

# Gender Inequality within Higher Education Institutions: a case study of the Royal University of Phnom Penh

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## សង្ខេប

ការសិក្សាថ្នាក់ខ្ពស់មានសារៈសំខាន់សម្រាប់ទាំងបុរសនិងស្ត្រីក្នុងការត្រៀមខ្លួនចូលទៅរកការងារ។ ការទទួលបានការអប់រំស្មើភាពគ្នាគឺជាកត្តាសំខាន់ក្នុងការសម្រេចបានសមភាពយេនឌ័រក្នុងកម្លាំងពលកម្ម។ ប៉ុន្តែ នៅប្រទេសកម្ពុជា មានកត្តាអវិជ្ជមានមួយចំនួនដែលរារាំងនិស្សិតស្រីមិនឱ្យបន្តការសិក្សាទៅថ្នាក់ក្រោយបរិញ្ញាបត្រ។ ការសិក្សានេះផ្តោតសំខាន់លើផលប៉ះពាល់អវិជ្ជមានទៅលើវិសមភាពយេនឌ័រដើម្បីផ្តល់អនុសាសន៍មួយចំនួន ដែលអាចជួយឱ្យមានតុល្យភាពយេនឌ័រក្នុងការសិក្សាថ្នាក់ក្រោយបរិញ្ញាបត្រនៅប្រទេសកម្ពុជា។ ការស្រាវជ្រាវនេះមានគោលបំណងបង្ហាញស្ថាប័នពាក់ព័ន្ធទាំងអស់ឱ្យឃើញនូវបញ្ហាដែលកំពុងតែកើតឡើង ដើម្បីរួមគ្នាដោះស្រាយនិងកាត់បន្ថយវិសមភាពយេនឌ័រនៅក្នុងសិក្សាស្ថិតិ ដែលទទួលបានពីការសិក្សានេះ បានបង្ហាញថា ប្រហែលមួយភាគបីនៃនិស្សិត ដែលកំពុងសិក្សាថ្នាក់បរិញ្ញាបត្រជាន់ខ្ពស់ បានបញ្ចប់ថ្នាក់បរិញ្ញាបត្រជាន់ខ្ពស់ជំនាញផ្សេងមួយរួចហើយ។ និស្សិតដែលកំពុងសិក្សាថ្នាក់បរិញ្ញាបត្រជាន់ខ្ពស់ភាគច្រើន ត្រូវរៀនផងនិងធ្វើការផង។ ដូច្នេះ ពួកគាត់មានអារម្មណ៍ថា មានបន្ទុកការងារច្រើន ព្រោះពុំមានអាហារូបករណ៍គ្រប់គ្រាន់នៅសាកលវិទ្យាល័យភូមិន្ទភ្នំពេញ។ ប្រមាណ៧៦,៨%នៃនិស្សិតដែលកំពុងតែសិក្សាថ្នាក់ខ្ពស់ ត្រូវផ្គត់ផ្គង់ការសិក្សាដោយខ្លួនឯង។ ដោយឡែក ភាគច្រើននៃនិស្សិតដែលសិក្សាថ្នាក់បរិញ្ញាបត្រជាន់ខ្ពស់ ផ្នែកអភិរក្សជីវៈចម្រុះ ទទួលបានអាហារូបករណ៍។ មានការយល់ឃើញខុសៗគ្នាអំពីការចូលរួមរបស់បុរសនិងស្ត្រីក្នុងវិស័យខ្ពស់សិក្សា។ ឪពុកម្តាយភាគច្រើន (៧៤,៤%) ទំនងជាចង់ឱ្យកូនប្រុសបន្តការសិក្សាបានខ្ពស់ជាងកូនស្រី។ បន្ថែមពីនេះ និស្សិតភាគច្រើនបានលើកឡើងថា ស្ថានភាពគ្រួសារអាចជាឧបសគ្គដែលរារាំងកូនស្រីមិនឱ្យទទួលបានការអប់រំខ្ពស់។ កង្វះការលើកទឹកចិត្តពីសង្គមក៏ជាកត្តាសំខាន់ផងដែរ។ ក្រសួងអប់រំ យុវជន និងកីឡាសាកលវិទ្យាល័យភូមិន្ទភ្នំពេញ មាតាបិតា និស្សិត អង្គការក្រៅរដ្ឋាភិបាល ព្រមទាំងភាគីពាក់ព័ន្ធទាំងអស់ត្រូវសហការលុបបំបាត់វិសមភាពយេនឌ័រ និងលើកទឹកចិត្តស្ត្រីឱ្យទទួលបានការអប់រំខ្ពស់ដូចបុរស។

