

# WOMEN AND POVERTY IN CAMBODIA

## Meeting Basic Subsistence Needs

Both women and men participants considered themselves to be equally poor. Yet when the focus is on the domestic and nondomestic roles of women and men, it can be seen that the burden of labor falls disproportionately on women.

All women in rural Cambodia take on a greater range of domestic and nondomestic roles than men. In all four regions women reported that they usually wake up before men and go to sleep after men. Women also reported they rest less than men do. It does appear that poverty is an issue that influences the amount of time each day women have to spend on domestic-related activities, something that most men avoid.

During an FGD in Kandal, there was a consensus that women spend more time working each day than men do. However, one middle-aged man took issue with that position:

*My wife might wake up before dawn and go to sleep after me but because we are poor I have to go far from the house to look for any kind of work I can find. This is very tiring, especially when you can find no work, as this means you get no food to eat. When I find work it is physically more demanding than the work my wife does, so I need to rest more than she does.*

Women disagreed that men often worked physically harder, although they admit plowing or climbing palm sugar trees are physically demanding activities. A middle-aged woman argued:

*When men are resting in the house or in the field, women are usually doing a range of other activities, including the collection of firewood, the washing of clothes, the care for children and the preparation of food. While we do not have much food to eat, it*

*still takes a long time to think of how we can use the available food to make sure no one is hungry after eating. As a poor woman, I have observed that women who are less poor than me also work harder than men, but they work at activities that give them money. I have also observed that men who live in their households do not complain as much about work being physically demanding. It seems if you can make money then nothing is really that demanding.*

In Rattanakiri, a female member of the Kavet ethnic minority complained of longer working hours than men in her village. But she also noted that one of the reasons she had to work hard is because it is now more difficult to find things to eat than previously:

*I do not seem to get as much rest as the men in the village, although I know when they go out hunting wild animals it is impossible to rest until the animal being hunted is caught. Sometimes this is very dangerous as they can be bitten by a snake or charged at by a wounded pig. My work is almost the same each day....Actually I now have to work harder for us to survive because it is harder to collect the foods from the jungle that we eat with our rice.*

It appears that there is a growing link between a shrinking natural resource base right across the country and an increase in the amount of daily work that women have to undertake to ensure that basic subsistence needs are met. This is not to deny that this problem also affects men as well. But men contribute to meeting subsistence needs on an ad hoc, irregular or seasonal basis. It has emerged from this PPA that poor women perceive they are spending more time each day than in the past ensuring that the basic subsistence needs of the household are met.

A young woman being interviewed in Banteay Meanchey talked of how poor women had to work very hard at activities that were not recognized by most men as lessening the impact of poverty. Without the women's

contributions, she argued, the effects of poverty would be even worse:

*These days you are only recognized by men as working hard if you can bring cash into the house for them to spend. Men look at government officials and see what good lives they can have and they think the low-ranking official can get this money from the work that his wife does. But I know that both husband and wife work together to squeeze everyone else, including of course the very poor. For a poor woman like myself, I have to be constantly thinking about how I can satisfy all the demands of my family. Even thinking about this makes me tired....It also means that I cannot rest properly during the day.*

Young women and girls are more likely to be disadvantaged than their male counterparts, particularly when it comes to access to education, because they, more so than males, are taken out of school to help at home or are kept from traveling long distances when there are no local facilities. While schooling does not always guarantee better life chances for the poor, it does not lead to further poverty unless debts are involved in the financing of school attendance or income is foregone because younger people are not out working.

The PPA revealed that the most vulnerable group to poverty in rural areas were widows with young children and no adult labor in the household. In such a situation, a widow not only has to generate all or most of the household's needs on her own account but also has to care for her young children. As a widow observed during an FGD involving women, including many widows, in Kampong Speu:

*Women today do more nontraditional work than they did in the past, including plowing and climbing palm sugar trees [a dangerous activity that often results in injury and sometimes death]. The widow has to do this more so than the woman that still has her husband or some older men living in the same household with her....But even if she has draft animals and plow, it is hard for her because someone has to look after the young children. If she cannot do this then older children have to care for young children. This task usually falls on the shoulders of a widow's daughter rather than her son. While it is hard for the boys to go to school, they are more likely to go than a widow's daughter.*

School attendance does not guarantee a high level of functional literacy for the poor but it does ensure

that at least young women have the opportunity of working in nonagricultural jobs, such as in the garment industry.



