HIGHER EDUCATION IN CAMBODIA

Poor rural female students' challenges, motivations, and coping strategies

Nich Chea

Abstract

Aim: The higher education system in Cambodia is from a gender equality perspective clearly unequal. This inequality is related to the societal gender patterns which determine not only women's access to higher education but also their struggle to remain in the program. Therefore, this study attempts to map out the mechanisms behind these conditions in order to understand certain challenges encountered by poor rural female students.

Theory: The purpose of this study under the framework of feminist emancipatory philosophy is to bring social change. Under this framework, women need to make their voice heard as a collective strength in order to bring social change. It is hoped that by giving insight into the difficulties encountered by female students in higher education, awareness will be raised among school principals, policy makers and other relevant stakeholders to take immediate actions so more women can attend higher education.

Method: A qualitative study is adopted to detail the subjective experiences of six female Cambodian students from rural areas who come to study at the Royal University of Phnom Penh.

Results: Based on unstructured in-depth interviews with the participants, the study reveals a number of major challenges that hinder them from participating and completing higher education. These include gender values, financial constraints, academic problems, physical health problems, and social relations with others and safety. The findings also identify a number of coping strategies adopted by these participants to overcome their challenges. Additionally, the study reveals that the main factors that motivate these rural women to overcome the challenges are future career, improving family conditions, breaking social stigma, and being independent. The knowledge and information on these challenges have the implications for the government, university principals and other relevant stakeholders in finding ways to promote gender equality. The study also has the potential to pave the way for the prospective female students who aspire to obtain higher education.

Foreword

This master thesis would not have been possible without the help of a number of people who are worth mentioning.

First of all, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor Petra Angervall for her continual guidance and support for these few months leading up to the completion of this master thesis.

Second, I am grateful to Ilse Hakvoort, program coordinator of IMER, and Dennis beach, chair of IMER program board, for their substantial support throughout the whole programme.

My heartfelt thanks are also extended to Girma Berhanu, Ernst Thoutenhoofd, Dawn Sander, Birgitta Svensson, and Kajsa Yang Hansen for their efforts in teaching and inspiring me.

This thesis is dedicated to my parents who instilled in me a love for learning and a deep appreciation for the enduring value of education. Without their fiancial and emotional supports, I would not have been who I am today. A special note of thanks to my brother, relatives, my fellow classmates, Sahrinna, Dimitrios, Izabell, and others who always concerned and made me feel emotionally warmed during my solo stay in Sweden.

Last but not least, I owe this success to my beloved fiancé, Vicheth, for his love, inspiration and support from the far distance during the difficult times. Thanks for being there for me in every ups and downs.

Contents

Introduction

Education plays an increasingly vital role in the development of all nations. It is the backbone of the infrastructure of any country and the most powerful instrument of change (Khan, 2007). Education provides the opportunities for self-fulfillment; it can at best provide a rich and challenging environment for the individual to explore, in his (or her) own way (Barskay, 1998). It helps people not only to increase their knowledge and understanding of the world, but also to provide specialized skills they may need to prepare for a job or career. It goes without saying that progress and prosperity of a country largely depends on the choices education made available to its people. Due to democratization of education, for example in the Nordic countries, education has been considered as a fundamental tool in promoting social equality including social class, gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and other dimensions (Gordon, Lahelma & Beach, 2003). As stated in the international policies of World Bank and UNESCO (2000), higher education is a global 'good', and the quality of knowledge generated within higher education institutions is becoming crucial to national development competitiveness. This implies that the higher the level of education provision and participation levels in education, the higher the levels of development are likely to be in that country. Because of this, higher education has received a great attention from many countries. Internationally, there is a growing concern to increase, and diversify the numbers of students in higher education. For instance, on September19, 2003, Ministers responsible for higher education from 33 European countries reaffirmed their position to promote higher education. Realizing the importance of higher education to the sustainable economic growth and social cohesion, Ministers concluded by extending their commitment to making higher education accessible to all and making Europe "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world".

Although national and international policies have succeeded in increasing students' enrollment in tertiary educational settings in many countries, there continues to be students who experience many challenges bridging secondary and university education. Despite the fact that females account for more than half of the world population, two-thirds of the illiterate population is women (UNDP, 2009). Girls are less likely to receive primary, secondary and tertiary education and less likely to be literate than boys in many developing countries. Gender inequality in education, particularly in tertiary levels, persists in most regions of the developing countries such as Arab States, Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (UNESCO, 2007). Females' enrolment in tertiary educational settings in these countries has gradually increased over time, yet their enrolment has been under-represented. Based on the Asia-Pacific Human Development Report (2011), Cambodia, one of the developing countries, was ranked 95 out of 138 countries on the Gender Inequality Index in 2010. The noticeable Cambodian school enrollment pattern is that the higher the level of study, the wider the gender gap is (MoEYS, 1998a; Hayden & Martin, 2011). Female representation in higher education has been relatively low compared to their male counterparts. Education of women is one of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which positively contributes to the economic growth, political development, and poverty reduction of the country (World Bank, 2012). Besides, educated women will offer a range of social benefits that are particularly linked to women's roles as mothers and their key roles in family care such as improving family health, nutrition and hygiene. The significant roles of women in the family and the society emphasizes the need for empowering women. To achieve this, education of women at tertiary levels deserves a great attention. Therefore, I am inspired to investigate challenges that Cambodian female students have undergone when pursuing higher education in university.

Statement of problem

In Sutherland's (1985) and Davies's (2006) studies, they illustrate how the higher education system was historically structured by and for men. The entry requirements were enshrined to only male-status. However, it was not until the mid-late nineteenth century that the real feminisms campaigned for the rights to vote, enter higher education, and professions. Due to neo-liberal systems, higher education system has been expanded their services and transformed themselves into mass or universal systems (Lin, 2011). The education that was previously available to only certain groups of people is now readily available to everyone including women. Nevertheless, female attendance in higher education on the one hand is related to material conditions such as housing, transportation, finance, etc. On the other hand, it is associated with social construction of needs, capacities, future career, family expectations, religion, etc. Therefore, women's participation in tertiary education is not without its challenges.

For the last two decades, the number of higher education institutes in Cambodia has increased gradually, however, most of them are located in the capital city, Phnom Penh. Long distance worsen the situation for many rural students by adding up more costs for traveling back and forth everyday or renting accommodation if rural students wish not to travel for far distance. This affects female students more than males (Birrel, Calderon, Dobson & Smith, 2000; Williams, Long, Carpenter & Hayden, 1993). Male students, for example, may find it easier than females in finding a place to stay in Phnom Penh. They can stay and live in Buddhist temple in order to cut the cost for accommodation, while it is not possible for women to do so due to religious norms. Some students who have relatives in Phnom Penh may ask them for a place to stay, while those who do not are forced to find a rented accommodation. Female students from poor and middle-income families may face difficulties in getting enough money to support their school fees, study materials, accommodation and other living expenses. Such challenges perhaps cause students to feel demotivated to study and likely to drop out of schools, therefore, they need to be addressed.

In the western countries, the research area of gender in higher education is large (see e.g. Acker, 1994, Deem, 2003; Morley, 2005). They have produced a substantial amount of published quantitative and qualitative data as well as critical literature, whereas the third world countries have had to rely on some gender-disaggregated statistics and quantitative studies generally funded by international organizations (e.g. Lund, 1998; World Bank, 2001). Cambodia, one of the developing countries, has very little research conducted on gender inequality in higher education, and that research tends to be a category of analysis in relation to access and number of representation. That makes the transcripts of women experiencing difficulties in higher education remain relatively hidden. It is worth noting that initiatives for gendered change begin with dissemination of women's voices. Women will only prevail inequality when ther voices are heard and taken into account. This means recognizing the right of women to define success and development for themselves (Derbyshire, 2002).

Accordingly, I am inspired to look closer at how gender is forming and expressed in the Cambodian higher education context in order to examine the challenges of female students at the university. It is hoped that the findings of this research study can contribute to the current understanding about the challenges of female students in pursuing higher education. Parents who are aware that their daughters have the potential to succeed in higher education would be more likely to encourage and support their children to go to university. Detailing the causes of gender bias in higher education enrollment can also inform relevant stakeholders to press for better implementation of postgraduate programs to attract more female students to universities; these may include the establishment of mentoring programs, the creation of safe spaces for female students, and the provisions of female-only scholarships (Walker, 2012). The result of this study can also be used to inform universities so they can better accommodate female students, especially the poor rural girls in their learning. Last but not least, the findings can offer useful recommendations for policy makers to develop sound policies to increase women's participation in higher education.

Aim of the study and research questions

The study aims to describe and analyze some of the challenges poor rural female Cambodian students encounter when pursuing higher education. To be specific, the interest is put on how these women experience the challanges of higher education and how they use specific coping strategies in order to tackle the difficulties they are in and why these strategies are needed. The following research questions are in focus.

1) What poor rural female students describe as their challenges when they attempt to obtain higher education?
2) What factors motivate these students to overcome the challenges?
3) What coping strategies are used by these students in dealing with the challenges? And why?

The section below provide a discussion of literature review of gender inequality in education in relation to the study. It is assumed that the review will provide a context for understanding these different realities, which in turn shape this study.

Research on the field

Throughout history, the concept of inequality existed in myriad forms but was rarely considered as a social problem. From Ancient Greece (Bottomore, 1991) to the eighteenth century, inequality was either ignored or explained in religious terms (Grusky, 2001). Not until the Enlightenment was it commonly believed that the nature of inequality could be altered. In the latter half of the twentieth century, inequality by age, class, disability, gender, nationality, race, and the intersections of these structures have become the focus of much research. Among these, the inequality between men and women has received great attention from scholars, politicians, activists and policy makers at both the global and national levels when fewer women than men hold leadership positions in social, economic, and political power in many countries. Gender equality is formally defined by USAID (2008) as the equal opportunity between men and women to realise their full civil rights, and contribute and benefit from economic, social, cultural and political development. And it is closely aligned with education. According to the World Development Report of World Bank (2012), one of the main mechanisms of development is to improve the quality of the education system that goes together with gender equality. Glewwe and Kremer (2006, cited in Junxia et al., 2014) echo that most economists and international development agencies believe that women who are highly educated can improve not only their own vocational opportunities, living conditions, and social status, but also help the economic growth and social development of the entire nation. Gender equality and women's empowerment are human rights that lie at the heart of the Millennium Development Goals (UNDP, 2009).

Gender inequality in a global context

Due to globalisation of the economy, "marketisation" of education, especially higher education has been expanded, but the question of who can participate remains a great concern. There has been an ongoing international debate questioning the role of widening student participation policies if they are a force for democratization or differentiation of social groups (David, 2007). Morley and Lugg (2009) emphasize that those with social capital are often able to access new educational opportunities, while those without it might remain excluded. Women in the developing world are less likely to be literate and attend higher education than their male counterparts. Even though women's rights are protected in any forms of constitutions, legislation, and national and international policies, progress has been made to achieve gender equality in education and women's empowerment remains slow in many developing countries. Gender inequality in education is unevenly distributed across the regions.

There is a significant imbalance between men's and women's participation in higher education with much fewer women than men enrolling in tertiary education in East Asia and the Pacific, South and West Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, while this occurs in the opposite direction in Latin America and the Caribbean, North America, and Europe (UNESCO, 2007). Women continue to be marginalised and oppressed as a consequence of gender, socioeconomic conditions and are deprived from access to free and quality education (UNICEF, 2003). In many African countries, for example, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, societal norms and cultural beliefs contribute to the gender gap between men and women in education as well as in the society. In these male previliged societies, women are regareded as inferior to men since birth. When a woman gives birth, it is common to hear men ask: "Is that a human being (boy) or an animal (girl)?" And as they grow up, women are not encouraged to get much education due to the negative attitudes toward women's education and the dowry system.

Soumare (1994) and Anamuah-Mensah (1995) emphasize that many people in African countries view highly educated women as arrogant, ambitously competitve to men, and supposedly not knowing housework, therefore, they are not marriageable. This finding is confirmed by the studies of Jacobs (1996) and Stromquist (2006), which states that highly educated women are considered to be a threat by some men, not only financially, but also psychologically; therefore, it leads to denial of women's rights to do higher education. A daughter's early marriage, however, is perceived as good since it ensures family prestiges and provides family a valuable dowry (Osterguard, 1992). Parents may use the dowry to pay off debts, or keep it to dowry wives for their sons. The dowry system makes women become the ownership of their husbands and their families, and consequently places women under the control of their husbands. Yet, the dowry will lose its value if the girl gets pregnant prior to the marriage or if she spends longer time in schools. Most Africans value large families. They believe that the longer the girl remains in school, the fewer children she may have. This belief is confirmed by the Forum for African Women Educationalists in 1996, which indicates that the girls' fertility will be reduced by 10% when they remain in school.

Similar to the studies of Soumare (1994) and Anamuah-Mensah (1995), Lin (2011) finds that in some Asian countries, women's education is not considered as important as men's. For example, though Taiwan is one of the newly industrialized countries, where economic development has opened up many opportunities for women to participate in the society, patriarchal values in this country continue to impede women from educational advancement and labor market. Many parents, especially those residing in rural areas, believe that spending on daughters' educations is a waste. From their perspectives, married daughters are like ''spilled water'', which means all resources spent on them cannot be recovered. In her study, Lin (2011) adds that most parents in Tawain and China would rather favor son's education because they expect their sons to take care of them in their old age. This is proved by the share of women in higher education system. In 2009, Taiwanese women's enrollment represented 48.9% for undergraduate education, 42.7% for master's education, and only 28.5% for doctoral education (Lin, 2011).

Contradictory to Lin's findings, Tsai (2004) find that more than 80% of Taiwanese families expect their children, irrespective of gender, to at least have a college or higher education. However, Knodel (1997) who studies gender gap in education argues that among rural families, family resources are less likely to be invested in girls' education for fear that daughters may not be available to care for their parents when they get older. The other studies of Wang (1980) and Brinton (1988) as cited in Lin (2011), report that marriage is an important determinant of Asian women's participation in higher education, as marriage is designated as a top priority in women's life. Unmarried women tend to be seen as incomplete, no matter how successful they are economically and socially. This kind of belief pressures women themselves and their parents to hinder women from pursuing higher educational and occupational attainments. Cultural practices and societal division of labour require that women engage in solely traditional productive and reproductive roles, therefore, impede women from doing socio-economic activities outside the house. Gender patterns in education are also common in Isamic countries, such as Pakistan and Iran whose religious rules and regulations isolate women and discourage them from active participation in the realm of education (Ara & Malik, 2012; Mehran,

2009).

However, some other studies conducted by Birrell et al. (2000) and Le & Miller (2005) reveal that financial constraint is a major barrier to females' education. Women are more likely forced to give up their study to help with household chores and family businesses or to work to support their younger siblings' (usually brothers') educations. Such practices happen in many developing countries when family meets financial difficulties. Morley (2009) who studies the intersectionality between gender and poverty argues that women are more often disapeared when power, resources and influence increase. This reflects women underrepresentation in school attainment and leadership positions.

