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**The ‘Stubborn Stain’ on Development:
Gendered Meanings of Housework (Non)-Participation in Cambodia**

Abstract

The persistence of intra-household inequality is widely regarded as a ‘stubborn stain’ on development achievements and aspirations. As a key hindrance, this paper considers gendered meanings of housework undertaken in male-headed households of Siem Reap, Cambodia. Encompassing cooking, cleaning and child-care as forms of unpaid labour performed in the home, the paper uses in-depth interviews to reveal the differential discourses that men and women draw upon to explain current variances in the (non)-sharing of this work. The paper thereby brings to the fore the diversity, and divergence, of meanings surrounding this everyday practice, discursive domains of domestic inequality which must inform future development interventions and programmes. Until such time that these underlying discourses are taken seriously in the development arena, the paper argues that women’s housework will remain largely tied to appeals to cultures, traditions and customs that guard against the ‘cleaning up’ of housework injustice.

Introduction

From earlier days of feminist research in developing countries, when the household was established as a primary site of gender subordination (Kabeer and Joekes, 1991), it is still widely contended in gender and development (GAD) analysis that the persistence of intra-household inequality is a key stumbling block to achieving gender equality and wider development goals. Indeed, as Barker (2008: 2) contends, 'promoting equal responsibilities between men and women in care giving is at the heart of one of the most challenging and lingering aspects of gender inequality: the historical social division of labour'. Through research undertaken on housework in male-headed households of Siem Reap, Cambodia, this paper argues that critical and complex questions remain concerning the factors sustaining women's predominant responsibility for housework, as well as those which are conversely encouraging men to take on a greater role in household endeavours. Revealing the differential discourses that men and women draw upon to explain current variances in the (non)-sharing of this labour, the paper contends that unless this discursive domain of domestic inequality is addressed within development interventions at all scales, the 'stubborn stain' of household injustice will remain. The paper ends by outlining these policy reflections and implications.

Housework as the ‘Stubborn Stain’ on Development

The focus of this paper on housework and the perceived factors influencing Cambodian men’s and women’s differential engagement in it, feeds into larger debates and concerns in the development arena that despite decades of effort, ‘large parts of the “mainstream” in all our societies, including their androcentrism and male bias, remain stubbornly intact’ (Woodford-Berger, 2007:131). Indeed, thirty years on from Ann Oakley’s (1974) seminal work on the equation of femaleness with housewifery, the unyielding distribution of housework remains problematic, in two main, though not exclusive, regards.

The first main ‘stubborn’ issue is the ‘double burden’ that is placed on women as they cope with the multiple tasks of housework, childcare, and an ever-expanding involvement in paid employment. Indeed, the ubiquity of this trend has led Jackson (2000) to argue that the notion of women being overworked in relation to men has achieved a somewhat foundational status in gender analysis of development. As Chant (2007: 336) ventures, this situation can be understood as a ‘feminisation of responsibility and obligation’ whereby rising numbers of poor women of all ages must negotiate these competing demands. This means that despite women’s increasing share of market earnings, rigidities within household divisions of labour act as ‘brakes on the equilibrating process’ with women’s efforts in generating income transforming few women’s positions within the household (Kabeer, 1994: 105). Acknowledging the multiplicity of gender forms, for married women who are not involved in income-earning activities, the question of housework burdens and men’s housework participation may also be of salience: first, given such burdens can discourage women

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3 to pursue individual employment desires and second, because some women do not
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5 have the power to shape choices such as the decision to work, thus rendering their
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7 housewifery role personally problematic.
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12 The second main 'stubborn' difficulty concerning housework relates to gender and
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14 societal norms that continue to emphasise women's natural proclivity and primary
15
16 duty for housework. It is the case that naturalistic arguments are habitually invoked in
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18 order to highlight women's innate abilities within, and affinities to, the domestic
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20 sphere. As a corollary, women's familial obligations are often problematically linked
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22 to women's supposed orientation towards fulfilling collective, rather than personal
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24 interests (Brickell and Chant, 2010). Hence, in many societies embedded gender
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26 regimes and 'cultural values' continue to promote the idea of women as 'naturally
27
28 ordained' bearers of housework responsibility.
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36 Cognisant with this, national level authorities often show the propensity to reinforce
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38 such ideals. The Malaysian government, for example, has backed a number of
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40 patriarchal initiatives, including the Happy Family (*Keluarga Bahargia*) campaign
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42 which includes constant exhortations to the population to observe family values in
43
44 their everyday lives, including that women should take care of the home and children
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46 (Stivens, 2006). In regard to national rhetoric then, 'negotiations over the simple tasks
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48 of child-care, cleaning, shopping and cooking are less simple than they might seem at
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50 first glance. They must challenge long-standing gender norms of the social meaning
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52 of gender itself' (Cravey, 1997: 176). Even in countries where legislative changes and
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54 political campaigns have encouraged men to share the burden of work, for example,
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56 laws have not necessarily tackled deeply embedded social practices. Although Cuba
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3 instigated the first direct assault on the 'second shift' (*Sobrecargo*) through its 1974
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5 drafting of a family code, (this included the requirement that men do half the
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7 housework), women continue to bear primary responsibility for domestic chores due
8
9 to engrained gender norms and a lack of monitoring and enforcement (Benería and
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11 Sen, 1982). Indeed, as most recently expressed in a major Organisation for Economic
12
13 Co-operation and Development (2010: 4) report on non-OECD countries, 'a critical
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15 but often missing element of the debate surrounding gender equality is a better
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17 understanding of the underlying reasons behind gender inequality', namely long
18
19 lasting codes of conduct, norms and traditions – often instilled in household divisions
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21 of labour – that determine gender outcomes. It is these baseline domestic beliefs and
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23 values that this paper argues must be placed more squarely within development
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25 debates and interventions.
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36 **Gendered Meanings and Practices of Housework**

