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### Addressing Unpaid Work in Cambodia

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## Addressing Unpaid Work in Cambodia<sup>4</sup>

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### Abstract

This paper presents an overview of development challenges related to promoting gender equality in Cambodia based on the available published evidence. To achieve gender equality objectives, Cambodia needs policy initiatives that address unpaid work and facilitate women's equal participation in labor and social development. This paper offers policy recommendations to address Cambodia's unpaid work issues, including the provisions of elderly care, enhancement of early childhood education coverage, promoting accessible and affordable childcare programs, pushing for parental leave, and increasing pension scheme coverage. The success of policy design and implementation requires political will to deliver the policies, accompanying efficient and effective public service delivery.

**Keywords:** Unpaid work; Unpaid care; Domestic chores; Unpaid work in Cambodia; Women's empowerment; Gender Equality; Gender justice; Gender policy; Gender and development; Cambodia.

### Introduction: Cambodia's Gender at a Glance

Cambodia's gender equality outcomes remain challenging for Cambodia in reaching Sustainable Development Goals. According to the Human Development Index 2019, Cambodia was positioned at 114th out of 162 countries in 2019, the lowest in the ASEAN region. Cambodian women still earn less than men. The average GNI per capita of women in Cambodia was about USD 3,129, while male GNI was about USD 4,089 (UNDP, 2019). By 2018, only about 15% of the female population had at least some secondary education, compared to 28% of the male population (UNDP, 2019).

Women's labor participation rate was approximately 75% in 2018 and 30% of those are in the agricultural sector, 45.4% in the services sector, and 24.55% in the industry sector (World Bank, n.d.). Textile manufacturing employs about one million workers; around 85% are women (Onishi, T., 2020). The tourism sector employs about 620,000 workers, at least 50% are women, according to the Asian Development Bank. According to the ILO, approximately 4.3 million people are in the formal sector, such as street vendors, domestic workers, entertainment workers, and construction workers.

The high numbers of women participation in the economy do not imply that women can fully utilize the opportunities and benefits, comparing to men (IFC, 2019). Women face challenges such as culture, inadequate social protection provision, gender-based violence, and vulnerability to economic

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shocks. The low skilled and unskilled women workers have limited access to social protection such as labor and social security protection, minimum wage guarantee, overtime compensation, and maternity leave (CEDAW, 2019). Women are concentrated in the low-wages and unskilled jobs such as footwear and garment industry and construction sector where mostly they are contracted as a short-term or fixed duration contract (CEDAW, 2019).

Access to health services is one of the biggest challenges for Cambodia's women. For every 100,000 live births, 161 die from pregnancy-related causes (UNDP, 2019). Teen pregnancy remains a severe concern to Cambodia. The adolescent birth rate is 50.2 births per 1,000 women aged between 15 and 19 (UNDP, 2019). According to the World Health Organization, more than five million women over age 12 are at risk for cervical cancer (Serrano, 2017).

Gender-based violence against women is alarming. Women, especially women in marginalized conditions such as entertainment workers, sex workers, and bear promoters, face high harassment and abuse risks. The CEDAW Committee noted in the concluding observation on the sixth periodic report that social norms remain the challenge to address the gender-based violence against women in Cambodia. The written and unwritten norms serve as the means to blame the victims, mostly women, rather than the perpetrators of gender-based violence (CEDAW, 2019).

Even though Cambodia has made progress on education targets in the education sector, girls have fewer education opportunities than boys. According to OHCHR, 45% of Cambodian women believe it is more important to educate a son than a daughter (OHCHR, 2015). Moreover, the number of girls in STEM subjects remains low. According to the Kampuchea Action to Promote Education (KAPE), there are about 14% of girls enrolled in the STEM disciplines in Cambodia, comparing to 86% boys (Kampuchean Action for Education, n.d.). This gender gap in STEM is one of the greatest in Southeast Asia, compared with 52% of women in Thailand and 48% in Malaysia (Kampuchean Action for Education, n.d.).