On the other hand, Bame (1991) who studies teacher's motivation in African countries, mentions that the shortage of qualified teachers is one of the reasons that brings education system in developing countries into deterioriation, and consequently causes women's dropouts. In Ghana, for instance, many trained teachers give up teaching to seek better employment elsewhere, which offer higher pay and prestige for them. Hence, Ghana, with a large number of "pupils", relies on unqualified teachers leading to the poor study performance of girls and their subsequent withdrwals from schools.

However, Tanye (2008), suggests that teachers' attitude toward students is perhaps the most significant implications for females' persistence and academic achievement. The studies conducted in many developing countries such as Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Malawi, Guinea, and Rwanda reveal that both male and female teachers believe that male students accadmically outperform their female counterparts. The gender bias perceived by teachers, to some extent, affects women's motivation and their academic performance. Apart from the afored mentioned findings, a number of research studies state that physical distance from campuses is a challenge for girls to pursue higher education (Birrel et al., 2000). Similarly, Glassman and Millago (2003) as cited in Tanye (2008), agree that long distance is deterrent to girls' participation and achievement in education, particularly in rural areas.

According to Mullen, Goyette, and Soares (2003), parents' educational level is one of the factors that affects women's participation in tertary education. Parents who have high educational attainment seem to have high expectations for their children's education; hence, they would encourage their children, both daugthers and sons, to go for higher education. And this statement would be one of the explanations of low enrolment rates of women in many developing countries. Similarly, Christie and Munro (2003) argue that well-educated parents serve as information provider to their children's education which contribute to the their children's academic achievement. On the contrary, Gunawardena et al. (2006) finds that parent's educational background does not seem to obstruct students' entry into a university or their choice of academic stream. These researchers claim that in the society that bride is expected to bring dowry to the groom's family such as in Sri Lanka, parents are more interested in investing in their daugther's education because the more education a girl receives, the more likely that she will generate future income, and this will serve as the alternative to dowry in the marriage market.

Gender inequality in Cambodia

As one of the developing countries in the world, Cambodia is no exception to the gender inequality in education. Although Cambodia is a signatory of the UN Education for All (EFA) Framework for Action (2000), which places considerable emphasis on women's education, particularly the elimination of gender disparities in primary, secondary and higher education, the target of achieving Education for All in Cambodia is still far from satisfactory. The state of education, especially female education, is still abysmal. Based on the Asia-Pacific Human Development Report (2011) Cambodia was ranked 95 out of 138 countries on the Gender Inequality Index (GII) in 2010. Despite Cambodia's effort in alleviating gender inequalities in school participation at primary and secondary levels, the gender gap remains wide as the students move to higher levels of formal education (Hayden & Martin, 2011). Statistically, the proportion of the age group attending primary schooling was 93.2% for boys

and 93.3% for girls, and the proportion of lower-secondary schooling for the age group participating was 33.7% for boys and 35.9% for girls in 2007-08. However, beyond lower-secondary school, the gender gap still remains large with only 41% of females enrolling for upper-secondary schooling and boys outnumbering girls in higher education by a factor of 3 to 1 in 2007 (World Bank, 2012). This implies that the higher the level of the study, the wider the gender gap is.

The high dropout rate for women at all educational levels is the major factor limiting the pool of female students to take part in tertiary education (Velasco, 2004). Previous research found that different factors contribute to high girls' dropout rates in secondary school and low enrolment in tertiary education. One among many possible reasons is the lack of latrines and sanitary facilities in schools. The survey conducted by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports in 1998, reveals that a large majority for both urban and rural respondents is dissatisfied with school latrines, and this may be one factor causing the girls' dropout after puberty when menstruation requires washing facilities. The study on school facilities is reaffirmed by a report from VSO Cambodia by Chea (2009), which shows that over 43% of Cambodian primary schools and secondary schools do not have clean water and over 34% have no latrines. In provinces, especially rural areas, schools have no access to water and no toilets, and sanitation is generally of poor standards.

Female students find themselves uncomfortable at school where clean toilets are not available. In this case, if they want to use the toilet, they have to go to the forest nearby. This situation affects girls more than boys and may be the reason that contributes to girls' absenteeism at schools and dropouts. Besides, the issues of safety and security of girls also affect their access to education. The most remarkable finding in rural areas was that girls drop out of school in large numbers at puberty. Due to the growing incidence of girls' sexual abuse and the abduction of girls for prostitution, security of school-going daughters was a major concern to parents. Parents in rural areas, therefore, are more reluctant to let girls go to school than boys when distance is an issue (MoEYS, 1998b).

However, Gorman, Dorina, and Kheng (1999) indicated that there were two fundamental causes of the wide gender disparities in the literacy and educational attainment levels—first costs and second social attitudes towards gender roles. Girls, especially the eldest daughter, are expected to stay at home to look after younger siblings, do small-scale retail trade or work in the field to help supporting their families. Many poor parents believe that attending school up to grade 3 is enough to be able to write and read medicine labels and things at markets after which children would be better off learning relevant life skills at home and thriving at locally available jobs to contribute to family income (Roberts, 2006). This is supported by the report of ILO (2006), which reveals that 8.6% of children aged 5-14 years are out of school, and many of them are girls who work in order to supplement the very little income of their poor families.

Last but not least, the study of Fiske (1995) on women and education in Cambodia shows that having female teachers and women in leadership or management positions is vital to provide girls with role models, which can positively affect their performance in school and influence aspirations for the future. Nevertheless, women in Cambodia remain under-represented in leadership and decision-making positions in politics, the public sector and the Judiciary at all levels. A vast majority of leadership positions are held by men. As found by UNDP (2014), women represent only 23% of total public sector employment, and their representation in the Senate from 1999 to 2012 remains unchanged of under 15%. Therefore, the lack of role models is perhaps one of the possible explanations to low female's enrollment in higher education.

Challenges take different forms; therefore, requires different coping strategies. According to Folkman and Lazarus (1980), coping processes refer to "what a person actually thinks and does in a particular encounter and to changes in these efforts as the encounter unfolds during a single episode or across episodes that are in some sense part of the common stressful encounter" (p.224). In higher education, Phinney and Haas (2003) identified various coping strategies students use to manage stressful situations such as being proactive, seeking support, self-struggling, avoiding, accepting, and being

optimistic. Although a lot of studies have provided insight into socio-cultural and economic challenges that prevent women from attending higher education, less attention has been focused on coping responses that help students to overcome those challenges. Therefore, it is useful to look into not only the challenges female students have encountered but also their motivation and coping strategies so that other students who walk on the same path can learn from these females' experiences and adopt the strategies that work best for them.

Theoretical framework

According to Alcoff (2000), feminism is defined as the sole force that leads to the existence of feminist ethics, feminist epistemology, and feminist political philosophy, which utilize women's lives as the model to indicate the weaknesses of existing principal theories, therefore leading to the reformulation of the theory. Due to the poor existing theory, feminism urges for social reconstruction in order to ensure equality within the society. In her book "Sex and social justice", Nussbaum (1999) discusses feminism by stating that "Feminism is internationalist, humanist, liberal, concerned with the social shaping of preferences and desire, and finally, concerned with sympathetic understanding of women" (p.6). This notion favors women's rights and freedom in acting against social and political inequalities within the globe. It places the rights of women in seeking for potential values and goodness at the forefront.

Kourany, Sterba, and Tong (1999) state that despite the diversity of philosophical stances, feminists share a few fundamental principles including: 1) gender equality is at the forefront of their cause; 2) an unyielding realization that this reality is far from being recognized; and 3) a relentless desire to push ahead until greater equality for women is a reality. Therefore, there is always a relationship between the voice and consciousness among and between women regardless of any typical feminist philosophical lens (Hayes & Flannery, 2000).

The feminist humanist philosophy would allow women to take their own stories, experiences, and autobiographies into account in relation to their personal education. Every woman has a story of how her goal of pursuing higher education has been impeded. From this lens, women would be given permission to focus on their own needs in relation to their education. In this sense, it is possible that some women may not be philosophically inclined to see their issue as a social problem and/or "the root of all further oppression" easily. Because humanist philosophy put emphasis on individual choice, I suspect that the study of females' challenges under this humanist philosophy would allow women to take responsibility for their own education as well as their own destiny. Therefore, I turn to look at "emancipatory feminism" as framework because the goal of feminist emancipatory philosophy is the emergence of new development of knowledge and awareness, which can potentially change the current situation of women within society (Tisdell, 2001). Feminist emancipatory philosophy is concerned with how women's learning and ways of knowing is influenced by the intersection between power, cultural and societal structures and gender, race, class, religion and sexual orientation (Tisdell & Taylor, 1998). It is obvious that the multiple systems of privilege and oppression is the root of women's challenges in learning and knowing. Therefore, Luke (1992) and Hooks (1994) have come to the common ground that in order to demolish social injustice and inequity and develop better ways of living and knowing within society, women altogether need to make their voice heard as a collective strength.

Therefore, the purpose of this study under the framework of feminist emancipatory philosophy is to bring social change. It is hoped that by giving insight into the difficulties encountered by female students in higher education, awareness will be raised among school principals, policy makers and other relevant stakeholders to take immediate actions so more women can attend higher education. Improving women's roles and status in the society seems impossible if women are not highly educated. The study is based upon a constructivist theoretical perspective. According to Creswell,

research based on a constructivist paradigm seeks to understand individuals' lived-in experiences—meanings directed toward certain objects and things. These meanings are varied and multiple, relying as much as possible on the subjects' views of the situation. These meanings lead the researchers to look for complexity of views rather than limiting the meanings to a few categories or ideas. As Creswell (2007, p. 21) put it:

> [These meaning] are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others (hence social constructivism) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives. Rather than starting with a theory (as in postpositivism), inquirers generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning.

Thus, the social and historical contexts of the participants' experiences are important in their construction of these meanings and in how the researchers come to interpret these meanings. According to the constructivism, there exist multiple realities, which are unknowable and "constructed by individuals who experience the world from their own vintage points" (Hatch, 2002, p. 15). Guba and Lincoln (1994) argued that these realities can be understood in the form of abstract mental constructions that are based on specific local experiences. Different qualitative researchers take up different realities, so do the participants being studied and the readers of the qualitative study (Creswell, 2007). Thus, the intent of my study is to report on these realities—how female Cambodian students in the study view their experiences differently regarding with the challenges, motivations, and coping strategies they have undergone.

Methodology

The following sections will detail the methods of data collection, data analysis, participants, settings, and recruitment process in order to provide a knowledge of how this research study was conducted.

Research design

This research study adopted qualitative case study as a research design. Creswell (2007) defined the qualitative case study as the study of particular issues at specific place and time so as to get in-depth information. Qualitative case study employs in-depth data collection that includes multiple sources of information such as observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports. In-depth interviews were selected and utilized because the research question of the study required details of information that each participant has gone through. Tisdell and Taylor (1998) who study feminist philosophy, maintain that the multiple systems of privilege and oppression is the root of women's challenges in learning and knowing. Therefore, to bring social change, women need to make their voice heard as a collective strength. Since, every woman has a story of how her goal of pursuing higher education has been impeded, the study of "females' challenges" of the six students would allow them to take their own stories and experiences into account in relation to their personal education. To better understand the study, context and details of the six participants' background will be presented below.

Contexts/Settings

The Royal University of Phnom Penh, known as RUPP, was chosen for this research study. There are several reasons behind this choice. First and foremost, it is one of the leading state universities that have over the past two decades attracted an increasing number of students from different cities and provinces. Second, as a former student there for four years, I am familiar with the context of the school and get to know many lecturers and school directors well; hence, getting permission to conduct

the research study was much easier than conducting in other universities. The last and related reason is my commitment to drawing the university's attention toward female students in order to increase their enrollment in higher education. I hope that the findings of my research study is of great advantage to the University Research Unit.

The Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) is Cambodia's oldest and largest public university, founded on January 13, 1960 (Royal University of Phnom Penh [RUPP], 2013a). It offers a variety of specialist degrees in fields including the sciences, humanities and social sciences, as well as professional degrees in fields such as information technology, electronics, psychology, social work, tourism, and foreign languages. The majors such as engineering, architect and medical sciences are offered at other separated public universities. The study instruction is given in Khmer language, but all the students, regardless of any majors they study, are required to take one English language course from year one until year four. This is done to prepare the students for the labour market's demand, therefore, all the students more or less know English.

Due to its many achievements, RUPP has full membership of the ASEAN University Network (AUN). In addition, the university maintains links with Cambodian and international NGOs, local and international universities and government ministries. As a result, various international and non-government organizations and government offices regularly contribute adjunct faculty members to help expand RUPP's capacity.

RUPP is geographically located on three spacious campuses. The main campus lies approximately five kilometers from the city center (Royal University of Phnom Penh [RUPP], 2013b). The mission of the university is to educate graduates who strive for excellence in their chosen academic fields and to promote cultural preservation, exchange and development (Royal University of Phnom Penh [RUPP], 2013c).

It's worth mentioning that in Cambodia, education in the university is not free. Therefore, even if RUPP is the public university, there are both pay-students and scholarship students. Only those who receive good grades, A or B in their high school examination will be granted a scholarship to attend the university with free-tuition fees, and the others will have to pay if they wish to pursue their study.

RUPP is the public university that shapes the students to be teachers. All graduates, either from public or private universities, can apply to be teachers or lecturers. To be a teacher/lecturer at private high school/university, the graduates can apply directly to that school, but in order to be a teacher/lecturer at public high school/university, the graduates are required to take National Teacher's Examination and they must be graduates from the public university to be eligible to apply. Therefore, the students who wish to be teachers/lecturers at public high schools/universities come to study in this university. In addition, the graduates from public university also get more privileged to apply for the jobs in ministries or municipalities than those who graduate from private universities. Every year, most students who graduate from RUPP become teachers at public high schools or lecturers at the public universities and few of them go to work in the ministries, municipalities, or NGOs.

Recruitment process

Due to the limited financial resources and long physical distance from Sweden to Cambodia, I was not able to go to Cambodia to collect the data. Therefore, I got help from my friend in recruiting participants. He is the one whom I considered a reliable person since he used to work in that university and knew more about the location, environment and people there. Therefore, it was easy for him to get into the school. However, in order to get into the class and recruit students to participate in the study, it was necessary for researcher to prove the classroom teacher that he came with a formal letter of permission for conducting research. I have explained him about my research study and have sent him my proposal, informed consent forms, and letter of permission to conduct research signed by head of

IMER program board. With all these documents, he went to the university and got into several classrooms to inform the students about this research study on my behalf.

Before participating in this study, students were well informed of the goals and purposes of the study. The idea was to create a reason for them to participate; therefore, women's conditions were described as a general problem and how the study was to contribute to changes.

