

Rural Women in the City

Telling the stories of migration and urbanisation
through the findings of women in Phnom Penh



An initiative of 4 Women, 4 Communities, 4 Stories



This publication is a collaboration between Dare & Dream and Women Peace Makers.

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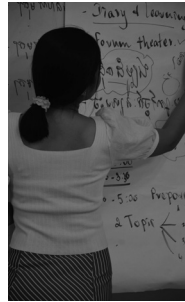
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This title is also available online.



Who are we?

Rural women in the city are all around you

Kagna Mourng

When we began our journey, I could never have imagined what would come next. A woman with a disability, an Indigenous woman, a woman facing violence, and me - a rural woman living in the city of Phnom Penh. How much did the four of us really have in common? How much of my own identity was truly rooted in my rural background?

I am from the village of Phum 3 in Kampong Cham. I am rural in my identity and in my heart. I have been living in Phnom Penh for 17 years. I am also a woman. I am ethnically Khmer. I am a Cambodian citizen. I'm a global traveller. I'm an advocate. But strongly slicing through all the layers of those aspects that make me who I am is my rural identity within an urban environment. I'm a rural woman in the city, and nearly nothing else has shaped me so strongly nor contributed so much to my own story and how I see the world beyond me.

4 Women, 4 Communities, 4 Stories is a journey. Known more formally as the project Learn, Share, Speak Together: Marginalised Women Creating a Collective Space in the City, there are two very distinct levels of analysis, activities, and activism. One is on unity and bringing all four doubly marginalised communities together so we can explore our common ground with the great hope of coming together to create a collective voice. The other is on the uniqueness and solidarity of each individual group - a socially constructed community in which we find common connections and bonds through our shared experience. Rural women in the city have their own unique stories, but we certainly have strong commonalities. We face leaving something behind in our home provinces. We struggle in suddenly arriving in a busy, hectic, and vastly different urban society. We are perceived differently by our city counterparts and we often face discrimination and negative stereotypes. We arrive in Phnom Penh



Kagna Mouring

Co-Founder of Dare & Dream
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Women Peace Makers

motivated by work, study, and a new life. We have hopes and dreams. We face great challenges. Many of us adapt. Many of us learn to cope. Many of us struggle, but many of us also strive and shine.

Through this process of listening to my own community of rural women living in the city, I have been as reassured of my own experiences and perspectives as I have been surprised by those others in similar situations. These women have shared their beautiful and powerful stories with me about discrimination, stereotypes, violence, lack of opportunities, social injustice, and so many other details that make up their lives. Even as I also see so many of their stories in myself, listening to their struggle and hardship in sad and painful memories still makes my heart ache. Through it, however, I find deep inspiration to uncover their coping mechanisms as I reflect on my own, and together we share our support and our resilient spirits. No matter where we were

born, we have all been taught that to be a good woman, we have to be good to others. We are affected by a value system that teaches us that our own worth lies in making other people happy. We recognise our many fears when we start to dream, but the biggest fear of all is actually being judged.

This work comes from a deep process involving many women. It involves listening, analysing, reflecting, and coming together. I invite you to read the findings of our study that has shaped our subsequent line of action as our initial 4 women have become 41 women. Our stories inspire us to grow, to share, and to find unity among each other. I wish that you are able to find the strength and inspiration of these women as I did navigating the Facilitative Listening Design process and connecting to women I consider very much my own community in Phnom Penh.

Facilitative Listening Design Steps

1



Listener recruitment

2



Customising tools

3



Coaching and Training Lab

4



Trial conversation and reflecting

5



Fieldwork and recording

6



Info-Space Lab

7



Information verification and analysis

8



Writing and planning relevant outputs

Design: Valentina Rivero

The Study

This study provides a snapshot into the multiple barriers that rural women in Cambodia face in their lives in their migration to urban areas, such as Phnom Penh. As part of a larger endeavour to capture narratives of intersectionality among rural-to-urban migrant women, Indigenous women, women with disabilities, and women facing violence, this subsection of the study explores the lives, experiences, and perspectives of rural women in the city through a qualitative information gathering methodology known as Facilitative Listening Design (FLD). An evolving peace research approach, FLD was chosen for this work largely for its advantage in providing the space for informal sharing on sensitive issues in local community contexts.

