NEGOTIATING AGENCY, EXCLUSION AND POWER: RURAL-URBAN MIGRANT WOMEN IN PHNOM PENH'S INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

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Dominant neoclassical migration theory makes various assumptions about women's roles in the household and community and in doing so suggests linear and one-dimensional migration processes and outcomes for women which provide no allowances for context, or the diversity of women's lives. The argument that migration significantly benefits women who move from rural villages to urban city centres may be correct in certain cases, however for those who migrate to informal urban settlements this is often not the case. This paper discusses the lives of migrant women in Phnom Penh's informal settlements to explore how poverty, migration and gender intersect to shape social exclusion and power relations for women. Based on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with rural-urban migrant women this paper identifies that whilst mobility has the opportunity to increase choice and economic security for women, the denial of various human rights as experienced by women in informal settlements often mitigates these benefits. This paper also discusses the dynamic nature of both the causes and consequences of migration for women in heterogeneous urban populations along with the need to consider how intra-urban inequities and gender can significantly impact migration outcomes for women.

1. Introduction

It is often claimed that migration empowers women by offering new opportunities in labour markets, thereby increasing personal financial contributions to the household and thus improving women's individual and collective bargaining power. Patriarchal values are also thought to be broken down in the city as people develop new ways of thinking and living (Ghosh 2009; Skeldon 1999). This paper aims to explore these generalised claims for rural-urban migrant women in Phnom Penh's informal settlements to determine whether there are specific aspects of both the processes and outcomes of migration which are either beneficial or detrimental to women in the context of social exclusion, marginalisation and human rights violations including the right to an adequate standard of living (including the right to adequate housing and water), the right to life, liberty and personal safety, the right not to be subjected to cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment, the right to fair and decent work, the right to health, and the right to non-discrimination on the basis of gender (Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1966; Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment 1984; UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women 1992). In doing so this paper also highlights the dynamic nature of both the causes and consequences of migration for women in heterogeneous urban populations, and the need to consider how intra-urban inequities and gender can significantly impact migration outcomes for women.

Migration is a dynamic and complex phenomenon which impacts women and men in different ways. Dominant neoclassical migration theory makes various assumptions about women's roles in the household and community and in doing so suggests linear and one-dimensional migration processes and outcomes for women (Ghosh 2009; de Haas 2007; Skeldon 2009). These assumptions provide no allowances for context or the diversity of women's lives, therefore leading to positive perspectives of migration which fail to enquire whether such approaches reflect the experience of women across a range of ages, classes and locations.

Migration has been considered extensively in the literature. Historically the phenomenon has been portrayed in both positive and negative contexts with these trends mirroring societal values of modern (city) and traditional (rural) at given points in time (Wratten 1995; Jarvis et al 2009; Erman 1998). As with the outcomes of migration, the process and its drivers have also been contested and are linked with ideologies of neoclassicism and structuralism. Grounded in economic theory, and closely resembling the push-pull framework[1], migration is considered a linear process for neo-classicists with workers moving from areas with low wages and a surplus of labour to destinations offering higher wages and a broader range of income earning opportunities (de Haas 2007). Within

1 The often-cited 'push' and 'pull' factors of migration in the Global South include rural poverty, increased waged labour opportunities in cities as a result of globalization and demographic growth (Portes 2008).

this process migrants are considered to act as individual and rational decision makers in assessing the economic costs and benefits of mobility. They are presumed to have complete information on migration options at their disposal and move to locations where they are able to attract the highest wages, and where there is a high probability of employment (International Organisation for Migration 2010; Chappel et al 2010). The primary critique of the economic rationality theory is its failure to account for structural inequalities, including inequitable resource distribution, which are fundamental to understanding the migration process given that 'migration does not take place in a social, cultural, political and institutional void' (de Haas 2007, pp.6-7). In her study of young Cambodian women who migrate to the city in search of modernity, independence and autonomy, Derks (2008) challenges neoclassical migration theory by arguing that a series of individual decisions do not adequately explain the complexity of the migration process, or the direction of migration flows.

To counter the economic rationality approach feminist and Marxist theories suggest that individuals are constrained by structural forces which result in the unequal distribution of power and resources. As such, individual migration decisions must be analysed in the context of global capitalism, proliferation of the manufacturing sector (largely in the Global South to benefit the Global North), the loss of traditional livelihoods as a result of uneven development, environmental degradation and land grabbing (de Haas 2007). Mediating between the neoclassic and structuralist approaches to migration is the household strategy theory which, as the name suggests, positions the household, or family, as the key unit of analysis. Developed primarily by Stark (1978) it is suggested that families share risks and develop strategies in response to external livelihood risks which in turn determines which household members will migrate. Remittances are argued to be the key motivator for migration in this context, which is a primary distinction from neoclassical migration theory.

