

# HOW CITIES ERODE GENDER INEQUALITY: A NEW THEORY AND EVIDENCE FROM CAMBODIA

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Support for gender equality has risen, globally. Analyses of this trend focus on individual- and/or country-level characteristics. But this overlooks sub-national variation. City-dwellers are more likely to support gender equality in education, employment, leadership, and leisure. Why is this? This paper investigates the causes of rural-urban differences through comparative, qualitative research. It centres on Cambodia, where the growth of rural garment factories enables us to test theories that female employment fosters support for gender equality: potentially closing rural-urban differences; or whether other important aspects of city-living accelerate support for gender equality. Drawing on this rural and urban fieldwork, the paper suggests why social change is faster in Cambodian cities. First, cities raise the opportunity costs of gender divisions of labour – given higher living costs and more economic opportunities for women. Second, cities increase exposure to alternatives. People living in more interconnected, heterogeneous, densely populated areas are more exposed to women demonstrating their equal competence in socially valued, masculine domains. Third, they have more avenues to collectively contest established practices. Association and exposure reinforce growing flexibility in gender divisions of labour. By investigating the causes of subnational variation, this paper advances a new theory of growing support for gender equality.

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## INTRODUCTION

There are many hotly contested debates in gender studies, but here are three points of agreement. First, support for gender equality has increased, over the past five decades, in many countries. Second, support is usually higher in cities (Boudet et al, 2012; Bolzendahl and Myers, 2004; Chung and Das Gupta, 2007; Evans, 2018; Vaz et al, 2016). Third, gender relations are not only shaped by individual characteristics, but also macro-level structures and interactional contexts (including locally prevailing norms) (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004; Risman, 2004; Thébaud and Pedulla, 2016; West and Zimmerman, 1987).

Scholars have debated why gender relations are changing over time. This paper engages with that debate, through an innovative methodology: comparative rural and urban fieldwork, interviewing long-term residents as well as rural-urban migrants. It examines why social change is faster in cities. By contrast, most analyses of growing support for gender equality focus on micro- and/or macro-level characteristics. Micro-level variables include whether an educated/employed woman is more likely to stand for political office/ share care work/ support gender equality. Macro-level studies often explore cross-national trends: e.g. whether higher rates of female employment are associated with more equitable divisions of leadership/ care work (Cha and Thébaud, 2009; Kroska and Elman, 2009; Sullivan et al, 2018; Sani and Quaranta, 2017; Shu and Meagher, 2018; Torre, 2019). These macro-studies incorporate national averages, usually omitting subnational variation.

But national averages (e.g. aggregate rates of female employment) are unlikely to directly influence individuals' aspirations, expectations, ideologies, and relationships. No one 'sees' or lives amid a national average (contra Goldin, 2006: 9). Individuals develop their aspirations and expectations partly through observation of their specific locales; their village/ town/ city.<sup>1</sup> Their place-based experiences can differ considerably, even within a single country (Boudet et al, 2012; Evans, 2018). Although many scholars regard it as a truism that support for gender equality is higher in cities, subnational variation in gender relations is rarely explained, nor used to account for rising support for gender equality. This is in urgent need of redress.

There is also scope to fine-tune our theorisation of social norms. Again, norms are increasingly recognised as more important than individual characteristics (Mason and Herbert, 2003; Inglehart et al, forthcoming; Pearse and Connell, 2016; Thebaud and Pedulla, 2016). People's concerns about how they will be perceived and treated by others may lead them to moderate their occupational choices, share of care work, sexual practices, living arrangements, political participation, and leadership bids. Expectations motivate compliance, often reinforcing inequalities.

However, causal mechanisms are rarely articulated. Some conceptualise 'norms' as behavioural trends (Butler, 2004:48-51). Others see them as 'collective definitions of socially approved conduct': not individual consciousness, but 'properties of a community' (Pearse and Connell, 2016:31-34, 46). But how do these widespread discourses, conventions, and intersubjective meanings actually *influence*

people's behaviour, motivate compliance, and thereby perpetuate continuity? What is the ontology of such intersubjective phenomena? What are 'norms', if not reducible to mental states? Further theoretical work is needed to clarify the ontology and causation, to explain why people challenge or conform to widespread practices.

I suggest we focus on people's reasons for acting (their beliefs and desires). Within beliefs, we can further distinguish between an individual's internalised stereotypes (their unquestioned assumptions about members of a gender) and their norm perceptions (beliefs about what others think and do). (Though the two are often conflated – as noted by Cislighi and Heise, 2018). This distinction recognises that someone might privately disavow gender stereotypes, yet comply with widespread practices due to concerns about how they will be perceived and treated by others. Stereotypes and norm perceptions are both learnt through observation of the world. By interacting with others, people gauge which behaviours are widely practised and supported in their communities. The belief that peers will chastise deviation furnishes individuals with a self-interested reason to conform. If everyone else complies, we assume collective approval – not recognising that others may be privately critical. We only revise our norm perceptions when we witness widespread behavioural change. But if beliefs only change *after* witnessing behavioural change, what catalyses *initial* behavioural change, amid risks of social censure? How do we overcome this 'chicken and egg' problem?