The Methodology

Facilitative Listening Design is an innovative adaptation of Listening Methodology. It is an “insider” human-to-human centred approach to better understand prevailing dynamics and explore sensitive topics that make for difficult conversations. It encourages deeper critical thinking and leverages the process to bring together groups at odds with each other and find solutions to protracted negative attitudes, stereotypes, or sentiment. It maintains the rigorous procedural and information-checking steps in conducting listening

research, but puts a stronger emphasis on gaining relatively in-depth insight into a topic as a snapshot at a given moment.

The advantage in this context is that it can be carried out quickly and respond to situations in a timely manner. It is also discrete. Conversations can happen in private or can be informal in nature to provide anonymity to the participants. There is no need to connect any recorded information to the individuals who participated as all documentation happens after and away from where conversations took place. The conversational style of information-gathering can be employed nearly anywhere, even in extremely sensitive environments where conducting more traditional research, using audio recording or questionnaires, may not be feasible. With no need for papers or devices, participants can blend into different environments and engage with people simply as people rather than research participants. It can also be adapted to a range of cultural needs and communication styles depending on the context and the groups involved.

The general procedure of a Facilitative Listening Design (FLD) approach was carried out to better understand thoughts and opinions of four doubly marginalised groups including rural women who have moved to the city, Indigenous Women, women with disabilities, and women facing violence. Eight general steps guided the process from design to implementation.¹

¹ For a detailed understanding of FLD methodology, refer to The FLD Handbook: Using Facilitative Design For Your Project (October 2017) provided at <http://wpmcambodia.org/project/the-fld-handbook>.

The Demographics

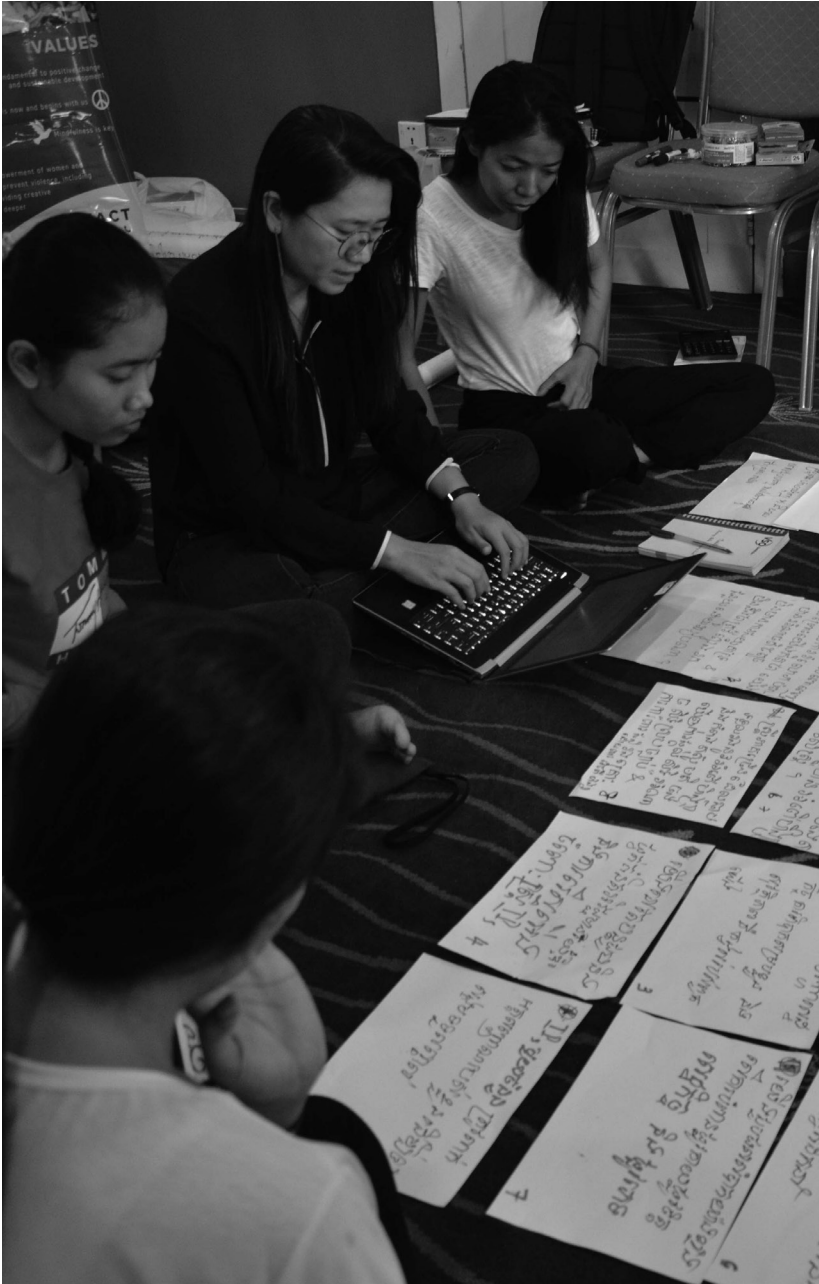
This study is a limited subsection of a main study involving 41 conversations with doubly marginalised women. This component includes ten conversations with ten women who are referred to as Sharers. The conversations were carried out by two information gatherers referred to as Listeners. The Listeners come directly from the communities they are seeking to understand. The women all live in Phnom Penh but originally come from seven different provinces including Kampong Cham, Takeo, Kampot, Kep, Banteay Meanchey, Kampong Chhnang, and Kandal.