Due to their tight schedules, these female students were at first reluctant to participate, but after being given all the necessary information about purposes of the study, the significance of the study, assurance of the confidentiality of the data, and anonymity of their identities, they tended to be interested to join. Thereafter, those who were interested were asked to fill in the informed consent letters by writing down their names, contact details (emails, phone numbers, etc.) and sign.

Despite the willingness and agreement to participate, they were informed that they could leave the study whenever they felt uncomfortable to join or for whatever reasons at any time. After recruiting participants and getting their letters of informed consents, the assistant sent these letters to me. I contacted the participants based on their contact details, which were specified in the letters of informed consent, and made an appointment to have interviews. Three days prior to the appointment date, I contacted them again to make sure that they were still interested to join the study and emailed them a very short description that we would do our conversation circle around the concept of challenges when pursuing higher education, their motivation and coping strategies to handle those challenges.

Data collection

The objective inquiry of this study was to get subjective experiences of respondents, which they told while going to university. The subjective experiences are unique, and they vary from individual to individual. They cannot be quantified. Interview was the method of data collection used in this qualitative study.

In-depth Interviews

Interviewing is undoubtedly the most widely used technique for conducting systematic social inquiry, as sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, psychiatrists, clinicians, administrators, politicians, and pollsters treat interviews as their "windows on the world" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). Interviewing provides a way of generating empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives. Berg (2001) identified three types of interviews, the standardized (formal or structured) interview, the unstandardized (informal or unstructured or in-depth) interview, and the semi-standardized (guided semi-structured or focused) interview. Structured interviews require the researchers to ask participants the pre-determined questions that consequently produce highly standardized data. And this allow researchers to make a greater degree of comparison between interviews. Semi-structured interviews, researchers rely on a set of pre-planned questions, but at the meanwhile, researchers are given freedom to further ask participants and make conversations flow more naturally. Unlike the above mentioned, for unstructured interviews, researchers have the most freedom to ask questions wherever participants take them to in order to generate data as much as possible. The interviews are individual-oriented, and the data produced are generally non-standardized. For this study, a one-on-one in-depth interview was employed with each of the six female students. The questions typically asked were open-ended questions, and the interviewers were allowed freedom to digress; that was, the interviewers were permitted to probe far beyond the answers (Berg, 2001).

Interviews were conducted via Skype as I was not able to travel to Cambodia. English was used as a language for the interviews between researcher and participants because it was convient for the researcher to quote participants' reponses. And participants were also capable to communicate in English because all of them are year-four students and most of them also work as teachers of English. It's worth mentioning that participants were told to find in quiet places when interviewed so there were no disturbant noises which affected the interviews. The interviews were audio recorded with the participants' consent and each lasted approximately 70-90 minutes. The interview sought to explore the unique experiences of each of the six interviewees based on interview guide.

The questions for the interview were developed based on the main themes that emerge from the main research questions and literature review, which include their family and educational background, their lives in Phnom Penh city, motivation, challenges, and coping strategies, etc. In particular, I asked the questions to explore in-depth responses expressed by these participants. Prior to ending the interview, the researcher asked the participant if she had any final thoughts or comments. This typically opened up for more in-depth discussion regarding their experiences. At the end of the interview, I thanked the participants for participation, and confirmed them that after the data were analyzed there might be a need for follow-up for clarification or further information because the data relied on the information from only interviews. Accordingly, they did agree with my request. And I did ask a few participants once again to clarify some information that I failed to ask during the first phase of interview.

Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis involves a range of processes and procedures such as familiarizing with the data through review, reading, listening, etc, transcribing the data, coding, identifying themes, exploring relationships between categories, developing theories and incorporating with pre-existing knowledge, testing theories against the data and writing report (Lacey & Luff, 2007). However, it does not follow a fixed and linear approach, but is an iterative, cyclical, and inductive process (Duff, 2008; Hatch, 2002). It is a labor-intensive, but an exciting process that consists of a combination of creativity and systematic searching, a blend of inspiration and diligent detection (Spencer, Ritchie, & O'Connor, 2003). The aim of qualitative data analysis is to make sense of the data that have been collected by giving explanation, or interpretation of the people and situations we are investigating. Approaches to analysis are contingent upon "basic epistemological assumptions about the nature of qualitative enquiry and the status of researchers' accounts" (Spencer et al., 2003, p. 200).

In this study, the responses from interviews were fully transcribed. The transcripts recorded the participants' verbatim. The responses from interview, transcripts, were analysed thematically in accordance with the aim of the research study. For the first phase, I adopted Initial Coding. I started by looking into the interview transcripts and broke them down into discrete parts, closely examining them and comparing them for commonalities and differences (Saldaña, 2009). For the second phase, I employed Focused Coding, particularly; I examined the data iteratively looking for "the most salient categories in the data corpus" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 155). Thereafter, I reread the categories to group them into different themes in terms of the challenges, coping strategies, and motivation in order to better understand the individual's experiences. Once these themes have been developed, I also explored the unique issues raised by each of the six participants.

Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis involves a range of processes and procedures such as familiarizing with the data through review, reading, listening, etc, transcribing the data, coding, identifying themes, exploring relationships between categories, developing theories and incorporating with pre-existing knowledge, testing theories against the data and writing report (Lacey & Luff, 2007). Despite this, the process of analyzing data does not follow a fixed and linear approach, yet it is a repetitive and

inductive process (Duff, 2008; Hatch, 2002), which demands a lot of work. A merging of creativity systematic searching, inspiration and diligent detection exist in the data analysis make the process itself an exciting job (Spencer, Ritchie, & O'Connor, 2003). The aim of qualitative data analysis is to make sense of the data that have been collected by giving explanation, or interpretation of the people and situations we are investigating. Approaches to analysis are contingent upon "basic epistemological assumptions about the nature of qualitative enquiry and the status of researchers' accounts" (Spencer et al., 2003, p. 200).

In this study, the responses from interviews were fully transcribed. The transcripts recorded the participants' verbatim. The responses from interview, transcripts, were analysed thematically in accordance with the aim of the research study. For the first phase, I adopted Initial Coding. I started by looking into the interview transcripts and broke them down into separated parts, closely examining them and comparing them for commonalities and differences (Saldaña, 2009). For the second phase, I employed Focused Coding, particularly; I examined the data iteratively looking for "the most salient categories in the data corpus" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 155). Thereafter, I reread the categories to group them into different themes in terms of the challenges, coping strategies, and motivation in order to better understand the individual's experiences. Once these themes have been developed, I also explored the unique issues raised by each of the six participants.

Ethical issues

This study adhered to the ethical code of the Swedish research council, "Ethical principles for research" (Vetenskapsrådet, 2012). Adequate information, participants' consent, and confidentiality are all counted. Prior to participating in the study, participants were given all the necessary information such as purpose of the study, methodology and the questions that they may be asked. It's worth mentioning to the participants that the study was entirely voluntary, hence, those who interested were asked to sign consent form and they were allowed to leave the study at any time if they felt so. Most importantly, participants were ensured that their identities would be kept protected. The participants' names were pseudonyms.

Researcher's positions

In order to undertake ethical and trustworthy research, it was critical to be attentive to positionality or reflexivity. The researcher's position or reflexivity involves reflection on self, process, and representation, and critically examining power relations and politics in the research process, and researcher accountability in data collection and interpretation (Jones et al. 1997; Falconer Al-Hindi and Kawabata 2002). To be reflexive is to be aware that social conditions and power relations that are inherent in research process influence the production of knowledge, therefore, it was important to consider the possible bias, dispositions and assumptions I brought to the research. In this study, I assumed both insider and outsider roles. My role as an insider included being a Cambodian and a former student at that university. What even more complicated was that, I was also a female myself. At the same time, I could have been perceived as an outsider for being a master student conducting research.

These insider and outsider roles could have had significant impacts on the ways my research was undertaken, including how my values, attitudes, and theoretical perspectives influenced the research process, my data collection and analysis, my relationships with the participants, etc. However, researchers are human beings, thus, it was impossible for researchers to get rid of the inherent biases and assumptions they brought to the research. However, there were possibilities that the inherent biases could be reduced to some extent through certain ways. Therefore, to be a reflexive research, I did my best to be constantly vigilant about and to balance the various roles I assumed within particular situations. As recommended by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011), I kept a research journal (i.e., memos)

in which I wrote down my reflections on the research process as the study proceeded. In addition to that, I also listened to the interview recordings right after each and every time I had finished interviewing participant in order to reflect on any common theme characterizing my reflections, examine how my attitudes and value enter into the research process, and identify whether they compromise the research process in any way. Last but not least, when analyzing the data, I tried to be neutral as much as I could by avoiding exaggerating.

Participants

Six participants were recruited to participate in this study. The recruitment is voluntary-based; however, the participants have to be year-four female students who are originally from rural areas. The reason of setting these criteria was that the difficulty of the students is not only because of being a woman, but also a woman that come from countryside background and lack of finances. It is more likely that the female students from provinces encounter more challenges than those who permanently live in the city. The six volunteer students come from several majors such as sociology, psychology, Khmer literature, and mathematics because the students from these majors pay the same tuition fees and the cost of study materials, and the schedule for study are not much different.

The particular university that these participants study is the public university that shapes the students to become teachers at public high school/university. Majority of the graduates will become teachers, only few of them that do some other jobs. Despite their commonalities, their challenges, coping strategies, and motivation for study may vary from individual to individual. I acknowledge that year-one, year-two and year-three students also face other typical challenges, but the logic behind choosing year-four female students is that these students have already gone through the university' life for three years and thus could have possibly encountered many challenges in the previous years. For this reason, it seems to be a reasonable ground to assume that they would have a lot of experiences in handling their challenges to remain in the program. Their unique experienced in coping with the challenges will be served as a life-lesson learned for other students who walk on the same path. It's worth mentioning that the students who have dropped out of school also have so many things to say about their experiences and reasons that led them to give up their study, but it seems that it is not easy to contact them for participating in this research since they are no longer in the school.

The students come from different provinces; therefore, the following brief description of the six participants is given in order to provide contextual information about each of individual family background and living conditions. The names of participants in the study are pseudonyms.

Sorya is 21 years old girl and comes from Banteay Meanchey province. The province is located in the far northwest of Cambodia about 6 or 7 hours drive from the capital city, Phnom Penh. She was born in the family whose parents are farmers. Due to the civil war in the country, her father could attend only up to grade 3 while her mother never went to school. Sorya is the fifth child among the six children. Her oldest brother and second older sister already got married and are now doing farming. Her oldest brother was not able to finish high school and her second older sister could finish only primary school. They dropped out of school due to the financial conditions of the family. They had to quit their study in order to help family working in the farm. Unlike her oldest brother and second older sister, Sorya and her third older sister and fourth older brother have an opportunity to go to higher education. Her third older sister already got married and now works as an accountant in an non-governmental organization in Kompong Speu province. Her fourth older brother is living with the third older sister in Kompong Speu province, and he comes to Phnom Penh only at the weekend to study for his master degree. Sorya lives alone in a small rented room in Phnom Penh during the weekdays, and her bother comes to stay with her only during the weekends. Her youngest brother has just started his primary school and he is living with the parents in Banteay Meanchey province. Her parents have faced a really hard time to earn money to support the four children to go to school. Sorya came to pursue higher education in Phnom Penh in 2011 after graduating from high school. She is now

a year-four student majoring in Khmer Literature at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) and English literature at Cambodia International Cooperation Institute (CICI). At RUPP, she is a tuition-paying student, while at CICI, she receives the scholarship that covers her tuition. Besides, she works as a part-time English teacher at a small kindergarten school in order to finance her study and pay for her living expenses. Sorya is a smart student in her class.

Thary is 21 years old and comes from Preah Vihear province. It is one of the farthest provinces in Cambodia, which takes approximately 6 hours drive to the capital city. Thary has two other siblings, all of whom are girls. Her father finished high school and works with very little salary in the Ministry of Agriculture. Her mother is a housewife. She does not have a job because she only has seventh-grade education. Her grandparents were poor, so they were not able to let her mother study much. Thary and her two sisters have been raised by her mother alone because her parents got divorced about 10 years ago. Constant arguments because of poverty led to their divorce. Her older sister stopped studying when she was in grade 8 because her mother could not afford her study. She got married since she was 18 years old and is now living abroad and working in the farm. Her younger sister is doing secondary school in the province. Her mother is now helping her grandmother doing a small retail in the province in order to get money to support her and her younger sister. Thary came to Phnom Penh to continue her study at the university since 2011. She is now living alone in a small rented house in Phnom Penh. She visits her hometown 4 or 5 times a year during school vacations and public holidays. Thary is currently a year-four student majoring in Psychology at Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) and English Literature at University of Cambodia (UC). She is a tuition-paying student at both universities.

Born in 1994, **Molika** is a student coming from Siem Reap province. It is the province that has the most popular tourist attraction located about 5 hours drive from capital city of Cambodia. Her mother is a primary school teacher and her father is a government official. The total monthly salaries of them is about $300, which is barely enough to support the whole family. Both her parents got only high school diploma. Molika has two younger sisters; one is a year-two student at the same university with her in Phnom Penh, and the other one is doing secondary school in her hometown. Molika was studying two universities last year. She started her class at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) in mathematics since 2011, and in 2014 she began at Panhasastra University (PUC). She started at the PUC by studying general English language for 9 months, and after getting the certificate of English diploma, she further took a Bachelor degree in International Relations. Unfortunately, she had to quit the PUC after the first term for the fact that the tuition fees for both universities are so expensive that her parents are not able to pay them. Moreover, at that time her younger sister just graduated from high school and also needed money to pursue higher education in Phnom Penh. So, she decided to quit one school in order to reduce the burden of her parents' expenses, which enabled her parents to pay for her younger sister's higher education. Besides, she also finds taking dual degrees simultaneously is tough. Her academic performance is not so good.

Sreypin is 22 years old and comes from Takeo province. It is located near Phnom Penh city, which takes about 2 hours drive. Her parents are farmers, and their main source of income comes from selling the rice only twice a year. Therefore, they raise animals and grow some vegetables to supplement their income. Both of her parents finished only primary school. Her grandparents (maternal) got divorced, so her grandmother had to raise her mother and her uncle alone. Since her grandmother could not afford to send both children to school, her mother was withdrawn from school and did farming and housework while her uncle could continue until university. Similarly, her grandparents (paternal) also got divorced. Her father lived with her grandmother. He was not able to complete his secondary school because his mother was poor and had to raise 3 children, and his stepfather was not kind to him too. Sreypin is the second child in her family. She has one older brother and two younger sisters, but one of her younger sisters passed away four years ago when she was 17 years old. She did not go to school because she had a mental problem since she was born, and finally died of serious sickness. Her youngest sister is 12 years old. She is in grade 8 and is now living in Takeo province with her parents. Her older brother is 24 years old. He was a scholarship student at two universities in Phnom Penh, but he already graduated and is now working at an Insurance

Company. According to what sreypin said, she would have not been able to come to Phnom Penh to pursue higher education if her older brother hadn't received scholarship because her family is very poor. She is fortunate that her older brother got scholarship, so her parents can afford to send her to university in Phnom Penh. However, Sreypin has to work as an English tutor in order to get some money to support her own living as her parents can pay only her school fees. Sreypin is a year-four student at the Royal University of Phnom Penh majoring in mathematics. Mathematics was her second favorite major after medical science. In fact, she liked medical science more than mathematics, but she could not study it because the school fee is 3 times more expensive and the length of study is twice longer. She would need to spend 8 to 10 years to study medical science, so she decided to study mathematics instead. Sreypin is living with her older brother in a rented house. She is a clever student. Everyday, she rides a bike to school and to tutor at 3 different houses.