Authors such as Chant (1991; 1998) have brought a gender perspective to migration theory by arguing that migration occurs not only as a result of labour opportunities (productive tasks), but also to ensure that housing and welfare needs of the family are met (reproductive tasks). Chant also suggests that the neoclassical perspective of migration views women as independent in terms of their mobility without adequate consideration of the gendered division of labour and intra-household decision making structures. Importantly, household organisation is central to the negotiation of resources and decisions as to who migrates, and when. Unlike other migration theories, the household strategy theory is able to account for human agency in the migration process. As such the rural poor are not 'passive victims' of global macro-economic forces, but are continuously seeking to improve their living conditions, albeit within structural constraints, and therefore migration is a conscious decision made as part of a broader household strategy to improve livelihoods (de Haas 2007). Despite its success in negotiating between neoclassical and Marxist migration theories, there are notable limitations. In particular, critics highlight that conflict, dissent and unequal power relations within the household are overlooked. The assumption that household resources are distributed equally amongst all members by a '*benevolent dictator*'

(Argarwal 1997), and that each household member participates equally in decision making, ignores the way in which women's voices are subordinated within the household, and how decision making power is used, usually by men, to determine who migrates where and when (Silvey 2004; Argarwal 1997). Hew (2003) proposes that household strategies instead mediate between the decision of an individual and the broader structural and economic forces at work; and in her study of female labour migration in Java Wolf (1992) explains that use of the term 'strategy' is misleading. Rather than a premeditated longer term plan, which the word 'strategy' implies, migration is better explained as a short term coping mechanism whereby individuals migrate in response to external shocks and vulnerabilities such as failed annual crops and emergency medical care.

2. Is migration beneficial for women?

Enmeshed in the ideological debate on migration is the question of whether the phenomenon results in positive or negative outcomes for migrants and their families, and in particular women, in both origin and destination locations. Over the last decade there has been a shift to a more favourable perspectives of migration flows and their relationship with development (Chappel et al 2010; Portes 2008; Deshingkar 2006; International Organisation for Migration 2010; Ghosh 2009; Wise et al 2013). The increasingly cited mantra of 'migration and development' has captured the attention of governments and multilateral organisations largely due to the purported positive effects of remittances[2] on rural poverty reduction. Supporting the economic rationality argument is the claim that migration empowers women by breaking down patriarchal relations in receiving destinations thereby increasing decision making power within the household. Within an international context mobility is promoted as a process of empowerment for women who immigrate to high income countries given the increased opportunity for employment and greater negotiating power within the household (International Organisation for Migration 2010; Skeldon 1999). Deshingkar (2006) suggests that internal migration has a positive effect on poverty through higher incomes and remittances however also highlights that poor migrants throughout the Global South remain socially and economically excluded and are particularly vulnerable given their insecure tenure status in the city. What is often lacking from the debate, however, are the personal motivations and aspirations of rural-urban migrants themselves. Do their experiences, both individual and collective, fit neatly into one or more of the theories defined in the academic debate? Or are personal experiences so inherently dynamic they are unable to be categorised and instead reflect a spectrum of theories either defined, or yet to be enunciated?

Several feminist authors have brought the voice of migrant women to the forefront of the mobility. Derks' (2008) ethnographic study of migrant women workers in Cambodia; Wolf's (1992) exploration of factory workers in Java; Thorbek's (1987) gender analysis of slum culture in Bangkok; Chant's (1991) study of female migration in Costa Rica; Erman's

2 Funds sent from migrants to family members remaining in the location of origin.

(2001, 1998) analysis of migrant women in Turkey's geckendous[3] and Hew's (2003) study of female labour migrants in Sarawak each unpack the stratum of migration theory within the context of women's lives, predominantly in the context of labour migration. These studies demonstrate that each migration experience is unique and, whilst there are similarities which can be neatly categorised (such as rural landlessness and income earning opportunities in the city), there are also complex social, cultural and political differentials which shape the process of migration and its impacts.

It is the diverse and gendered experience of migration which is omitted from studies claiming the transformational effects of remittances on household well-being and national Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and the positive impacts of mobility on gender equity and women's empowerment. Whilst remittances may provide an important source of income for rural families, this is often at a cost to migrants themselves; and although women may gain control over their material lives, patriarchal structures and values remain deeply entrenched (Arya & Roy 2006; Jolly & Reeves 2005). Relationships of power are also critical in analysing the consequences of migration for women, however are frequently omitted from analyses of migration processes and outcomes. Migration itself shapes social orders and inequalities and many women who migrate, whilst benefiting on one hand from increased earning capacity, experience social exclusion and marginalisation in the household, community and workplace through labour exploitation, inadequate housing conditions, marginalisation in the community on the basis of residential status, lack of access to health services and unequal distribution of resources within the household (Kabeer 1997; Erman 2001; Thorbek 1987). The denial of human rights protections for rural-urban migrant women, both in origin and destination locations, indicates that human rights violations 'multiply along migration paths' (Wise et al 2013, p.437) with migrants frequently moving from one situation of deprivation to another.