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41 While the previous section examined the 'stubbornness' of housework as a
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43 development issue, it is important to stress that women who are burdened housework
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45 responsibilities can potentially negotiate such rigidity. While in the past a pervasive
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47 myth of family solidarity and unity tainted the approach of academics, development
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49 practitioners and policy-makers, intra-household relations are now represented as a
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51 continuous process of negotiations, contracts, renegotiations and exchanges between
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53 household members. While this paper does not focus on the bargaining ploys that go
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55 on between husband and wife, it does highlight the gendered vocabularies used to
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57 sustain, and in contrast, erode, the idea of women as singularly obliged to fulfill
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housework chores (see Brickell, 2008b in relation to discourses used to ‘explain’ domestic violence). As Hall (1997: 6) evidences, such ‘discursive formations’ can be understood as definitions of ‘what is and what is not appropriate in our formulation of, and our practices in relation to, a particularly subject or site of social activity; what knowledge is considered useful, relevant, and “true” in that context; and what sorts of persons or “subjects” embody its characteristics’. Hence, with specific reference to housework, this paper reflects a move away from viewing individuals as subjugated to, and products of, discourse, and instead takes the approach that men and women are continuously involved in the reconstitution of domestic ‘truths’ (Lilja, 2009). Just as the household is seen then as a space of divergent interests and aspirations arising from gender and generational differences, it is the case that the discourses drawn upon to justify housework (non)-participation are likely to be accordingly pluri-vocal and conflictual. Nevertheless, while people may identify representations of multiple, and even competing ways of being a man or women rather than binary modes of being, the paper brings to the fore the normative underpinnings of gender which dependent on an individual’s positioning within the household and wider power geometries, render particularly kinds of being a man/woman more acceptable than others.

To tease out these connections further, it is critical to consider men’s viewpoints on the (non)-sharing of housework, viewpoints in academia that have been at best neglected, and at worst, become paradigmatic of an assumed non-interest and non-participation on the part of men. Indeed, as Pearson (2000: 219) queries, while ‘there is overwhelming evidence that globalisation offers women increased participation in labour and other markets, often at the price of the intensification of women’s work burden... what are the implications for men?’. Questioning these implications are

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3 vital as Connell (2005) contends, since boys and men are essentially 'gatekeepers' to
4 gender equality, often controlling women's access to the resources needed to claim
5 justice in the domestic sphere.
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12 At the same time that scholars have called for a greater exploration of the 'male side
13 of the coin', so too have there been calls to account for what motivates wives to
14 accept unequal housework divisions that preserve male privilege (Zuo and Jiping,
15 2001). As Chant (2006: 207-208) notes, for women who 'encroach' upon the 'male
16 terrain' of paid work, many re-double their efforts to live up to ideals attached to
17 norms of 'good wives' and 'dutiful daughters' to counteract stigma. Women may thus
18 view offers of housework as a negotiating strategy rather than as a source of
19 oppression, resulting in women taking on additional labour burdens (Gates, 2002).
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34 Indeed, this is potentially because of men's inflexible attitudes towards change which
35 can curtail women's life chances. Where housework participation is highlighted, for
36 example, the sometimes-mutable language surrounding it remains a hindrance. In
37 Mexico, Gutmann (1996) suggests that while husbands feel at ease in responding
38 (occasionally) to women's immediate needs by what they call 'helping out', they are
39 not prepared to overturn the cultural orthodoxy of women's domestic labour. Thus,
40 joint responsibility for domestic work may be verbally expressed, but not necessarily
41 in ways that overcome gendered-biased attitudes. Indeed, as Connell (2005) admits,
42 although some men accept change in principle, in practice they still act in ways that
43 sustain men's dominance and assign domestic labour and child care to women. Again,
44 the importance is illuminated of understanding - and ultimately attending to - the
45 connections between the rhetorical and the practical in relation to domestic inequality.
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Housework in a Cambodian Context

Like many countries of the Global South, Cambodia is currently in the midst of dramatic change associated with its move away from socialist economic systems to market-driven capitalist ones. The Cambodian government in the pursuit of transformation has placed great emphasis on foreign investment with large amounts (at least up until the financial crisis of 2008) surfacing in construction, the service sector and garment industry. With women's labour force participation the highest in the region, women's equality with men has been championed by government mainly on the grounds that women represent the 'nation's invaluable assets' driving economic development (UNIFEM et al. 2004: 22). In fact, women's economic activity rate (for those aged 15-64) is only marginally less than for men (78.8% versus 81.6%) (NIS, 2009) with national level data indicating that women are now taking on a wider range of domestic *and* non-domestic roles than in the past (UNIFEM et al. 2004). Gendered divisions of labour within the household have nevertheless remained more constant with little revaluation of domestic and child-rearing responsibilities having been facilitated within this altered social situation (Brickell, 2008a). Indeed, national level data illustrates how women spend more than twice as much time as men on housework (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2007: 17).

One extreme rupture however that suspended this status quo linking traditional and present-day rhythms of domestic life was that of the Khmer Rouge regime. During its reign between 1975 and 1979 all kinship networks were shattered, including women's pivotal roles as mothers. With the family reconfigured into a collective entity, and