Rima is a 22 years old girl who was originally from Kondal province which takes about one hour drive from Phnom Penh city. However, she came to study in Phnom Penh since she started her primary school. When she was young, she, her parents, and her older brother lived in Phnom Penh together. They built a small wooden hut on her aunt's land in Phnom Penh because they were asked to stay there in order to look after the land. Five or six years later, her aunt removed that hut because she had to build her own house on that land, so her mother went back to her hometown. Nowadays, her mother is living with her grandfather (maternal) in the Kondal province except she, her father, and her older brother who are still staying at her aunt's house. Being away from hometown, Rima, her father, and her old brother because she and her brother have to continue their study. Her father did not study much. He could study only grade 9, so now he works as a car mechanic in a small garage in Phnom Penh in order to support the family. He can earn more by working in Phnom Penh than in the countryside. Since, they cannot afford to rent an accommodation, they have to continue staying at their relative's house. So, three of them go to visit their hometown very often by their own motorbike because it's not so far from Phnom Penh. Unlike other people, Rima is not physically healthy. She has got sickness since she was a child. She had difficulty in breathing and in need of oxygen. She often lost conscious whenever she was surrounded by many people. She got sick very often when she was young. There was one time that she was seriously sick. Her parents had spent all of their money and even borrowed money from others to cure her, but she was not better. Her aunt told her mother to abandon her, but her mother did not. Without having any money left for the treatment, her mum cried and went to beg many doctors in the hospital to cure her, but no one cared. Luckily, there was one doctor who was kind-hearted agreed to cure her without taking any money. When she was a kid, her family condition was not so bad. Her mother has high school diploma, so she worked as an educator at organization. But after she got sick, her mother stopped working in order to take care of her. Since then, her mother hasn't had a job. Due to the fiancial constraint, she has to work at home (hometown) as a tailor in order to contribute to the family income and support the children's education. Rima has only one older brother. He is 24 years old and he is a year-four scholarship student at one university. However, Rima is a tuition-paying student. She does not get any scholarship in the university because her academic result in high school was not good. She did quite well when she was in primary school, however, her sickness had brought her study performance went down during high school. Rima's family condition is not good, so she decided to work part-time as a teacher of English in order to support her study.

Nayan is a year-four female student from Kompong Cham province. It is the sixth largest province in Cambodia located on the Mekong River. It takes about 3 hours by vehicle from Phnom Penh city. She was born in a family whose parents are farmers. Besides doing farming, her parents also sell rice, beans, peas and other agricultural products in the market. She was born in the family that used to be poor, while it has turned to be better when she grew up. Nayan has only two siblings. She is 22 years old while her younger brother is 8 years old. He is studying primary school in Kompong Cham province. Her father could study only grade 7 since his family condition was not good, so he stopped study in order to support his younger siblings and family. His family wanted him to study, but he didn't want. Unlike her father, her mother finished high school, but she was not able to pursue higher education because Nayan's grandparents did not allow her mother to continue. They thought that it is

more than enough for girls to get education. Right after her mother graduated from high school, her grandparents asked her mother to get married with his father when she was about 17 years old because he could earn money, so they believed that he could support her and the family. Her parents are young. They are about 38 or 39 years old. Nayan is an outstanding student. She has always got good result since high school. Nayan has moved to Phnom Penh since graduated from high school. She is now living in a rented accommodation, which is near to her uncle's rented house. She was asked to live with him, but she doesn't want to. She needs a quiet room to stay and focus on her study. Nayan studies only one university majoring in Sociology. Besides, she works as a teacher of English at a small Kindergarten school in order to support her living.

5. Findings

The results of the study are presented below. The findings are divided into three main sections related to aspects of challenges, motivation, and coping strategies. Under each section, there are numerous themes developed from the participants' own responses. The responses presented as quotation are participants actual words.

Challenges in pursuing academic studies

The results show how women in this study struggle with a number of difficulties in doing academic studies. The difficulties raised below were identified as challenges that have been obstructing them from pursuing and completing their higher education. To be able to enroll in higher education and remain in the program, countryside women especially those who come from poor and low-income families have to bite their teeth and fight toward their goals.

Mindset, comments, and attitudes of family and community

The students' interviews reveal that the family and the community's attitudes toward education is one of the main obstacles for women pursuing academic degrees. Sorya and Sreypin, for example, shared common experiences about how people in their community viewed them in relation to attending higher education. Below Sorya describes her neighbors' opinions when she first came to continue her higher education in Phnom Penh.

> Some of them said, especially the older people. They said that "Oh! You are a girl, don't study too much, just stay at home and help the family to earn money by farming is enough." Some of them said like this but not all. The people around my house say that "Why you study a lot? What will you become after you study?" I told them that I will let them know one day. (Sorya)

As described by Sorya some people are filled with gendered expectations of "helping the family", or lack of understanding of the values of education. However, unlike Sorya and Sreypin, some responsdents in the study, receive postive comments from people around. Nayan and Thary, for example, describe how they received admiration from people in their neighborhood when knowing that they have a chance to continue their higher education. They believe that many people have changed their negative mindset toward girls' education. Nayan says:

> Most of them they admired me that I have a chance to pursue my study. They think it is the best chance that I will get the bright future. In the past, the elders, they have old concepts, but now they've changed a lot, I believe. They said that it is very good, very nice that young people can continue their study. (Nayan)

16

Also, Thary describes how she has recieved positive comments, but at the same time she adds that there are also some people in her province who said to her that it is not good to go to university. When asked why she received those comments from her neighbors, Thary explains:

> Some people said, it's not good to go to university because there are many students that cannot finish their study and they go back to hometown by having nothing, just pay a lot of money to school, but they don't understand or get the knowledge from the university, so some people said to me like "Please, don't go to continue your study because it's not good. It wastes your time and money." (Thary)

Accordingly, Thary is dealing with both positive and negative comments from her neighbor about pursuing higher education. Some people agreed that she should go for it, while some others did not see the importance of doing further academic studies.

Through the interviews, all participants respond that there are more girls from their provinces that go to university now than they did before, even though they still are very few. They also describe that the common causes that prevent some people in their community from sending their children to higher education, especially daughters, are family conditions, safety concerns, and early marriage. Molyka and Rima, for example, say:

> Their families don't want them to come to study in Phnom Penh because it's far and they think it is not safe and they are afraid that their daughters will do something that affect the family's fame and cultural norms. And some family they don't have enough money to spend on their study. And some people think that in the future, their daughters will get married and their husbands will support her, so they don't need to do anything besides housework, their husband will work out for them. (Molyka)

> People around my house in the province, there is no people go to university because their family condition is poor and their parents don't allow them to study, but ask them to work such as working in the garment factory in the province. Their highest education is high school. (Rima)

Most of the female students also talk about how families' perception plays an important role in the choice of children's education. In the interview, Sreypin explains that it is perhaps the high cost of sending childrent to pursue academic degree that affects most parents' attitude toward their daugther's education. To save costs, many parents in her village asks their daugther to get only high school diploma and take the exam to be primary school teacher or do farming.

> Their families' conditions seem better than mine. Maybe they want their children to get only high school education and become a primary school teacher or work in the town, is enough for them. Many young people in my village become primary school teachers and some others do farming. Maybe they think that if they send their children to Phnom Penh, they will have to spend a lot of money and also they might afraid the problem happen to their children too. (Sreypin)

Despite the perceptions of people in their community, their own parents' opinions and decisions seem to have played the most critical role in these females' enrolment and completion in higher education.

The parents of the six female participants were not able to study much. Only a few of them could finish high school, some could study only primary school, while others were able to study only a few grades and one of them did not attend school at all. However, they all want their children to study as much as possible. All females in this study expressed similarly that their parents want them to go to higher education because their parents feel very regretful for their own lives. They do not want to see their children walk on the same path, working as farmers and being poor, thus, they try whatever means to let their children study.

Born in the very poor family, Rima never feels upset with her parents. Moreover, she is very grateful to her parents' love and support, especially her mother. Both of her parents love children equally regardless of sons or daughthers, and they sacrifice a lot for her and her brother. Rima cries when she is telling her story.

> I never feel upset with my parents. My mum afraid other people look down on our family, so even though she has nothing, she tries to work hard and let me and my brother study. Sometimes she goes to borrow money from other people to pay for my tuition fees. She wants me and my older brother to have good job in the future so we can help our family. My parents are proud of me and my brother. They never think that I am a daughter or my brother is a son. (Rima)

Also below, Thary, refers to how her parents have been supportive. She describes that her parents got divorced since ten years ago because of the poor living conditions that caused them to have arguments. And because of this her older sister could not finish secondary school. That's why her parents want her to go for higher education to avoid walking their track.

> They had argument everyday. They broke up because of money. They think that they have poor knowledge, that's why they were poor and argued until got divorced. They don't want me to have a bad future like them, so they push me to study and finish my study and get higher degree, so that's their opinion. (Thary)

Further, Sreypin claims that her mother received only primary school education because of her grandmother's perception towards daugther's education. That's why now she is inspired to go to higher education by her mother. Sreypin's statement below sums up what all participants say about their parents' opinion toward their higher education.

> "I am poor, I don't want you to be poor too, ok, you should go to university and try to study hard". My dad did not say anything. He followed children's will. (Sreypin)

Early marriage or arranged marriage is also one of the common issues in Cambodia that withdraw females from school. For some families, parents decide or choose husband or wife for their children. Thary, Molika, Sreypin, and Rima said that they have never been asked or even forced to get married by their parents. Instead, their parents allow them to make their own decision but their parents advise them to be cautious and thoughtful when choosing a life partner because the choice they make will potentially affect their happiness for an entire life.

> They never forced me to get married. They let me decide. If he is good, they agree. If not, they don't agree. They told me to think carefully; otherwise, it will affect the whole future. (Rima)

Sorya, though, was not forced but encouraged to get married many times by her parents while she was in year two. They wanted her to get married with her neighbor who lives in the same province. They believed that he is a good guy. Nevertheless, she rejected her parents' suggestions repeatedly because she knew that getting married would mean she had to stop studying or at least it would definitely affect her study, and more importantly, she could not live with the person she did not love. With her persistence, her parents ultimately stopped asking her to get married, and expected her to study hard as they have spent a lot of money on her education.

> Before I came here, they wanted me to study, but when I was in year two, they asked me to get married many times again and again. They said he is a good guy. […]. I tried to tell them that I never fell in love with him and I could not stop study to get married too. So, they said that, "ok, but you must study hard because I spend much money on you. I want to see you have a good job and have a better life in the future." (Sorya)

Nayan and Sreypin were asked to get married too, not by their parents, but their grandparents. Sreypin's grandmother did not want her to continue her study for fear that she will not have husband when she gets older. However, these female responsdents do have strong commitment to accomplish their future goals without hesitation. Sreypin explained to her grandmother that she wanted to be an independent woman and she could not settle down unless she has achieved something.

> My grandmother said to me that, "you're too old, it's enough to get married, if you still continue to study, maybe you don't have husband." […]. But, my mum said it's up to my daughter. I told them I don't want to get married, because now I don't have anything in myself. If I depend on my husband, he will look down on me, and maybe have some problem happen in the future. (Sreypin)

Similarly, Nayan's grandparents told her to stop studying and recommended her to learn to do houshold chores as it is an important skill for the wife-to-be. However, her parents are reasonable and understanding, especially her mother. She understood the feeling of being forced to get married, therefore, she did not push her.

> My grandparents asked me "Why do you have to study? When you get married, you will become a housewife so you should know how to keep the house and do housework, something like that." […]. My parents understood very well especially my mum. She felt regret for her past, she didn't want me to feel regret the same as her that's why she was against my grandparent's ideas. (Nayan)

Even though a few of the female participants in this study used to be asked to stop studying and get married by their parents, their parents seemed to be understanding when their daughters convinced them with logical reasons. They acknowledge that they would not have been able to step into the university and remain in the program until now without their parents' encouragement and support. They all positively believe that many parents, if not all, in this contemporary society seem to have positive attitudes toward girls' education more than before. They do not have pre-determined assumption toward gender roles of men and women like those in the previous generations such as grandparents and/or great-grandparents.

Lack of financial resources

According to the women in this study, the family's scarcity of economic resources seem to put them in a hard time. Being a woman is difficult, but what is even more difficult is being a woman from poor family and living away from home. Living and studying in a large city are costly because everything in the city is more expensive than in the rural provinces. Women who come from poor family background might find it difficult to cover such huge expenses as food, accommodation, gasoline, tuition fees, study materials, etc.

Born in a poor family with many siblings, Sorya and Sreypin share a similar problem regarding financial issues. Their parents are farmers; therefore, income from growing rice is not stable. Sorya says:

> My family is farmer. My older brother studies, I also study and my younger brother also studies. My parents have to pay for my older brother and me, the rent fees, tuition fees, food, clothes, gasoline and everything. There is a lot of expenses. (Sorya)

Similary, Molyka also encounters financial problem. Her mother is a primary school teacher, and her father works for the municipality, but their salaries are very little. Their total salaries are $300 per month, which cannot fully cover the three children's expenses. What makes thing even worse is that Molyka was studying at two universities last year, and because of that, she did not have time to do any

job. Therefore, her parents are expected to take responsibilities to pay the tuition fees for her. She realizes that her parents really face a hard time earning money to support her and her younger siblings.

> I was studying two universities, one is at RUPP and another is at PUC. The tuition fees are a lot, and the living expenses as well. And my parents have to spend on my two younger sisters too. […]. I didn't have time to find part time work to help my parents. The spending is they pay all. I know she is working hard to earn money for me to study. (Molyka)

According to Molyka, she cannot rely too much on her parents' supports because they cannot afford all on their own. Likewise, Rima cries when talking about financial problem. She mentions that her family has become very poor since she got serious sickness when she was a child. Her parents had sold everything and spent all the money they had to cure her. Now her health has become better, but her mother needs to spend lots of money for her and her older brother to study in the university.

