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STUDENT LEARNING, CHILDHOOD & VOICES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Becoming and being academic women in Cambodia: Cultural and other understandings

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Abstract: Cambodia's higher education is under development. This is the first study of the role of women teaching in a university in Cambodia. There has been many studies of academic women in western countries and these guided the 16 interviews in Khmer that were carried out by young female researchers, translated by them and then analysed with the assistance of NVivo. Becoming an academic for many Cambodian women meant support from their parents and others close to them. Receipt of an international scholarship may have been critical. Perhaps the most important issue for these academic women was the need to balance demands on their time. Teaching hours could be negotiated, potentially at least, but only where the student numbers warranted it. An affirmative action approach appears to have developed at one of the two universities. Areas for future research are identified.

Subjects: Education; Gender & Sexuality; Higher Education

Keywords: gender; higher education; academic work; Cambodia; South-East Asia

1. Introduction

There have been a multitude of studies of academic women in the west and some in other countries but very few in South and South-East Asia (Maxwell et al., in press). No such studies have been completed in Cambodia. This fifth exploratory study, in a series of six in south and South-East Asia,

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Cambodia's universities, like most of those in S and SE Asia, are under development. There have been many studies of academic women in western countries and this is the first study of the role of women teaching in a university in Cambodia. The 16 interviews in Khmer were carried out by three young female researchers, translated by them and then analysed to find the main themes. Becoming an academic for many Cambodian women meant support from their parents and others close to them. Receipt of an international scholarship may have been critical. Perhaps the most important issue for these women once they became academics was the need to balance demands on their time. Teaching hours could be negotiated, potentially at least, but only where the student numbers warranted it. An affirmative action approach to including more women was identified at one of the two universities in the study.

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Table 1. Territory, population, economy and educational expenditure (The Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN], 2014, p. 19)							
	Country total land area (km²)	Population (million)	GDP per capita (US$)	GDP per capita (PPP$)	Population below national poverty line (%)	Government spending on education (government expenditure, %) 2012	Public spending on education (GDP, %) 2012
Cambodia	181,035	14.521	879	2,287	26.1	–	2.6
Lao PDR	236,800	6.385	1,279	2,824	24.0	13.2	3.3
Myanmar	676,577	60.384	875	1,393	25.6	6.1	0.8
Thailand	513,120	67.597	5,116	8,907	7.2	29.5	5.8
Vietnam	331,051	87.840	1,403	3,440	13.1	19.8	6.6

makes an initial contribution to the literature on Cambodian education identifying past and present cultural influences upon the roles of Cambodian academic women. After addressing the gender literature of Cambodia, we then briefly set out the methodology followed by the results, a brief discussion and finally the conclusions. This section contextualises the study.

Cambodia has borders with Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam. The Mekong River supports much of the main industry. The population is about 15 million: 90% are ethnic Khmer; 80% live in rural areas; and the vast majority of Cambodians are Buddhist. About two-thirds are under the age of 30 (UNDP Cambodia, 2014). "Economically, Cambodia has enjoyed strong growth rates during the past decade. ... Cambodia [is] well on its way to become a lower-middle income country in the near future" (UNDP Cambodia, 2014). However, comparative statistics in Table 1 show that Cambodia is one of the poorest countries in a poor region, spending on education is low and has an entrenched system of patronage (USAID 2008, in Hayden & Martin, 2011, p. 33). Cambodia's Human Development Index is 0.584 ranking it 136th out of 177 countries (UNDP, 2014, p. 170). Cambodia, by contrast to Lao PDR and Vietnam, experienced a transition to democracy in 1993 "though many of its democratic advances have since been reversed" (Gainsborough, 2012, p. 35).

