

# Breaking Barriers: A Young Girl's Rise as a Voice for Child Protection

Ma Yaly, 19, from Peak Snaeng Thmei village in Angkor Thum district, Siem Reap province, has transformed her life from a shy, withdrawn teenager into an inspiring youth leader. Growing up with low self-esteem after her parents' divorce at age six, Yaly often felt isolated and lacked confidence. Her turning point came in 2021, when First Step Cambodia established child and youth clubs in her district under the Promoting Protection Plus Initiative. Encouraged by a friend, Yaly joined the club in her commune-initially just to accompany her friend, but soon driven by curiosity about the club's purpose and impact.

As a member, and later elected representative of her 10-member club, Yaly immersed herself in training sessions on child rights, life skills, child protection, non-violence, facilitation, and advocacy. For the first time, she found herself learning practical skills and knowledge that empowered her to speak up and take action. The supportive environment and coaching from First Step Cambodia helped her overcome her shyness and build lasting confidence. She began sharing what she learned with friends and other youth, and her ability to connect with both children and adults grew stronger.



Ma Yaly, CAY Representative,  
Peak Snaeng commune Angkor Thum District  
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“I am honored to be elected as a representative of the CAY club and to have the trust of my commune and district councils. Advocating for children's rights-on issues like school dropout, early marriage, and violence-gives me great pride. Thanks to First Step Cambodia, I've gained confidence and skills to lead and inspire others. No matter the challenges, I'm committed to sharing knowledge and empowering youth to build a better future. My dream is to become a lawyer and continue fighting for those who need a voice.”

Over more than two years of engagement and leadership, Yaly has become a passionate advocate for children's rights. She regularly attends meetings with the Commune Committee for Women and Children (CCWC), the Women and Children Consultative Committee (WCCC), and local NGO networks, using her voice to raise awareness about school dropout, violence against children, and early and forced marriage. Her dedication and resourcefulness have been recognized by local leaders, and in November 2023, she was appointed as a member of the Women and Children Consultative Committee of Angkor Thum District.

Yaly's journey reflects the power of youth participation and the importance of nurturing young leaders, especially girls, to drive positive change in their communities. Her story is a testament to how capacity-building programs and supportive networks can help young people overcome personal barriers and become changemakers in society. Yaly is now committed to sharing her knowledge and empowering others, so that together, they can contribute to a safer, better commune.