Drawing on comparative rural-urban research, this paper explores how city-living erodes gender inequality in Cambodia. First, the high cost of urban living and growth of industries seeking women (manufacturing and services) have increased the opportunity cost of gender divisions of labour. This raises self-interested support for female employment. Second, cities have increased exposure to disruption and deviation. Given the density, diversity, and interconnectedness of Cambodia's cities, urban residents live amid myriad encroachments, experiments, and attempts to push boundaries. By seeing scores of women demonstrate their equal competence in myriad socially valued domains, urban residents come to question their gender ideologies. Third, cities enable association. Gathering together after work, urban residents have more opportunities to share, learn from, be inspired by, and collectively rethink heterogenous gender ideologies and practices. Association and exposure reinforce a positive feedback loop, with growing flexibility in gender divisions of labour. This paper is one of the first to use comparative rural-urban research to analyse why city-living erodes gender inequality, and then use these insights to advance a new theory of what erodes gender inequality more broadly. But before presenting this analysis, let us first consider contending hypotheses.

## **THE DRIVERS OF GENDER EQUALITY**

Over the past five decades, in many countries, there has been growing support for female education, employment, and political leadership. Possible drivers include: (a) the rise of time-saving domestic appliances and contraceptive devices (Coen-Pirani et al, 2010; Goldin, 2006; Greenwood et al, 2005); (b) shifting opportunity costs of gender divisions of labour (Ruggles, 2015; Elmhirst, 2002); and (c) exposure to women in socially valued roles (Bolzendahl and Myers, 2004; Ridgeway, 2011). These are

all theories of change over time. Can they also account for rural-urban differences (as highlight by Boudet et al, 2012; Bolzendahl and Myers, 2004; Chung and Das Gupta, 2007; Dirksmeier, 2015; Evans, 2018; Orso et al, 2016; Rammohan and Johar, 2009)? If not, we might question whether they fully explain the drivers of gender equality.

Some argue that household appliances and contraception reduced women's care work and catalysed growing female labour force participation in the USA (see Coen-Pirani et al, 2010; Goldin, 2006; Greenwood et al, 2005). Such technologies (along with electrification and safe water access) are more accessible in cities (DHS, 2017). Could this explain subnational variation in gender relations? This could be part of the explanation, though incomplete. Less care work may not be enough to catalyse shifts in gender practices and beliefs – as we see from geographical comparisons. Fertility has rapidly declined in South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, yet female labour force participation remains low. Meanwhile in Sub-Saharan Africa, fertility remains high, but so too is female labour force participation (Klasen, 2018). Further, female labour force participation is often higher in rural areas, notwithstanding rural women's lower access to appliances, and larger volume of care work (DHS, 2017; Fletcher et al, 2018). Many women just work incredibly long days, without reward or recognition.

Rising opportunity costs are another possible driver of female employment. As American young men's wages fell in the 1970s-80s, families could no longer rely on a male breadwinner, so came to regard female employment as advantageous (Ruggles, 2015). In Indonesia, a long dry season and monetary crisis in 1998 precipitated increased support for women's factory work (Elmhirst, 2002: 163). Likewise in Zambia, worsening economic security triggered rising female employment (Evans, 2018). Across the world, female labour force participation is often counter-cyclical (Klasen, 2018:16; Serrano et al, 2018). The opportunity costs of women staying at home also increases with the growth of sectors seeking female workers: manufacturing, tourism, health-care, call-centres (Goldin, 2006; Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004; Klasen, 2018; McDowell, 2009).

This theory (that female employment rises with opportunity costs) could explain rural-urban differences. Opportunity costs may be greater in cities due to higher land and living costs, as well as more sectors seeking stereotypically feminine characteristics (not physical strength). The existing literature on rural-urban migration supports this hypothesis. As a rural-urban migrant from Inner Mongolia explained, “[Back in the village,] others would laugh at me if I had let my woman go outside and do this dirty job before. But here [in the city] it's impossible for me to sustain my livelihood of my household alone” (Zhang and Gao, 2014: 191). The high cost of urban living provides a financial incentive to forego concerns about social respect. Self-interest helps overcome the aforementioned ‘chicken and egg’ problem.

However, economic self-interest does not provide a full explanation of rural-urban differences in gender beliefs and practices. Research in 20 low and middle-income countries finds that, notwithstanding poverty, rural families are less likely to acknowledge, appreciate, and applaud female labour force participation (Boudet et al, 2012). One possibility is that if people do not see many women

demonstrating equal competence in socially valued domains, they may not even contemplate it, let alone regard it as beneficial. Even if rural women *are* earning money, something else may be required to undermine gender discrimination.

Besides economic self-interest, we also need to recognise beliefs. A growing literature suggests that people develop their gender ideologies through observation of the world around them. If people only see men in socially valued roles, they may doubt women's equal competence, so regard their encroachments into male-dominated domains as risky and inappropriate. Given confirmation bias, people tend to ignore information that contradicts their assumptions: dismissing exceptions as outliers, not disproving stereotypes about the typical man/ woman (Ridgeway, 2011). People are more inclined to question their ideologies when they see a *multitude* of counter-examples, i.e. through prolonged exposure to flexibility in gender divisions of labour (Beaman et al, 2012; Ridgeway, 2011; Lu and Tao, 2015; Seguno, 2007; Shair-Rosenfield, 2010; World Bank, 2011). But herein lies a conundrum: without widespread exposure to women demonstrating equal competence in socially valued domains, gender beliefs endure – inhibiting behavioural change. How do societies overcome this 'chicken and egg' problem?