**Figure 5: Women participating in a focus group discussion. More than 50 percent of PPA participants were women.**

## Household Decision Making

In traditional Cambodian culture it has always been assumed that while men participate in public affairs to a greater extent than women do, albeit with women indirectly influencing the decisions that are made, in the household it has been assumed that women are more influential than men. At one level this is correct, perhaps even more so in poverty-affected households where the oldest woman living in the household controls what little money the household may have. This imposes a tremendous responsibility on that woman, according to older women participants in Kampong Thom. One woman who had experienced the peace and stability of the pre-war era in Cambodia argued:

*The money my family has to spend is for when someone gets sick or we have to pay for one of the young ones to go to school. Keeping this money is my responsibility, and I can decide whether it should be spent on cheap liquor, school books or some cloth....If my husband wanted money for drinking and playing cards I could say no, although this might lead to a fight. But I would not buy something for myself if it meant others would have to go without. So it seems that I have the responsibility to make sure that what little money we have is spent wisely....Having lots of money, which I can't imagine, might reduce this burden on me—I simply don't know.*

The PPA identified situations where women are the nominal money managers but do not actually have the power to curtail expenditure by male household members. This was illustrated during an interview that was conducted with a poor woman in her late 20s in the province of Kandal:

*You can see for yourself—we are very poor. Not a month goes by when I do not worry whether we will have rice to eat every day. But my husband, who cannot find any work because he lacks skills that people want, except growing rice, takes our money and spends it on alcohol. I do not see many rich Cambodian men spending all their families' money on drinking. It is depressing being very poor and that is the reason my husband drinks a lot, but it makes our situation even worse, and then I am cursed when one of the children gets sick or we do not have enough food to eat.*

Among some of the ethnic minorities, women said that control over household finances was largely irrelevant to them. Explained a Kuy woman in the upland province of Preah Vihear:

*I cannot control my husband or any other men with money because we do not have any. My husband does not blame me if we do not have enough to eat because the only thing we use money for is to buy fermented fish, MSG, salt, fish sauce and some sugar. Even then we do not always need money if we have something to exchange, although these days it is becoming more difficult for us to exchange products from the forest for other things.*

From this PPA it has emerged that few women perceive that they actually have the power to curtail expenditure by other household members, not least of all because they have little by way of cash reserves. There is a general perception that poor households rely on women to manage what little money they have. For the women themselves this is an onerous responsibility.

While the cash reserves of the poor are very limited, control over reproductive decisions is something that impacts the degree of poverty, as can be seen by the claims of many women that they have too many children. During the PPA, women were asked whether they had any control over reproductive decisions. In one group located close to the border with Viet Nam in Kandal province, one woman laughingly remarked:

*We do not talk about making children, we just do it. Don't you know this is the Cambodian way? Poor or not, we don't sit down and discuss with our*

*husbands in the mosquito net whether we should have children just in case we get bit by a mosquito....Some NGOs came to our village and talked about husband and wife deciding when they should have children—but you try telling this to a Cambodian man.*

As the discussion proceeded, one woman with 10 children said:

*I think I do have too many children....It is impossible to look after all of them but if some die then who will look after us when we get old? I try to help my mother out when I can, and I want my children to help me if they can. It would be good if I did not have to have one child after another because it makes me feel weak, but of course I dare not discuss this issue with my husband. This is not a Cambodian custom, and I would be criticized by other people, including women, in the same village.*

A Phnong woman in Mondol Kiri also admitted that even though women there had too many children, several of them died of diseases because there was no health center:

*We were born to die. You see in this village there are too many elders and orphans without supports. Now the village is almost quiet because diseases have taken many tolls.*

Similar issues were raised in another PPA site where women were asked specifically whether they had knowledge of reproductive health techniques, including birth spacing, contraception, sterilization and abortion. In Sihanoukville a newly pregnant woman made this observation:

*According to Buddhism it is wrong to have an abortion. I do not personally know whether this is right or wrong but I do know in the village some midwives can help you have an abortion. I have also heard it can be very dangerous and you could die. I also have to be careful as to what my husband and my own family would think. As for eating medicine to stop babies or some operation so that you could never have babies again I am not too sure. If I had many children (more than three or four) I would consider this. The problem is that I cannot talk about this with my husband as he might not agree. As for birth spacing, I know that breast-feeding is quite good, but if you are poor like me perhaps I cannot produce enough milk.*

Some men agreed that women could or should not make unilateral decisions on reproductive matters. But they

were not always against some reproductive-controlling techniques. The following claim was made by a middle-aged poor farmer in Prey Veng:

*It is true that all of us have too many children, but this would not happen if women did not agree to have the children. I do not agree with women taking medicine to stop them having children—there needs to be a natural way of doing this.*

Such a position could be strongly supportive of birth-spacing programs in poor villages, although as the PPA has illustrated, there has been little outreach to the poorest villages by either the government or nongovernment sector.

A larger number of men argued that the problems associated with having too many children were related to the fact that there was not enough land, draft animals or farming implements. Explained another middle-aged farmer:

*We cannot help the fact that we have too many children. This is natural; in some families many of the children do not live to be adults, and some do not even survive infancy. We love our children and see nothing wrong in having a large number... The real problem is that when we do not have enough land or the children are too young to help us in the field, we become poorer than in the past. You look at the rich or even the King and his large family. It is poverty—not the large number of children—that is the problem.*

This also illustrates that men of the same age do not necessarily share the same opinion on similar issues. The lesson that can be drawn from this point is that programs targeted at the poor have to avoid the pitfalls of overgeneralization.