2. Status of women in Cambodia

The 1993 constitution states that "every Khmer citizen shall be equal before the law" (Article 31) and "all forms of discrimination against woman (*sic*) shall be abolished" (Article 45). The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women was ratified by Cambodia in 1992. In 2008, the Government recognised "women are the backbone of the economy and society" and the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) developed its third five-year strategic plan which focused on five strategic areas including the "education of women and girls, attitudes and behavior change" (MoWA, 2014). Individual policies on gender equity are hard to find in Cambodia but some NGOs are leading the way (e.g. Flemish Association for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance, 2013). Cambodia ranks poorly, 109th amongst the 148 countries, on the Gender Inequality Index (GII) (UNDP, 2014, p. 178). It has a high female work participation rate of nearly 80% (UNDP, 2014, p. 174). However, the lack of human rights can be understood because, historically, Cambodians did not enjoy human rights. Consequently, western human rights appear foreign to Cambodians though written into the constitution and laws (McNamara, 2013, p. 29).

The legal framework and gender policies exist but commitment to their implementation is limited (Frieson, Chean, Socheat, Nirmita, & Mony, 2011, p. 7; Kim & Öjendal, 2014, p. 1). In Korea, Kim, Yoon, and McLean (2010) found a policy initiative to increase female academic staff largely had little impact "that due to the lack of internal motives and drivers and effective systems to support the policy" (p. 285). Kim and Öjendal (2014, p. 1) say that "the party system constitutes a conservative bloc of patriarchal resistance to greater gender equality". They forcefully expand on this later:

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men often neither understand the weight of the issue nor show particular interest. … Lip service is paid by parties that in reality remain stuck in their patriarchal origins. They alienate women, not through explicit exclusion and discrimination, but through arguments on competence, keeping women at arm's length from decision-making, not actively promoting capacity building or targeted selection and certainly not spending any resources on improving the situation. (Kim & Öjendal, 2014, p. 24)

Yet, gender equality is "smart economics" according to the World Bank (2012, in Kim & Öjendal, 2014, p. 2; Yasar, 2010, p. 544; see also HRINC, 2010) because it produces benefits for societal productivity, it feeds directly into other development outputs and it will develop to a "deeper democracy" (Kim & Öjendal, 2014, p. 2).

3. Sociocultural impact

Cambodian women's status has varied over time:

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, women were significant actors in Cambodian political life … the powerful role of Cambodian women was [later] challenged (and) new legal reforms placed women in a position of inferiority in relation to men … the *chbap srei* listed [see below] what came to be considered correct behaviour for women. … in the 1950s and 1960s, women were expected to live up to this image of a virtuous woman. During the socialist era, the socialist discourse of the strong, hard-working and brave "revolutionary woman" gained ground. … In the 1990s the re-establishment … of normality, meant a return to tradition as defined in the *chbap srei*. (Lilja, 2012, pp. 44–45, our additions)

Kim and Öjendal (2012, p. 9) pointed out that, in *contemporary* Cambodia, women have multiple roles in society: they typically have control over resources as well as being responsible for bringing up children; commonly assist in agricultural work and frequently work in informal sectors and enterprises. Derks (2008, p. 15) noted that young Khmer women now contribute to the national economy, to the needs of families and pursue their own aspirations. The last point was new. However, Thon et al. (2009, in Kim and Öjendal, 2012, p. 10) found that women leaders, such as academic women, often face major constraints of culture, tradition and family pressure and other more subtle barriers to their work.

New roles are not without their contradictions. Even now Khmer women are seen as the bearers of culture in Cambodia (Derks, 2008, p. 12; Kent, 2011, p. 196) promoted through the *chbap srei*. According to the *chbap srei* "women should respect their parents and husbands, make a harmonious home, be frugal, speak softly, always forgive their husbands and conceal any difficulties in their household" (Kent, 2011, p. 196). First articulated around the fourteenth century, they are "still taught in some Cambodian schools today" (Kent, 2011, p. 196; Lilja, 2012, p. 45). However, the powerlessness and subservience taken to be "traditional" for Cambodian women need to be treated critically (Jacobsen, 2008, p. 245). The roles learned during times of war and the return of refugee women mean that traditional roles are being challenged (Kent, 2011, p. 198). The importance of female leaders and role models is being slowly realised (Kim & Öjendal, 2014, p. vi). Yet, Cambodia remains a male-dominated culture in a patrimonial society. Moreover, a UNESCO-sponsored study found that "the education sector has repeatedly served to underpin the hegemonic structure … and education is largely [an] unfulfilled promise of modernization" (International Institute for Educational Planning [IIEP], 2011, p. 14).

