

# A Feminist Lens to Food Security in Cambodia

## Context and Project Background

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), 45% of Cambodians are moderately or severely food insecure. Despite steep economic growth in the past two decades, inequalities in accessing nutritious food persist. Women and children are disproportionately affected by malnutrition. Approximately 22% of children under the age of 5 are stunted and 10% are wasted. Only about 50% of children aged 0-6 months are exclusively breastfed. Similarly, of women aged 20-49 years and 15-19 years, 4% and 14%, respectively, are of short stature. Barriers to healthy and nutritious food for mothers and children among others are poverty, lack of knowledge, cultural norms and expectations associated with food, lack of time and resources for continued breastfeeding, excessive marketing of unhealthy food products, and breast milk substitutes replacing nutritious foods.

The **Multisectoral Food and Nutrition Security (MUSEFO) Project**, which is part of the global program “Food and Nutrition Security, Enhanced Resilience” under the BMZ Special Initiative “Transformation of Agricultural and Food Systems” (SI AGER) has recognized **gender-transformative approaches** as central to achieving food and nutrition security. Women and young children are thus centered in all project activities.

## Gender-transformative Approaches

At the community level, MUSEFO is employing a participatory peer-to-peer learning approach, also known as **Care Group (CG) approach**. Women receive high-quality knowledge and training on nutrition and basic hygiene and are empowered through active involvement in decision-making processes, opportunities of taking leadership roles, financial support, and entrepreneurial training for nutrition-sensitive businesses. A gender analysis

conducted in 2017 revealed that Cambodian women are in charge of all food-related household activities and of buying and selling food products on markets. Leveraging on women’s decision-making power when it comes to food choices, 8,314 women living in Kampot and Kampong Thom province are currently care group members and benefit from trainings. Voluntary nutrition counsellors, referred to as **Village Health Support Group (VHSG)** members have also been trained on providing nutrition counselling and offer an additional support structure for **CG members**. Until now 1,091 VHSGs have been trained and have become an integral part of the care groups. Challenging traditional gender roles, where men are often not involved in household chores and unpaid care work, men are deliberately included in care groups and participate in trainings on nutrition and gender roles. Currently, men constitute at least 10% of care group members.



CG members and VHSGs have also been integrated in national strategies, such as the Strategy for Social Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC)

and the nutrition counselling approach will now be implemented nation-wide. In line with our ‘digital by default’ strategy a nutrition counselling app is under development, which will facilitate the working process of VHSGs and Health Service Providers (HSPs) and guide households (men, women and young children) in assessing their nutritional status by receiving tailored advice and nationally high-quality information.

Women’s economic power and financial literacy are being strengthened through the promotion of (mostly) female-led nutrition-sensitive businesses. As part of the [Saving for Change](#) (SfC) and **Revolving Funds initiative**, women can lend money against an interest rate, which is decided on collectively by the group members. All finances are managed by appointed group members, who have received training in accounting. The saved funds are almost entirely invested in nutrition-sensitive businesses and the remaining is added as a social security measure for the communities. In total, the SfC groups have already accumulated 127,000 USD, which has been reinvested. Leading by example, several women’s groups have received training in food processing and are now social business entrepreneurs (also

called **Food Banks**). Through newly acquired food processing techniques, women are collaborating with local farmers to prevent food waste and create new products, such as banana chips, dried mango, soy and mung bean milk, and pumpkin juice. Although production has only started very recently (In May 2023) the women in the two pilot provinces Kampot and Kampong Thom have already earned an impressive 5,348.2 USD, with a profit margin of 33% to 52%.



In the last decade, Cambodia has seen a steep increase in female workforce participation, which unfortunately has been accompanied by declining rates of exclusive breastfeeding. Returning to work shortly after giving birth has been reported as the main reason why mothers discontinued breastfeeding. Although companies are legally obliged to provide lactation rooms and daycare services at the workplace with >50 female employees, this has only been weakly enforced. MUSEFO’s strong commitment in supporting the Ministry of Health’s agenda of achieving 85% exclusive breastfeeding coverage across the country, has led to the opening of the first lactation room in March 2022 and continued advocacy of optimizing the maternity leave benefits for Cambodian families.

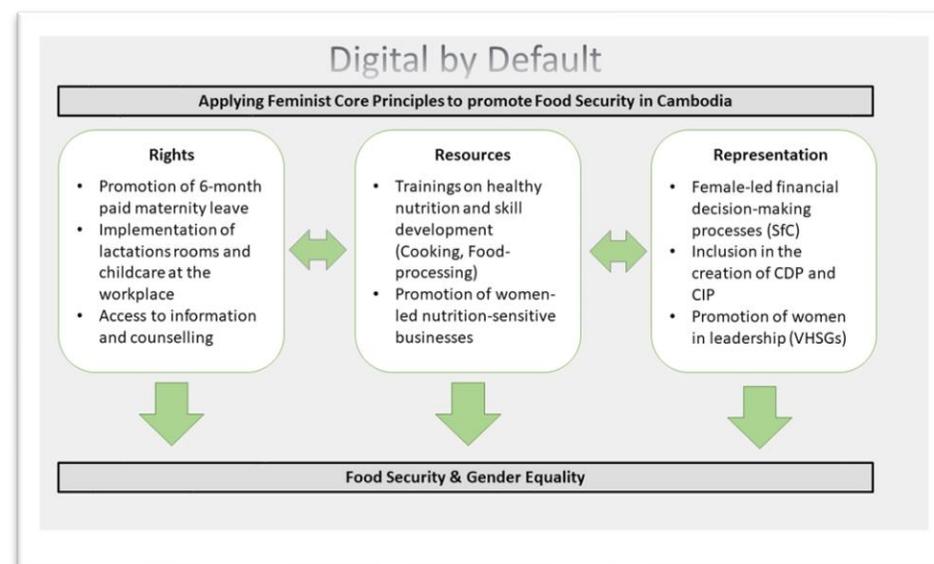
### Applying feminist core principles to Food Security

The German feminist development policy aims to strengthen **rights, resources, and representation** (3Rs) of women and marginalized groups.