On the other hand, some of the women of a similar age in a different FGD in close proximity to the above village argued quite differently:

*What a man thinks are the right number of children to have and what we think are not always the same. It is our honor, our obligation to have children, that is expected of us... But many of us have been pregnant a lot of times and often our babies die in our womb or die soon after we give birth to them. We also know women who die during childbirth. So while bearing children is normal for women it is not always easy. While it is hard to say we are poor simply because we have too many children, it is also necessary to understand the hardships that we experience during pregnancy, childbirth and child raising as our health can suffer and then everyone in the family is poor.*

It is a serious enough problem when any member of a poor household suffers from a protracted illness, but there is little disagreement with the fact that when women fall ill, the consequences are even more severe.

However, the PPA illustrated that there are differences among ethnic minorities on this very issue. Among the Cham, whom the Khmer consider have much greater community solidarity than the Khmer, there is an ambivalence that possibly reflects the disproportionate loss of life among this ethnic minority group during the civil war, most notably during the Pol Pot period.

During an FGD with Cham males in Kep, one man noted:

*We do not want to see our children grow up to be poor but as a small group of people in Cambodia we know we have to look after ourselves. During the Pol Pot period many of us were killed, and we have to increase our population. When there are more Cham, we will not be so poor.*

Ethnic Phnong women in a village of Mondol Kiri also argued differently:

*If we do not have more children we will become even poorer because people will come from other parts of Cambodia and take all our resources. You can see that for yourselves from the people who have come [to resettle] here. They said they were poor where they come from, which might be true, but here they are not so poor while we are getting poorer.*

In this instance it is not men per se that are influencing the reproductive decisions of women but the dynamics of the land frontier, where the poor from elsewhere in Cambodia are now starting to migrate into areas inhabited by ethnic minorities, due in part to population pressures.

The inter-ethnic differences do not stop there. During an FGD with a group of ethnic Phnong females in Mondol Kiri, one woman said:

*Many babies do not live long as the spirits decide who can live and die. Therefore, we must give birth to more children to avoid not having a family to support us. Also we are quickly becoming a minority in our area and have to deal with different people who do not respect the same traditions as us. If we do not have more children we will have to adopt their traditions, and we will lose our identity.*

It would appear then that for different reasons, reproductive health programs targeted at the dominant Khmer female population would not work very well

among some of the ethnic minorities. This is an argument for designing culturally appropriate programs.

## Domestic Violence

Some women raised the issue of domestic violence, although most FGD participants argued that verbal rather than physical abuse was more of a major problem. Interestingly, the region with the greatest degree of food insecurity, the Coastal region, reported the lowest incidence of domestic violence. Only 7 percent of FGD participants there considered this a serious issue compared to 32 percent in the Mekong Plain region, 20 percent in the Tonle Sap region and 25 percent in the Northeastern Mountain region.

The most interesting finding from the PPA is that 76 percent of participants believed much more domestic violence occurs now than in the past. The highest reported percentage of domestic violence is in the Northeastern Mountain region at more than 80 percent and the lowest at just over 70 percent in the Coastal region.

It was very difficult for people to establish a linkage between domestic violence and poverty because almost all FGD participants considered they are poorer now than they were in the past. If domestic violence leads to marital separation, rare for women who are subject to strong cultural constraints not to break up a marriage, participants considered it a cause of poverty for both women and men. This is expressed by a 50-year-old woman during an FGD in Pailin:

*During the time of the Khmer Rouge, married couples were free to dissolve their marriages if they did not work out and the organization would still take care of both the man and woman....But now there is no one to take care of a divorced woman, and if she has young children she is like a widow. Under the Khmer Rouge, discipline was strict and a man did not speak strongly to a woman as the Khmer Rouge respected the rights of women. This is not true today because women are having no real rights.*

This argument overlooks the fact that in many instances the Khmer Rouge forced young couples to marry against their will, the penalty for refusal sometimes being death. Still, it is necessary to bring out into the open such perceptions. The woman's view also overlooks the fact that for the first time in modern Cambodian history women have a basket of rights guaranteed by the 1993 Constitution and a government ministry specifically created to look after the affairs of women. The problem is

that this does not guarantee that the Government can effectively target poor women living in rural areas. For now it appears that NGOs have a more effective outreach to women living in rural areas than the Government, though not always to the poorest of rural women.

