MINISTRY OF WOMEN'S AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS

THE NATIONAL POLICY

FOR

WOMEN, THE GIRL CHILD AND HIV/AIDS

CAMBODIA

NOVEMBER 1999
PART I

INTRODUCTION

Cambodia has emerged from two decades of war that resulted in devastation of the family unit and society as a whole. The separation and loss of family members, destruction of family homes, placed women and children in extreme poverty and exploitative situations.

The Royal Government of Cambodia is now faced with an enormous task of reconstruction and socio-economic development as well as the promotion of human rights. Under the Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia, men and women are guaranteed equal rights however, some traditional norms and values continue to hold women in subordinate and exploitative roles severely limiting their ability and capacity to effectively participate in rebuilding the nation.

Today Cambodia is experiencing the fastest growing rate of HIV transmission in the Asia region. The Royal Government has established the National AIDS Authority (NAA) as a mechanism to develop a comprehensive and multisectoral response to prevention, management and control of HIV/AIDS. The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs recognises the crucial role played by the NAA and will continue to cooperate and participate in efforts that aim at combating HIV/AIDS through its National Policy on Women, the Girl Child and HIV/AIDS.

The most prevalent mode of transmission is via heterosexual intercourse through casual sex and the frequent use of commercial sex workers. Furthermore, the use of condoms as a method of prevention from HIV infection has not yet reached desired levels.

Groups that are most vulnerable to HIV infection are young people, women, commercial sex workers, young workers, migrants, orphans, children and dependents of family members who are infected with HIV or suffering from its consequences. HIV/AIDS destroys families with women and children being the most vulnerable because of their subordinate roles, fear of violence and dependency on male partners and family members for financial support. For female-headed households the consequences of HIV/AIDS will be severe because it may destroy the only source of emotional and financial support for both children and dependants.

Women need protection from infection because they are the pillars of a strong family support structure and are often the caregivers for ill family members. Secondly they play an important role in promoting awareness, setting values and limits on behaviour, imparting life skills and disseminating information on all aspects of family life. Finally it is important to stress that female contribution in the maintenance of a strong family structure and a constructive partnership with men are essential to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS.

The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs advocates for the protection and strengthening of families particularly women and children against HIV/AIDS through the National Policy on Women, the Girl Child and HIV/AIDS.
PRINCIPLES

The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs' National Policy on HIV/AIDS will be based upon the following principles:

• **Human Rights**
  The rights of women and the girl child are integral part of the human rights agenda as stipulated in the Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia. Women and men must have equal rights in marriage. Women and men have equal rights to information, education and family planning services.

• **Family**
  The family is the basic unit of society. The family ideally seeks to care for, nurtures and socializes its members. Family life will be promoted and strengthened through family oriented policies and programs. Special needs of women, girls and people living with HIV/AIDS should be addressed in the context of the family.

• **Stigmatization and Discrimination**
  Stigmatization and discrimination cause material, social and emotional stress and make it extremely difficult for women and the girl child with HIV/AIDS to utilize what is already a limited set of support services.

• **Confidentiality and Privacy**
  Women and girls have the right to confidentiality and privacy concerning their health. Confidentiality needs to be maintained because it enhances collaboration for HIV/AIDS prevention.

• **Equality and Equity**
  A Five-Year Strategic Plan, endorsed at the highest levels of Government and circulated throughout the country, was launched by the Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs on International Women's Day in 1999. In the Plan the Ministry advocates for the elimination of all forms of discrimination particularly gender, geographic disparities in the distribution and management of resources related to the prevention and management of HIV/AIDS.

• **Accessibility and Quality of Services**
  Women and the girl child have the right to access appropriate, affordable and good quality HIV/AIDS services.

• **Appropriateness**
  All people are entitled to services that are appropriate and responsive to social, cultural and economic conditions in Cambodia.
PART II
THE STATUS OF WOMEN, GIRLS AND HIV/AIDS

The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs recognizes that there are many factors which contribute to the spread of HIV/AIDS infection. Many of these factors are rooted in poverty, economic and social deprivation, gender inequality, migration, under resourced Government institutions, weak legal mechanisms, limited preventive education for young people, and high female illiteracy rates. Some of the cultural norms and behavior such as the subordination, discrimination and violence against women also contribute to the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Situation Analysis
In Cambodia the predominant mode of HIV transmission is heterosexual. Men frequent commercial sex workers and also pass HIV to their permanent partners. According to the findings of 1999 in country research men's condom use with commercial sex workers is 53% whilst with partners in casual sexual relationships it is as low as 5%. A recent sentinel survey shows that 50% of commercial sex workers are HIV positive and their vulnerability is exacerbated by the fact that these women are not empowered nor protected to insist on using a condom. There may be 138 times as many women who are not commercial sex workers who are at risk of HIV infection as there are female commercial sex workers.

