender-based violence. The two male participants are affiliated with the Cambodian Men's Network, while one of the women participated in GADC's 16 Days of Activism campaign and another worked as a GADC researcher on unpaid care work. All participants have been engaged with GADC for approximately three to five years, with one involved for nearly nine years, and all have received training on SOGIESC, gender awareness and sensitization, and gender-based violence. This training has empowered them in a twofold:
 - Leading community engagement, such as hosting gender cafés, facilitating men's dialogues, and organizing informal village meetings; and
 - applying gender concepts in daily life to identify various forms of violence (including domestic abuse) and effectively report cases to relevant institutions, including the courts when necessary.
- **For Gender and Development for Cambodia (GADC),** the researchers were able to interview the Feminist Education Program Coordinator, who has been with GADC for six years; the Cambodian Men Network Project Officer, who has been with GADC for four years; and one Community Facilitator, who has been with GADC for nine years. The Community Facilitator works directly with target communities, facilitating community mobilization and coordinating with local authorities.

Findings

GADC's strategies for cultivating empowerment on its target communities

GADC cultivates empowerment through feminist principles embedded in its program, projects, and practices. Rather than treating empowerment as an outcome, GADC understands it as a continuous, participatory, and transformative process that builds feminist critical consciousness, develops capacities, creates safe spaces, promotes collective action, challenges gender norms, and links grassroots experiences to broader advocacy efforts. Below are the main themes that are generated:

- **Empowerment as a process rather than an outcome.** At the core of GADC's work is its understanding of empowerment as a gradual process articulated through the "gender continuum" model. Empowerment begins with building gender consciousness through gender awareness and sensitization activities that equip oneself to recognize gender inequalities and challenge normalized forms of discrimination embedded in their everyday lives (e.g. normalization of domestic violence in families).
- However, GADC does not treat awareness as an end in itself. Instead, knowledge must be translated into action, wherein individuals and communities can identify problems affecting their lives, especially women and girls, and collectively respond to them. Among FemLeaders, this process resulted in increased visibility of women's and girls' struggles within their communities and encouraged them to take action to address these issues (which will be elaborated in the succeeding sections). Similarly, Core Group (CGs) became equipped with feminist perspectives that enabled them to respond to concerns in their communities, such as gender-based violence from a survivor-centered perspective and inadequate access to healthcare— highlighting how pregnant women are disproportionately affected by limited healthcare services. This suggests that empowerment is cultivated through consciousness-raising processes that enable individuals to reinterpret their lived realities and envision possibilities for change.
- **GADC's Framework of Empowerment: A Feminist Approach.** GADC's approach to empowerment is grounded in an intersectional and inclusive feminist framework. Rather than treating gender inequality as a uniform experience affecting women alone, the organization

recognizes that oppression is shaped by the intersection of gender with other forms of marginalization and social inequality. At the same time, GADC understands patriarchy as a broader social system that not only disadvantages women, but also reinforces unequal power relations that affect society as a whole, including men. Consistent with this perspective, one of GADC's primary strategies for fostering empowerment is feminist consciousness-raising, which encourages individuals and communities to critically reflect on traditional gender norms and unequal power relations embedded in their everyday lives.

- This feminist orientation is reflected not only in GADC's principles, but also in the way the organization structures its programs. As GADC's Feminist Education Program Officer explained, community concerns are first identified through the Community Outreach Program (COP), ensuring that the organization's interventions remain grounded in grassroots realities. Issues emerging from the COP subsequently inform the Advocacy Networking Program (ANP), which advances policy advocacy at the national and regional levels, while also shaping the work of the Cambodian Men Network (CMN) in engaging men and boys as allies in promoting gender equality. Complementing these efforts, the Feminist Education Program (FEP) conducts research and delivers feminist education and capacity-building initiatives for GADC's target communities and project beneficiaries. These interconnected programs ensure that GADC's advocacy and capacity-building activities remain grounded in the realities and needs of target communities. Research generated through these programs, in turn, informs feminist education and training activities that are responsive to the communities they serve.