Another dimension to domestic violence relates to the powerlessness, the sense of frustration that the poor feel at not being able to climb out of poverty. A group of men during an FGD in Kampong Thom freely admitted there was domestic violence but one younger man pointed out:

*I would only hit my wife if she hit me first, but the problem is women tend to scream at you to make you look silly in front of other people. It looks as though I have no control, especially when she refers to me being poor, which both of us are, so I feel inclined to hit her.*

Women in one FGD initially denied there was any domestic violence in their village. When told there is domestic violence in many other villages, they reluctantly agreed to share their perceptions. According to one older woman:

*They say men never beat women in the past—that is untrue. But we also beat men who were no good. What you are seeing today is men beating up women and not using nice language with them even when women use sweet language. This is not whether you are rich or poor but how you choose to deal with other people. Being poor today means having not enough food to eat and money to pay for things that are needed. Being poor in the past meant using bad language.*

Among ethnic minority women this was a difficult issue to discuss because they do not want outsiders to probe into all aspects of their domestic relationships, although many of them believe that in the past there were greater levels of domestic violence than currently. Ethnic Vietnamese agreed there is considerable verbal, nonphysical violence in their households but none of them were prepared to attribute this to their poverty.

The issue of domestic violence is very complex when dealing with different socioeconomic strata and especially different ethnic groups. This PPA does not argue that because men are poor that they are more likely to engage in acts of violence, verbal and physical, nor does it argue that different ethnic groups have different levels of domestic violence. What the PPA does support is the argument that being poor does little to resolve the problems of domestic violence.

## Finding Suitable Marriage Partners

For younger women one of the consequences of poverty is the difficulty in finding a suitable spouse. All young female FGD participants argued that men never want to marry poor women although very few of the poor women actually wanted to marry poor men either. The pressure is on younger women to find some form of income, and that includes, if necessary, working outside the village.

Many women acknowledged that when a young woman leaves the village in search of work, she would end up doing something that she is ashamed to do. In remote upland villages, particularly in the Northeastern Mountain region, no one really knows what happens in such instances because young women do not leave the village in search of employment. In provinces closer to Phnom Penh, the poor are quite aware as to what will or may happen to young women. As one person in a Kandal discussion pointed out:

*When young women leave the village, given their lack of education, they might end up working for some rich family as a maid or as a beer hostess in a bar or restaurant and even as a sex worker. If such young women come back to the village with a lot of money then perhaps no one will care, but until this day we have not seen young women bringing much money back to the village—at least not enough to buy land, draft animals or farm implements. If young women have this kind of money, they would have no trouble getting married.*

In deconstructing the notion about the ideal marriage partner, the poor appear pragmatic enough to realize that a young woman with money, irrespective as to how she earned it, enhances her marital prospects. The ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia appear to have a similar position to the ethnic Khmer in this respect, as evidenced by the following points made by an older Vietnamese living in Kandal:

*The Khmer always argue that the honor of their young women is important. Having access to land for growing rice or other crops or a boat to go fishing is also important for survival. How people get the money to buy land or a boat is also important, and I know from experience it is not easy. I do not think any young man would marry a young woman that did not come from a family with land or a boat, or preferably both.*

The issues associated with honor and prestige do not escape the poor. In a village in Siem Reap, one young woman who is aware of income-generating opportunities outside the village argued for staying home:

*I do not honor my family if I go and work in Phnom Penh or even Siem Reap because there are many things to spend money on in both those places and you need money to buy these things. From what I have heard, a young woman like me might have to do something that will bring dishonor on my family, such as working as a beer girl.*

Yet other young women from poor families who are living and working in Phnom Penh spoke differently of their honor and their prospects:

*It is not always good what we do but we need money. When we have a lot of it we will return to the village and bring more honor to our family than if we had stayed in the village. But if this cannot happen then we should stay here because there is no future in the village.*

There are multiple layers of reality when an issue such as this kind is discussed, but it cannot be argued that the poor have completely abandoned any meaning associated with the notion of honor. That there are few local employment opportunities in most villages means that for the poor it is necessary to work elsewhere. On the one hand this exposes them to greater social risks, including those associated with HIV/AIDS, but on the other hand it might also provide practical learning experiences that can be applied to the reduction of poverty, if and when such young people return to their local communities.

## Health and Education

For poor Cambodians, access to health and education is highly problematic. Not one woman, during either FGDs or interviews, considered she enjoyed good access to either health care or educational resources. Women reported that the most stressful times in relation to accessing basic health care occurred during their pregnancies or when their young children became ill. In all villages visited by the PPA teams there were no antenatal and postnatal services offered, and women had to rely on services provided by traditional midwives, which are quite satisfactory when there are no medical complications. Indeed most women prefer to be seen by a traditional midwife with whom they are familiar. In this respect there was no difference between women living in upland provinces such as Rattanakiri or a coastal province like Sihanoukville.