> In general, it's difficult. Sometimes, we have money, sometimes we don't have. Before my family was not that bad because my mum worked as a children educator at NGO, but she had stopped working long time ago since I got serious sickness because she had to take care of me. Now she works as a tailor at home in the province and my father works in the garage in Phnom Penh. They earn very little money. (Rima)

In short, the lack of financial resources is idenfied as one of the main challenges for these poor rural women to come to pursue higher education in Phnom Penh. Most of the respondents' parents do not have sufficient finance to support their children's education leading these women to feel worried about their education and family's condition.

Academic problems

According to the women in the study, university students are required to devote much time to do self-study in academic settings more than relying on teachers. They have to work harder, stay more focused on the course content and perform well on assignments and tests. They also describe how students might encounter a number of academic challenges including finding study materials, finding time to study, understanding course content, maintaining a high level of motivation, balancing academic demands with work, personal responsibilities; etc. Some of these academic challenges are common and sometimes are manageable while others are difficult to handle. Taking one course can be difficult enough; therefore, taking four or five courses at the same time can seem downright impossible. But what about those who juggle between two universities and those who study and work at the same time? What are the academic challenges they encounter and how do they manage them?

Sorya and Nayan are studying and working at the same time. Nayan studies at one university and works, while Sorya studies at two universities and works. They work as part-time teachers of English at Kindergarten school. From Monday to Friday, they occupy their full day with teaching in the morning, and studying in the afternoon and evening. Everyday, they have dinner late and go to bed late because they have to cook, read the books, and do assignments and homework. They admit that they feel really exhausted. It is really a big challenge for them.

> In the morning, I have to get up very early to go to teach at 6:30 am. In the afternoon and evening, I study, so it's full day. I come back home everyday at 8:50 pm. And when I arrive home, I have to take a bath and then cook. I feel very very tired. There are a lot of homework and assignments, so I have to read the book and do it until 2am. And when I go to the class, I

feel really sleepy and I look at my eyes, it's really black because I don't have enough sleep. (Sorya)

Due to the lack of money, Rima and Sreypin did not have enough study materials. Both of them do not have their own computer. When she first started her academic year, Sreypin did not even know how to use it. Their parents cannot afford to buy them one. Sreypin describes her difficulties as the following.

When I was in year one, teacher asked us to do assignment. I didn't have computer and didn't even know how to type computer. I knew nothing because I just came from the province, but he said "You have to do it, if you cannot use computer, how can you study?" I felt hurt, but I did not hate him. (Sreypin)

Another typical challenge shared by Sreypin, Nayan, Molika and Thary is the problem with the English language. Because English has been used more than any other foreign languages in Cambodia, all university students are required to take some English language courses even though their major is not English literature. Unlike those who live in the city, these participants find it hard to understand teachers when they first came to study in university in Phnom Penh because they did not study much English while they were in high schools in their provinces.

As you know that students come from the province, their English is not good, and my English at the first time was not good because I didn't study English much when I was in high school. Sometimes teacher came to teach, sometimes not. And I had no money to study English at any private institution, so when I first came to study in Phnom Penh, it was hard for me to understand teacher when he spoke in English. (Sreypin)

Nayan admit that her speaking is still limited, and she is determined to herself that she will keep trying more in order to improve her speaking abilities.

Even though, I can communicate now, but sometimes I still feel dissatisfied with my speaking. I can understand teachers and even foreigners I can understand what they mean. But I have problem with describing what I want to say. Actually, I have some ideas in my brain, but I cannot transfer them into words. Now I just know that it has improved, but I will put all effort to improve it. (Nayan)

Molika, on the other hand, has problem with her academic performance. She does not perform well in school. She was studying at two universities last year. She explains that she chose to study Mathematics at RUPP because her mum wanted her to be a teacher of Mathematics in a public high school, while she herself likes accounting. She followed her mother's decision and has been studying Mathematics until now. For another university, her mother also pushed her to study. She chose to study International Relations because she knew that her lecturer studied this major and he now has a good job, but she also asked for her mother's approval. Finally, she dropped it because of not being able to handle schoolwork at the two universities and afford the high costs of tuition fees. She admits that her academic performance is not good probably because Math is not the subject she is interested in, that's why she has not tried hard enough.

My result at PUC is not good because I start year one at PUC when I am year 4 at RUPP. I have to work hard at RUPP because it is the final year, so I cannot concentrate much at PUC. At RUPP, the result is also not good because I haven't put much effort since year one because I don't like that major. (Molyka)

To conclude, the six participants are facing different difficulties concerning academic performance. Some of them find it hard to study when they do not have adequate study materials. The other participants, however, have difficulties in managing the time when they are studying at two universities or studying and working simultaneously. But the most common problem shared by these

female students is the problem with English language. Unlike most students in the city, many of them find it hard to speak English fluently and fully comprehend the lesson when teachers explain in English because they did not study much English when they were in high school.

Physical health problems

There are some understandings in the Cambodian society that women are born physically weak. Some argue that they easily get sick when they try to handle lots of tasks without having adequate time to relax; etc. For these female students, physical health is a troublesome question. They get sick when they are juggling between study and work. Schoolwork, housework and some other workload have put women's health into deterioration. Five out of six participants admit that they get sick quite often. It seems very tough for some of these women who live alone and have nobody that can take care of them.

Sorya, a female student who occupies the whole day with working and studying at the two universities from Monday to Friday, revealed that she got sick quite often, and there were two times that she got seriously sick. She had suffered severe stomachache for two months due to having irregular meal. She went to teach every morning without having breakfast because she was expected to arrive at school at 6:30 am. It was her difficult time since she was living alone while her older brother was helping her parents with farming in the province.

> When I was in year two, I got serious stomachache because I had to go to teach very early at 6'30 am and I didn't have meal on time. […]. Because of that, I could not go to teach. I just stayed in the room and cried, cried. It was many times that I got sick. And another time, I also got diarrhea. One night, I went to the toilet for almost 30 times. It was really really hard to live alone. (Sorya)

Not different from Sorya, Rima used to get sick quite often. She was born physically weak. She remembers that there was one time that she got sick and almost died when she was a little kid. If her mum had not spent all the money and sold everything she had to cure her, she might have died then. Rima, actually, has difficulties in breathing. Even though she has been treated since she was young, she mentioned that her illness is not totally cured. It has become less severe and less often than before, but she still gets sick. She sometimes loses conscious at the university due to the lack of oxygen when she is surrounded by many people. The sad story of Rima is really touching, and it causes her to cry when describing her living conditions, and especially her physical health.

> In fact, I would die since young, but my mum spent money to cure me in many hospitals until poor (cry). She even kneeled down and begged the doctors in the hospital to cure me because she had no more money. Now I'm still sick sometimes. I sometimes feel upset with myself. Other people have good family living condition and their health has no problem. So when I think a lot, I am also headache. (Rima)

Nayan, Thary, and Sreypin also get sick quite often, but their illnesses are not as serious as Sorya and Rima. They usually get fever, catch a cold or cough. They feel really difficult and lonely when they live alone and get sick.

> Hm…I sometimes get sick and I live alone, so it's hard. I feel lonely when I get sick. Normally, I often got flu, headached and cough. (Nayan)

In short, physical health is an issue to be concerned about for these female students. Some of them get sick because of weather changes, while the other get sick because of studying/working too much. It would be good if they live with parents or relatives and receive care from them. However, without

having parents live with, these females need to be emotionally strong and take care of themselves whenever they get sick.

Social relations with others and safety

Living far away from home and parents is not easy, especially for the girls. The long distance from Phnom Penh to their hometown may mean that they have to spend many hours for travelling back and forth and much money if they happen to travel very often. However, even if they want, they may not be able to do so since most of their time is occupied with their study time. So, when they cannot visit their family as often as they want, it is more likely that they feel homesick. Being homesick can also affect the females' concentration on studying if it is very serious.

Upon the interviews, the six female participants admit that being homesick is also one of their challenges while they are away from home. Sorya and the other participants mention that they miss their parents so much. They are concerned about their parents' well-being and their parents also worry about them.

> I cannot go hometown very often even though I am homesick because it is far and I don't have time too. I really miss them and they also miss me. My mother is old, and I worried about her health. (Sorya)

Life in the capital city might be far different from life in the countryside. Women who have been raised and grown up in the countryside for almost twenty years might somehow feel difficult to adapt to the environment, people, and ways of living in the city. The countryside women, especially those from the poor family background can possibly be discriminated by those who are from opposite sex and/or those who are economically better off. Therefore, social relations with others, especially classroom teachers and classmates, play a critical role in making poor countryside women feel either warm or cold, and this might affect their emotions or study performance, to some extent. In this study, social relation with others is identified as a difficulty by some of the participants. The interview with these six female participants reveals that all of them have good relationship with their teachers. They do have good communication with their teachers, both male and female teachers. However, five out of six participants have problem in making friends with their classmates. As a result, they have very few friends.

The females in this study comment that they get along well with their teachers both male and females, but these participants find it hard to communicate with their classmates. Some of the classmates, who are rich and live in the city, do not like to make friends with poor countryside girls. Thary describes her experience as the following.

> There are a lot of teachers that like me. […]. I ask them when I don't understand any lesson. But it's difficult for me to make friends with people. Some of the rich students that live in Phnom Penh city, they think that I'm not a good person that they can make friends with because I'm from the province. It's not just a province, but Preah Vihear is a poor province. Sometimes, they look down or say something not good about me. (Thary)

Rima also expresses her sadness about how her classmates ignore and discriminates her.

> Sometimes when I don't understand any point, I ask my classmates, but they don't talk to me. I have only one closed friend since I studied; the others just talk a few words. Maybe they think I'm not clever or rich as them. (Rima)

23

Sreypin, the poor female student from Takeo province, tells similar stories to what Rima and Thary have mentioned. During the interview, Sreypin states that she used to be laughed at and ignored by her classmates when they knew that she was a countryside girl whose parents are farmers. She felt deeply embarrassed when they laughed at her.

> The first time that I came to class, I felt very embarrassed. When I said my parents are farmers, all students in the class laughed at me. The teacher asked me a lot. I don't know if he never knew me that's why he asked me a lot of questions or he wanted to insult me. Maybe, he didn't know me, so I didn't blame him. […]. I didn't talk to my classmates much because when I talked to them, they didn't look at me or respond to me. (Sreypin)

Thary and Nayan are living in a rented accommodation alone because their younger siblings are studying in primary and secondary schools in the province. These two females mention that they do have relatives in Phnom Penh, but they think that living with them comes with a pressure. They prefer to live alone and have their own quiet room, this would allow them to have more freedom to do whatever they want and focus on their study much better. They mention that their parents are concerned about their security and safety very much, but they think that they can take care themselves.

> I live alone in a rented room. I think it's easy than live with friend. When I live alone, I have a lot of freedom. My parents and grandparents feel very worried, but I told them I can live alone. I'm not a young girl like before. I have a lot of relatives that live in Phnom Penh, but I think it's not easy to stay with them, if I go to stay with them, they will not give me much time to study or I will have a lot of things to do such as help them to do housework. (Thary)

However, Nayan and Sorya feel that it is very dangerous to travel home late at night. They are worried about their own safety everyday, because they are females driving motorbike alone at night, and sometimes carry laptop in the bag. There are possibilities that they can get accident, robbed and/or get sexually harassed.

> It's my difficulty when I drive motorbike home at late 8pm because of the insecurity along the road. I really worried every night because I'm a girl and sometimes I have valuable material with me, laptop, that's why I am worried, especially in Phnom Penh, I think there is no security. (Nayan)

The other two participants, Rima and Molyka, who are staying at their relatives' houses, feel a bit safer than the four participants. They study in the morning or afternoon, so they do not worry about their safety and security along the road as much as the participants who study and work until night.

Security and social support from teachers and peers are the crucial factors that possibly affect females' completion of higher education. They might either motivate or demotivate women from pursuing their study. However, these are viewed as the challenges for the female participants. Most of them feel unsecured for travelling alone at night, and they also express their resentment for being ignored or discriminated by some of their classmates. They feel happy to be treated warmly by their teachers, except their peers. As a result, these poor countryside women have very few friends that they can turn to when they have problem.

Coping strategies

Since these women encounter a variety of challenges, it is necessary to find ways to cope with those challenges. The following are the specific strategies adopted by these participants to deal with their own circumstances.

Coping with financial problems

Four out of six participants include Sorya, Sreypin, Rima, and Nayan, work part-time in order to reduce their parents' burden and get some money to cover their monthly expense and tuition fees for studying in Phnom Penh. Sorya has been working as a part-time teacher of English at a small kindergarten school in order to deal with her financial problem.

> There is a lot of expense, that's why I decided to find a job because I want to find money in order to cut down my parents' expense. I've been teaching at the small kindergarten school since I was in year two until now. I got only $90 for teaching half day in the morning. It's very little because it is a small school and because I not yet graduate, that's why my salary is little. (Sorya)

When asked why she decided to work, Sreypin explains that in fact her mother did not want her to study in Phnom Penh. Her mother wanted her to study at a university in her hometown because it is very expensive to study in Phnom Penh. She could not afford to send two children, Sreypin and her older brother, to university in Phnom Penh at the same time. Due to the strong desires to study in Phnom Penh, Sreypin had promised her mother to find a job in order to help her mother pay for her own living expenses.

> My mum said "If you still want to study in Phnom Penh, I will try to work hard in order to pay for your tuition fees, but you have to help me finding the money to spend for living expenses by yourself." I promised her I could do it, so she agreed to let me study in Phnom Penh. I work as an English tutor at 3 houses. I get $150/month in total. My salary is not enough for spending, because not only tuition fees, but food, clothes, rent, and everything. Sometimes, my parents send money to me, but only a little not as much as before. (Sreypin)

Nayan also works as a part-time teacher of English at Kindergarten school. She has been teaching there since she was a year two student. Nayan was born in middle-income family. Financial problem is considered as one of her challenges, though it is not as serious as the other participants. When asked why she decided to work, Nayan explains that because she feels pressured if she entirely depends on them. Therefore, she finds the way to support herself.

> I want to work by myself. It's pressure if I depend on them totally. I find the way to help myself since high school. Even when I was in high school, I collected the coconut that fell down from the trees to sell. Everyday, my mother still supports me, but it is not 100%. My everyday spending, I can pay it. I tried to find the job since I first came to Phnom Penh, I didn't want to depend on others. (Nayan)

According to Sorya, Srey pin, Rima, and Nayan, they choose to work as part-time teacher of English or English tutor in order to deal with their financial problem. It is easy to find this job because there are many English institutes or schools in Phnom Penh. And the job itself does not require them to be proficient in English since it is just a teacher of English at kindergarten school. And they can choose whether to work part-time or full-time.