Although women and the girl child account for 52% of the population, cultural and religious beliefs play a critical role in perpetuating gender discrimination and subordination. Women and the girl child have little or no education therefore restricting their opportunities to improve their standard of living. The illiteracy rate for females is 48% in contrast to 22% for males. One third of women head households and these women lack independent economic resources. For women with partners the fear of abandonment or violence places them in a potentially subordinate and exploitative situation.

The Girl Child
Girls are at risk of HIV infection because of limitations to opportunities such as education, access to information and services, knowledge of reproductive health and sexual issues, and their rights and protection from exploitation. The most vulnerable groups are street children, abandoned children, and those from poor families.

Educational opportunities for girls are poor. This is supported by school enrolment rates which indicate that by the age of 15 female enrolment in schools is 50% lower than that of boys. By the age of 18 female enrolments are three times lower than male enrolments and girls drop out at a time when school curriculum does not include education on reproductive and sexual matters. They also leave with lack of knowledge of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS.

As the epidemic grows young girls particularly virgins are at a greater risk of being trafficked for commercial sex. Already recent studies estimate that 30% of commercial sex workers are
between the ages of 12 and 17 highlighting the need to combat an increase in the number of children being exploited.

The social and economic consequences of adolescent fertility for girls under 18, is related to factors of early marriage and early pregnancies that occur frequently in the country. Health consequences for early sexual experience include complications of abortion and reproductive health risks of contracting sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS.

Poverty
Almost 40% of Cambodians live below the poverty line. The status of women perpetuates their cycle of poverty because women are more likely than men to be the poorest of the poor. In addition female unemployment, low wages and high illiteracy rates force women into a position of dependency on male partners for financial support. For women in employment HIV/AIDS may lead to financial vulnerability because they may loose their employment creating further problems that place their families under great financial strain.

Reproductive Health and Needs
Women and girls are biologically and socially more vulnerable to HIV infection but intervention methods often lack a gender sensitive approach. The chances of infection particularly for those who engage in unprotected sexual activity are increased by ignorance on prevention, reproduction and sexual issues, including the causes of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS. Even when human sexuality is taught at schools, girls are at a disadvantage because they are taken out of school earlier than boys.

Most mothers to child interventions focus on the protection of children after a mother has contracted HIV. This is done at the expense of the need for HIV/AIDS prevention in women and girls as the most effective way of protecting children from infection. In addition many women have little or no knowledge of how HIV is transmitted endangering their lives and that of the child. Pregnancy places HIV positive women at greater risk of spontaneous abortions, still births and post partum hemorrhage. Furthermore, a mother can transmit HIV to the child in pregnancy through the placenta, during childbirth through ruptured membranes and after birth through breastfeeding. These risks may force women to consider whether or not to continue with the pregnancy and whether to keep or abandon the child after birth. This may pose further problems for poor women who do not have finances to maintain a child or to access medical services for an abortion.

In Cambodia the majority of women give birth at home. Many access services of traditional birth attendants (TBAs) whose authority is derived from their historical place within communities. Many of the TBAs have limited knowledge of protection against HIV/AIDS and this places them and their clients at risk. Their role in society needs to be acknowledged and measures taken to include them in education and prevention programs.
**Women as Caregivers**
Traditionally women and girls care for sick members of the family. As the HN/AIDS epidemic spreads, older women may be expected to assume major care giving roles and adolescent girls may be taken out of school to assist in caring for younger children and ill family members.

Problems of women and girls as care givers are highlighted because the burden of care often becomes acute for poor women and girls particularly those with HIV/AIDS themselves. Poverty and the practice of placing needs of their family members first may result in women with HIV/AIDS having less access to expendable income for their own psychosocial and health care services, thus seriously affecting female life-expectancy.

**Women Living With HIV/AIDS**
Women and girls lack access to quality prevention, care, support and legal services relevant to their needs and many are unable to pay for them. In addition they are exposed to discrimination, hostile and violent attitudes from partners and other members of the community.

**Violence Against Women**
Domestic violence is tolerated as a family matter in which law enforcement officials are encouraged not to intervene. Poverty, subordination, rape and other forms of violence render women and the girl child vulnerable to HIV/AIDS.
PART III

STRATEGIC GUIDELINES

As the epidemic grows there is need to improve services and promote the protection of women and girls. Therefore the Ministry of Women's and Veterans’ Affairs places prevention, care, support and protection of women and the girl child on the agenda for policy makers and service providers through the National Policy on Women, Girls and HIV/AIDS.

VISION

The Cambodian people, both men and women, united in preventing transmission of HIV/AIDS, and protecting the rights of all people in reducing their risk of HIV infections and accessing appropriate care and support.