4. Theoretical explanations

Thus, "gender is constantly redefined and negotiated in the everyday practices through which individuals interact" (Poggio, 2006, p. 225, in van den Brink & Benschop 2012, p. 72). Several authors have begun to unpack explanations for gender inequity. In so doing, they have to account for "Gender inequity (being) deeply embedded in social and workforce norms, traditional divisions of labour and breadwinner roles, established family and marriage dynamics, and a strong adherence to gender stereotypes" (Fox, 2013, p. 23). Social cognitive theory has used schemas that overrate men and underrate women in

professional settings in barely visible ways that accumulate over time (Valian, 2005, p. 198). Consequently, men are provided with more advantages than women. Määttä and Dahlborg Lyckhage (2011) refer to a normalising process, i.e. gender differences can be seen as natural (taken for granted) so, for example, Whelan (2013) contends that unconscious bias is the "key reason" that gender inequity remains. Such bias is associated with unconscious thinking which "maps onto" associative, rather than propositional thinking (p. 57). This kind of unconscious cognition is developed over time, intensity of experience and contextual variables. The resulting pattern recognition systems are generally an advantage but Whelan points to three disadvantages: they are (1) not updated often, (2) not based on logic and so not fact checked and (3) not readily recognised and hence not easily rectified (p. 58). Actions based on associative pattern recognition systems lead to:

(1) stereotypical thinking ("think manager/think male");

(2) back-lash (in displaying behaviours that are considered masculine, women are likely to be penalised and/or evaluated more negatively); and/or

(3) stereotype threat which occurs when women themselves "are more likely to conform to (the stereotype) and behave in accordance with others' expectations" (pp. 59–62).

The metaphor of the "psychic mask" succinctly explains the stance (Ritchie, 2013, p. 94).

Certain decisions create gender inequity. Decision-making theory posits that a decision is essentially a (rational) selection of one from many options. Decision-makers are linked to psychological, local and then societal structures. Moreover, options are not limitless and decisions are from a possible set. Kallos and Lundgren (1979, 12, in Maxwell, 2010, p. 38) used the idea of a frame which circumscribes decisions to the limited number of decision options available giving rise to frame factor theory. Decisions being framed by a variety of contextual influences (Maxwell, 2010, pp. 37–39) add to the social cognitive explanations. Lundgren (1999, p. 2) summarised: "external frames limit and regulate changes in [human] internal processes indirectly. Rather than in direct cause–effect relations, changes in frames enable or disable certain process possibilities". Frame factor theory is useful in considering humans' choices, or lack of them.

Decisions have had practical effects on western female academics. Elg and Jonnergard (2003, p. 157) pointed out in regard to a gendered academia that "the career demands at work are often especially strong at the same time as women's private biological clock calls for starting a family" and add that the management of the domestic sphere, lack of extra time for the workplace and lack of access to work social networks (p. 157) contribute to gender inequity. Valian (2005) used four partial explanations: (1) it was a pipeline problem (see also van den Brink & Benschop, 2012, p. 77); (2) women's childcare responsibilities; (3) women and men have different values and preferences; and (4) women have not been socialised to play by men's rules. Finally, Luke (2001, p. 73) observed that "there are indeed global patterns of women's exploitation and oppression, their marginal economic and social status". However, it would be a mistake to conclude that the forces impacting upon women in South-East Asia are similar to those of western women. It would also be a mistake to uncritically transfer western theoretical explanations to other cultures even though globalisation and other effects have made the world smaller. With these caveats in mind, and before considering our research into the life of academic women in Cambodia, we first address gender and education issues there.

5. Gender and education in the Mekong delta, particularly universities in Cambodia

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MOEYS) is nearly on track for meeting universal primary education but "not beyond that" (Royal Government of Cambodia [RGoC], 2014, p. vii). In relation to gender (CMDG 3), "most targets are met and good progress is made on others" (RGoC, 2014, p. vii). Despite these, the gender disparity is obvious at all levels of education (Table 2). Secondary school participation for both genders is relatively low.

