

## **Rural Cambodian Women's Perspectives: An Exploratory Study on Community Ailments, Migration and Opportunity**

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### *Abstract*

Life in rural Cambodia is difficult, and rural women face issues such as gender-based violence, limited educational opportunities, and pressure to work while maintaining domestic roles. The current exploratory study examines the attitudes of rural Cambodian women ( $n = 48$ ), framed within in context of migration to Thailand, with particular focus on the areas of community ailments, migration, and educational opportunities. Descriptive statistics indicates the persistence of an unhealthy community, with participants acknowledging the problems of domestic violence, crime, drug use, alcohol use, and depression. The data suggest some improvement in Cambodia, though participants nonetheless recognized working in Thailand as a competing option to the rural village life. Education is viewed positively with evidence suggesting that the perceived benefits of education do not outweigh the economic push factors. As incoming aid money increases, data will be helpful in guiding conclusions and informing decision making. Conclusions reflect a nuanced perspective of female participants' agency given their challenging situation, reflecting informed decision making with informal risk analysis.

**Keywords:** *Cambodia, women, rural, migration, education*

### *Introduction*

Cambodia is considered a very poor country with a high poverty rate and low GDP per capita by world standards (World Bank, 1999). Despite growing attention toward gender equality, significant social and economic barriers remain for Cambodian women (UN Women, n.d.). Although women play an important role in Cambodia, they are underrepresented in the economic and political spheres of power in Cambodia at-large (Asia Foundation, 2013). Cambodian women and girls are highly susceptible to gender-based violence (GBV) in spite of the Cambodian government's acknowledgement of the issue and commitment to address GBV in the signing of

the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1981 (LICADHO, 2004; UN Women, 2015). Sexual and physical abuse persists at epidemic levels in Cambodia (LICADHO, 2004). Literacy and education remain at significantly lower levels for women than men in Cambodia (UNESCO, 2015). In particular, rural women in Cambodia are trapped in a cycle of gender-based discrimination, limited access to education, and restricted occupational options locally, partly related to rural Cambodians' dependence on small-scale subsistence agriculture (World Bank, 1999).

This study sought to better understand issues impacting Cambodian women and their families at the local grass-roots level in an exploratory manner. The women and rural communities targeted in this study experience an increase in support from a foreign NGO, sponsoring educational and other programs in the villages. Thus, a more clear understanding of the issues these women face in their communities is needed in order to understand the impact that the resources and support from the NGO will have over time. First, the researchers sought to situate the reality of NGO support in rural Cambodia within the larger discourse on humanitarian and development aid. In addition to the discourse on aid here, they additionally explored literature on gender and social issues in Cambodia.

Aid has an unclear relationship with economic development (Subramanian & Raghuram, 2008). Policy does not necessarily improve the positive relationship between aid and economic development (Easterly, Levine, & Roodman, 2003). Aid has been found to both improve the quality of governance and further reinforce poor governance (Easterly, Levine & Roodman, 2003; Subramanian & Raghuram, 2008). Aid dependence encourages political instability, undermines effective government infrastructure as non-governmental aid-related actors absorb key human capital away from governmental agencies and roles. Further, higher aid has been associated with more corruption in developing contexts (Knack, 2001). Knack stated, “a case-study approach should examine more closely the recent experience of high-aid countries with deteriorating institutional quality” (2001, p. 326).

Development aid can either obfuscate or encourage poor governance (Easterly, Levine, & Roodman, 2003). Cambodia is an aid-dependent developing country (Lay, 2014), and despite the large amounts of international money that flows into Cambodia, little evidence of this aid is apparent in the rural villages included in this study. Over five billion USD in aid to Cambodia has not improved inequality partly

due to lack of political will and poor leadership, and lack of investment in local infrastructure (UNPF, 2015). In order to improve effectiveness in Cambodia, humanitarian response should lay the foundation for long-term development in Cambodia and efforts need to move “from reaction and response to preparedness, prevention, and resilience” (UNPF, 2015, p. 9).

One important pertinent shift in aid discourse has been a general trend toward seeing the importance of supporting local actors, including state, civil society, and NGOs, in management of humanitarian and development aid, rather than outside entities and international actors (Gingerich & Cohen, 2015). Despite decades of acknowledgement of the disconnection between development aid and the needs on the ground in local contexts, particularly the lack of investment in local capacity building, issues persist (Gingerich & Cohen, 2015). “One of the most effective ways to understand the different needs within a population is to collect data by sex and age...” otherwise “...interventions can be misguided, fail or put vulnerable groups at risk” (Mazurana, Benelli, Gupta, & Walker, 2011, p. 3).

Migration is a crucial option for Cambodian women looking to improve their economic opportunities. Unfortunately, in part due to the low status of women in the region, their relegation to the informal economy and their undocumented status if they migrate to neighbors like Thailand, women migrants are highly susceptible to trafficking and other forms of severe exploitation (UN Women, 2013). As the Asian Development Bank (2013) stated, “Women migrant workers are more susceptible to exploitation and abuse” (p. xviii), an issue that was intensified by the global economic crisis of the late 2000s. Women migrants are also more likely than men to accept deteriorating work conditions abroad (Asian Development Bank, 2013).