> Um…There are a lot of English schools in Phnom Penh, so it's easy to find the job as a teacher of English. They don't require me to have bachelor in English because I teach small children. They accept me if I know some English, friendly, and have confidence to teach. And I can choose to work part-time or full-time, one or two hours, and half day or full day. The

25

salary is based on the number of hours that I teach. Even though it is not much, but at least I can get some money to support my study and living. (Sreypin)

When further asked if the job is easy and if they enjoy with what they are doing, the three participants give similar responses that teaching kids is really difficult and exhausted. It is not easy to take care and control them. Sorya explains that she sometimes cries because of feeling too difficult.

> It is really hard. The school asked me to teach the students about 6 or 7 years old. They don't listen to me. I feel really tired to teach and control them. Because I was really tired, sometimes I cried in the school that I taught. And the branch manager asked me "Why? Why? What happened to you?" I told him that I was really exhausted to teach them and he encouraged me to move on. (Sorya)

Not different from Sorya, Nayan also has difficulty in teaching the small kids. She said that she is always blamed by her school manager and/or kids' parents when the kids fight with each other, get injured, or fail the exam.

> Umm… sometimes, my students cannot catch what I teach and they fail the exam. And sometimes, when they played with their friends and got injured, the problem is teacher. The director or branch manager and the kids' parents will blame the teacher. I feel hurt when they blame me even though they don't use bad words. (Nayan)

Unlike the three participants above, Molyka does not have time to work because she was studying two universities last year. But now she has just decided to drop one. This is what she did to help reduce her parents' expenses in order to have spare money for her younger sister to study at the university too.

> I told her that I didn't want her to spend much money on me. I want her to keep money for my younger sister to study because at that time my younger sister just finished high school and my mum have to spend money for her to go to university too, so I stopped study by myself. She didn't ask me to stop. (Molyka)

Similar to Molyka, Rima cannot work to help reduce parents' expenses. She has been trying to find the job, but not yet found one. Because her family has severe financial problems, her parents are working really hard and her mother sometimes borrows money from others in order to pay for her and her brother's study. And Rima sometimes borrows money from her closed friend when her mother does not have any money.

> […], even though we are poor, she has nothing, she tries to work hard and let me and my brother study. Sometimes she goes to borrow money from other people to spend on my tuition fees. Sometimes, when I cannot pay the tuition fees on time, I borrowed my closed friend money and paid her back when I had money from my mom. (Rima)

Overall, financial resources might not be a big issue for the rich or middle-income family, yet it is perceived as a major obstacle by most of the female participants whose families' conditions are poor. The family scarcity of resources has pushed these female students to borrow money from others, find part-time job to support their study and living expenses in the city, and/or drop out of school due to the inability to cover huge tuition fees. Being a woman from the countryside is already hard, and being born in a poor family is make the lives of these women become even harder.

Coping with academic performance

Due to lots of works and things to do, Nayan and Sorya describe their feelings of exhaustion and have difficulties in managing the time. Therefore, they have decided to resign from their job at the end of this month. The reason is they worry about their academic performance in the program. Nayan says:

> I did not perform well since I started working. That's why next month, I will resign from my work. My family especially my parents and my grandparents are worried about my study. I told them that my study now is a bit lower than before because I don't have enough time to read the book. This is the final year, so I have to try hard to pass the exam with good grade first. (Nayan)

Here, Nayan describes how her parents express worries about her not performing well in the study. Another difficulty as mentioned by Sreypin is concerned with computer skills. Not knowing how to use computer is really difficult because as the students in university, students are required to use computers for searching, doing assignments; etc. To cope with this, Sreypin did everything for her roommate in order to ask her roommate to teach her to use the computer.

> I did everything for my roommate, cooking, cleaning the house, etc., because I wanted her to teach me how to use computer. I shared the room with her and other 2 females, but their living conditions were better than me. They learned how to used computer since high school. (Sreypin)

Until now, both Sreypin and Rima do not have their own computers. Because their parents cannot afford to buy them one, want it or not, they have to share it with their older brother. The difficulties remain, however, they know this is the only way they can do. Rima understands her family conditions very well, and she does not complain or feel unhappy with that at all.

> My mother bought computer for my older brother, so I use his computer when I need. I never get jealous with my brother because my mother has no money, so we have to share. (Rima)

The other aspect concerns English language which is one of the problems raised by all of these participants. However, their effort has enabled them to overcome such difficulty. Sreypin describes how she improved her English language as the following.

> I spend time in the library, and lab everyday to listen to the cassette, and I asked senior students because I often went to library, so I knew many people and they told me how to learn better. I got advice from senior students. And when I didn't understand any point, they explained me. Before go to school, I read the book, so I can understand much better when teachers explain the lesson. (Sreypin)

Similarly, Rima is very brave to ask teachers whenever she feels doubts about any lesson. This is how she improves her academic performance.

> When I don't understand, I ask them. They answer too. I don't feel shy, because if I don't ask, I will never understand. (Rima)

Based on the interviews, these female participants encounter an extreme academic hardship. However, most of them are really determined to challenge the difficulties that they are facing by putting all the efforts to improve their study and seeking support from teachers and others.

Coping with health problems and safety

Living alone is hard, especially during sickness. Sorya describes how she used to get serious sickness for long period of time. To deal with this, she had to go to the clinic by herself and sought help from her closed friend. She says:

> At that time my brother was not here with me, so I went to the doctor by myself and I took medicine everyday. It took me around 2 months to feel better. When I got diarrhea at night, I called to my friend to buy medicine for me. (Sorya)

Similarly, Nayan, Thary, and Sreypin, who get sick quite often, help themselves by going to the pharmacy to buy medicines. But these participants will get a warm treatment from their mother. Their mother will pay a short visit to them when their illness is getting worse.

> I helped myself by buying the medicines. If it is serious and I cannot recover from my illness, my mother will come to visit. Then it will be fine. (Nayan)

In short, these female respondents have to be on their own for most of the times. It might be a lonely moment to get sick when living alone. However, want it or not, this is the challenge that they have to go through.

Living alone is sometimes lonely for these women, but travelling back and forth from Phnom Penh to province is far and is not easy. So even though these female participants miss their family so much, the only thing they can do is to visit them only during the big festivals or school vacation. Besides these, they communicate with their parents through phone calls whenever they miss them. Their parents also encourage them and console them when they have problem.

> I call my parents whenever I am free. Last time, my mother got sick, so I called her. And when I got sick or headache, she also called me, and asked me, "Why you got sick? Do you think too much? Don't think too much!" (Sorya)

Some also mention how they time to time are discriminated by some of their classmates. And they do feel upset about how their classmates treat them. These discriminationg attitudes often seem to be related to these women's social background but also to gender. Several of the participants try to deal with these negative attitudes, for example Thary says:

> Sometimes, they look down or say something not good about me. I don't care because I'm not like that. (Thary)

Sreypin, on the other hand, has committed to herself that she must study hard; otherwise, others will keep looking down on her because no one wants to make friends with a poor and stupid girl. Due to her hardwork, Sreypin received good grade at the end of the first semester in year one, and most of her classmates started to change their attitudes toward her since then, and her teachers also liked her.

> I tried to study hard. After I got grade B in the first semester, I felt that everyone were more friendly to me. Teacher also liked me because I often answered his questions and I always got high score in class. […]. I think that I don't have money, my family is poor, so the only way that can make other people like me is I have to study hard to be an outstanding student. So, I told my self, I must be better than them, and then I could do it. I felt proud of myself. (Sreypin)

Safety is another concern for these female students in addition to social relations with peers. To deal with the insecurity, these women realize that they have to be cautious every time. Nayan, for example,

try to be vigilant as she is a female driving motorbike alone at night and carries valuable belongings such as a laptop. The following is how she keeps her self from potential incidents.

> I always wear socks and long thick clothes to cover my body. I did not stop my motorbike along the road or answer the phone call while riding and I always speed up when I ride at the quiet places. (Nayan)

In brief, challenges have always been encountered in various forms. Some are controllable while others are not. Based on the interviews, it seems that these females are brave enough to confront their difficulties and rely more on themselves than others. However, there is still a need of support to be provided to these women in order to secure their safety and well-being.

Motivations and ambitions in the future

Born in the poor families from the countryside, these female students encounter many difficulties. Some may suffer from physical, mental, financial or other personal problems that affect motivation. Motivation is the cornerstone for success. It gets things started easily, continued progressively, and accomplished successfully. Motivation can be many different things to different people. To some people, money is motivation, whereas to others, family is their motivation. Whatever the cases, having clear goals and an understanding of why they want to complete a class or school will keep students motivated and moving forward despite the challenges. Based on what have been found about women's challenges in this study, it seems that these women have really faced a hard time in order to attend higher education and remain in the program until their final academic year. There would be reasons or something behind that keep inspiring them to struggle until this stage. The following excerpts will answer to the research question "What factors motivate these students to overcome their challenges?"

By the end of the interviews, all female participants in this study share similar responses toward the above question. They mention that they are motivated to fight against those challenges because of anger that resulted from living in the difficulties. They get angry and depressed with themselves when they do not have what they are supposed to have. Such a living condition inspires them to try hard in order to get rid of experiencing the same things in the future. In addition to this, they want to be able to fully participate in the society and become socially recognized. As it appears, they are determined to make changes for themselves, their family, and the society, and the only way that makes all these things possible is through education. For example, Sreypin says:

> I felt angry with myself and I was very stressed because I didn't have this and that, etc., so it was very hard but I told myself to be patient and study hard to find the money, I will get what I want. My family is poor, so if I did not pursue my study to higher education, I cannot help my family to live better than this. And I want to help society in the future. I don't want older people to look down on girls and one more thing I want to be a famous girl too, I want to achieve some things that can make me and my family feels proud. (Sreypin)

In addition to these, Sorya mentions that she has been trying her best throughout the four years because she wants to have a good job in the future in order to pay gratitude to her parents. She acknowledged that they have sacrificed a lot for her; therefore she needs to do something for them. Besides, she wants to break the social stigma against women's roles. She does not want to stay at home and live dependently on her husband. She understands the values of sharing responsibilities to earn money.

> I must try to study hard in order to help my parents and myself in the future also. I also think that when I get married, I don't want to stay at home and wait for the salary from my husband. I want to be an independent woman that has enough abilities to earn money. If I have husband

> I think that we should try together because in the family if one person works and the other person stays at home, then that family will be poor. (Sorya)

Nayan, Molyka, and Rima claim that they have met a lot of difficulties, but they did not give up a long the way because their mother has always encouraged and motivated them. They do not want their mother to feel disappointed and upset; therefore, they have to struggle and move on until they achieve their goals, or else some people around them will continue to look down on them.

> I am the one who loves family the most. The most motivation and encouragement come from my warm family, especially my mum. She told me not to give up, so even sometimes I don't understand the lesson, I told myself I have to do it. I don't want her to feel hopeless. I don't want people around me such as my neighbor in the province and especially my classmates at the university keep looking down on me. (Rima)

Overall, all these female participants really understand the values of education. They agree that only higher education and personal commitment can help them achieve their desired goals and get everything they want.

> When I have higher education, my dream will come true. I can reach my goals and everything I want. If one person does not have high education, people around will look down, so if I have high education, I can have a good future. Education helps me a lot. When I come here and I know English, I can work part-time job. If I don't have education, maybe I cannot find money to support my study. (Sreypin)

To sump up, despite the difficulties that they have encountered, these female students in this study are motivated and committed to fight for their goals. Their motivations does not get lower by the challenges that come along the way, instead; it grows even much stronger to push them forward. These females have been inspired to try hard because they want to make changes for themselves, their family, and the society. They firmly believe that education is a means that makes everything possible.

Summary

Although women have substantially benefitted from the expansion of higher education, evidence exists that women's pursuit of higher education tends to be restricted by a number of challenges. First, the results illustrate how gender values that have been embedded in Cambodian society are still seen as a challenge for women. Even though these female respondents manage to bridge into higher education, some people in their community view higher education as not necessary for girls. Their attitudes toward higher education seem to be shaped by gender values. Second, the scarcity of family economic resources is addressed as one of the major determinants that put these poor rural girls into difficulties. Some of the respondents are forced to do part-time job to get extra money for supporting their study and living. Third, these females face academic problems. All of them have problem with their English language. Some do not perform well in their study because they have to juggle between work and study, while some others do not perform well due to the lack of interest in what they are studying. Fourth, working and studying affect these women's health badly. Without having adequate time to sleep, they get sick very often, and they need to take care of themselve when living alone. Last but not least, safety issues and social relations with others are identified as another main challenge. The discrimination from peers and homesick cause these respondents to feel lonely and sad.

To be able to attend the university and remain in the program, these women have to do anymeans to overcome the existing challenges. First, to deal with financial issues, some of the respondents have to borrow money from their relatives or anyone they know. The other participants, however, are forced to do part-time job. Half of the respondents have been working part-time since they started their university in order to lighten thier parents' burden on tution fees and living expenses. Second, to cope

with academic challenges, the respondents try to study very hard day and night. Some of them get sick very often because of the juggling between work and study without having adequate time to relax. Some participants try to seek support from others by asking senior students, and teachers. With the lack of study materials, they even have to share computer with their older siblings in order to do assignment and research. Third, when getting sick, the female respondents have to be on their own most of the times because they get support from their friends only once in awhile. For example, they need to see the doctors, buy medicines, and take care themselves. Last but not least, the respondents try to seek emotional support from parents when they stresseful with their study and work or unhapy with their friends. However, despite the difficulties encountered, these women are determined to complete their higher education. The factors that motivate them to struggles against those challenges include future career, improving family conditions, breaking social stigma, and being independent.

Discussion

The discussion section is divided into several themes in relations to the empirical findings of the study. Below are the main themes to be discussed.

Socio-economic constraints and women's participation in higher education

According to the results, parental expectations for daughters' participation in higher education seem to have changed as compared to those in previous generations. Even though grandparents and some of the people in the neighbourhood hold gender values in relation to education, according to the females in this study, their parents are described as supportive of their desires to advance to higher education. It is worth mentioning that these women are born in poor rural families and most of their parents did not receive much education, however, they demonstrate active encouragement to their daughter's tertiary education. The increase of parental expectations may result from the fact that investments in their daughters' education can generate high income to support the family in the future and help build the family's prestige. According to these women, their parents love them and their brothers equally. This implies that the attitude of parents toward females' higher education has changed regardless of family's socio-economic status and the existing patriarchal values. This is, however, contradictory to what has been found by Knodel (1997) and Lin (2011). Knodel (1997) argues that among poor rural families, family resources are less likely to be invested in girl's education. In a similar vein, Lin (2011) who studies gender and education maintains that many parents in some Asian countries view female's education as a "spilled water" which cannot be recovered. Gender roles in Cambodia have been given renewed attention in more recent years despite the slow progress toward gender equity. To exemplify, Ministry of Women's Affairs has tried to promote women by conducting workshop to raise awareness of gender equity (Velasco, 2004). This is perhaps one of the possible factors that contribute to the change of some parents' attitude toward women's education. Even so, there are also numerous examples in the study of the unequal conditions women in higher education are facing.

