HOW WOMEN’S ROLES IN LOCAL POLITICS ARE UNDERSTOOD AT THE COMMUNE LEVEL: BOEUNG PREAH COMMUNE, CAMBODIA

By

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Dedicated to My Parents

For their unconditional love and support;

To My Husband and My Son for being my greatest motivation
ABSTRACT

Promoting women’s political participation aims to achieve gender equality and bring justice to women whose rights and choices have been constrained. Women all around the world have remained subordinated in politics, and this is still true today, from the local to the global level (Whitworth, 1994). For some women who participate in public political activities, their ability to gain leadership or primary positions has been restricted by many factors. Gender roles and gender stereotypes shape formal political structures in the same way that these factors shape a family’s structure (Lilja, 2008).

This qualitative study therefore, contributes to better understanding local perspectives on the roles of women in Cambodia’s local politics, either as voters or politicians in order to address gender inequality. This study will be an input for developing strategies which aim at engaging local people in gender equality programs which promote women’s participation in politics, and it will also contribute to the study of gender and politics in Cambodia. Based on Beoung Preah commune, Cambodia, this study drew on feminist epistemology and qualitative methodology. It involved the use of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with community members, political party representatives, local officials and other relevant local actors in Beoung Preah commune.

This study explores local understandings of women’s political opportunities and political representation, in which they believe to make change in their community. This discusses the reasons behind women’s underrepresentation in local politics and suggests steps forward, grounded in local participants’ knowledge. It investigated local discourses on gender stereotypes such as how research participants conceptualize femininities and masculinities constituting the ideal attributes of political leaders. This is important for understanding women and men’s political opportunities and constraints. The study also explored different local perspectives on women’s political representation, expectations, emerging outcomes and socio-economic and political challenges, which make gender inequality a more complicated issue to address in the commune context.

While achieving gender parity is in progress, the query of whether gender equality can be simply achieved right after women’s inclusion in local politics needs to be further investigated.
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<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCWC</td>
<td>Commune Committee for Women and Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMDGs</td>
<td>Cambodia Millennium Development Goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNRP</td>
<td>Cambodia National Rescue Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPP</td>
<td>Cambodian People Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPWP</td>
<td>Committee to Promote Women in Politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D&amp;D</td>
<td>Decentralization and Deconcentration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAD</td>
<td>Gender and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GADC</td>
<td>Gender and Development for Cambodia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDGs</td>
<td>Millennium Development Goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOP</td>
<td>Ministry of Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCDD</td>
<td>National Committee for Sub-National Democratic Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEC</td>
<td>National Election Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIS</td>
<td>National Institution of Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NZAID</td>
<td>New Zealand Agency for International Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WAD</td>
<td>Women and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WID</td>
<td>Women in Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOW</td>
<td>Women for Women project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WPAN</td>
<td>Women Political Activists Network</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

In Development Studies, gender equality is globally considered central to development policies and process. Within a mainstream gender discourse, enhancing women’s status and women’s empowerment is a key area to achieve gender equality as women have been historically marginalised and subordinated in many sectors of development (Desai & Potter, 2014). Political spaces are a significant means for women to access and influence development policies which affect them. Increasing women’s representation in politics has been a priority in development agenda (Rai, 2014). The assumptions of women’s representation, which claim that women’s presence in politics can formulate and articulate women’s interests, can be challenged. However, increasing women’s numbers in political positions is believed to be influential in changing gender stereotypes in public life (Rai, 2014).

The United Nations has been active in supporting women’s policy issues and promoting women’s participation in politics (Rai, 2014). Cambodia has aligned its development agenda with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which was initiated by the United Nations (UN) in 2005. This MDGs initiative was modified to Cambodia Millennium Development Goals (CMDGs) to suit the country context (Ministy of Planning, 2011). The MDGs (2005-2015), as well as the CMDGs (2005-2015), has strongly urged for national and global actions on a number of development priorities, one of which is to bring gender equality in all aspects of development. From the CMDGs progress report 2011 (Ministy of Planning, 2011), it shows that Cambodia has made some improvements on CMDG#3 (the third goal) by increasing the number of female political representatives and narrowing down the gender gaps in the education and employment sectors, although the weakness and challenges still remain.

Cambodia’s constitution promotes equal rights and opportunities for men and women from all ages, nationalities and ethnic groups, but the gender inequality is still there (Öjendal & Kim, 2014). The limited number of women representatives in the national assembly, sub-national institutions and commune office has been a concern for Cambodia’s government. In order to address gender inequality at this decision making
level, core national policies such as the Rectangular Strategies (phase I, II, III), Organic Law, and National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP and NSDP updates) all ensure women’s inclusion and gender-sensitive action plans (Ministry of Planning, 2011; Öjendal & Kim, 2014). Through the lens of Women in Development (WID) approach, as long as there are gender-sensitive legislations, policies and women’s inclusion, achieving gender equality is realistic. Though, Gender and Development (GAD) approach has shown that, legislations alone are not adequate solutions, and practitioners need to focus on changing gender relations starting from the family level.

This study, therefore, aims to contribute to understanding the factors which influence political participation at the local level, especially for women. Qualitative research was conducted with local participants in Boeung Preah commune, a local community in Cambodia, to explore local understandings of women’s political opportunities and political representation. This research also intended to uncover the reasons behind women’s underrepresentation in local politics and local government, and suggests steps forward, grounded in local participants' knowledge.

This first chapter provides the foundations for the whole research thesis. It begins with the research location by presenting some relevant facts in an attempt to provide some socio-economic and political context of Cambodia, and Beoung Preah commune, Prey Veng province. Then, the research rationale discusses how the research topic was selected and why my research questions are significant to contribute to promoting women’s participation in politics. Next, it briefly provides a summary of my methods of data collection and analysis as well as my positionality. Finally, it outlines the thesis structure which discusses how my research objectives and questions are addressed.

1.2 Introducing the research location

Cambodia is located in Southeast Asia, neighbouring the gulf of Thailand, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam, with approximately 15 million people. The country’s administration is divided into provinces and municipalities (*krong*). Provinces and municipalities are divided into districts and sections (*khan*) respectively. Communes (*khum*)/quarters (*sangkat*) are sub-divisions of each district/section, and villages (*phum*) are the lowest level of local government (UN, 2004a). Beoung Preah commune is in Ba Phnum district.
which is a sub-division of Prey Veng province, located in the south-eastern part of Cambodia, about 90 kilometres away from the capital city, Phnom Penh (Image 1&2).

**Image 1: Map of Cambodia**

*Source:* Adapted by author from UN (2004b)
A brief context of Cambodia’s politics

Throughout the past decades of history, Cambodia has experienced changes of political systems which have led to Cambodia’s current development status. In the past, Cambodia maintained an authoritarian monarchy before becoming a French protectorate in the 18th century (Chandler, 1992). One of the factors influencing the Cambodian King to create a French protectorate in the 18th century was to secure Cambodia’s territorial integrity against invasion from the neighboring countries. During the French colonial rule (1941-1953), administrative and political reforms brought some significant change, but also caused controversies which led to nationalist movements against the colonial rule during the 1940s. One of the reasons was that the French reforms were considered as deteriorating Cambodia’s traditional learning and civilization (Chandler, 1992).

Although democratic elections were proposed by the French, politics in the form of political parties started to be popular when the late King Norodom Sihanouk successfully claimed for Cambodia’s independence from the French in November 1953, and joint politics in 1955 (Baaz & Lilja, 2014; Chandler, 1992). Unfortunately, the country was stabilised for only 15 years under the late King Sihanouk’s political leadership. In the
mid-1960s, the late King Sihanouk’s popularity declined for a number of reasons and internal conflicts started to raise concerns (Baaz & Lilja, 2014). The political instability led to a coup d’état against the late King Sihanouk in 1970s by Lon Nol, his political opponent, and Cambodia was changed from a Kingdom to a Republic. With the influence of international relations and the formation of communist groups, the republic of Cambodia declined in 1975 and the country fell into the most horrific radical revolution in Cambodia’s history, the Khmer rouge regime or so called ‘Cambodian genocide’ (1975-1979) (Baaz & Lilja, 2014). The Khmer rouge regime ended in 1979 with support from Vietnam, but there was still an aftermath of civil war which came to an end after the conflicting parties signed the Paris Peace Agreement in 1991. The country sought its first free election in 1993 with support from the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) (UN, 2004a).

In many reports, the Cambodian government has been acknowledged for its effort in national reconstruction processes after the Khmer rouge regime and two decades of ongoing internal conflicts (1980s-1990s). Based on its constitution, Cambodia is self-declared as a democratic country, but according to recent studies, the political culture of Cambodia actually fits in the discourse of hybrid democracy, a mix of authoritarian and democratic government systems. Among other reasons, Cambodia is categorised as so, because of the limited freedom of political participation which is an important indicator of a democratic society (Baaz & Lilja, 2014). In addition, within a full democratic system, citizens look into the politics of issues (which means that the ideology of political parties are more important than the persons representing), but within the hybrid democratic system, citizens look into the politics of presence (which means that the identities of the political candidates matter the most) (Baaz & Lilja, 2014; Lilja, 2008). Cambodia’s current political culture has been situated within local discourses of patron-client relationship in which voters and politicians negotiate personal deals and promises as an exchange for voters’ loyalty toward a political party, and vice versa (Baaz & Lilja, 2014). Therefore, the personal qualities of political candidates can be beyond the intrinsic ability to perform their jobs, which is the ability to maintain and protect the political constituency (Baaz & Lilja, 2014). Such conceptualisation, therefore, should benefit the discussion of why women representatives are important for politics.
Image 3 below shows a pre-election rally, in which the portrait of the Cambodian People Party’s leaders was used in the party’s slogan, portraying the importance of political leaders’ identities.

Image 3: A parade during the political campaign in Cambodia (2013)

Source: Adapted by Sophea Tieng (2013)

Socio- economics

Cambodia is categorised as a developing country with low income levels, but the poverty line decreased from 34% in 2008 to 17.7% in 2012, which is a positive indicator for the country’s economic development. Cambodia has enjoyed a fast growth rate with its free market economy since 1998 (post-conflict years). In 2008 and 2009, Cambodia was hit by the global financial crisis (World Bank, 2016).

The country’s economy has mainly relied on agriculture, the garment industry and services within the tourism industry. It is reported that the export-oriented garment industry (apparels and shoes) has provided jobs for 90% of the women labour force, mostly from rural provinces (Asian Development Bank, 2015). This is one of the reasons for migration from rural provinces to Phnom Penh city or employment zones. Employment issues and huge growth in migration have worried Cambodia’s policy makers. Cross-border migration to the Republic of Korea, Thailand, Malaysia and other countries is increasing as a result of domestic employment shortages, relatively lower
wages, and limited access to land for agricultural production (Maltoni, 2006; Tunon & Rim, 2013). The migration trends from Tunon & Rim (2013) shows that there has been an increase in women’s cross-border migration. These women are highly demanded to work as domestic and factory workers.

In Beoung Preah commune, migration has become a local issue as it will be shown in the findings chapters. Up until 2010, 97% of Beoung Preah’s population had remained farmers, though around 16% of them migrated for jobs and most of them were women. Only 7.25% of Beoung Preah commune’s population worked for the local government and public administration, and 11.34% of them were employed by the private sector, according to the online commune database provided by National Committee for Sub-National Democratic Development (2010). In Ba Phnum district, civil society such as non-governmental organizations and other development partners have been active in programs such as gender equality, livelihoods, education and health care especially for women, children and the poor. These not only provide some employment opportunities for local people but have also engaged local government to pay more attention on gender equality and women’s issues (Interviews, 2015).

### 1.3 Research rationale and research questions

One reason for conducting this study is to contribute to the government and civil society’s efforts in eliminating gender inequality in Cambodia. Based on the country’s development agenda, which includes CMDGs, National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) and the country’s commitments to join global efforts, achieving gender equality has been one of the development priorities for Cambodia (Ministry of Planning, 2011). Not only is gender inequality a problem in itself, but it is also considered as one of the major cross-cutting issues which hinder development process, for example, in political participation. It has been argued that equal political representation and gender justice are important for making a stable and democratic country (Lilja, 2008).

Gender norms and gender stereotypes have been deeply rooted in Cambodian society, and these have influenced and restricted women’s choices of economic, social and political roles. Women in Cambodia are still under-represented in politics even though political structures and laws are apparently gender neutral (Öjendal & Kim, 2014). This is because social norms and stereotypes are very strong in confining the extent to which women can achieve their goals and contribute to their society. Thus, gender roles make Cambodian
women less visible in public administration and politics in many ways. At the local level, on top of the gender disparity in the political office, it is noticed that most women who are already in the positions of power remain in the secondary roles (COMFREL, 2012). Therefore, while more women have been included in the political structure, questions concerning women’s political representation and the outcomes of this inclusion are still on-going.

My personal experiences also contribute to identifying my research problem. Before my study commenced, I had worked with Gender and Development for Cambodia (GADC), where I was involved in a project called “WOW”, established by Committee to Promote Women in Politics (CPWP). There, I worked with Women Political Activists Network (WPAN). WPAN consisted of a group of local women from different age groups who wished to become local politicians or become involved in any commune work (CPWP, 2012). The organisation’s achievements in capacity building and advocacy activities with national, district and commune leaders were recognised. There seemed to be a green light from the local political gatekeepers that women were strongly encouraged to stand for local political candidacy. However, not many women whom the organisations had trained were elected to primary positions in the commune council after the commune/sangkat election in 2012. The proportion of women in each commune council of the project targets is less than 20% (NEC, 2012). According to the commune/sangkat election result as shown in table 1, the number of women occupying positions in the commune council remains limited.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Commune</th>
<th>No. Councils</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Roles of women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Beoung Preah</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Commune council member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Cheung Pnum</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Commune council member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Chheu Kach</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Commune council member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Reak Chey</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Commune council member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Roung Damrei</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Commune council member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Sdau Kaong</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Commune council member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Speu Ka</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Commune council member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Speu Kha</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Commune council member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Theay</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Commune council member</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Adapted by author from NEC (2012)
On average, women have occupied less than 20% of commune political space in Ba Phnum district, and none of them were elected as the commune chief or deputy commune chief which are the more influential roles in the commune’s organisational structure illustrated by Ly (2015). In Beoung Preah commune, some women who were elected also gave up the positions (Interviews, 2015). In this commune, women councillors were assigned to leading the Commune Committee for Women and Children and assisting civic registration and conflict resolution (Interviews, 2015).

I am interested in exploring the extent to which local people have known about women’s roles in local politics or want to improve the status of women. In some literature, gender norms and stereotypes are important factors which limit women’s political opportunities, while intersectionality issues such as economic power and patron-client relations are also noticed (Lilja, 2008; Öjendal & Kim, 2014). The lack of gender equity policies at the local level has also discouraged women to join politics (Chhoeun, Sok, & Byrne, 2008). However, there has been no research conducted in the location of this thesis, regarding these issues yet.