The above theories all focus on female employment. Indeed, it is widely-regarded as an important catalyst of gender equality. But perhaps existing scholarship – on time-saving (household and contraceptive) devices, opportunity costs, and exposure – overlooks another important catalyst of gender equality: cities. This hypothesis is supported by research on women's rural-urban migration. Migrants to Beijing explained that 'exposure to new people, situations, and ideas had made them more worldly and self-reflexive' (Gaetano, 2015: 80). 'I can meet all kinds of people when I work in the city and I can get a lot of knowledge there. But here in the countryside we don't read anything at all. And we don't know anything about the outside world at all. We are like idiots... I prefer working in the cities... I can have the chance to know all the modern things in the city. There is nothing at home but a few fellow villagers' - narrated Qin (a rural-urban migrant) (Zhang, 2013: 184; see also Hancock, 2001; Jacka, 2005: 68). Exposure to alternatives may be less common in remote, isolated communities.

But cities do not undermine all forms of gender inequalities. In the USA, urban men are no more likely to share female-typed housework (such as cooking and cleaning) (Quadlin and Doan, 2018). Further, gender-based violence is not necessarily any lower in cities, and may be exacerbated by urban poverty (McIlwaine, 2013). Cities may thus compound inequalities. In the United States, gender inequalities were historically inscribed by urban spatial designs – marginalising women, distancing them from the male-dominated public sphere (Spain, 2014). On the colonised Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt (now Zambia), men dominated the three largest economic sectors: mining, domestic work and rural-urban trade. With high copper prices, limited mechanisation, state support for local industry, and subsidised living costs, this male breadwinner model persisted during the early decades of independence. But these conditions did not endure beyond the 1980s (Evans, 2018). As families' economic security deteriorated, and the opportunity cost of women staying at home rose, urban families became increasingly reliant on (and supportive of) women's employment. The opportunity

costs of city-living are thus contingent. Furthermore, city-dwellers' proximity to health and police services does not necessarily entail contraceptive-access or state protection. These are dependent upon government policies, such as gender-sensitive training for law enforcement. Experiences of the urban are thus mediated by occupation, quality of services, and the sectoral composition of job growth (ibid).

In sum, support for gender equality is often (but do not always) higher in cities. Yet rural-urban differences are not well-explained by existing theories of the causes of rising support for gender equality. This creates a puzzle. Drawing on comparative rural and urban research in Cambodia, I suggest that cities raise opportunity costs, cultivating support for female employment. City-dwellers then come to question gender ideologies through exposure and association with diversity, reinforcing a snowballing process of social change.

## **METHODOLOGY**

I am keen to understand: what drives support for gender equality; test the widely-accepted hypothesis that female employment is catalytic; and consider what else (besides female employment) might explain rural-urban differences. Cambodia is an ideal case study. The growth of garment factories in rural Cambodia has created a labor demand shock. This enables me to test whether rising female employment (a shift in individual characteristics) increases support for gender equality in villages; why rural inequalities might still persist; and what further dynamics in cities might be important.

Qualitative fieldwork was undertaken from July to September of 2016 with over fifty long-term rural residents, rural-urban migrants, as well as long-term urban residents. They included rural factory workers; farmers; prosperous traders; teachers; political activists; university students (on scholarships); and lecturers; as well as local government officials. Rural-urban and circular migrants' life histories were particularly valuable: narrating the *effects* of city-living (and helping me test alternative hypotheses that more progressive people move to cities). This research was located in three sites: the capital (Phnom Penh), and two villages in Kandal and Takeo provinces (each within a few kilometres of a garment factory, also near clinics and police posts). These villages were within two hours' drive of the capital Phnom Penh, via tarmacked roads. Both sites were enmeshed in rural-urban flows: circular migration, remittances, goods, and ICTs (Rigg, 2013; Parsons, 2017). The Kandal village was not poor: they were middle-income farmers on historically fertile land. By purposefully selecting villages that were not extremely poor, and by interviewing rural-urban migrants from across the socio-economic spectrum, I tried to examine the effects of place, rather than income.

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

To undertake this research, I collaborated with Rosa Yi (a male Cambodian rural-urban migrant, who lectures on gender and development issues at the Royal University of Phnom Penh). The Kandal site is his home village. Rosa's in-depth local knowledge, familiarity and rapport with the villagers greatly enhanced the research process. We recognised that participants' self-presentations were inevitably

influenced by our identities. They might exaggerate their support for gender equality, thinking this would be welcomed by a white, Western researcher (a possible source of financial support). Accordingly, we took great care to introduce ourselves as being interested in the village, and ongoing socio-economic change more broadly. We listened, and followed *their* narratives, downplaying our interest in gender and rural-urban differences. We did not presuppose or pre-define gender in/equality, but rooted our analysis in participants' priorities and perspectives. This enabled attention to unanticipated issues, such as everyday public discussions and leisure. We also spent time with participants, joining their routines – at the village café, market, garment factory, collecting grass for cows, hanging out in the city, and a university campus. Observation was important, as narratives may be influenced by hegemonic discourses of rural homogeneity (Mills, 2012: 91). In Kandal, we stayed at Rosa's family home, with his 72 year old mother. We collectively reflected on findings throughout the research processes; identifying common and divergent themes, asking his mother for her perspective on rural narratives, and devising further lines of inquiry.

