

VANNY RATH, UNLIKELY SCHOLAR, ADVOCATE FOR HER BUNONG PEOPLE.



Vanny Rath is a most unlikely scholar, but that has never deterred her. Today she is either unique or a rarity as a female Bunong indigenous graduate who has published research that looks at life and health issues from the perspective of her people. The Bunong people are one of Cambodia's small ethnic minorities of around 30,000. Their traditional lives and culture are at serious risk as in recent years they have lost free access to ancient ancestral lands. At the same time, they remain prone to diseases such as malaria with limited or no access to modern health services. Vanny in ***"Health Perceptions on Malaria of Bunong Indigenous People In Keo Seima District, Monduliri Province"*** concludes that Bunong communities themselves and health service providers need to do more to bridge the various gaps that deny Bunong people improvements in health enjoyed by the rest of Cambodians. By chance, a similar but unconnected survey conducted by Italian NGO CIAI, examining maternal child health, made findings that endorsed Vanny's research.

http://monduliricentre.org/uploads/VANNY%20RATH_2013%20Health%20Perceptions%20of%20Bunong%20People.pdf
<http://monduliri-centre.org/uploads/CIAI%20Final%20%20Report.pdf>

Vanny was born in June 1986 in Srae Prash village, Keo Seima District, near the border that takes you from Monduliri and the highlands to Kratie and Kampong Cham provinces of the lowlands. Today Keo Seima is a bustling market town on the main road that connects Monduliri's capital Sen Monorom with Phnom Penh. That road was completed just 5 years ago. It has brought with it the opening up of Monduliri to major agro-industrial development and migrants. Monduliri has been the last developed, largest in area and least populated of Cambodia's 25 provinces. I remember not so long ago taking that route when my air-flight back to Phnom Penh was abruptly cancelled. In fact planes have never flown to and from Sen Monorom since. It was the rainy season. The route was a track, exceptionally muddy, with logging trucks well and truly stuck. Every 10 kms or so, the guards would change from government soldiers to Khmer Rouge fighters. That is where Vanny Rath grew up.



Rath is the third of seven children born to farmers Len Vanny and Tert Yuth. Like her sisters and most girls in those days, her destiny was to help in home and fields. People thought that schooling for girls was a waste of time, effort and money. Rath defied tradition. She kept asking but it took her until the age of 11 before she got her wish. By then she stuck out, older and bigger than her classmates. She avoided the absenteeism and dropping out of many students, especially girls, and completed her primary education. Rath then received a stroke of luck. A new secondary school opened, and she was able to go to it. The only problem was could her family afford to let her go, should they take an offer of marriage for her? You can imagine the debate and the pressures, but yet again the unlikely scholar won through; she stuck at her task, and eventually completed her secondary school. By then, her talent and potential were recognized, and she won scholarships to go to University. But then that would mean leaving home, as a girl, unescorted, going to live far away in the big city with total strangers. It was a risk, but a risk that Rath wanted to take.

The risk was even greater as Rath soon found out after arriving in Phnom Penh, that big city with much traffic, and drivers not in the habit of observing highway rules. She had to learn to ride a bicycle, and only mastered the skill after breaking an arm! Rath chose to study "Agricultural Economics and Rural Development" at the Royal University of Agriculture and English at Phnom Penh International University. The products of her learning can now be seen in her thesis. Cambodian health service-providers, please take note.