Therefore, the main question my research project seeks to address is how the roles of women in local politics are understood by local people, local leaders and other local actors. With this objective, the research then aimed to answer four questions below:

1. What do local people (both men and women) think about the roles of women in local politics in their commune?
2. What are the factors influencing women’s political opportunities? What kinds of support do women need?
3. What are the implications of the inclusion of women in local political spaces?
4. How does having women in local leadership positions change (or not) gender relations and gender inequalities at the local and everyday level according to local actors (including leaders, community members etc.)?

This research is significant in that it hopes to contribute to a better understanding of local perspectives on the roles of women in local politics, how women have been empowered in the political sphere, and how the current practices could be improved. Within this research process, participants shared their personal views and experiences, and this knowledge can contribute to further studies on women in politics as well as discussions which might benefit the community. This research has also empowered participants who
started to have confidence to speak and to be aware of the importance of their knowledge in my research.

1.4 Epistemology

This research adopts a qualitative methodology to meet the above objectives and answer the questions of ‘what’, ‘why’ and ‘how’.

I decided to use a qualitative research design based on my epistemological standpoints as a social constructivist, or specifically, a feminist. Both social constructivist (Creswell, 2014) and feminist epistemologies understand knowledge as subjective and partial because knowledge depends on the way it is constructed and who constructs it (Gregory et al., 2009; Sultana, 2007). This means that there is no universal knowledge that can explain all life settings. Hence, there are some contexts that statistics cannot provide enough explanation for. There can be more than one answer, and many positions and perspectives

Qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions are appropriate tools to inquire subjective information according to Willis (2006) and Crang and Cook (2007). At the core of my research, I am trying to understand the knowledge and experiences of local people in the commune I visited, as these people are the ones who know best the context of their lives and make decisions accordingly. Plus, it helps to understand the gender and political issues on the ground, how the problems happen and what challenges and solutions there are. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were appropriate to accomplish my objectives in accordance with my philosophical worldview (Creswell, 2014). Instead of focusing on statistical findings which might enable generalisations to an extent, I tend to focus on the details and complexities of my participants’ views.

The semi-structured interviews and focus groups allowed for flexibility of discussion (Steward-Withers et al., 2014). Therefore, sometimes, there were slight changes in the pattern of questions asked. The interviews and focus group facilitations were simple and relaxed, giving my participants and me a chance to develop a good understanding and open conversation. My analysis was grounded in my participants’ points of view by using quotes at length but I also discussed most of the findings whilst reflecting on feminist
literature. In addition, I was able to make some notes on my observations and any unprecedented events throughout my fieldwork to provide extra inputs for analysis.

The study topic was selected not only because of its academic significance, but it was also inspired by my personal experiences. Considering my background in gender equality advocacy and my identification as a feminist, I wish to see every individual in my country and other places enjoy their lives with equal treatment, respect and care. Because the term ‘women’ is found in the title, I do not mean to overemphasise the roles of women and disregard the roles of men or categorise them. This is because in my country context, I believe that women have not received fair treatment in most aspects of their lives. I think studying the roles of women is important to raise awareness of women’s achievements and enable women to be empowered. While women should get more attention because of their historical disadvantages, interdependence and collaboration between all genders should also be promoted. However, my interest in gender equality is not ended when women have 50 per cent share of resources, but it is interesting to explore the extent to which the gendered outcomes have satisfied all community members.

1.5 Conclusion and thesis structure

There are several important points underpinning my thesis. It is clear from this chapter that this study aims to understand the extent to which local people are aware of women’s roles in local politics and what they think can be improved in order to enhance the status of women and gender equality.

Overall, this chapter provides the overview of the research which partly contributes to the rest of the discussion throughout the thesis. Next, chapter 2 provides theoretical discussion on feminist perspectives on gender equality for analysing my research findings. Feminist theories and the knowledge of gender and development approaches are used extensively in my research discussion. Chapter 3 provides a review of the context in which the research project was situated. It discusses Cambodia’s historical and political context in relation to gender. Chapter 4 discusses how the research was conducted, starting with a discussion on the methodological framework, fieldwork preparation, fieldwork process, and after-fieldwork assignments. In addition, it reflects upon the research process and approach to analysis. Chapter 5 discusses how women’s political opportunities are accessible or constrained in Beoung Preah commune. The main issues the chapter focuses on include local perspectives on gender roles, gender discourses,
femininity and masculinity and other social, economic and political factors which influence women’s decisions to join politics (or not). This chapter aims to answer two research questions: (1) what do local people think about the roles of women in local politics? and (2) what are the factors influencing women’s political opportunities and what kind of support do women need? Chapter 6 discusses local perspectives on women’s roles in local politics by focusing on the political representation of women in the commune council. It centres on how women’s presence in decision making positions contributes to commune development. Within this chapter, two questions will be answered: (1) what are the implications of the inclusion of women in local political spaces? (2) How does having women in local leadership positions change (or not) gender relations and gender inequalities at the local and everyday level? Finally, chapter 7 which is the conclusion chapter recaps the main findings and discussion of the research; discusses the research implications, and suggests for further research on gender and politics in Cambodia.
CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK IN WOMEN AND POLITICS

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to present the theoretical perspectives and concepts which will inform my findings and analysis chapters providing a lens for my study, but also adding extra nuance to my arguments.

First, I discuss several feminist key theories which link to development and women in politics. These theories are used as the up-front explanation to assist my efforts to understand the current gender gaps in politics in Cambodia. As this section will explain, feminism has enlightened debates on how the world can work towards advancing the status of women. Various perspectives on how gender has affected world politics will be discussed in this section. The knowledge of feminist theories helps to reflect why there are still gender gaps in the local government in Cambodia despite having political will in place. Overall, this chapter discusses feminist perspectives on the cause of women’s subordination, gender equality, masculinities and femininity, Women in Development and Gender and Development approaches, which will be used as an analytical lens in this study.

2.2 Theoretical perspectives on gender in politics

2.2.1 Feminist theories, development and women in politics

Feminism is a significant theory for social movements for gender equality and women’s rights, and it was brought into development debates in mid-1970s, particularly in academic disciplines (Maynard, 1995). Each feminist perspective explains the main cause of women’s subordination in politics in different ways and informs specific strategies to advance women’s status (Razavi & Miller, 1995; Tickner, 2008). Though, Maynard (1995) contends that categorising feminism is problematic because feminist thinking continues to develop by time and context and each labelled feminism has become involved in dealing with positional issues which can be found in other feminist perspectives.

To start with, it is suggested that in many parts of the world, men remain the dominant actors in world politics especially high politics (state, security, war and peace), while
women’s roles are seen as secondary (Whitworth, 1994). Now, I discuss different understandings of gender inequality, development and women’s roles in politics through several feminist lenses.

Liberal feminists believe that women’s underrepresentation in politics has derived from social norms which restrict women’s access to education, employment and institutions. Plus, the conventional gender division of labour and the lack of equitable laws do not encourage women to join politics (Whitworth, 1994). Hence, liberal feminists aim to overcome women’s subordination by promoting equal rights and opportunities for men and women, through its advocacy for the changes of legislations and social policy (Maynard, 1995). On the positive side, it is acknowledged that liberal feminism has brought a significant change for women in politics; from having the right to vote (Connelly et al., 2000) to having political positions (Whitworth, 1994). Therefore, changing laws and social policy was seen effective to equate women with men in the public sphere (Whitworth, 1994).

In line with liberal feminism, Women in Development (WID) is an influential approach to development, adopted in the 1970s to advance women’s decision making in development policy (Kardam, 1994; Young, 2008). This initiative was inspired by two factors: women’s movements for equal rights and status (especially in employment in the northern countries during 1970s) and the emergence of research on women’s roles in economic development in third-world countries. The WID approach restructures development programs by challenging the stereotypes and conventional sexual division of labour in order to promote equity for women in all sectors and boost economic efficiency (Razavi & Miller, 1995).

However, there are a number of critiques to liberal feminism and the idea of WID (Whitworth, 1994). Unlike liberal feminism which emphasises equal capabilities, radical feminist analysis emphasises the criticism of patriarchal systems. Radical feminists argue that women could bring different consequences to world politics if women were leaders (Whitworth, 1994). Based on this perspective, the concepts of masculinities and femininities are important for achieving gender equality in politics. Masculinities can be referred to typical social and physical characteristics of men which are constructed and reinforced by a society within a specific timeframe and place, and is often discussed in relation to femininities; the characteristics applied to women (Connell, 1998).
Femininities and masculinities play an important role in shaping the world’s political arenas including international relations, war and peace (Whitworth, 1994). For example, wars are claimed to be masculine behaviour while the act of peace or rejecting wars are claimed to be feminine behaviour. Therefore, it is argued that, if women remained subordinated in political structures and had no influence on decision making in international politics, women would only join men’s ideologies including the act of wars (Whitworth, 1994). Based on this example, the women’s inclusion in WID approach does not necessarily have significant implications on development and politics.

WID is also criticised for inadequately addressing gender inequality at its roots. In the WID approach, overcoming women’s subordination relies upon the extent to which women can be productive and competitive in the market place regardless of the struggles women might face behind the scenes (Razavi & Miller, 1995). The fact that women may be occupied by a heavy reproductive workload at home is not necessarily recognised, while such a burden diversely affects women’s productivity at work and, hence, legitimises unequal resource and power allocation (Razavi & Miller, 1995).

Marxist feminism explains the cause of women’s subordination as a result of modernisation. Changing from a traditional economic system to a modernised economic system created class and unequal power relations between men and women in the first place. This is because women’s traditional roles had very little to do with resource management and markets, a channel for accessing economic power when modernised economic system was formed. Hence, women who were economically dependent would remain subordinated to men who could provide them economic security, and men who were in the lower class would remain subordinated to men and women from higher classes (Razavi & Miller, 1995). This is how women started to be inferior in many aspects of their society including political power.

A little bit different from Marxist feminism, socialist feminism is seen as being concerned with both restructuring economic structure and gender relations at the same time in order to achieve gender equality (Maynard, 1995). Inspired by socialist feminists, the Gender and Development (GAD) approach originated in mid-1970s has come to complement WID in addressing gender inequality in a society and development world. Using similar terms as in WID, GAD approach promotes gender equality, gender equity and women’s empowerment but it is implemented in different ways (Razavi & Miller, 1995). Gender
equality can be defined as the equal treatment, including the provision of rights, services access and opportunities, for men and women regardless of their gender differences (United Nations Population Fund, 2014). Gender equality may also mean that individuals’ suitability to perform certain roles should not be discriminated based on their gender (i.e. being a male or a female). Gender equity and women’s empowerment are measures and strategies to compensate the disadvantaged groups, particularly women, allowing them to exercise their rights and opportunities (United Nations Population Fund, 2014). One difference between GAD and WID is that the former also values reproductive roles so that resources and power should not be only allocated based on economic productivity (Razavi & Miller, 1995; Young, 2008). GAD also nuances WID approaches by promoting ‘togetherness’ and ‘connectedness’ between men and women in an attempt to address inequality and subordination. In other words, in GAD discourses, it is encouraged to discuss multiple subjects in gender equality, not just women alone (Razavi & Miller, 1995). However, GAD is seen lacking analysis on the issues of class and race which challenge the assumptions that women and men are homogenous, having the same experience or benefiting the same development initiatives by dominant western discourse. Hence, intersectionality also became a key concept within feminist thinking (White, 2006).

2.2.2 Intersectionality

Intersectionality refers to the multiple strands of inequality a particular group of people might experience (Walby et al., 2012). Learning from the feminist critiques above, there seems to be a convergence to focus on intersectionality issues such as class, race, and social hierarchy which overarch women’s subordination and gender inequality. It has been acknowledged that WID and GAD approaches have benefited women by increasing women’s representation, institutional change and more resources allocated to women. However, it is suggested to incorporate race and class in understanding gender inequality within different development contexts (White, 2006). For example, some literature argues that the legacy of the West’s colonialism also contributes to gender inequality in the South through new colonial discourses which mislead the status of women in the South (Kishwar, 2014). The universal gender index cannot be used to measure the status of women in many aspects of development including politics, because what constitutes gender equality can be understood differently by people from different races, cultures, and even economic systems (Kishwar, 2014). In addition, study has shown that class in
which women are situated also determines women’s ability to achieve their political goals (Rai, 2014). In line with intersectionality, feminists proposed another approach to development which is called Women and Development (WAD) which values the perspectives of women from the third world which should be incorporated with development models for third world countries (Young, 2008).

From the perspective of intersectionality, issues such as race and class are also significant in understanding women’s positions in politics. As previously discussed, the notion that women represent women is limited with two reasons based on Rai (2014), and this limitation is consistent with the concept of intersectionality. First, women and men cannot be generalised as homogenous as women have different values, needs and live in different class and cultural settings. Second, women can play roles in formal and public sphere as politicians through being a member of political parties, so it does not necessarily mean they could address women’s needs if the political parties’ policy would not (Rai, 2014; Rendel, 1981). Plus, although women can hold political power, it cannot secure the women’s advancement in the society if women are still seen as powerless in the smallest political unit which is the family (Rendel, 1981). Based on Rai (2014), this reflects representation as a form rather than a content, when hierarchy and patriarchy still remain powerful despite the presence of women. In addition, it is problematic to assume that women in the third world also have the same perspectives on world politics according to Sedghi (1994). Sedghi (1994) argues that while feminist groups in the first world challenge the patriarchal system to make change in politics, women in the third world support the government for their national defence without necessarily getting rid of the patriarchal system.

In relation to intersectionality of class, Rendel (1981) wrote in their work on Women, Power and Political Systems that while women were traditionally underrepresented in politics in many European countries, a small group of women who originally came from the family of high ranking officials used to have more privilege in access to political opportunities. These women including wives, mistresses, mothers, daughters or succeeded widows were appointed to high political office based on their husbands, sons and fathers’ merits rather than on their own merits. Rendel (1981) describes this as the political importance of the family to form a patronage system and secure men’s political power. This work also mentions that access to politics from this kind of relationship could
be impractical for different races or countries where people might not accept the patronage system associated with women. As sub-categories of class, Rendel (1981) asserts that women’s education and economic status influenced women’s direct and indirect access to political power. Nevertheless, when women’s access to political power through political parties, the qualification in terms of political experiences still undermine higher educated women’s opportunities to be involved in a male-dominated politics regardless of her intrinsic ability. In other words, women face multiple inequalities. This understanding can also be used to reflect the gendered politics and power structures at local level.

