

# Chapter 8 - **SREY SOTHEAVY**

## Promoting peace through interfaith community dialogue



*Photo: Sotheavy at the ACT office in central Phnom Penh in 2025, Photo by Khleang Molynin, WPM.*

Cambodia's turbulent journey to a fragile peace and nascent democracy spurred a new generation of peacebuilders committed to healing their society. Among them is Srey Sotheavy, Executive Director of the Alliance for Conflict Transformation (ACT), who stands out as a pioneering woman leading these efforts. She is widely recognised as a key figure in Cambodia's locally-led peacebuilding movement, contributing to long-term conflict transformation, social healing, and reconciliation in the post-war era.

In a country where women's voices were long marginalised in peace processes, Sotheavy emerged in the late 2000s as a powerful advocate for interfaith dialogue, community reconciliation, and the inclusion of women and youth in building a durable peace. Her story, firmly grounded in the WPS framework's four pillars of participation, prevention, protection, and relief & recovery, exemplifies how patience, humility, and grassroots leadership can transform post-conflict communities.

## EARLY JOURNEY INTO PEACEBUILDING

Born just a few years after the Khmer Rouge genocide (1975–1979), Sotheavy grew up in a society recovering from the devastation of conflict. Her first inspiration came from her mother, a survivor of the genocide who was active in Cambodian Christian volunteer groups and introduced her to voluntary service at a young age. Sotheavy often helped as an interpreter during her mother's community activities, an experience that she says grounded her in both her Christian faith and a sense of responsibility to others.

Those early encounters with grassroots activism shaped her conviction that faith and dialogue could be powerful tools for peace,

and set her on the path toward professional peacebuilding. As a young professional, she entered the sector in 2009 when she joined ACT as an interfaith project manager and researcher, and she eventually rose to become its Executive Director. Alongside her core duties at ACT, she also volunteered with the Working Group for Peace (WGP), a volunteer peace network promoting conflict prevention.

These early experiences in community-level peace efforts shaped her conviction that dialogue and understanding must start at the grassroots. During this time, she also earned a Master's in Business Administration in 2010 and later a Master's in Peace and Conflict Studies, while taking short peacebuilding courses in the Philippines and Thailand to further hone her skills.

A defining moment early in her career came in 2009, when simmering tensions on the Cambodian–Thai border near Preah Vihear Temple flared into a military skirmish. The young Sotheavy joined a multi-faith and multi-ethnic peace delegation that ventured into the conflict zone to help de-escalate the crisis:

*"We had developed Thai-Khmer exchange programmes and dialogues among youth and rural communities along the border, to foster understanding and wellbeing among people. So when tensions were mounting, we went to the border, and tried to engage in peacebuilding from a religious perspective." Amid artillery fire – "we could hear bombing and shooting, so it really wasn't secure. We could feel the ground vibrate with every explosion," she recalled – her team led interfaith prayers along the border, bringing Buddhist monks and other faith leaders from both sides to pray together for peace. Despite the risks, Sotheavy described how the peacebuilders connected with all parties to manage risks and to strategise effectively:*

*“We kept in contact with the military and local authorities on both sides. They didn’t support us, necessarily, but they understood what we were trying to do.”*

This creative act sought to provide enough space for dialogue amid the hostility, calming fears and reminding everyone of their shared humanity across divides. For Sotheavy, the role of religion was crucial. When we asked Sotheavy whether religious dialogue offered a less inflammatory way to reach conflicting parties, she explained that it did: in her view, religion could act as “*a form of mindfulness, helping people to pause and reflect on what is right.*” She went on, explaining that in her experience, “*religion can control people’s impulses and make them think about the right thing to do.*” She also pointed to the absurdity of armed conflict when framed in religious terms: “*We should ask them to stop and think – why are Thais and Cambodians fighting, if we are both Buddhists? And why are Christians and Muslims fighting, if we follow the same God?*”

The experience at Preah Vihear taught Sotheavy that conflict prevention often begins at the community level, with cultural sensitivity and solidarity. It cemented her belief that faith can be a powerful connector in times of crisis, a theme that would continue to define much of her work.