Table 2. Key statistics, Cambodia (UNICEF, 2014)	
Enrolment ratios: females as a percentage of males 2008–2012, Primary GER	94.7
Enrolment ratios: females as a percentage of males 2008–2012, Secondary GER	84.7
Secondary school participation, net enrolment ratio 2008–2012, male (%)	39.4
Secondary school participation, net enrolment ratio 2008–2012, female (%)	35.8
Adult literacy rate: females as a percentage of males 2008–2012	79.7

It is widely recognised that the quality of Cambodian higher education (HE) curricula and of HE teaching is poor, even for the region (e.g. HRINC, 2010). HE institutions (HEIs) numbered 10 in the 1990s and, by 2012, there were 97 with the majority being private (Sen & Ros, 2013, p. 6). In that time, private *and* public HEIs in Cambodia became 80% private funded mainly from student fees (Ahrens & McNamara, 2013, pp. 57–58). Course availability became generated by student demand rather than country needs. As a result, "two thirds of postgraduates enrol in business courses most of whom the job market cannot absorb" (Ahrens & McNamara, 2013, p. 62). Demand has been such that the student numbers doubled in just five years, from 117,420 in 2006–2007 to 245,329 in 2011–2012 (You, 2012, in Sen & Ros, 2013, p. 6). The number of fee-free bachelor students has dropped dramatically (Ahrens & McNamara, 2013, p. 59) and only 5% of the tertiary-age population (4% of females) is enrolled in tertiary education (HRINC, 2010, p. 6). According to Sen and Ros (2013, p. 11), "the current HE system suffers from an overdose of outdated, incoherent, patchy and reactive policy documents and a shortage of regulatory regimes". The focus on teaching (Om & Walker, 2013, p. 11) means research in Cambodian universities is "modest and uneven" (Kwok et al., 2010, p. 33, in Om & Walker, 2013, p. 12). Not only has HE not provided social mobility (IIEP, 2011, p. 15), a potential future consequence is that "ASEAN economic integration in 2015 will be a serious, possibly fatal, challenge to Cambodia's HE system if it does not move fast enough to reform and improve" (Sen & Ros, 2013, p. 17). Cambodia has to address these difficulties without several generations of academics who were dispersed or annihilated by years of conflict (Ahrens & McNamara, 2013, p. 4; Hayden & Martin, 2011, p. 33; McNamara, 2013, pp. 23–25; Peycam, 2011; Sen & Ros, 2013, p. v).

Considerable efforts for improvement in HE are needed. Thanks to the efforts of Khmer scholars in Paris in the 1960s and 1970s, then of the grass roots organisation, CEDORECK (1977–1991), Khmer culture studies maintained some intellectual vigour over difficult times (Peycam, 2011). Following HE rebuilding in the 1990s, a first step towards quality improvement was the introduction of the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia in June 2003 (Chen, Sok, & Sok, 2007, p. 130). The government has moved to reduce gender disparities in management (MOEYS, 2010a, p. 17), provide modules on gender mainstreaming (p. 55) and gender sensitivity into teacher education in 2011 (p. 54). It also introduced a HE sector research policy but no areas of research priorities were provided (MOEYS, 2010b). In 2013, academic position levels became regulated based on academic qualifications, publications and professional contributions to their institutions (Sen & Ros, 2013, p. 6). Recently the World Bank has made available a substantial amount to facilitate research (Om & Walker, 2013, p. 13).

Virtually, nothing is known about the working conditions of academic women, how they came to be academics or about the environment in which they work. Many of the current female academic staff were students in the 1990s, so it is useful to note Gray and Ith's study (1995, in Gorman, 1999, p. 20) in which they found the main constraint on girls' access to HE to be "Khmer tradition" (*chbap srei*). More generally, research by Carmen Luke, based upon 12 interviews each in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong—low GII countries compared to Cambodia—found that work, childcare and home, the triple burden faced by many women everywhere, contributed to gender inequity in HE alongside "enduring resilience of locally embedded cultural values and structures" (Luke, 2001, p. 237). She also found that gender inequity persists alongside the idea that women should not receive special treatment and that merit would prevail (Luke, 2001, p. 238).

