

Woman, you made me

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Behind every great man is a great woman. Behind every great woman is her mother. We spoke to six powerful women - from a superstar restaurateur to the ringleader of human rights protesters - about their lives and the unusual stories of the woman who inspired them.



Kep Pung, founder of human rights organisation Licadho. Photograph: Ruth Keber

Kek Pung, founder of LICADHO

Ruth Keber

When Dr Kek Pung was seven years old she made a promise to Buddha: if he saved her from malaria she would do everything in her power to help people in similar situations. Kek did this and much more when she founded the human rights organisation Licadho in Cambodia in 1992 – with the guidance of her mother, who was the first woman to become a member of parliament.

When I was seven years old I almost died from malaria. I lost all the hair on my body, and was skin and bone. Every day I thought I was going to die. I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep.

But I prayed to Buddha and asked him for a miracle.

The disease rattled my body for over a month until my father came home with injections of quinine.

In return, I promised I would help others going through the same ordeal by becoming a doctor.

I was raised in Phnom Penh, I went to a French primary and high school and I went on to study at the Faculty of Medicine in Cambodia, which I finished in France.

I traveled and lived abroad for many years with my late husband, before returning to Cambodia in late 1991.

I hadn't had time to serve my country and wanted to volunteer as a doctor, but there was nothing left in the hospitals, no medicine, nothing, so I knew I could not work as a doctor.

I thought what is another job to help people?

It was then I founded the human rights organization Licadho, to help monitor the activity of the Khmer Rouge before the 1993 elections. In the beginning, we were working with the United Nations, teaching human rights to people.

Now we can provide medical assistance, vaccinations, shelter, food and clothing to victims of human rights.

Both my parents have been equally inspiring to my life.

My mother Siv Eng Tong was the first woman to become a member of parliament in 1957, and went on to become the Minister of Social Affairs in 1958, she served two more consecutive terms in parliament.

My mother always had 6-7 male candidates against her, but the population then was 52 per cent female so my mother targeted the women voters.

She said: you don't know me, I am quite new but I am addressing myself to women. But I assure you I have a commitment to help women and if you vote for me, us in this region we have a lot of factories and I know you don't have the same salaries as men for the same work, you have less.

So if you vote for me I can assure you, I will work very hard to get same work same salary. And my second point is if you are pregnant you can have maternity leave and you salary will not be cut.

My father was not a member of parliament but he was selected three times in the government by Sihanouk, two times as Secretary of Education and once Minister of Information, he was always in the sector of education.

He told me, he always gave me good advice, in our life, if you can do something for your country or human beings, for a person, please do it.

I saw their example so I always lived like them.

Like when I was seven, I said my God, if someone helps me, I would feel so happy to feel better and it was my father who did this for me.



Restaurateur Van Porleng. Photograph: Alexander Crook/Phnom Penh Post

Van Porleng, restaurateur

Laura Walters

Van Porleng just about did not make it out of Cambodia when the political situation disintegrated in the 1970s, but since her return to the country in 2002 the 45-year-old French-educated Van's restaurant owner has become a successful businesswoman. She is president of the Cambodian Restaurant Association, director of the Cambodian Country Club, on the board of the Cambodian Pony Welfare Association, the French Chamber of Commerce, and the Women's Association of Small and Medium Businesses.

I came back in 2002 and saw the house that belonged to my father before the war, and what had become of it.

We took back the French-colonial building, which was originally the Indochina Bank. When we took it back it was in very bad condition. We decided to reinvent it in the sense to really preserve the history of the building, and to keep in touch with my past. Renovations finished in 2004. We opened the restaurant for the public in 2007 because it's my passion. My background is in hospitality, and Cambodia has so many opportunities in the tourism and hospitality industries.

When we were renovating I met with the workers and I was wearing jeans, casual clothing, and they spoke to me quite roughly, but when they knew I was the boss they changed.

Men and women are not equal, there is still a pay gap, but I believe there are a lot of good female candidates in positions to move forwards.

People are more open-minded now; this will help women become more successful. The advice I give is the same advice my mother gave me: Always believe in what you are doing, despite the fact that you will encounter inequality.

My mother inspires me. She was not a working person in the sense that she didn't have a position as a managing director, but she's always been behind to push, whether it was my father or myself.

She always said to love what you are doing, and be kind to people.

Kindness doesn't mean you have to bend down to people or accept everything.

Kindness is in yourself, in human beings.

You need to see the positive side of things, and then you will achieve what you go for.

My mother is proud of what I've achieved.

When she first came into the restaurant she had her tears in her eyes, and now she comes often to eat, and she tells me where things used to be, and stories from before the war.



