

# Cultural Strains and Social Attitudes towards Girls' Basic Education in Contemporary Cambodia

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本稿では、現代カンボジアでの基礎教育すなわち9年間の無償の学校教育に関し、女子の中途退学率が高い要因について論じる。学年が上がるほどその率は高くなる。貧困によるやむを得ない退学は減っており、それに代わる主な要因として「就学開始の遅れ」「高い欠席率」「留年」「勉学意欲の低下」「正規雇用に対する低い願望」「家事」「両親の低学歴」「学校までの距離」「安全上のリスク」、そして「早婚」があげられる。筆者はこれらの理由に加えて、幼い頃から女子に対する文化的抑制と社会規範が学業継続の選択に影響を及ぼすと考えている。興味深いことに、これらは、実際には家族内の女子に対する差別であるという、親たち年長者の認識を伴っていない。さらに、将来に向けての教育の質や雇用機会に対する期待が極めて低い点も、女子が学業を達成できなくなることに大きく影響している。

## 1. Introduction

The general understanding that improvement of education contributes to national development and poverty reduction has been adopted in many countries and regions. Cambodia, with no exception from the rest, has been pursuing many strategic policies to uplift the current state of its education system and quality which was shattered by the arrival of the Pol Pot regime around 4 decades ago (1975 to 1979). Through that period, Cambodia has seen the loss of many educated people and the collapse of its education system.

In 2012, the World Bank claimed that improvement of development goes together with the increase in the quality of education and gender equality. Glewwe and Kremer in 2006 also made a joint statement in their study that many economists and international agencies believe that highly educated women can make better not only their own employment opportunities, living conditions, and social status, but also contribute to the growth of economic and social development at the nation level. Thus, it is undeniably important to promote chance for children, particularly girls to attend school. For the reason that girls are more vulnerable to being push out of the education cycle from the early age (Sopheak Song, 2012).

To assist the better understanding of current the state of education in Cambodia, a brief on how basic education was first introduced and impact of the abolition of education system during the Pol Pot regime is made below. It is the description of how the present education was formed and to what

extend that boys are favored than their girl counterparts either in household or education facilities.

## **1.1 Cambodia Traditional Education and the Arrival of Modern Education System**

### **1.1.1 Pre-Colonial Era (Prior to 1863)**

The practice of schooling in religious institutes reached its peak around 12th century in Cambodia where religious leaders were viewed as intellectuals and teachers (Bit, 1991). Prior to that, traditional schooling system had been installed around the 7th century for only a small group of elite individuals.

However, only male students were allowed to take part in the practice for the reason that teachers were Buddhist monks and students needed to stay in religious institutions for any specific length of time to complete their education. Lessons included principles related to individual lives, family, social conduct, moral ethnics, some basic literacy and numeracy skills (Chandler, 1988; Dy, 2004).

### **1.1.2 First Accessibility for Girls to Formal Education System during the Colonial Period (1863-1953)**

The French took control over the Indo-China Peninsula during 1800s and colonized Cambodia in 1863. Chandler (1991) noted that during the first 20 years, the French did not introduce modern French schooling system or interfere with traditional politics in Cambodia.

It was only until the early 1900s that the colonial administration began to modernize the traditional schooling system by introducing new education system. Notwithstanding, main targets of the new system were limited to a few Cambodian elite members who were trained to serve in colonial administration. For the reasons that religious institutions only provided primary education and maintained traditional culture.

It was also during this reform that girls for the first time could participate in formal education outside home circle. As stated above, accessibility to education was only provided in religious institutes where mentors were all males. Girls had been barred from the practice due to religious reason, and the social norm which prohibited girls from staying in any other places outside their homes was also commonly viewed as acceptable.

On the other hand, Clayton (1995) argued that the French was not active into educational expansion and development in Cambodia due to the fear of education would bar French from placing their grips on the Cambodians. Others such as Chandler (1998) and Osborne (1969) added that such low investment in modernizing Cambodian education is likely because the traditional Cambodian intellectuals lobbied against the idea of Romanization traditional language as French did to the Vietnamese.