Commitments and social change will give all people affected by HIV/AIDS equal access to prevention, care and support services and opportunities to take part in decision making with full protection against all forms of discrimination.

MISSION

To promote and strengthen prevention and management of HIV/AIDS and to build the capacity of women and girls to protect themselves and their families against HIV/AIDS through comprehensive, integrated and multisectoral strategies that are accessible, affordable, equitable and sustainable.

In order to reduce the risks and impact faced by women and girls related to HIV/AIDS. The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs shall contribute in the following areas: preventing HIV infection, reducing the impact of HIV/AIDS in women and girls, and ensuring access to care for women and girls with HIV/AIDS.

OBJECTIVES

Preventing HIV/AIDS infection

• To promote and strengthen the prevention of HIV/AIDS in women and girls as a means to protect the social, economic and development security of Cambodia.

• To promote public awareness and encourage men and women to take personal responsibility in reducing the spread of HIV/AIDS.
To ensure that HIV/AIDS is targeted at the earliest age and that all children, especially girls at risk are equipped with skills to negotiate for safe sex.

**Reducing the impact of HIV/AIDS on women and girls**

? To inform and promote the development and implementation of policies and programs that ensure that women and the girl child can realize their dignity, creativity and safety in the prevention and management of HIV/AIDS.

? To promote public awareness directed at overcoming all forms of discrimination and stigmatization of women and girls affected by HIV/AIDS.

? To support and promote a sharing of responsibility between men and women in community based care and support services.

? To undertake or commission research necessary for establishing facts required for the improvement and development of appropriate HIV/AIDS polices and programs that protect and improve the lives of women and the girl child.

? To promote and strengthen collaboration between the Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs and other Government institutions, international community, private sector, and civil society in the response to HIV/AIDS.

**Ensuring access to care for women and girls with HIV/AIDS**

? To facilitate the access to and provision of HIV/AIDS services relevant to the needs of women and the girl child.

**Rights of Women Living With HIV/AIDS**

Women and girls living with HIV/AIDS are entitled to the same rights to assure their autonomy, security of their person and their freedom of association. They have the right to access services and to live with their families. Women living with HIV have the right to continue their employment and being HIV positive should not by itself be ground for cancellation of employment, down grading, relocation of the employee and discrimination. Women and girls living with HIV/AIDS also have the right to confidentiality and privacy surrounding the disease.

The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs appeals for an end to all forms of discrimination and stigmatization of women and girls in prevention, care and support services.

The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs advocates for integrated and multisectoral efforts to educate families, communities, Government institutions, international community, private sector and civil society regarding the rights of women and girls living with HIV/AIDS. Particular attention should be paid to those women who are at the risk of marginalisation.
Legislation
Public measures shall be taken to protect persons living HIV/AIDS from discrimination in employment, education, health and social services. The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs will collaborate with other Government institutions, international community, private sector and civil society to promote the dignity, self-esteem and well being of women and the girl child by ensuring that gender issues are integrated into legislation, education, health and social service policies and programs.

The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs will embark upon legislation that protects women and the girl child from infection and marginalisation; safeguards the rights of women and the girl child living with HIV/AIDS; and the right of women and the girl child to services.

Women and girls have the right to insist that they or their sexual partners take precautionary measures to prevent transmission of HIV. The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs will advocate for the right of women and girls to choose a partner and for men not to place the lives of women at risk. The Ministry will advocate for 100% condom use by both men and women in commercial and casual sex. Women, particularly commercial sex workers will be encouraged to insist on condom use as a method of protection from infection.

Women and girls living with HIWAIDS shall respect the rights, health and physical integrity of others.

Services
The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs is committed to the protection of women and children against HIV/AIDS and advocates for multisectoral, comprehensive, appropriate, women friendly, affordable and sustainable HIV/AIDS services. The Ministry will advocate for improvement and expansion of HIV/AIDS services to ensure that throughout Cambodia women and the girl child can access and receive good quality services, appropriate information and education on HIV/AIDS and related issues. These services shall promote non-discrimination, tolerance, mutual respect and inclusion of women and the girl child in HIV/AIDS service provision.

The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs advocates for appropriate HIV interventions that facilitate optimum use of existing resources to target as many women and children with information and services. The Ministry also promotes the strengthening of the role of the private sector and communities in prevention care and support for women, children and families of people with HIV/AIDS.

The Needs of Women and Girls as Caregivers
The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs will advocate for community and home based care programs that take into account the social and economic needs of women and the girl child who are most often primary care givers of family members with HIV/AIDS. The Ministry will encourage programs that give psychosocial support to women and the girl child caring for family members with HIV/AIDS.
Alleviating Poverty in Women
The vulnerability of women to HIV infection is directly linked to their low status in society. The root causes of poverty need to be tackled through a developmental approach that also addresses problems of gender inequality, discrimination and violence against women.