'You have to respect yourself and look for every opportunity around': Seng Takakneary. Photograph: Sreng Meng Srun/Phnom Penh Post

Seng Takakneary, businesswoman

Bennett Murray

Seng Takakneary owns the SentoSaSilk Shop, Villa SALT hotel and Uniform workshop. She is also the founder of the KhmerAseanFashion magazine and is the president of the Cambodian Women Entrepreneurs Association. A powerful businesswoman, Takakneary said that she aims to preserve Cambodia's silk tradition, create economic opportunities for the poor, and promote the advancement of women.

I started here because I wanted to do something to help people. My mother inspires me, and she is proud of me, because I have six brothers and sisters and only I do something like this, dealing with the handicrafts and the community.

Behind the silk is a farming family and a job opportunity. We have to create opportunities and exports. The exports make us proud to be Cambodian, proud to have our own products. I want to do something for myself, and something for the families.

My mother is a housewife, and my father is a professor of Khmer literature. Few have a higher degree as my father in his field, and he holds a good position at the Ministry of Education. I am the middle child of the family.

I don't have any business education background, but I have an administration degree from the National University of Management. After graduating, I worked for one of the Japanese trading firms as an administrative assistant from 1992 to 1998. I liked it, but it was very slow for me because it was a corporation that only had a quiet representative office in Cambodia. Afterward, I became the head of administration for an NGO until 2004, when I started this business.

For myself, I don't think men give me a hard time. But for other women, as a whole, I think there is that problem. Because in some minds, the woman should depend on the man. I think, no, we have our own ability and work. We can do many things.

Sometimes, men do not give us the opportunity. But for me, I'm okay because I started with more luck than other women. When I started this business, I was picked up the Asean-Japan Centre and the World Bank project, because they could see the work really helps the community because I can translate the product from poor quality to high quality.

I think I can inspire other women. They see how hard I work, how I do my job

everyday without getting tired. I'm always on the move and continue to run. I never stop.

I would tell a young woman who wants to succeed professionally that you have to have your own commitment, you have to respect yourself, and look for every opportunity around you. If there's a chance, you take it. And try to educate yourself, because you learn everyday. Not just from school, but from everyday life.



'We need the women protesters. The public feel so sad when they see police hit women.' Tep Vanny, 32. Photograph: Heng Chivoan/Phnom Penh Post

Tep Vanny, human rights activist

Khouth Sophak Chakrya and Bennett Murray

Tep Vanny, 32, regularly risks her freedom to protect the property rights of her family and neighbors around Boeung Kak lake. For her leadership in the protest movement, former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will present Vanny with a Vital Voices Global Leadership Award next month in Washington, DC.

I first moved to the lake in 2006 with my husband's family after marrying Ou Kongchea, a military official. In that year, we were happy after hearing that the municipal authorities were to systematically give land titles to villagers in my area. I wondered why some villagers were starting to protest after the Phnom Penh governor Kep Chuktema signed a contract to lease 133 hectares of the land plot in the Boeung Kak development project to the Senator Lao Mengkhin, the owner of Shukaku Inc, for 99 years.

But the company started to pump the sand from the river to fill in the lakeside, and caused villagers' houses to flood. Thousands of families were threatened and subsequently evicted to another site with small compensation, and some families were wounded by the police's electric batons when they protested to demand a fair resolution. Because of the injustice, I decided to join with the protesters to protect my home and my community in late 2010.

My husband and my family have worried when they see me lead hundreds of women from my community to protest again and again. But they have never stopped me, because I reminded them that we cannot live without a home.

We need the women protesters. The men were always fought against by the police when they demonstrated because the police always treat them as dangerous. But the public always feels so sad when they see the police hit the women.

Nonetheless, me and twelve other women were arrested by the authorities, and the Phnom Penh municipal court sentenced us to two and a half years imprisonment. But the appeal court decided to release us on bail after we were jailed for a month and three days in Prey Sa prison.

Many people, especially the policemen who cracked down on our protesting, always show inappropriate sexual behavior toward me. Once, people even wrongly said that I had been a pinup model. But I do not care about that.

After much struggle, the government finally gave 12.44 hectares to about 700 families in the Beoung Kak area in August 2011.

And currently, more than 600 families received the land titles. But the base authority has cut 64 families out of this land titles project.

Right now, we continue to strengthen our stand and strike for a resolution for all of us, although the authority and police threaten to arrest us again.



Zorida Doung presents eight TV shows and runs a fashion label. Photograph: Alexander Crook/Phnom Penh Post

Zorida Doung, showbiz queen

Julius Thiemann

Zorida Doung, 28, is a powerhouse of showbusiness. The presenter of eight TV shows for three stations (SEA TV Concert and SEA TV CEO Forum, among others), she is also the owner of Cambodia Models agency and fashion label Zo Fashion, and a much sought-after actress. She kept up her schooling despite the sniff of stardom and lately has been engaged in social projects and tries to convince young people – especially girls who try to make it as models, singers, or actresses – not to abandon their education.