After discussing different feminist perspectives, it can be seen that feminism and feminist approaches to development have brought some significant impacts on the causes of gender inequality. It is argued that there is no convergence on the best feminist theory or approach to development (Maynard, 1995) but the theoretical debates in this section show that in order to better address gender inequality and women’s subordination, changing the legislations and providing equal opportunities for women might be not enough. Hence, I agree that the GAD perspective provides me with a clear framework to discuss gender inequality in politics in this thesis. To do this, I discuss women’s political opportunities in the formal sector as well as how they negotiate power at home. As part of GAD, the intersectionality concept benefits my analysis in that it helps to deconstruct the gender discourse to a certain degree and explore the complexity of women’s life settings at the ground level. It also includes the perspectives of men. In this thesis, I believe that gender is contextualised, so it is important to avoid being judgemental about women’s subordination in the Cambodian context. In addition, while I want to explore local people’s views on the importance of women’s inclusion, I also investigate the gendered implications that women and men have experienced and other issues intersecting gender inequality such as culture, socio-economic and political context, to better understand women’s positions in local politics.

2.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has provided a framework to study the gender gap in Cambodian local politics from many angles. It is clear from this chapter that there have been many achievements for the cause of women and equality since the birth of feminism. Feminist theories are a significant lens for the study of gender equality and
women’s rights. In this thesis, feminist theories will also be used to discuss gender inequality in politics in global, regional as well as the Cambodian national context. The GAD lens and intersectionality can also be incorporated with the attempt to understand gendered implications in political development, and to discuss strategies for increasing women’s representation. This lens will be used to discuss gender issues throughout the findings and discussion chapters.
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CHAPTER 3: CONTEXT OF WOMEN IN POLITICS IN CAMBODIA

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I situate my research by presenting the historical context of women and politics in Cambodia at the national and local level.

This chapter has two main sections. In the first section, I demonstate past experiences and strategies of Cambodian women politicians at national level in their advocacy for a more equal share of political participation and positions of power. It includes the activists’ experiences in social movements for the cause of promoting women’s rights in Cambodia. Then, I examine specifically the roles of women in politics at the local level based on previous studies. This section provides inputs for identifying the gaps in understanding local perspectives on the presence of women leaders in their community development. Overall, this context chapter reviews what has been studied regarding the roles of Cambodian women in politics, and it provides a background to my research problem in order for conducting this study.

3.2 Historical context of women in politics in Cambodia

Some literature on the political context and decentralisation process in Cambodia has covered the importance of women’s roles and participation in politics at national and local levels and the efforts of different actors to achieve gender equality in politics. There have been some publications which discuss the opportunities and challenges to promote gender equality in political structure as well as other aspects of development.

3.2.1 The roles of women in politics in the past

This sub-section unpacks the roles of Cambodian women in the political sphere. It helps deconstruct dominant discourses on Cambodian women as powerless and completely isolated from politics (Frieson, 2001; Jacobsen, 2008). Although it is evident to a degree that some gender stereotypes and gender norms have subordinated women, it cannot be concluded that Cambodian society values men over women. For example, some social norms are seen as gender neutral such as non-gender-based inheriting rules in the family (Jacobsen, 2008). Plus women can be viewed as superior as household heads, educators and care providers who influence the mind set and well-being of their families (Frieson, 2001; Jacobsen, 2008). These norms however, make women’s roles more prominent in
the private sphere of Cambodian society and less visible in the public sphere (Frieson, 2001; Lilja, 2008).

Although mainstream studies of the history of Cambodia usually do not emphasise gender issues, it is claimed that Cambodian women have played an important role in politics in the past, particularly in the politics of nationalism (Frieson, 2001). For example, during Cambodia’s national movement to claim independence from the French in the 1940s, women became involved in restoring the national identities through writings about culture and women’s social roles which basically dictated the gender roles and women’s code of conduct (Frieson, 2001; McGrew et al., 2004). Women’s roles in promoting the country’s politics by this means centred on family relations and household chores (Frieson, 2001). Women’s empowerment, hence, was promoted in accordance with women’s code of conduct to protect national identity, emphasizing the importance of Khmer women’s figure and motherhood rather than gender equality principles (Jacobsen, 2008).

While there were also Cambodian women writers who challenged the patriarchal setting in the Cambodian nation by that time, most women in solidarity with men only challenged the French influence on Cambodia’s culture and sovereignty (Frieson, 2001). Such promotion of national identity and the gender norms was strong. These contentions suggest that women would join patriarchal system for their nationalist movements/nation regeneration rather than challenge the system for their own gender interests (Sedghi, 1994).

Frieson (2001)’s findings echoes Rendel (1981) in that Cambodian women, as in other South East Asian countries such as Burma and the Philippines, have rarely gained access to political power in their own merits, but through the existing privileges from their male kinship ties who are more influential in the public domain. In other cases, women are also offered political positions, social benefits and property as an incentive/reward for actively serving in national defence and conflation services during the revolutionary and post-revolutionary period (1970s-1980s) (Jacobsen, 2008).

Frieson (2001) found that despite the limited visibility of women in the public sector, Cambodian women have political power behind the scenes, which refers to the idea that women (as wives/mothers) use their family roles and sexual relationships confined in the domestic sphere to influence men’s political affairs. Knowledgeable and active royal
women such as queens Jayarajadevi and Indradevy of King Jayavarman VII are acknowledged for contributing to the strong leadership in ancient Cambodia (Ly, 2015). During Cambodia’s Angkorean times (circa 12th century), the influence of a ‘scholarly and ambitious wife’ of the King Jayavarman VII could possibly be one among the reasons behind the revolutionary King’s decision making, as proposed by some scholars (Chandler, 1992, p. 58). An observation of political events in Cambodia (mid-1960s to 1980s) suggests that women took part in their husbands’ political decisions which led to the coup d’état against late King Norodom Sihanouk, the fall of Republic Cambodia ruled by Lon Nol in 1970s and the victory and the fall of Communist Party of Kampuchea (Khmer rouge regime 1975-1979). This observation feeds an argument that the prosperity and/or the failure of these political regimes were possibly attributed to the ideology of political leaders’ wives or consorts (Frieson, 2001).

After Cambodia’s first free election in 1993, the government was reformed. Women were underrepresented in the top-level government in 1993 and 1995, with most of their positions appointed to them were limited to women’s affairs (Jacobsen, 2008). By 1993, women were still struggling for political participation due to gender stereotyping, and women’s historical disadvantages in education and employment which limited women’s ability to advance their positions (Jacobsen, 2008). The on-going divide of public/private sphere and the political culture, which is not fully democratic, have caused women to become less active in politics (Lilja, 2008). It is also claimed that the legacy of colonialism, where by women were not allowed to officially appear in politics and public administration, also contributed to the underrepresentation of women in politics in the later regimes (Jacobsen, 2008).

In contemporary Cambodia, the number of women’s movements in civil society such as women’s organisations, state-led women’s associations, non-governmental organisations and women’s self-help groups have been increasing although only a few high ranking positions including the ministerial level positions have been appointed to women (Jacobsen, 2008). With less executive power, women have played roles as advocacy workers, trainers, resource mobilisers and peace and security keepers (Frieson, 2001; McGrew et al., 2004).

Cambodian women politicians in the past several decades have used a number of strategies to promote women’s empowerment in the political sphere. It is noticed that the
issues of women’s subordination have been discussed in relation to gender stereotypes and social norms such as women’s code of conduct which limit women’s opportunities and visibility in the public sphere while the power of women is recognized to some extent. The strategy of relevance (Razavi & Miller, 1995) is one way of negotiating power and promoting the status of women in Cambodia. This can be exemplified in claims such as educating voters to trust in women because women will articulate the needs for women (Norodom Ranariddh, 1999), and investing in women’s education and health care will provide a good return to development (Ky, 1999). Regional networking such as women’s cooperation in the ASEAN community has been recognised as a platform for women politicians from regional countries to share experiences and visions, and build solidarity to pressure their political leaders on addressing gender issues (Kao & Hofmann, 1999). As a strategy of resistance, Lilja (2008) demonstrates that Cambodian women politicians resist the current gendered politics by deconstructing discourses on the image of Cambodian women and promoting identities of successful women politicians. Although it is problematic to generalise that the identities and interests of ‘women’ are singular, or that women’s representation is completely authentic, women’s access to institutions and positions of power provides a new image of women outside the domestic sphere. At the bottom line, political representation provides marginalized groups, in this case, women, justice (Lilja, 2008).

3.2.2 Contextualizing local politics

This thesis deals with women participating in local politics. Local politics in this thesis can be referred to as political activities at the local level which are governed by the bottom structure of the government (local government) such as commune councils (Berman, 1981).

Theoretically, local government acts as an agency which directly confronts with local pressure groups such as unions, rights groups and associations and addresses local needs and concerns at the local level. However, their political agenda is subject to the central government and economic, social and cultural conditions (Berman, 1981). Political activities in local offices range from state politics and electoral politics to legal, fiscal policy implementation and general public service delivery in a local territory for local people (Berman, 1981).
Decentralisation can be defined as a public reform process in which political power is transferred from the central government to the local government to ensure local-based economic and social development with high levels of effectiveness and efficiency (Turner, 1998). This western concept of public administration has been brought to developing countries during the 1990s (Turner, 1998).

Decentralization is claimed to be a practical way for local development in four ways (Nickson, 2006). First, it allows local government who has the best knowledge of local needs, concerns to make decisions which are responsive. Second, it ensures efficiency through the local government’s ability to mobilise internal resources, minimising its reliance on external resources. Third, local government can construct a clear mapping of development targets and beneficiaries. Last, decentralisation processes can be used as a platform for engaging people and civil society and brings accountability (Nickson, 2006). In practice, the original decentralisation has been reformed to fit in developing countries’ political situations. Deconcentration has emerged from the failure of implementing the original concept of decentralisation. Deconcentration means that local government are given executive powers with limitations in some areas such as fiscal policy, and the local government must perform their roles with support from the central or sub-national government (Turner, 1998).

Some parts of this thesis, I link my discussion to the terms ‘decentralization and deconcentration’ to refer to the government reform since 1993 which has caused a lot of implications on the political participation and political power of the commune councils regardless of gender issue. For example, this reform process allows spaces for Cambodian women at the local level to build up their power and political experiences as a departure point (Norodom Ranariddh, 1999).

3.2.3 Women and politics at the local level

Women’s representation in local politics is often discussed with regards to gender issues in decentralisation and deconcentration (D & D) processes. D&D is a government’s initiative to promote the bottom-up approach in which local institutions, namely commune and sangkat councils take care of its own community people (Öjendal & Kim, 2014). The commune/sangkat election law indicates equal rights for men and women to vote or stand for election at commune/sangkat level but it does not specify any quotas to
ensure women’s space after the election (Law on commune/sangkat council election in Khmer, 2006). These laws and social policies are in place to promote women’s empowerment in politics.

The representatives in local institutions aim to deliver public services to local people and design commune/sangkat development plans for and with local people. Particularly, the presence of female representatives is considered significant to protect and make benefits for women through public decision making. To achieve gender equality, gender mainstreaming strategies have been integrated into D&D processes through policies and programs implemented by government mechanisms and civil society.

Literature from the west shows that traditionally, women had played a major role in local politics which includes leading self-help organisations, child care and social services. However, these roles are considered as informal politics and non-politics because these involved less executive or structured power (Brownill & Halford, 1990). In Cambodia, findings suggest that women’s presence in local politics make impacts to local development via their formal political roles and social, peace-making movements (McGrew et al., 2004). It is claimed that women’s participation in the commune councils, since the first commune/sangkat election, has contributed to the improvement of post-conflict governance, building good cooperation across political parties and building partnerships between civil society and the government. Women are also the focal points for better dispute resolutions between the local authorities and local people over land or human rights issues as women tend to promote non-violent responses. The progress in gender-based violence prevention in communes is also accredited to women who have been active in the civil society’s gender equality programs (McGrew et al., 2004).

Based on statistics, women leaders are still underrepresented at the commune level. The election results show that women councillors accounted for 14.6 % and 18% of the commune seats in 2007 and 2012 respectively (Öjendal & Kim, 2014), while the proportion of seats held by women commune councillors have been expected to be 25% by 2015 (Ministry of Planning, 2011). At the local level, although the decentralisation initiative has created more spaces for women leaders (Öjendal & Kim, 2006), gender stereotypes still disadvantage women. Plus, gender inequality overarches other social hierarchies, such as patron-client relations (Chan & Chheang, 2008).
There are different explanations regarding the absence or under-representation of women in local politics in Cambodia according to previous literature. Women as commune councillors or village chiefs have been under pressure because of existing gender norms, family, education, trust, security and economic barriers (Chhoeun et al., 2008; Öjendal & Kim, 2006). Gender norms have been rooted since the ancient time of Cambodia, and it is argued that these norms prevent women from being involved in politics (Brickell, 2011; Chan & Chheang, 2008). For example, the gender norms restrict women’s mobility while working for the commune council requires women to work outside their homes, leaving the household chores and family behind. Through gender norms, women are also expected to focus on reproductive roles, serving husbands and the family (Miedema, 2011), so that women, without support from their spouse and family, find commune work, a productive role, as a double burden. Chhoeun et al. (2008) states that women are often rejected from public roles because of historical disadvantages such as low education and limited work experience in that sector. To overcome this challenge, many organisations, especially NGOs, have implemented women’s leadership programs to build women’s capacity and confidence in their roles (Chhoeun et al., 2008). This kind of program has been successful in terms of increasing numbers of women as political activists (Chhoeun et al., 2008).

Even though women and men have adequate capacity and equal rights with men to participate in the political sphere, the cultural characterisation of women and men (femininities and masculinities) may limit women’s political opportunities (Chan & Chheang, 2008). For instance, politics can be assumed as a masculine field which is suited with allegedly masculine behaviours such as being brave, strong, dominant and confident but women are viewed as timid and shy. Therefore, women may not be supported by their counterparts or voters (Öjendal & Kim, 2014). The masculinities concept may also discourage men whose wives wish to do politics. Besides expecting to be the breadwinners of the family, some Cambodian men who accept that women (or wives) can join formal employment still refuse to share responsibilities and household chores as these tasks are considered feminine-like practices (Brickell, 2011).

Gender disparity still remains in the commune councils because there are limited numbers of women selected as commune election candidates, by political parties (Chan & Chheang, 2008). Political power at the commune level is distributed based on a political party list. Women lose their chances to be elected as well as rarely acquire the leadership
roles because they are generally placed lower down in the candidate list. Furthermore, even though each political party has its own gender policy on promoting women’s participation, these policies are too broad, which can lead to a failure in implementation (Öjendal & Kim, 2014). In relation to decisions on whether to place women on the top list or not, research has found that political parties are concerned with two factors: the possibility of winning the election according to gender preference by voters, and the economic status of men and women candidates (Öjendal & Kim, 2014). These findings mean that socialisation which determines the gender suitability in public roles still remains, and these are yet further constrained by economic factors, which are a barrier for achieving gender parity. These debates indicate that there is a policy challenge for increasing women’s participation in the decentralisation process when the legislation has no control over the internal policy of political parties.

