

NATIONAL

Divergent Views on NGO Law at Conference

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Non-governmental organizations play a pivotal role in enhancing the economic, political and social status of women in Cambodia, Minister for Women's Affairs Ing Kantha Phavi said yesterday at a conference on women's issues.

At the conference in Phnom Penh, which discussed developing a common agenda on women's issues for NGOs, government, donors and the private sector, Ms Kantha Phavi and fellow key speaker Ros Sopheap, executive director of NGO Gender and Development for Cambodia, addressed advancements women had made in terms of health care, education and political representation.

Some progress had been made toward the UN Millennium Development Goals to reduce the maternal mortality rate, which now

stands at 461 deaths per 100,000 women, down from 472 in 2005, according to Ms Sopheap.

The number of women in political roles has also increased, Ms Kantha Phavi said, noting that 22 percent of members of Parliament are now women, compared to a mere 5.83 percent in 1993. But large disparities remain, the speakers said, with only 8 percent of school directors and 15 percent of the Senate being female.

Speaking on the sidelines of the conference, however, Ms Sopheap and Ms Kantha Phavi presented a less united front with regards to the controversial new NGO draft law—which many organizations fear will allow the government to intimidate and shut down local and international NGOs.

The NGO draft law, which aims to regulate Cambodia's 3,000-plus

NGOs, is currently with the Council of Ministers and scheduled for review by the Interior and Foreign Affairs ministries before being sent to the National Assembly.

Ms Kantha Phavi said that although she had not seen the draft law herself, she believed concerns about it were overstated.

"I think we dramatize a lot on this law," she said. "It's not to control, just to know who's doing what. We need a mapping of activities of NGOs in order for the Cambodian government to complement" their work.

Ms Sopheap said she believed the proposed law could hinder NGOs in their work to improve women's lives. "Based on the draft NGO law, I think there will be less opportunity for government and NGOs to address issues of inequality. This is something we really need to think about," she said.