Data was recorded, transcribed into English, and then transferred into software enabling qualitative text analysis (NVivo 11). The data was coded, using emergent themes and subthemes: on the ways in which gender relations are/not changing (e.g. rising support for female employment), as well as the drivers of those changes (e.g. rising living costs, environmental shocks). Names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

## **CITIES AS CATALYSTS OF SOCIAL CHANGE**

'What a man can do a woman can do', reiterated (separately interviewed) female undergraduates in Phnom Penh. Had they ever heard such discourses back in their villages? No, they shook their heads. Indeed, this adage captures urban discourses of equality in urban (but not rural) Cambodia. Urban women are increasingly venturing into historically masculine domains: education, employment, public discussions, and leisure.<sup>2</sup>

In Cambodian towns and cities, early marriage is lower; teenage pregnancy is lower; the total fertility rate is almost one child lower; median years of schooling are higher; gender gaps in literacy are smaller; as are differences in average monthly earnings and occupations (ILO et al, 2014: 59; NIS and MoH, 2015; NIS, 2015: 49). Female technicians, for example, earn 13% less than their male counterparts in urban areas, but 35% less in rural areas (ILO et al, 2014: 59). Only 12% of managers are female in rural areas, as compared to 42% in urban areas (ILO et al, 2013: 36). Likewise, for shares of employed professionals, gender gaps only persist in rural areas, not Phnom Penh (NIS, 2015: 72 – though this of course omits likely male dominance at higher levels). Thus, even in occupations *not requiring physical strength*, gender inequalities are still larger in rural areas.<sup>3</sup>

In Cambodian towns and cities, the opportunity cost of women staying at home greatly increased with the rise in (i) urban living costs and (ii) sectors seeking female labourers (garments, tourism, and other services) (Lopez-Acevedo and Robertson, 2016; Mejía-Mantilla and Woldemichael, 2017). In their

struggles to manage school fees, rent, health care, and competitive consumption, urban residents increasingly support female employment. Participants explained that these financial incentives outweighed countervailing concerns about norm perceptions (lauding the male breadwinner, and female purity). By seeing their neighbours prosper through female employment, others recognised its economic benefits, and followed suit – explained multiple generations of urban residents.

Rising female employment appears to shift gender ideologies. Urban residents and migrants detailed how prolonged exposure to women successfully performing socially valued roles led them to regard women as equally competent and deserving of status. Cham (a 24-year-old, on a full university scholarship, interviewed by his father's cowshed back in the village) explained that upon arrival in Phnom Penh,

*I was surprised, because I just left from a rural village, where men like me feel they are better, feel they are more knowledgeable... Men are supposed to be the head of the household. Men are supposed to travel far, to do business. While women stay home and take care of the family. It's part of Cambodian tradition... So I didn't take girls' ideas seriously. I thought I was more intelligent, and expected them to follow my ideas... It's part of the culture, you're exposed to that idea: "women can't even move around the kitchen" [translated].*

In village life, Cham explained, most people are farmers, interacting with other farmers, with similar experiences and outlooks. So, 'you don't really have new knowledge: people know similar things, so they repeat similar things. Rural people are left behind... How they see women has not changed much over time... [Notwithstanding their economic contributions as traders, factory workers and farmers] they still perceive women as housewives' (translated). Such expectations (together with concerns for safety) lead many rural parents to restrict their daughters' movements. But in the city, parents seem more supportive of their daughters' independent mobility and occupations.

Upon travelling to Phnom Penh for university (with a full scholarship), Cham was astonished to see 'female lecturers, female heads of department, a lot of women working in the university, and many female class monitors'. He also attended an NGO event and watched a documentary about gender equality. He discussed these ideas with a friend, who volunteered for an NGO and explained that Cambodian women soldiers had played an important role in securing independence from France! This surprised Cham, who had previously regarded women as weak and fearful. But through cumulative, iterative exposure to women in positions of authority, gender sensitization, and discussion, he came to champion gender equality.

Cham also remarked on rural-urban differences in public spaces:

*The café – it's public, so it's a space for men... If women go people will consider them *kat leak* [an imperfect woman]. In Phnom Penh, will you also find a café like that just for men a local café like this; it's generally for old people. Women don't go. I've never been to one like that in Phnom Penh. At university, we go to the canteen regularly as a group, men and women [translated].*

These themes of urban exposure and association were widely reiterated in our sample of rural-urban migrants. Young migrants emphasised their enjoyment of diverse associations, learning new ideas, seeing women in unexpected domains. Many had previously presumed women were ‘passive dependents’, unable to perform socially valued roles:

*When women are housewives they are submissive. They are told to do; directed to do. It's not really equal. They did not have enough freedom. I think people are the same, we want to go out, but her husband think 'every day you have been fed by me, so you cannot do anything without my agreement'... I been experiencing this.*

*Women here – students, staff, government worker, office worker – they have to go to work on a daily basis to get money. Without any job how can they live here?...*

*At the first time seeing this it surprised me a lot (because I had been experienced women could be housewife and do house jobs like cooking, cleaning, caring children). When I come to Phnom Penh, thing just changed....*

*Women have same intellectual ability and physical ability. Gender equality.*

- Rural-urban migrant student.