Despite parents' encouragement for higher education, the lack of financial resources is seen as one of the major challenges that put these females into difficulties. According to these women, their parents' incomes from farming are not stable. To let them participate in higher education, their parents try to work hard and find any means to support their education even if they sometimes have to borrow money from others. Nevertheless, it is never enough to support their education due to the high costs of tuition fees and living expenses in the city. Due to the family scarcity of resources, some of the respondents do not have, for example, computer to facilitate their learning. Unlike the rich students who find it easier to get access to modern equipments, some of these poor women are forced to share one computer with their older sibling, and this is not easy since academic life in the university requires

students to do assignment and searching most of the times. This is in line with the findings of Mullen et al. (2003) and Morley and Lugg (2009) as compared with affluent parents, parents with lower socio-economic status are less capable of providing rich and constructive learning environment to foster their children' academic achievement. In short, the lack of computer resulting from shortage of family resources limit these women's learning development to some degree.

The analysis of the data also indicates that respondents place foreign language (English) as their academic challenges. This is again resulted from the lack of family economic resources. While many rich students in the city can afford to learn English at the private institution since they were young, these poor rural females did not learn much English until they enter university. This makes the respondents unprepared for their academic studies. They could not fully comprehend the lesson when they enroll in higher education in Phnom Penh. According to them, their English now still lags behind those who are in the city. The data analysis also suggests that two of these women do not perform well in their study due to the lack of interests in their study. They are forced to study the major that they do not like because of the influence from parents, older sibling, and other people. With poor knowledge and the lack of information, their parents ask them to study the major that they believe is good without considering these women's interests. This reflects the significant influence of parents' educational background on children's choice of education. As found by Christie and Munro (2003), unlike low educated parents, well-educated parents tend to serve as an information provider, assistant and analyst for their children in a complicated higher education system. They do not force their children to choose any educational pathway; instead, they provide their children with necessary information to consider when they are in decision process. With parents' guidance, students from high-educated families are less likely to walk on the wrong path or feel any regret (Mullen et al, 2003). In brief, academic challenges such as poor English language and the lack of interests in the study bring these females into a tough journey.

Besides the aforementioned, the analysis of the data pinpoints family attachement and social relations with peers as major challenges. Despite the good communication with both males and females teachers, most of the respondents do not get along well with their peers. These poor rural women get discriminated by their fellow classmates who are better off. Such discrimination take different forms as being lauged at, looked down upon, ignored, etc. Some of the wealthy and high-achiving students in the city are not willing to make friends or talk with them. As a result, they have only one or two friends. The cold treatment caused these females to feel even lonelier in addition to the homesickness resulting from being far away from family. Goto and Martin (2009) who study psychology of success in higher education claim that peer discrimination can have caustic effects on one's mental health and self-esteem.

Most of the respondents clearly communicate that they would have felt much better if their friends comfort them or willing to share or listen to their personal problems. But everything turns to be contradictory. They have nobody whom they can turn to when they have family issues or whatsoever. The respondents express a deep resentment and sadness in relation to the negative attitudes of their peers toward them. In short, the negative attitudes of their peers toward them double their sadness and loneliness.

What is even more depressing is the lack of safe public transportation. Unlike some other countries where public transport such as bus or train is available, people and students in Cambodia rely on their own transportation such as bicycle, motorbike, or car. Therefore, to be able to go to school on time, students need to have their own bike or motorbike if they cannot afford to have a car. With the lack of finance, some of the respondents go to school by bike, and some others are forced to buy a motorbike since the school is far from their accommodation. Either bike or bicycle, the female respondents express a great concern over their own safety while traveling along the road in the city. The growing incidence of traffic accidents and robbery in the city cause these women to feel deeply worried everyday and everytime, especially the respondents that drive motorbike during the nighttime. Being a woman from the countryside, the respondents are more likely to be the victims than men and those

who originally live in the city. To illustrate, they can get an accident, be robbed and/or sexually abused. This assumption is supported by study of Lodwick & Teske (2009), which states that security of school-going girls is a major concern. Many girls drop out of school due to the increase of sexual abuse and the abduction of girls for prostitution. However, such a claim also reflects the terrible traffic and the insecurity of the crowded city that needs to be improved.

Straddling multiple worlds: families, work, and schooling

Even if these female students get financial support from their parents, economic challenges are still appearantly persisting for these poor rural girls. The instability and low incomes of their parents are not able to support all the children sufficiently. To deal with the high cost of their tutions fees and living expenses in the city, some of these females describe how they are forced to do part-time job since they were in year one or two. For these poor women, even if their salary from part-time job is very little, it can partly reduce their parent's burden. However, such solution subsequently provides some drawbacks. For one, it negatively impacts their study performance because they do not have adequate time to read the books, do assignments, and prepare for examinations. Their academic results have been getting lower since they started working. And another thing, it causes physical health problem as some of these female respondents try to juggle between working and studying simultaneously without having enough sleep and meal on time. Living alone and far away from family is absolutely difficult. They need to be on their own on cooking, studying, working, and taking care themselve. As found in Krause's study in 2005 as cited in Chan (2011), students who work more than 12.5 hours a week are more likely to have one of the two consequences, either they drop out of school as they are pressured from both learning and earning money or their academic achievement is detrimentally affected as they attempt to juggle between the two. However, for fear of failing examination, these women decide to resign from their work at the end of this month in order to put much more efforts on their study in this final year.

Due to the long distance from Phnom Penh city to the province and the tight academic schedules, these females are not able to visit their parents as often as they want. Because these women have strong family attachment, living far away from family often causes them to feel lonely, demotivated and sick. Therefore, to lower down the feeling of homesickness and loneliness, communication between these female respondents and their parents are made on phone calls. All of these women also describe how they try to seek emotional supports from their parents when they are stressed with their study or work, and when they are unhappy with their academic results. They feel much better after talking to their parents and receiving encouragement and advices from them. To them, parents' emotional support is a great motivator when they face difficulties. This findings prove Schunk and Pajares's study (2002) on "Development of Academic Self-efficacy " which reveals that parental support and encouragement is of one of the crucial factors that could enhance children's self-efficacy and as a result benefit their learning and intellectual development.

Females against unrealistic societal expectations

Based on the data analysis, there exist a number of inspirations that push these female respondents to complete their higher education. First and foremost, employment prospect is one of the factors that exert a strong influence on these female respondents' desires for higher education. Due to the marketization of education, higher education is perceived as a basic qualification and a means to enhance one's comparative advantages and career opportunities in a competitive labour market (Lin, 2011). Higher qualifications are a prerequisite for well-paid jobs. Second, parent's divorce and the need to challenge the notion of men as the sole breadwinners motivate these female respondents to be self-reliant and to do educational advancement in order to secure their earning power in the future. These women strive to get higher degrees to be financially independent. They believe that men are no longer the sole breadwinners as they were in the past. Third, it is the need for proper living conditions

and building family's prestige. They believe that high educational attainment and well-paid jobs will enable them to contribute to family's economics and take care their parents in their old ages. They used to be looked down for being poor, so they do not want such a thing to happen in the future. While cultural expectations such as early marriage and pre-determined gender roles have substantial impacts on many women's completion in higher education, the participants in this study often do not cite this as a major factor affecting their higher education aspirations, but they are fully aware of the deeply rooted gender values. Instead, gender values that have embedded in the Cambodian society seems to serve as an aspiration for these females to struggle against many challenges, which may, in turn, positively affect their higher education completion. These women are commited to fight against many challenges with the hope of breaking social stigma against women. They want to fully participate in the society and to be socially recognized. This findings echo Kaziboni's (2000) claim that women see education and credentials as a means to improve their self-image in the large society and develop their confidence to challenge unrealistic and unfair societal expectations. Last but not least, with all the above motivators, the respondents do not forget to be thankful for their parents' encouragement and support throughout the difficult times. This is seen as a great motivator for them to struggle toward the end of the academic program.

Empowerment and change?

The present study reveals the typical challenges experienced by a group of rural female students in pursuing higher education. The findings reveal that despite the aforementioned challenges, girls' motivation level for higher education has gone up, reflecting their moral courage to defend their rights. These rural girls have adopted a number of coping strategies in order to be able to attend higher education and remain in the program. The efforts of these females in overcoming challenges and obstructions have implications for other girls in the community to strive for their educational rights. However, despite women's struggles to participate in higher education, there continues to be a need for the joint efforts of all stakeholders at both national and international levels. Joseph (2012) prescribes that gender equality in higher education should start with conscientising girls from secondary schools and constructing opportunity through partnership with schools and other institutions to ensure greater levels of academic readiness and freedom of choice for girls. The challenges encountered by female students in pursuing higher education can be reduced or eliminated through coordinated actions among policy-makers, international organizations, education personnel and other relevant stakeholders, including the active involvement of members of the local community, local education officials, and the media. The establishments of safe public transportation, mentoring programs, student loans, safe accommodations, female-only scholarships, etc., are of great importance in increasing women's enrolment in higher education (Pennell & West, 2003). Also, educational institutions should not see themselves as the only experts on education. Rather, to secure equitable access to higher education for women, it is important for educational institutions to see themselves as resource centers with outreach services to accommodate or offer guidance to poor female students who are in need of help. Once enrolled in university, students need academic adversing and support to meet the academic demands and support networks to help balance school, work, and family life. In school environments, it would be great if all students develop peer support groups irrespective to family socio-ecnomic background. Teachers and schools should act as the mentors to eliminate discrimination against poor rural women. This would create a friendly learning environment for the poor female students, which consequently enhance their motivations for study (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). Last but not least, pursuing higher education will be less likely for women unless there is a shift in people's attitudes and values toward gender roles. Such change takes time and involves significant reassessment of the conceptions. Gender awareness needs to be urgently and widely promoted among low-educated parents and especially women themselves who hold traditional perceptions of gender roles. However, to achieve all of these, it requires political will and commitment from the government to ensure effective implementation of its policies and continued investment in education.

Conclusion

The findings from the in-depth interviews presented above make it clear that despite the success of increasing females' enrolment in higher education and substantial progress of alleviating gender inequality in Cambodian higher education over the last two decades, many challenges remain. The students identify a wide range of challenges and social problems that continue to impact themselves and their fellow community members. Even though people's perceptions toward gender values are less severe in contemporary Cambodian society than in the past, to some extent they are still embedded and practised in some rural areas in Cambodia. Financial constraint is a major determinant of higher education enrolment and especially of higher education completion. Attending higher education involves a lot of costs; therefore, sending children to university is a huge hurdle for many families. Under such conditions of economic stress, students from economically disadvantaged families especially girls have limited opportunity to access and complete higher education. To be able to attend the university, these poor countryside girls are forced to do part-time job, which consequently lead to other problems such as low academic performance and physical health problems. Issues of girls' safety and security when they have to travel back and forth to school and work at night are related to fears and threats to family's honor. A part from this, they also get discriminated by their classmates. The discrimination from peers against these poor rural women and the lack of counseling and support from teachers and university principals have made higher education's climate become unwelcoming for these women. Given this trend, it can be assumed that higher education of females might be perceived as a threat to this existing status quo, which give more rights and power to elites and men.

In conclusion, the study shows how poor rural women in this study make it to university, how they have been struggling to get there and how they have been coping with the challenges. The enrolment rate of women in higher education contributes to more women holding professional and leadership positions. Higher education is a fundamental tool for promoting women's social status. Without equal participation in education, gender inequalities in the society will continue to exist. Therefore, it is important to pave the way for other disadvantaged females by removing the obstacles and challenges so more girls are motivated to not only enroll in higher education but also stay until the completion of their schooling. To achieve this, there continues to be a need for active involvement from community organizations, school principals, teachers, parents, and other relevant stakeholders to address these issues.

Limitations

Given the nature of the study, the following limitations are warranted. This research study only employed interview as a data collection method, therefore, the findings relied on the respondents being willing to give accurate and complete answers (Breakwell, Hammond & Fife-Schaw, 1995). Second, it was possible that respondents provide inaccurate information due to feelings of embarrassment, nervousness, memory loss or confusion. Due to this, prior to the interviews, I tried to establish the rapport with the respondents by chit-chatting a few minutes in order to lower their fear and shyness so that I could generate valid and reliable data as much as possible. Third, even though my study was to explore rural female students' perspectives and experiences relating to their higher education challenges, coping strategies and motivation, I do not intend to make generalization of the findings to the entire population of female undergraduates, nor do I intend to claim that the findings are representative of all higher instituions in Cambodia. The interview was conducted in only one institution; therefore, the experiences and perspectives of participants are unique to only that particular institution.

Future research

The present study offers some suggestions for future research. One useful avenue is to examine in more depth the females' challenges by recruiting female students from different universities or higher institutions in order to generate diverse experiences in relation to females' challenges in pursuing tertiary education. It would be interesting and illuminating to explore female dropouts' experiences because these women might have so many things to say about their challenges, which lead to their withdrawals from school. It is recommended for future research to study how teachers and parents' support influence women academic achievement by including teachers and parents as participants. This would provide implications and effective and efficient means to increase women's attainment in higher education. Last but not least, future study should use more than one method of data collection in order to triangulate the different perspectives from different sources in order to better ensure the truthworthiness and richness of the findings.

References

Acker, S. (1994). *Gendered education: Sociological reflections on women, teaching and feminism.* Buckingham: Open University Press.

Alcoff, L. (2000). Cultural feminism verus post-structuralism: The identity crisis in feminist theory. In W. Kolmar & F. Bartkowski (Eds.), *Feminist theory: A reader* (pp. 402- 414). Mountain View: Mayfield Publishing Company.

Anamuah-Mensah, J. (1995). *The race against underdevelopment: A mirage or reality.* Accra, Ghana: Ghana University Press.

Ara, N. & Malik, K., S. (2012). Gender discrimination in education: A barrier in development of female education at higher secondary level. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Contemporary Research in Bussiness, 4*(5), 330-339.

Asia-Pacific Human Development Report. (2011). *Gender Equality.* Phnom Penh.

Bame, K.N. (1991). *Teacher motivation and retention in Ghana.* Accra: Ghana University Press.

Barskay, R. F. (1998). *Noam Chomsky: A life of dissent.* London, UK: The MIT Press.

Berg, L. B. (2001). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (4th ed.). Needham Height, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Birrell, B., Calderon, A., Dobson, I.R. & Smith, T.F. (2000). Equity in access to higher education revisited. *People and Place*, *8*(1), 50-61.

Blackwell, E. & Pinder, J. P. (2014). What are the motivational factors of first-generation minority college students who overcome their family histories to pursue higher education? *College Student Journal, 48*(1), 45-56.

Bottomore, B. T. (1991). *Class in modern society* (2nd ed.). Publisher: Routledge.