A Listener Profile

One of the project's Listeners was Pagna, a woman from Kampong Cham province who has lived in Phnom Penh for two years. Pagna came to the city after receiving a scholarship to study at the Royal University of Phnom Penh. She joined as a Listener because she loves to work with women and wanted to learn more about how other rural women experience life after moving to an urban area. She was also interested in finding out whether violence is a common theme and thought that she might be part of a change.

Pagna says that she learnt so much from the ten Sharers she had conversations with through the Facilitative Listening Design process. She admits that she initially felt very nervous to approach others and talk about such personal things, but she managed to overcome her awkwardness as she got closer to them. By listening to their stories, she was inspired by the solutions they offered to confronting challenges and the resilience that came through their narratives. Pagna plans to continue to use listening in many different ways in her life and see how she can help to bring others' stories to influence attitudes and create positive change.





The Findings

Initial findings of FLD were analysed by the Listeners themselves based on the data they collected and the themes they heard the most during their fieldwork. Through a process of early analysis, the following findings emerged among the conversations had between Listeners and Sharers.

Rural women in the city **Emerging themes**

- 1.** We are looked down upon for our low-paying jobs, skin colour, clothes, rural identity, and often, poverty.
- 2.** We face strong negative gender norms and stereotypes and discrimination from our own families and communities when moving to the city.
- 3.** We often face safety and security issues while traveling, working, and living in the city.
- 4.** We often come to the city with limited work options and succumb to labour exploitation.
- 5.** Discrimination against us in the city often leads to trauma, depression, and low self-esteem.
- 6.** We are resilient, often overcoming economic and emotional burdens and challenges when we come to the city to explore better opportunities.
- 7.** When we arrive in the city, we are looking for job opportunities, safe lodging, and information.
- 8.** We want to see women from rural areas supported and able to lead a better life.
- 9.** We want to see women dare to speak up and express their feelings on family and work related issues.

Perceptions of provincial poverty in a high class city

Being a provincial woman, my skin colour is not beautiful like city people and I was criticised for my appearance. At that time, I lost my self esteem. I didn't even want to try to make myself beautiful because I believed what people said.