A significant number of Cambodian women seek work, despite the risks and conditions, in Thailand (UN Women, 2012), and large

numbers have been deported by Thai officials. This number dramatically increased with the Military Junta coup of 2014 and with estimates in the hundreds of thousands of Cambodians deported in 2014 (Finch, 2014; Hodal, 2014; Radio Free Asia, 2014). In 2015, approximately 50,000 more Cambodian migrants were deported through the border crossing at Poipet by Thai authorities (Soenthrith, 2015), which included 19,296 women and 2,277 girls (Mekong Migration Network, 2016). The Poipet border crossing is both a major transit point for tourists and migrant workers between Cambodia and Thailand as well as the closest official border crossing checkpoint to the villages included in this descriptive study. To make matters worse, the number of deportation of Cambodian migrant workers is expected to increase further in 2016 (Crowell, 2016). The dramatic increase in migrant workers back to the region from Thailand has and will continue to put increase economic pressures on the local communities, further intensifying the already difficult economic and social situations for women.

This exploratory study focused on women in a cluster of rural villages in Cambodia along the border of Thailand. These communities, like elsewhere in rural Cambodia, are impoverished and residents must travel to other areas in order to access non-agricultural work. An industrial park, known as the Poipet Oneang Special Economic Zone, contains several foreign and domestic apparel and packaging manufacturers and is located approximately five kilometers north of the villages. Workers at these facilities make approximately \$120 USD per month, far below the gross national income (purchasing power parity) of \$256.67 as indicated by the World Bank (2016). Although the factory wage is higher than the official Cambodian minimum wage of \$50 USD (Economic Institute of Cambodia, 2008), this factory wage is still considered too low to support a family. As Tolson (2014) noted “making ends meet with factory work is near impossible for many” (p. 20). Agricultural work in rural Cambodia,

which rural villages are often limited to, pays even less than factory work and is seasonal, less than \$100 per month on average (Chandararot & Liv, 2013).

### *Literature Review*

In order to more comprehensively understand the situation for women in rural Cambodia, four categories of literature were examined. These categories illuminate key facets of village life for the women as well as inform the research questions for the study. First, gender-specific literature is discussed in order to situate the study within the ongoing discourse on women's issues in Cambodia specifically. The remaining three categories (i.e., community ailments, push/pull migration factors, and opportunity for children) address the three research questions within the broader social context in Cambodia. Further, this study endeavors to fill intersectional gaps in the literature by offering more nuanced knowledge at the micro-level.

### *Women in Cambodia*

Gender inequality continues in Cambodia as women are increasingly responsible for both domestic work and wage earning for the household (Chhoeun, Sok, & Byrne, 2008). Migration in Asia is increasingly feminized, stratified, and diversified (Piper, 2008). The shifts in migration impacting dominant gender roles are still common in Cambodia (Eng, Li, Muslow, & Fischer, 2010; National Institute of Public Health, National Institute of Statistics and ORC Macro, 2006). Southeast Asia has experienced a feminization in migration trends. Cambodian families have experienced transnationally split households, gender role reversal, and relationship conflicts (Piper, 2008). Gendered migration has a powerful influence on children as the most disruptive impact occurs when the mother is absent from traditional family settings (Piper, 2008). However, migration can act as the only option for personal development for women in socially restricted cultures/communities, unwanted

marriages, and abusive relationships.

Domestic violence is a significant issue for women in Cambodia. Women in Cambodia are more likely to experience domestic violence if they have significantly less education than husbands, have more living children, were living in urban areas as children, and experienced domestic violence against their mothers (Yount & Carrera, 2006). Yount and Carrera (2006) found that 18% percent of married women 18-49 experienced domestic violence, and most married women have fewer years of education than their husbands. Women in poverty are more likely to experience domestic violence, and women who experienced domestic violence between parents were more likely to experience domestic violence with their spouses (Yount & Carrera, 2006). Socioeconomic dependence on husbands impacts women's likelihood to passively endure domestic violence (Yount & Carrera, 2006). Additionally, gender inequality and male domination in a society have been found to predict domestic violence (Yodanis, 2004).

Research on domestic violence in Cambodia has profound implications for the children (particularly females) served at NGOs. For instance, targeted efforts to develop women's leadership in Cambodia have shown promise to improve poverty and gender inequality despite persistence of traditional social norms and gender roles of women in rural communities (Chhoeun, Sok, & Byrne, 2008). Women are particularly situated in Cambodia to be key change agents at the local level. However, more assertive women have been found to experience more domestic violence, and less assertive women in Cambodia experience less domestic violence (Eng, Li, Muslow & Fischer, 2010). These findings imply the need for local NGO programs that encourage the leadership roles of women while simultaneously educating men on domestic violence prevention and the importance of empowering women. Identifying key prospective change agent women in the local communities and understanding their perspectives on local social issues may

illuminate mechanisms at the local level that grassroots organizations can use to more effectively implement positive change.