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3 egalitarianism sought in all aspects of life, Pol Pot and his cadre assigned men and
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5 women the same tasks in agriculture, irrigation, and even as militia. As Kumar et al.
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7 (2001: 44) explain, in the aftermath of the regime new opportunities to participate in
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9 the economic sphere opened up because of the mass mobilisation of men into the
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11 military, mass killing, and increased labour demand for war and rehabilitation work.
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13 Combined with the banishment by Pol Pot of Buddhist derived codes for women that
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15 offered practical advice on societal relations and comportment within the domestic
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17 realm, traditional sexual division of labour were undermined. It is these traditional
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19 rules from a time rooted in a golden age before genocide and colonisation that
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21 continue however to form a key basis for the ideals on which present-day women are
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23 judged, and on which international agencies centre their concern (see Brickell, 2011).
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25 In the *Cambodia Demographic Health Survey* (2005: 272), for example, women were
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27 asked the question, ‘husbands should not help with housework chores?’ with
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29 disagreement taken to reflect gender-egalitarian ideals. Pointing to a continuity of
30
31 traditional thinking, in the case study province of Siem Reap, only 0.8% of women
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33 disagreed with this statement (National Institute of Statistics, 2005). It is to these
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35 patterns of female servitude however which some development actors in Cambodian
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37 society are starting to pay some attention.
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48 First, in a press release by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in June 2009,
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50 a positive example is provided of male participation in family life (via the work of
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52 ‘The Women’s Entrepreneurship Development and Equality’ programme). Hailed the
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54 ‘Mr Mom of the Cambodian Countryside’ the press release outlines the experiences of
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56 a village leader in Takeo Province who ‘rushes home early from his social functions
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58 and other chiefly duties to get the cows in from the field and the family dinner on the
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3 fire (literally)' (ILO, 2009). The actions of 'Mr Mom' are related to the business
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5 advances his wife has made selling unique boxes to up-market tourist shops, earnings
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7 from which are only possible if unconstrained by housework. By referring to 'Mr
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9 Mom' however, the ILO may unintentionally infer that in doing housework, men are
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11 somehow acting like (American) mothers, not fathers in their own right, and
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13 moreover, that men's help in domestic labour is actionable only through economic
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15 imperatives rather than rights or ideal-oriented changes.
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22 Second is the work of the Cambodian Men's Network who as part of their national-
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24 level engagement produces publicity to promote housework as a central element of
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26 gender equality.ⁱ In the poster entitled 'Gender equality is the foundation of family
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28 happiness' a young family is depicted (Figure 1). The domestic scene includes a
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30 father washing the dishes and looking back towards his wife and son engaged in
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32 reading practice.
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55 While the husband is clothed in semi-traditional dress with a scarf (*krama*) around his
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57 waist, and his wife wears a sarong (*sampot samloy*), the key message is that despite
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59 adherence to customs such as these, changes must occur within domestic divisions of
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3 labour. The network also projects this message in another poster illustrating a father
4 holding his baby entitled, 'Men can do the housework too!!'. Aligning childcare with
5 household responsibilities, the poster tries to place greater emphasis on paternal
6 obligation to adopt more gender-egalitarian ways by making men see housework as
7 something integral to their parental role rather than merely a set of tasks to do.
8 Promoting such programme interventions and messages at the wider scale is likely to
9 be particularly problematic in Cambodia where a dearth of knowledge surrounds men
10 and masculinity. As aforementioned gatekeepers to domestic level change then, it is
11 Cambodian male as well as female voices that this paper uncovers.
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27 **Researching Gendered Meanings of Housework**

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32 The qualitative research methodology was conducted in two main stages, in the first
33 comprising oral histories (100) and discussion groups (25), and in the second (after a
34 period of initial analysis), semi-structured interviews (40). The data collection
35 between 2004 and 2005 forms part of a wider project that charted the changing
36 contours of gender relations in the post-conflict period, with both interview-based
37 methods drawn upon in this paper. The oral histories were completed in two sessions,
38 and were used to understand change over the life course given the shifting
39 expectations, responsibilities and attitudes tied to men and women's roles in and
40 outside of the household. Despite my prior year-long learning of Khmer, I interviewed
41 participants with the aid of two translators (one male, one female) who had research
42 training on gender and development issues. In all instances, to gather background
43 socio-economic information about participants and respective households a profile
44 form was used. In order to obtain further understanding, I met with key
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3 representatives from the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) and Cambodian
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5 Men's Network (CMN).
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10 The sample was based on an equal proportion of men and women of differing ages
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12 living in two communes in Cambodia. Slorkram commune is located in the centre of
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14 Siem Reap, the rapidly developing town that plays host to the UNESCO World
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16 Heritage site of Angkor. Representing a national as well as regional tourist hotspot, it
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18 is a key player not only in Cambodia's move from virtual isolation to global
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20 interconnectedness but also in the potential renegotiation of gendered divisions of
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22 labour within the household. In Siem Reap's rural vicinity is the second commune of
23
24 Krobei Riel, which although sharing some of the benefits from tourism, remains
25
26 predominantly a rice farming community. Indeed, while many women in Slorkram
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28 play an active part in the service-oriented work associated with tourism, women in
29
30 Krobei Riel continue to toil as farmers and home-based basket weavers (albeit with a
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32 greater market for their handicrafts).
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41 The sample of participants was obtained through visits on different days and times to
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43 randomly selected households in the two communes and via contacts with schools,
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45 local businesses and construction sites. The recorded, translated and transcribed
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47 excerpts in this paper from 13 interviewees should be read alongside wider trends
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49 drawn out from the overall research. These respondents' accounts have been selected
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51 to reflect the range of men's and women's ages and backgrounds (from male-headed
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53 households who made up the majority of my sample), as well as to provide space for a
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55 detailed understanding of how participants' viewpoints and experiences have shaped
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57 their attitudes to, and experiences of, housework. It was possible, for example, to
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3 work with sets of respondents of varying employment statuses, life-course positions
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5 and educational backgrounds (from 18 years the youngest, to 85 years old the eldest).
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8 Hence, this paper captures some of this cited diversity.
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10 11 12 **‘Dutiful non-participation’: Male perspectives on housework** 13 14

