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STATUS AND POWER: LINKING HOUSEHOLD POWER DYNAMICS WITH WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN LIVELIHOOD PROJECTS

Introduction

Does women's work outside the home such as in public office or in wage employment lead to their improved intra-household bargaining? While there is a general agreement that it positively affects some aspects of gender relations, it does not systematically result in gender equality. Its implications are more nuanced than simplistic. If we look at the history of Khmer society, we can see that women have always been economically active, evident in records from the late 13th century (Chou 1967). Yet women still occupy lower status at home and in the society, leaving them at a disadvantage in many aspects of life and career (MOWA 2014).

Women have always been economically active but still occupy a lower status in Cambodia. Takeo, January 2016

More women in positions of power in government or leadership roles in rights movements does not guarantee equality, however (Markham 2013; LICADHO 2014; Domingo et al. 2015). Income-earning opportunities might result in women's improved command over financial matters but not necessarily other family affairs (Malhotra and Mather 1997; Doss 2013). While their involvement in activities outside the home can lead to less domestic violence or give women the choice to leave an abusive relationship (Kabeer 1997), it can also subtly reinforce or even trigger violence (Hughes et al. 2015). Indeed, in some societies such as Cambodia and Thailand, sociocultural norms and decorum can be more powerful in determining gender power relations than income or position in public office (Mutakalin 2008; Pen 2016).

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In this Issue

What can be drawn from the literature exploring diverse cultural contexts is that women's ability to lead or govern or earn and use their own income is not the only catalyst of change in gender relations. Change also depends on such factors as the relationships women have with family and peers, the types of work or social activities they engage in, and wider economic, sociocultural and other external influences (Sultana 2013). Added to this complex nexus are the degree to which gender relations have changed, the types of decisions women can make, and the types of intra-household gender relations that remain intact due to the influence of traditional norms.

To understand changes in gender relations in the Khmer family this article draws on a case study of women's participation in rural livelihood projects. Specifically, it examines what aspects of intra-household bargaining have been altered as a result of participation, and attempts to identify the driving or restraining factors that influenced any change that may have occurred. The reason for the focus on NGO-run livelihood projects instead of wage employment or public office is threefold: these projects aim to build women's capacity to improve agricultural production, food security and incomes; they usually embed within them gender ideologies; and paid rural jobs are mostly limited to seasonal agricultural work.

Background to the study

The article draws on in-depth qualitative research conducted between 2013 and 2015 in Battambang, Kompong Speu and Mondolkiri provinces as part of my doctoral project (Pen 2016), which engaged 87 rice farmers (55 women) in semi-structured interviews and group discussions. Information was also collected through observations, community meetings and informal chats with villagers and local authorities over six months of ethnographic fieldwork. The villages visited during fieldwork had an active presence of development projects, resulting in the majority of the study participants being project beneficiaries: 68 of them (44 women) had joined savings groups, rice banks, cow banks or forestry communities.

The study focused on women heads of household because of the unusually high proportion of single women-headed households taking part in local project-related groups: 21 of 55 female interviewees head families alone and seven share headship roles with their husband, well above the national average of 25.6 percent (NIS 2008). That most of these women took part in local groups raises legitimate questions as to whether 1) the projects influence a change in their status from housewife to household head, and 2) project participation is conducive to their well-being and intra-household bargaining power.

The analysis is guided by Kabeer's (1999, 435) concept of empowerment, understood as "the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability". She identified three interrelated dimensions of power: resources, agency, and achievement or well-being outcomes. Access to and control of resources (material, social and human) serve to improve women's capacity to exercise choice, whereas agency determines women's ability to define their goals in life and to realise them through bargaining, resistance or manipulation. Both resources and agency determine women's capability to choose different ways of being and doing what they value. The achievement dimension is hard to grasp and difficult to measure because of contextual differences in values and ways of being and doing.

Women as household heads – an exception?