These findings illustrate how GADC's feminist approach translates into practice. Participants of the FemLeading project reported that their involvement in GADC's activities increased their awareness of issues affecting women and girls, including the lack of safe community spaces, school dropout, and unequal access to resources. Similarly, CG described developing a better understanding of domestic violence and the legal protections available to women experiencing abuse. These experiences suggest that GADC's feminist education and consciousness-raising activities help participants better understand the issues affecting their communities, recognize shared concerns, and take collective action to address them.

- **Empowering communities through building capacities, leadership skills, and practical competencies.** Capacity-building and leadership development are central to GADC's approach to empowerment. Through training on gender sensitization, SOGIESC, gender-based violence, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, and FemLeadership, community members gain the knowledge and skills needed for advocacy and participation in decision-making spaces. These trainings are conducted iteratively and are tailored to local contexts. GADC recognizes that deeply entrenched gender norms cannot be transformed through one-time interventions alone. To make learning more accessible and participatory, GADC also employs methods such as art-based activities and role-playing in its training sessions. Among FemLeaders, these capacities translated into greater self-confidence, the ability to engage with community members and local authorities, and the development of project proposals addressing community issues, which they use to advocate for and negotiate with local authorities. Core Group members, beyond receiving the said training, also participated in GADC campaigns such as One Billion Rising, International Women's Day (IWD), and the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence. These spaces further strengthen their capacities to address issues within their communities. As part of engaging men, men CG members are also part of the Cambodian Men's Network, which provides a space for men to reflect on and unlearn harmful forms of masculinity. Moreover, CG members working within commune offices receive capacity-building support that equips them with a stronger gender perspective.
- **Creating safe and participatory spaces.** GADC's cultivation of empowerment also relies on creating safe and participatory spaces where community members and staff can share experiences, engage in critical reflection, and receive support. One way this is operationalized is through its quarterly Gender Cafés, which provide dedicated spaces for men and women to engage in dialogue on gender sensitization, SOGIESC, and GBV through a series of sessions. These Gender Cafés intentionally separate men and women because they recognize that their lived experiences and realities are distinct and require different spaces for expression and reflection. GADC also organizes spaces for collective care that allow Core Group members to process the emotional and mental burdens of community work, especially handling GBV cases. These spaces recognize care as an integral component of empowerment by attending to participants' well-being and preventing burnout, thereby enabling sustained engagement in collective action. Similarly, a FemLeader detailed that GADC

also creates spaces for young people to discuss experiences of LGBT discrimination and provides emotional support for LGBT participants, especially those who face rejection or lack of support from their families. Such findings indicate that feminist empowerment is relational and affective, requiring environments that foster trust, recognition, and solidarity.

- **Community organizing.** GADC also cultivates empowerment through community organizing and mobilization. GADC has community outreach officers assigned to their target communities who build good relationships with local authorities, form and capacitate core groups, and facilitate community members' participation in political spaces. GADC creates pathways through which grassroots actors can directly engage in local governance. Core Group, as described, collect data directly from villagers through door-to-door visits, participates in commune meetings, and communicates community concerns to local authorities. Meanwhile, FemLeaders utilize the confidence built during capacity sessions to mobilize their neighbors and village elders. By bringing residents together to discuss shared issues, they meet with commune authorities to pitch and negotiate local development projects—ones that are grounded in their communities' concerns. To achieve this, FemLeaders conduct door-to-door visits and utilize their personal relations to bring villagers together. This demonstrates that empowerment is not confined to personal transformation only, but entails increasing communities' capacities to exercise collective agency and influence decision-making processes.
- **Another theme that emerged in the interviews is GADC's commitment to transforming normative gender relations.** For example, when a woman participates in political spaces, her empowerment does not end with her individual participation. GADC also engages her husband and other family members to promote the shared distribution of unpaid care work and encourage support for her leadership role. In this way, the organization recognizes that women's empowerment also requires transforming the social and household conditions that shape their opportunities.