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17 In this first empirical section, I examine men’s opinions on why the status quo
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19 remains, of women bearing the lion’s share of work whilst men, in many instances,
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21 fail to aid them. Three interrelated discourses are shown to inform these perspectives,
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23 namely: women as keepers of domestic and national pride; housework as a form of
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25 labour tied into a gendered politics of reciprocity; and lastly, housework as practice
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27 that embodies notions of tradition and respect that both genders must adhere to.
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30 Ultimately subsumed under the rubric, dutiful non-participation, I use this term to
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32 encapsulate men’s recourse to ‘traditional’ values in their discourses, values that they
33
34 deem vital in upholding given the supposed vulnerability of Cambodian identity after
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36 thirty years of violent change. In turn, men’s non-participation in housework is
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38 deemed dutiful given that in Khmer tradition it was women, not men, who performed
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40 society’s reproductive roles. Here then, Cambodian men show a tendency to purport
41
42 the unassailability of Khmer culture (Brickell, 2011).
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51 Turning to the first discourse, is the importance assigned by men to domestic order,
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53 not just in terms of the efficient functioning of the household, but also to showing
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55 respect to community and nation at large. In urban Slorkram particularly, men appear
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57 conscious of how the domestic domain communicates their respectability to the wider
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59 community with its orderly nature seen as a key way to reflect the elevated class
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3 status and identity of its inhabitants. Bunroeun, for example, explained thatⁱⁱ,
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8 *‘The house shows the class of the owner and the decoration reflects the culture of a*
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10 *nation. The curtain on the internal and external doors and windows also shows how*
11 *well the house is organised. I mean, how much people love their home. We can*
12 *interpret how people live in their home from it- whether women take care of it and*
13 *whether it is clean or dirty...one thing should stay in its place, not in several’*
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19 (Bunroeun, male, Slorkram, 36 years old, married, mechanic)
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24 As Bunroeun intimates, it is women who must uphold the aesthetic standards required
25 of the home for fear of appearing to lack moral hygiene. Home thereby becomes a
26 reflection of women’s virtuousness and domestic skills, not only in ensuring its
27 cleanliness but also in attending to vernacular customs of home. As Bunroeun
28 explains, such customs also encompass the need for domestic possessions to stay ‘in
29 place’, again evoking a sense of order which women must also adhere to through their
30 spatial rooting to the home (this extends to his own wife’s housewife role).
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43 The importance of order in Cambodian domestic life is also evident in relation to the
44 second discourse characterising men’s narratives: reciprocity, as a moral system of
45 merit marking through offerings in Buddhist practice. In terms of traditional gendered
46 divisions of labour, reciprocity, or the complementary nature of male and female
47 roles, is evoked in variations of a popular Khmer proverb, ‘the seedling supports the
48 soil, the woman supports the man’. In the case of decoration, for example, Bunroeun
49 elaborated that while it was men’s waged earnings that paid for them, it was women
50 that responded by caring for them. While men’s and women’s traditional roles in
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3 these proverbs are cast as interdependent they are not deemed interchangeable. In
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6 turn, men such as Teng are especially clear in their attitudes towards such ‘fixity’ of
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8 roles,
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12 *‘There is no real division in tasks between mother and father. In the family it is rather*
13 *like the right and the left hand. I am the man and I work, but in practice, my wife*
14 *manages the money. Khmer history shows that the man is like a cow carrying the cart*
15 *and woman orders around the ox cart and cow. The relationship is like in the past- in*
16 *traditional Khmer daily life. Men work outdoors making money and women do the*
17 *housework and small-scale business at home.’*
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27 (Teng, male, Slorkram, 66 years old, married, retired)
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32 As Teng’s narrative outlines, women are acknowledged to be traditionally in charge
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34 of household affairs, reflecting the past observation that ‘the peasant wife is by no
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36 means a totally docile and submissive creature. Her role in the maintenance of the
37
38 family is critical’ (Ebihara, 1968: 113-114). Nevertheless this agency (ordering the
39
40 man around on the rice fields) does not mean that women are free to switch roles.
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43 Despite having two daughters working as tour guides around the Angkor ruins and
44
45 cultural villages theme park, Teng makes reference to the binary nature of men’s and
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47 women’s lives led in the public versus private sphere, both in ‘traditional Khmer daily
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49 life’ but also in present-day times. This obedience to supposed ‘traditional’ lifestyles
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51 is emphasised by older participants who are not afraid to explain in a forthright
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55 manner how,
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'In 2004 the divorce rate is higher than the crime rate. The girls don't respect their husbands because they are equal and whoever arrives home first cooks. In Khmer culture men aren't allowed to cook and do the laundry except when the wife is delivering the baby. This is the only time when male will help for a week doing this kind of work. For the under 50s everything is changing but for the over 50s tradition is still important so when the husband comes back from work his wife helps him to take his clothes and shoes off then cleans her husband's feet. Young wives go out too much and expect their husband to cook and clean.'

(Teng, male, Slorkram, 66 years old, married, retired)

'It is very different from the past when the woman respected the husband very much and she would organise something in the bedroom, tidy for the husband and cook when he arrives home from work. At that time both of them reciprocally respected each other like the ideal husband and wife. Husbands responded to this by supplying money to the wife and making the main decisions. The wife's duty was to work around the house and not outside.'

(Ros, male, Slorkram, 80 years old, re-married, retired medicinal healer)

The viewpoints of Ros and Teng again demonstrate the value placed on reciprocity, and at the same time conjures up associations between 'tradition', notions of respect, and women's proper place in the home. Generational changes such as equal sharing of cooking or women spending more time outside the home are viewed as conflicting with Khmer tradition and thus should be resisted. In this way, Teng's argument that in Khmer culture 'men aren't *allowed* to cook and do the laundry' (my emphasis), gives a sense in which, first, traditional divisions of labour are temporarily negotiable only

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3 in infrequent circumstances and second, that it is men's *duty* to uphold to this custom,
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5 hence the idea of 'dutiful non-participation'. In both interviews observance to
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7 tradition is thus seen as conducive to a stable marriage, with problems arising from
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9 wives' lack of domestic labour in return for the money that has been received from
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11 husbands. Indeed, Ros had been married three times, with the reasons behind his past
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13 divorces stemming directly from issues of spousal non-compliance.
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19 While men like Teng and Ros draw on the unassailability of Khmer culture, others
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21 draw upon proverbs to 'naturalise' disagreements within the household and thereby
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23 legitimately dismiss women's demands. Men distance themselves and make excuses
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25 as to why they are unable to assist, typically claiming that they are too far from the
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27 house earning money for the family. This is played out in Amara's household where
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29 he lives with his housewife, three children and son-in-law,
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36 *'There are problems in my house- like the Khmer saying that "when plates rattle in*
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38 *the basket you can hear the sound of family life". Annoyance comes from my life full*
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40 *of work and my wife who nags me to do more in the house. I say, no way! I can't do*
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42 *that- my job is as a carpenter. I can only help if my wife is ill or if she has just given*
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44 *birth to my child.'*
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48 (Amara, male, Slorkram, 53 years old, married, carpenter)
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53 Again insisting then men are only expected to do housework when their wives are ill
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55 or in labour, Amara is very clear in his annoyance towards his wife for nagging him,
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57 evoking the notion of family members, like plates, often colliding with one another. In
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59 terms of divergent opinions and beliefs, Amara (unlike the participants in Gutmann's
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3 Mexican study who would joke and jest), is adamant that his role is solely as provider
4 for the family with no room for negotiation given his wife does not work (at his
5 request). Again, Amara's reference to the traditional fixity of gender roles ties into the
6 idea running through a great number of men's narratives, that non-participation in
7 housework is somehow respectful.
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15 16 17 18 **'Necessity is the *mother* of invention': Female perspectives on housework** 19