In the public sector, women are underrepresented at the national, provincial, sub-national, and local levels. At the national level, women represented about 14% of senate members and about 18% of parliament members. There are only three female ministers amongst 26 ministries at the ministerial level, while only one female provincial governor exists amongst 25 provinces and the municipality. According to the data in 2014 of the Ministry of Women's Affairs, female district governor represented about 1% of total district governors. Further than that, women from ethnic minorities and indigenous communities are not represented at the national and provincial levels (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2014).

## Why Unpaid Work Matters for Cambodia?

Unpaid work is a pressing issue to promote women's empowerment and gender equality in Cambodia. Unpaid work is driven by macro-economic, demographic, and social institution factors (Alonso et al., 2019; Ferrant et al., 2014; Mathew, 2019). Mathew highlighted that the invisibility and exclusion of unpaid work from national accounts' systems renders its visibility for policymaking (Mathew, 2019). This argument can be reflected in Cambodia's context. Cambodia's macro-economic policy has made unpaid work invisible. Unpaid work in Cambodia, like other countries, is not included in the national account due to non-monetary flow. Thus, the policymakers have not addressed unpaid work issues through national policies, such as National Action Plan to Prevent Violence against Women and Cambodia's Gender Strategic Plan (Neary Rattanak), and Cambodia's macroeconomic policy.

To date, there is limited data on unpaid work and its effect on Cambodia's social and economic development. However, growing evidence in the region suggests that unpaid work impacts women in many ways, including educational attainment and vocational training, labor force participation, income, political participation, and health. The data from the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) shows that 52.64% of 770 million inactive women in the ESCAP region, in which Cambodia is included, stay out of the labor market due to unpaid care responsibilities (Mathew, 2019). The data also suggested that fathers with young children in the region are likely to be employed than mothers. Roughly 51% of women with children are employed, compared to 87.5% of men with children (Mathew, 2019). Moreover, 64% of women workers in the region work in the informal sector due to the need for flexible arrangements between home and work (Mathew, 2019). In Vietnam, women choose less benefited jobs that allow them to balance paid jobs and unpaid responsibilities due to the unequal distribution of unpaid work (Chowdhury et al., 2018). Like Vietnam, Indonesian women tend to work in less benefited employments due to childcare constraints (Halim et al., 2017). In Indonesia, low female labor force participation is suggested to link with unpaid care work (Halim et al., 2017). Without access to formal childcare, Indonesian mothers are likely to switch to unpaid family work (Halim et al., 2017).

In the wake of COVID-19 and EBA, Cambodia announced to cut the 2021 national budget to USD 4 billion, dropping from USD 8.2 billion in 2020 (Hutt, 2020; NNA Business News, 2020). The national budget for social affairs, against the 2020 budget allocation, is expected to decrease by 11.3% in 2021 (Hutt, 2020; NNA Business News, 2020). Mathew noted that austerity measures had been associated with worsening development outcomes for women (Mathew, 2019:17). For instance, the fiscal consolidation after the Global Financial Crisis intensified women's unpaid care burdens to a point

which cannot be absorbed without experiencing strain and ill-effects (Mathew, 2019:17). Thus, with the current inadequate public infrastructure and a lack of policy priority to tackle unpaid work, women are not advantaged from this austerity measure.

Moreover, the demographic trend would demonstrate a likelihood of increasing women's unpaid work for children and the elderly and reducing women's opportunity to participate in social, economic, and political affairs. As of 2019, Cambodia has more than 16.5 million population, of which 1.24 million were working abroad (National Institute of Statistic, n.d.). Women make up more than half of the total population, approximately 51% (National Institute of Statistic, 2019). Roughly 65.3% of the total population is under 30 years old (UNDP, n.d.). Of the total population, 5.9 million, approximately 37% of the total population, are children aged between zero and 17 years old (UNICEF, 2018). The children population comprises 1.8 million aged between zero and four, 1.7 million aged between five and nine, and 2.5 million aged between ten and seventeen (UNICEF, 2018). More than 1.2 million people are aged over 60, which is 7.6% of the total population, as of 2019 (Help Age, n.d.). Cambodia's population is projected to increase to around 18 million in 2030, in which women make up more than 50% of the projected population (Statistics Bureau of Japan, n.d.). The proportion of older people is expected to increase nearly triple in the coming decades. This data also suggested that Cambodia needs a policy that addresses elderly care and childcare to facilitate women's participation in economic and social activities.