3. Migration and urban poverty in Cambodia

Since 1960 As a result of several decades of civil conflict Cambodia has experienced various periods of population movement, predominantly under forced conditions. The first wave of migration occurred in the early 1970s when those from rural areas fled to Phnom Penh or Thailand for protection from armed warfare between US backed government forces and the Viet Cong. It was in 1975 that Democratic Kampuchea (Khmer Rouge) took power with a specific agenda of agrarian reform. During this period private land ownership was abolished and the entire population of Phnom Penh, which had grown to 2 million people, were forcibly sent to the countryside to be re-educated as farmers (Chandler 2008; Fallavier 2009).

3 Geckendou is a Turkish word for an informal settlement.

Following the fall of the regime four years later, in 1979, many who had survived returned to Phnom Penh and occupied abandoned buildings and land on a first-come first-served basis (Beng & Payne 2004). The 1991 Paris Peace Agreements marked the beginning of the end of the civil war and saw the return of almost 750,000 refugees to Cambodia (ref). Most were unable to return to their rural homes due to heavily bombed agricultural land and damaged infrastructure. Instead, many chose to migrate to Phnom Penh. The genesis of informal, low-income settlements in occurred during this time and continued throughout the 1980s as settlements were established on vacant land - usually the least desirable plots of land beside railways or on river banks - and in close proximity to labour opportunities (Fallavier 2009).

In response to a growing urban population the Municipality of Phnom Penh (MPP) formally recognised many older settlements in 1985 by granting occupation rights which gave residents secure tenure, without land title, and access to compensation in the case of eviction. During this period the MPP also issued family books to those with occupation rights which provided access to government utility connections for a limited number of households. Families who arrived after this period settled on state public land and were tolerated by local authorities, however given no benefits (Fallavier 2009). In line with increased resistance to the formation of informal settlements the MPP established an blurred delineation between 'squatters' and 'urban poor' with the former defined as those who illegally occupy public or private land and the latter referring to households with some form of secure tenure, but not ownership. Fallavier (2009:75) highlights that in Cambodia the term squatter has meaning beyond tenure and translates to 'people living in anarchy'. The perception of 'squatters' as being a threat to the social order results in discrimination which is played out in the broader community and results in local authorities refusing to engage in dialogue with residents on issues such as infrastructure upgrading and land titling.

Today Cambodia has one of the highest urban growth rates in South East Asia (6 per cent annually) which sits in sharp contrast to the projected national growth rate of 1.7 per cent (National Institute of Statistics 2008; UN-HABITAT 2010). In 2009 there were 410 informal urban settlements and 40,548 urban poor families (almost a quarter of Phnom Penh's population) residing within Phnom Penh's eight districts (Sahmakum Teang Tnaut 2009). These settlements are located near railways, river banks, water reservoirs, rooftops, alleys and middle-occupancy buildings. Over the past ten years there has been a geographical shift of the urban poor to Phnom Penh's outer districts as increasing land value and government intervention pushes, often forcibly, settlements to the periphery of the city (Sahmakum Teang Tnaut 2009). Residents of low-income settlements continue to face significant social discrimination in the city. Discrimination also exists *within* low-income communities, mainly towards renters and seasonal migrants, given their perceived lack of stability and inability to contribute to savings groups and other NGO projects which promote collective organisation. Such social exclusion significantly limits the resource and support networks of individuals and households, which further compounds economic vulnerability (Fallavier 2009).

4. Methodology

This paper is based on the findings of a study conducted with rural-urban migrant women in Phnom Penh's informal settlements and explores not only the commonality of their experience, but the diversity of their lives. Fieldwork for this research was conducted over a six month period during 2010 and 2011 and included focus groups and in-depth interviews with 49 women. Six informal urban settlements were selected for inclusion in the study. The size and socio-economic conditions of each community varied significantly. Poor, yet slightly better off settlements had high rates of home ownership, active participation in NGO-initiated community groups and housing constructed from higher quality building materials such as concrete and tiles. Women in these communities had generally worked in garment factories at some stage, with many now remaining at home to manage the household and care for children. Husbands were often *motodop*[4] drivers. Structures in poorer settlements were made from recycled materials including bamboo, tin, or wood, and most families rented their homes. Infrastructure, including drainage and road access, was inadequate with solid waste often blocking access routes and accumulating under and next to houses. Women in these settlements earned income through the informal sector[5] often as waste pickers, street vendors or sex workers.