Beyond being elected, the literature shows that there is limited motivation for women as commune councillors to perform their daily roles or continue their political career based on the current policies. For example, dependants’ allowance for women councillors’ husbands who stay at home is missing in the financial procedure of the Council of Administration Reform while there is such incentive for male councillors’ dependent wives (Chan & Chheang, 2008). Besides that it is discriminatory, it does not encourage the families of women councillors to accept the shift of traditional gender roles if they are only compensated by limited incentives that these women could earn outside the home. Therefore, women councillors face a double workload: productive and reproductive roles if they continue with their careers. A recent study on leadership pathways for female political activists also suggests that the extent to which women are successful in political careers depends on their internal factors such as relevant work experience, personal drive, satisfactory educational background, aspiring personality, and external factors such as personal wealth and support from family and surroundings (Ly, 2015). For women who are already pursuing public roles, there is also a need to make financial policies consistent with the activity plans assigned to them (Chhoeun et al., 2008).

3.3 Conclusion

While there is political will and development policies in place to advance women’s participation in politics, the obstacles for women still remain. Suggestions of gender stereotypes, hierarchy, socialisation (masculinities and femininities), and sexual double
standard for women are still found in the literature. It is unclear whether gender mainstreaming in the legal framework and documents, such as political parties’ policies, could be an adequate solution. The literature has demonstrated several significant points in gendered politics at the global, national, and local levels, most of which are aligned. However, at some points, gender inequality seems to be contextualised, not to forget the different political agendas at the local level which could be influenced by specific economic, social and cultural conditions.

In the context of Beoung Preah commune, the understanding of women’s roles in local politics is still limited. The overall context is covered based on literature and program reports from women programs in general. It has not clearly been shown how local people view women’s roles in politics, and whether or not their willingness to support the political parties is based on the gender of appointed leaders. There is a need for greater understanding of how beliefs about masculinity and femininity play a role in the success of women political leaders and the extent to which people think masculinities and femininities impact local politics. It would also be constructive to hear men’s voices on women’s roles in local politics and men’s perceived strategies in dealing with the same issues. Regarding the economic barriers such as low salary which have pushed women to drop-out of politics (Chhoeun et al., 2008), it is unclear if it is the case for male commune councillors or not. Perhaps, the unequal economic benefits within this institution are distributed based on clans and political interests, other than gender aspects, as what the literature has discovered in other parts of Cambodia. Furthermore, how women’s leadership is perceived as making change in their communities, which is the ultimate outcome, remains unclear. The next chapter discusses in details how local knowledge of these issues was adapted, interpreted and used throughout this thesis.
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CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the research process for this thesis. The chapter is divided into subsections which describe approaches to conducting my fieldwork and analysis. First, it deals with my theoretical perspective on how knowledge is constructed, and how that has led me to have this research design. Then, it briefly outlines my methods of data collection and rationale behind these decisions. It also discusses the process of organising and interpreting the information I have gained from the field work. Finally, I reflect upon the whole research process to ensure that I carefully acknowledge my positionality and research ethics.

4.2 Methodological framework

The research design is influenced by a number of significant factors, one of which is the philosophy, or ontology, underpinning this thesis (Creswell, 2014; Kitchin & Tate, 2000; Murray & Overton, 2014). The term ontology theoretically describes how the subjects and objects in the world are believed to exist and react differently. Ontology flows into epistemology which studies the belief of how knowledge is constructed and how objects are learnt and understood by different knowers. In research, epistemology informs how researchers use certain methodologies and how knowledge can be gathered and interpreted accordingly (Murray & Overton, 2014). In other words, researchers choose a research methodology which is consistent with their worldview, resulting in the adoption of qualitative, quantitative or mixed approaches to research (Creswell, 2014).

My research topic derived from my interest in studying my participants’ experiences, and their ways of reasoning in order to make decisions concerning their own lives. I partially adhere to a social constructivist approach that values individual’s experiences as knowledge (Creswell, 2014). I am also inspired by feminist epistemology which claims that knowledge is partial, subjective and it is subject to the way it is constructed (Gregory, Johnston, Pratt, Watts, & Whatmore, 2009; Sultana, 2007). Considering myself as a feminist has influenced me to take into account voices from diverse groups, especially women, and obtain qualitative information from them.

With these approaches, the gaps can be understood by studying how Boeung Preah local people, both men and women think about the gender gaps, women’s roles in politics and
whether or not women’s representation is significant and why. I agree that qualitative methods encourages my participants especially women leaders to express their views of the realities they live and work, in their own words. In this thesis, the qualitative methodology aims to explore views and lived experiences related to commune development, gender norms, women’s needs and women’s representation, acknowledging subjectivities of my informants at the micro level rather than assuming stereotypes (Moss, 2002). To sum up, the qualitative methodology is consistent with my approach to knowledge, and it is a suitable way of doing my research topic. The following sections will describe the techniques of finding participants and collecting and interpreting data (methods) within this methodological framework.

4.3 Data collection methods

A purposive sampling strategy was used in my research design and process. This strategy means that the selection of research sites, methods and participants does not need to be randomised or size-oriented, but it seeks for the best understanding of a particular setting (Creswell, 2014).

4.3.1 Choosing the research site

My decision to conduct this research in Cambodia is based on two reasons. First, I wish to dedicate my knowledge to the country, to contribute to the government’s efforts in enhancing the status of women, which also aligns with my research scholarship objectives. Secondly, I prefer home-located research because of convenience, familiarity, language, cultural fluency and other practical values (Unwin, 2006).

Boeung Preah commune (as in Image 4) in Ba Phnom district, Prey Veng province was selected for this qualitative study for a number of reasons. First, my two-year work experience with the Committee to Promote Women in Politics (CPWP, 2012) group provided me with insights into how local women in Ba Phnom district had strived to change their economic, social and political status. Secondly, although the project I worked with took place in five target communes in Ba Phnom district, Beoung Preah commune was chosen over the others because it is the largest commune in terms of land and population; It has political diversity and there are three women commune councillors (The National Election Committee, 2012).
Finally, my existing relationship with the local authorities, implementing NGOs and women’s network in this district was another asset to help in conducting my field research, in terms of administrative procedure (such as authorisation/ invitation letters) and the participant recruitment process. These reasons make conducting research in this site interesting and achievable.

Image 4: Women farmers and typical houses in Beoung Preah Commune

Source: Adapted by Sophea Tieng (2015)

4.3.2 Sampling method

A non-probability sample was used in this research, which is not intended to statistically represent the whole population in the commune but to reflect the thoughts of some key actors (Ritchie et al., 2003). The sampling is purposive in terms of the characteristics of participants including gender, age, social roles and occupations, but the participation needs to be voluntary (Richie et al., 2003). The combination of this sampling method was chosen because the study aims to gather rich information from those who have knowledge and experience related to the topic while it ensures ethical principles that no participants were forced or pressured to participate. Purposefully selected participants who did not have time or interest in this research referred the contacts of other participants who might be eligible and available to participate. The sample size was responsive to time, budget and my capacity to handle the project (Ritchie et al., 2003).
As my research questions aim to ensure different perspectives, I involved thirty people, of which were nineteen community people (male and female), six local leaders (male and female commune councilors and members of Commune Committee for Women and Children), three district leaders (male and female) as shown in Table 2. Overall, I had fifteen female and fifteen male participants who were from various age groups (twenty to sixty years old). The majority of participants were residents in Boeung Preah commune, and the rest were residents in Ba Phnom district.

Table 2: Participant Characteristics (Boeng Preah commune, Ba Phnom district)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Political parties</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community people</td>
<td>20-60</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmers</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business (sellers, repairers)</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School staff</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local officials</td>
<td>40-60</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commune councillors (or political party activists)</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>- Cambodian People Party (CPP) - Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District leaders</td>
<td>30-60</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District officials</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>- Cambodian People Party (CPP) - Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District women affairs official</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commune Committee for Women and Children</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I prepared a name list of potential interviewees based on the relevance of their knowledge to my research questions, and the diversity of perspectives I would like to gain. I decided to talk to all three women councillors who originally came from different political parties by the election time in 2012. Only three among eight male councillors were selected, one
of whom was the commune chief. They all were members of different political parties. I chose to interview one male district councillor and one female district councillor to gain insights into their experiences and future visions on promoting women in local politics. Local people who were invited to join the study were those who resided in the same neighborhood as women councilors, so these people have some notions on what women leaders have been doing at home and at work.

4.3.3 Participant recruitment

It is not surprising that permission from gatekeepers to conduct research in some locations may be required (Willis, 2006). Gatekeepers can be defined as persons who have control over information about the research site and local people (Crang & Cook, 2007). Prior consultation with the commune chief was made to find out if the topic would be too politically sensitive. It was suggested that a formal letter requesting permission to conduct field work in Ba Phnom district should be sent to the district office, addressing the chief of district governors. I had planned to use my connections with my former workplace (a Non-Governmental Organisation or NGO) to facilitate this process because the organisation has a memorandum of understanding with the district office through its collaborative projects. This planning was made in a hope that the district authorities trust the organization more than individuals. However, shortly before doing this, I was advised by a district official that for educational purposes, I shall not use NGOs’ connections to request for permission because this could mislead the local authorities that the research would be conducted by that NGO. Alternatively, my own formal letter, my supervisor’s supporting letter and research supporting documents (including question guides and ethics approval) were an adequate proof of the research purpose to get an approval from the district chief of governors.

After getting the approval, it was important to bring the approval letter to the commune chief and spend some time to brief research information and other planning to get extra support. The commune chief and female commune councillor assisted me in finding a contact list of commune council members, district councillors and CCWC members. I used the contact list to search for my pre-determined participants for interviews and make preliminary contact through phone calls. In my first call, I briefly introduced myself and confirmed with participants about the research project and any consent issues to make sure that my request is likely to be accepted. Though, this process was done again during
a face-to-face meeting in which we discussed the information sheet and consent form in detail. The most important features of the consent form that I stressed included recordings and names used in the research. After participants agreed, the interviews could be started.

I needed to find the locations of community people such as farmers, sellers and teachers to join interviews and focus groups. As the letter indicated to commune chief to collaborate, it means that the commune chief could help mobilise participants for this study. However, I did not prefer this which is similar to nomination, as it could potentially conflict with voluntary participation. Instead, I connected with local people by myself. I used the local contacts that helped me make connections with people in the commune. Two people that I know guided me on where to find eligible participants and advised me on cultural appropriateness when approaching community people. These two people are Beoung Preah residents and ‘respectful’ persons, one of whom is my friend’s father and another one is a former WPAN member I used to work with. In the first phase of my participant recruitment, my friend’s father helped me by passing information sheets to my target interviewees, collecting phone numbers and accompanying me to find the locations of participants. In the second phase, the woman volunteered to walk with me in the village in order to recruit other 13 community people to join focus groups. This social gatekeeper introduced me (as a student) to the village locals as I approach their homes. They allowed me to hand in my participants the participation information sheet and inform them about my identity, purposes of visit, my research purposes and consent related issues. Some local people passing by and came to greet were also invited to join the focus groups. The process took place for a full day. This connection was very helpful in the participant recruitment process. However, some positionality issues were inevitably occurring. This will be discussed in the reflection section.

4.3.4 Tools to generate data

There were three methods of data collection in this project: interviews, focus groups and personal journal. All inquiries were made through semi-structured interviews which were adjusted from one to another. This approach allowed me to listen to what participants would like to share while keeping focused on pre-determined questions (Steward-Withers et al., 2006; Willis, 2006).
Interviews

The main tool for collecting data in my research is interviewing (or in-depth interview) which is a common method used in development research (Willis, 2006). Interviewing allowed me to obtain rich information by having private conversations between me and participants on particular issues (Willis, 2006). In this case, it was face-to-face interviewing. I chose to conduct interviews because I wish to explore the general context of commune development and participants’ opinions, understandings and everyday experiences related to women’s participation in politics and how gender norms have changed in recent years (Crang & Cook, 2007).

I interviewed nineteen people including farmers, sellers, teachers (community people), men and women commune councillors, district councillors, and Commune Committee for Women and Children (CCWC) members. An interview protocol, including questions, guide and interview schedule (participants’ profile, date, time and locations) were prepared in advance to ease my interviewing process (Creswell, 2014; Willis, 2006). I had separate question guides for four groups of participants depending on their roles in the community. Probing questions depended on how the conversation developed. Digression was common in my interviews. I handled this situation by following my participants’ flow of conversation but trying to create new questions which could partly answer my semi-structured questions. During the interviews, participants were often asked to clarify their ideas, explain and elaborate on their points of views. The face-to-face interviews took place at the homes or offices of participants, depending on their preference. Participants also suggested available times to meet and were one hour long on average. Voice recordings were used for all interviews.

Focus groups

The second method was focus groups. Focus group discussions are a qualitative method which provides a group of participants a forum/space to discuss a topic. They can either express their views or resist other people’s views (Crang & Cook, 2007). I conducted two focus group discussions to learn how participants interact within the group and challenge different opinions about the roles of women leaders and gender issues. This method aims to answer the first question of the research.

The focus groups were comprised of community people who were living close to female commune councillors. These people were non-politicians and non-professionals. Focus
groups were divided into female-only (7 people) and male-only group (6 people), and these took place at a village temple at different times. The purpose of gender division is to balance the power relations and create spaces for women to talk as women could be more inferior to men in a joint discussion. However, the inequality such as level of education, social positions and different living conditions might also create gaps among them (Chacko, 2004). As with in-depth interviews, I prepared a set of semi-structured questions and began the discussions with greetings and brainstorming questions. In addition, as the focus group members could be identified as an existing group (Crang & Cook, 2007), they were more confident to talk to me and with each other. To control the silences, dominant speakers and digression, I applied Crang and Cook (2007)’s technique which uses the third person statements to provoke a new topic and debate. This technique was a useful aid to the discussions.

**Personal journal**

Finally, I used a personal journal as a tool for reflecting on my field work process, including, but not limited to what I understand about the research site and how my relationships had grown. The personal journal was also used to keep track of who I met and topics we talked about, so it helped me initiate some new questions for the next participants. All of the three methods were effective for my study but some disadvantages and positionality issues were inevitable and will be discussed.