Conditions for Cambodian HEI academics ("teachers") vary but some generalisations can create the picture. Om and Walker (2013, pp. 11–12) claim that university teaching "is well paid" and a master's degree will mean a job will be gained "with relative ease". Teaching is largely teacher centred (HRINC, 2010, p. 29). Salary is based on face-to-face teaching. HRINC (2010, p. 31) estimated that teachers receive an average monthly salary of US$100 in public HEIs for teaching 12 h per week. Additional hours may bring US$12/hour face-to-face and in some private HEIs, teachers may receive US$800/month by teaching many hours (HRINC, 2010, pp. 31–32). The salary structure is such that they will need to teach at two or more universities (most are in Phnom Penh) in order to make a living. McNamara (2013, p. 39) noted that many teachers have short hours which enabled them to arrange "other forms of income generation or food production, often at the expense of lesson preparation time". HRINC (2010, p. 7) reported that, for just over 8,000 teachers (includes foreigners), just 7% of staff teaching bachelor degrees at public and private HEIs hold a PhD degree, about half hold a master's degree and the remainder a bachelor's degree. There is a large gender difference in public (12% female) and private (8% female) HEI teaching staff (HRINC, 2010, p. 31).

In summary, HE in Cambodia is endeavouring to overcome difficulties unprecedented in history. Women growing up in the 1970s and 1980s and even beyond faced enormous difficulties yet some are to be found in Cambodia HEIs today. In the new world of the digital age, young women face circumstances and opportunities not seen before. How did junior and senior women become academics? How did these women negotiate roles in their academic world?

6. Methodology
This research is constructivist and exploratory since there have been no studies of this kind in Cambodia. Two universities were the sites for the research where eight academic women each were interviewed. Following Luke (2001), interviews were the key sources of data and were undertaken in the Khmer, taking between 30 and 60 min each using a semi-structured interview schedule, then transcribed and translated into English for analysis using NVivo (2012).

Procedurally, a four-hour research meeting was held in Phnom Penh with three young female research assistants and another junior male researcher who was not involved in the training. The study research question, the sampling strategy, the wording of questions and probes in the interview schedule, the information sheet, the transcription schedule and the University of New England ethics approval were discussed. Any follow-up questions/clarifications were discussed and minor culture-related word changes were made. All research assistants had had interview experience and the level of English spoken was quite high. An honorarium was paid to each of the research assistants.

7. Results
Although our interest lay in the becoming and in being junior and senior academics, only two junior academics were identified amongst the 16 female academics interviewed. Interviewee selection had to be via local administrators. The two junior academics had less than five years university teaching experience, whereas the senior academics' experience averaged 15.3 years (range: 9–30 years). This means that most of the senior women became academics in the early democratic era. The low number of less-experienced women means that the analysis is essentially that of the senior cadre. Some differences identified here are likely due to be institutional effects.

7.1. Influences on becoming an academic—shaping their role
Parents support was the most common and the most strongly put reason for becoming a "teacher" (*n* = 11) but three of these women indicated that their parents "did not force them" or "they let me to decide whatever I like". Friends (*n* = 2), husbands (*n* = 2) and the need to support parents (*n* = 3) were also influential. Other supportive reasons were ability (*n* = 6) and another five indicated that they were inspired by a university teacher, liked the job or the subject. In addition to the support of the government (*n* = 2), the lure of a scholarship was critical for 8 of the 14 senior women. For one woman, this was life changing since she started as a worker at the university "then I started my bachelor's degree that was provided by the government. I have changed my life from

a worker to a lecturer … I promised myself that I need to work for state [government] forever”. In those days, as now, the appeal of a scholarship abroad was high:

> I actually wanted to teach at public institution because during that period I observed being a government staff I could have opportunity to get the privilege of a scholarship to study abroad. … At that time, not many scholarship programmes were in place. … Working in the public sector I could keep up to date for the obtaining the information about the scholarship. … (I won) a scholarship supported by The Ministry of Education and The Government of Japan. … All expenses were covered by the programme. My ambition was realised.