Participants were diverse in terms of their age (20 to 62 years of age), province of origin, length of residency, work type, family structure, education and marital status. Half had lived in Phnom Penh for five years or less including five women who migrated in the last 12 months. In addition to a broad spread of ages women had also migrated from numerous provinces (ten in total) with Prey Veng being the most common place of origin. None of the women interviewed had completed secondary school and 13 had not completed any schooling at all. The highest level of education attained was Grade 8. Just under half of the women participated in NGO-initiated community groups to varying degrees – some were active members and others were 'notional' members, however had not attended meetings or contributed to savings schemes. Several women were specifically excluded from community groups on the basis that they were renters.

5. From rural to urban: Why are women moving?

Rural-urban migrant women moved to Phnom Penh for a range of reasons and in each case exercised varying degrees of agency in the decision to move ranging from complete control to limited, if any, voice. The primary driver for migration was poverty and limited economic opportunities in their ancestral province. Women migrated in search of a better life for themselves, their families who migrate with them, and immediate kin who remain in the province. In some cases women migrated simply as a means of survival.

4 A '*motodop*' is motorbike taxi.

5 There is no official definition of the informal sector in Cambodia however it is generally accepted to be unregistered and unregulated economic activity (ILO 2006).

Land plays a critical role in rural livelihoods and those with insufficient landholdings are unable to access the primary means of livelihood in the province – rice farming. Whilst some landless women worked in rice fields owned by other families, the income generated was irregular and insufficient to support a household even where husbands and children assist in agricultural work. The absence of alternate rural livelihoods forces families to seek employment in the city. Almost all of the women interviewed were landless and cited this as a critical factor in their decision to migrate to the city. They had either sold land to pay off debts (usually high interest loans from money lenders to pay for medical emergencies) had very small landholdings, or had not owned land previously. Several women moved to Phnom Penh to escape abusive family situations. Eight young single women migrated in search of garment factory work as a means of supporting their parental families in the province. This migration was usually initiated by parents, and undertaken despite the tensions surrounding the independent mobility of young women (Brickell 2012; Jacobsen 2008; Derks 2008). On one hand young women are expected to earn income to support their parental families, with the garment and manufacturing export sector providing one of the few opportunities to do so. However women's physical distance from their ancestral province, far from the surveillance of parents and relatives, often leads to assumptions and accusations regarding their sexual behaviour and moral conduct (Derks 2008; Jacobsen 2008). Women also spoke of their desire for modernity in regard to their living conditions (electricity), personal appearance (clothes and jewellery) and employment (machines as opposed to back-breaking outdoor manual labour in the rice fields) as a key factor which influenced their decision to migrate to Phnom Penh.

The initial drivers for migration are only one side of the story. In our conversations I explored with women the discussions and negotiations that took place within the household, and sometimes the community, which resulted in the decision to move to Phnom Penh. The initial suggestion to migrate was made by either women, their husbands, or in several cases a mother or sibling with the final decision usually made jointly with husbands after a period of negotiation, or solely by the women themselves. A small number of participants explained it was their husbands or parents who made the final decision, however only often after a period of consultation, demonstrating that women are proactive in the migration process. The initial impetus to move to Phnom Penh came not only from the household itself, but also from community and kin. Neighbours and relatives, either resident in Phnom Penh or migrant returnees to the village, were important conduits of information regarding city life and work prospects. In many cases they were highly influential, actively encouraging women and their husbands to seek work in Phnom Penh to relieve financial pressure. For others, particularly young women migrating in search of work in garment factories, the influence from peers who returned to the province with money and consumer goods purchased with garment factory wages was more subtle. Channak[6] explained this to me:

6 Pseudonyms have been used for all participant names.

There are a lot of women from my province who moved to work in the city. After they come to work here they have something new and modern so others want to come and earn money like them (Channak, Age 31, Interview 11).

For those living in extreme situations of rural poverty, the question of whether there was in fact a decision to be made must also be considered. For Sina and her family there was no choice *'if we continued to live there we would die because we had nothing to eat'*. Theary also explained that she exercised limited choice in her decision to migrate:

At that time my father died and my three sisters were small. My family situation was difficult so I had to force myself to move and work in the city. I followed my friend who was my neighbour in the province. My mother did not want me to come but I had to because I had no choice (Theary, Age 30, Interview 14).

