Empowering Women for Peace and Prosperity in Cambodia
Project for Peace Proposal by Darah Tabrum ’11, Agnes Scott College

In the 1970s, the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia and killed almost all of the educated class in the country. Although the Khmer Rouge is no longer in power, the effects of their regime can still be seen in the reduced opportunities available to women. The Cambodian Ministry for Women’s Affairs maintains that women’s equality in Cambodia will be achieved when gender is mainstreamed which would have “every person involved in policy, service provision, program design, project implementation and similar roles to automatically consider the affects of their contribution on both men and women.”

Crucial to this evolution is the empowerment and education of women so that they can participate at all levels of government. With the knowledge that in Cambodia the “female share of school enrollment declines at each level of education,” it can be maintained that education is required for the furthered economic, political and social empowerment of women.

This Project for Peace will build on the work already begun for Cambodian women by the Harpswell Foundation. This project will create a fully-functioning library to support the educational endeavors of Cambodian women college students and recent graduates. By providing these women with a library and teaching them the research and computer skills necessary to use it, they will have the tools they need to succeed in college and beyond.

Universities in Cambodia do not provide housing for their students. Male students are able to live for free in Buddhist temples, but female students cannot. This restricts their ability to pursue higher education. In response, the Harpswell Foundation built and maintains two dormitory and leadership centers to house young women from the rural areas of Cambodia where 90% of the population lives. The dormitories are in Phnom Penh the capital where the universities are located. They provide women access to the universities that would previously have been unattainable because they would have had nowhere to live. In addition to housing, these women are offered leadership training. This empowers them with the confidence, in addition to their college education, to pursue higher level jobs that, ultimately, will put more women into positions to contribute to peace and prosperity throughout Cambodia. This

1 Source: “A Fair Share for Women—Cambodian Gender Assessment 2008” http://www.un.org.kh/index.php?option=com_jdownloads&Itemid=65&task=finish&cid=6&catid=4. This report was formulated with information from government and NGO sources and has been used by the World Bank and UN.
leadership training has already empowered the students to succeed in various summer internships such as working with school children in Cambodia, completing internships at the World Bank, and for the United Nations Development Program.

Space in the leadership center and bookshelves have been donated by the Harpswell Foundation for the establishment of a dedicated library. These donations plus the funding through the Project for Peace will enable me to accomplish the project. A library will provide these young women, already outstanding students at a number of Cambodian universities, materials and guidance necessary for a successful college experience and the acquisition of research skills that are necessary to access and succeed at the graduate level.

To implement the library, two main components are required: supplies and a resource librarian. The primary supplies needed are books and a computer. The library will have an even split between books in English and books in Khmer. There are several book stores in Phnom Penh where the Cambodian books can be purchased. A resource librarian will also be required to create and manage the library.

I will act as the first librarian and will work on-site to ensure the acquisition of the necessary resources. I will use personal interactions with the students to teach them how to use the library and the computers most effectively. After I leave, the librarian position will be sustained with a volunteer to ensure the continued effectiveness of the library.

Studies show that the empowerment and education of women positively impacts a community’s peaceful function and economic prosperity. To this end, the library and the higher education it promotes will contribute to the success of these women and ultimately to the success of their society.