Gender inequality in Cambodia is exacerbated by age, particularly in the workplace, despite clear provisions in the Cambodian Constitution and the Labor Law of 1997 and 2007 prohibiting age and gender discrimination in the workplace (Prake.org, 2016). Kashyap (2015) found that Cambodia's labor inspectorate was ineffective and little oversight was in place to enforce these provisions. Although research has been conducted on workplace discrimination of women in Cambodia (Kashyap 2015; International Labor Organization, 2012), limited research has focused on the combined factors of gender and age. In the garment industry, there is a noted preference for young women to work as sewing machine operators (International Labor Organization, 2012). Beresford, Cucco and Prota (2011) pointed out that "the career of a Southeast Asian garment worker is notoriously short, often starting at around age 15 and ending in the mid- to late twenties" (p. 1). A study conducted by the International Labor Organization (2012) found that one garment factory employed 208 women and only 32 men. Age was also an important feature of the workforce as nearly half were "younger than 24 years old and only 22 percent were over 30 years old" (p. 2). In the local context, age is certainly a factor in women's ability to join the workforce particularly in factory work. During a fieldwork visit to one packaging company's operations, a Thai manager expressed to one of the study's researchers that despite the company's desperate need for more workers, an unemployed local woman who was 40 years old was too old to be employed at the factory. This example illustrates the increased pressure on women to migrate for work as they age as well as their relegation to domestic duties for the family if unable to migrate. Hence, more work is needed to understand this specific demographic of middle-aged and elderly women, especially in regard to how their collective wisdom and



understanding of the issues in the community can inform development and humanitarian aid, improve the lives of migrant laborers, and improve education in rural Cambodia.

### *Community Ailments*

The literature offers some insights into community ailments in Cambodia. Although these issues are linked to economic issues, it is important to understand several of these issues distinctly: domestic violence and health. Domestic violence is prevalent particularly in rural areas of Cambodia (Yount & Carrera, 2006; Eng, Li, Muslow, & Fischer, 2010), perpetuating and exacerbating many of the other related issues rural women face. The Cambodian government acknowledged the widespread issue in 2005 with the passage of the *Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Prevention of Victims* though little has been done at the local level to implement and enforce this policy (LICADHO, 2006).

Alcohol and domestic violence are also closely linked (NCADD, 2015). Alcohol misuse is considered prevalent in Cambodia, particularly among younger and poorer males (Yeung et al., 2015). Alcohol consumption increased by 71% in Cambodia from 1990-2008 and alcohol was attributed to 2.3% of the deaths in Southeast Asia in 2004. Additionally, alcohol has a powerful negative impact on the economics of this region (OECD/WHO, 2012). Alcohol misuse was also noted as increasing among married males and middle aged males (Banta, Addison, Job, Yel, Kheam, & Singh, 2012). Lopez, Mukaire, and Mataya (2015) also found alcohol use prevalent among rural youth. These trends illustrate the challenges rural Cambodia women face in terms of community ailments. In addition to the health dimensions of alcohol, other health issues are also prevalent in rural Cambodia.

A variety of health issues impact rural communities in Cambodia, particularly nutrition, reproductive, and mental health issues. Illness has more of an impact on

household economy in rural populations in Cambodia than crop failure, and medical expenses are the single most important reason rural Cambodians are forced to sell land (Kenjiro, 2005). Poor health is an important factor in impoverishment and Ir et al. (2010) found that over a quarter of rural households has a member with serious illness. To exacerbate poor health, rural Cambodians lack access to healthcare, and many rural villages rely on NGOs to provide healthcare services through NGO health centers (Ui et al., 2010).

Poor nutrition is a key component of poor health among rural Cambodians. Despite economic growth and poverty reduction in Cambodia, the country still has rampant childhood malnutrition which accounts for significant economic burdens on Cambodia (Bagriansky, Champa, Pak, Whitney, & Laillou, 2014). Although rapid economic growth has been documented in recent years in Cambodia as well as a reduction of child stunting due to malnutrition (Zanello, Srinivasan, & Shankar, 2016), the World Food Program (2016) found "32 percent of children under 5 years of age stunted," and "24 percent underweight" (p. 2) with rising inequality and landlessness exacerbating these issues for the rural poor. Inequality and landlessness further limit access to education and health services (Shephard-Johnson, 2012). Malnutrition has an impact on children's cognitive and physical development, and factors such as mother's education, household wealth, toilet facilities, and types of residences were significantly associated with childhood stunted growth and malnutrition (Sunil & Sagna, 2013).

Reproductive health is a significant issue impacting rural Cambodians, particularly women and children. Rural Cambodian women often cannot afford treatment or transportation costs for proper prenatal care and rely on NGOs to provide remote care in the villages (Kieng, 2016). Lopez et al. (2015) found a correlation between alcohol use and risky sexual behavior among rural youth. Further, unmarried migrant Cambodian mothers from Thailand

have been shown to choose unsafe abortions as a preferred birth control method rather than preventive measures, increasing maternal mortality rates in the border region (Hegde, Hoban, & Nevill, 2012). Migrant Cambodian women frequently experience forced or coerced sexual encounters during their time working in Thailand. Often, these women find it difficult to convince sexual partners to use condoms and thus are left to unsafe abortions as their only alternative. Education and access to healthcare for mothers is also a significant reproductive health issue in rural Cambodia. As Sunil and Sagna (2013) noted, prenatal visits during pregnancy, delivery care, breastfeeding, and childhood immunizations are limited among poor rural women in Cambodia also impacting malnutrition and stunting of children. Limited access to reproductive health information and effective healthcare for poor rural Cambodian women exacerbates the poor reproductive health of these women.