## **Abstract**

Higher education is important for both men and women in preparing to enter the job market. Equal access to education is a key factor in achieving gender equality in the workforce. Unfortunately, however, there are a range of factors that de-motivate female students from pursuing postgraduate education in Cambodia. In this paper, I investigate these factors, focusing upon the negative impacts of gender inequality to make recommendations that are likely to address the gender imbalance in Masters Programs in the country. This research aims to inform all relevant stakeholders how they can adapt their practices to reduce gender inequality in higher education. An exploratory study using descriptive statistics shows that around one-third of existing Masters Candidates already hold a Masters qualification. Most currently enrolled students work and study at same time and feel constrained by this dual workload. As there are limited scholarship opportunities available at the Royal University of Phnom Penh; 76.8% of students, self-sponsored their higher education. A disproportionately high number of students in the Masters of Science in Biodiversity Conservation receive scholarships. There were significant differences in perceptions about the participation of men and women in the higher education sector. Most parents (74.4%) preferred to support their sons, rather than their daughters in pursuing further education. In contrast, most student respondents suggested that their family situation was a major de-motivating factor acting as an obstacle to women accessing a higher education. A lack of social encouragement was also a significant factor. Increased enrolments of female students should be encouraged through cooperation between the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), RUPP, parents, students and NGOs through to address these issues.

**Keywords:** Gender Inequality, higher education institutions, Master programme

## **Introduction**

Education plays an important role in national socio-economic development by improving people's living conditions through access to better employment opportunities. Access to higher education is necessary if women are to develop their capacity to contribute to society at all levels. Thus, increasing the proportion of female students in higher education is an important factor in achieving the vision of the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) to become an upper-middle income country by 2030. Through the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), the RGC has a strong commitment to developing Cambodia's human resources to remain competitive in light of the countries recent integration into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Economic Community (Ogisu and William, 2016). Cambodia's National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) 2014-2018 focuses on building capacity without gender discrimination. This focus is in response to an existing gender gap in higher education

participation. Based on recent Gender Parity Indices (GPI) for tertiary education, Cambodia was assessed as the lowest rate in terms of the greatest imbalance in favor of male enrolment. In contrast, countries, i.e., Thailand, Malaysia and Philippines had gender imbalance in favoring women (Williams *et al.*, 2014).

In Cambodia, a contemporary higher education system was established in 1947 through the founding of the National Institute of Law, National Institute of Politics, and National Institute of Economic Science, under the strong colonial influence of the French higher education system. The first Western-style local university was the Phnom Penh-based Khmer Royal University established in 1960. Six other universities were established in 1965, namely the Royal Technical University, Royal University of Fine Arts, Royal University of Kompong Cham, the Royal University of Takeo-Kompot, the Royal University of Agricultural Science, and the People's University (MoEYS 1971, cited in Pith and Ford 2004). Unfortunately, between 1975 and 1979, Cambodia, under the rule of the Government of Democratic Kampuchea led by Pol Pot, banned higher education and killed many educated people including professors and students. Under this regime, the Cambodian educational system was almost completely destroyed. Most schools were closed. At the beginning of the 1970s, there were said to be 20,000 teachers working in Cambodia; while only 5000 were remaining 10 years later. Others claim that up to 90% of teachers may have been massacred (MoEYS, 2017). During the Khmer Rouge period, many men and women became illiterate.

In a study of the expansion of higher education and quality improvement in Cambodia, Williams *et al.* (2014) described how after the collapse of Government of Democratic Kampuchea in 1979, the pro-Vietnam People's Republic of Kampuchea was established with the support of Soviet Union. Experts from Russia and Vietnam were sent to Cambodia to re-establish the higher education system based on the Soviet model. Most universities and other higher education institutions closed by the Khmer Rouge were re-opened in 1979. By the early 1990s, the prolonged civil war ended as Cambodia slowly transitioned from Vietnamese control to become a democratic nation. The National University of Management, Royal University of Law and Economics, and the National Institute of Education were established in contemporary Cambodia after the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement in 1991 and the national general election supported by the United National Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC).