It is interesting to note that four of the five who said that they did not originally want to become a teacher had received an international scholarship.

7.2. Factors influencing their daily academic life
Parental support was important in their becoming academics but once an academic there was hardly any mention of parental ($n = 1$), collegial ($n = 1$) or wider family support ($n = 1$). Perhaps this is not surprising given that almost all were senior women. Although *chbap srei* was not mentioned, one senior woman pointed out: “I need to be a good role model to the future generation. I have to behave well in my career and have a good attitude. Lecturers are respected by students when they show this good model”.

By far, the dominant theme for the women was the need to balance demands on their time. A common idea was “I just survive. To ensure quality I have a lot of responsibilities. Moreover, I have to take care of my family, children and prepare food”. Another said “I have a family and children. I cannot be present at (university) full time. I can do my lesson preparation at home. I usually go to (university) only when I have meetings or when I have appointments with my students. So I can say that I have time at home to take care of my child”. Another mentioned the pressures of additional teaching demands: “because this university has a special course at the weekend, so I need to teach both Master and Bachelor's degree. I am busy teaching from Monday to Sunday. … For me, even when I finished from university I need to continue the works at home at night time”. And there are evening classes for some: “it always stops at 8 pm. I usually get home at 8:30, and I need to play with my daughter. Sometimes I have other priorities but I need to put them away so I can spend time with my child”. None of the women complained.

Of nine women who talked about the competing roles, five indicated that achieving balance is not necessarily an overwhelming task: “When I finish my duty at university and I go back home I also have a duty as a housewife. I think I have no problems with these two responsibilities” or

> I am not so busy with my life as a lecturer. My house is near the university so I can save a lot of time to do whatever I need. I teach only 14 hours per week, so it is not too much, I can have a lot of free time. Besides teaching, I also have some projects and lead the students to provinces, but (the latter) is rare.

There was an acceptance that their lives were busy. However, for one woman when research was also involved “I needed to take care of my children. It was a busy time for me to be involved in the research. I got help from my parents to take care my children. During my study, I had a lot of commitments to do for family as well as to take care the children. Sometimes I left my children with my parents at home”. As a corollary to this, four indicated that they did, and four did not, have enough time for themselves. It seems that many of the women used the flexibility of the teaching hours to facilitate their busy lives by, perhaps, teaching more, or less, hours. But this had to be balanced against the need to earn enough.

Salary was an important issue. Salaries are not high for public HE workers.

As you know the salary of government official is not that high, so it affects my living

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conditions. The income I earn cannot fulfil all the needs or even making my living more satisfactory. … It pays (about US$2) per hour. However … the payment always arrive late, sometimes … after six or seven months. Fortunately, that has been a progress related to the rate of payment. Nowadays, the supplementary fee [additional teaching hours] is pretty high compared to what it used to be, from seven to US$8 per hour. (our addition)

Such a low basic public sector salary does not auger well for recruitment of quality staff especially because private sector HE salaries are higher. Moreover, salary is only paid for teaching, that is, no pay in school breaks. Nevertheless, the women are prepared to work for between US$80 and US$200 per month. However, "if I want to earn extra income I need to teach more hours than I do now. The supplementary hours could be done at private university. Until now, there is no difficulty I have encountered". Pay rates do not vary by gender according to one informant.

7.3. Gender differences in academic role

Generally speaking, five women thought that there was "equality" or "no difference" in academic role. Others disagreed. Such differences included men's greater physicality and motivation or "males might have more time than females because they don't have to worry about housework nor taking care the children … I see that men perform better than women because they have sufficient time for their professional development". One careful response contained most interesting observations:

Firstly, talking about the number of lecturers in this university academic women are less than academic men. Secondly, about the (foreign) language, men have more chance to learn and understand more than academic women. So they [are able to] to research information from the internet … On the other hand, talking about training I find that men have more opportunity to participate, because they have more time … For academic women, beside [the fact that] they have not enough knowledge (of) foreign languages, they also need to continue their housework and take care of children. … So if we look seriously we will see the difference. But if we look simply like at the teaching program at university it is not so different.