*Author: What do you think of Phnom Penh? [speaking to three female, trainee flight attendants]*

*Son: I meet new people, we share our experiences. But in rural areas, we just stuck with the old ideas. The idea is stuck because we don't go out. [Here in the city] I feel wonderful. Seeing women dress up beautiful, earn their own living.*

*Bopha: I saw a woman driving a tuk tuk.*

*Son: Now it's common.*

*Author: How did you feel, seeing her?*

*Bopha: I feel strange. Why don't she find other job, like seller or company? I've never seen that before.*

*Son: It really impressed me, 'cause what a man can do a woman can do...*

*Chanda: It shows men I can do it.*

Exposure to a multitude of people deviating from traditional practices seems to increase people's confidence in the possibility of social change – not only affecting their internalised ideologies but also their norm perceptions. This has catalysed mutually reinforcing, incremental experiments of minor transgressions. Having enviously eyed their friends doing homework, young girls pressure their parents to send them to school. As low-income hawkers develop wide social networks, seeking out information to get by in the city, they also learn about alternative practices and ideologies (see also Evans, 2018; Simone 2008; 2013). After seeing care work being shared by male neighbours (in rows of rent rooms), garment workers encouraged their husbands to follow suit. Not all requests are heeded, of course. Srey (a rural-urban migrant garment worker, now exposed to more co-operative, mutually-supportive urban marriages) came to regard her own husband as ‘useless’, not entitled to leisure, or her devotion. Having seen more equitable relations, she came to expect and demand better. He refused, and she promptly divorced him (see also Nishigaya, 2010, Lawreniuk, 2016; Vu and Agergaard, 2012 on peer learning among rural-urban migrants in Cambodia and Vietnam).

Other influences include hearing peers and NGOs champion equality; watching powerful role models in films; as well as reading media accounts of successful women at home and abroad. This has increased of late, with more donor funding for gender NGOs (Frewer, 2017). In Cambodia, the proportion of parliamentary seats held by women increased from 5.8% in 1997 to 8.2% in 2000 to 20.3% in 2015 (ADB, 2015: 142). Seeing masses of women demonstrating their equal competence in socially valued masculine domains, urban residents have first-hand evidence of abstract discourses of gender equality.

By highlighting rural-urban migrants' observations of *relatively* more egalitarian spaces, I do not mean to downplay Phnom Penh's persistent inequalities. Men continue to dominate public fora (such as Parliament, trade unions, the Government-Private Sector Forum and chambers of commerce, ADB, 2015: 15). Gender pay gaps prevail (World Bank, 2014: 33); work is often precarious, unsafe and often dangerous; while police are often unsympathetic to survivors of domestic violence (Brickell, 2017).

Furthermore, cities are not inevitably disruptive. Factory work hours are long, and tightly controlled. Breaks are brief: gulp a sugary drink, guzzle a plate of rice and fatty meat, chat about bundles completed, hasten back (as I observed during fieldwork). Due to the high cost of transport in Phnom Penh, factory workers have limited mobility. They typically associate with other migrant workers, not necessarily learning from its rich diversity. To quote a 23-year-old rural-urban migrant worker:

*We don't go out much... We just go back and forth between factory and home* [translated] (see also Cook, 2015:43; Mills, 2012:101; Parsons, 2017:193 on Phnom Penh and Bangkok).

Notwithstanding such caveats, cities appear to accelerate social change by raising opportunity costs of the male breadwinner model, amplifying exposure to women in socially valued domains, enabling collective discussions, and mutually-reinforcing, iterative experiments. This sustains a positive feedback loop.

## **SOCIAL CHANGE IS SLOWER IN VILLAGES**

Qualitative and quantitative data suggest that social change is also occurring in Cambodian villages, but at a slower pace, with less support for the urban adage that 'women can do what men can do' [translated]. To explain this, we turn to the village café in Kandal. At first glance, it is quite unremarkable: red plastic chairs, clustered on a dirt floor, sheltered by a corrugated iron roof. At weekends, it became fiery and animated: as male patrons were transfixed by televised Thai boxing. Weekdays were more relaxed: men's discussions centred on farming and national politics. In the past decade, they had become much more critical of the government (see also Ojendal and Sedara, 2006: 526). Their exposure to widespread dissent had increased through access to independent radio (owing to an improved signal); Facebook (via smartphones); and return migrants' narratives. Seeing critique appeared to amplify their confidence in collective resistance.<sup>4</sup>

Drought was a major concern. Many had lost crops the previous year (wasting expenditure on fertiliser, pesticides, bamboo, insecticides), so decided not to replant. This situation was worsened by a government bridge-building project that temporarily blocked water-flow to their fields. Having lost confidence in the commune council (local government), some farmers had formed a group, crowdsourcing funding for a generator to pump water from the creek to irrigate vegetable crops.

Author: *Were there any women at the meeting?*

Sanna (male, 46-year-old farmer): *No. It's a man's job. Women are considered as housewives.*

*This activity is for men.*

Author: *Why? Women also help with farming?*

Sanna: *When men decide what to do women will follow.*

Author: *Why are men decision-makers?*

Sanna: *Because men are head of the family. In our village, men are doers [neak tver], women are helpers [neak suoy]. Men undertake most of the work, and become more knowledgeable.*

This account was widely corroborated – for both this specific initiative and collective discussions more broadly. Men's leadership was typically explained with reference to their 'longer legs': i.e. better travelled, larger social networks, so *neak cheh* (more knowledgeable) (as also observed by Chhoen et al, 2008: 542; Ogawa, 2004). By contrast, traditional rural Cambodian women stay at home: tending pigs and chickens, while caring for large families, with few labour-savings tools (see also ADB, 2015: 21). While rural women do chat with their neighbours, in passing (expressing frustrations about the quality of their children's education, or their husbands' drinking), such discussions are brief (hastened by the relentless demands of care work). Only men have the liberty to unwind at the café after farming, returning home when food is ready.