- A 26-year-old teacher in Phnom Penh originally from Kampong Cham province



Rural women who move to Phnom Phnom often associate themselves with poverty and feel a strong sense of inequality among their city counterparts. They often feel looked down upon and stigmatised for their identity connected to a province outside of the country's urban centre. Clear indicators of their background are seen as barriers and are not easy to hide, even after time adapting to city life.

Many Sharers equated their skin colour to being from the countryside, with darker and less cared for skin than women from the city. They also saw their clothing style as less refined and instantly recognisable as from the provinces. Skin colour and fashion were connected to feeling unattractive and being the targets of gossip from city people. Several women commented that

these were barriers to making friends and connecting to others after moving to Phnom Penh.

Some Sharers also talked about work and university life, having come to the city and engaging in work and study. They felt they were frequently associated with low-paying work or in university environments surrounded by rich students who saw them differently as women from provinces. Some mentioned that ignorance was prevalent in the city and it was harder to gain respect. One Sharer confided that when she moved to Phnom Penh to work with an organisation, she was regarded negatively due to her rural roots until her boss made a concerted effort to showcase her skills and abilities to the other staff members.





*“Love
yourself.
The more
you face the
problem, the
stronger you
get.”*

- A 29-year-old Human Resources Leader at a private company originally from Kep province

Fearing for our safety

I was coming back home. Someone was walking from behind me. I was scared and I tried to run faster.

- A 21-year-old university student originally from
Takeo province

Women coming from provinces in Cambodia often face new fears when moving to the city. Life in an urban setting can be unsettling for a woman who has grown up in the countryside. Frequent travel, new work environments, and everyday living can be fraught with safety and security concerns for those who are not familiar with how to navigate city life.

Every Sharer who spoke with the Listeners mentioned safety and security were a major concern for them. Housing issues were a frequent source of fear among many Sharers. Some women discussed incidents of intruders in their homes, being forced to leave the residence at night, or even issues of stalking by those who knew where they lived. There were reports of women that had to leave their living places because of fears for their safety.

Travelling from back and forth from their provinces to the city and travelling within Phnom Penh itself were also brought up by many Sharers who told stories of bad experiences and constant fears. Travelling on a motorcycle was cited as a sometimes fearful activity, especially when going through areas associated with drug use or criminal activity. Some talked about feeling followed or pursued by suspicious individuals or feeling fearful as they walked within the city, especially at night.

A few women discussed their fears in their workplaces, sometimes in relation to sexual harassment. For those that experienced harassment directed from someone who had more power, such as a manager, it was difficult to find a solution.



*“Before you
help others,
you must
first help
yourself.”*

- A 25-year-old woman working in event management in the city
originally from Takeo province

Trouble starts from home

*Let's just see how long it takes
until she gets pregnant...*

- A young woman from Kampong Chhnang
province talking about what she hears from
people in her own hometown

It is not only challenging for rural women who move to the city after they arrive. Many women face negative stereotypes and discrimination from their own families, neighbours, and communities in their provincial hometowns upon making their decision to migrate. Most often, gender plays a major factor in perceptions that arise from their move to the city. Even when they return to their provinces to visit, they are frequently met with a new kind of discrimination from those they have grown up with for most of their lives.

For some Sharers, there is an instant assumption in their communities that the city will corrupt them or somehow lead them to a life seen as less desirable. For example, some said that after announcing their decision to move to Phnom Penh, they received comments about promiscuity and the possibility of coming back pregnant. Others noted that they felt judged or disrespected

by members of their communities about their decision to migrate. Many comments and attitudes about rural women in the city start from within their own communities and relate to their relationships with men or their suspected loss of purity. Several women expressed that they were often seen as a “bad girl” after leaving for Phnom Penh and even ended up fighting with their families about it.

Other Sharers that left their rural hometowns to get an education in the city were also often faced with reactions at home that challenged their desire to study. They said that their pursuit of higher education was more generally not valued and further contributed to less support for their urban move. For example, one Sharer said that people in her village continued to ask her why she would choose to study and reminded her that studies would not pay for food or provide her with anything to eat.