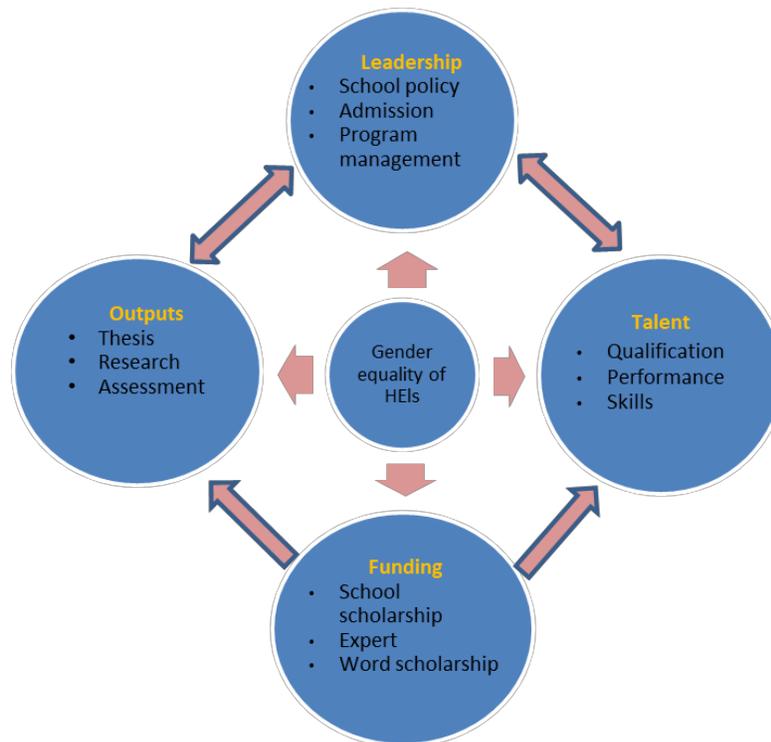
In a post-conflict state, the RGC has been acutely aware of the importance of human resource development to stimulate socio-economic growth. The higher education system in Cambodia has gone through a transition as access has improved, first being influenced by socialist countries such as Russia, Vietnam, and in Eastern Europe; before gradually becoming more influenced by Western education ideals, influenced by countries such as the United States and Australia. In 1997, the first private higher education institution, Norton University, was established in Cambodia in another landmark event. This was followed by other private institutions such as, the Institute of Management Science and the Institute of Technology and Management in 1998 and the Institute of Cambodia in 1999. By the end of 2007, the higher education system in Cambodia had grown dramatically, comprising 22 public and 40 private universities. In 2014, this figure had increased to 39 public and 66 private higher education institutions (HEIs). From having only one HEI in 1979/80; the higher education sector in Cambodia expanded to 486 institutions, as well as 111 Technical and Vocational Training colleges by 2017 (MoEYS, 2017).

In 2016 there were 45 public HEIs (22 universities, 23 institutes) and 103 private HEIs (61 universities, 42 institutes) in Cambodia; with a total enrolment that had increased from 10,000 students in 1997, to 97,524 students. The rapid growth of private sector HEIs meant that each of the 14 government ministries was required to work individually to manage institutions relevant to their portfolio. The lack of a strong overarching higher education policy impacted the quality of the Cambodian education system, where the rapid growth in the number of universities and enrolments resulted in a large number of graduates ill-suited to meet market demands (Cheat, 2009). Rany *et al.* (2012) suggested that there is a requirement to expand higher education quality to meet expectations consistent with the global and regional context. More recently, the RGC has paid much closer attention to the rapid increase in the number of HEIs and enrolments, leading to policies that better regulate both the private education sector and the practice of public universities enrolling private (non-scholarship) students.

## **Theoretical Framework**

While there are different theoretical perspectives on gender inequality, the most compelling are concerned with identifying the causes and analyzing the drivers that produce

gender inequality. Most theories on gender inequality emphasize the different ways women and men access and control over the material resources (Young *et al.* 1994). However, the key to understanding gender inequality is to understand the specific situations women experience. For instance, Dixon (1976) offered an analytical framework based on five spheres of activity including sexual relationships, reproduction, homemaking and child care, education and economic production and political decision-making. She suggested that gender inequality has different characteristics in the domestic and public realm.



**Figure 1.** Conceptualizing gender inequality in HEIs in Cambodia. Adopted from Kaplan and Norton (1996).

The primary objective of this research is to identify the factors that de-motivate women from pursuing postgraduate studies at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, a public university. A conceptual framework adapted from the C-Change MAI instrument based on additional relevant literature on the multi-dimensional framework for gender equity assessment in higher education using a balanced scorecard approach (Kaplan and Norton, 1992) was applied for this study. This framework is considered to be valid for use in the case of Cambodia as it determines obstacles to further study using specific criteria. It is also anchored in an analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT).