The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs has launched a Five-Year Strategic Plan that aims to improve the status of women. The Ministry will support the development and strengthening of capacity building programmes, micro enterprises, small business development and cooperative exercises that address socio-economic problems of women and the girl child and promote self reliance. All women, particularly those affected by HIV/AIDS, will be assisted in accessing resources and services.

Human Resource Development
There is need for Women and girls to be afforded the opportunity to play leadership roles in promoting their own well being and in contributing to the growth and development of Cambodia and reducing the spread of HIV/AIDS.

The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs will advocate for education and training of women and the girl child in HIV/AIDS related prevention and care services. The Ministry will also advocate for the utilization of different categories of service providers including health professionals, other health workers, counselors and volunteers. This is crucial to improve and strengthen information, education and communication networks and to increase the capacity of service providers to meet psychosocial needs and deliver more appropriate services.

The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs will lobby other Government institutions, international community, private sector and civil society to encourage women and men living with HIV/AIDS to assist in mobilizing support systems themselves and participating in the development, planning, implementation, and monitoring of HIV/AIDS policies and programs.

Education
The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs will promote and encourage women and the girl child to participate in education beyond primarily level so as to increase their knowledge of reproductive and sexual health and access to employment opportunities.

The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs will advocate for the integration of HIV/AIDS education into the formal school curriculum.

Advocacy, Information, Education and Communication
The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs will promote the development of awareness campaigns, dissemination of information, education and communication materials as a method of prevention and management HIV/AIDS. The Ministry of Women and Veterans Affairs will advocate for materials that are appropriate particularly for illiterate women, children, and men in rural areas.
The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs will advocate for an allocation of the National Budget to support the programs.

The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs will continue its cooperation with women's networks inside and outside Cambodia and support for women at all levels as a social and political force in the promotion of the National Policy on Women, the Girl Child and HIV/AIDS.

The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs will work with civil society to monitor the mass media to ensure that women and children living with HIV/AIDS are presented with dignity, honor and that the media observes the rights of women and girls to confidentiality and privacy.

Research
The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs will undertake or commission research necessary for establishing facts required for the development of appropriate policies and strategic programs to protect and reduce the rate of HIV infection in women, men and children.

Finances and Budgeting
Education, prevention, care and support programs on HIV/AIDS and related issues are expensive and as the epidemic spreads the Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs will not be able to cope with the demand for services. The Ministry will advocate for cooperation and sustainable financing of gender responsive HIV/AIDS policies and programs.

In addition the Ministry advocates for a community approach as part of the response and appeals to other Government institutions, private sector, international community and civil society to participate in the development and strengthening of a comprehensive, integrated and multisectoral response to HIV/AIDS.

CONCLUSION
Cambodia is in the process of recovery from decades of war. As HIV/AIDS spreads it will have devastating social and economic impact on the development of the country. The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs recognizes the implications of the epidemic and therefore endeavors to contribute to an increased sharing of responsibility between men and women in addressing the problem.

The Ministry of Women's and Veterans' Affairs is committed to a multisectoral approach and reaffirms its commitment to cooperate with the NAA, other Government institutions, international community, private sector and civil society in the prevention and management of HIV/AIDS.

The Government's new commitment is to invest in social sector policies and programs as a viable and sustainable way of promoting a society based on equal rights, responsibility, dignity, and participation of both women and men in national development.
GLOSSARY

**Appropriate HIV/AIDS Services**: HIV/AIDS services and programs, methods and approaches which are responsive to the needs and problems of the girl child and women and which are accessible and responsive to social, cultural, economic and political conditions of Cambodia.

**Capacity Building**: The development of skills for the promotion and building of the girl child and women.

**Civil society**: All institutions and organizations outside government.

**Community Development**: The conditions in which efforts of the people themselves are united with those of government authorities to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of their communities.

**Empowerment**: The process of increasing personal, interpersonal and political power to enable individuals or collective to improve their life situation. It requires the full participation of people in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of decisions determining the functioning and well being of the society.

**Human Resource Development**: The development of human capabilities, abilities, knowledge, and know how to meet people's ever growing needs for goods and services to improve their standard of living and quality of life.

**Women**: Cambodia accepted agreements reached at the Fourth World conference on Women, Beijing, September 1985

**Multisectoral**: Collaboration between a number of sectors.

**Policy**: Accepted guidelines setting up boundaries that supply general limits and direction in which programs may take place. It helps to achieve objectives and should permit interpretation.

**Poverty**: Defined with reference to the poverty line, i.e. if a household earns less than an income lower than a set amount, that household and its members are deemed to be living in poverty.

**Strategic Planning**: A process of deciding what the future of the institution should be and what strategies must be followed to make that future happen.

**Sustainable**: That which is affordable, financially viable, efficient and effective.