Twelve years ago, I was the first girl to win the teenage contest Freshie Girl. I think

this could have helped my career a lot, but I decided to go back to study and worked as a flight attendant to support myself at the same time. I am glad I did this because many girls that are beautiful drop out of school because they think they can become famous. Not only beauty makes you successful but also education. I try to make teenagers understand that. I finished my BBA in accounting and then did an MBA for management skills on top.

My mother inspired me to do that because she is such a strong woman. When my father passed away 13 years ago, there were just my mother, my three sisters and I left. My mother worked so hard to get us all through school and provide us with an education. She is such a clever businesswoman. She's a tailor, mostly making bridal dresses and evening gowns. She is really strict and taught us to work hard. When my father died, I was too young to understand that we had financial problems because he was a high-ranking soldier and a doctor. As long as he lived, we had enough money. Only when I was grown I understood how hard it must have been for my mother. Sometimes she wanted to sell her dresses she made in the market but didn't have enough money to pay the motodop to get there. But with her discipline and cleverness my mother succeeded, and all her daughters got through school and are successful today: my youngest sister is a TV presenter like me, my oldest lives in the USA and the second youngest studies at university to become a fashion designer.

I know that all Khmer ladies have ideas, but they keep their dreams to themselves. This is why I am doing a TV programme that educates women on how to get a good education.

I want Cambodian women to be strong, forget their bad experiences, and get on their feet instead of crying. Nobody is perfect, but if a woman is strong, she will be successful.



Mixed-media artist Tith Kanitha says she is inspired by Louise Bourgeois.
Photograph: Ruth Keber

Tith Kanitha, artist

Laura Walters

Tith Kanitha, a 25-year-old graduate of the Royal University of Fine Arts, majored in interior design, but a workshop prompted her to become a mixed-media artist instead. It was a turning point in her life. Since then, her sculptures, public performances and 3D art have been displayed throughout Phnom Penh. Kanitha's art focuses on exploring different media and portraying social messages. Her work will take her to New York next month for the Season of Cambodia art festival.

In 2009 and 2010, I was invited to be part of an exhibition about gender issues. It was called *Hey Sister, Where Are You Going?* It was my first performance in public. I took some stoves, and then I smashed them in a public mall. I don't like the idea that women can't move away from the kitchen. This exhibition was my first big challenge. I was not sure how the audience would react. It was a bit aggressive, but the audience connected with the topic. I want to show there are now many possibilities for women. You can move, you can do what you want.

I wanted to be an artist, but I am not very good at drawing. I thought, "How can you do art if you can't draw?" For me, art is about my country and my culture, it is about the temples and the history.

My mentor told me to do something different, something related to my background. I found that something different, and I love it so much. It's something so new.

I use a mix of media. I have always done installations on the ground. In the past couple of years, I have moved to the canvas, creating 3D art on the canvas and using it in my sculptures.

I went to Burma last year on an exchange between Southeast Asian contemporary arts. It was a female art symposium. I was so inspired, it touched me.

In Cambodia, the balance between men and women is not quite the same; they are not quite equal, but I do not feel the effect of that.

I know there is not complete equality, and it is a social issue, but personally I do not feel suppressed. I grew up in a family that values women.

My artwork expresses me as a woman, but not because I try to address gender issues in each piece of art. I was already born as a girl, so everything is already affected by my gender. I want to portray social messages through my art, more than just gender messages.

Personally, my mum inspires me. I grew up through my mum. She is very strong. She said to me, "One thing I can give you is knowledge." She worked very hard to get the money for me to study. She told me to use the time, and opportunity to study wisely. We were not like wealthy families who can easily pay for university. She always pushed me to study, and she told me not to hate people. I only recently understood what she meant by this: when you hate people you isolate yourself from them. You do not understand them, so you cannot move forward.

Professionally, I am inspired by the French 20th-century artist and sculptor Louise Bourgeois. She used different materials to make huge sculptures. She connected with people, her work was different. I don't want my art to be the same as hers, but I am inspired by her ability to do something new.

Going to New York for Season of Cambodia is a big step for me, not only as a woman, but it's a big step for the new generation of Cambodians. We are all quite young, and it is hard to make things happen, but this is a great opportunity. I don't feel like I'm in a position to give advice to aspiring female artists, I just want to share my ideas: Everything that you want to do, just do it. It does not matter if you are a woman or a man, you are a human, and any human can do what they want if they go for it.