## Research Methodology

A case study was conducted on the Royal university of Phnom Penh (RUPP). RUPP is the largest and most-established public university in Cambodia and was selected based on its characteristics of providing a range of Masters courses across the sciences and social-sciences. Being a public university in Phnom Penh it also attracts a diversity of students from each of the provinces in Cambodia from various socio-economic backgrounds.

This exploratory study used descriptive statistics to compare the experiences of Master of Education (MED) students and other courses (Non-MED students) and identify the factors that influence gender inequality in HEIs in Cambodia. A survey was used to collect quantitative data, a survey was conducted. A cohort of students was recruited for the survey, with the aim of achieving a level of precision with a maximum 6% standard error (Yamane, 1967) (Table 1). In addition, a stratified sampling approach was applied to select a smaller cohort for face-to-face interviews using a structured questionnaire.

**Table 1.** Number of respondents interviewed.

<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Sample Size</b>
MED students	45	40
Biodiversity	8	8
IT engineering	32	17
Development studies	32	17
Non MED students	72	42
<b>Total</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>82</b>

The structured questionnaire comprised open and closed questions to gather information about student perceptions on gender inequality, the background of each student, their degree of satisfaction with their studies, their motivational factors, and the perception of female students about their working spaces and university in general.

An Excel spreadsheet was used to prepare the quantitative data for input into Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software for analysis. Descriptive statistics such as a weighted average index (WAI) and a t-test were adopted. The WAI was used to rate the degree of satisfaction of the students with the university admission process, quality of education, and

university facilities, as well as the perception of the students towards women in higher education on a five-point scale, where: 1 = very satisfied; 2 = satisfied; 3 = moderately satisfied; 4 = dissatisfied; and 5 = very dissatisfied. An independent t-test was used to compare the mean scores of two groups for given variables, such as gender. Content analysis was used to qualitatively analyze the data obtained from the structured questionnaire, which was crucial for elaborating upon the factors that influence gender inequality.

## **Findings and Results**

### ***Gender inequality of accessing to higher education***

When RUPP was established in 1960, it was known as the Royal Khmer University. Modern buildings were constructed in the New Khmer architectural style, influenced by both European postmodernism and Angkorean traditions. With the establishment of Khmer Republic in 1970, its name was changed to the Royal University of Phnom Penh. During the Khmer Rouge regime between 1975 and 1979, all educational institutions were closed, with majority of the deans, professors, and teachers arrested or killed. The university were abandoned and remained deserted for almost five years. It was not until 2001, that RUPP began to offer its first postgraduate degrees following the civil war, with graduate diploma and masters courses in Tourism Development. Today, RUPP is a full member of the ASEAN University Network (AUN) with a motto of 'education, research and service to society'. As the national public university, RUPP has been responsible for developing significant human resources, particularly with respect to the training of teacher candidates for high schools and other public service roles (Strategic Plan 2014-2018). The university has a largest student population in Cambodia, hosting about 20,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students in its programs at any one time. The university has programs in both the sciences, and social sciences and humanities. It also has a language program through the Institute of Foreign Languages. In total, there are fourteen master programs at the university including courses in biodiversity conservation, chemistry, climate change, clinical psychology, development studies, education, IT, engineering, linguistics, philosophy, physics, social work, sociology, TESOL, tourism & resources management and translation science. The university accepts enrolments from both non-fee paying (scholarship) students, as well as fee paying (private) students.

**Table 2.** Gendered participation in the research.

Gender	MED		Non-MED		Overall	
	(n=40)		(n=42)		(n=82)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Male	28	70.0	29	69.0	57	69.51
Female	12	30.0	13	31.0	25	30.49
Total	40	100.0	42	100.0	82	100.00

The field work compared 82 students from of these disciplines including students from the Masters of Education (MED); as well as non-MED students from the Masters of Development Studies, Masters Biodiversity Conservation, and IT & Engineering programs, with 69.5% of the participants being male and 30.5% being female. Female participants were fewer in the cohort due to the low female enrolment rates in these programs (Table 2). On average, the participants were 28.4 years old, with students from the MED program (29 years) slightly older than those in the Non-MED programs (28 years), which was not significantly different based on the t-test. Only 8% of the cohort was over the age of 35, with majority of students in all programs aged between 26 to 30 years old. Overall 62% of participants were married, with students from Non-MED programs more likely to have started a family than those from the MED program. This is considered to be important in Cambodia, where marital status can indicate greater burdens in terms of work and family life and may affect an individual’s capacity to study.