Several rural women identified leisure time as an inequality, and lamented their dearth of free time. Others were less overtly critical: yes, they would like their husbands to help, but regarded gender divisions of labour as inevitable, and assumed strategic silence to minimise conflict (see also Brickell, 2011a: 1367; Ogawa, 2004).<sup>5</sup>

By gathering at the café, learning from those with new sources of information, men are regarded as more knowledgeable. These perceptions influence everyday interactions. Feeling less informed, some women are reluctant to speak out on local and national socio-political issues: fearing mistakes and consequent mockery. Further, men at the café see their peers publicly criticising the government and so feel emboldened. Meanwhile, women are less exposed to public dissent, so often lack confidence in collective resistance (see also Brickell, 2011b; Chhoen et al, 2008: 542; Hiwasa, 2013; Ogawa, 2004 on rural Cambodian women's isolation more broadly).

Participants in Kandal divulged that no one had ever initiated the idea of women's public leadership. This can be understood in terms of internalised ideologies and norm perceptions. First, lacking exposure to women successfully undertaking leadership roles, few expressed confidence in their equal

competence (as Sedara et al, 2012 similarly observe of rural Cambodia). Second, while some *did* privately wish for a female candidate, few anticipated wider support. As one female village chief explained, “I never dreamt I would become a village chief. In this village it is unheard of for women to be in authority... I thought people would react badly to me’ (Chhoen et al, 2008: 535). While rural support for women’s leadership is growing,<sup>6</sup> even when they are elected to Commune Councils, women are typically assigned less prestigious, less remunerative roles: typically ‘women’s matters’; often involving menial, voluntary work (such as preparing tea for their male counterparts); and less likely to be given external training opportunities (with associated *per diems*) (Chhoen et al, 2008:544; Sedara et al, 2012). Further, even when people do support women’s leadership, this is often justified via gender stereotypes: of being ‘approachable, humble and patient’ (though Tem, 2016:15 interprets this as valuing a different kind of leadership).

Few rural participants seemed troubled by women’s absence in public fora – explaining that men were already representing the family. While a minority was privately critical, they did not wish to be ‘the odd one out’, encroaching upon masculine terrain – as encapsulated below:

*This is how we divide the work. At home we talk, exchange ideas, husband and wife. But in public, men go out and discuss amongst themselves. For my whole life, women do not go out and discuss... There’s a lot of work to do at the home. Women go if they’re invited, but there’s no point in them going if the husband is already there. [translated]*

- 54, rural, female home-based trader in Kandal.

*If any woman wants to spend time in the café, she will be badly talked about. You cannot leave behind your housework: people value you because of housework. Generally women are not free. [translated]*

- 35, rural, female fruit seller at a nearby market.

*Men tend to discuss among themselves. They don’t involve women... Women are busy: cooking, cleaning, farming... It’s only men who are free... That’s life, there’s nothing that women can do to change it... [But] I want it to change. I want men to pay more attention to what is going on inside the household: to pay more attention to their wives and baby, and less time drinking. [translated]*

- 24, rural female garment worker.

*In the rural area, it’s the men who decide everything in the house... Sometimes they won’t even ask the wife. Men in the rural area, they act like they [are] the king.*

- 22, female student in Phnom Penh, originally from a village in Takeo.

In sum, by sharing ideas at the café, men come to be regarded as knowledgeable, and thus as naturally better leaders. Rural gender inequalities are also shaped by gender divisions of labour – though these are changing. Historically, one cow farmer in Kandal explained, you would often overhear a husband say to his wife ‘you only live by depending on me’ (translated). Interviewed middle-age and elderly rural women likewise commonly presented themselves as dependents: reliant on male breadwinners

for both income and ideas about the outside world. They seemed reluctant to complain – expressing limited sense of entitlement, recognition of alternatives or fear of their husband’s anger (see also Brickell, 2011a).

*Historically there were only two things for women: housework and help with the farming... Women didn't have anything to do. They just did all the cooking, the cleaning, looking after the cows, and helped with the rice farming.* [translated]

- 39, rural, female garment worker, in Takeo.

These gender divisions of labour influence young women’s ambitions. A female student (on a full scholarship at a Phnom Penh university) explained that back in her village, young women’s expectations were limited to marriage and motherhood. Only two women in her village were high school graduates. Many had married at 16. ‘In Kmae tradition, the girl no need to be high knowledge, just do the wife. They just treat the girl like not have abilities, and sometimes they not want the girl go to school cos it’s not safe – [it’s] so far’. Another student (the daughter of a housewife and rice farmer, from an isolated village) explained:

*If you just see a lot of women working as housewives, you view women as someone who incapable of doing something else. Your perception of women would be like that. So why should I send my daughters to Phnom Penh for education? It's a circle... Back in the province, I never imagined I could be a teacher at university, CEO or leader.*

While rural girls increasingly seek education and employment, their ambitions are often limited to running a business near home, to accommodate housework and stay near familiar areas where they feel comfortable. Some do wonder whether girls are as intelligent as boys, but often lack the confidence to go against the tide of public opinion. Even if young women question these norms and seek independent mobility, many are constrained by parents and husbands (concerned about safety, sexual propriety and neighbourhood gossip).