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22 According to Plato, 'necessity is the mother of invention'. With the onus of
23 housework falling particularly on mothers' shoulders in Cambodia, wives (like that of
24 Amara) are inextricably faced with finding inventive ways to deal with the labour
25 burden this creates at the same time as giving due care and attention to the duty-bound
26 sentiments of their husbands. In this regard, two main themes emerged on why
27 women feel it necessary sustain the status quo, firstly, because they perceive they
28 have no alternative option than to do so, and secondly, because housework neglect
29 may, in their eyes, result in abandonment, separation or divorce.
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44 Turning to the first discourse, women's recourse to norms of housewifery may not
45 stem from a lack of awareness of personal preferences but to the existence of external
46 constraints, 'namely men's relative disregard for household well-being which inhibits
47 women acting in overt self-interest' (Brickell and Chant, 2010: 149). Women may
48 therefore have no alternative other than to take on the double load of working for
49 income as well as on an unpaid basis in the home. Thus the approach of many women
50 in Cambodia is to stress how their completion of housework does not necessarily
51 spring from positive feelings, but rather from a coercive situation of paternal
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3 irresponsibility. So rather than conforming to an unequal order because they fully
4 accept its legitimacy, many women do so because they believe they have no other
5 options (Agarwal, 1997).
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12 This sense of necessity was revealed further through the narratives of women who
13 used a specific Khmer proverb to explain their perspective: 'Better to lose one's
14 father, than one's mother; it's better to lose one's goods when the boat sinks in the
15 middle of river, than one's goods when the house burns down'. Intimating that a
16 mother is seen as stable (like a home) in contrast to an unstable boat, grandmother
17 Jorani elaborated that,
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29 *'It is better for the father to die because he cannot look after the children well. The*
30 *father is likely to re-marry and listen to his new wife who will not care for his*
31 *children. It is different from one's own mother who can look after her children well*
32 *even if she has nothing. She will borrow food to feed them and not allow them to die.*
33 *A man without a wife will not stay at home and will instead go everywhere taking no*
34 *care of his children – eating only for himself and his new wife.'*
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43 (Jorani, female, Krobei Riel, 49 years old, widowed, housewife)
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Using poetic discourse as a form of social commentary, Jorani, like many other
female participants deem the ritual association between a father and a boat (or
sometimes a canoe) to be a product of men's failure to act selflessly, particularly in
situations where the mother dies and the children are left in his care. This analysis sits
in contrast to some men's more categorical interpretations, in which they draw on
naturalised assumptions of the 'biological rootedness' of women, to explain, almost

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3 unanimously, that it is better for a father to die, as only women can look after
4 children. Indeed, I found that women are consistently deemed more ‘caring’ (*kang*
5 *val*) than men by both sexes with ‘care’ defined in a uniform fashion as ‘thinking
6 about the family a lot’. Conversely, a perceived lack of care shown by men was
7 implied strongly by young as well as older rural women, as newly wed Ary insists
8 through her observations on village life,
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20 *‘They help sometimes such as chopping the firewood and collecting water – and then*
21 *they go out to work...some husbands go to drink and when drunk come back home*
22 *breaking some kitchenware or they bet on the cockfight...as a result they often do not*
23 *work, let alone help their wives!’*
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29 (Ary, female, Krobei Riel, 27 years old, married, home-based basket weaver)
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34 Here then, with Cambodian women gaining important public value through
35 domesticity, it is they who in light of what they perceive as their male partners’ lesser
36 concern for household well-being (through gambling and drunken behaviour), must
37 take on the burden of household responsibility (see Brickell, 2008b). This situation is
38 compounded by traditional dictates that advise against wives questioning or
39 contradicting their husbands despite any angry conduct.
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51 The second discourse stoking women’s continued anxieties about housework is that of
52 marital breakdown, a concern that is related to both cultural and demographic factors.
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54 As Teng’s earlier reference to divorce rates and women’s transgression of accepted
55 gender roles suggests, women worry that acts of housework defiance may endanger
56 marital stability. Such warnings are instilled in traditional stories such as ‘The
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3 Woman with Holes in Her Basket' (*Srey Kanhchoe Thluh*) where the fates of two
4 women are contrasted. The first woman carries her husband's catch of fish in a basket,
5 but full of holes, the fish escapes as she failed to repair it out of laziness. Angered, her
6 merchant husband exchanges her for a new more virtuous wife who patches up the
7 basket and becomes wealthy. As Ledgerwood (1994: 120-121) reflects, the virtueless
8 woman is reduced to begging while the virtuous woman who is willing to fulfill her
9 husband's orders and not let the family's wealth slip through her fingers, is met with
10 happiness. In this way, should a woman neglect her household responsibilities, act too
11 forcefully or not meet the entirety of her husband's demands, then blame can be
12 assigned to her for the breakdown of their marriage. This, in turn, is particularly
13 problematic for women as divorce can deprive Cambodian women of their status.
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32 Turning to the latter point concerning additional demographic factors, it is the case
33 that post Khmer Rouge because of higher male versus female deaths, a relative
34 shortage of males has become particularly noticeable in the 35-54 age group leading
35 to adult males being in short supply and many women being abandoned (Zimmer and
36 Kim, 2001: 363). While the sex ratio is marginally improving according to figures
37 from the National Institute of Statistics (from 92 males per 100 females in 2001 to
38 93.5 in 2008), the legacy of these structural features can be found in the narratives of
39 wives still today. The perceived correlation between housework negligence and
40 family breakdown is illustrated well through the experiences of Da,
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55 *'I used to work outside the house in a restaurant. I stopped in 1991 because I got*
56 *married and my husband said I should be concentrating on housework. I still want to*
57 *work outside the house though and although I have asked him many times, he will not*
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3 *allow me. When I worked in the restaurant I was divorced and working in my uncle's*
4 *place. I had to earn the money a husband would. My aunt tried to persuade me to get*
5 *married again but I didn't agree. When I finally re-married, my mother started to*
6 *ignore me as I still worked in the restaurant. She did not want me to get divorced*
7 *again.'*