A literal understanding of the words *mé krousa* (household head) and *mé phteah* (housewife) helps cast light on a larger issue of intra-household gender inequalities. The way these words have been used and understood in everyday life partly serves to reproduce and reinforce gender inequalities. They carry an implicit sense of perceived hierarchical difference in status and attached tasks and values. *Mé* is literally translated as mother or someone in a high position of authority or supervisor-like role; *krousa* refers to a household or family in a broader sense; and *phteah* is a physical shelter for the family.

The position of *mé krousa,* very often held by the husband (Lee 2006), is conferred with guardianship of family members and responsibility for their moral and material well-being (Mao and

Vann 2010), as well as management and decision-making authority within the family (NIS 2008). The title *mé phteah* is accorded to a married woman whose traditional role is to manage and perform domestic tasks (Chuon 1967).

The statistically significant larger numbers of male-headed households in national censuses (NIS 2008, 2015) suggest that women gain headship status in exceptional circumstances. Among the participants, some took on the headship role after the death of their husband, divorce or desertion. Others became heads because their husband was sick and unable to work. Male outmigration has also created a shift in gender roles, with wives left behind assuming temporary headship, such as the case of Tim, a 33-year-old from Kompong Speu, whose husband migrated to Thailand.

What is more interesting is that some female participants headed their nuclear family by dint of their wealth, education or family background. Kunthea, a 30-year-old household head inherited a house and farmland from her parents; her husband moved from another commune to live with her. Sar became head of her family of nine for a different reason. Outspoken and literate, she moved to Kompong Speu to live with her husband who, unlike her, could barely read and write. Sar served in the army during the 1980s and has been politically active ever since. At the time of study she was serving as the village head and the leader of a self-help group.

Other married women emphasised their status as heads or co-heads of their households, contributing perhaps to the above-average proportion of female household heads in the study. This divergence from national census data may have also been influenced by how questions were asked. All participants were free to define the meaning of household head based on their own understanding rather than conform to what is recorded in the Family Book. For these women, the fact that they manage a household, care for children, keep and control household finances and earn their own income is already enough to proclaim themselves as the family head and to have equal status with their husband.

The headship experiences recounted by the study respondents indicate that women's engagement in livelihood projects does not necessarily lead to a change in gender relations or transition to headship status. Many of the female participants had already assumed headship before joining a project. Caveats aside, intra-household power relations are complex and constantly changing. Plus, becoming head does not mean having more power. The following discusses what changes are made possible through women's participation in livelihood projects.

Measuring change – resources, agency and well-being outcomes

The most immediate change was in the participants' access to resources: agricultural skills training, health and hygiene education, interest-free loans and the distribution of seed, livestock, food and housing materials from the projects.

Changes were also visible through their exercise of greater agency manifested in decision making through participation, negotiation, resistance and manipulation. Albeit difficult to measure change in intra-household bargaining, participants who head or co-head their households expressed having more confidence and autonomy in decision making about farm activities and household expenditures, and their own health care, travel and private goods. However, decisions related to major transactions such as land, house and farm equipment or migration were still made jointly by husband and wife, as in the case of Tim whose husband migrated to Thailand.

Improvements in women's social capital are also important benefits of self-help groups (Basargekar 2010; Hiwasa 2013). In my case study, the groups created spaces for women to socialise and build support networks. Women who were both project beneficiaries and group leaders had more opportunities. Usually starting from a very basic skill such as literacy, they learned leadership and public speaking skills, necessary for them to lobby local government, resulting in some becoming politically active and elected to the local council (Banteay Srei 2013).