### **1.1.3 Post-Colonial Period and the Expansion of Universal Education (1953-1970)**

Post-colonial period was described as the golden era of development in Cambodia.

Notwithstanding, attempts in enhancing universal education failed after the ambitious plan of the late Prince Sihanouk met with massive education crisis. One of the main reasons responsible for the failure was the economical unaffordability of the quantitative educational expansion plan. The second was the inconsistency between policy implementation and expansion of infrastructure and enrollment. The third was the political forces which were at work in improving and actualizing the policies (Ayres, 1998, p.10).

However, several scholars noted that during this phase Cambodia produced a sophisticated basic education system and formal schooling was brought to all children. Prince Sihanouk regime, compared to the French era, had produced significant progress of education expansion at all level regardless of improper quality in basic education system (Bit, 1991; Deighton,1971; Dunnett, 1993).

As indicated by Peng Cheng Pung (1959) only 10 % of female adults was literate in 1958. But as Deighton (1971) pointed out in his study, from 1950 to 1965 the number of female students enrolled in primary school level had increased from 9 to 39 %. There is a claim that Cambodia was one of the best performer in illiteracy rate reduction and had the most progressive education system among South East Asia countries in the 1960s (Dunnett, 1993).

#### **1.1.4 Fierce Civil War (1970-1975) and the Collapse of Education System (1975-1979)**

From the 1960s to the 1970s, Cambodia faced the wave of ideological war between communism and capitalism. Between 1970 and 1975 Cambodia was dragged into an undeclared war after a military coup which was supported by the United States toppled Prince Sihanouk's government. As the Americans fled Southeast Asia in 1975, Khmer Rough (Pol Pot regime) took over the country and established agrarian communist government who did not considered the educated elites were good to society (Kelly T. Crowley, 2010).

Duggan (2003) reported that the Khmer Rough had excused the government in 1960s failed to serve the needs of people. During 1975 and 1979 formal schooling system was abolished. All intellectuals and teachers were targeted for persecution because agrarian Khmer Rough went against the idea of valuing education provided to those people. The Khmer Rough regarded those educated people as the enemies and excused education they had obtained from the previous era favored capitalism.

It is estimated that 75% to 80% of higher educated people and 67% of primary and secondary school students fled the country or were killed. This situation left Cambodia with few educated experts of individuals who possessed any kind of educational experience (Kelly T. Crowley, 2010).

## **2. Current State of Basic Education in Cambodia**

Form of basic education has changed through the time from the provision of basic literacy to formal primary education, and to the primary education plus secondary education in the mid-1990s

(Dy, 2003). Together with the assistance of international agencies, the Dakar Framework action on "Education for All" (EFA) was introduced to Cambodia in 2003. Progress on the development of basic education has been made over the years, but more improvement in the area of education quality and gender equity is still required.

Basic education in Cambodia consists of 9 years of formal schooling which is divided into the primary school level (grades 1-6) and the lower secondary school level (grades 7-9). The definition of these levels was made after years of actual practice to improve basic education standard started from basic literacy (during 1980s) to primary school plus secondary school (1990s-present).

Having been shadowed by the dark period during the Pol Pot regime and civil wars which lasted for decades, gave Cambodia significant impact on the re-establishment of basic education. The loss of many educated people in that regime resulted in the scarcity of human resource and positioned Cambodia to the longer trail in order to heal from those scars.

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) of Cambodia has continuously collaborated with development partners, communities and the private sector to improve public basic education. Many laws, policies, action plans, and standard have been implemented to guarantee the access to education and its quality. These include the Law on Education (2007), the Annual Education Strategic Plans (from 2014 to 2018), the Teacher Policy Action Plans (2015), among others while significant progress has been made in various sectors, challenges still remain in early childhood education, access to basic education for all children, and the quality of education.

