



**Health Unlimited**



**Health Unlimited  
Statement on Indigenous Women's Health Issues**

Statement by

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Health Unlimited is helping to create a world in which the most vulnerable communities can enjoy their right to health and well-being.

Mr Chair, members of the Permanent Forum, distinguished observers:

The indigenous people of Cambodia are facing serious threats to their livelihood, culture, language and knowledge from economic development, sector reforms and preventative diseases. People have little understanding of their rights and entitlements as a result of physical remoteness, illiteracy and linguistic barriers.

I am here today to present the views of indigenous women from my own community and promote their interests with regard to health.

Cambodia is the poorest country in Southeast Asia, recovering from decades of civil unrest, war and genocide. The dominant ethnic group in Cambodia is Khmer but in the remote northeast, the majority of the population are indigenous people.

After years of relative isolation the region has recently opened up to so called development, logging, cash cropping and industrial farming. Traditionally we have depended on the forest for our livelihoods and now threatened by diminishing forested areas; rapid deforestation; migration; land loss, confiscation of customary lands and border insecurity. These are affecting our ability to survive in a rapidly changing environment.

In the final year of the *"International Decade of the World's Indigenous People"* it is regrettable to note that little progress has been made to improve the health and well being of my people. Severe malnutrition, maternal and infant mortality continue to be the major cause of illness and death in my community.

Health professionals are typically Khmer and have limited local language skills and little understanding of traditional health practices. Poorly paid themselves, they have little motivation to provide services to those who are unable to pay. As a result people often feel unable to question health officials on the issues of unofficial charges, lack of exemptions for the poor, discrimination by health providers, and general poor service standards.

Health Unlimited undertook a health situational analysis in 2001, which showed that all health indicators are significantly worse than the national average. 70% of children under 5 are severely stunted an indication of chronic malnutrition. Maternal and child morbidity and mortality rates in the province are the highest in Cambodia with infant and under 5 years mortality at 187:1000 and 231:1000 respectively. This is significantly higher than the national average for Cambodia of 95:1000 and 124:1000.

In order for Indigenous people in Cambodia to be included in reaping the benefits of the Millennium Development Goals, we suggest that the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples recommend the following policies to the UN agencies and bodies:

- Allocate specific funds for in-depth research into the health practices of IP women to ensure future development programmes include indigenous knowledge and practices.
- Ensure the participation and representation of indigenous women in decision-making fora on issues that affect our lives

- Employ a policy of affirmative action for indigenous people in the recruitment for UN supported programmes in order for us to be involved in decisions which affect our lives and enable us to participate in our own development
- The UN should bring pressure on The Royal Government of Cambodia to ensure that government policies and international agreements are implemented and in such a way that Indigenous People receive their full entitlements.
- The UN agencies should fund and support local and international organizations who work in communities that service indigenous people.
- The complexity of indigenous peoples' issues requires long-term commitment by development agencies and donors alike. A commitment to long term development in regions where indigenous live needs to be made by UN agencies

We ask that UN agencies and bodies take immediate action to ensure that the current crisis which is affecting the world's indigenous people is addressed.