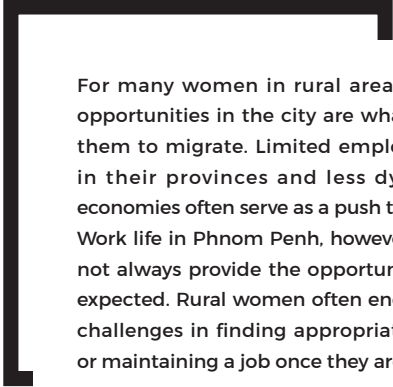
*“Just believe
in what you
are doing,
you will do it
well.”*

- A Sharer from the project who wanted to convey a message to other rural women in the city

We come to work but the reality is different

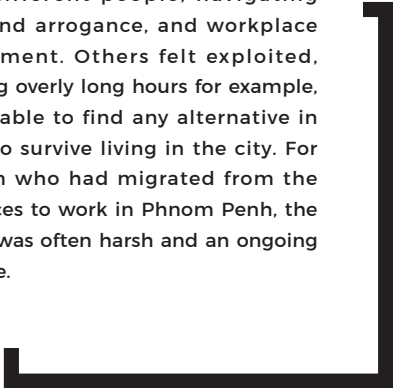
Sometimes I have to force myself to work extra hours in order to afford to live here. That is why I always work until night.

- A university student in Phnom Penh originally from Kampong Cham province



For many women in rural areas, work opportunities in the city are what draw them to migrate. Limited employment in their provinces and less dynamic economies often serve as a push to move. Work life in Phnom Penh, however, does not always provide the opportunities as expected. Rural women often encounter challenges in finding appropriate work or maintaining a job once they are hired.

Some Sharers discussed the specific challenges they faced working in a new urban environment that often differed from what they were used to back home. They shared their difficulties working with different people, navigating egos and arrogance, and workplace harassment. Others felt exploited, working overly long hours for example, but unable to find any alternative in order to survive living in the city. For women who had migrated from the provinces to work in Phnom Penh, the reality was often harsh and an ongoing struggle.





*“Your
efforts
will
pay
off.”*

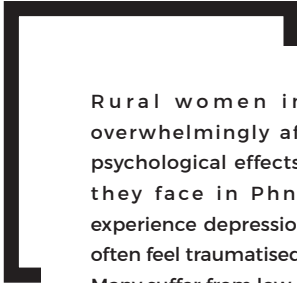
- A Sharer in the project
originally from Kampot



City attitudes can knock us down

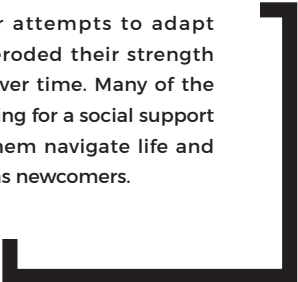
I ended up with low self esteem after being surrounded by a negative environment where they always tell me that I am not good enough or beautiful enough...

- A reflection from a rural woman living in Phnom Penh



Rural women in the city are overwhelmingly affected from the psychological effects of discrimination they face in Phnom Penh. They experience depression and anxiety, and often feel traumatised from everyday life. Many suffer from low self esteem.

Some Sharers linked their psychological responses directly to experiencing discrimination in the city noting that it served as a form of trauma that wore down their self esteem. Others found that it was their attempts to adapt to the city that eroded their strength and confidence over time. Many of the women were looking for a social support system to help them navigate life and build confidence as newcomers.





*“Don’t give up
and keep loving
what you do.
Whenever you
have a problem,
do not compare
those who seem
to have more
achievements.”*

- A Sharer from the project studying at a university
in Phnom Penh who moved from Takeo province

In spite of challenges, our resilience shines through

Through their reflection on the hardest moments of their lives leaving what they know behind and coming to the city, these women redefine themselves and tap into their strengths to prove they can handle whatever comes next.

- A Listener in the project who spoke with women and also migrated from Kampong Cham province to Phnom Penh to pursue her dreams

Rural women who migrate to the city nearly always come with some measure of ambition. Perhaps they wish to study. They might be looking for better work. Whatever it is, they nearly all are in search of opportunity.