The examination of women's motivations to migrate, and their agency in the process, demonstrates the complexity of each individual experience. Both men and women are key decision makers in regard to household mobility, usually following a period of negotiation with their spouse. Young women often migrate in search of work to support their parental families and identify as having made this decision themselves; however this decision is framed within strong cultural expectations of dutiful daughters and mothers (Brickell 2012; Derks 2008; Jacobsen 2008; Gorman et al 1999). The impetus for both Sina and Theary's migration demonstrates that the distinction between forced and voluntary is not always clear.

6. Multiple dimensions of exclusion and vulnerability in the city

6.1 Economic vulnerability

High levels of economic and social vulnerability characterise the lives of women in Phnom Penh's informal urban communities. Each of the participants directly linked the many issues and struggles of their daily lives in the city to financial pressure in the household. The average daily income for households[7] ranged from 4800 riel (USD1.20) to 20,000 riel (USD5.00) per day. The fluctuation of daily income and high cost of living in the city were of particular concern and impacted women and their families in various ways. Firstly women were often unable to support their children's education with just under a third of women separated from their young children who remained in the province with relatives. In some cases this was not only to facilitate schooling, but the challenge of financially supporting extended families in Phnom Penh. One woman, Sunla, explained to me that because her uncle's family were considered 'rich' they could take better care of her son. Phearun had also chosen to live separately from her daughter in order to provide a more stable environment:

7 The average household size is 4.7 people (NIS 2009).

I miss my daughter, but if she stays here I am a renter and I move a lot, so she has to move schools all the time. I left her in the province since she was five years old (Phearun, Age 41, Interview 02).

Phearun's daughter is now thirteen. The emotional impact to women was evident as they explained the emotional strain and heartache of leaving young children behind.

Women also cited significantly higher costs in the city, particularly for food and rent, which absorb much of the additional income earned in the city. Poorer households are unable to access official state connections to water and electricity, instead paying up to 70 per cent more for services purchased from private vendors. Economic vulnerability also limits the ability of women and their families to absorb external shocks, most commonly health problems. Due to the high cost of health care women and their families had rarely visited a health facility, or obtained loans from money lenders at high interest rates for emergency medical care. These conditions also reflect the denial of multiple human rights including the right to an adequate standard of living, which encompasses the right to adequate housing and the right to water, and the right to health (Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 25; International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights Article 11 and Article 12). Consequently, women felt there was minimal change in their living standards following migration. The perceived benefits of city life were the ability to earn a regular and more stable income when compared to seasonal agricultural production in the province.

6.2 Work in the informal sector

Women were largely employed in low skilled and poorly paid work, predominantly in the informal sector which lacks 'formal contracts, rights, regulations and bargaining power' (Davis 2006, p.181). Labour exploitation including long work hours, low pay and limited work options reflects women's limited access to labour and the violation of the right to fair work, pay and reasonable hours as outlined in international human rights law (Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 23; International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights Article 7). Those without formal education, and those lacking the connections necessary to secure work in garment factories, migrated with the intention of finding work as a street trader, waste picker or beer promoter. Several studies have outlined links between the Cambodia's demographic imbalance, lack of job opportunities in the labour market and resulting reliance on the informal sector, particularly for women (Lee 2006; International Labour Organisation 2006). This has resulted in a disproportionate number of women in the informal sector, many of whom are rural-urban migrants earning less than their male counterparts. Waitress and waste pickers earned the lowest daily income at just over USD1 per day. Several participants were employed in garment factories at some stage prior to their current paid or unpaid work to support their parental families in the province. However many women had shifted from garment factory work to waste collection or other informal sector work, explaining that they preferred informal sector work when compared to the rigidity and regulation of garment factory jobs. The move to informal sector work was also driven by the need to earn daily, rather than monthly, income.

The capacity to earn higher and more regular income was one of the key motivators for women in their decision to migrate. Whilst balancing higher income with the higher cost of living in the city, the increased choice that women gained over their work options offered a subtle form of agency exercised within social and cultural boundaries. Although a significant source of marginalisation on one hand, work in the informal sector provides *opportunities* for women to break new ground in their urban lives when compared with the province. What remains unclear, and therefore requires further investigation, is the disconnect between women's often substantial economic contributions to the household and bargaining power within this domain, as will be discussed further in this paper.

6.3 Remittances

Globally remittances represent the second most important external funding source for developing countries (Lopez-Ekra et al 2011) and governments are now embracing the potential that such flows can have on GDP and economic growth. Studies to date have focused largely on the impact to the recipient household and communities in the context of international migration, rather than remitting individuals and households. Portes (2008) suggests that the benefits of remittances are overstated from the perspective of the recipient family within an international context. Based on discussions with women in Phnom Penh it appears that in the context of rural-urban migration the benefits may also be overstated for those in the sending destination given the vulnerability (poor housing, neglected health and nutrition and exploitative work) which women encounter in order to remit funds.