Chan, H. (2011). *First-Year Student Retention in a Cambodian University.* Unpublished Master's thesis, Royal University of Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Chea, V. (2009). *Reaching the unreached: Bridging the social divide in Cambodia through inclusive education.* Paper presented at the 12th UNESCO-APEID International Conference, Bangkok, Thailand. Retrieved from http://www.vso.nl/Images/reaching-the-unreached_tcm80-23047.pdf

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Christie, H., Munro, M. (2003). The logic of loans: students' perceptions of the costs and benefits of the student loan. *British Journal of Sociology of Education 24*(5), 621-636.

Davies, B. (2006). Women and transgression in the halls of academe. *Studies in Higher Education*, *31*(4), 497-509.

David, M.E. (2007). Equity and diversity: Towards a sociology of higher education for the 21st century?. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 28*(5), 675–690.

Deem, R. (2003). Gender, organizational cultures and the practices of manager academics in UK universities. *Gender, Work, and Organization, 10*(2), 239-259.

Derbyshire, H. (2002). Gender manual: *A practical guide for development policy makers and practitioner*s. Retrieved from http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http:/www.dfid.gov.uk/Documents/publications/gendermanual.pdf

Duff, P. A. (2008). *Case study research in applied linguistics*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Falconer Al-Hindi, K. & Kawabata, H. (2002). Toward a more fully reflexive feminist geography. In, P. Moss (Ed.), *Feminist geography in practice: Research and methods* (pp. 103-115). Oxford: Blackwell.

Folkman, S., & Lazarus, R. S. (1980). An analysis of coping in a middle-aged community sample. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, *21*, 219-239.

Fiske, E. (1995). Using both hands: women and education in Cambodia. Asian Development Bank: Manila, Philippines.

Glassman, D. & Millago, M. (2003). *Save the children US village schools in Mali 1992-2003: A future to quality access?* Paper presented at the biennial meeting of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa, Grand Baie, Mauritius. Retrieved from http://www.adeanet.org/biennial2003/papers/8Bd_SC%20Mali_ENG_final.pdf

Gordon, T., Lahelma, E., & Beach, D. (2003). Marketization of democratic education: ethnographic challenges. In T. Gordon, E. Lahelma & D. Beach (Eds.), Democratic education (pp. 1-10). London, UK: Lightning Source.

Gorman, S., Dorina, P., & Kheng, S. (1999). *Gender and development in Cambodia*. Phnom Penh: Cambodia development Resource Institute.

Goto, T. S. & Martin, C. (2009). Psychology of success: overcoming barriers to pursuing further education. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 57*, 10-21.

Grusky, B. D. (2001). *Social stratification.* Retrieved from: http://inequality.cornell.edu/publications/working_papers/Grusky2.pdf

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 60-69). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Gubrium, J. F., & James A., H. (2002). From the individual interview to the interview society. In J. F. Gubrium & H. James A. (Eds.), *Interview of Research* (pp. 3-32). Thousand Oaks: CA: Sage.

Gunawardena, C., Rasanayagam, Y., Leitan, T., Abeyasekera-Van Dort, A., & Bulumulle, K. (2006). Quantitative and qualitative dimensions of gender equity in Sri Lankan Higher Education. *Women's Studies International Forum 29*, 562–571.

Hatch, J. A. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in educational settings*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Hayden, C. & Martin, D. (Eds.) (2011). *Crime, anti-social behaviour and schools*. Basingstoke: MacMillan.

Hayes, E., & Flannery, D. D. (2000). *Women as learners: The significance of gender in adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hesse-Biber, S. N., & Leavy, P. (2011). *The practice of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.

ILO. (2006). *Cambodia child labor data country brief*. Geneva: International Labor Organization.

Jacobs, J.A. (1996). Gender inequality and higher education. *Annual Review of Sociology 22*, 153–185.

Jones, John Paul III, Heidi Nast and Susan Roberts 1997. *Thresholds in Feminist Geography: Difference, Methodology, Representation.* New York: Rowman and Littlefield.

Joseph, J. (2012). Perspectives on gender Inequality and the barrier of culture on education. *Journal of Community Positive Practices, 4*, 769-789.

Junxia, Z., Xiaopeng, P., Linxiu, Z., Alexis, M. & Scott, R. (2014). Gender inequality in education in China: A meta-regression analysis. *Contemporary Economic Policy, 32*(2), 474-491.

Kaziboni, T. (2000). Picking up threads: Women pursuing further studies at the university of zimbabwe. *Studies in the Education of Adults, 32*(2), 229-240.

Khan, A.S. (2007). *Gender issues in higher education in Pakistan*. The Bulletin.

Knodel, J. (1997). The Closing of the Gender Gap in Schooling: The Case of Thailand. *Comparative Education Review, 33*(1), 61-81.

Kourany, J., Sterba, J., & Tong, R. (1999). *Feminist philosophies.* (2nd ed.). New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Lacey, A. & Luff, D. (2007). *Qualitative research analysis*. Nottingham, UK: The NIHR RDS for the East Midlands.

Le, A.T., & Miller, W. (2005). Participation in higher education: equity and access? *The Economic Record, 81*(253), 152-165.

Lin, M.-J. (2011). Women's aspirations for graduate education in Taiwan. *International Journal of Educational Development 31*(1), 515-523.

Lodwick, D. G. & Teske, J. H. (2009). Girls' dropout experiences. Denver, CO: REFT Institute Inc.

Luke, C. (1992), Feminist politics in radical pedagogy. In C. Luke & J. Gore (Eds.). *Feminisms and critical pedagogy* (pp. 24-53). New York: Routledge.

Lund, H. (1998). *A single sex profession? Female staff numbers in Commonwealth universities*. London: The Commonwealth Higher Education Management Service, ACU.

Maslow, A.H. (1970). *Motivation and personality* (2nd ed.). New York: Harper-Collins

Mehran, G. (2009). Doing and undoing gender: Female higher education in the Islamic republic of Iran. *International Review of Education, 55*, 541-559.

Ministry of Education of Taiwan. (2010a). *The number and percentage of female top academic executives in colleges and universities*. Retrieved 08/10 from:

http://www.edu.tw/files/site_content/B0013/308- 3.xls

Ministry of Education of Taiwan. (2010b). *The number and percentage of female presidents in colleges and universities*. Retrieved 08/10 from: http://www.edu.tw/files/site_content/B0013/307-3.xls

MOEYS. (1998a). *Education statistics and indicators 1997–8*. Phnom Penh: Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport.

MOEYS. (1998b). *Survey on girls' education in Cambodia*. Phnom Penh: Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport.

Morley, L. (2005). Gender equity in Commonwealth higher education. *Women's Studies International Forum, 28*, 209-221.

Morley, L., & Lugg, R. (2009). Mapping meritocracy: intersecting gender, poverty and higher educational opportunity structures. *Higher Education Policy, 22*, 37-60.

Mullen, A.L., Goyette, K.A., Soares, J.A. (2003). Who goes to graduate school? Social and academic correlates of educational continuation after college. *Sociology of Education 76*, 143–169.

Nussbaum, M. C. (1999). *Sex and social justice*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Osterguard, P.C. (1992). The process of and outcomes of gender bias in basic schools: A Nigerian case. *Journal of Negro Education, 58*(2). 54- 65.

Pennell, H., & West, A. (2005). The impact of increased fees on participation in higher education in England. *Higher Education Quarterly, 59*(2), 127-137.

Roberts, K. (2006). *Why children drop out of primary school?* Phnom Penh: VSO Cambodia.

Royal University of Phnom Penh. (2013a). *History*. Retrieved from http://www.rupp.edu.kh/content.php?page=about_rupp#hist

Royal University of Phnom Penh. (2013b). *Introduction*. Retrieved from http://www.rupp.edu.kh/content.php?page=about_rupp#intro

Royal University of Phnom Penh (2013C). *Mission statement.* Retrieved from http://www.rupp.edu.kh/content.php?page=about_rupp#mission

Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Schunk, D. H., & Pajares, F. (2002). The development of academic self-efficacy. In A. Wigfield & J. S. Eccles (Eds.), *Development of achievement motivation: A volume in the educational psychology series* (pp. 15-31). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Soumare, J. (1994). *Women's education in developing countries: Barriers, benefits and policy*. New York: West.

Spencer, L., Ritchie, J., & O'Connor, W. (2003). Analysis: Practices, principles and process. In J. Ritchie & J. Lewis (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice: A guide for soical science students and researchers* (pp. 199-218). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Stromquist, N.P. (2006). Women's rights to adult education as a means to citizenship. *International Journal of Educational Development 26*(2), 140–152.

Sutherland, M. (1985). *Women who teach in universities*. Stoke- on-Trent, UK: Trentham Books.

Swedish Research Council. (2012). *CODEX: Rules and guidelines for research.* Retrieved from http://www.codex.vr.se/en/index.shtml

Tanye, M.V. (2008). Access and barriers to education for Ghanaian women and girls. *Interchange, 39*(2), 167-184.

Tisdell, E. (2001). The politics of positionality: Teaching for social change in higher education. In R. Cervero, A.L. Wilson, & Asso- ciates (Eds.), *Power in practice* (pp. 145-163). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Tisdell, E., & Taylor, E. (1998). Adult education philosophy informs practice. *Adult Learning*, *11*, 6-10.

Tsai, S.L. (2004). Effects of higher education expansion on inequality of educational opportunity. *Taiwanese Sociology 7*, 47–88.

UN. (2000). *Education for All (EFA) Framework of Action*.

UNDP. (2009). *Gender.* Retrieved from http://www.undp.org.ir/index.php/gender

UNDP. (2014). *Women in public decision-making and politics*. Retrieved from http://www.kh.undp.org/content/dam/cambodia/docs/DemoGov/NearyRattanak4/Neary%20 Rattanak%204%20-%20Women%20in%20Public%20Decision-Making%20and%20Politics_Eng.pdf

UNESCO. (2007) *Global education digest 2007: Comparing education statistics across the world.* Montreal: UNESCO Institute of Statistics.

UNICEF. (2003). *Equal access to education 2011*. Retrieved from http://www.unicef.co.za

USAID. (2008). *Glossary of gender terms and concepts*. Retrieved from http://www.ungei.org/resources/files/Glossary_of_Gender_Terms_and_Concepts.pdf

Velasco, E. (2004). Ensuring gender equity in education for all: Is Cambodia on track? *Prospects, 34(1)*, 37-51.

Walker, K. (2012). Cambodia's postgraduate students: Emerging patterns and trends. *ASEAN Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 4*(1), 1-13.

Williams, T., Long, M., Carpenter, P., Hayden, M. (1993). *Entering higher education in Australia.* Canberra: AGPS.

World Bank. (2001). *Engendering development: Through gender equality in rights, resources and voice.* New York: Oxford University Press.

World Bank. (2012). *World development report 2012: Gender and development*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

World Bank and UNESCO. (2000). Task force on higher education and society. *Higher education in developing countries: peril and promise*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Appendix I

Participant's Letter of Informed Consent

Research title: The study of poor rural Cambodian female students' challenges, motivations, and coping strategies in pursuing higher education.

Research setting: Royal University of Phnom Penh

Researcher: Nich Chea, Graduate Student in the International Master program in Educational Research, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Description of the research project: This research project is conducted as part of the Master's Thesis requirements for the International Master Program in Educational Research of the University of Gothenburg. This purpose of the research is to examine in detail the challenges encountered by Cambodian female undergraduates in pursuing higher education in Phnom Penh and how they cope with those challenges. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the efforts of Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in promoting gender equality in higher education.

You are invited to participate in this research because you have completed the first three years of your undergraduate program and, therefore, will be able to share your valuable experiences as a female university student. As part of this research, I would like to conduct an interview with you. The interview will be about 70-90 minutes, and will be conducted via Skype at any time that is convenient to you.

Voluntary participation

Please understand that your participation is **voluntary**. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.

Confidentiality

The detailed information which you provide, your name and the voice-recording will be carefully protected from any other person to ensure strict confidentiality as your data will only be used for this research purpose.

If you agree to participate, please write your name and sign below.

I, _____, consent to participate in this research. I understand that my participation is voluntary and have the right to withdraw at any time with no consequence. I understand that all information gathered will be securely kept and remain confidential.

_____   _____

       Signature of Participant   Date

*How can I contact you?   Phone: _____

Email: _____

Other: _____

Questions

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call me at +46767817059 or email at: chea_nich@yahoo.com

Appendix II

Family background

1. Where are you from?
2. How many brothers and sisters do you have? What are they doing? Do they go to school?
3. What do your parents do? And where are they living now?
4. How would you describe your family living condition?
5. Would you mind telling me your parents' education? How much education did they receive?

Educational background

1. Can you describe your education before you came to Phnom Penh? Your education in primary and secondary school? Where did you study? And your study performance?
2. How many universities do you study? What is/are your academic major(s) at the university? Why did you choose this/these major(s)?
3. Are you a pay student or scholarship student?
4. I wonder why did you choose to study in Phnom Penh? Why don't you study in your hometown? Are there any universities there?
5. Based on my observation, I see some female students stop study after high school, so why did you pursue higher education?
6. Is pursuing higher education your own decision or it is influenced by parents or anyone?

Parents' and community's perception

1. What was your parents' opinion about you going to university, in other words, what did they say to you?
2. Have your parents ever said "you're a girl, you don't have to study much, you will get married in the future"? Do they have these kinds of ideas?
3. Have your parents ever asked or forced you to get married?
4. What about people in your hometown? What do they think about you when you go to university?
5. Are there a lot of females in your province go to university? Why/Why not?

Current situation

1. Can you tell me where are you living now? Do you live alone or with anybody? Why?
2. How do you go to school? How long does it take for you to school?
3. Can you tell me how much does it cost for the tuition fees and how much do spend for your monthly living expense?
4. I wonder how do you fund for your tuition fees and support your living expenses? From your parents or whom?
5. Do you study any language at other school or work somewhere also?
6. Do you want to work by yourself or your parents ask you to go and find the job to do?

Challenges and coping strategies

1. Have you encountered any problem or met any difficulties for living and studying in Phnom Penh? Can you give describe that or give me some examples?
2. Did/do you handle them on your own? If yes, how?
3. If no, who did you go to when you have problems? And how did they help you?
4. Do you think that your problem can affect your study?
5. Do you think your challenges that you have encountered are influenced to some extend by your status as women?
6. Do you think that you might not have experienced these challenges if your family were rich?

Motivation and future goals

1. What inspires you to struggle against those challenges?
2. What are your future goals (short-term and long-term)?
3. Do you have any suggestions/requests to government, school principal, teachers or parents? or advice to other female students?
4. Is there anything else you would like to add?

References

(Format as per APA-manual.:
http://www.ipd.gu.se/forskarutbildning/anvisningar_for_doktorander_och_handledare/referensskrivning/

Reference list using hanging 1,5 cm.

Appendices