### ***Parents behavior towards children’ higher education***

The level of higher education reached by the parents of students was believed to have potential impacts on the performance of students studying masters programs at RUPP. Overall, only one-third of parents have participated in higher education, which was higher for Non-MED students. The parents of many MED students lived in rural areas and were either born or lived through the Khmer Rouge regime and thus did not have much opportunity to access a higher education. Moreover, 74.4% of parents were found to prefer their sons to access higher education as opposed to their daughters (Table 3), which was significantly higher for Non-MED students (90.5%) than MED students (57.5%). Most masters level students (87.8 %) work while they study, which is slightly higher for MED students (90%). MED students generally work at public or private high schools or at private institutions as teachers.

**Table 3.** Parental preference for sending their son or daughter to university.

Favour of Parents	MED		Non-MED		Overall	
	(n=40)		(n=42)		(n=82)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Son	23	57.5	38	90.5	61	74.4
Daughter	17	42.5	4	9.5	21	25.6
Total	40	100.0	42	100.0	82	100.0

Respondents to the structured interview, who were teachers at high schools, indicated that they were motivated to obtain a masters qualification to have a better chance of being promoted and receiving a higher salary. Non-MED students were found to mostly work with NGOs either in Phnom Penh or other the provinces. Most students who did not work were studying a Masters of Biodiversity on a full scholarship from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). A condition of this scholarship required them to attend university full time, which made it difficult to access jobs outside of those provided by their sponsor or the university.

**Table 4.** Barriers to women accessing higher education.

De-motivating factors	MED		Non-MED		Overall	
	(n=40)		(n=42)		(n=82)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Family situation	27	67.5	33	78.6	60	73.2
Lack of scholarship opportunities	13	32.5	19	45.2	32	39.0
University admission	3	7.5	6	14.3	9	10.1
Degree not important for women	3	7.5	4	9.5	7	8.5
Lack of social encouragement	22	55.0	29	69.0	51	62.2
Other	4	10.0	2	4.8	6	7.3
Total	40	100.0	42	100.0	82	100.0

Table 4 presents the results of the survey outlining the major obstacles limiting access to higher education by women. The most common response was family attitudes with 73.2% of respondents suggesting that parents believed that women should not attempt to obtain a higher education as they will take on a role as housewife in the future. Traditional attitudes that suggest that if women obtain a higher education that they would be difficult to control were still shown

to be prevalent. Many respondents suggested that their parents still thought of their daughters and sons unequally. In general, parents were found to prioritize the education of their sons over their daughters. In particular, many families suggested that daughters were required to be available for housework, in preference to studying. Another major demotivating factor influencing gender inequality in higher education was a lack of social encouragement for women with the inclination to approach further study.

### ***Perception of women about higher education***

A WAI was used to assess the satisfaction of women with different aspects of higher education, as well as differences in the perceptions of MED and non-MED respondents. In general students had a moderate to high-level of satisfaction with their higher education program. They were more satisfied with the admissions process, entrance exams, candidate selection, the quality of teachers, school facilities, the curriculum, master theses, practicums, and workshops and only moderately satisfied with elements such as scholarships, internships, exchange programs, public lectures and publications. The t-test demonstrated a significant difference between MED, and non-MED students, in term of the admissions process, scholarships and practicums. Students from Non-MED programs were found to be more satisfied with the admissions process because they were not required to pass a difficult English language entrance exam, as well as studying all of their subjects in English. Most MED students were less satisfied with the availability of scholarships. Scholarships are less likely to be accessed within their program. Non-MED students were also on average more satisfied with practicums, which were considered to be more practice-oriented with a greater level of field work than for MED students.

Most students reported receiving encouragement from their family to pursue a higher qualification (79.3%), which demonstrates that this is an important factor in decisions to pursue this pathway, especially at Masters Level. Non-MED students were found to be more likely to receive encouragement from their families (80.9%) than MED students (77.5%). Only 20.7% reported receiving financial support, with 9.8% of respondents suggesting they received neither encouragement nor financial support. MED students were found to be more likely to receive financial support from their families (27.5%) than Non-MED students (14.3%), however, this was

mainly due to Non-MED students having greater access to other form of support such as scholarship from NGOs.

