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When Khmer daughters move



Annuska Derks

After nearly three decades of civil war, social upheaval, revolutionary experiments and international isolation, Cambodians experienced since the 1990s an economic and political opening of their country. These political and economic changes brought with them new developments, ideas, products and hopes as well as worries regarding the country's development. The more general historical developments and political processes have been at the center of attention of much scholarly research. The various ways in which Cambodians deal with new opportunities and constraints in order to fulfill their needs and desires have, however, received far less attention. My research is oriented toward such an ethnological understanding of Cambodia. I focus on young rural women who came to Phnom Penh, the growing capital of Cambodia, in search of work.

Women on the move

As has been the case in other countries in Southeast Asia, changing circumstances in Cambodia and the growing demand for female labor have increased employment-related motivations for female migration. This has given rise to various women-centered studies, in which women's increasing migration and labor participation is analyzed in the context of their exposure to (new) structures of domination. As migrants and laborers, women are most often portrayed as exploited subjects, forced to leave their villages and work under unequal, capitalist conditions in order to provide their families with much-needed monetary income.

This idea of the exploitation of women is most prominent with regard to those women who end up working in the sex business. In the various studies on the issue of trafficking that I conducted while working for a local research organization in Cambodia¹, I was confronted with

¹ I worked from 1995 till 1998 as a researcher for the Center for Advanced Study in Phnom Penh. I returned to Cambodia again in order to conduct fieldwork, which took place from September 2000 till May 2001, and on two shorter return trips of about a month in 2002 and 2003.



pervasive images of young women or girls who are brutally forced, kidnapped or deceived into a globalized sex industry. What I observed, however, was a much more differentiated and complex picture. Not only were the target groups, the recruitment practices and the services or activities in which «trafficked» persons end up much more varied than portrayed in the general picture of young women in «sexual slavery», but also those women who ended up in the sex industry did not necessarily see themselves as the victims of an organized «global sex traffic» (Law 2000: 11). I encountered, amongst others, young women in search of a better life for themselves and their families, wanting some adventure and using some opportunities open to them, leading them into various new experiences, positive and negative.

This motivated me to take a broader look at female mobility as I prepared for my PhD research. Instead of looking only at the forced forms of mobility, and instead of focusing on sex work, I decided to take a broader look at the migration of, and the spectrum of jobs available to, young women coming from the countryside to Phnom Penh. These young women are most likely to end up working in the sales, service and the growing industrial sectors, performing jobs that contrast sharply to those performed within their mostly rural, rice-growing places of origin. For comparative reasons I therefore focused during my field research on migrant women working in the three sectors of trade, factory work and sex work. Trading, especially small-scale and in food items, is traditionally associated with women and an important activity in which women contribute cash to the household economy. My focus in this sector is on street trade, which is usually associated with the informal economy. Work in the industrial sector, on the other hand, is part of the formal sector and a relatively new economic activity. It is related to the modern capitalist world economy of which Cambodia is becoming a part and in which women play a role as an apparently flexible, docile and dexter-

ous work force. Garment factories are the main industrial employers and therefore I concentrate on migrant women working in this particular industry. While sex work is not a new activity, the scale of and forms in which it has been practiced within the past ten years is unprecedented. Sex work is most of all related to issues of shame and cultural notions of proper behavior and sexuality for women, and therefore forms an interesting case for comparison.

Although all three categories of work may seem clearly defined and may each be related to specific entrance routines, working, earning and related living conditions, as well as to specific forms of intervention and regulation, individual stories of young rural women in Phnom Penh showed that the borders between these categories of work are easily crossed. I therefore soon realized that mobility is not only related to the geographic movement of women, from the countryside to the city, but also to the work and living situations of rural migrants who live in the city. Furthermore, mobility relates to patterns of behavior which these young women display as they try to make sense of ambiguities and contradictions in their pursuit of personal desires and their responses to family obligations or cultural ideals structured by different forms of inequality at the local, national and global levels.

Female migrants and gender ideals

These ambiguities and contradictions are most obvious in times of rapid social change, such as those experienced by Cambodia moves towards an open-market economy and democratization after years of warfare, the Khmer Rouge regime of terror and the Vietnamese-backed socialist regime. This heritage has led to the pervasive idea of the destruction or even loss of Khmer culture and «[i]n



the face of a threatened loss of their culture, Khmer emphasize certain cultural symbols as the embodiment of “Khmer-ness”» (Ledgerwood, Ebihara and Mortland 1994: 9). The cultural symbol of the Khmer woman has thereby taken on a special meaning. Ledgerwood writes:

«They – the Khmer – are focusing on women. The sense of their importance goes beyond the fact that more women than men survived the horrors of their recent history, or the fact that women are somehow «culture bearers» *par excellence*. There is something of central importance to this focus that is linked to the proper behavior of women.» (1990: 2)

And thus, as has been observed in other societies, women become portrayed as the carriers of the «burden of representation», who by their «proper behavior», their «proper» clothing, embody the country’s boundaries (Yuval-Davis 1997: 45-46).