Most women had sent remittances to their families in the province at some point following their migration to Phnom Penh, and just over half were currently remitting funds. Women further compromised their own health, security and living conditions in order to maximise the amount of money sent to their families. Women would skip meals, work two or three jobs, or walk two hours each way to their place of work to save additional money to remit to their families in the province. Those who were unable to send money regularly saved what they could for special occasions to remit. Although this research did not focus specifically on remittances it was apparent that the payment of money to rural kin often operated as an additional impediment to women in informal urban settlements as they struggle to support their own lives in the city, and also those of their families in the province. Whilst remittances may go some way to combating economic poverty in rural areas there has been limited analysis of the way in which remittances compound urban poverty for migrants. Further research is required to fully analyse the impact of remittances for women, and their families, who are disbursing funds.

6.4 Sexual and gender based violence

The work which women undertake in the city as a means of survival, and to support their families in the province, exposes them to a high risk of sexual and gender based violence which has been reported specifically in relation to garment factory workers, beer promoters and sex workers (Taylor 2011; Makin & Sakada 2006; Amnesty International 2011). Many participants spoke of the harassment and violence which they and others women had experienced since migrating to the city including domestic violence and rape. Whilst no research has been conducted on domestic violence in informal urban settlements in Cambodia[8] several studies highlight the link between financial pressure, alcohol abuse and domestic violence in both urban and rural households (Gender and Development for Cambodia 2010; Brickell 2008). Women who participated in this study often cited men's consumption of alcohol as one of the main problems in their community, and highlighted the relationship between alcohol consumption, domestic violence and intra-community conflict. The experience of sexual and gender based violence for women in informal settlements is a violation of multiple human rights (Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 3 and Article 5; Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment 1984; UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women 1992) and impacts women's sense of security and safety both in the household and the wider community.

6.5 Social networks, isolation and exclusion

Urban informal settlements are heterogeneous and are sites of both conflict and cooperation with notable intra-community disparities in terms of wealth and power (de Wit and Berner 2009). Migrants are located on the periphery of informal settlements in Phnom Penh both geographically and socially. Social exclusion operates in various dimensions and at differing levels and is, fundamentally, the inability of individuals, for reasons beyond their control, to access opportunities, resources and rights which others in society are able to access (Burchardt 2000; Pearce 2001). For migrant women in informal settlements social exclusion is experienced primarily through the inability to participate in formal institutions (education, health and finance) and social structures (political and community participation) as a direct result of discrimination and lack of resources.

At the individual level rural-urban migrant women are severely excluded from community activities, including projects initiated by NGOs, and rarely engage socially outside of the community. Often networks within the community were also limited however patron client connections, which are necessary for survival, were present for the majority of women. Social exclusion impacts significantly on the confidence of women and many new migrants

8 Whilst no studies have focused specifically on domestic violence in informal urban settlements in Cambodia, the high rate of domestic violence in Cambodia has been discussed extensively in the literature (*See* Ministry of Women's Affairs 2009; Bricknell 2008 & 2011; Surtees 2009; Santry 2005; Gender and Development for Cambodia 2010).

feel nervous or ashamed to request assistance from their neighbours on arrival. Sreyya knew no one in the Phnom Penh when she migrated with her husband and grandson. She pitched a tarpaulin on a spare piece of land and observed how other waste pickers worked:

> *It was difficult. I was afraid because I didn't know people and I didn't know what to do. So I followed other waste pickers and when I saw others collect and then they put into their bag, I did the same thing (Sreyya, Age 52, Interview 26).*

I asked Sreyya whether there were people in the community that she could talk to about her problems, including domestic violence:

> *I don't talk to my neighbours often, I have no time. I just say a few words and then come back to do my work (Sreyya, Age 52, Interview 26).*

Lack of time and confidence is compounded by intra-community dynamics which operate to exclude renters. Poorer communities are characterised by a highly transient population who rent properties on both a short and long-term basis. Of the women interviewed eighteen were renters and six were under an unusual arrangement whereby they owned the physical structure (mainly recycled building materials including bamboo and plastic sheeting) but paid half of the negotiated rent for the land with the remainder being subsidised by an NGO. The discrimination which renters encounter takes various forms. Renters explained that they were not permitted to participate in NGO supported community groups as they were perceived to be unreliable, transient and lacking the financial capacity to participate. One afternoon I was discussing these problems with Srey Momm who explained that migrants were normally not permitted to join community groups. Another woman who had overheard this part of our conversation was quick to confirm this, explaining that the group was only for villagers who owned a house. Those who didn't could leave at any time and had no right to join the group. Srey Momm had been renting in the community for two years and had a well-established food stall at the front of her house. Yet despite her active and long-term presence in the community she was not permitted to participate in community groups given her status as a renter. Other women also commented that even though they were interested in the group, participation was difficult as meetings were held during the day when they were working.