**4.4 Data analysis procedure**

**4.4.1 Data Organization**

There are several types of data collected from the field work. I drew Creswell’s steps in organising this data (Creswell, 2014). All interviews and focus group discussions were recorded using voice recorders. The recordings were set with real date and time, which is consistent to the interview schedule in hard files. Each recording consists of the heading which is the topic of the research and the profile of interviewees (as stated in the interview protocol). All recordings are stored in the researcher’s personal computer. The transcribing was done during and after fieldwork. During the field work, few interviews were transcribed to help me review the past conversations to see if there are interesting findings, mistakes, doubts or issues that prompted me to upgrade my interview guidelines. Field notes and reflection notes were made as an on-going process after each
research activity completed. The transcribing was done in original language which is Cambodian/Khmer language. All transcripts were filed on the researcher’s personal computer with password protection. NVivo program for qualitative data analysis was employed in this process to ensure that data is well organised and stored and it is flexible to make changes on software compared to hand coding. The Khmer script was imported to NVivo qualitative research software. The process of coding was done in Khmer language without translation to reduce the discrepancy in meaning. However, after the coding was completed, the overall findings were written in English. To ensure authentic representation and respect as much as possible, participants’ words were quoted at length in both Khmer and English language. The main purpose of including original scripts (Khmer) in the thesis findings is that it facilitates interpretation for readers who can read in Khmer. This also aims to minimize the discrepancy of translation. In addition, presenting Khmer scripts in the thesis is to move towards a more plural academia, challenging Eurocentric assumptions that English is the only language to be included in the academic work (Zanotti & Palomino-Schalscha, 2015).

I used thematic analysis which is inspired by grounded theory. Grounded theory was developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, as an approach to qualitative data analysis which generates new theories based on participants’ findings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The process starts from the examination of the gathered data, grouping the data into themes or categories to create full meanings. The discussion of these small meanings leads to a holistic knowledge and can be understood as a new knowledge or theory. Grounded theory focuses on the larger context which comes from experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

In this feminist post-positivist era, grounded theory data are suitable for deconstructing the contextual discourse, and taking the analysis of the data to a macro level, over and above the symbolic interactionist interpretation

(Keddy et al., 1996, p.451)

Keddy, Sims and Stern (1996), in their journal article, have stressed the relevance of grounded theory in social science by studying three feminist scholars’ research methodologies, and they argued that ‘grounded theory’ is part of doing feminist research. Grounded theory approach is preferred in this study because it deconstructs certain
stereotypes and discourse about how women’s roles in local politics are understood in the Cambodian context. It attempts to create a new knowledge which is the knowledge of participants including people whose voices are rarely heard in academic texts, and the conclusion would be subjective and accurate for where they live and work rather than for other places (Keddy et al., 1996). The analysis is inductive in that it groups multiple statements, opinions, different pieces of information and texts into several macro labels. As a result, it creates a number of themes which adequately represent the main ideas and arguments which aim to answer the research questions. Grounded theory is somehow similar to thematic analysis with an exception that the analysis should emphasise the storytelling which “carries the most emotional impact from the point of view of the participants” (Keddy et al., 1996, p. 451).

4.5 Reflections on the research process and ethical considerations

Reflecting on the research process is considered an integral part of my research because words which describe emotions, understandings, experiences and interactions of participants may be formed and transformed as a consequence of research approaches, and time and places the storytelling took place (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Awareness of positionality issues and reflexivity is very important in field research (Chacko, 2004; Sultana, 2007). My personal journal is an approach to keep myself reflexive and acknowledge any possible positionality conflicts between me and my participants. I would like to acknowledge the possible ethical and positionality issues as below.

4.5.1 Ethical considerations

Not only does the reflection process help shape my analysis, it also acknowledges the extent to which ethical guidelines have been applied throughout the research process.

Consent and confidentiality

Prior to starting the field work, I applied for ethics approval on my research project, from the Human Ethics Committee (HEC) at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW). In this application, I had to declare my awareness of how to work with human subjects such as how I would approach participants to talk to me, how I made sure participants were consenting to give responses to me, and how I would avoid harming and disadvantaging my participants.
Consent forms and participation information sheets are two important documents, and I had to ensure that participants understand them. I translated these documents into Khmer language and printed the documents on both sides (Khmer and English). Some academic words such as ‘research’ and ‘Master of Development Studies’ used in these documents were new or strange for some community people (even some literate ones) because they had never been exposed to a higher education setting before. I needed to explain these words to them in informal spoken language. For example, I equated ‘research’ to ‘big homework from school’, so they could relate to my work and research purposes. In addition, those who had seen a group of students or interns conducting research or surveys in this location before helped explain the others. There were also some participants in focus groups who volunteered to read the consent form to the others. I asked all participants to sign the written consent forms except those who preferred oral consent. To comply with the ethical guidelines, pseudonyms will be used when I present participants’ ideas across the research findings to avoid direct identifications of participants.

**Gifts and farewell**

At the time of recruitment, clarifying with participants that their participation was voluntary and that they would not receive any financial compensation or travel allowance was another important thing. Small gifts were prepared for each participant to show my appreciation. I sought suggestions from other researchers to make the decision on the gift contents to ensure that it was culturally appropriate. Gifts may be questionable due to ethical consideration (Gillen, 2012). This concern is useful but it could be unfair to judge that all participants would participate in a study only for gifts. In my setting, giving gift was neither mentioned in the participant information sheet nor announced before the discussion started to avoid such confusion. To some extent, these kinds of acts may have caused conflicts of interests or ethical issues, but I drew on Crang and Cook's idea that it all depends on what we know as culturally appropriate things to do. After the fieldwork completion, I had a chance to say goodbye to the community people, and I organized a farewell lunch with district authorities who had collaboratively given me a warm welcome and access to district administration. This is believed to be a moment which built relationships among the researcher and the district authorities to ensure future collaboration.
The role of my research assistant

A male research assistant, who is a university student and passionate to learn more about gender and development, was invited to accompany and assist me in travel, logistics, and some transcribing. In the process of keeping my personal journal in use, I conducted regular reflection meetings with my assistant who could see my participants’ interactions differently from how I did. Not only did meetings with the assistant provide inputs on writing in the reflection process, but also helped improve my interview and facilitation skills from time to time. The assistant did not have responsibility to design the question guides, recruit participants or interview participants although he also helped reflect on the preliminary findings.

The assistant also had to sign a confidentiality form and ensure the proper management of voice recordings and transcripts. In return for my assistant’s efforts, I covered the travel, accommodation and food expenses. It might be the case that financial compensation for the research assistant can be offensive (Binns, 2006). However, there should be open communication and trust to avoid wrong expectations. With prior consultation and agreement on the roles and responsibilities, extra allowance was considered as the incentive for my research assistant who spent huge amounts of time and energy with my project.

4.5.2 Reflections on my positionality issues

Reflecting on positionality, power and reflexivity has been an increasingly debatable topic in doing ethical and rigorous development research since the mid-1980s and that is also discussed in feminist epistemology and feminist research methodology (Gregory et al., 2009). ‘Positionality’ can be referred to as how I hold my positions including but not limited to cultural, political, social and academic aspects of my identity against my research participants, my gatekeepers and other people's identities (Gregory et al., 2009, p. 556). In addition to complying with ethical principles approved by the Human Ethics Committee, being aware of positionality and power relations and being able to reflect on these in my research process to ensure more ethical knowledge production are highly significant (Chacko, 2004; Sultana, 2007).
I personally appreciate Chacko’s illustrations on how positionality was applied in her research condition. One similar aspect of position I and Chacko might be sharing is our identity as a researcher studying abroad and doing home-located research but having less cultural fluency in the field, regardless of our language fluency (Chacko, 2004). I coped with the gaps of cultural fluency by confirming with my local connection on what activities and ways of communication are considered culturally appropriate. For example, I asked them for some information about my potential participants' background such as their personality, family and work, and any precautions to avoid being awkward and offensive. The questions such as 'How old is he/she?', or ‘what should I dress up like?’; ‘Are there any sensitive questions I should avoid?’ and ‘Can I give participants gifts?’ have helped me prepared myself to behave properly and fit in each participant's world during the interviews and focus groups. As Chacko (2004) explained, I was probably treated as an insider because I am Khmer and have previous relationships with some local people in the commune and the district, but I could be an outsider because I have a different family and educational background. As participants might view me as a well-educated student, some tended to think that I know better than them by always asking me “if I say something wrong, please let me know”. This could cause some participants to try their best to polish their response in a hope that it would make sense to me while it did not necessarily reflect their thoughts. To deal with this potential issue, I tried to reassure participants that there is no right or wrong answer, and that I am most interested in their own views.

The reluctance to ask for the local authorities’ intervention in the recruitment of participants was to minimize the risks of having involuntary participants and having questions answered in particular ways rather than participants’ own ways (Willis, 2006). However, working without connecting any channels was not realistic. Local connection helped me liaise with participants, allowing me to socialize, introduce myself and develop some trust.

As mentioned earlier in the recruitment process, relying on only few persons’ network is seen convenient but it can be problematic as it does not guarantee the diversity of perspectives (Willis, 2006). For example, first several participants who received my participation information sheet might be relatives to the local contact, so they might have
similar views. While the local contact only provided partial help in recruitment, being friendly, humble and gentle is the best technique I have used to approach my participants. Once participants felt comfortable to talk, there was a chance to check if participants were happy to participate in my study.

**Different aspects of my identity and positionality**

My identity could possibly create several positionality issues when conducting interviews and focus groups. Interviewing commune and district leaders, both men and women, is very important as this can enable the collection of information which is useful for understanding the context and challenges of the local government, particularly why women are encouraged or discouraged to become involved in local politics. However, having an opportunity to interview them does not guarantee reliable and accurate information.

My identity as a former NGO worker is problematic. In Cambodia, to a certain extent, civil society such as NGOs might be viewed as opposed to the government instead of as a partner for development. As a consequence, local officials especially those who are directly in charge of the governance have been reluctant to discuss or share the weaker aspects of their performance or government policies with me. I needed to clearly state the research purposes and distance myself from my former role as a former NGO worker. I also expressed my respect by avoiding questions which are provocative, sensitive or offensive for the government officials and encouraging them to express what can be solutions or stimulators to the current development. Both local authorities and local people might have reacted to me based on my positionality. The responses they provided me were all a matter of trust. Therefore, I kept clarifying with participants about my role as a student. Another issue of my identity is that because I am a woman and my research involved women’s participation in politics, a number of participants might give me answers which are in favour of promoting women’s status regardless of their authentic perspectives. Finally, as a young woman, I had to be flexible with the way I speak to different people with a different social status, age group and gender. For example, it was easier for me to talk to someone of my own age than an elderly person, or women’s group than to men’s group, though the presence of a male research assistant did help in gender balancing.
4.6 Conclusion

Research design, especially the construction of the research methodology is an important part of research in which the research questions will be addressed. The design significantly impacts research findings so researchers need to be very thoughtful about it. This chapter has covered the main features of methodological framework as well as acknowledging all the issues underpinning my research design and process. To sum up, I have the following main points.

First, this qualitative research is inspired by a feminist standpoint, and I agree that through qualitative methods such semi-structured interviews and focus groups, I have learned the complexity of issues I discussed in the fieldwork. Although I did not interview everyone in the village, I believe that those who participated in the project already provided a lot of insights into understanding my research problem. Through qualitative methods, my research centres on interpreting participants’ words rather than giving them multiple-choice answers to choose from.

Second, a purposive sampling strategy is another asset for this study because it allowed me to explore the perspectives of key people and groups who were actually involved in the issue. This can help maximise the research outputs from asking people who have experience or contact with key actors in local politics, or who have authority to answer some questions. Finally, as I discussed in this chapter, although this methodology aims to get the best information, there can be some limitations. For example, it can be done differently by those who have different philosophical worldviews from mine, and the outcomes and illustrations would be different. In addition, I am concerned that the positionality between me, my participants and people I have met has also shaped my research outcome into the way it is.

After discussing how I collected and used my data, in the next two finding chapters I will look at (1) what local participants think about women’s political opportunities in their commune, (2) the implications of women’s political representation and (3) how increasing numbers of women in public roles and decision making positions is realistic to community people.
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CHAPTER 5: EXPLORING WOMEN’S POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides some context behind women’s opportunities to participate in their society from an everyday political level to a formal political level in Beoung Preah commune. There are two main sections in this chapter. In the first section, the chapter looks at the political importance of gender relations and how local perceptions on femininity and masculinity shape the understanding of women’s political opportunities. In the second section, the chapter discusses the issues which influence women’s decision making and women’s ability to participate in and benefit from their society through local politics. This section also looks into participants’ opinions of problems, causes of problems and suggestions for more gender equitable outcomes.

At the end of the discussion, two of my research questions will be answered. The first research question, ‘what do local people think about the roles of women in local politics?’ will be answered by understanding how local views on gender roles and governance guided their belief about the roles of women in politics. The second research question, ‘what are the factors influencing women’s political opportunities? What kind of support do women need?’ will be answered based on understanding lived experiences of women councillors.

5.2 Gender roles and implications for local politics

As previously discussed in the conceptual framework, the political process in Cambodia is seen as gendered from the family level (Frieson, 2001). Then, discourse on gender roles practiced in the households has political importance. First, gender roles determine how much effort women can contribute to her society, as a member of households. Second, local people’s views on gender norms affect the way local people think in terms of how women should contribute or have contributed to local politics. Gender roles are defined here as “the normalized roles that men and women are expected to perform in their everyday lives” (Castree et al, 2013: Gender Role). However, the practice of gender roles in a society differs by time, place and culture (Castree et al., 2013). Based on this definition, gender roles are embedded in all levels of actions including attitudes and performances at home and everywhere else.
5.2.1 Gender roles

Gender roles and gender norms are deeply rooted in Cambodian society (Öjendal & Kim, 2014). Gender roles in Cambodia, like other parts of the world, generally categorise women and men’s roles into two categories: domestic/private domain and public domain (Brickell, 2011; Chan & Chheang, 2008; Whitworth, 1994). Not only do such gender roles refer to gendered divisions of labour but they also refer to social and cultural values and attitudes which need to fit in these domains. For example, women were traditionally expected to do household chores, serving the husband and nurturing children at home, while men are expected to generate income and support the family (Brickell, 2011). Performing differently from gender norms can affect their social reputation and self-esteem (Gender and Development for Cambodia, 2010; Miedema, 2011). As defined, gender roles are a subject of time and place.