The real problems occur during the postnatal period, and while the effects include anemia, back pains and gynecological disorders, the causes are lack of proper rest following childbirth, the need to work hard and the inability to afford extra nutrients required during breast-feeding. Women in an FGD organized in Pursat argued:

*When you are poor it does not matter when you give birth to a baby because you are always busy trying to manage household activities. Just because you give birth to a baby does not mean that other family members do not need your support. It is even worse if we have rice to transplant or harvest.... Then there will be no rest. Everyone tries to give you a little more food but if they do not have it to spare what can they do?*

*The women who are not poor are lucky because someone will look after them, they do not have to go out and work as hard, and there will always be more food.*

In the upland provinces it is even more problematic, as expressed by a woman suffering from malaria who had just given birth at the time of the PPA:

*I feel weak as it is from giving birth to my child but now I am also suffering from malaria. It is terrible, as I have to go and work in the field with my husband since we are about to harvest our upland rice. He cannot do this job on his own, and we cannot afford to employ anyone. Without the rice we would starve to death. When a man gets sick, the woman is expected to look after him. I know my husband would try to come and help harvest the rice if he were the one that is ill, but I could not let him. All of us poor women are in a similar position.*

Malaria is endemic in much of the Cambodian countryside, especially in the upland provinces, and it exacerbates other illnesses that women may acquire following childbirth. Supplying poor households with mosquito repellent-impregnated nets, Vitamin A supplements and even access to clean water would go a long way to resolving some of these postnatal problems. The poor women have some knowledge of these solutions but lack the financial and political resources to access the providers of such services in Cambodia.

Serious problems also arise when another member of the household falls ill, particularly infants whom women are breast-feeding or young children who are in their maternal care. While most women prefer to breast-feed, irrespective of their ethnic background or where they are located in Cambodia, the ability to continue breast-feeding depends on whether the lactating mother

is adequately nourished. All women interviewed agreed that attempts should be made to provide additional food to lactating mothers, but they also noted that during months when there was inadequate food this proves to be a major problem. Of relevance is the serious food shortages for the poor in most regions of Cambodia, which usually occur from July until after the December-January harvest. However, in the upland provinces, serious food shortages can occur at any time during the year because upland ethnic minorities rely to a greater extent on hunting and gathering than do the lowland Khmer, Cham or Vietnamese.

There is some gender bias in the way poor communities deal with women's health problems. In a village inhabited by the ethnic Kavet in Rattanakiri, it was learned that if a family member was seriously ill and required hospitalization, the family would be more likely to try and arrange for a man to be transported to hospital than a woman. One male villager explained:

*We cannot afford to be without women in the household, even a woman who is seriously ill because women look after the house. Men spend a lot of time in the forest so they can manage the forest but not the house.... Yet we really do not like taking anyone to a faraway hospital because they are not much good anyway. It is better to understand what caused the illness in the first place, such as not treating the bad spirits with respect. Good spirits would never cause illness.*

As this man pointed out, transporting seriously ill people to a culturally alien hospital is not the preferred alternative for either gender among the ethnic Kavet. Culturally sensitive health workers or, alternatively, a training program in public health designed by the Kavet, and the other groups are affected this way, in conjunction with public health workers is more likely to meet the needs of those ethnic minorities.

Most poor families try to send all their children to school if they can but for the very poor, attendance at school is almost a luxury. But often, they cannot afford the school uniforms, transport fees and formal and nonformal fees that are paid to teachers, points that were made in Chapter 5. The reality for many young girls is that they cannot even complete the basic four years of education. This is put in context by a group of women in Svay Rieng who argued:

*We want all of our children to attend school but when there is a family illness or young children need to be looked after we always ask our daughters to do this rather than our sons.*

*Daughters are better at doing this kind of thing, and it is their duty to do so. Sons should try to stay at school so they can at least read and write Khmer.*

*If we were not so poor and did not have to spend all day looking for food, then our daughters could attend school.*

It should come as no surprise that more males in FGDs were literate than females because of such cultural attitudes. Interestingly, the few women who considered themselves literate in the Khmer language did not have the same argument. In Oddar Meanchey, a group of women who returned to Cambodia in the early 1990s after spending nearly a decade in displaced people's camps just inside Thailand and who joined one of the FGDs remarked:

*If we take our daughters out of school we will always be poor.*

*It is daughters who are capable of earning more money than sons and are always around to assist in times of need. Sons will get married to someone else's daughter who may not live in the same village as us. We know this is not just what happens in Cambodia but what we have observed in Thailand—the men laze around getting drunk all day in Thailand and have other wives while the women work really hard.*

An important point that emerges from this PPA is that because of nearly three decades of civil war and significant internal migration and displacement, the poor have experiences that the poor in some other countries in the region do not have.