Sharers talked in detail about their life stories and highlighted both their hardships and their personal triumphs in adapting to urban life. Some discussed multiple new tasks, such as studying, working, and even long journeys by bicycle trying to navigate the city from one place to the other. Money was often an issue for many, with stories of struggle to earn enough to survive.

Along with challenges highlighted from rural women living in the city, coping strategies, survival skills, and clear signs of resilience were also commonly shared. Learning was a key

theme mentioned across conversations. Sharers talked about learning in both formal means through education and through traditional forms of learning by experience as they became immersed in a new urban context and society. Some discussed seeking out resources, such as reading books, as a way to motivate themselves and navigate the environment, and even the trauma that some were experiencing. Even some women who did not necessarily migrate to the city to study ended up with new desires to pursue higher education after observing opportunities and benefits associated with further training. Sharers also cited key qualities and skills they found necessary to adapt to their new urban lives. In particular, patience, confidence, and the ability to put shyness aside and speak with self assurance were mentioned.



*“Education
is a part
of success.
Decisions
don’t rely on
age, they rely
on critical
thinking.”*

- A young rural woman studying in Phnom Penh

Our needs on arrival in the city are basic

It was such a difficult and tough situation when I first came to the city and I didn't know anyone. First, I needed to rent a room by pooling money together with others...

- A student from Takeo who recently moved to
Phnom Penh

For many women who migrate to the city for whatever purpose, not knowing anyone leads to numerous other challenges. Leaving their families and communities back in their hometowns in provinces, sometimes far from the capital, can be a lonely experience and can also leave them alone to deal with emerging needs on arrival.

All Sharers in their conversations with Listeners stated that accommodation was the main need they faced when they arrived in Phnom Penh. Safe lodging, in specific, was what all the women were in search of. Some discussed finding housing opportunities with charity organisations that supported them. Others shared their opinion

that government support is needed to help them secure safe housing. They overwhelmingly said that a safe and affordable dorm or appropriate facility is key to their initial arrival.

General information was also mentioned as a basic need for rural women arriving in the city. The type of information varied depending on the Sharer and her reason for migrating. Some discussed the need for information on opportunities for jobs or scholarships. One young woman discussed arriving in Phnom Penh with the intention to study but did not even know what was available or how to decide on a university major.



*“Believe in
yourself.
Be strong
and do not
depend on
anyone.”*

- A successful 33-year-old business owner in Phnom
Penh who came from Banteay Meanchey province

We need support to shine

I want to see our society pay more attention to women from other provinces. In order to help us adapt to life in the city, there should be a support system that includes sharing information about university opportunities, a safe place for women, and workshops to improve our leadership.

- A 25-year-old chemistry teacher in the city who originally came from Kampong Chhnang province

Rural women migrating to Phnom Penh are looking for a strong support system at many levels to assist them in navigating their new lives. They are clear on their needs and how support should look like in order for them to succeed and thrive as new city dwellers.

Sharers talked about supports needed at different levels. Beginning with their families, some women talked about the need for understanding and support early on in their hometowns. Their families, friends, and communities needed to support this difficult transition, sometimes just simply with understanding and goodwill. Nearly all Sharers talked about the need for society-at-large to support rural women in the city. They asked for urbanites

to be open-minded, to provide them the opportunity to be who they are. Support also was expressed in terms of programmes and institutions. Some said that leadership and empowerment programmes for rural-to-urban migrant women were extremely crucial to their success. Information-sharing played a large role in a desired support system including housing availability, university opportunities, and safety topics to be exchanged in some way. Some Sharers talked more concretely about the need for the Ministry of Women Affairs or other entities to provide mentorship opportunities or avenues for counselling and advice.