After the border incident, Sotheavy continued to deepen her involvement in civil society peace efforts. Through WGP, she joined a cohort of young Cambodians passionate about mediation and peace education. That grassroots work, alongside her expanding roles at ACT, gave her a strong foundation in facilitation and community engagement. Even as her responsibilities grew, she remained present in villages – listening to elders and youth to understand local perspectives. “*We must go to the people, we need to understand their problems on*

*the ground,*” she emphasised, reflecting the participatory ethos underlying her work.

## INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND COMMUNITY RECONCILIATION

One of Sotheavy’s hallmark contributions has been her leadership in interfaith dialogue as a tool for peacebuilding. ACT – the organisation she now leads – has long promoted cooperation across religious and ethnic lines, and Sotheavy was at the forefront of these efforts from the start.

Early on, she managed ACT’s Interfaith Peacebuilding project, which formed local networks of Buddhist monks, Muslim imams, Christian pastors, and government religious officials to mediate community disputes. The approach was simple yet powerful: bring diverse faith representatives together to address communal problems and model solidarity.

These networks facilitated dialogues in conflict-prone villages, organised joint activities like tree-planting in deforested areas, and celebrated key milestones and events. In 2018, for example, ACT celebrated the observance of UN World Interfaith Harmony Week by organising interfaith activities in Oddar Meanchey province under the theme of: “*Protect Forest, Protect Life,*” integrating spiritual collaboration with environmental peacebuilding. This initiative demonstrates how Sotheavy and her organisation have leveraged faith-based platforms to promote harmony and sustainable community development.<sup>1</sup> Such efforts also build trust across faith and ethnic divides – a critical step toward social cohesion after conflict.

Another vivid example of Sotheavy’s peacebuilding work comes from another part of Cambodia’s borderlands. In the



Photo: Sotheavy during the Interfaith and Inter-ethnic Peacebuilding Project related to Natural Resources Management, between 2014–2019. Photos taken by ACT staff, shared with permission.



Photo: Sotheavy pictured with participants during the Interfaith and Indigenous day campaign in Kampong Speu, in 2017. Photo taken by ACT staff, shared with permission.



Photo: Sotheavy at the ACT office in central Phnom Penh in 2025. Photo by Khleang Molynin, WPM.

remote northeast province of Mondulkiri, she dedicated herself to working with and empowering women and youth from the Bunong Indigenous minority, a group long affected by land grabs and displacement.<sup>2</sup>

Over time, she witnessed a profound transformation. Women who had once remained silent during negotiations began speaking up about their rights – particularly in land-grabbing cases, which had become widespread in their area and across Cambodia. *“As a result of continuous engagement, the women now have the courage to raise their voices in the community on issues related to conflict and peace,”* she reported proudly. By creating space for these women to speak and be heard, she has supported villagers to become more active agents in resolving disputes. This inclusive approach was more effective in addressing specific grievances (such as unjust land encroachments), and also worked to mend historical mistrust between Indigenous families, local authorities, and the Khmer majority population.

Sotheavy explained how her method of reconciliation goes beyond convening meetings – it involves nurturing healing and empathy. Whether mediating a land dispute or an issue flaring inter-ethnic tensions, she begins by creating a safe space for all sides to share their grievances and perspectives. She often helps individuals from opposing sides process trauma and truly listen to one another’s stories. *“I am eager to bring different people together, whether they are of different religions or traditions, and help them reconcile with one another,”* Sotheavy said.