**Table 5.** Perception of the Students towards Master program.

Attribute	MED		Non-MED		Overall		P-value
	(n=40)		(n=42)		(n=82)		
	WAI	OA	WAI	OA	WAI	OA	
Admission procedures	0.72	H	0.76	H	0.74	H	0.321
Scholarships	0.44	M	0.63	H	0.53	M	0.000**
Entrance exams	0.69	H	0.73	H	0.71	H	0.183
Candidate selection	0.69	H	0.70	H	0.69	H	0.686
Teaching quality	0.74	H	0.79	H	0.76	H	0.246
School facilities	0.60	M	0.66	H	0.63	H	0.148
Curriculum	0.67	H	0.69	H	0.68	H	0.492
Master thesis	0.64	H	0.67	H	0.66	H	0.332
Internships	0.53	M	0.53	M	0.53	M	0.916
Exchange programs	0.52	M	0.52	M	0.52	M	0.920
Practicums	0.61	H	0.68	H	0.64	H	0.042*
Public lectures	0.63	H	0.67	H	0.65	M	0.226
Workshops	0.63	H	0.67	H	0.65	H	0.342
Publications	0.59	M	0.53	M	0.56	M	0.156

**Noted:** OA = Overall Assessment significance at the 0.05 level. WAI= Weight Average Index measured on five-point scale = Considerably Less (Cl)=0.00-0.20,, Less (L)=0.21-0.40, Moderate (M)=0.41-0.60, High (H)=0.61-0.80, Very High (VH)=0.81-1.00; OA = Overall Assessment; \*Significance at the 0.05 level; \*\*Significance at the 0.01 level.

Notably, only 21.1% of students interviewed received financial support from their work place to study, with Non-MED students (23.8%) more likely to access this support than MED students (20%). Understanding this is important as a lack of financial support can be an obstacle impacting gender inequality in higher education. The capacity for students to spend time studying during their working hours is important for students who are working. More than a half of all respondents indicated that their work place did not allow this, which caused workloads which were difficult to manage (76.8%). Notably, MED students were more likely (52.5%) to be able to spend a portions of their working hours studying, as their employers in public and private schools are more likely to encourage from the increased knowledge of the students. If they studies, they were deemed more likely to be promoted to higher teaching grades and benefit from higher

salaries. More than half of all MED students study because of a motivation to increase their salary, which is considered to be a major factor in driving the pursuit of higher degrees. Despite this, it was found that work places that employ non-MED students are more likely to increase the salary of their workers on the basis of a Masters qualification, as many of the private schools that employ teachers do not have a policy to increase salaries on this basis.

Encouragingly, 56.1% of respondents reported that programs prioritized the recruitment of female students, with similar results for both MED and Non-MED programs. Moreover, 89.9% of respondents suggested that their efforts were recognized socially, which was a factor that encouraged them to pursue a higher education, with the efforts of non-MED students (90.5%) slightly more likely to be recognized than their MED peers (87.5%). Just over half of all respondents suggested that higher education was very important for women, with 56.1% eschewing old perceptions that women should not be highly educated over one of equal access to this opportunity. This was similar for both MED (55%) and Non-MED (57.1%) students.

**Table 6.** Perceptions of respondents about higher education.

Attribute	MED		Non-MED		Overall		P-value
	(n=40)		(n=42)		(n=82)		
	WAI	OA	WAI	OA	WAI	OA	
Importance of women in higher education	0.87	VH	0.88	VH	0.88	VH	796

**Note:** OA = Overall Assessment significance at the 0.05 level. WAI= Weight Average Index measured on a five-point scale: considerably Less (CL) = 0.00 - 0.20; less (L) = 0.21 - 0.40, about the same (M) = 0.41 - 0.60, higher (H) = 0.61 - 0.80, much higher (VH) = 0.81 - 1.00; OA = Overall Assessment; \*Significance at the 0.05 level; \*\*Significance at the 0.01 level.