Consistent with this approach, GADC actively engages men and boys through initiatives such as Men Dialogues, the White Ribbon Campaign, and the Cambodian Men Network, creating spaces for them to reflect on and challenge harmful gender norms and understand that gender equality benefits everyone. The organization also advocates for reforms in educational curricula by challenging gendered norms embedded in traditional texts such as the Chbab Srey. Importantly, GADC recognizes

that changing deeply entrenched beliefs requires sustained and iterative engagement rather than one-off interventions. By continuously working with women, men, families, and community leaders, GADC seeks to transform the social conditions that constrain women's participation and leadership. This long-term engagement contributes to more sustainable social change by fostering shifts in attitudes and everyday practices alongside individual empowerment.

- **In line with this, GADC also recognizes the importance of including women in formal decision-making processes.** For instance, FemLeaders often serve as interns or volunteers at the commune level. These young women gain firsthand knowledge of subnational governance while earning recognition from local authorities – these are important, as FemLeaders note that young women in these spaces otherwise frequently remain silent and absent. Consequently, these interns are subsequently recruited into official commune roles such as administrative assistants or financial officers. Furthermore, Core Groups (CGs) and Community Outreach officers (COs) secure active roles in political spaces, participating in commune meetings to integrate community concerns directly into local decision-making. These opportunities underscore GADC's emphasis on building collaborative relationships with local authorities, as such partnerships create institutional openings through which women and community members can exercise voice, gain recognition, and influence governance processes.
- **Linking grassroots voices at the national, regional, and international level.** Finally, GADC's empowerment framework directly links grassroots experiences to broader structures of governance and policy advocacy. Information gathered by Core Groups and Community Outreach Officers are transmitted to the Advocacy and Networking Program, which elevates these concerns to national, regional, and international platforms. At the national level, GADC engages with the Ministry of Women's Affairs to advocate for amendments to domestic violence legislation and monitor the implementation of the Neary Ratanak framework. Globally, they participate in international mechanisms such as CEDAW reviews. GADC is also a Steering Committee member of the Movement for Alternatives and Solidarity in Southeast Asia (MASSA), which aims to link CSOs and grassroots practices and voices across the region. GADC ensures that community experiences directly inform policy processes. Empowerment, thus, is seen not only as the capacity of grassroots actors to participate

in local decision-making spaces but as the integration of their voices into national, regional, and international development discourse in the hopes of shaping structural changes.

It is important to note that these six themes are not mutually exclusive. For example, when GADC organizes communities, it simultaneously engages in feminist consciousness-raising. Rather than operating as separate dimensions, these themes overlap, intersect, and reinforce one another in practice.

Experiencing and Enacting Empowerment: The Perspectives of FemLeaders and Core Group Members

In answering the question of how GADC's community members experience and enact empowerment through their participation in GADC's programs, this section draws on the interconnected dimensions of power from within, power to, and power with using Rowland's framework. Across the experiences of both FemLeaders and Core Group members, empowerment emerges as a multidimensional process rather than a singular outcome. Community members first develop confidence, critical awareness, and a sense of agency (power from within), which enables them to act upon issues affecting their communities (power to). These individual capacities are then transformed into collective forms of action and solidarity through community organizing, advocacy, and engagement with local authorities (power with).

- **FemLeaders: From Internal Transformation to Collective Agency.** For FemLeaders, empowerment begins with the development of power from within through GADC's capacity-building activities. Through the FemLeading program, participants learn peer-to-peer facilitation, community organizing, forum management, and project proposal writing. These experiences enable them to develop self-confidence, particularly in assuming leadership roles within their communities. All FemLeaders interviewed emphasized that the program helped them become more confident in speaking publicly and engaging with others.

More importantly, this confidence represents an internal transformation that challenges prevailing gender norms. One participant explained that young women in their communities are often expected to remain silent and avoid questioning others, particularly in public spaces. Empowerment, therefore, involves more than simply becoming confident; it entails overcoming the internalized belief that

women should remain passive and unheard. Through this process, FemLeaders develop the conviction that they are capable of contributing to their communities and addressing collective concerns. In this sense, civic confidence emerges as an important manifestation of power from within.