In the upland areas, access to education is problematic for both males and females because there are few schools in remote localities. Where these schools exist they do not often employ bilingual teachers, so most of the teachers only speak Khmer. It is expected of the students that they must learn Khmer. Among some of the ethnic minority groups there is a reluctance to let young female students learn Khmer lest they cast aside their indigenous language. A Kuy woman in Preah Vihear told the PPA team there that to learn to speak Khmer was a real struggle for her:

*My family asked me why I needed to learn Khmer, to which I replied that if I wanted to live and work among other Cambodians then I needed to learn Khmer. They then asked me why I wanted to live and work among other Cambodians, to which I replied that this would be the only way to have an opportunity to escape from poverty. This did not convince my family who thought I was only trying*

*to become like a Khmer. But look around you. All my village is poor. At least I can go to a place like Kampong Thom and ask for work.*

The remoteness from schools is another obstacle for young females living in the upland areas. Families are not keen to permit their daughters to spend a long time away from home attending school, partly because they are worried about what may happen to their daughters but also because they are needed for essential domestic work. Concerns about sons living away from home are less than for daughters.

This last point is also found among concerns of lowland Khmer to an important extent, as mentioned during the PPA. Kandal province, for example, is not far from Phnom Penh but young people living there need to go away from home if they want to attend school. According to a man in one of the Kandal FGDs:

*Send your sons away to school if you have the money...It is a good idea and they might be better off, but send your daughters away and what will happen to them? Perhaps they will return to the village pregnant. No one in Cambodia sends their daughters away to study.*

Such an attitude reflect traditional Cambodian cultural values, and it is not surprising that some Cambodian men subscribe to this attitude. Cultural traditions that do not benefit poor Cambodians, especially young females, have a pervasiveness that is not easily challenged. Clearly one of the solutions may well be the establishment of single-sex dormitories in Phnom Penh and provincial capitals, although the more effective solution is to provide education at the village level. Even then, some flexibility in teaching hours needs to be offered so that young girls can attend classes, according to FGD participants.

Some of the Cambodian women who were interviewed stated they also want relevant forms of vocational education and training, such as dressmaking, hairdressing, food preservation, craft manufacture and silk weaving skills. Women also would like to have information on available sources of credit and how they can qualify to access this credit. They would like real information on what they can produce for the market. They would like training in cattle, pig, goat and poultry raising, tree and vegetable farming. These vocational and training needs vary from those of men that relate to skill development in motorcycle repairs, irrigation pump maintenance and woodworking. Men also want training in some animal husbandry, industrial agriculture (rubber, palm oil and cassava) and technologies associated with growing

export-quality rice. Like women, they are also very interested in credit, but less interested in developing greater levels of market knowledge.

There appears to be regional differences in training demands. In provinces such as Siem Reap, women would like to learn silk weaving whereas in Mondol Kiri, ethnic Phnong women would like to receive training in craft manufacturing, particularly in making baskets that they could sell to non-Phnong people. Most Khmer women would like more training in pig raising but Cham women, who are Muslims, would like to learn goat raising. Ethnic Lao women in Stung Treng want training in poultry while the ethnic Tumpuon women in Rattanakiri want training in cattle. Vocational training in food preservation is sought among all upland ethnic minority groups while the lowland Khmer women would like more training in dressmaking.

## Labor Activities

Women would participate in almost any labor activity that would provide them money. The problem, as this PPA has revealed, is that there are few opportunities for paid labor for the poor.

To find paid work, out-migration, either temporary or permanent, is necessary. Young men are supposed to be encouraged while young women are to be discouraged; and yet, some women recognized there are more opportunities for young females than for men. According to an older woman from Prey Veng:

*The garment factories in Phnom Penh want young women to work in them, not young men. At first when we heard about this preference we thought it was quite strange because we always thought young men would be preferred over young women. We thought that the factories must be paying the young women very low wages but when we heard they could earn KR160,000 to KR200,000 per month we realized that young men would probably work there as well. If you are lucky to pick up paid employment in the local area, the most you can earn is about KR3,000 per day. Nowadays, having daughters is much better than having sons because garment factories generally recruit girls. Boys are rarely employed in this area.*

A young garment worker who returned to her village in Kampong Speu during the PPA painted a different picture:

*When you see the long line of young women lining up for a job you think it must be quite a good job. Once you have worked in the place for a few months*

*you realize that you have to work for every riel. Most of our earnings go to pay for a place to sleep and our food. If we want to send money home, we have to work very long hours. Of course, it is better than nothing, but one day I would like to return to my village. Whether I can return will depend on if I have enough money to buy some land and animals or find some kind of paid employment here in the village.*

In spite of this, the other women participating in the FGD still believed that this young garment worker is better off than if she had stayed in the village.

Where there is limited paid employment locally it appears to be a common practice that women get paid less than men, but rather because it is considered there are some jobs that women cannot do well. For instance, in several PPAs organized in Kampong Thom, women complained about differential payments for agricultural labor. Men could receive up to KR5,000 per day to work as casual laborers harvesting corn, peanuts and sesame, but women could only receive KR2,500 to KR3,000 for similar work.