What, then of teaching, research and service differences, if any? No differences were seen in teaching load or responsibilities by a clear majority of women ($n = 10$). Two women pointed to the potential difficulties for women in completing teaching tasks fully as they "needed to get home". In contrast to teaching, in research males did more ($n = 6$) though there were opportunities for both ($n = 5$) but women may "choose" not to be involved ($n = 4$). Principal reasons given for the difference in research was a constellation of practices; men's access to time ($n = 3$), no housework for men ($n = 2$), men's access to travel ($n = 2$) and foreign languages ($n = 1$). For these reasons, men can undertake projects and so add to their low salary and at the same time build capacity. Affirmative action strategies in the context of research were also mentioned (see below). On the other hand, females were said to do more administrative work ($n = 6$).

7.4. Differences

Thirteen of the 16 women indicated that there was no difference in the various ways that the women and men were treated or treated each other. However, many differences were evident. The existence of a men's network was only evident to six women, one of whom put the position this way: "Men usually meet up during their breakfast time at the cafeteria in the campus. Compared to men, I noticed women do not regularly get together … Male lecturers socialise more, for instance, at a football club, play ping pong and they also regularly catch up for a drink or dinner". Yet, seven said they had not observed a men's network in operation. Complementary to the issue of the men's network and its implied access to information/power, women and men were said to have equal access to power by 10 women. Meetings were important for access to power: "Women always raise ideas/issues during meetings". Just two thought men had greater access even though the vast majority of management were men.

Fourteen women commented on promotion. Men were seen to be promoted more than women (*n* = 4). Promotion was generally made against criteria in the university promotion policy such as completing assessment task corrections on time. Nine women thought that promotion was based on ability (see the paragraph on the competency discourse below) but two women noted affirmative action was evident (see below). However, "spending little time [less than men?] at work will influence the opportunity for promotion" and women had less opportunity to build capacity. "For promotion, females also have less chance as you can see there are not many females in management team [holding up the management team list]". Promotion means salary was increased. "It's actually not that much, sometimes, it's between (US$7–10 per month)". Three women showed no interest in promotion. So, promotion opportunities are essentially gendered and there are a variety of reasons for this including nepotism (*n* = 2), time available to complete tasks and the competency discourse.

Nine women often used the competency discourse as an explanation for differences especially in relation to promotion but also in terms of the future of gender equity. There was generally not qualification of this discourse, for example, by referring to the triple burden on women's time and the flow on effects of this. Words used included "ability" (*n* = 7), "qualifications" (*n* = 5), "skill" (*n* = 4), as well as two mentions each of "knowledge", "competence", "capacity" and "knowledge". This discourse was used to explain the more powerful position of academic men.

7.5. Affirmative action

There was evidence of affirmative action or related activities identified by 11 of the women. This is heartening though most of the better examples came from one university. On this latter point, leadership is clearly important: "I am not sure whether they will give the priorities to females in the future as the new rector has just arrived … The previous rector gives more values to female lecturers". In relation to affirmative action itself, one woman observed:

> Every time, when the university has a new project they [project leaders named] always ask ladies first if they have skill that are relevant to project. For example, when my leader has the new project, he always ask me. If I can he will accept me to do this because I have enough ability.

Another woman said "When it comes to job promotion, women usually have high priority" and the same university "gives the priority to women first if they have ability" for overseas postgraduate study. Women's Rights Day was mentioned several times when women in the university were celebrated. In contrast to these activities, at another university, gender equity was "encouraged" (*n* = 4) but there were few examples of actual practices. Accouchement leave was only available to full-time staff according to these women (e.g. three months at RUPP) and this issue had been the subject of discussions over a long period.

Role models were important at one university. Four women from this university mentioned at least one senior woman.

> However, the good thing is that now I observe some competent women are able to take up high position, for instance, Dr. (name). She was equipped with strong competency which made it possible for her to be promoted.

Such appointments can encourage other women, for example, "on the celebration of Women's Right Day, the vice rector always invites women to give the speech and encourages them to be more exposed and to increase their interest in job promotion". These celebrations occur at both universities.