According to a survey of Demographic & Health (DHS) in 2014, only 81% of females and 83% of male students aged 6-11 were actually attending primary schools while the net admission rate for girls in primary schools decreased from 98.2% in 2013 to 95.4% in 2014 (World Vision, Education-Policy Brief 2017). The percentages dropped to 63% for both sexes in lower secondary schools and continued to drop to just 33% for male and 24% for female students in upper secondary school. (Education Policy and Data Center, 2017). The quality of education at the primary school level in Cambodia was scored at 2.9 out of 7 or 114th out of 140 countries by World Economic Forum in 2015. Particularly, poor literacy scores might be partially related to lack of access to reading materials especially for students in rural area. Additionally, Cambodia has the worst pupil-teacher ratio compared to its ASEAN neighbors at 47:1 with Laos at 26:1, Vietnam at 19:1 and Myanmar at 28:1. This is said to be negatively affecting the quality of education.

The other main factor that has been repeatedly suggested to undermine the quality of education is the quality of teachers itself. It is believed that only 58% of primary school teachers have completed the minimum requirement of 12-year schooling due to the scarcity of human resources in education after the Pol Pot regime (1979). The minimum requirement was reduced so it means the 58% of existing primary school teachers obtain less ability to operate professional skills and develop pedagogical practice (World Vision, 2016).

### 3. Possible Causes of Girl-Early-School Dropout within Basic Cycle of Education

To achieve universal basic education, the gender parity in education is one of the main factors that help narrow down the percentages of out-of-school children. As cited in the World Bank Report (2017), securing gender parity in education leads to many benefits to the society because educated women tend to participate more in formal work, thus enabling better healthcare and education for their children eventually in future.

Progress has been made over the years in Cambodia and disparity gap in education attainment has also been narrowed. However, compared to the rest of South East Asian countries, Cambodia is still well behind the rest of the group by receiving 10th rank on the list (Global Gender Gap Index, 2017).

As more women in Cambodia see the increase of legislators, politicians and the better opportunities to tertiary education, girls who locates in rural area seems still to receive less from this kind of prosperity. Back to the year of 2000s where Esther Velasco (2001) described that while majority of her study's respondents, which comprised 241 people from 6 different provinces in Cambodia, insisted that girls and boys had the same rights to education and economic participation as well as contribution to household income, they also unconsciously illustrated attitudes that presume housework and childcare were exclusively responsibilities of women and girls. These attitudes create the challenges and burden to girls to strive for their desire toward education (Velasco, 2001).

#### 3.1 Family-Related Sources

To date, few evidences are available to show that girls are likely to stay longer in education than boys do (OUI, 2007). In most cases, girls tend to spend shorter period of time in school than boys (Diyu, 2002). Song (2012) stated in his study that having children participate in any form of work is one of the most critical conditions that leads to inaccessibility to basic education. In terms of learning achievement, girls tend to do better than boys but they are more prone to working full time and quit school (Song Sopheak, 2012).

There have been many incentives for children who come from low-income families. One of these is the provision of scholarships. However, the amount is not enough for children not to involve in paid-job to support families' needs (Tan, 2007). As reported by United Nation International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) in 2012, a considerable number of girls who reside in rural or remote areas are likely to drop out of school for the burden of caring for younger siblings, helping their parents in agricultural farms, or moving to urban areas to work as factory workers which is not uncommon in Cambodia due to severe poverty.

As early as the 2000s where gender disparity was visibly shown in gross school enrollment rates of girls and boys in Cambodia, Valesco (2001) suggested that the load of housework, distance to school, possibility of insecurity along school roads, late school enrollment and marriage at a young age are all responsible for girls' dropout. Similarly, Keng (2003) conducted a research that focus on

what keep children, especially girls in school. As a result of the research, late school enrollment, high absenteeism, grade repetition, low educational and formal occupational aspirations, load of housework, and parental educational background were highlighted (Hirakawa & No, 2012).

### **3.2 Outer Sources which Influence the Choice of Dropping Out**

To date, many scholars, researchers, government officials, and international agencies studied on the complex behaviors of early dropout to identify the main causes. These complex behaviors vary based on geographical reasons, tradition, or socio-economic status of each individual (Hirakawa & No, 2012).

A study conducted by Rumberger in 1983 suggested that family background was a chronic cause of early dropout. It also argued that various causes were pointed out by students for quitting school with pregnancy or marriage responsible for women's choice and getting job was for men.