Post-migration networks were critical in securing housing and finding work, with a high degree of reliance on relatives or neighbours. Of the women interviewed only three had migrated to Phnom Penh without the assistance of neighbours or urban relatives. The strong reliance on such networks reflects the social structure of Cambodian society which is based on relationships of reciprocity with kin and patrons (Ledgerwood 2002; Kim 2011). Individuals and households without these networks experience an added degree of difficulty in their lives as they negotiate access to various resource and support networks.

Within informal settlements women interact with neighbours as well as kin, mainly to share information or borrow small amounts of rice or money. When I asked women who they spoke to when they had a problem the most common responses were either a community leader or sister. Women frequently commented that they had no one to speak to about their problems. Although several participants continued contact with friends they had met whilst working in garment factories, women commonly described their social isolation both within and outside of the community in terms of friendships, but also engagement with formal institutions and structures including banking, health and police services, and local government authorities. Those most isolated, even within their immediate community, were the poorest women. By comparison, women who had worked in either waged labour or as small traders in the market in Phnom Penh were better connected, perhaps due to the networking skills and confidence they had developed through their employment.

7. Negotiating small gains

The majority of participants stated that whilst Phnom Penh offered a greater range of income earning opportunities which paid more money, and more regularly, their expenditure in the city was much higher. Food and vegetables, which were previously grown and harvested for free in the province, now cost money. The cost of rent and utilities were significantly higher and transport (usually *motodop*) was an additional cost to be factored into the weekly budget. The fluctuation of daily income results in families borrowing small amounts of money from neighbours, usually for food, which are then repaid when household cash flow improves. In more serious circumstances families return to the province for short periods as a safety net, yet inevitably migrate back to the city. Given these challenges, several women expressed a desire to return to the province. Sros came to the city with her husband and first child many years ago but wished to return to the province:

> *Now I am always hard on myself because I have made a decision that was wrong already. I sold the house to come to Phnom Penh and now we don't have anything in the province so we cannot go back. When we first arrived it seemed like the people here they looked down on us and don't talk to us. This makes me very sad so my feeling is that I just want to go back but I don't know how to do it (Sros, Age 53, Interview 30).*

Unlike Sros, the majority of women indicated that they would not consider returning citing numerous reasons including the lack of income earning opportunities, the relative ease of work in Phnom Penh when compared to the rice fields, access to electricity, better education for their children, and the shame of returning to the province unsuccessful.

> *It's not good for me to go back with nothing because my family moved here for four or five years, but we have nothing left. So if I go to live back in the province with nothing I will feel embarrassed (Rathana, Age 24, Int25).*

Despite the difficulties they encountered in their daily lives, the benefits of city life outweighed those in the province even though net improvements were marginal in terms of living conditions and livelihoods.

> *Normally people dream something big, but sometimes we cannot reach that dream. At least my family can live in a better situation even though it's not so good like what I thought, but at least it is better (Channak, Age 31, Interview 11).*

If we move beyond an economic analysis, many of the subtle changes in social relations and household dynamics for women become apparent. When women were asked why they decided to move to the city the most common response was *'there was nothing to do in the province'*. By this women meant that there were limited, if any, livelihood opportunities other than rice farming. Women explained that although the city had not provided its promised benefits, work was easier and more flexible when compared with the province. In comparison to hard manual labour in the rice fields, women felt working in a garment factory or picking waste offered more flexibility, and was physically easier. Women also perceived they had more livelihood opportunities in Phnom Penh when compared with the province and it was not uncommon for women to move between different jobs. Greater choice and flexibility of work translated to slight improvements in economic security for women and their families, which was previously absent in the province. However this does not circumvent the fact that women's work was largely unskilled and poorly paid, nor does it suggest that women's increased financial value translated to greater bargaining power in the household.