This internal transformation enables FemLeaders to exercise power to act upon issues affecting their communities. Through their project proposals, they identify community needs and develop strategies to address them. One compelling example concerns a FemLeader who identified religious segregation within her community. She observed that interactions between Buddhist and Muslim communities were limited and noted that, in her community, Muslim women generally did not enter mosques and instead practiced their faith at home. Reflecting on the gendered and exclusionary dimensions of these community practices, she envisioned a communal space where people from different religious backgrounds could gather and where women could rest and socialize freely. Her aspiration reflected a broader desire to promote interfaith dialogue, social cohesion, and inclusion.

Recognizing the issue was only the first step. She transformed this awareness into action by drafting a proposal, conducting door-to-door consultations with neighbors and community elders, gathering support from villagers, and organizing community forums. Despite her nervousness, she engaged with local authorities and advocated for the community's needs. These actions demonstrate how power from within was translated into power to, enabling her to move beyond awareness and pursue concrete social change.

Her experience also illustrates the emergence of power with. Beyond advocating for her own project, she encouraged other women to speak, ask questions, and engage in discussions with local authorities. By creating opportunities for women's participation, she helped cultivate a collective sense of agency among women who had traditionally been excluded from public decision-making. Empowerment therefore, extended beyond individual transformation and became a collective process through which women recognized their capacity to participate in community affairs. Through these forms of civic engagement, FemLeaders gained recognition from local authorities and were treated differently—as legitimate actors capable of contributing to local development. Thus, empowerment not only transformed individual consciousness but also reshaped community relationships and participation.

■ **Core Groups: Building Community-Based Support Systems.**

The experiences of Core Group members similarly demonstrate the interconnected dimensions of power from within, power to, and power with. Composed of both women and men, Core Groups play a central role in addressing gender-based violence, promoting gender equality, and responding to community development concerns such as lack of healthcare access and infrastructure.

Like the FemLeaders, Core Group members develop power from within through a series of trainings on gender sensitization, SOGIESC, and gender-based violence, particularly domestic violence. Male Core Group members also participate in men's dialogues that encourage critical reflection on toxic masculinity and gender inequality. According to GADC's Community Outreach Officer, these activities specifically engage men who perpetrate harm and seek to transform their attitudes and behaviors. As a result, some men move from being perpetrators of violence to becoming advocates for gender equality. This transformation demonstrates how power from within involves not only increased awareness but also the capacity to critically reflect on one's own beliefs and behaviors.

These trainings also encourage participants to practice what they have learned within their own families and communities. In doing so, Core Group members become role models who embody alternative gender relations and challenge existing norms. They further extend this knowledge by sharing it with their neighbors and assigned communities, thereby mainstreaming gender awareness at the grassroots level. Through these sustained engagements, they gain the trust of community members and gradually become recognized as community leaders and support systems.

This role is particularly evident in how they address cases of gender-based violence. Equipped with knowledge about domestic violence and its impacts on women, children, and families, Core Group members are able to identify and respond to cases of abuse. Because community members trust them, survivors often seek their assistance before approaching formal institutions. Core Group members provide information, emotional support, and advice, while emphasizing that survivors themselves should decide whether to pursue legal action. Rather than making decisions on behalf of survivors, they respect survivors' autonomy and provide the information necessary for informed decision-making. In this way, empowerment is understood not as speaking for survivors but as enabling survivors to exercise agency over their own lives. Core Group members also

accompany survivors to safe spaces, facilitate legal referrals, and assist those who wish to report cases of violence. Several participants described this support system as particularly important in communities where domestic violence has become normalized and where formal justice mechanisms remain inaccessible or ineffective. As trusted intermediaries, Core Group members communicate that violence is unacceptable while simultaneously facilitating access to institutional support. Their efforts demonstrate how power to is exercised through direct intervention, while power with emerges through the creation of community-based support networks that collectively challenge violence.