Employers of this labor claimed women take more time off during the day, whereas men work the whole day. Women questioned this claim but the men argued there was little difference whether women or men received higher daily rates because it all went back into the household finances. This was quickly disputed by women, one of whom pointed out:

*Every riel we earn goes back to the family but not every riel the man earns goes back to the family. In fact some of this money is used by the man for drinking. Sometimes he uses it all and has nothing to bring back home. This rarely occurs in the case of a woman.*

As wage labor is quantified, so too are some forms of labor exchange. Among the upland ethnic minorities, there are forms of generalized reciprocity that imply that assistance needs to be rendered whenever necessary. Ethnic minority women provide their labor when necessary for a range of everyday activities but men only generally provide it when logging, hunting, harvesting or house-building activities are required. During FGDs among ethnic minority groups, men claimed they were more deeply involved in reciprocal forms of labor than women, which was mildly disputed by women. The system of generalized reciprocity among upland ethnic minority groups ensures a culture of shared poverty.

Men from all regions felt rather comfortable with the fact that they could be paid more for doing the same or less work than their female counterparts, even though

it would be in the interest of everyone to be paid at the same daily wage rates. As one male construction worker from Prey Veng offered:

*Women cannot work as hard as we can on building sites. The work is heavy and often dangerous. At a certain time of the month, women are even weaker. Also, women should be looking after older and younger family members, so when something goes wrong they return to the village. That is why we should get paid more.*

## Access to Land, Water, Credit and Agricultural Extension

In Cambodia, large numbers of landholders do not have full legal ownership of their land. Most have legal access to their land as allowed by the 1989 law that resulted in the allocation of land in the rural areas to all households. However, more than 300,000 people returned from refugee camps along the border with Thailand between 1992 and 1993. And, there were significant numbers of internally displaced persons due to the civil war that did not effectively end until after Pol Pot's death in 1998. In the upland provinces, the situation is more complex because most of the ethnic minorities claim customary access to land on a communal basis rather than access on an individual household basis.

Bias against those who left Cambodia in the 1970s and 1980s have affected many people when they returned from border camps. In Battambang province where significant numbers of these returnees were offered land, much of it full of land mines, there have been difficulties, according to women in PPAs there. One widowed woman explained:

*When I came back I thought it would be good, as now there would be peace but I found that the land allocated to me was claimed by a man already living in the village. First he told me that it had land mines, and I would not be able to clear it of the mines by myself. When I protested, he then told me that the village head had wrongly allocated the land to me. I went and complained to the village head, but he told me that I left Cambodia in the hope that I could find a better life abroad, and he was not going to help me.*

Similar accounts can be heard from other areas where significant numbers of returnees were sent, including some provinces far from the border. These returnees want

protection from local officials, who are either insensitive to their plight or continue to harbor a bias against them.

Internal displacement has also created some problems for women. For instance, in Oddar Meanchey, a group of women complained during an FGD that the original land they occupied had been seized by the military for its own use. The military told them that the women had no legal proof of occupation. Despaired one woman:

*Soldiers created the problems in this area. During war they take your sons for fighting and your daughters for their own pleasure. Once peace arrives they take your land, and local officials either can do little about this or provide support for the soldiers to do this. These soldiers and local officials do not listen to us.*

Problems for the internally displaced occurred throughout most of the 1990s. These problems were generally more specific to the northwestern border provinces, but during the PPA similar troubles were found in Kampong Thom, Kampong Chhnang and Pursat.

Highlighted issues in the upland villages occupied by the different ethnic minority groups include people's rights to access areas for hunting, the gathering of other nontimber forest products, including wild foods or those considered sacred, which have been restricted. This has an impact upon all community members. An ethnic Prov women in Rattanakiri told this story:

*Some strangers came to our village to look at the land, and then went into the forest with a military escort. A few months later we were told by local officials that there were some areas in the forest we could no longer hunt and gather in. We protested but were told that local Prov men agreed to this rule because they were given money by these strangers. We think it is not the local Prov men but the officials who did this.*

It would appear, based on discussions with other ethnic minorities in the upland provinces, that instances of this co-opting of land are increasingly occurring.

Water is a problem that involves all women, whether it is access to and utilization of safe drinking water or for household garden plots or the irrigation of agricultural crops. There are many points that emerged here that illustrate the gender-specific problems associated with water.

All women complained that they spend a lot of time each day accessing water for cooking, washing and bathing purposes. In all regions women stated the time spent was almost double what it was in the wet season. The situation is even more serious in the upland provinces, where near drought-like conditions occur by the middle

of the dry season. And then during the wet season in all regions there are more problems associated with young children getting diarrhea because of the water quality and the less time women have to look after young children because of wet season agricultural activities.