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15 (Da, female, Slorkram, 48 years old, re-married, housewife)

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20 Da's narrative suggests a prevailing perception that failure to achieve balance
21
22 between the two spheres of paid work and family responsibility leaves men at liberty
23
24 to desert non-conforming wives. This is certainly an attitude that Da has been made
25
26 aware of by her aunt and through the refusal of her second husband to permit her to
27
28 work outside the home. Da attributes this refusal to her husband's jealousy, as this
29
30 employment would bring her into greater contact with men. The importance of
31
32 domestic diligence as a means of divorce avoidance is also a theme permeating
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34 through Seda's interview,
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41 *'We moved to Siem Reap because my husband was offered a job and the company*
42 *sent him here. I did not want to move but I was afraid that if I didn't my husband*
43 *would find a new wife. A man far from home finds a new wife quickly because he*
44 *wants his food cooked for him- so a girl is a first priority!'*
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50 (Seda, female, Slorkram, 42 years old, married, housewife)

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55 Seda moved from Kandal province to Siem Reap with her electrician husband in
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57 1997, a move that she was deeply unhappy about making. As a mother of four
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59 children and knowing that the marriage would not survive physical separation she
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3 thereby made the decision to migrate for fear of abandonment. As Seda purports, a
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5 man's first priority is to find a woman to serve him and to take care of his children, so
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7 much so that should a wife not satisfy these needs she will become essentially
8
9 redundant. For women like Seda then, housework is a key requirement for keeping
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11 one's husband, and even if the marriage ends, the burden of housework will remain *in*
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13 *addition* to the then heightened necessity of paid work. Deriving spousal legitimacy
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15 through housework then is particularly relevant to Cambodia where rhetoric of marital
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17 insecurity pervades.ⁱⁱⁱ
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27 **Gendered perspectives on 'strategies of cooperation'**

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32 This last empirical section focuses on the contribution that men make to daily
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34 reproduction and the reasons behind this. Two 'scripts' appear to characterise men's
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36 responses, first, those related to the problem of unemployment, and the second, to
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38 those oriented towards more positively-derived motivations. I call these 'strategies of
39
40 cooperation' since men's participation in housework appears often tactical, making it
41
42 difficult to draw a line between personal and collective interests. As aforementioned,
43
44 while men who believe they have fulfilled their provider role tend to stress domestic
45
46 work as female work, for those unemployed a more contentious relationship with
47
48 housework arises. This is something that father of five, Thy reflected upon,
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55 *'I help my wife, cleaning the clothes and doing the ironing. I want to help as much as*
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57 *I can. I have no way of being head of the family apart from this. This isn't traditional;*
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59 *I just want to help my wife. It is not my work; it is my wife's duty...I want to share her*
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3 *work because I have no job... If I am head of the family and I can't do something in*
4 *the house, it would feel wrong.'*
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8 (Thy, male, Slorkram, 49 years old, married, unemployed)
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12 As Thy's interview suggests, he is aware of the need to take responsibility for his
13 household's well-being in light of his precarious employment and admits 'it would
14 feel wrong' if he could not contribute. Despite aiding his wife with the washing and
15 ironing of clothes however, it is significant that he continues to articulate a disjuncture
16 between his role in reproductive work and his duties as a man. Furthermore, although
17 Thy's participation in housework is relatively active compared with Amara's earlier,
18 their viewpoints are remarkably similar, domestic tasks remain a woman's domain
19 (regardless of Thy's wife's now heightened income earning responsibilities). As an
20 extension of this point, although some (though not all) unemployed men do seem to
21 help with some housework tasks, this could be interpreted as a tactical choice made
22 by men. Like Thy, this seems to occur when men sense that their contribution to
23 housework could be utilised to maintain their status as household head in a situation
24 where they have no other means to assert so, apart from that they are a man with pre-
25 ordained rights. This strategy is quite different from in Mexico where unwillingness
26 to participate in reproductive labour often derives from unemployed men's attempts to
27 protect the remaining vestiges of masculinity (Chant, 1994).
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53 The complex relationship between unemployment and housework participation is
54 further demonstrated through two interviews conducted within one household. In the
55 first, Sovannarith explains his employment situation, and in the second, his mother-in-
56 law describes the way her 22 year-old daughter/his wife responded to this situation.
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6 *'I stopped working as an electrician at a hotel because they only paid me irregularly.*
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8 *I do want to find a new job but I don't know where I should try.... Instead I look after*
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10 *the children each day, I enjoy taking care of them. At home I always carry water to*
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12 *put in the jar to drink and to water the vegetable. I worry because I do not work. All*
13
14 *my friends are no longer friends with me'*

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17 (Sovannarith, male, Slorkram, 19 years old, married, unemployed)

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22 *'My daughter often makes arguments with her husband when the baby needs milk –*
23
24 *she asks him to fix it. Or when her husband is sleeping, she wakes him. She even*
25
26 *scolds him. If he does not wash the babies clothes she will insult him. Last night, he*
27
28 *was forced to sleep outside because of my daughter. She refuses to do anything in the*
29
30 *household because he is unemployed'*

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33 (Soportevy, female, Slorkram, 55 years old, divorced, retired)