Beyond gender-based violence, Core Group members also mobilize around healthcare access and infrastructure concerns. Many villages they serve are located in remote areas with limited access to health facilities. Participants explained that these conditions disproportionately affect women, particularly pregnant women who struggle to reach distant health centers due to poor road conditions. Recognizing these challenges, Core Group members volunteer in commune health centers, regularly raise these concerns with local authorities, and advocate for improvements in local infrastructure. Their ability to identify community needs and engage authorities demonstrates the exercise of power to, while their collaboration with local institutions reflects power with. Similarly, Core Group members address the lack of access to childhood vaccinations in remote communities. Because health workers are often unable to reach these areas, Core Group members coordinate with healthcare staff, encourage them to visit remote villages, and conduct door-to-door outreach to inform families about vaccination schedules. They also collect data on community needs and communicate these concerns to relevant authorities. Through these activities, they act as bridges between communities and public institutions, facilitating collective action to improve community well-being.

Across both FemLeaders and Core Group, empowerment emerges as a dynamic process through which individuals develop feminist critical consciousness, exercise agency, and build collective capacities for social change in their own ways. While power from within provides the foundation for empowerment, it is through ‘power to’ and ‘power with’ that community members transform awareness into meaningful action capable of addressing gender inequality, violence, and broader development challenges.

Conclusion

This study examined how Gender and Development for Cambodia (GADC) cultivates empowerment among its target communities and how community members experience and enact empowerment through their participation in GADC's programs. The findings suggest that while Cambodia's gender equality frameworks, particularly the Neary Ratanak strategies, and its commitments to international human rights treaties have expanded women's access to opportunities, services, and formal participation, these policies are implemented within a sociocultural context shaped by prevailing gender norms. Cultural expectations reflected in the *Chbab Srey* and *Chbab Proh*, the unequal distribution of unpaid care work, the prevalence of domestic violence and gender-based violence, and women's continued underrepresentation in local decision-making spaces formed the broader context in which the study was situated.

In addressing these implementation challenges, this study examined how GADC operationalizes women's empowerment at the grassroots level through a case study of its work in Rolea B'ea Commune. Based on interviews with GADC staff (two Project Officers and a Community Outreach Officer) and community partners (FemLeaders and Core Group members), the study identified six reinforcing strategies shaping GADC's approach to empowerment: (1) treating empowerment as a continuous process rather than a fixed outcome; (2) grounding empowerment in an intersectional feminist framework; (3) building capacities and leadership through feminist education and training; (4) creating safe and participatory spaces for dialogue and critical reflection; (5) strengthening community organizing and engagement with local authorities; and (6) linking grassroots experiences to advocacy at the local, national, regional, and international levels. Rather than operating independently, these strategies reinforce one another and demonstrate how GADC merges feminist consciousness-raising, capacity-building, community organizing, and advocacy. They also show that empowerment is cultivated as an ongoing process of strengthening individual and collective agency while transforming unequal gender relations.

Within the community examined, these strategies were reflected in the experiences of FemLeaders and Core Group members. Participants described developing greater self-confidence, awareness of gender issues, leadership skills, and the capacity to organize collective action within their communities. FemLeaders identified community concerns, mobilized residents, developed

project proposals, and engaged local authorities, while Core Group members applied their training to support survivors of gender-based violence, facilitate referrals, advocate for improved health services, and act as intermediaries between communities and local institutions. These experiences illustrate how participants enacted different dimensions of empowerment: developing confidence and critical awareness (power from within), acting on community concerns (power to), and building collective action and solidarity (power with). These outcomes are particularly significant in grassroots contexts where normative gender norms continue to shape everyday life and where gaps in access to services and resources disproportionately burdens women and girls.

The findings also support feminist conceptualizations of empowerment advanced by Rowlands (1997b) and Batliwala (2007), which emphasize the transformation of unequal power relations rather than the mere acquisition of skills or resources. At the same time, the experiences of GADC's target communities reflect alternative development principles rooted in cooperation, solidarity, participation, and collective agency. Empowerment, in this case study, emerges not as a linear achievement but as an ongoing social process through which individuals and communities build the capacity to challenge inequalities and have the agency to reshape the conditions of their lives.

This study is limited by its short field engagement and its focus on selected target communities and groups in Rolea B'ea Commune. As such, the findings should be understood as a case study of how GADC's approach was experienced and enacted in this particular context rather than as representative of all GADC target communities. Future research across multiple sites and over a longer period could examine how these strategies are adapted in different community settings and how experiences of empowerment evolve over time.

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