Finally, mental health is a significant health issue impacting rural Cambodians. Impoverished Cambodians receive virtually no mental health services (Seponski, Lewis, & Megginson, 2014) with only 35 psychiatrists in the entire country. Poverty and mental health issues are circularly related, and therapeutic interventions are often ineffective at addressing mental health concerns among those living in abject poverty (Seponski et al., 2014). Seponski et al. (2014) argued that poverty alleviation should be a key component of mental health therapy in Cambodia. Despite the relatively recent history of conflict and trauma in Cambodia throughout the Khmer Rouge era, daily stressors such as impoverished daily circumstances have a stronger impact on rural Cambodian's mental health issues than prior conflict-related trauma (Cantor-Graae, Chak, Sunbaunat, Jarl, & Larsson, 2014; Jarl, Cantor-Graae, Chak, Sunbaunat, & Larsson, 2014). Nonetheless, poverty has a major impact on many facets of life for rural Cambodians and thus makes necessary an exploration of the economic situation in rural Cambodia.

### *Push/pull Migration Factors*

Poverty is a pervasive issue in Cambodia, particularly in rural areas (Engvall, Sjoberg, & Sjöholm, 2008). In order to understand poverty-related issues in rural Cambodia, it is important to understand the rapid economic growth that Cambodia has experienced in recent years (World Bank, 2016), and the improvement in many areas, including education, that has occurred (UNESCO, 2015). Poverty reduction has been rapid; however, much of this reduction is semantic, with about three million Cambodians categorized as near-poor, being \$.30 per day away from poverty and remaining vulnerable to a variety of economic and environmental factors (World Bank, 2014). Rural households are more often landless, and involuntary landlessness is rising in Cambodia often due to land grabs, weak legal protection, and distress sales (Engvall et al., 2008). Further, landless rural Cambodians depend more substantially on remittances from migrant worker family members. FitzGerald, Sovannarith, Sopha, Sithen, and Sokphally (2007) found significant variation among poverty trends in rural villages across Cambodia, though several common characteristics remained including growing inequality between poor households and better off households, isolated villages experiencing worse health outcomes, more food insecurity, poorer soil and fewer modern agricultural inputs like effective irrigation, more reliance on wage labor for poorer households, indebtedness, and vulnerability to crisis through events like illness and crop damage. These issues converge to further limit the opportunities of rural Cambodian children particularly those from landless and impoverished households.

### *Opportunities for Children*

Inarguably, education is an essential element to improving the life chances of children and improving quality of life worldwide as exemplified in the global support of the Education for All (EFA) initiative (Chansopheak, 2009), which is the Cambodian

government's acknowledgement of the benefit of education to the nation through the Education Law, and the guarantee of primary education to women and children in Cambodia as a human right (Vo, 2016). Improving educational quality and access is a complex endeavor. Although nationwide reforms in Cambodia since 2001 have seen increases in the net enrollment rate to 97% (Kluttz, 2015), significant barriers remain including high absenteeism, minimally improved quality of primary education, high dropout rates, limited community involvement in local schools, and equitable educational spending across the country (Chansopheak, 2009; Kluttz, 2015, Tan, 2007). Further, rural students face hidden fees and costs despite initiatives to abolish school fees. These costs increase at the secondary level further limiting rural and marginalized children from accessing secondary and tertiary education further exacerbating impoverishment (Vo, 2016). In addition, there is a rural/urban divide in secondary education with less than 30% of rural students attending lower secondary and just over 15% attending upper secondary, compared with much higher rates in Phnom Penh and other urban areas (Kluttz, 2015). As Kluttz acknowledged, child labor in Cambodia is not only a symptom of poverty, but a lack of opportunity and capability formation through education. Rural, poor, and marginalized families continue to face high opportunity costs for education for their children, particularly at the secondary level because of family financial situations (Tan, 2007). Nonetheless, Cambodia has made great strides in education but major hurdles remain particularly for geographically and economically marginalized families and their children.

In order to more comprehensively understand the issues facing rural women in Cambodia, there is a need to acknowledge the complexity of the situation. The purpose of this study is to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the perspectives on rural village women on community ailments, migration push/pull factors, and opportunities.

The following research questions were developed to garner clearer understanding of the perspectives of this unique sample.

### *Research Questions*

*Research Question 1:* How do female participants view the ailments of their local community?

*Research Question 2:* How do female participants view the push/pull factors related to migration?

*Research Question 3:* How do female participants view opportunities for the children of their community?