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39 Isolated from friends on account of his largely house-based existence and the stigma
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41 he feels attached, Sovannarith highlights his employment. As a result, he looks after
42
43 his children and plays a larger than before role in housework chores. His anxiety is
44
45 compounded, as his mother-in-law confirms, by the actions of his wife who verbally,
46
47 and sometimes physically, forces him to do the household's washing and other
48
49 activities. Chastising his lack of income earning, his wife, Melea, essentially forces
50
51 Sovannarith to help by withholding her own domestic labour as she tries to generate a
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53 wage for the family through waitressing. Unlike the majority of female perspectives
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55 on housework then, Melea is not afraid to challenge the status quo with her husband
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57 in what is perceived to be a far more vulnerable status position than her.
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6 The second 'script' drawn upon in situations where male participation in housework is
7
8 evident, is in relative terms, more positive in nature. As Khemera elaborates,
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12 *'I do not have any children but I adopted a nephew who lives with me. I look after*
13 *him. I do housework – women's work – I cook, do the dishes and so on. I share my*
14 *wife's work. I feel happy doing it. I want to have excellent soup and food so I have to*
15 *cook it myself as my wife does not understand my preferences.'*
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22 (Khemera, male, Krobei Riel, 35 years old, married, drinks seller)
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27 Again in Khemera's interview, while he cooks, does the dishes, and casts his
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29 involvement as a happy one, housework is still classified as 'women's work'. Rather
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31 than driven by an exclusive desire to help the household collectivity, Khemera's
32
33 motivations appear less altruistic than this. Rather they pertain to his culinary
34
35 preferences and the 'deficiencies' of his wife to satisfy such tastes. In contrast
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37 however, there are men who are making adaptations for the general good of the
38
39 household. This is something I discussed with Savuth as he answered my query as to
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41 whether there would ever be a day when men stayed at home and women went out to
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43 work,
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51 *'Yes, I think it is possible and it does happen in Cambodia even now, when women go*
52 *out to work and the husband does the housework. I have a friend that works in the*
53 *military and his wife also works in the public. Now he's staying at home to do*
54 *everything and his wife works for the government. I think their life is better than*
55 *before because they have her money to come and visit.. For me though, I am a stupid*
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3 *man because I never help my wife do the laundry but sometimes I clean the litter with*
4 *a broom.'*
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8 (Savuth, male, Slorkram, aged 44, married, motorbike driver)
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12 As Savuth's case illustrates, while men may be aware of positive examples of men
13 helping in cooking, cleaning and childcare, this does not automatically mean that they
14 are any more likely to do so themselves, even when this means that the household can
15 benefit from a enlarged income stream. While his own wife's limited qualifications
16 guard against this possibility, as Savuth nevertheless admits, 'I am a stupid man'. The
17 example of Savuth and his friend thus emphasises the complexity of men's
18 participation in housework, economic motivations for which whilst validated by both
19 men, do not result in both their participation because of perceived personal traits and
20 differences in household circumstances.
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36 **Concluding Thoughts: 'Cleaning Up' Housework Injustice**

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41 This paper has revealed some of the differential discourses that men and women draw
42 upon to explain perceived variances in the (non)-sharing of housework. While men
43 show an almost strategic tendency to cite historical and/or cultural justifications
44 behind their non-participation, women frame their housework engagement around
45 discourses of necessity, demographic legacy, and marital insecurity. In regard to the
46 former, older men particularly appear to couch their lack of involvement through a
47 notion of 'dutiful non-participation' whereby 'tradition' as an unchanging ideal is
48 harnessed to justify women's almost exclusive responsibility for housework. Turning
49 to the latter, Cambodian women's absorption of these responsibilities appears, first,
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3 pragmatically rooted in men's refusal to help, and second, as an attempt to ensure the
4 survival of their marriage. Finally, moving beyond a deterministic focus on the
5 absence of men from housework, the paper demonstrated the strategic, self-serving
6 nature of some (though not all) of men's participation, motivations for which do little
7 to overturn expectations of female domesticity. In the interests of moving towards
8 greater balance in housework-inputs then, it is important to consider in a more
9 dedicated fashion the complexities of men's *participation* in different housework
10 practices over the life-course. This is particularly important for women who negotiate
11 what Sen (1995: 12) terms 'cross-purposes' between the spheres of home and work.
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27 In turn, this paper has demonstrated the importance of taking a multi-level approach
28 to tackling the underlying determinants of domestic inequalities. Namely, it appears
29 critical for national level machinery to promote through its public engagement and
30 educational syllabuses a more nuanced construct of Khmer national identity.
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35 Furthermore, given the significance of men's eschewing of housework on cultural
36 grounds, appealing to men's self interest is a likely engine to spur on change. In this
37 way, training workshops and information campaigns must explicitly target, (younger)
38 men for whom the benefits of household-level change must be demonstrated (through
39 organisations such as CMN).
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51 Bringing these points together, this paper has shown more broadly how any
52 development interventions and programmes designed to engender greater male
53 participation in housework must address the diversity, and divergence, of discourses
54 surrounding unequal divisions of labour. This can be seen in two central regards, both
55 of which bolster the idea that agencies involved in gender and development analysis
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3 and policy making should address more seriously the rhetoric of everyday life that
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5 ultimately has a profound influence on the outcomes of their work.
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10 The first point stems from the particular reluctance to enter into the personal politics
11 and intimacies of the domestic. While agency discourse tends to render gender
12 inequality problematic on the basis that unequal access to opportunity diminishes
13 growth potential and sustainability, it has failed to move beyond a language of
14 inefficient allocation and/or underutilization of resources. As reports by the United
15 Nations (2009) and Asian Development Bank (2009) typify, while priority is given to
16 equal access to, and control of, financial and economic resources for the achievement
17 of gender equality, of glaring absence is consideration of *how* such resources, once
18 obtained, are *converted* into greater 'empowerment' within the norm-laden household.
19 The Millennium Task Force (2005), does highlight investment in infrastructure to
20 reduce women's and girls' time burden as one of seven strategies to eliminate gender
21 disparity in education (as per MDG 3). But despite noting unequal divisions of
22 household labour as a key problem, measures to overcome such burdens are limited to
23 technical interventions,(including transport, water, sanitation and energy issues).
24 While important, these do not directly attempt to overturn the ideological hegemony
25 of women's domestic responsibility. Similarly, while the United Nations
26 Development Programme (2010: 63) have acknowledged in the Asia-Pacific context
27 that women's paid work cannot be looked at in isolation from the work that they also
28 perform at home, this recognition is linked almost exclusively to economic
29 imperatives - that combining both is not ideal 'for the broader economy if women's
30 capabilities remain confined and untapped'.
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3 The second point I want to make moves beyond such limitations in current approach
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5 to propose a ‘domestication’ of the development agenda. Here I use ‘domestication’
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7 as a two-way concept to provide a framework for understanding how policy
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9 undergoes processes of enculturation within the home but also as a means of
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11 addressing pervasive and often inequitable domestic discourses and practices through
12
13 policy itself. In this way, housework practices should not be viewed as inherently
14
15 inward-looking, but instead as private conversations that should be made to occupy
16
17 public spaces of policy formulation. Here it may be worth looking at other
18
19 development issues that contend with this difficult spatial dichotomy. As Pickup et al.
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21 (2001: 293) acknowledge in relation to domestic violence, for example, ‘we are
22
23 struggling with the private/public divide, and how to make policy reflect the insight
24
25 that the personal sphere is a matter of public concern and political action’. Until such
26
27 time that that the personal becomes political, women’s housework will remain largely
28
29 tied to appeals to cultures, traditions and customs that guard against the adoption of
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31 long-term gender sensitive practices and the ‘cleaning up’ of housework injustice.
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Notes