Such concerns have lessened in the past decade.<sup>7</sup> Mobility is increasing with improved transportation (mass road-building) and motorbike ownership. Ongoing school building programmes increase proximity, alleviating concerns about daughters’ safety while traversing long distances. Government investment in infrastructure combined with Cambodia’s high population density mean that many villages now have police posts, clinics and schools. Such proximity increases contraceptive access. The total fertility rate halved between 1990 and 2012 – from six to three (Dingle et al, 2013; NIS and MoH, 2015: 12-17; MoH, 2016: 3). This reduces the volume of care work, and alleviates time constraints on female education and employment.

Besides lesser concerns about safety, and time constraints, rural families are increasingly aware of the financial benefits of women’s earnings in the garment industry, tourism and Phnom Penh’s burgeoning service sector. These economic incentives have led many to forgo concerns about social

respect. With more women migrating for waged work, it has become more widely accepted – especially in recent years where agricultural livelihoods have suffered from drought. As compared to the male-dominated construction industry, garment work is *relatively* better and more regularly paid, enabling higher remittances (MoP, 2013: 7-17; World Bank, 2015: 30-31). Women also tend to remit more income than men (ADB, 2015: 28). In this context, some fathers even wished for daughters – citing their economic potential as garment workers. One male farmer proclaimed his ‘unluckiness’ in having *only* sons (as also observed by Parsons et al, 2014:1377).

## **The Effects of Rising Female Employment in Rural Areas**

Social change was slower in villages. But is it accelerated by rising female employment? To answer this question, and test that widely-accepted hypothesis, I explored how rural garment factories have influenced gender relations. All employed rural women interviewed expressed delight in being able to improve their families’ economic situation. They reiterated increased self-esteem and pride. Some had started sharing care work with their husbands. Indeed, when we first arrived in Takeo we found our male host preparing lunch – which we enjoyed when his wife returned from the garment factory. Another disruptive rural performance was women motorbiking *en masse*. Historically ‘short-legged’ women were now independently mobile, going out to provide for the family – as narrated below:

*For my whole life, women have followed men. Historically, wives just followed their husbands. Women couldn't go very far. Women couldn't move around the kitchen. Only men could get out of the house, so they could get more information... Women have children, so don't have time for anything else. Previously, women did not have higher knowledge. But now... you look at the society and you see a lot of women working just like men.*  
[translated]

- 60, rural, her daughter is working for an internet company in Phnom Penh

The effects of female employment vary by occupation. Traders (who independently liaised with and learnt from others) were particularly confident. Kim (35) recently started motorbiking to a village 30km away, to sell 100kg of local fruit – as encouraged by her sister (who works in Phnom Penh). Since starting her business, Kim excitedly emphasised that she has more ideas to share with her neighbours; great pride in her financial contributions; and independent mobility.

*If you met me 5 years ago, I wouldn't have anything to tell you... I was really scared, really careful with my words... I was more of a listener... I would not even try to engage in the conversation... I would always be afraid of making a mistake... afraid of people getting angry with me. Before, I only stayed at home [except to tend fruit trees]... I was afraid of my husband. I would not try to argue... If I wanted to do something and he rejected it, I would just follow him...*

*But since I've started making my own income, my words have been stronger... When I got exposed to the market place I gained new ideas. I told my husband that even if he disagrees with me, I will go ahead... He's*

*changed a lot... Now he is very supportive, and I'm braver... Before, I depended on my husband but now I want to try out some ideas on my own... I've got to know other people over there. It's fun! [translated].*

But Kim's account was unusual in our sample. Interviewed rural women workers generally felt unappreciated. It was rare for husbands to cook for their wives returning from the factory. Many women complained about their husbands becoming 'more relaxed' (translated): e.g. drinking all day, but still regarding themselves as breadwinners and household heads. Yet despite their newfound independent incomes, few rural women appeared to even contemplate divorce. Its rarity and ensuing concerns about risk meant that it was rarely considered it as an option (see also Brickell, 2014). There was no point complaining to police about your husband. It would be embarrassing, and the wife would end up paying for his release, when they inevitably reunited. [Rural-urban differences may persist then, even when controlling for local infrastructure, such as police posts]. Rural women's struggles are encapsulated below:

*I am the main income provider, but never once has my husband recognised that. [translated]*

- Rural female teacher, married to a local government official.

*At work they talk among themselves, 'we are women but let's try to work hard so we have face and mouth', i.e. so you are recognised in the community... Now, because I earn money I have face and mouth... [But] a lot of my friends complain that their husbands are just staying at home, doing nothing, while thinking that working in factory is an easy job. They think they have a harder job than the women, even though actually working factory is a very hard job. The bells keep running all the time. Then you come home and you feel very underappreciated... Even though you bring money home, they do not appreciate - is what some of my friends complain. However much they earn, [social] change is very limited. Not only husbands but the community does not appreciate us women. [translated]*

-39, rural garment worker.

*Women have become more economically significant in the family, especially when men lose a lot... [But] some men wait for wives to cook for them. And the limited change in perceptions, it's not just upon men, it's also among women – who work in the factory. Men are still seen as more important at home. [translated]*

- 36, male farmer, Kandal.

This continuity in rural gender relations is partly due to exposure and association. While women do now travel to garment factories, their time is tightly constrained – curbing networking and learning. Interviewed rural factory workers often regarded men as more knowledgeable, and so deferred to their decisions. Few rural women had seen married men cooking, so did not contemplate such redistribution, let alone push for it.