MUSEFO committed to a gender-transformative and post-colonial approach in line with feminist core principles. Women continue to be underrepresented in political decision-making and thus are often left behind in policies. Representing and advocating for women and minority rights is thus crucial in reducing systemic inequalities. Following a rights-based approach, one of the main priorities continues to be gender-inclusive policy development. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic and Social Rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, mothers are entitled to special protection after childbirth, including but not limited to paid maternity leave. Through continued advocacy and in cooperation with Helen Keller Intl. (HKI) extending maternity leave has been pushed on the political agenda. Currently, women in Cambodia are only entitled to 50% payment for the first 3 months paid by their employer. The National Social Security Fund (NSSF) pays an additional 70% of their wage for the first 3 months (for those registered with NSSF). Unfortunately, Social assistance coverage through NSSF was reported to be very low. In recent years, through advocacy efforts the implementation of social security schemes for women has increased tremendously and can be considered as a great milestone for women’s rights.

Likewise, through participatory, women-led care groups and saving groups MUSEFO promotes an environment where women and marginalized, vulnerable groups can become **Agents of Change**. Achieving sustainable changes in norms and behavior requires empowered female societies, which can challenge underlying gender roles and norms. Cooperating with men through our care group session further mobilizes social and systemic change. Employing a community-based, post-colonial approach, women-led care groups and saving groups also foster collective and autonomous decision-making. For instance, saving groups establish their own rules and guidelines, VHSGs are selected by the care group members and group members are included in the creation of commune development plans (CDP) and commune investment plans (CIP).

Taking an intersectionality lens, MUSEFO also recognizes that multiple vulnerabilities intersect and impede food security, dietary diversity, and health. For that reason, MUSEFO ensures that activities reach and benefit the most vulnerable populations. At least 10% of those who are currently active care group members are also ID poor cardholders<sup>1</sup>.



### Cooperation and Gender as Quality Feature of our Work

Together with the Multi-Donor Fund **Cambodian Nutrition Project (CNP)**, partly financed by the Royal Government of Cambodia and KfW, MUSEFO is supporting the MoH in improving access to health and provide quality nutrition counselling for pregnant women, lactating women and children. As a result, nutrition counselling conducted by the VHSGs and soon provided through digital applications has become an integral part of the **Commune Participation Policy (CPP)** of the MoH. Through the ‘digital by default’

<sup>1</sup> The Identification of Poor Households Programme (IDPoor) is part of the Government of the Kingdom of Cambodia’s ongoing efforts to reduce poverty. Households identified are issued Equity Cards verifying their status.

approach, which has been identified as ‘game changer’ in the transformation of food systems within the 2<sup>nd</sup> National Strategy for Food and Nutrition Security (NSFSN), 2019-2023, health centers, VHSGs, and households can benefit from quality nutrition information, health services, and guided nutrition counselling nation-wide.

The implementation of the Care Group Approach has been largely driven by the local NGO RACHA. Through innovative and creative approaches and in close cooperation with the MoH, they have developed a range of IEC materials, such as songs, dances, and cooking videos, which have been officially integrated in the **SBCC strategy of the National Center for Health Promotion (NCHP)**. All materials will also be provided in the nutrition counselling app under MoH and will thus be accessible to women, children, and the most vulnerable populations.

In cooperation with CARD and other donors, MUSEFO has also made significant contributions to the **2<sup>nd</sup> National Strategy for Food Security and Nutrition (NSFSN)**, 2019-2023. The empowerment of youth, women, and vulnerable populations now constitutes one of the four main priorities of the Government of the Kingdom of Cambodia. This especially refers to economic empowerment and active engagement of women in leadership and decision-making processes. Under the **National Financial Inclusion Strategy (NFIS)** 2019-2025 a formalization of saving groups and promotion of women-led small and midsize enterprises (SMEs) is also formally included. Discussions with the National Bank of Cambodia are already underway and could lead to a formalization of MUSEFOs Saving Groups.

The promotion of parental leave and workplace nutrition through lactation rooms can also be considered a major success factor in improving gender equality. In cooperation with the NGO HKI healthy nutrition at the workplace has been integrated under the Ministry of Labor. Up to date 28 lactation rooms in 28 workplaces have been implemented and trainings on workplace nutrition has been conducted. Together with HKI, MUSEFO has also substantially contributed to the implementation of 120% paid maternity leave for the first 3-months after birth. Although an extension of maternity leave to 6-months and an introduction of paternity leave would be desirable, parental leave has finally gained political awareness and reached the political agenda. However, further

progress in expanding parental leave has been significantly impeded by the elections in July 2023 and the prior election campaign. In the future, we hope to mobilize further efforts to reach our goal of 6-month maternity leave and introduction of paternity leave to support gender equality and promote continued breastfeeding.

MUSEFO, together with partner ministries, other international donors, and NGOs continue to work towards the achievement of the sustainable development goals. **SDG 5: Gender Equality** and **SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities** continue to be centered in project activities and constitute essential components in achieving **SDG 2: Zero Hunger** and **SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing**.

### Other Information

Employing participatory, post-colonial, and digital approaches to challenge systemic inequalities of women and other marginalized groups and promote food and nutrition security has been, despite challenges, a success story. We see it as essential to communicate and share our approaches with other GIZ projects and local CSOs and NGOs. In the future, we would like to explore opportunities of organizing digital south-south exchanges and thus contribute to knowledge sharing and learning from each other.