A WAI was also used to assess the perceived importance higher education for women. Surprisingly, students in both the MED and non-MED programs rated higher education as very important (Table 6). A t-test suggested no significant difference between the perceptions of respondents from each type of program (MED 87% and non-MED 88%). In the structured interviews, respondents expressed that both men and women have the same right to access higher education, and suggested that more women accessing higher education is important for the socio-economic development of the country. Women were perceived as equally capable of completing higher education programs. Overall 89% of respondents expressed interest in continuing their studies, with 62.2% wanting to pursue a Ph.D. and 19.5% wishing to advance

their dream careers with a Masters qualification. For instance, some students working at Ministry of Finance, which to also teach part-time at other institutions and aspired to obtaining a qualification in both education and finance. Only a small number of students they did not want to continue with further study (8.5%), while even fewer were not sure (1.2%).

## **Discussion**

This section considers the factors that de-motivate women from pursuing Masters qualifications to better understand how to improve gender equality in postgraduate programs. It has been suggested that gender inequality in the context of Asia-Pacific remains a 'hot' development agenda, which is vital for Cambodia to consider if the country is to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. The enrolment of female students in higher education still relatively low (UNESCO, 2010). HEIs in Cambodia are argued to have problems related to gender inequality based on policies and cultural norms, such as the perceptions of other family members. These were considered to be unfair and the root causes of women's inability to access to education and employment opportunities and (Escalilla, 2011). For instance, the major de-motivating obstacle limiting women from accessing higher education was found to be a students family situation, with 73.2% of respondents citing this as a factor. Many Cambodian parents believe that women should not access higher education as they are likely to end up as housewives. In some cases, parents maintain the traditional perception that if women access higher education that they will be difficult to control and understand how to be promiscuous. Others also perceive that equal opportunities should not be provided to both daughters and sons. For instance, they prioritize educational opportunities for their sons. By thinking in this way, parents preferred to invest in their sons, particularly if they are only able to provide support for one child to study. In Cambodian society, it is believed that sons are more likely to be able to help parents in their old age and they have an obligation to do this. Parents often perceive that daughters will care more about their new families after they are married. Many families would still prefer their daughters to aspire to house work rather than studying. This lack of social encouragement was found to be an important factor influencing gender inequality in higher education.

The status of women within the structure of Cambodia society is particularly rigid and unyielding. Female students within Masters Programs at RUPP are often required to manage both paid and unpaid work, throughout their studies. Upon graduation, women also struggle to access attractive employment opportunities or high positions within the government. Meanwhile, other countries in the region, such as the Republic of Korea, Japan, Thailand, China, the Philippines and some Pacific Islands have achieved a higher level of gender parity in higher education because gender mainstreaming approaches are well-integrated at all levels of government. Postgraduate students at Master level in Cambodia are required to balance work with studying on the weekend, which presents many challenges for married women with children, with the added burden of housework when they arrive home.

At RUPP, only 30.5% of enrolled Masters student are female. This is related to inequalities in terms of workloads and societal expectations with respect to paid work and domestic work. Workloads are a key factors that de-motivates women from studying at the Masters level. If this situation continues, women will continue to experience low completion rates women in Masters Programs and inequality in the work place will persist. Women are often restricted from participation in decision making processes because they lack the university qualifications required to access good positions in the government, private sector and NGOs. These roles are dominated by men. When women do not access decision making positions, many issues relevant to women and children are not considered in laws and regulations, with a negative impact on wellbeing.

When women marry at a young age, they are often constrained from pursuing further education, while male students often still freely enroll at the Masters level after they marry. There are significant difficulties that women face in being able to earn money while studying. At the same time, women are not encouraged by society to pursue these opportunities. At the Royal University of Phnom Penh, there are no scholarship programs specific to female candidates and women are often required self-fund their studies. As 76.8% of respondents reported the need to work, while studying at the Masters level, balancing their responsibilities at the workplace, university and home can be a significant burden for female students, which is more challenging than the situation faced by male students. A lack of scholarship opportunities, particularly for

female students from rural provinces de-motivates women from accessing higher education, in part due to the cost of renting accommodation in the city (Escalilla, 2011).

A lack of female role models higher education able to encourage others to participate is a factor in the obstacles women in Cambodia face. Fiske (1995) identified that in Cambodia, women being observed in leadership or management positions act as role models for female students, which positively affects the motivation of these students. Despite this, women remain under-represented in leadership and decision-making positions among politicians, the public service, and the judiciary at all levels. For instance women represent only 23% of total public sector employment and female representation in the Senate between 1999 and 2012 remained unchanged at under 15% (UNDP, 2014).