Relating to this concern with the meanings of «Khmerness», Ledgerwood (1996: 42) finds that «Khmer cultural constructions of gender [...] have caused women to pay a price for their mobility and economic activity». She points to the pervasive idea that women are less capable today of meeting the idealized standards of classical Khmer literature as they leave the necessary guidance and supervision of the family and village, thus calling their reputation into question. Even though migration to the city has now become a more viable option for young women from the countryside, a young woman leaving her village for work in Phnom Penh easily raises suspicion about her virtue and the nature of her work. As is often repeated, a woman who leaves the spatial boundary of the village is vulnerable to the dangerous influences that are associated with leaving the protection of family and village. Her behavior will therefore easily be considered as morally doubtful. A well-known and high respected monk remarked:

«In our society, we have to take care that our daughters be good daughters. A good daughter, from the Khmer point of view, does not go far from home. As the

Khmer saying goes “Do not keep a good dessert for tomorrow; do not allow a woman to go far”... The Khmer value virgins and if parents do not allow their daughters to go [...] far from home, we cannot blame them, because they know their daughters will lose their future if they lose their virginity.» (quoted in Derks 1997)

Male mobility has been much less associated with such moral considerations regarding sexual propriety. This can be explained by the fact that male mobility has a precedent in off-farm laborers during the slack season, as monks, as traveling merchants or for administrative purposes. Moreover, the double standard regarding sexual morality, allowing men sexual experiences from which women should be protected, also makes male mobility less problematic.

Approached from this perspective, female labor migration may be viewed as not being in accordance with specific gender ideals held in Khmer culture, in that it necessarily means leaving the protected environment of home, family and village. Yet, such ideals are not fixed if only because they are typically compromised of contradictory ideologies which are constantly undergoing change (cf. Ong and Peletz 1995: 4). In the face of alterations in incentives, economic needs and opportunities, female migration and labor participation therefore become important means to express other ideals, above all those related to women’s contribution to the household economy and accumulation of family wealth.

City life and modern experience

It would, however, not be right to put female migration and labor participation solely in the context of such filial obligations and ideals as the changing symbolic meanings of proper Khmer women become restated as «tradition». Proper



² See also Mills (1999) about women as symbols of modernity in Thailand.

behavior is not just related to gender, but also to age, class, ethnicity, etc. Moreover, just as women may be portrayed as «symbols of tradition», they are at the same time portrayed in media and advertisement as symbols of progress and modernity². These images of modernity certainly exert appeal as they reach into the villages through the occasional television and through the stories of those who have experienced it during a stay in Cambodia's main urban center, Phnom Penh. These images contribute to the perceived attractions of city life and jobs, especially for young people, and are important for the creation of a continuous flow of migrants to the city.

For these young rural migrants, Phnom Penh is «the chosen metaphor for the experience of the modern world» (Chambers 1994: 92). This «modern» experience plays an important role in young rural women's perceptions of their work, lives and positions in the city. Yet, in their desire to be «modern» (*thoansamay*) they struggle to find a proper balance between what they considered to be old or traditional (*boraan*) in village life and what they associated with «the too modern» (*thoansamay peek*) in the city. This struggle is not only one between parents and daughters, between managers and workers, between men and women, or between women themselves, but is also related to the constraints and opportunities of this specific historical context.

Cambodia's distinctive past is marked by war and destruction, and as such crucial for local meanings of modernity. These meanings of modernity constitute above all a break with this violent past and the onset of better times. The political and economic developments in Cambodia since the early 1990s brought hopes, proclaimed at the highest political levels, of a «new era of growth and prosperity». This is above all seen as a process of modernization and national economic development through integration in the capitalist global economy. Such ideas and hopes of prosperity, development and modernity have reached people at all levels of Cambodian society. Young

women and their mobility play an important role here. First, their labor contributes to an important extent to the pursuit of national economic development, especially in the factories that produce for a global market. Second, their earnings contribute, to a greater or lesser extent, to meeting the needs and aspirations of their rural-based families, who through new commodities, agricultural inputs and the education of younger siblings hope to enhance their comfort and their position in the village. Third, women are pursuing their own aspirations regarding «modern» urban experiences, consumption and display, as these are promoted in images of modernity in advertising and mass media, as well as in stories of peers living and working in the city. These three positions are not necessarily easy to reconcile, especially when taking into account the above described symbolic and subject positions of women in a rapidly changing society like Cambodia. Edwards and Roces (2000: 10-11) speak therefore of a «modern» Asian woman, who «exudes contradiction and ambivalence as she straddles tradition and modernity, victimization and agency, between being a subject and an object».

One may ask whether these oppositions are merely analytical constructs of social scientists or whether they are reflected in lived experience as such. By paying attention to Khmer women's own narratives and presentations as well as their responses, actions and creativity, I seek to gain insight into women's subjective experiences and the ways these are based on practices in which women can be considered neither as mere «victims» of conditions of structural disadvantage based on cultural and social constructions of gender, nor as purely free and unfettered actors (Mills 1999; Ortner 1996).



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