One crucial aspect of these material, social and human capitals is women's strengthened fall-back position, which refers to the outside options that determine how well-off they would be should marriage or trust break down (Agarwal 1997). A case

in point is that of Kimmao, a 50-year-old mother of five from Battambang, who joined a self-help group in the early 2000s. Illiterate in the beginning, she was encouraged by NGO staff to learn to read and write so that she could take a more active role in the group. Once literate, she started working as a volunteer to facilitate the activities of her group. Kimmao's marital history has been one of conflict and disruption. After years of domestic dispute, which she was unwilling to talk about, Kimmao was deserted by her husband; she raised her five children almost single-handedly. At the time of study, her youngest daughter was studying grade 9 and her two eldest children were school teachers. Although Kimmao had recently conceded headship on the return of her husband, she maintained her parental authority over her children and continued to be the key decision maker. Sitting several metres away from her husband, Kimmao said without hesitation that,

> Whenever they [the authorities] ask to put the name of the family head on official paper, I give my husband's name. But in reality, I am the head. I manage everything myself. I've worked to support my children through school to become teachers. The real household head is me. I also make decisions in the family including about major purchases. Nobody would dare do anything without my permission.

The shifting gender roles described above underscore the importance of strengthening women's human and social capital, which should be an essential feature of livelihood improvement approaches. The resultant increased agency was reflected in women's sense of accomplishment, pride and self-esteem. In Kimmao's case, her sense of achievement stemmed from her newfound literacy, improved farming skills, better income and community responsibilities. What was the most important to her was a long-term positive outcome for herself and her family as a result of her hard work and investment in her children's education.

> Before nobody wanted to be friends with us. Now people in the village talk to us because I have two adult children who are teachers. Even if we are not rich, we have knowledge that no one can steal.

Participating in groups that create spaces for networking and mutual support, and taking on household headship in difficult circumstances, are beneficial for women's general well-being in the long run. These experiences can be considered "portable assets", a concept first coined by Bird et al. (2010) in relation to women's education and capacity to rebuild their lives after the loss of physical assets and later reframed by Chant (2015) to also include women's experience of headship. In my study, women with such "portable assets" displayed more confidence and seemed more adaptable and capable of withstanding future shocks and less afraid to assert their authority. For instance, Kimmao was not afraid to claim to be the "real household head" during the interview in the presence of her husband.

Women with experience of household headship and local leadership, and awareness of the concepts of human rights and gender equality learned from the groups, are less likely to tolerate physical violence, unlike other women who might continue suffering in silence for fear of divorce or abandonment (Brickell 2014). Their denunciation of violence is manifested in their view of the concept of "fire in the house": although they agreed that family issues should be kept within the family, physical violence is for them a serious violation of a woman's human rights and needs to be reported.

Conclusion: equality starts at home

This article has explored the relationship between women's engagement in community-based development projects and intra-household bargaining. Through the lived experiences of participants, it shows that the types of activities that women engage in, livelihood improvement projects in this case, can be significant factors that drive change in gender relations. Such projects provide women with not only resources and skills to improve their incomes but also spaces for socialisation and peer support.

Although gender division of domestic chores remains largely intact and women continue to perform the role of housewife, their construction of their own status in the family and their participation in decision making reflect their gradual empowerment as they actively manipulate and defy the notion of male headship and claim their productive and

reproductive contributions as vital to sustaining family well-being.

Because family is a place of constant power struggle, the accumulation of women's economic, social and human capital opens up a new opportunity for them to challenge and (re)negotiate the existing patriarchal system. For this reason, efforts to address gender inequality should not overlook the importance of this micro-social setting where the seeds of genuine gender equality are sown.

State and non-state actors working to address gender issues should put more emphasis on intra-household gender dynamics that go beyond addressing women's economic status in order to have a better chance of improving women's agency and well-being. In other words, they should proactively promote women's ability to participate fully and equally in household decision making because crucial to the empowerment of women is their voice in decisions that matter to them – decisions that affect them and if not favourable are at least not detrimental to them, and decisions that can potentially weaken gender discrimination and lead to equal well-being outcomes for all household members.

On a final note, the analysis is exploratory and based on the experiences of women with leadership roles in project-related groups. More research is required to explore the effects of these groups on members who have no project role and the impacts of employment and gender-blind community-based development projects on women's lives.

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