The problem is exacerbated when heavy flooding occurs, as it did during this PPA. Once flooding occurs, women have to spend much time ensuring that young children do not drown in the floodwaters, the livestock are shifted to higher ground and that food supplements are found from nonflooded areas.

In the upland provinces because of topography and most villages' close proximity to the watersheds, flash flooding is more likely to occur. In the lowland areas women get more time to prepare for flooding. Women in FGD in Kampong Cham, where flooding was very bad during 2000, complained about flood warnings. According to one woman's experience:

*Local officials did not receive information from the Government in time to tell us that the flooding would get worse, and we continued working in our rice fields until the floodwaters started to rise and then we found our rice fields flooded. Next we found we could not stay in our houses. Flooding has always occurred but nowhere near as bad as this.*

These women did not know about flood forecasting and the importance of an early warning system, but they were concerned that the Government appeared nonresponsive to their plight. There is clearly an argument for more detailed flood forecasting, using if necessary the observations of local villagers in the absence of reliable data, and the establishment of an early warning system. This would be information that should be shared with local communities, including women.

Distinct gender differences relate to what priorities should be attached to the delivery of water services at the community level. Women everywhere want more convenient access to safe water for drinking, cooking and bathing purposes. They do not want to spend as much time per day as they do currently accessing water for these needs. This does not appear to be a major concern of men, who think as long as water is available then the problem is solved. Men asked for irrigation systems for agricultural crops but not irrigation water for household gardens or systems that could be designed so that women could take advantage of them for bathing and washing.

Few of the women who participated in this PPA have access to credit. Indeed, as Chapter 5 demonstrates, some women and their households sank into further poverty because they had to sell land, draft animals and often much

of their rice crop. It is clear that women everywhere would be very enthusiastic about a micro-finance program if they could benefit from it. It also appears that women are more specific about how they would repay credit extended by such a program, as one person in Siem Reap said:

*If we borrowed money at a low interest rate to buy a cow, pigs or poultry, we could repay this loan by returning to the borrower a calf, piglet or chickens up to the value of the loan plus interest. In the event of illness we could borrow money and agree to repayments over a period of time so that we do not have to sell our land or livestock.*

Men in the same FGD were nowhere near as explicit about how they would repay a loan, focusing instead on why they need to have access to micro-finance. This PPA appears to corroborate the widespread perception that women are more creditworthy than men.

There are no agricultural extension services in the villages where the PPAs were undertaken. And women did express support for extension services targeted specifically at them. In particular, they wanted to know how they could increase the productivity of the wet season rice crop they jointly cultivated with men, although in the upland provinces where they grow different glutinous rice this was not considered a priority because there is normally less pressure on the land.

Women also thought technical training courses should not target only men. The men claim that women are not capable of participating in training courses because many of them are not literate. While this is partly correct, one woman interviewed in Svay Rieng argued:

*Just because I cannot read and write does not mean I cannot learn by watching what needs to be done. I can then take what I have learned out into my own fields and see if it works. Maybe they could even teach me how to do this myself by coming out into my field. It is not necessary to have some local village man being trained and then teaching me because he might not even do this.*

This is a good argument for promoting a farmer-centered extension strategy that is also gender-sensitive.

## Influence in the Public Domain

The PPA found that women have a significant role to play in decision-making at the community level. Only 10 percent of FGD participants previously considered that women had a responsible role to play in decision making

on issues that impacted upon their lives at the community level. By the time of this PPA, more than 36 percent of participants agreed that women now deserve greater authority. This trend, participants acknowledged, started during the revolution in 1975 when women became more involved in community roles and responsibilities. However, there is considerable variation from one region to the next.

Both in the past and currently, women in the Northeastern Mountain region have played a greater community role than in the other regions—16 percent in the past and 65 percent nowadays. How the big percentage increase can be explained is not clear from the findings of the PPA although historically it can be argued that gender relations have been more equal among upland ethnic groups than lowland ethnic groups.

In the Tonle Sap region, 41 percent of participants considered that women now play a larger role in community-based decision-making processes than in the past.

In the context of poverty reduction, the involvement or noninvolvement of women in these processes

is thought to demonstrate the depth of poverty in the local community. This was not cross-tabulated but intuitively there appeared to be a correlation between villages with more active involvement of women in community-based decision-making processes and lower poverty. Women in some of the FGD made this point as did a number of male FGD participants.

No women or men were so naïve that they thought it possible that communities by themselves could solve all the problems associated with poverty. As one female FGD participant in Takeo explained:

*It would not matter if every man and every woman participated in the affairs of the community—poverty would not be reduced by this fact alone. We need things that our community cannot provide, such as supplementary food in order to work on local projects....It is impossible for us to train our own teachers...We lack the technical knowledge to redesign irrigation structures.... Our knowledge of modern health care does not exist.*