She argues that treating everyone with humility and compassion creates conditions for mutual understanding. Communities that once saw each other as enemies or as ‘others,’ can gradually find common ground

through these facilitated conversations. This grassroots reconciliation rebuilds trust, reduces prejudice, and lays the groundwork for collaborative problem-solving in the future. In applying an interfaith lens, she explains that: *“As an interfaith person, I’m not there representing any religion. I’m representing all faiths, and trying to get people to break down their perceptions of hierarchies within and across religions.”*

However, Sotheavy acknowledges that interfaith peacebuilding is not always easy – particularly for women. *“It’s challenging because across all major religions, leadership is largely reserved for men,”* she told us. *“Buddhism, Islam and Christianity all have restrictive ideas about women’s roles.”*

Over time, Sotheavy has found that respect and persistence can shift mindsets. *“Once they engage in training with me, they can see for example that I do have a lot of respect for monks. Then they start to understand the interfaith approach as a mechanism for listening, for understanding, and for accepting one another – as well as for avoiding judgement or discrimination based on faith,”* she explained. Through dialogue and patient practice, her work has shown that interfaith work is not about diminishing any one tradition but about creating space for all. This approach has enabled her to build alliances even with initially sceptical religious leaders and laypeople, opening doors for women peacebuilders to be recognised as legitimate actors in a field long dominated by men.

Sotheavy was also candid about the broader challenges that peacebuilders face in Cambodia, where deeply-rooted power imbalances and a legacy of impunity often hamper local conflict resolution. Many conflicts – over land, forests, fisheries, or development projects – pit impoverished communities against powerful business

or political interests. In such cases, “less powerful people cannot take any further action, or it takes a much longer time” to get justice, she noted, with disputes sometimes dragging on for decades while communities suffer.<sup>3</sup> Corruption and a weak rule of law often allow powerful groups to act with impunity, so even well-intentioned peace efforts can stall.

Aware that unresolved grievances may fester into future violence, Sotheavy continues to focus on prevention. She works with civil society coalitions to tackle root causes – pushing for fairer land policies, accountability from authorities, and dialogue between citizens and officials. Progress is often slow and frustrating, but she believes it is the only way to break the cycle of conflict. Each small success – a mediated agreement here, a community petition that averts an eviction there – becomes a building block toward peace. Sotheavy explained that the process of inclusive problem-solving is as important as the outcome, because it strengthens communities’ ability to handle disputes peacefully going forward.

## WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP AND THE WPS AGENDA

As a woman leader in a field largely dominated by men, Sotheavy personifies the Participation pillar of the WPS agenda. She not only holds a leadership role herself, but also advocates for other women to have a voice in peace and reconciliation processes. She pointed out that many Cambodian women already quietly mediate family and neighbour disputes behind the scenes, but that “*there needs to be more acceptance and recognition of women’s role in peacebuilding*,” since they face “so many challenges and barriers” to public participation.

Sotheavy works to amplify these informal efforts into formal roles. She has organised women’s forums to discuss community issues and pushed for women to be included in village mediation committees, striving to make their contributions visible in public decision-making. Over the years, she has mentored young women activists and volunteers, helping them build the confidence to speak up in meetings typically led by men.

In practice, Sotheavy’s commitment to women’s participation often overlaps with her interfaith and community work. She explained to us some of the complex dynamics of identity and exclusion in Cambodia, where gender intersects with religion and ethnicity to shape women’s experiences. In particular, Sotheavy reflected on the triple discrimination faced by women from minority communities – for instance, Cham Muslim women, who are marginalised simultaneously on the basis of their sex, their ethnicity, and their religious identity.

She noted with pride that many of the women and young people she has worked with over the years have become more vocal about human rights and social protection issues, and that local authorities have had to become more responsive as a result. In a country where rural women often lack formal power, such victories show the WPS agenda in action at the grassroots.

Beyond the community level, Sotheavy has also engaged in policy advocacy to advance the WPS agenda in Cambodia. She has been a key civil society voice in national discussions on developing a National Action Plan (NAP) for WPS – the country’s first framework for integrating women into peace and security efforts.

In late 2024, she spoke at a workshop on WPS where she underscored that peace in Cambodia hinges on tackling structural inequalities. “When we talk about peace and violence, we must confront the structural issues that perpetuate harm within our society. Tackling these issues at their root is essential, and the WPS Agenda must be widely understood and put into action,” she urged.<sup>4</sup>

She also stressed that issues like gender-based violence, corruption, and the marginalisation of minority groups are interlinked – and that a holistic WPS approach is needed to address them. As she told us, “It’s slowly getting better for the younger generations of women, but there is still work to be done. There have been many years of women’s empowerment and gender work now, but we need to see a lot more change.” Through her advocacy for an inclusive NAP, Sotheavy is helping turn grassroots gains into national commitments, ensuring that policies better support local gender empowerment initiatives and women’s security.

