

Breaking the Mould

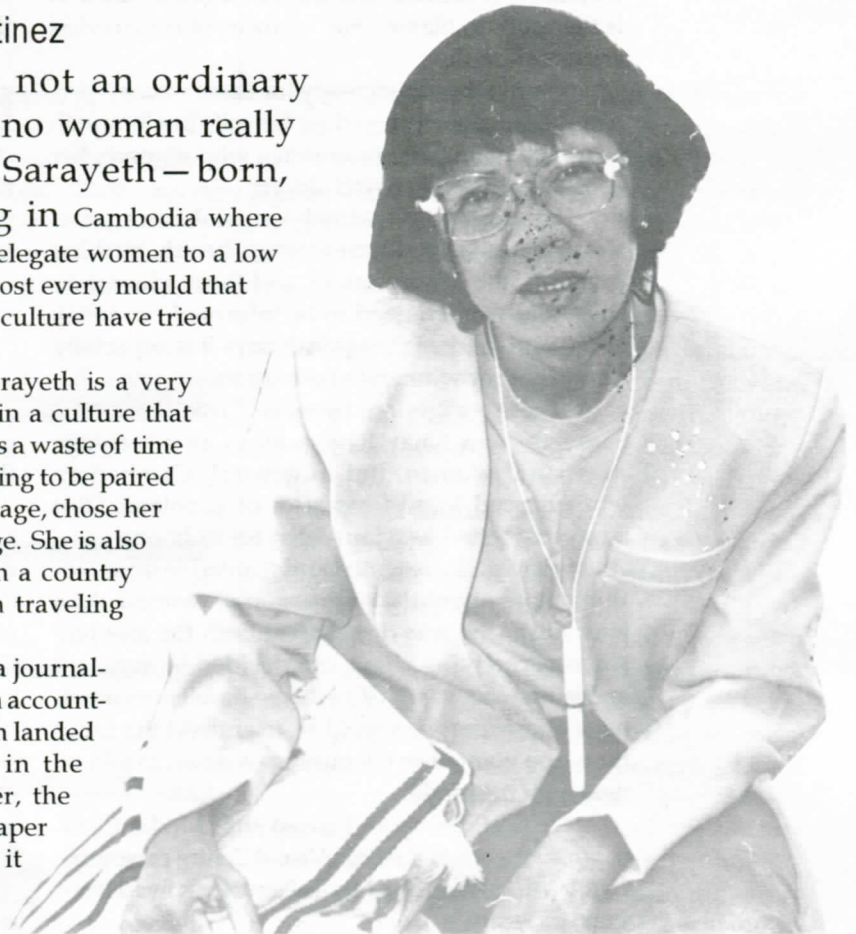
by Luz Maria Martinez

Sarayeth Tive is not an ordinary woman. Well, no woman really is, except that Sarayeth—born, raised and living in Cambodia where custom and tradition relegate women to a low status—has broken almost every mould that Cambodian society and culture have tried to fit her in.

To begin with, Sarayeth is a very well educated woman in a culture that looks at educating girls as a waste of time and money. Then, refusing to be paired off in an arranged marriage, chose her own mate while in college. She is also a journalist working in a country that frowns on women traveling without a man.

Sarayeth became a journalist quite by accident. An accountant by training, Sarayeth landed a job as a journalist in the Kampuchea newspaper, the only non-communist paper in Cambodia, because it needed someone who could write in English. Sarayeth, who studied English in addition to Accounting, fitted the requirement. This change of jobs defined the rest of Sarayeth's life and career.

As a journalist, Sarayeth found that women were highly oppressed. Newspaper stories of women consisted mostly of sex stories that showed women in pornographic pictures. Cultural practices, the lack of information and, in general, the patriarchy that kept women uninformed



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combine to make the situation for Cambodian women difficult.

One of the biggest issues in Cambodia, Sarayeth says, is widowhood. According to Sarayeth, in Cambodia, there is the "bad widow" and the "good widow." The "good widow" is the woman whose husband died either of natural causes or because of an accident. The husband's death is not seen as the woman's fault and her chances for remarrying are better.

But the "bad widow" is a woman whose husband has abandoned her. When a man leaves a woman, it is because she was not a good wife and is therefore to blame. Her chances of remarrying are therefore slim.

Sarayeth feels strongly for these women perhaps because she is a widow herself. But Sarayeth has since remarried an organist who respects her decisions. She has two children.

In addition to widowhood, violence against women, human rights of women, health, birthing practices, the environment and the media are issues that women need to be informed on, speak about and address. Sarayeth says it is especially important for women to take up these issues because these are ignored by men. "Urban women," Sarayeth says, "may have a bit of an advantage over rural women. But in general, Cambodian women need to address a lot of problems." But Sarayeth lasted as a journalist for only one year. As a woman, she resented and wanted to do something more about the oppression of women. As a journalist, she was dissatisfied with the low pay she was receiving. Sarayeth decided to move on and join a women's NGO where she felt her knowledge and expertise would be useful. At the same time, she wanted to encourage women to join or deal with the media.

In 1994, Sarayeth started the Media Campaign, Network and Audio Visual Centre programs. Cambodia's Women's Media Centre evolved from these programs.

The Women's Media Centre aims to establish itself as a public interest media center offering media services to non-government organizations. The Media Centre has four programs: Media Campaigns, Television and Radio Programming, Network Program, which is directly under Sarayeth, and the Audio and Visual Program. The Centre has been allowed by the government TV chan-

nel airtime for a program with a magazine format where women will be speaking, acting out and using whatever medium to bring out the issues. NGO experts will also be in the program.

Staffed by professional media experts, the Centre's main goal is to produce media materials on women and social issues and to improve the situation of women in media.

Sarayeth says there are few women journalists because women are required to stay at home and tend to their families. In contrast, journalists need to travel around a lot to cover stories. A woman journalist will find it very difficult to be able to do that.

But the basic problem is that education for girls and women is not a priority. Many families feel that educating a daughter will lessen her chances of finding a husband because the fear is she will then be smarter than the man. This is one of the reasons why the Women's Media Centre is focusing on the plight of the girl-child.

Apart from being the Centre's Executive Director, Sarayeth is also actively involved in a media watch group that monitors the media's portrayal of women and designs follow-up campaigns to improve these images as well as the working conditions of women in media.

In addition, Sarayeth helps produce educational videos and, along with the Centre's staff, trains women on audio-visual technology. The Centre has produced "Are we the Enemy?", a documentary that looks at the casualties of land mines in Cambodian fields through a woman's eyes. Sarayeth is the screenwriter and one of the producers. "Are we the Enemy?", a well-done documentary in English, is available at the Women's Media Centre and is also available for viewing at Isis International-Manila.

Though very well on its way to becoming a successful NGO, Sarayeth still appeals for a lot of support in terms of funding and broadcast equipment. The Centre also needs volunteers and an ongoing training on radio presentation and programming. Those who would like to help or know more about the Women's Media Centre of Cambodia can write to P.O. Box 497, Phnom Penh, Cambodia or call (855) 18 810 243 or fax (855) 23 362 344. ☺