UNESCO Bangkok (2014) classified the obstacles which bar children from attending basic education. The classification contains of capacity, the access and financial barriers. Capacity barrier is related to the lack of demand for education which was mainly caused by the inadequate quality of education. Access barrier happens when children are deprived of education due to distance or cultural and social reasons. Lastly, financial barrier refers to the inability of poor families to pay for direct or indirect costs of schooling.

Natural disasters also leave significant impact on education. The loss of property and lives as well as children and their families being displaced occur considerably (USAID, 2014). In South East Asia, Cambodia is one of the most vulnerable countries affected by natural disasters with floods as its main and most frequent threat, and unfortunately, 21% of its schools are located in flood-prone area (ADPC, 2008).

### **3.3 Lack of Role Models in Employment Opportunities in Cambodia**

Female participation in employment are 80.9% compared to 88.7% for males. In 2014, United Nations Development Program indicated that women participated only 23% of total public-sector employment. A vast majority of high positions are held by men and women representatives in the senate from 1999 to 2012 remain unchanged of under 15% that only in 2017 for the first time the percentage reached to 18.5%.

Fiske (1995) claimed in the study on women and education in Cambodia that having more female teachers and women in leadership or management positions is crucial to present girls with role models which can positively influence performance in school and aspiration for the future. It may thus be concluded that the scarcity of women role models partially contributes to the low enrollment of female in higher education in Cambodia, as most girls often drop along the way even before they complete their basic cycle of education.

### 3.4 Gender Parity Policy in Education and Achievement

The constitution of Cambodia of 1993 and the law of Education of 2007 recognize 9 years of basic education as the rights of every citizen regardless of sexes. Cambodia is also a signatory to the convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). In response to Education For All and gender equality policies in education and vocational training, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), the Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training (MoLVT) and other relevance ministries of Cambodia have achieved remarkable results in terms of gender mainstreaming in policies and plans including the gender mainstreaming strategic plan (2011-2015), the policy on human resources in education sector (2012) and the like.

Gender parity in primary and lower secondary education has been achieved with net enrollment rate of both sexes stand close to each other, though gaps remain between regions and age groups. Girls had better chances of completing primary school and surpassed boys in gross enrolment rate in 2011-2012 at the lower secondary school level, drop-out rate generally stands close to that of boys. Beyond lower secondary school level, accessibility of girls to education is more limited and completion is challenging (Ministry of Women Affair, 2014).

## 4. Conclusion

The gap of gender disparity has been significantly improved and likewise the gap in gross enrollment rates of the two sexes in both primary and lower secondary school levels has been narrowed down. However, the survival rate of girls to go beyond the lower secondary school level is still a concern as the dropout rate at this level increased from 14.2% to 19.5% from 2009 to 2012 school year (MoEYS, 2014).

A study by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2017 also found that gender parity, particularly in basic cycle of education, has improved to a favorable level compared to the past 10 years though the grade repetition and drop-out rates still exist.

To address the high level of girl's dropout rate from education circle which is universally regarded as an essential factor to cope up with the demands for high-skilled labor market, more incentives towards parents who locate in rural or remote communities are required. Keng (2004) indicated that children of both sexes were eventually left to decide by themselves whether to continue study or not after some years in school.

Remarkably in rural areas, children who often bear the burden of earning household income are provided with the rights in making decision such as in education completion. However, children are not preferred to decide such a major event at such a young age all by themselves since they lack of guidance in career choices. They should possess full capacity to practice their rights in receiving protection and helpful recommendations from their parents as well as guardians.

Meanwhile, to gain desire from older generation in rural communities to invest in at least

girls' basic education, the quality of education in schools, especially the quality of teaching staff, is undeniably vital. Due to the mismatch between school curriculum and job market requirement, parents and female students tend to invest less to pursue higher education. In many cases, girls more than boys end up leave school even before completion of basic education.

Attitudes of the older generation in rural communities or even among teachers present profound impact on girls' self-value. Although the gender gap in younger age groups has been improved, the low level of literacy and the large gaps between women and men in older age groups remain a major gender issue and a social challenge (Ministry of Women Affairs, 2014).

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