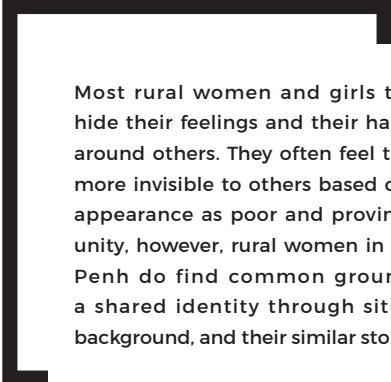
“Women should support each other. Do not easily judge people by appearance, but use your critical thinking in a big picture and try to put yourself in another’s shoes.”

- A company employee from a poor family in Kampot province that earned a prestigious scholarship to study in Phnom Penh and later to do a Master Degree in the UK

A voice

We should have enough confidence to speak and raise our voices. We should express our feelings and ideas with other people directly, so that our problems can be solved.

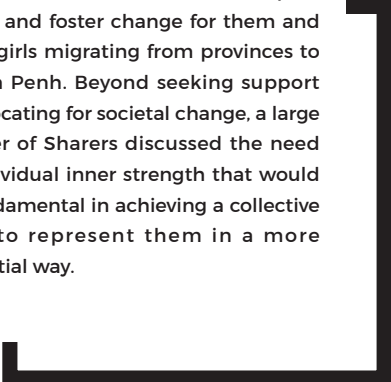
- A woman who moved from Kampong Cham province to the city in primary school and eventually became a teacher



Most rural women and girls tend to hide their feelings and their hardships around others. They often feel they are more invisible to others based on their appearance as poor and provincial. In unity, however, rural women in Phnom Penh do find common ground and a shared identity through situation, background, and their similar stories.

All Sharers talked about the need to find unity in their voice among women, and specifically for rural women living in the city. Many provided strong suggestions saying that women should express their feelings, raise important issues, and have self-confidence in their communication.

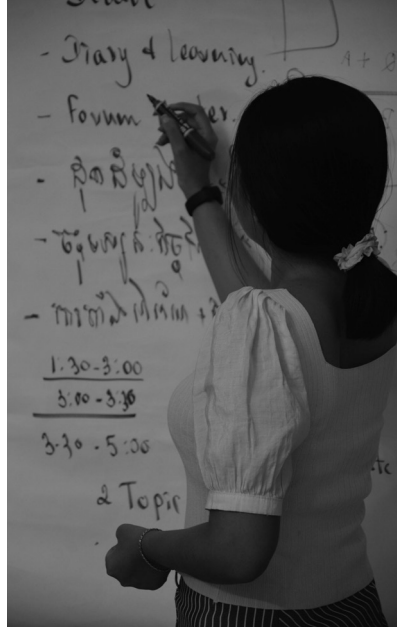
Several talked about the importance of education for rural women and the effect that education, training, and critical thinking skills could make on strengthening a unified voice. They conveyed that such a voice could impact society and foster change for them and future girls migrating from provinces to Phnom Penh. Beyond seeking support or advocating for societal change, a large number of Sharers discussed the need for individual inner strength that would be fundamental in achieving a collective voice to represent them in a more influential way.





*“When you
are positive,
you will be
connected
with only
other positive
people.”*

- A rural woman who came to study in Phnom Penh
and later received a scholarship to study in Australia



This initiative would not be possible without the generous support of Voice.



Rural Women in the City is the result of a collaborative initiative that began as 4 Women, 4 Communities, 4 Stories. These four women saw themselves as doubly marginalised, meaning that beyond gender barriers, they also faced another fundamental hurdle in their lives in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. This included an Indigenous woman, a woman with a disability, a woman facing violence, and a rural woman who had migrated to the city. These four women came together to explore intersectionality and how each other's own communities might find connections to the others.

This publication examines the findings of the rural-to-urban migrant women who have moved to Phnom Penh from the Cambodian provinces. Following the implementation of Facilitative Listening Design (FLD), a participatory community research approach that connects “Listeners” to “Sharers” in deep conversation, these findings paint a picture of rural women in the city. They not only highlight the challenges and struggles faced by these women, but also show the triumphs and the resilience found in their strength and will to improve their lives. Even further, the women from the study have the opportunity to share their own motivating words for other rural women in the city and encourage a collective conversation and unified voice.