Although women may have made small gains within the public sphere this was not necessarily the case within the household. An often cited benefit of migration for women its ability to challenge gender norms and patriarchy given exposure to new ideas and ways of living (Ghosh 2009; Skeldon 1999; International Organisation for Migration 2010). However participants in this study identified that both they and their husbands continued to subscribe to socially constructed gender roles in the household. It is important to contextualise Cambodia's migratory movements within a post-conflict setting. The role of women as custodians of culture is particularly important given the return to strong traditional norms following the period of civil conflict which, amongst many detrimental impacts, restricts the mobility of young women (Jacobsen 2008; Derks 2008). There remain strong cultural norms in contemporary Cambodian society regarding women's conduct, behaviour and roles (Brickell 2012). Men are responsible for external relations whilst women are confined to those activities which are centred on the domestic sphere. Young women must remain physically close to their mothers to maintain the family honour and their own marriage prospects. Later in life women are predominantly responsible for household affairs, including finances and child rearing, in both urban and rural settings. However it is also suggested, in other patriarchal contexts, that husbands generally exert *control* over financial resources, in making key policy decisions regarding allocation, leaving women responsible for the *management* of those resources which involves implementing

policy decisions into practice (Kabeer 1997). This was certainly the case for the majority of women I interviewed. When talking with women about the process of decision making in their household I found that men were primarily deferred to as the key decision makers and household head. Women could often voice their opinions however the final decision would rest with men given they were perceived to be household head, even where women contributed significantly, and in some cases solely, to household income. Whilst there was a degree of joint decision making, major decisions were predominantly made by men particularly in the area of health, children's schooling and purchase of assets. In addition, men rarely assisted with domestic chores or childrearing even where women spent a significant proportion of their time engaged in productive work. In several cases women were instructed by their husbands not to work so that they could properly attend to their domestic responsibilities. Despite family situations adapting as a result of migration, decision-making and power within the household changed only in subtle forms, and in limited circumstances, even where women contributed significantly to household income. Women with increased agency were those with higher levels of education, or those who had been employed in waged-labour. Erman (2001) identified similar outcomes for women in Ankara's squatter settlements where husbands devalued their wives financial contributions and often instructed them to quit work in order to attend to their gendered duties in the household. Erman (2001:125) argues that whilst women may take pride in their achievements and contributions to the family post-migration, this does not necessarily challenge existing household power structures resulting in 'traditional patriarchy attempt[ing] to reproduce itself under urban conditions.'

However agency and influence operate at multiple levels and women with extended families often commented that younger siblings, particularly sisters, would seek their advice which gave some women a personal sense of control and authority. Sunla transitioned between rural and city life, often at the request of her parents, and in response to her familial obligations as the eldest daughter. Now settled in Phnom Penh with her husband and several siblings who also moved from the province her decision-making capacity in the household operates at differing levels and in nebulous forms. In relation to her siblings she identifies herself as the head of the household given that she is the eldest sister and has the power to 'control'. With her husband the relationship is markedly different: '*he is the one who makes the final decision after our contribution'*. Yet Sunla also describes the way in which household members come together to jointly discuss significant decisions, often deferring to their parents for advice. For Sunla her varying levels of agency in the household are inextricably linked with multiple and gendered roles – as an older sister, as a wife and as a daughter.

In considering whether migrant women are able to exercise choice and agency in the spheres of household and community post-migration the outcome is varied. For some the process of migration has provided waged labour opportunities, which, when combined with other pre-existing factors such as completion of primary education, results in a higher degree of bargaining power in the household. However for the majority of women power

dynamics in the household are reproduced post-migration even in circumstances where women contribute significant financial resources to the household, which was the case for most respondents working in the informal sector.

8. Conclusion

The argument that migration significantly benefits women who move from rural villages to urban city centres may be correct in certain cases, however for those who migrate to informal settlements this is often not the case. Through multiple social exclusions women experience economic vulnerability and social isolation, which is often exacerbated by the payment of remittances. Women's migration is often undertaken in response to the violation of human rights in rural areas, however life in the city often entrenches women's lack of access to human rights protections including labour exploitation, sexual and gender based violence, and lack of access to health, safe housing, water and sanitation, and education. Despite these challenges, women gain an increased level of control within their lives even where gendered norms are reproduced in the household, and where economic contributions to the household fail to result in increased bargaining power. Many women are able to exercise choice over work options, even where the only options available are poorly paid and low skilled jobs. For others, regular income and the ability to plan for the future outweighs the higher costs of city living and social isolation. However it should not be assumed that migration automatically improves the position of women in the household. As I found in Cambodia, and as Kabeer (1997) demonstrated in Bangladesh, and small gains are made within cultural and gendered boundaries. Whilst migration offers the *opportunity* for a better life, structural inequities, power and social exclusion must be better understood in the context of heterogeneous communities, including the way in which migrant women negotiate or participate in these structures, to maximise gains at the individual and community level. Reconceptualization of the development and migration paradigm requires a radical shift from the current discourse which is grounded in neoliberal ideology. In short, we need to move beyond a crude economic assessment of the benefits for individuals (in both the receiving and sending destination) to a more dynamic consideration of the way in which power and exclusion shapes the diversity of women's experiences and identities, particularly as rapid urbanisation and globalization drive rural populations to informal settlements in urban areas where existing and new forms of marginalisation are produced and reproduced.

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