Gender division of labour

Gender division of labour still exists at the local level like Beoung Preah commune, but it has gradually changed due to local people’s frequent exposure to gender awareness programs and consumption pressure. Women participants and their neighbours occupy most of the household chores, some of the farming activities or home-based businesses, while men do less household chores and work to generate income for the family. Although sharing gender roles is becoming more common, the core gender roles are not yet interchangeable. For example, women can take part in earning an income, but women may still be housewives. In the past, there may have been a stronger divide between men’s roles and women’s roles in the family, compared to the present time, for example in the organisation of housework. Men have changed their attitudes toward the family’s obligations and housework, as Sreyleak would suggest:

In the past it’s like that, people think housework is 100% women’s work, but since they are exposed to awareness-raising programs by Gender organization (GADC), they have changed. If it was before, when men had free time, they’d rather lie down and watch TV for fun until lunch time,
and they will have lunch. They would not help. But now they understand more, they help each other as they think household chores belong to everyone.

(Sreyleak, female, former women political activist, Tamau village, interview, June 2015)

It might be problematic to judge that women are subordinated since roles in the households can be valued as equally important as roles outside the households (Brickell, 2011). However, when there is a divide between men and women’s roles as Sreyleak describes, men and women are not collaborative in the family. Not only does it reduce the family’s efficiency but it also unnecessarily restricts women if they need time for other opportunities. Sreyleak believes that this norm, at least, is being changed and this divide is not as strong as before.

From some perspectives, an attempt to resist such gender relations may also fail when gender roles are strictly reinforced by the other gender (GADC, 2010). For instance, gender roles also pressures men who are supposed to be the breadwinners in the family, and this can be reinforced by women.

In addition, entering paid employment is not always a women’s choice regardless of how overwhelming the household chores can be. Brickell (2011, p. 1354) explains this divide as “a stubborn stain on development” as it hinders women’s opportunities for two reasons. First, while this divide constantly sets the domestic sphere as a women-only space, domestic chores create a double burden for working women when there is no replacement in her domestic sphere. Second, women are nurtured to be dutiful mothers and daughters, so they prioritise the family’s household chores over their personal interests.

**Gender roles and education**

Education is an important means for social and political development in the commune as one school leader believes:

If girls study hard and participate in politics when they come back to the commune, I think this will absolutely make change. If all women in the
village, commune and district have strong knowledge, our community must be developed.

(Dara, male, school leader, Pra Srae village, interview, July 2015)

While the significance of gender equality in education is better recognised by local people, combating school absenteeism is still what local authorities pay attention to. Gender norms have been obstacles for girls more than for boys in accessing education, in some parts of rural Cambodia (Velasco, 2001). The obstacles can range from having to deal with household chores and threats from gender-based violence, restriction on mobility and gender preferences on children’s education (Velasco, 2001). In Beoung Preah commune, there is a different trend in talking about gender inequality in education which shows that some gender norms in the past are still influential but this is not always the case. For example, a participant described a dilemma whereby his daughter was forced to drop out of school, but this does not explicitly show that parents have gender preferences over their children’s education:

កូន្រសីខ្ញុំឈប់រៀនគឺដឹងសម្រាប់កូន្រសីនិងកូន្របានឈប់ទៅបំផុតជារបស់កូន្រសីគា។ កូន្រសីឈប់ទៅដឹងរឺបានឈប់យោញា។ កូន្រអាចមិនឈប់ជារកសុីរកសុី។ មានការធំេចក្នុង៉ាត់ ះ េក់មែម៉ូ េក្នុង៉ាត់េដោយកម្តុជិត។ មានការធំេចក្នុង៉ាត់េដោយកម្តុជិតេេសេរៀនជាប់បាក់ដឹង។

My daughter quit school as at that time, my daughter and my son passed their BacII exam at the same time. So, my daughter decided to quit school and let her elder brother study. When our living condition was poor, my daughter quit school to earn money. It’s nothing besides working as a garment worker. I told her not to quit, and I said ‘father did not have anything to help (inheritance)’ but she said she felt sad for the parents, and she’d rather earn income for her brother and sacrificed her own opportunities.

(Sithorn, male, local official, Ang Krong village, interview, July 2015)

Based on his statement, Sithorn expresses regret for his daughter’s disadvantage because of the family’s poverty, which gives limited options for everyone in the household. Yet, it should be noted that this kind of decision that young women like his daughter make can be influenced by her perceived personal and societal gender roles. Although it does not explicitly show that women are forced to make a decision, through the way girls are nurtured, confined by their gender role as a dutiful daughter, women might be self-aware

1BacII means they finish high school (grade 12)
that sacrificing for the family is a worthy decision to make. Hence, studying for them might be less important while it is more relevant for their brothers who are expected to be the bread winners whose career development is seen as important. This reinforces a study which says that “As a corollary, women’s familial obligations are often problematically linked to women’s supposed orientation towards fulfilling collective, rather than personal interests” (Brickell, 2011, p. 1354).

Surprisingly, some local people during the fieldwork tended to say that education for all genders should be focused on because school drop-outs have become a concern for both boys and girls because of the direct and indirect results of migration and poverty. Some suggested that the current school attainment rate at primary and secondary level suggested that boys’ attendance has dropped significantly. During the focus group, some people did not appreciate the old perceptions about girls’ education which stated that ‘girls should not study much because at the end of the day, they will be housewives and that girls who are literate are keen on having relationship with boys as they can write love letters’ (Women focus group, 2015). These statements are less occurring in everyday speaking in the community despite the fact that they remain influential. Therefore, it is suggested that gender norms are not always the case which influences educational planning. As Velasco (2001) also commented, girls’ mobility for education may have been less restricted by gender norms nowadays because girls’ mobility has been enhanced for employment, as a participant said:

Before, daughters were not encouraged to study because elderly people did not want them to write love letters, daughters just do cooking. […] Now, what’s the point about love letters, if they all go out for businesses (rok si) […] and, women and men, now all use mobile phones [that means even though they cannot write love letters, they can use phones to communicate].

(A female participant, Pra Srae village, focus group, July 2015)

It is suggested the old gender norms which may restrict girls’ mobility for education is changing as described above, because it seems that they are able to leave home if it presents opportunities to raise the family’s living standard. Another key factor which
prevents both girls and boys from completing their education is migration which may have resulted from consumption and globalisation pressure. On the one hand, ideas around women’s education are also changing due to the increasing number of young men and women who migrate to the city for higher education with satisfactory outcomes afterwards. On the other hand, a study of young women’s journey through higher education contends that education may not necessarily be an empowering means for young women’s success, but their resistance to gender norms embodied in their girlhood made them succeed in education (Rogers, 2014). Therefore, taking this into account, it means that resistance to dominant gender roles affects girls’ education, and education conversely affects gender roles.

Women’s image, migration and power negotiation

Throughout history, men have had more privileges compared to women in terms of decision making in the households in a patriarchal setting as well as decision making to appear in public domains such as local politics (Brickell, 2011; Jacobsen, 2008). Empirical findings through this research suggest that while certain gender norms still exist, there is a wider recognition on the significance of women’s roles in local politics. As an attempt to interrupt women who wish to explore more opportunities beyond households, ‘women belong near the kitchen stove’ is an expression which is often heard and used to ridicule women’s dreams. While a precise definition and rationale behind this phrase can hardly be found, interpretation of this term is based on individual knowledge and experiences. For Phat, this phrase depicts inequality for women and dictates that women have no rights to do other things outside the kitchen. Phat uses the notion of women’s rights to contradict this idea as quoted below:

Men and women have equal rights to learn and to lead. Women also have rights to take high ranking positions in government. This is only applicable for well-educated women, not low-educated women who only have little knowledge. At the local level, women who are well educated also can stand as a candidate because women and men have equal rights. All human
beings are born with the same rights, unlike the old society (in the past) which said women belong near the kitchen stove; it’s not like that. Both men and women have equal rights to education, rights to governing the country under law.

(Phat, male, farmer, Tamau village, interview, June 2015)

Phat’s expression can be interpreted that the idea of ‘women belong near the kitchen stove’ can be challenged because the contemporary society, to his knowledge, focuses on legislations and rights, which provides women more options. He personally thinks women’s rights are both legal rights and natural rights. However, the extent to which women should deserve this recognition relies upon how much women are educated, which is problematic. Similar to this, another participant expressed his knowledge in relation to the restriction on women’s mobility that:

‘Women belong near the kitchen stove’ is an old saying, which means that women cannot go far away. It is the old-fashioned saying which underestimates women. But women nowadays can move beyond the kitchen stove (literally). Because women at the present time can pursue their study, to bring political development at the national level, and global level... that’s our Khmer women. Now, no men can say this saying. This saying is old, which does not portray the current situation.

(Leng, male, farmer, Tamau village, interview, June 2015)

Through Phat and Leng’s comments, how women are portrayed in their society is related to the awareness of laws and changes in gender stereotypes. They believe that women are making a difference, and women’s performance nowadays have transformed the image of women from being occupied with household chores and staying at home, to being in higher education, doing politics and connecting with outsiders around the globe. This transformation, in reverse, affects their views on gender stereotypes and the old idea of ‘women belong near the kitchen stove’ is no longer the only way.

Now, some would suggest that women cross the line and no longer belong near the kitchen stove, and women’s resistance to the gender norms comes through some forms of negotiating power. Power is defined as “the ability of one agent to affect the actions or
attitudes of another,” and power can be exercised, deployed, and constructed to be positive or negative (Gregory et al, 2009: p.577). Empirical evidence shows that while power relations in the family are framed by gender, family hierarchy and culture, power is being negotiated through economic force, one of the impacts of globalisation. From one perspective, it can be noticed that once the family’s economy and livelihood is controlled by parents, parents have greater influence on children’s decisions. When economic means are removed, this level of influence might also decrease. In other words, decision making in the family partially relies upon who the breadwinner is. Two participants highlighted the political importance of economic force on everyday life of people in their community. Both raised the case of parents’ influences on their children’s marriage:

Now we talk about women’s rights and youth rights, you think parents still arrange marriage for them, no? Now if they get along with each other, they ask us to follow them (arrange ceremonies). There is no longer such an idea like ‘cake is never bigger than the basket’. They (young people) go to work and experience more. Parents have no rights to suppress or dictate children anymore. Before, no, you cannot do anything if parents deny your proposal. Social norms have been changed. Now children raise parents, and before parents raise children. Now parents only look after grandchildren instead.

(Maly, female, district official, Ba Phnum district, Interview, July 2015)

In Maly’s interview, parents used to arrange marriage for children especially for girls in the past. Her interview shows that in the past, although children used to disagree with arranged marriage, they still needed parental acceptance from both sides on their love relationship before the marriage could take place. In relation to this, local people used to say that ‘cake is never bigger than the basket’, which is a popular proverb from a classic novel in Khmer literature. In the novel, the mother warns her daughter not to choose love over parents because parents (the basket) provide shelter for children (the cake) so that they are more superior (bigger). This implies that parents are the guardians of children, so parents know best what is good for their children’s future including decisions on marriage and relationships. Hence, arranged marriage was a norm. However, according to Maly’s
opinion, the value of this proverb has become less convincing when both young men and young women are economically independent. If so, that means economic power is an important means of power negotiation, as someone may legitimise someone else’s power to make decisions on behalf of them just because they provide financial support. In another comment about women and men’s behaviours toward HIV testing services for pre-marriage couples, health centre staff also echoed the same idea as mentioned above.

Most women already have their partners in mind and parents only need to arrange the wedding ceremony for them. No more arranged marriage. [...] Parents have no more influence on children over 18. [...] Now the cake is bigger than the basket. Before, the mother arranged for them because parents organized for a living. But now children organize it. Once they go to study in Phnom Penh (city), they live their lives and earn income themselves. Now they can earn like 200 dollars per month and send money to their mother.

(Dara, male, health centre staff, Pra Srae village, Interview, July 2015)

Dara’s expression shows that the conventional family hierarchy becomes repositioned when young people are more economically independent. In addition, young people have more exposure to new cultures, education and opportunities, allowing them to resist the old ways of thinking and exercise their rights and freedoms. Although both Maly’s and Dara’s interviews do not necessarily mean that children are more superior than their parents in terms of power in decision making, children, especially women, gain power to escape from the locus of households, which allow them to act as an individual and for their own interests.

Like other participants, Sreyleak finds economic power as a negotiating power in her family and as a practice of resisting gender discourses. Sreyleak stated that:

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If we can earn income on our own, men also value us. Men cannot look down on us. If we do not have income, men (husbands) can give us the money but he will take it all back when he wants. But normally, he can give us 100,000 riels to spend for groceries, school fees…and then it is all spent, nothing’s left. If we forget where each spending goes, husbands get mad. If we women have jobs, we control our income, we spend for ourselves and we are happy. Then, when other people see us, they want their children to become like us; it is like my niece who said ‘because aunty has a salary, she is not afraid of uncle’.

(Sreyleak, female, former women political activist, Tamau village, interview, June 2015)

According to Sreyleak, she feels more confident and independent to have her own income so she will not have troubles when she spends some money. By saying she is not afraid of her husband can be implied that she has implicit power which makes her less inferior to her husband on any occasion. It indicates a more equal relationship. For her, such power is not just for her self-esteem, but she is also a role model for the younger generation. Economic power should not be adequate to address unequal gender relations (Razavi & Miller, 1995). However, it can be used for bargaining power (Kabeer, 2003) for stepping back from subordination, as a short term goal.

**Political participation in the domestic sphere**

Based on a previous study, whether women have been active in politics either on the stage or behind the scenes, it seems that when women ‘do’ politics, their roles, participation and approaches have been highly influenced by their gender roles (Frieson, 2001; Jacobsen, 2008). For example, during the 1940s women involved in political activities such as nation regeneration in a way that women can utilise their feminine characteristics, the image of ideal women and motherhood to promote national identity and influence others (Jacobsen, 2008).

Brickell (2011) focuses more on the activities and performances of men and women in the household. The discourses centre on women’s inability to avoid domestic chores rather than domestic chores as one of women’s choice and how politically influential women can be within a household. Even if women still play a role as a mother: women can
influence the family members on their political decisions. If women have access to information, they know more about opportunities and constraints that their family are having. They made better decisions in the households which bring about change if they are educated, as one participant suggested:

Housewives need to have knowledge. If they are head of the household, they not only cook meals and wash clothes for their kids but need to know about the outside environment. If not, they miss information about issues which can threaten their families including children and grandchildren.

(Neary, female, local official, Dei Thoy village, interview, July 2015)

To some local people, women do not have to be politicians or in public/administrative positions to be politically influential. Besides having rights to vote which legitimates women’s power in electoral politics, women are considered as an important channel for political engagement between politicians and citizens. As a quote below shows, women through their role as a mother, either working mother or housewife mother, can contribute to social change as well as mobilising political constituencies. When I asked her if she thinks having women in leadership is important, a female district official said:

Now people know more about the significance of having women in leadership. Some men want more women to become leaders because they think women are the mother of the world. It means that a woman stays close to her child the most because men have to go far away for a living so they do not have enough time to guide the children, so men want women to be more knowledgeable. Some men would argue [if women guide/teach children, what are the roles of husbands?], but they would say ‘leave this job for the wives because husbands are not home regularly and husbands only need to earn money to support the children’.