### *Method*

#### *Research Setting and Participants*

A survey was designed to understand the local situation in a selection of small border villages in Cambodia, near Thailand, and north of the Cambodian city of Poipet. The city of Poipet is located approximately 10 kilometers south of the villages. Poipet also contains a special economic zone, where the city's casinos are located, as well as the official border crossing into Thailand. Although Khmer people are not allowed to gamble in these casinos, they can be employed in them. The rural villages included in the sample are called Orussea village, Toul Pangro village, Oneang village and a village known locally as Handicap village. Collectively, there are several small government schools as well as an NGO school serving these villages. The villages were selected for this sample because these are the villages from which the children and youth served in the NGO reside. Therefore, more understanding of these children and youth's community and households is needed to better contextualize the issues encountered by the NGO. The Thai border, via informal border crossings, is located approximately five kilometers west of the villages, as well. The setting of this study represents a uniquely situated environment, in part due to the proximity of the villages to

these three geographic areas (manufacturers to the north, Poipet and casinos to the south, and the border with Thailand to the west), and their associated push and pull factors.

The populations of these villages were as follows at the time of data collection: Orussea village had approximately 200 households with 500 people, Toul Pangro had approximately 90 households with 250 people, Oneang village had approximately 170 households with 340 people, and Handicap village had approximately 56 households with 130 people. All of the villagers were available during daytime hours in these villages over a three-week period of the survey. Despite a total of 516 households and 1220 people, only 50 individuals (4.1% of the population) were available in the villages during this period. The researchers recognized that this is a very small sample. They also recognized that alongside the haphazard sampling method, their ability to generalize findings is limited. The goal at the outset was not to obtain a specific stratum of participants, rather to sample those participants available. The situation at the time of data collection was such that most of the adults from these villages were away from the village working and many were working in Thailand according to respondents. The sample obtained was uniquely situated to observe and be informed about the conditions of their respective villages.

The total sample consisted of 50 respondents (96.00% female, 4.00% male). Given the small sample size associated with male respondents, alongside the theme of the current research as pertaining to women in the community, the two male participants were cut from the data set resulting in a working sample of  $n = 48$ . The female sample reported an average age of 46.85 ( $SD = 9.31$ ) with a minimum age of 33 and maximum age of 67. The average life expectancy in Cambodia is 67 years for men and 71 years for women (WHO, 2015). Participants reported the number of people that live in the household ( $M = 6.60$ ,  $SD = 3.13$ ), the number of children in the household ( $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ), and the number of people responsible for

earning money in the household ( $M = 2.10$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ). No other demographic related data was collected.

This sample of women represented a distinct group in the border region; the adults remaining in households (during daytime hours) cared for children and handled other domestic duties. The sample offered a unique perspective, particularly due to the women's age, allowing a viewpoint grounded in the past though attentive to the present. Also unique was the timing of this data collection prior to the influx of aid money aiming to impact education, nutrition, and well-being.

### *Data Sources*

Data sources for this study included a survey administered in the aforementioned villages. Findings were further substantiated and triangulated through confirmation by an NGO staff as a form of member checking (Berg, 2009; Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2002). The study survey was designed using 25 four-point Likert scale statements. Survey items were intended to access the voices of the local villagers on several key social issues in the villages prior to qualitative interviewing. The development of survey items was first informed by the issues denoted by the NGO staff and community members in informal qualitative interviews. Although comprehensive qualitative findings are not presented in this study, the researchers developed several thematic categorical findings, which were then used to develop the categories of survey items. As an exploratory study, the items in the survey were intended to further inform the researchers on the extent of the issues in the community previously discussed with NGO staff and community members. Data collection was also intended to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the perspectives of these women as foreign NGO funding increases.

Circumstances did not provide the opportunity to pilot test or otherwise provide validity assessments on the survey items or the



survey as a whole. While survey items have face validity, they lack other more sophisticated and rigorous assessment. Survey items were developed from field observations and open-ended interviews. This development process has provided a starting point for quantitative assessment. It is from this point that the researchers hope to further develop longitudinal tools across each of the three areas to further understand the situation. As items were not combined, the researchers have no measure of internal consistency reliability.

The first subset of statements targeted social ailments in the community. The second subset of statements targeted the push/pull factors related to migration, focusing on the villager's perceptions of Cambodia in general and the local situation for themselves, their children, their friends, and family. This subset of questions also included statements about the treatment of the participants, and their friends and family while working in Thailand. The third subset of statements targeted attitudes toward education and the perceived opportunities for children. Four items assessed perception of a local NGO school. These items were not included as part of this descriptive study. Lastly, a single item assessing the extent to which participants felt they were important parts of the community was asked of participants but was not included in this descriptive study.

### *Variables and Measures*

The 30-item author-generated questionnaire (not including open-ended questions) assessed an array of demographic variables (5 items) as well as an assortment of items meant to capture both opportunities and ailments in the community (25 items). Demographic variables included gender, age, household size, children in the household, and number of income earners in the household. The following groupings of items captured various situational themes: community ailments (5 items), push/pull factors (8 items), education/children's opportunities (7 items). Additional items (5) were not addressed in this manuscript.

*Community Ailments.* Five items asked the participants to reflect on the ailments facing their community. Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed with statements like "Drinking alcohol is not a problem in my community" and "Crime is not a problem in my community". Each item was assessed using a four-point Likert scale (1 = *disagree*, 2 = *partly disagree*, 3 = *partly agree*, and 4 = *agree*). In the case of this set of variables, a lower score indicated the greater severity of the problem while a higher score indicated a lessened severity of the problem.