## **Policy Implications**

***Ministry of Education Youth and Sport (MoEYS).*** To increase admission of women to higher education programs, the MoEYS should consider providing founding for scholarships, transportation and accommodation costs for women. The cultural perceptions of parent and society on the higher education of women have meant that they have been excluded from a range of financial support provided to men. In recognitions of this, the Ministry of Education should provide greater access to scholarships specifically for women. Many students who undertake study at the Masters level live away from Phnom Penh. The ministry should provide transportation and accommodation subsidies to incentivize women from provincial areas to encourage women to pursue higher education opportunities.

***Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP).*** At RUPP, the MED program should focus on providing financial support for female students, and improving admission procedures and research activities to promote full time higher education programs. In some programs, students conducting field work, such as those in the Masters of Biodiversity program receive full scholarships enabling them to focus completely on their study. These opportunities are less available to MED students. Thus the MED program may consider using some of the revenue from university fees to provide more scholarships to women. Admission procedures at RUPP often limit the participation of teachers from rural areas through having a policy of admitting new students only one time per year. Thus, the program should adapt the admissions procedure to

enable enrolment on two or three occasions each year to increase the opportunities of students to from rural areas to participate.

Often programs are only available on the weekends to cater for full-time staff at private institutions, government agencies and NGOs. The MED program should consider full time options such as those in the Master of Biodiversity program focused more on research and other part time course work options to enable more flexible options to be offered to students. Moreover, the MED program should improve its opportunities to participate in research and/or field work activities, including the development of a thesis or publications to contribute to more resources being made available in the education sector.

**Admission procedure.** Admissions procedures should prioritize female applicants, who have shown high capacity but are constrained by other factors; or to refuse progress to students who are enrolled but don't participate in classes to free up more spaces for students who wish to be there.

**Students.** Students should follow the school regulations well, work hard to complete assignments and theses on time and attend the class regularly so they can complete their program within two years. Female students face with transportation and accommodation challenges before should become aware of them before they decide to take a course and prepare for them.

**Workplaces.** While Masters Programs are delivered on weekends, most also have a variety of events and activities aimed at improving academic progress, such as seminars and workshops at other times during the week. In recognition of employees studying on the weekends, employers should allow them to attend some extra events during work hours, in line with school requirements. RUPP attracts speakers from all over the world who come to share knowledge with students, which may be useful in improving the results of students, as well as benefiting their roles in the work place.

**Parents.** In reality, scholarship programs rarely prioritize either female or male candidates, rather focus on competency and the quality of the applicant. They are decided on the basis of examinations and the quality of papers produced. There are no current policies held by the Ministry of Education or RUPP to prioritize female students. Another alternative would be for parents to reconsider their focus on only their sons accessing higher education programs to

recognize their daughter's aspirations equally. If possible, parents should support their daughters to access higher education if they wish.

## **Conclusion**

The insights obtained about the overall management of Masters Programs at RUPP are telling. While majority of students had only bachelor degrees before commencing a master degree, 29.3% had already obtained a master qualification already. Most students (78.1%) needed to work for at least one or two years after completing a Bachelor program to be able to afford to study at the Masters level. They were motivated to study at a higher level to fulfill their work requirements and improve their performance with a view to obtaining a promotion. Most of students were worked while studying and felt constrained by their dual workload. Most students were self-sponsored (76.8%), as RUPP does not have its own scholarship program, with students who receive scholarship support, being funded mainly by NGOs, as it the case with the Masters in Biodiversity scholarship holders. These students are fully supported by USAID and are able to study full time, which is an opportunity that is offered to very few MED students. A limited number of public school teachers are able to access scholarships from UNICEF. Students suggested that that the requirements of Masters Programs at RUPP were often onerous, when trying to balance course requirements with work and family responsibilities. There is a demand for students for more scholarships to be provided from within the university. Some programs, such as the MED experienced low student satisfaction in terms of the number of scholarship and research opportunities available.

There was found to be seriously biased perceptions with respect to male and female participation in higher education. Majority of parents (74.4%) were found to preference a higher education for their sons over their daughters; with 56.1% survey respondents believing that women should be able to access higher level qualifications, while nearly a half (43.9%) believing that this was not necessary. Most respondents (73.2%) suggested that their family situation was the major demotivating factor for women intending to access a higher education, with 62.2% or respondents citing a lack of social encouragement. Around 39% of survey respondents suggested the availability of scholarships factor was also a significant motivator for women seeking a higher

education. Providing more scholarships is one approach believed to have the capacity to address gender inequality in the Cambodia higher education sector.

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