

Gender Issue in Education in Cambodia

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■ Gender Problems in Cambodia

- Formerly a French colony, Cambodia became independent in 1953. The Khmer Rouge seized power in 1975, and over the next four years instigated a brutal regime under which as many as 1.5 - 2 million Cambodians may have died of execution, overwork, starvation and disease. The impacts of this period of terror are still felt in Cambodian society today. Cambodia is a male-dominated society and females are expected to conform to traditions.
- Gender problems exist not only in developing nations, but also in highly developed countries such as western nations. A Southeast Asian developing country, Cambodia, deeply rooted in restrictive and hierarchical culture, is rife with gender issues, especially in education.
- It is a fact that in Cambodia women outnumber men; however, the illiteracy rate of women is higher than that of men; the school enrolment rate of female students is lower than that of male students. Although Cambodia has made good progress in education, gender inequality still remains a major challenge in this sector. Boys and girls start schooling on equal footing in primary education but dropout rate among girl students starts to go up with their grade improvement, particularly after completion of secondary level.

■ Backgrounds of gender gap in accessing education

- There are many reasons behind the wide gap between males and females in terms of access to education. First, it is the traditionally-based parental notion (stereotype) towards sons and daughters. Customarily, parents consider boys more important than girls in the way that boys can go out to work, while girls have to stay at home and take charge of the household chores.
- Also, girls, after getting married, are expected to be fed by their husbands so they do not need to do any job. Thus, the majority of parents find it pointless to let their daughters get high education. In the old days, it was also believed that daughters would become very stubborn if they were educated. Moreover, they would know how to write the love letters to men, so in order to prevent disgrace in the

family, the girls should not be sent to school. In contrast, the boys are usually the breadwinners or the head of the family in the future; thus getting more knowledge would gain good reputation for their family. As a result, in poor families, if they can afford for only one child to go to school, then it will be the boy who gets the opportunity.

- Another factor is that girls are needed in the house or at the fields. Most Cambodian families, around 80%, are farmers, so they need a lot of workforce or labor force to assist in the fields because Cambodian farmers are still applying the old traditional ways of farming. Therefore, the girls should stay at home to cook or to work in the fields rather than go to school.
- In Cambodia, 65% of agricultural labor and 75% of fishery production are in the hands of women. Alike, some parents would think that formal education is not that crucial; they would likely let their daughters to learn some skills or go to the city to working as the garment factory workers or domestic servants.

■ Challenging factors of female education in Cambodia

- Although the ministry of education, youth and sports claims that students can have access to education free of charge, in most areas of Cambodia, students still have to pay unofficial fees to enrol in the school, and they have to pay for their extra class as well in order to upgrade their knowledge. More than that, female students have to spend much money on the uniforms and the supplies, which is a heavy burden for poor villagers.
- Besides, the distance of the school is another barrier for female students to have access to education. It is not a big problem in the city in which there are plenty of schools, but in rural areas, schools are hardly found. There are not many schools available in the countryside or remote areas; accordingly, parents would not riskily allow their daughters to go to school since the security in the rural areas is not good enough.
- The lack of latrines and sanitary facilities are also the reasons why female students do not attend school. Female students find themselves uncomfortable at education centres where clean toilets are not available. In this case, if they want to use the toilet, they have to go to the forest or the big wood nearby. For this reason, girls will feel better to stay at home enjoy proper facilities.

■ Efforts of Government

- Now a day, the government and international and local organizations have played their roles in promoting gender equity in Cambodia
- The government has made some reforms regarding to the educational

sector, for example by providing scholarships to poor students. Also, has built more schools which are quipped with clean toilets in rural areas or build school dormitories, which make it easy for female students to go to school.

- Moreover, women the rural areas get free health care service. And the government has developed some non-formal education regarding sexual reproductive health and nutritional awareness to villagers. In the meanwhile, women are encouraged to take part in all kinds of social activities or even the political factor should be taken into account as well. Furthermore, the government approved and enforced laws to promote gender equality in education.

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