*Push/Pull factors related to migration.* Four items asked the participants to reflect on their current situation. Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed with statements like "The situation in Cambodia is improving" and "The situation in the village is improving". Each item was assessed using a four-point Likert scale (1 = *disagree*, 2 = *partly disagree*, 3 = *partly agree*, and 4 = *agree*). Additionally, four items asked the participants to reflect on their knowledge and first hand experiences working in Thailand. Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed with statements like "I have always been treated fairly when I work in Thailand" and "My friends and family have always been treated fairly when they work in Thailand." Each item was assessed using a four-point Likert scale (1 = *disagree*, 2 = *partly disagree*, 3 = *partly agree*, and 4 = *agree*).

*Children/Educational Opportunities.* Seven items asked the participants to reflect on the opportunities that their children had, educational experiences, quality of education, and importance of education by gender. Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed with statements like "My children have more opportunities than I did as a child" and "I believe education can improve my child's life." Each item was assessed using a four-point Likert scale (1 = *disagree*, 2 = *partly disagree*, 3 = *partly agree*, and 4 = *agree*).

### *Analysis Strategy*

Descriptive statistics (*M* and *SD*) were

used to gauge sentiments of the three general topics: community ailment, push/pull factors related to migration, and children/educational opportunity. For all items, the larger the value, the stronger the agreement to the statement. Scores ranging from 1 to 2.50 account for general disagreement with the statement, while scores averages from 2.50 to 4 account for general agreement.

Results

Community Ailments

There is the overwhelming consensus that the local community is unhealthy (see Table 1 for means and standard deviations). Averaging across the five social ailment items, responses were in disagreement to statements saying that any particular ailment was not a problem ( $M = 1.44$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ). Unfortunately, these were some of the most extreme scores of the study. The ailment reported as the greatest was domestic violence ( $M = 1.32$ ,  $SD = 0.47$ ). Of note, this item not only had the most extreme (in this case lowest) mean, it also had the smallest standard deviation. This implies that the local situation is unhealthy. Precisely 1/3 ( $n = 16$ ) of the sample reported “disagree” with 2/3 ( $n = 32$ ) of the sample reporting “partial disagreement” that domestic violence is not a problem. In short, participants reported that domestic violence is a relevant concern. Ratings for the remaining community ailments (alcohol, drugs, depression, and crime) all yield means below a 2.00 threshold.

Table 1  
Descriptive Statistics for Community Ailments

Community Ailments	M	SD
1. Drinking alcohol is not a problem in my community.	1.48	0.71
2. Using drugs is not a problem in my community.	1.36	0.48
3. Depression is not a problem in my community.	1.64	0.77
4. Domestic violence is not a problem in my community.	1.32	0.47
5. Crime is not a problem in my community.	1.38	0.67

\* Scores < 2.50 associated with disagreement; scores > 2.50 associated with agreement

Push/pull Factors Related to Migration

The general sentiment regarding the extent to which Cambodia, the economy, and the village are improving, falls toward the agree end of the spectrum. The sentiment is not overwhelmingly positive providing some indication of slow economic improvement (see Table 2 for means and standard deviations). Regarding the working conditions in Thailand (fair pay and treatment for self and family/friends – four items), participants acknowledged a general disagreement with statements of fairness. These results indicate that while an option, Thailand is not ideal. Lastly, when asked to what extent Thailand was the “best option,” participants indicated modest agreement ( $M = 2.38$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ). One might summarize the situation in Cambodia as promising, but that currently Thailand, while lacking in fair treatment, serves as a better alternative.

Table 2  
Descriptive Statistics for Current Economic Situation

Current Economic Situation	M	SD
1. The situation in Cambodia is improving.	2.98	0.59
2. The economy in Cambodia is improving.	2.80	0.49
3. The situation in the village is improving.	2.74	0.69
4. Travelling to Thailand is my best option for work.	2.38	0.73
5. I have always been paid for my work in Thailand.	2.00	0.53
6. My friends/family have always paid for their work in Thailand.	2.06	0.64
7. I have always been treated fairly when I work in Thailand.	2.06	0.89
8. My friends/family have always been treated fairly when they work in Thailand.	2.25	0.73

\* Scores < 2.50 associated with disagreement; scores > 2.50 associated with agreement

Education/Children’s Opportunities

There is the general consensus among participants that education has merit (See Table 3 for means and standard deviation). Participants agreed that education has value, agreeing with the statement that the completion of schooling should happen before entering the workforce ( $M = 3.53$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ) and that education can improve a child’s life ( $M = 3.48$ ,  $SD = 0.50$ ). Similarly, participants agreed that

attending a government school ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ) was beneficial. Participants indicated agreement with the statement that their children had more opportunity than they did ( $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ).