ⁱ CMN is a network of men from the NGO Gender and Development for Cambodia (GAD/C).

ⁱⁱ All participants' names have been changed to protect their identities

ⁱⁱⁱ Divorce and separation rates are actually quite low in Cambodia at 2.4% and 0.4% respectively (NIS, 1998)

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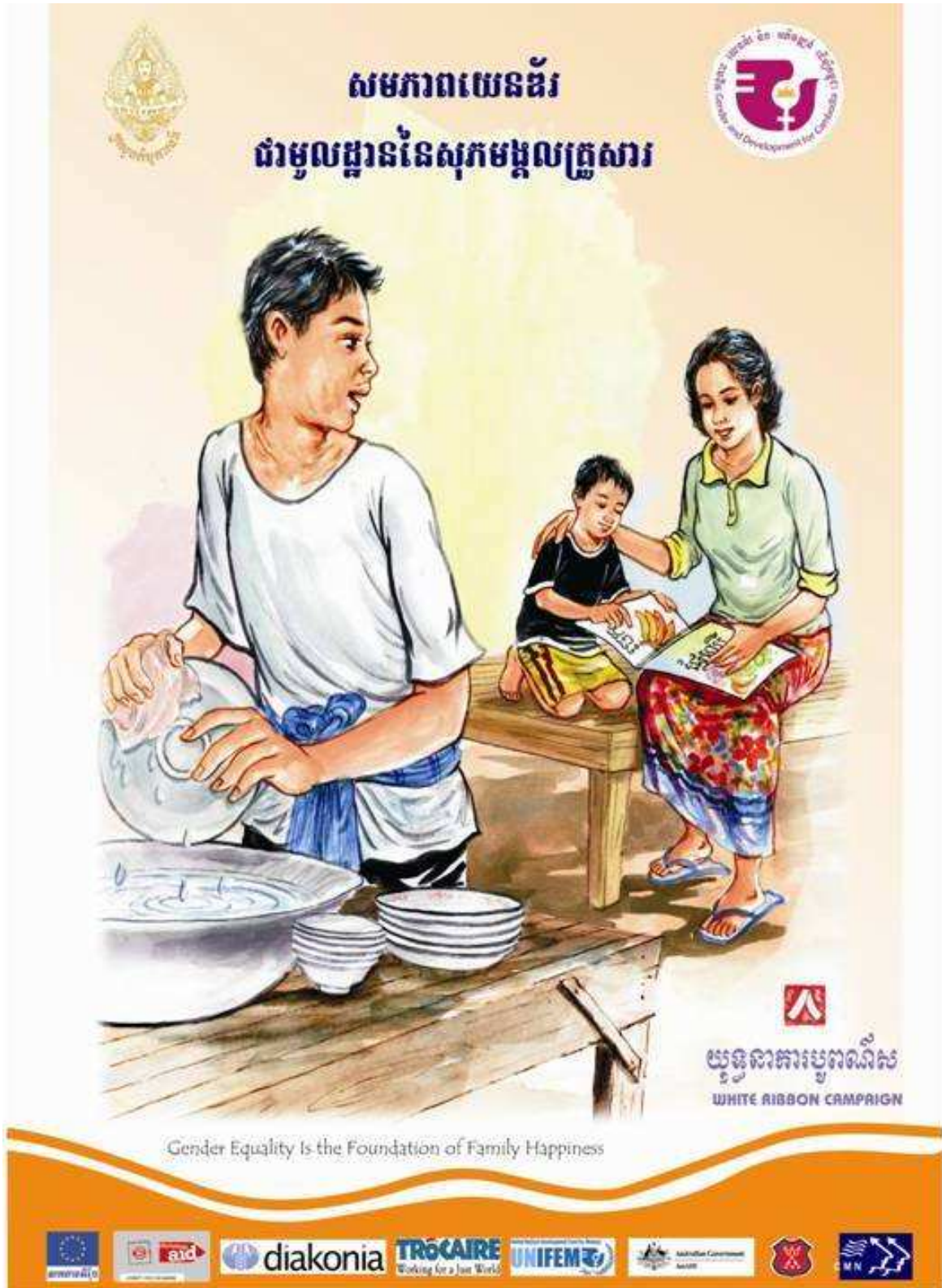


Figure 1. CMN poster ‘Gender Equality Is the Foundation of Family Happiness’

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