Under Sotheavy’s leadership, ACT itself has been recognised for putting WPS principles into practice. In 2024, ACT was among nine organisations in Southeast Asia honored in a Women, Peace & Security good practices competition organised by UN Women and ASEAN.[5] The award highlighted ACT’s innovative “Media for Peace” initiative, which trains journalists and community reporters to promote peace and inclusion through the media. This project – often championed by Sotheavy – has reached some of Cambodia’s most remote communities, with little access to information.

Producing radio programs, videos, and articles in local languages, the initiative bridges communication gaps and spreads awareness of peaceful conflict resolution.

“We want the media to play their role as activists – to educate people and provide information on peace-related issues,” Sotheavy explained. The impact has been tangible: in remote provinces, women who had never engaged with the media began hearing stories of other women mediating conflicts or defending their land rights, and felt inspired to do the same.

Women in these remote areas are now more confident to discuss issues of conflict and peace,<sup>6</sup> an outcome encapsulating the essence of WPS – empowering women at the grassroots to participate in peacebuilding and strengthening community resilience.

## TOWARDS A VISION OF PEACE AND SOCIAL COHESION

Across all aspects of her work, Sotheavy’s goal is to nurture social cohesion in a society still scarred in many ways by war and division. She understands that peace is more than the absence of violence. As she put it, “Peace is everything... freedom, social justice, mental health, well-being... it’s a holistic concept” – one that also requires transparency and accountability from leaders.

In each dialogue she facilitates and each project she leads, Sotheavy strives to bridge divides, whether religious, ethnic, gender-based, or generational. She has brought former adversaries together to find common ground – from Khmer Rouge survivors and ex-cadres seeking reconciliation, to Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian neighbours jointly addressing community problems. By uniting people around shared values of compassion and respect, her initiatives reduce the risk of future conflicts and lay a foundation for inclusive development.

Sotheavy often notes that building peace in Cambodia means overcoming both the

legacy of past violence as well as present-day social fractures – between urban and rural communities, majority and minority groups, rich and poor. Every relationship repaired and every group brought into dialogue is a step toward healing the broader society.

Even as she has gained prominence, Sotheavy remains grounded. Colleagues describe her as a leader whose humility and closeness to the people she works with have earned her widespread respect. She takes pride in being alongside the communities she serves, learning from their struggles and helping them to find solutions. Reflecting on her years of engagement, she said: *“It’s been my privilege to work at the community level. I think we’ve been able to bring people together to understand one another.”* For her, this process of building understanding is as important as any formal agreement.

She continued: *“We can help people reflect on the peace process of the 1990s – bringing those lessons into their lives today so they can find their own solutions to conflict and tension.”* In this way, she connects Cambodia’s history of national reconciliation to the everyday challenges of local disputes, showing how past lessons can inspire communities to chart their own peaceful paths forward.

For Sotheavy, this perspective has particular urgency in 2025, as border tensions between Cambodia and Thailand have once again escalated at the time of writing. She stresses that the ability of communities to draw on past experiences of peacebuilding is vital in navigating present-day disputes, reminding us that reconciliation is not a one-time achievement but an ongoing practice.

Sotheavy also emphasised that true peace requires addressing a web of interconnected factors – from historical injustices and poverty

to public health crises and governance issues – that affect people’s sense of security. Her ability to connect these big-picture issues with grassroots action makes her a unique bridge between policy and community, faith and development, past and future.

Looking ahead, Sotheavy remains cautiously optimistic, and convinced that progress is possible if enough people join hands. In her vision, every Cambodian – regardless of religion, gender, or background – has a role to play: *“Peacebuilding is a long road that we must patiently walk together, with humility and forgiveness, in order to transform our communities.”*<sup>6</sup>



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