Thus although rural women are increasingly important financially providers (given garment factory employment), men still tend to be regarded as more knowledgeable and better leaders. This partly reflects gender inequalities in leisure and care. But there are caveats. Rural participants were by no

means homogenous. People's experiences and perspectives were mediated by their age, marital status, occupation, economic context and access to government services. Of the three major female occupations in the village (garment factory workers, traders and farmers), traders appeared most confident public speakers – in our observations and group discussions. They liaised with a broad range of people, sometimes collaboratively, sometimes through struggle, but each time learnt from them, expanding their horizons – as highlighted in Kim's account above.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the causes of growing support for gender equality, via an innovative methodology: comparative, qualitative rural-urban fieldwork. It has examined how the impact of female employment is mediated by rural/urban location, in order to revisit the widely-accepted theory that female employment boosts support for gender equality (Bolzendahl and Myers, 2004; Davis and Greenstein, 2009; Evans, 2018; Ridgeway, 2011; Shu and Meagher, 2018). This rural-urban contrast is important because although many gender scholars affirm the importance of local context and the truism that city-dwellers are typically more supportive of gender equality, we know very little about the causes of rural-urban differences. This is a curious omission. Going forwards, others might contribute to this field through: quantitative work with subnational data (to provide descriptive data on rural-urban differences); field experiments randomising urban migration (to explore whether city-living causes a shift in gender relations); or comparative qualitative work (to understand the causes of these effects).<sup>8</sup>

My comparative qualitative research suggests that Cambodian cities disrupt gender inequalities because they enable three key processes: (1) shifts in perceived interests; (2) exposure to women demonstrating equal competence in socially valued domains; as well as (3) association, mutual learning, and collective critique.<sup>9</sup> In Phnom Penh, the opportunity cost of women staying at home has increased with: the growth in economic sectors seeking female labourers, and rising living costs. With the ensuing increase in flexibility in gender divisions of labour, city-residents have come to recognise its economic advantages. Resultant exposure to women successfully performing socially valued roles has undermined gender ideologies. People come to regard women as equally competent, and anticipate social support. This shift in gender ideologies has fostered a positive feedback loop. These shifts in perceived interests, exposure, and association are also happening in rural Cambodia, albeit more slowly. Rural remoteness and homogeneity curb exposure to alternatives, dampening confidence in the possibility of social change, deterring deviation.

Besides highlighting the disruptive power of cities, this paper has demonstrated a key driver of social change, namely association. Although many rural Cambodian women are now important economic contributors, they rarely share and learn from diverse others. In my rural sites, local drought and political authoritarianism were always discussed in the village café – an exclusively male terrain. By gathering together, rural men learn from others with new sources; building on each other's contributions; creatively exploring diverse solutions; accumulating expertise. Shut out of these

conversations (by norm perceptions and domestic responsibilities), rural women are regarded as less knowledgeable, less suited to leadership. Thus men continue to be valorised as more knowledgeable – natural leaders. Rural politics thus remains male-dominated, notwithstanding growing female labour force participation.

This link between everyday public discussions, spaces, perceived knowledge and support for women’s leadership is a fairly novel observation. Some scholars argue that by seeing women perform historically male-dominated roles, others will come to regard them as equally competent in a broad range of other domains, including leadership. I suggest such equivocation is not automatic. As we see from rural Cambodia, flexibility in gender divisions of labour is insufficient to accelerate wider progress towards gender equality. Interconnected, diverse, and densely-populated cities play a crucial (hitherto neglected) role in amplifying exposure, association, and collective critique: reinforcing snowballing processes of social change. By examining the causes of rural-urban differences, this paper thus reveals important catalysts of gender equality.

## ENDNOTES

1 See parallel research on how local economic geography, rather than individual characteristics, influenced EU-scepticism (Carraras et al, forthcoming; Dijkstra et al, 2018).

2 These four domains were volunteered by a number of urban participants, not pre-selected by the researchers.

3 This quantitative data may even underestimate the long-term impacts of city-living. The population of Phnom Penh (the capital) doubled between 1998 and 2008 (MoP, 2012, 94). 80% of this population growth was fueled by migration, rather than national population growth or revised city boundaries (MoP, 2012; 2013, viii). High rates of migration may blur data on rural-urban differences, since many self-identifying ‘urban residents’ are recent arrivals (potentially still influenced by rural norms). Their inclusion obscures the long-term effects of urban residence.

4 Though of course not all can afford radios and televisions. Further, many are not interested in this information, or disregard that which conflicts with their assumptions. Many rural participants, especially older generations, only listened to Buddhist teachings.

5 As will be discussed later, urban women were much more inclined to either identify leisure time as an inequality or enjoy more leisure time.

6 The proportion of women elected to commune councils increased from 8% in 2002, to 14.6% in 2007 to 18% in 2012 (Sedara et al, 2012).

7 On anxiety alongside growing acceptance of rural-urban migration, and new practices, see also Parsons and Lawreniuk (2017).

8 Comparative work is important here too, as the significance of cities likely varies geographically. If only the wealthiest can afford city-living, rural-urban differences in attitudes may just reflect class composition (as Maxwell, 2019 finds on immigration).

9 As Simone (2013: 245) observes, “[T]he intersection of bodies, materials, and discourses’ enables ‘collective experimentation’” (see also Amin 2013; Earl, 2014: 136; Evans, 2018; Glaesar, 1999: 255; Merrifield, 2013: 916; Simone, 2008; Storper et al, 2012).

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