

The Gender and Education Situation in Cambodia

Mr. Houn PHORN (Cambodia)

Today, gender inequality, simply described as the unfair and inequitable treatment between men and women, is seen in many aspects of Cambodian society especially education in rural areas. It is a fact that in Cambodia women outnumber men; however, women's illiteracy rate is higher than men's. The school enrollment rate of female students is lower than that of male students. Although school enrollment of girls is increasing lately, most do not complete basic education of grade 9 of secondary school, so the gender gap grows greater at secondary and high school level. There are many reasons behind the wide gap between males and females in terms of access to education.

It is the traditionally-based parental notion towards sons and daughters. Customarily, parents consider boys more important than girls in a way that boys can go out to work, while girls have to stay at home and take care of 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 as sons.



Children in Cambodia

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 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 breadwinners; 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 to access to education.

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 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.

Alike, some parents would think that formal education is not that crucial; they would likely let their daughters gain some skills or go to the city and work at a garment

factory. Some villagers say that there is no reason for their daughters to attend school, for they are poor and unable to get a job even with the education. Besides, the distance to 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 and security is not good enough.

Lack of latrines and sanitary facilities are also the reasons why female students do not attend school. Female students find themselves uncomfortable at education centers where clean toilets are not available. In this case, if they want to use a toilet, they have to go to a forest or a big wood nearby. For this reason, girls will feel better to stay at home enjoy proper facilities.



Lack of educational facilities

Gender in social status, more to the point, social status of women in Cambodia is really a serious concern. Cambodian culture, which is very restrictive and hierarchical, gives more value to men. As one Khmer saying puts it, “Men are gold; Women are cloth”. Cambodian women have to follow all the social rules in order to become good women accepted by the society. Without compliance with the Khmer codes of conduct, women are singled out by her family, relatives, friends, and the outsiders.

In short, Cambodian people are very conservative and traditional, promoting gender equality is like changing their culture, which most of them strongly oppose. However, the government should introduce some reforms to the educational sector, for example by providing scholarships for poor students. Also, it should build more schools which are equipped with clean toilets in rural areas or build school dormitories, which make it easy for female students to go to school in order to encourage them to enroll in class.