(Sinoun, female, district official, Ba Phnum district, interview, July 2015)
Through the interviews with Maly and Sinoun, women at home have an important role as a child bearer. Intimacy creates a mode of interaction between mothers and children, and knowledge is passed on to the next generation through child bearing. Nevertheless, it does not show gender relations which can make mother’s influence on children conditional. According to the theoretical discussion earlier, it could be argued that if women were influenced by men in a patriarchal setting, women would only pass on the masculine attitudes to their children, which may not make a lot of difference to the local politics nowadays (Whitworth, 1994).

During focus group with women, while some say they do not know much about what is happening in their society, some say they are keen on observing their leaders. To their knowledge, their rights to vote and with consent are something realistic as they discussed below:

Question: are women in the village now interested in politics?
Participant A: I do not know much about politics.
Participant B: I want to know about politics.
Participant C: I want to see what they have built. I would admire them for building something.
Participant E: Then, we can vote altogether.
Participant F: Now we vote for whoever we like, no one forces us. We vote for anyone we like, men or women, we don’t care […]

(Female participants, Pra Srae village, women focus group, July 2015)

Through this conversation, community women are seen as important actors as political observers, although they are not present in political power. This should be regarded as an important issue when discussing women’s roles in politics as Brownill and Halford (1990) contend that traditionally, women’s participation in the social side of politics was categorized as non-politics, so that women’s politics through her non-public sphere is overlooked. Now, I will look at how local perceptions on masculinity and femininity are related to politics.

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5.2.2 Masculinity and femininity

Conceptually, femininity and masculinity issues have been discussed a lot in relation to world politics that women would make a difference to the world politics if women became leaders (Whitworth, 1994). Empirical findings show that the discussion of femininity and masculinity shapes local people’s vision of whom they expect to be their respective leader.

A previous study in Cambodia shows that influenced by the gender stereotypes, local people have less preference towards women political candidates (Öjendal & Kim, 2014). It is assumed that women’s feminine characteristics such as being timid and shy are not suited in political positions, while men’s masculine characteristics such as being strong and dominant make men a better political leader (Öjendal & Kim, 2014). Nevertheless, masculine behaviours such as being dominant may not be an excuse to discriminate against women leaders in Boeung Preah commune. There are several aspects of masculinity that do not seem to fit in local’s expectations. For Dara, being timid is somehow a more positive aspect of the current leaders as he stated that:

Women deserve to be the chief if they have good behavior and they are gentle. They do not speak about unnecessary things like men. Women would go straight to the topic. I think with men as a chief, women (under supervision) do not challenge a lot because after men say a few words, they will stop talking. If women were the chief, women keep challenging.

(Dara, male, health centre staff, Pra Srae village, interview, July 2015)

Dara’s statement means that women [either local women or women commune councilors] find it more comfortable to approach gentle leaders. Women leaders would be preferred because they are more open or gentle to others, which encourage longer conversation. Perhaps, for Dara, communication with women is seen as less risky if mistakes are made.

In the argument below, Sokbun describes drinking alcohol as a masculine behavior. Such a characteristic is viewed as careless in terms of leadership because if men were not much into drinking (alcoholic), men could be more focused in the commune work. However, in
particular for women, the statement does not assure that women do not consume alcohol. Plus, according to a women’s focus group discussion, women who drink alcohol as much as men can be viewed as less feminine which is also less culturally acceptable. Perhaps, women are also much more occupied than men because of their domestic roles, leaving her no opportunities to join any gatherings outside. For some reasons, because women do not fit in the habit of drinking, women are viewed as better leaders. Sokbun stated in an interview:

I think it is good if women are present in politics especially in elected positions in both the commune council and district council. First, women are determined, they don’t have time to hang out and drink [refers to drinking/eating/gathering], they are focused on work. Second, women know women and children affairs. There are many other important points, and in fact, women are patient and always try to address internal conflicts.

(Sokbun, male, district official, Angkrong village, interview, July 2015)

According to Sokbun, when it is not common for women to drink and have gatherings, it reduces corruption if women were leaders. This is because bribery works through intimacy and relationship built by gathering activities. However, this issue of femininity and masculinity around fiduciary risk is debatable in men’s group discussions as shown below:

Participant A: I agree that women are not involved much in corruption because women are not greedy like men. I was told by some elderly people
that women are not as greedy as men. First, women have long term visions even if women are physically weaker. Women have more empathy than men. And women are not as rude and aggressive as men.

**Participant B:** I want to say women have Brahma Viharas² more than men.

**Participant A:** Corruption takes place whenever you need money to gain power for threatening the others. If women do not use such power, women are less involved in corruption. It is women’s nature.

**Participant C:** Men dare to go to Karaoke and be fun, but women do not dare to go.

(Male participants, Prasrae village, men focus group, July 2015)

The statements above show men’s positive views about women leaders in terms of their attitudes toward corruption as women are assumed to have more transparency. Women have more compassion as one participant said women have characteristics of Brahma Viharas with other people. It can be interpreted that women are not keen on using power for fighting or hurting others, therefore women are less likely to be interested in power. Hence, corruption which is a tool to obtain power would not be attractive to women. In addition, by saying that men have access to entertainment (Karaoke which is a place for drinking, dancing and gathering) more than women, it assumes that women have less opportunities for corruption, as a participant previously said that bribery occurs through gatherings.

However, according to some men, the extent to which corruption takes place is subject to women and men’s views on materialism, and therefore women are also subject to corruption as two participants contest that:

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²Brahma Viharas refers to four principles of divine emotions in Buddhism, which includes Metta (Loving-kindness) Karuna (Compassion), Mudita (appreciative joy), and Upekkha (Equanimity) retrieved from according to http://www.brahmaviharas.org/, last accessed 18 February 2016.
Participant A: But I know women’s mind set, now if men come back from work with an empty pocket, women will complain; you can try! So like the traffic cops, nowadays; they blow the whistle (literally) and fine people every day for money, right? I am not joking; no one wants to be poor; maybe men want to be poor because after they go out eating, drinking and for entertainment. How can you say women do not want to become rich? As long as they want to become rich, they are likely to corrupt.

Participant B: For women, even they want to become rich, they would never dictate husbands to extort money from someone but it is women’s job [to follow up about husband’s income]. Women need to ask about income because she needs money for every expense. First, it’s for children, and if men come back with empty pocket, how can she get money to buy food?

Participant A: Women want to become rich more than men do because they want make up, jewellery, and high heel shoes… all luxuries.

(Male participants, Pra Srae village, men focus group, July 2015)

Through the conversation above, participant A and B tended to argue over whether or not men are more corrupt than women or the other way around. In the discussion context, some traffic police officers (usually men) do not receive good impressions from many people especially because of the misuse of power in their traffic law enforcement. This has become a demonstration for participant A who said that the motive behind traffic police officers’ acts is women’s needs. However, other participants highlighted the fact that women and men are the same, and that the difference is between good and bad people.
Participant C: So after women come back from work with empty pockets, men do not ask about money? I think men and women are all the same.

Participant D: For me I think we cannot generalise and it is not evident. Women and men are all human beings. We cannot generalise. Men or women, they are not all the same. There are good people and bad people.

Participant E: If you say it depends on individuals, I agree.

(Male participants, Prasrae village, men focus group, July 2015)

Women are sometimes viewed as possessing soft, gentle personalities but some are unkind and tricky. One participant criticised women as being arrogant whether in her position or husband’s position as he said:

For me I think women are fearful when they hear about joining politics[…]
But I noticed that when a woman gets any positions, she acts if she’s higher than the king (literally), I do not know why. […] and we said ‘if the husband were a captain (sak bei), the wife would be a major’ (sak boun).

(A male participant, Pra Srae village, men focus group, July 2015)

In the statement, this participant argues that women tend to be arrogant once they become involved in power, and women are seen as having ‘power behind the scenes’ although they are not present in the political spaces. As studied by Frieson (2001), this power behind the scenes means that women are highly influential in the family structure and women can command or persuade their husbands to make decisions accordingly. By viewing women as an arrogant type of leader, although participants accept that such femininity can be subjective, it does not encourage some local people to think of how women leaders or women politicians can make change at the commune development which is being led by men.

In conclusion, it is clear from this section that local understandings of gender roles, masculinity and femininity are complex and diverse. This is important for understanding women’s political opportunities and challenges.
5.3 Women’s political opportunities

The findings from this study show that while government, civil society, and other stakeholders encourage women to join politics, and some political opportunities are open for women who are interested to join, not every woman would decide to join politics or remain in the positions. This section will discuss women’s political opportunities by explaining the reasons behind women’s decisions and explorations of new opportunities. Overall, three factors which include social, economic and political factors are discussed together.

Responding to a query of why female focus group participants do NOT prefer working for the local government (or join politics) if they are given opportunities, there are different opinions as shown below:

Researcher: If you are given an opportunity to work in local politics, would you do it? (For those who said no)

Participant A: That’s because we are not knowledgeable
Participant B: I personally do not want to do it. I’d rather do business, farming or other things
Participant C: I would just stay at home and rather look after wealth/property within my household.
Participant D: No preference on that work
Participant E: Impossible that I can go… [Lots of housework]

Researcher: If there is someone to help, would you like to do it?
Participant E: If there is someone, I would want to do it… even when I am speaking now, I’m still thinking about my cows.

(Female participants, Pra Srae village, women focus group, July 2015)
Based on these responses, there are several issues which discourage women not to join politics. First, women participants do not feel they have enough qualification; hence they are not confident to say they would like to take up the opportunities. Second, women participants might not be interested in public work, and would rather look for other opportunities which are worthy of their labour. Third, women participants might not be interested in other work because they would prioritise their duties at home. Lastly, women might be interested in politics too, but they do not feel they have enough time to do it due to their overwhelming workloads at home. These statements are now used as scenarios for discussing women’s constraints and motivations in political positions at the commune level.

5.3.1 Political and social factors

Based on examples given in the women’s focus group discussion above, women’s political opportunities are subject to a number of political and social factors which include political culture, family support, gender norms, and capacity gaps.

Political culture

Part of the findings illustrate that political culture also affects women’s decision making and opportunities. Men remain the main actors in local politics because men have been more active in political parties than women in the political history until now. One of the reasons is politics can be dangerous for women as a participant says:

They say ‘women should not join that political party because local people do not like this party. They should only join this ruling party instead’. So some women are afraid of politics. […] I want more women to be present in politics, but most of them are fearful. We usually say politics only results in death or defection. […] Our country is not yet developed, but maybe it’s possible in the future (to have more women) […] Some are threatened (both men and women) by saying ‘if you join this political
party, and something happened, I would not be responsible’. That is our bad norm, that we do not have solidarity.

(A male participant, Pra Srae village, men focus group, July 2015)

The findings suggest that if the country was fully democratised and politics were seen as less dangerous or risky, it would increase women’s participation in politics as political opportunities are offered through electoral politics. Changing political culture could then provide women with more security and trust.

**Family support**

Some women such as female commune councillors can have opportunities based at the local level but this role shift does not adequately reflect change in the family structure or promotion of women’s choices. Although women have to work, they are still attached to the obligations toward their family which creates a double burden for women, for example as studied by Brickell (Brickell, 2011). A female participant said:

They are men, it is easier for them as I usually join work missions with men, for example, with a group of five men and I am the only woman. So… they can do their political party work, their workload is lighter than mine. During a mission, I always think of my children and grandchildren who go to school, wondering what they have to eat. We (women) think a lot about family needs. Before going out, we have to prepare rice and food for family members.

(Neary, female, local official, Dei Thoy village interview, July 2015)

Compared to men, Neary needs more effort to balance family life and work life. Although women work outside home, they would not forget about obligations at home. However, from Neary’s opinions and other women’s, even if the household burden was heavy, women would find it encouraging if they still had emotional support from family. Family support is an important external factor which motivates women who wish to participate in political office as is also evident in other parts of local communities (Ly, 2015)
In response it has been suggested that women commune councillors deserve fewer responsibilities from commune council work, one of her male colleagues said:

We think that all commune councilors (women) have husbands and children so they work at home and serve the government at the same time. So we should give them some spare time. For men like us, meals are already prepared when we come back home because our wives stay at home. One female commune councillor is busy because her children all go to study and her husband works in construction. The other woman (councillor) has to look after grandchildren.

(Sithorn, male, local official, Ang Krong Village, interview, July 2015)

As Sithorn’s script suggests, women are encouraged to have lighter workloads or more time off from work because women suffer hardships in balancing family life and work life, which is well understood by her male counterparts. It also reflects that it is easier for men to work outside as they have privilege at home because of the presence of their spouses, while it is harder for women to work outside as they perform dual roles with or without the presence of their spouses. However, this demonstrates that changing the family structure in which men are more superior than women has not fully happened. In addition, a solution that gives women more spare time to be dutiful housewives may be thought of as an equitable solution but it may not help advancing women’s status especially if women wish to become an outstanding colleague.

**Gender norms**

As discussed earlier, local perceptions about gender roles, femininity and masculinity have guided local people’s views on women being a leader in their commune, some of which are positive for women. Although there is wider recognition of women’s roles in politics, and women are encouraged to apply for political opportunities, women need to appeal to moral standards more than men do. It means that compared to men, women are more prone to positions being dismissed if either men or women act morally wrong. This case was termed sexual double standard for women (Lilja, 2008), when women need double protections on their political positions. While the definition of morality varies
based on participants’ experiences and personal values, there are some interesting points revealed. For instance, women are judged if they have intimate relations with male colleagues that affect political party’s reputation:

Some voters do not care whether leaders are women or men, but political parties think that they must increase the number of women. Only some people think that leaders must be women or men. We think that there is a need for women’s inclusion in all villages, but we do not have many women now. It is difficult to find female candidates. Some (women) are not appropriate, and it makes us feel difficult to select them. I am not devaluing women but honestly, some people are difficult (literally), they tend to attract/flirt with other women’s husbands (male politicians). It’s very tough… that creates a bad reputation of our political party, it’s chaotic. I speak honestly (laughing)!

(Sokbun, male, district official, Ba Phnum district, interview, July 2015)

Some political parties tend to avoid nominating women who are considered to have inappropriate manners, for example, flirting married men in the same political party. In relation to this, women were not encouraged to go outside, far away from home, not only because of security reason but also to avoid gossips or accusation of adultery issues.