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Educational/Children's Opportunities

Educational / Children's Opportunities	M	SD
1. My children have many opportunities.	2.52	0.81
2. My children have more opportunities that I did as a child.	3.12	0.90
3. I believe education can improve my child's life.	3.48	0.50
4. I believe my child will benefit from attending government school.	3.24	0.74
5. It is important for a child to finish school before going to work	3.53	0.82
6. It is more important for a boy to attend school than a girl.	2.62	1.02
7. It is more important for a girl to attend school than a boy.	2.32	0.77

\* Scores < 2.50 associated with disagreement; scores > 2.50 associated with agreement

Discussion

As has been stated, life in rural Cambodia can be difficult, with the difficulties being worsened given issues of gender inequality, the prevalence of domestic violence, and limited economic opportunity. The purpose of the current research was to ascertain the view of the rural, village women across three particular areas – community ailments, push/pull factors related to migration, and opportunities for children. Also relevant are the circumstances of increased aid and development that aim to improve education, nutrition, and well-being. When considering whether or not to migrate, the sample of rural women offered the perspective of a marginalized and informed voice highlighting an array of factors to be considered. Additionally, the current research sought to ameliorate the disconnection between development aid and the needs of the local populace.

Community Ailments

The data described a difficult situation in the

selected communities. In response to Research Question 1 (How do female participants view the ailments of their local community?), the low average scores indicated the pervasive presence of social ills in the community. The data revealed that 100% of those surveyed endorsed the view that drugs and domestic violence were a problem. Of those surveyed, 96% agreed alcohol was a problem, 90% agreed crime was a problem, and 85% agreed that depression was a problem. There was minimal variability in the responses to social ill items. While not surprising, these findings confirm the challenges that the women in villages face and the changing awareness of these challenges over time. In not one single case did any given participant provide a response indicating agreement with the statement that domestic violence is not a problem. As is illustrated in the literature, domestic violence is linked to husband's control, which likely negatively impacts women's proactivity toward the issue (Eng et al., 2010). The comorbidity of such issues as alcoholism and domestic violence and the ensuing cascade of problems that follow (e.g., mental health issues) only add to the difficulty of rural Cambodian life.

The community ailments addressed in this survey (domestic violence, alcoholism, drug abuse, crime, and depression) are indicative of the social ills discussed in the review of literature - particularly nutrition, reproductive, and mental health issues. While measurement tools and sampling issues raise questions of generalizability, the looming question of how to remove these ills is a problem. At times, given the lack of congruence between aid and actual development, attention is needed on the continued verification of the existence and extent of the problem as well as the impact of aid (citeNGO Policy Briefing Paper No. 3, March 2001). Further, acknowledging the dynamic nature of these social ills in a rapidly changing society will enhance aid effectiveness and fidelity.

It is reasonable to ask how the unique

sample assessed might have provided a perspective different from other groups, for example, elderly males, youth, or working individuals. While differences in perspective are currently unknown, a point of comparison to our female sample would provide a more encompassing view of the situation. Our more nuanced view of the at-home female villages can and should be added to the broader perspective incorporating views from varying demographics.

### *Push/Pull Factors Related to Migration*

In response to Research Question 2 (How do female participants view the push/pull factors related to migration? ), participant responses helped the researchers to understand the relative position rural Cambodia occupies in comparison to Thailand. Findings revealed that the perceived improvements in Cambodia as a whole are not powerful enough to outweigh the perceptions of some that Thailand despite the issues of vulnerability and exploitation that these women and their friends and families face still represents the most realistic economic opportunity for people in the village. Roughly 33% of respondents agreed that traveling to Thailand was their best option for work.

Examining attitudes toward the changing situation of Cambodia, roughly 80% agreed that the situation in Cambodia is improving, 80% agreed that the economy in Cambodia is improving, while 70% agreed that the situation in the village is improving. Such data can be looked at in multiple ways. Might the situation have been so dire that any change is improvement? Might there be genuine improvement, and if so, are all benefiting? While the phrasing of the survey items attend to changes in the current situation (e.g., language of “improve”), the items do not allow a direct assessment of the economic conditions. Survey items that tap into the more tangible - access to clean water, food, gas, a stable income, and financial savings offer more concrete realities regarding the push and pull factors related to migration to Thailand. Conversely, the

survey items in the current research access the changing nature of village life.

Responses did not favor a positive working environment in Thailand. Approximately 90% of those surveyed disagreed that they had always been paid while working in Thailand while 80% disagreed that their friends and family had always been paid. Similarly 70% disagreed that they had been treated fairly while 70% disagreed that friends and family had been treated fairly. These women are not ignorant of the difficulties that migrant workers face, and many even have first-hand, if not indirect, experience of migrant Cambodian workers being treated unfairly. However, when weighing the options of staying in the village, migrating within Cambodia, or migrating to Thailand, those villagers who traveled took the calculated risk of migrating to Thailand.

The circumstances in Cambodia represent a push factor, though moderate given participant responses, and the circumstances in Thailand a pull factor, also moderate. Therefore, the choice is not so blatant and obvious as is often portrayed. Rather, these villagers are conscientious of a variety of variables that inform the decision to migrate.

### *Opportunity for Children*

Education was viewed as important with participants clearly seeing the benefits of education to improve a child's life and the need to put school before work. In response to Research Question 3 (How do female participants view the opportunities for the children of their community?), participant responses were some of the most promising across the survey. Regarding statements of opportunity, 60% of respondents agreed that their children had opportunity; 90% agreed that their children had more opportunity than they did, while 80% agreed that their child would benefit from attending the government school. All respondents agreed that education could improve their children's lives while 90% agree that it was important for children to finish



school before going to work. Such responses are promising given the specific rural context in which students face a multitude of barriers including issues with transportation, hidden fees/costs, and the alternative of child labor. The provision of more and better education to rural areas, whether by government schools or by NGO programs, likely improves the overall perception that children have more opportunity in contemporary Cambodia. Older adults lived through the rule of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, a legacy that likely influences their understanding of improving opportunity in Cambodia.