7.6. Possible future actions

The women's thoughts on the future of gender equity were mixed though more were positive than negative. Only one woman saw no reason for change. A gender policy was evident in only one of the universities. Here, critique by the women and practices in the university were more evident. At this

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university, workshops are conducted, (*n* = 1), information shared through the Women's Association (*n* = 1) and gender issues were taught in years 2–4 but not in the foundation year (*n* = 1). As illustrated by this university, and supported by three women, leadership is important. One woman said "We also need support from family, friends and government" and, of course, the women themselves (*n* = 2). However, four of the eight women at this university noted policy and practice incongruities. Several women were resigned to the slowness of change. Despite this, the vast majority were happy with their situation, only two not so because of the low salary.

8. Discussion

Perhaps the key finding was the evidence for affirmative action in one university. Role models, capacity building, gender issues in the curriculum, formal women's groups and meetings were evident there. Policy impact at this university supports the Kim et al. (2010) view that national policy initiatives demand local leadership. Government actions (MOEYS, 2010a) may also have been an incentive towards promotion of females. If we can accept the reasonable proposition that the university is a leader of society, then this university may be leading the way in Cambodia. It may be the forerunner against hegemonic structures identified by the IIEP (2011, p. 4). Affirmative action is not new in Cambodia as Velasco (2004) noted in the context of primary education. A case study of this university would be warranted.

A second important finding was there appeared to be little knowledge of gender policies and issues. Gender discourse was not evident though this may be the result of Khmer/English translation. Certainly there was not the strength of opinion expressed by such commentators as Kim and Öjendal (2014). It can be noted that the Royal University of Phnom Penh plans to introduce a course on women's studies in 2016.

A competency discourse was evident. As Luke (2001) found—"merit"—men's greater ability, qualifications, skills and so on were used to explain disparities. This discourse was not qualified by an understanding of how and why these had come about and consequently no clear picture emerged in the women's own words of a way forward, certainly not of a united action.

The discourse of competence can be aligned with the triple burden of paid work, housework and child rearing though only one of the women made a clear connection between the two. The women reported that the males did more research. Though the opportunities for research were there for women, these were not taken up though several of the women wanted to do (more) research. The low level of women in management roles was evident for all to see. Promotion favoured males. However, there was an acceptance of these situations. A contributing factor could be the effects of the *chbap srei* especially as the women interviewed were relatively experienced. Some women were not interested in promotion, nor research and were content with their busy lives. In Kim's (2005) terms, the women were culturally positioned within their working environment. This cultural dimension of being an academic is worthy of further exploration.

This exploratory study has pointed to a range of ways in which the roles of academic women were created and embodied. However, further research is indicted:

- Because the great majority of interviewees were senior academics, further work is needed to see how junior female academics, say those with less than five years' experience, became and undertake the role of academics;

- Also in this study, little information about the academic service role was unearthed and research is needed here;

- The relationship between receiving a scholarship and career choice is worthy of further research in a country like Cambodia. This is especially the case for older women where in-depth case studies could well prove illuminating. Harman (2003) reports that international Ph.D. students in two Australian universities believe their careers would be positively affected;

- The tension between the number of hours taught and the need to make a living is worthy of further research also. Further, does the ability to select the number of hours provide the flexibility for women to negotiate the triple burden successfully? and

- Institutional differences in research/project work/affirmative action needs to be explored (unit of analysis).

9. Conclusions

This was an exploratory study, the first of its kind on gender in HE in Cambodia. The data were from 16 interviews, eight each from two universities in Phnom Penh carried out by young female researchers. Becoming an academic for many Cambodian women meant support from their parents and others close to them. Receipt of an international scholarship may have been critical. Perhaps the most important issue for these academic women was the need to balance demands on their time, that is, finding time for paid work, housework and caring/rearing children. Some women had support from parents. Pay was relatively low but teaching hours could be negotiated, potentially at least, but only where the student numbers warranted it. Men usually did more research—they did not have the triple burden. Men were employed more in universities, held high positions and were more likely to be promoted. Against this, an early affirmative action approach appears to have developed at one of the two universities and could lead to greater impacts on gender equity over time, not only in universities but beyond.

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