Social institutions, such as traditional gender roles, beliefs, and practices, influence Cambodia's unpaid work. One of Cambodia's social institutions' most critical is Cambodia's Women Code of Conduct or Chbab Srey, which codified women's status in the home. According to the code, Cambodia's women are expected to perform domestic duties within the household, while men are expected to go out of home and earn a living for their families (Anderson & Grace, 2018). The Ministry of Women's Affairs (2014) highlighted that social norms on gender relations prevent women and girls from accessing education and training opportunities instead of expecting women to take care of the household. The International Finance Corporation (IFC) highlighted that women's subordination to men under the Chbab Srey limits women's economic independence and opportunities (IFC, 2019). Unpaid work responsibilities, fueled by the conventionally social practices, prevent women business owners from accessing the markets due to a lack of time or no-time access to networking and building business partnerships (IFC, 2019).

These challenges unequivocally suggest that Cambodia needs more responsive policies in order to tackle unpaid work and promote gender equality. The following sections will discuss some policy recommendations to address unpaid work.

## Policy Recommendations

Cambodia needs to set clear policy initiatives to achieve its national gender equality targets. The effective policy design and implementation require political will and good governance that bridge policy gaps and reach desired development outcomes. This paper offers policy recommendations below. The policy initiatives need to go hand in hand with efficient fiscal and functional decentralization as well as effective and efficient public service delivery.

**Provide the elderly care program:** Elderly Care is essential to reduce old-age poverty and promote the working-age population's labor force participation rate. The public elderly care program is recommended for Cambodia to build a comprehensive and integrated social protection policy and ensure equitable development outcomes. There are a few options for designing the elderly care program, including community-based care that is purely funded by the state for the rural population, voluntary elderly care with state's subsidy for workers in the informal sector, and contributory elderly care with workers and employees in the formal and public sectors. Cambodia can roll out the elderly care program by enhancing tax revenue mobilization and administration.

**Promote accessible and affordable childcare program:** Childcare Program is essential to integrate women into productive labor forces and keep children safe and healthy. Policies and programs that provide public childcare facilities and good quality of caregivers are recommended for Cambodia. Childcare benefit packages can be integrated into the parental leave packages that enable mothers to return to the labor market.

**Enhance the accessibility of early childhood education:** Good quality of preschool is needed for Cambodia to prepare its human capital in the wake of Industrial Revolution 4.0 and globalization. Cambodia needs to rethink its existing early childhood education's structure and curriculum, especially preschool and community preschool. Cambodia's children under six years old in all segments of the population should access early childhood education, either under the form of preschool or community preschool.

**Expand coverage of pension schemes to the informal sector:** Pension schemes are essential to reduce old-age poverty. Pension schemes should also cover workers in the informal sector that are employed in marginalized and vulnerable conditions. The voluntary pension schemes with the state subsidy should be introduced to the workers in the informal sector. Introducing voluntary pension schemes with the state subsidy would incentivize workers in the informal sector to participate in the pension schemes and reduce the socio-economic burden for family members of the elderly.



Push for parental leave: Parental leave is crucial to promote inclusive and equitable economic and social development. Providing only maternity leave, with exclusion or less provision of parental benefits, makes the female labor force more expensive and discourages employers from hiring the female workforce. Providing only maternity leave, without other public support such as childcare and skill upgrading opportunities, may discourage women from re-entering the labor market after the maternity period. Several studies cited by You. S (2020) suggest that parental leave contributes to sustain a household income, reduce gender earning gaps, reduce the likelihood of post-partum depression, increase an infant's healthy development and reduce gender-based violence (You. S, 2020).

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