The middle-of-the-road attitude about the importance of school for girls over boys (and boys over girls) may point toward a potential shift in attitudes regarding gender. Approximately 64% agreed that education was more important for a boy than for a girl. Despite the traditional gender roles common in Cambodia, further work needs to be done to understand how attitudes toward these roles are changing, how these roles relate to education, work, and migration, and how social issues relate to gender roles. Gender roles are likely seeing some transformation due to Cambodian women migrating for work and becoming key wage-earners for their families. Similarly, female migrants also bring back cultural elements from their work experiences from Thailand and elsewhere, which will inevitably impact the local village culture. Further exploration of these changes is needed.

In sum, education, for children as well as aging adults, is one essential element necessary to improve the local situation. However, education is not the sole solution. Certainly, the perspectives of this study's unique demographic should be included and engaged to inform development efforts regarding education. Education-related aid can and should have a specific focus and linkage to this marginalized group of rural women. The individuals from this sample should also be seen as a resource for informing humanitarian work of NGOs and development work of government agencies.

Children and youth voices in these communities need to be heard in order to take into account the pressures to leave school and migrate for work.

Education should be part of a comprehensive multi-pronged approach that addresses the economic situation, gender disparities, migration issues, and generational issues facing Cambodians at the local level, through collaboration with local Cambodians. Without a comprehensive approach, education will continue to be undermined by economic realities, and survival will take a front seat to long-term educational aspirations.

### *Limitations*

While data from the current descriptive study provide insight into the situation of the women sampled in the rural villages surrounding the Cambodian city of Poipet, the research has important limitations. Due to the sampling circumstances, only those individuals at home during the working hours were accessed. A larger sample consisting of women (and men) across varying circumstances would not only have increased the overall sample size but would have provided a more diverse array of viewpoints on the matters of social ailments, the economic situation, and opportunities for children. It is reasonable to imagine differing views depending on employment status, occupation, marital status, and educational level. Similarly, a more nuanced look at the sample could have been accessed via a greater number of items assessing basic demographic information. Although the findings do not directly inform humanitarian aid, the current research attempts to give voice to a group that should be heard distinctly within the discourse on development.

It is important to keep in mind that this sample accounts for viewpoints for a particularly small region in Cambodia. As was previously outlined, this region represents a uniquely situated environment given the proximity of the villages to three geographic

areas (manufacturers to the north, Poipet and casinos to the south, and the border with Thailand to the west). One should be somewhat cautious in generalizing the findings obtained across contrasting regions.

The original focus of the research was to examine the collective view of rural villagers in Cambodia. Given the make-up of the sample, the focus shifted more specifically to rural village women. A worthwhile parallel would be the view of rural village men in Cambodia. Each of the issues examined (social ailments, economic situation, and opportunities for children) would be furthered by the ability to compare and contrast the views of female and male participants.

A further limitation of the study has to do with the questionnaire that was used to assess participants. While the questionnaire clearly addressed the objectives of importance, the author-generated items and questionnaire as a whole did not go through any validation procedures beyond that of meeting standards of face validity. While this does not directly impact the findings, there are limitations associated with combining items to form summary scores. Additionally, the Likert scale respondents used was a four-point scale. A scale using more point (e.g., a seven-point scale) would have allotted for greater variability in responses and thus may have permitted greater fidelity in participant viewpoints.

### *Conclusion*

The situation in rural villages in Cambodia remains difficult, despite slow and modest improvement. Cambodians are faced with tough decisions in order to survive and must weigh a variety of options using the social networks and information to which they have access. Women in this study were not oblivious to the challenges migrants face if they traveled to Thailand to work. However, in comparison to the local situation, migration continues to represent a method for leveraging potential opportunities despite being problematic.

Women face gender-specific issues in the village but also embody a wealth of collective knowledge and wisdom about the changing situation over time. In order to improve the local situation and encourage local development, aid and education must engage these women as stakeholders and change agents to make efforts impactful and sustainable. Such engagement will undoubtedly provide a more nuanced view of the situation on the ground, delegitimizing efforts of victim blaming, and, in turn, highlighting the idea that the villagers engage in an informed decision-making process in which they are forced to make the best out of a bad situation.

The findings of this study have implications for improving the local situation, an endeavor that must include local women across the age spectrum and value their unique perspectives of local issues. Development projects in rural Cambodia should prioritize these women as potential key change agents and advisors. Furthermore, research on youth perceptions of the issues discussed in this study is also necessary to fully understand community issues. Including youth perspectives into the body of research will add further generational viewpoints on these issues, and may allow for comparison with the finding of this study. Finally, as the findings of this study imply, informal migration from Cambodia to Thailand cannot be curbed effectively until the local situation is improved, and the local situation cannot be improved without collaboration between the Cambodian government, non-governmental organizations, and most importantly, the local people.

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