**Qualification: education and political experiences**

Education is important from the perspectives of both female and male participants. Because women have more historical disadvantages compared to men, women have rarely been the top leaders in the commune, as a participant expresses:
I think most of women commune councilors are aging. They are at least 50 years old. The most important thing is their education. Those who are working got their education a long time ago. When they had children, and then grandchildren, they did not pursue their study. Men are better educated. Like me, after having a job, I no longer studied. Men do not have to look after kids but women look after children and then grandchildren.

(Sinoun, female, district official, Ba Phnum district, interview, July, 2015)

According to Sinuon, mature women find it difficult to reach the top political positions. The fact that women had to compromise their studies with their motherhood when they were younger has made them weaker than their male counterparts. It is clear from Sinuon that gender roles have contributed to the fact that women have missed lots of opportunities. During the interview, Sinuon contends that perhaps men had primary roles (army, leaders and decision makers) in national conflation during the post-conflict periods (which refer to the national defence and reconstruction after the Khmer rouge regime, the Cambodian genocide period 1975-1979). Therefore, men have been active in politics and are usually mobilised for political activities. Plus, men continued their studies after the civil war, which made them wiser than women from their generation. As has been found in a study elsewhere, some women at the local level were offered political positions and benefits as a reward for joining the cause of the nation (Baaz & Lilja, 2014). Women who had privileges to join politics nowadays were also those who had some educational background which was better than other women in the village. However, Sinoun has a positive vision, that women from the next generations who are better educated can lead the way, but she doubts if commune work remains a good choice for young women or not, as she said:

[...] Maybe in the future women can become the leaders. Women from this and next generations will have more capacity. Some hold bachelor’s degrees, and some hold associate degrees which mean that there are more qualified people. As we can see, there are some graduates who find it hard to find a job and just stay at home (literally) [so why not recruit these
people to work in the commune?]. Some who want a public job cannot find it because there are limited posts, and the private sector offers more employment opportunities. However, I think if they had other jobs [corporate jobs], they would not come here [government jobs] even though there are posts available. But for some, they prefer working for the government because although there are fewer incentives, they expect retirement benefits; it’s more stable.

(Sinoun, female, district official, Ba Phnum district, interview, July 2015)

In this generation, there are also women who are better educated but local state jobs might be not their choice. As Sinoun has mentioned, commune work might be attractive to those who are unemployed. If private jobs and state jobs provide equal incentives, state jobs might be more preferred. Therefore, the implications of gender roles are not the only factors which influences women’s political opportunities, women’s economy is also important.

5.3.2 Economic factor

As found earlier, economic independence is bargaining power within the household. Therefore, economic factors such as incentives and economic background influence a lot on women’s decision making.

Low incentives, high pressure

It is found that women commune councillors who are successfully performing in political roles are likely to have other sources of income (Ly, 2015). For women, making the decision to accept political opportunities or not also depends on their ability to negotiate their power at home, using the offered economic incentives. A female participant describes how she gave up commune work after she was elected in the commune/sangkat election in 2012:

I did not accept this position because the salary for commune work was too low. It was only 70,000riels for commune council members at that time and a teacher’s salary was higher. I also wanted to be a commune councilor, but I was thinking that if I chose teaching, it would be better for my family’s living conditions. Now a teacher’s salary has reached over
600,000 riels. But, actually I love commune work.

(Sreyleak, female, former WPAN and now teacher, Tamau village, interview, June 2015)

Sreyleak gave up her dream job as a commune councillor because of the low incentives she would receive. As she mentioned, the current salary she got from school was already six to seven times the salary from the commune, therefore, if she did not have other sources of income, she would not be able to survive. It also can be implied that for those who wish to have long term participation in local politics, they need to have a higher commitment and expectations beyond economic incentives. I asked what happens if women earn little money at work, she replied:

If women are occupied at work and earn a little, there can be problems at home because someone [refers to husbands] at home will argue with them. That means the person who stays at home is exhausted while women always disappear from home, without income or with less income just to pay for gasoline or phone cards, women will be questioned a lot. That is really discouraging women’s efforts. […] if it is men who earn less, there would be fewer problems because women rarely fight with men about that. […] I don’t know why, it’s our society which values men this way. Even men come back home without money, women hesitate to ask, but men would dare to ask. […] Maybe men think they do housework for their wives.

(Sreyleak, female, teacher, Tamao village, interview, June 2015)

Although women have a chance to join politics, the lack of support and motivation influence highly on the women’s decisions. Therefore, what happens behind the scenes shows that gender equality in political spaces cannot be achieved without having to change gender relations at home (Razavi & Miller, 1995). According to Sreyleak’s narratives, it seems that it is more usual for men to question women about their income if women work outside of their domestic sphere. This contradicts the earlier discussion on masculinity and femininity that women tend to be the ones who inquire into their
husband’s income. Such a stereotype concerning men means that women’s power is legitimated by women’s ability to extract benefits outside the domestic sphere but these benefits also need to adequately compensate men’s opportunity costs while they think they are ‘doing their wives’ household chores’. Otherwise, women would rather go back to their normal domestic domain.

**Economic background**

Economic background influences women’s decisions to become involved in politics. In some studies, it shows that some political parties find it hard to nominate women as the first candidate on the political party list, because women have less economic resources than men to conduct political campaigns (Öjendal & Kim, 2014). From my findings, those who choose to join politics might not get benefits from politics as much as they get from other sources of income, given that they are solely rewarded by the income from the local government. These people want to use all the knowledge they have with commitment to make a change in their everyday life. For example, qualified women for political parties can be found, but some women might prefer not to, as one would described:

> We can actually find qualified persons, but they do not want to spend time with such a thing. Plus, there is no financial support from political leaders to pay for travel or motorcycle gasoline. So if political leaders love and support us, we spend our own resources like that.[…] For women supporters, personally speaking, those who have a good economic condition, perhaps they do not want to become involved. Only those who are poor and suffering, they want to join when there are political activities.  

(Neary, female, local official, Dei Thoy village interview, July 2015)

How economic backgrounds are linked with political participation can be seen problematic. Based on Neary’s quote, while it is demonstrated that economic merit is required to be an effective political candidate, some who have good economic background tend to step away from politics because they think it is not relevant to them. Ironically based on Neary’s opinion, a motivation for political supporters who have been
more active in politics might link to poverty, and perhaps poor people are the ones who want to advocate for change the most. In her explanation, those who already meet their basic needs and good living standard might not care much about politics because there are no rewards and they can use their time to do something else. Hence, if this view is taken into account, there seems to be no meeting point for political parties and those who wish to be political candidates.

A study also comments that strong economic background is important for women to become outstanding political leaders (Ly, 2015). This can be true to an extent for Beoung Preah commune. Several participants suggest that if women do not have strong or medium economic background, they cannot work in politics any longer, and they may not be selected as candidates unless they have stronger personalities compared to others. For example, Phan says that:

Women need to have an appropriate living condition […]. If the living condition is too poor, it’s very difficult. Implementing jobs is also difficult, and voters also judge candidates accordingly. Now it is difficult to make local people listen to us. I mean, if we cannot make our own living, how can we guide others to make a better living? Only if our living is appropriate, they may listen to you and they believe in you. Candidate selection is not about women or men, but it’s important to fit the criteria.

(Phan, male, local official, Pra Srae village, interview, July 2015)

Economic background is important to avoid personal attacks from local people as well as to provide support for subordinates as Phan states. To be successful in politics, a good economic background is preferable for potential candidates while motivation for performance is beyond the financial reward. Based on Phan’s statement, however, the fact that economic background is an issue for women more than men is unknown.

5.4 Conclusion

Instead of thinking about women’s roles in local politics only in a formal political structure, the chapter also focuses on women’s political participation as a member of households. It means that in order to achieve gender equality in a wider political structure, it needs to change gender relations from the household level.
Based on local perspectives, politics and electoral processes can be seen as gender-neutral for men and women, but the fact that gender stereotypes and gender norms still hinder women’s opportunities behind the scene is also acknowledged. The contemporary gender discourse and knowledge of masculinity and femininity at the local level can be an asset for analysing local behavioural change which shapes local understandings of opportunities and challenges in increasing the number of women in decision making positions and women in political participation.

Besides gender roles and gender stereotypes, the chapter also investigated the economic, political and social factors which should get the attention of policy makers for long term outcomes. In conclusion, it is clear from this chapter that making political opportunities equally accessible for all especially marginalised groups is a first measure for achieving gender equality, though the gendered outcomes are also important. The next chapter will focus on how women’s political representation actually makes impacts on behavioural change and women’s status in the community.
CHAPTER 6: THE POLITICAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AT THE COMMUNE LEVEL

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I focused on the political opportunities for women including those who wish to join formal politics and those who participate in politics. Besides understanding the factors which influence women’s participation in local politics, understanding what happens when women participate in local politics is also interesting. Hence, this chapter discusses two main points regarding local perspectives on the political representation of women. First, it illustrates the extent to which local people think women’s presence in decision making positions makes a difference to the commune council’s performance and local people’s well-being. Second, it discusses what form of representation of women takes place in the commune council, and how decision making incorporates the needs and concerns of women and other groups whom women are representing.

As discussed in chapter four on understanding women’s political opportunities, the increase of village women being active in productive roles and community programs means that gender discourses on women as passive housewives is being transformed. It is also explained that the discourses on gender roles have been gradually changed through the transition of social and economic forces such as globalisation and migration for employment and education. The chapter also found that women have started to appear more in the political sphere in Boeung Preah commune. Therefore, it is interesting to ask how local people perceive the impacts of more women occupying political spaces. Despite the fact that most participants are more open about the roles of women in local politics, gender roles in general have not been fully interchangeable between men and women. This fact leads me to explore whether or not women occupying positions of power affect gender inequality at the commune level as well as in women’s homes and at the everyday level. On the whole, this chapter provides more understanding on women’s roles in local politics which were also covered in the previous chapter, but it highlights the importance of having women in decision making positions in which women use the executive power to provide care for those whom women represent. Throughout this chapter, the third and the forth of the research questions will be answered: To what extent does having women’s representation in the commune change gender inequalities at local and every day level?, and How does having women in local leadership positions change
(or not) gender relations and gender inequalities at the local and everyday level according to local actors (including leaders, community members etc.)?

6.2 Implications of having women in positions of power at the local government

There are different understandings of how women’s presence in decision making positions (such as the roles of commune chief or commune councillors) makes impacts to the community, according to local people. For some local participants, increasing the number of women at the decision making level is believed to be an important force in promoting gender equality and the well-being of local people, while some other participants feel less optimistic about that. The following sections discuss different perspectives on the presence of women in positions of power, in this case, the commune councillors who represent and articulate the needs of local people in the commune.

6.2.1 Local comprehension of the significance of women’s representation

Although women occupying positions in local politics are seen as increasing, the needs for women’s representation is often justified by an assumption that women representatives can look after women population because they have common interests, needs and experience as a woman. As this research has found, commune matters, which involve women and children’s affairs, are preferably handled by women leaders, based on both women and men’s perspectives.

As learnt from Ruedin (2013), representation in politics refers to the act of presenting the ideas or interests of citizens or particular groups, at the seat of government where policy making takes place. For local government, representation can be referred to both making decisions on behalf of citizens and providing public services (Berman, 1981).

Political representatives

One of the factors which motivate political parties to mobilise women political activists is to attract women supporters, with a promise that women will bring about the interests of women and children (Sarom, interview, 2015). For instance, Sreyleak suggested that women are the best suited political representatives to articulate the needs and concerns of women because women are assumed to understand the physical and emotional well-being of women and children.
Women understand about children’s concerns; they are women; they are the ones who bear children and grandchildren so they know about their problems. When there are NGOs coming, such as the RACHA organization which provides health support for the local community, women leaders request support in health care such as intestinal worm medicines or treatment for malnutrition for children. In every meeting, they raise this issue and they also propose that ‘in the village, there are children who often get diarrhea because of the lack of hygiene, so the NGO can provide anti-bacterial soaps and so on’. […] in the commune investment plan meeting (conducted annually), she also raised about concerns of women and children in the village.

(Sreyleak, female, teacher, Tamau village, interview, June 2015)

From the above statement, we can see that women’s experiences in women’s health, family livelihood and child bearing legitimise women’s capability to speak for women’s interests when there are investment plans and project meetings with stakeholders such as non-governmental organizations. Because women are fulfilling similar gender roles, and they are more associated with nurturing children, women are assumed to know more about women and children’s needs and concerns better than men do. This can imply that the presence of women in the commune council is significant in that it helps resolve women’s issues, which are assumed to be less understood within men’s leadership.

On top of presenting women and children’s needs, most suitable roles for women politicians are claimed to be promoting knowledge of gender equality and women’s empowerment. This view is reinforced in several interviews and focus group discussions, similar to what Leng responds as below:

Question: Which areas of the commune work do women do best?
Answer: I notice that women in the commune committee are doing the best in gender awareness and learning programs. They have done the outreach activities (to raise awareness on particular issues) in the villages, so people have more knowledge, reduce family conflicts, and girls can go to school far away from home, different from the past.

(Leng, male, farmer, Tamau village, interview, June 2015)

After asking, the reason of why women or gender equality programmes are usually described as the roles of women leaders rather than men leaders is not clearly known. However, perhaps local people know about women political activists through various local-based women’s empowerment programmes which focus on gender equality and women’s rights. This means that women are more visible than men in this type of programme. Throughout the fieldwork discussions, most participants were aware of women’s presence in local government through awareness raising activities such as village meetings and trainings on gender equality concepts, law to prevent domestic violence, girls’ education and other related issues as Leng also explained. Even though there are some women commune councillors in charge of administrative work such as the civic registry for birth certificates, they mostly involve dealing with women, for example, collecting documents of mothers and new-born babies from the health centre (Interviews, 2015). Chanthy would describe the role of women leaders as the one who usually circulates information in the village regarding gender issues, commune development plan meetings, and the one who can mobilise local participation.

When there are village meetings, they invite me. […] I was invited by the deputy village chief who is a woman. When there are village planning sessions, they also invite local people to join. Like when you come, you communicate with her and she will spread the information in the village. I often join the village meetings, about gender. […] I learnt about violence against women, not allowing men to abuse women, something like that. […] when there are meetings to discuss support planning for the poor, they (women) arrive at the scene (the poor households), and they issue equity fund card (ban krei kror) for us. There is no bribing at all.
In her interview, Chanthy is very enthusiastic about having the presence of women in local government. She has a good relationship with a female deputy village chief as well as women commune councillors. For example, she was satisfied with women’s performance and the equity fund card she has received, which can be used to access a number of free services in the commune including health care while these services are not free for the majority. She believes that the equity fund project has reached its intended beneficiaries (women and the poor) by saying that women leaders help identify poor households at the scene without bribing. Otherwise, the real poor would not get benefits. For Chanthy, women leaders can be seen as more approachable and involved. As discussed in the previous chapter, discourse of feminine characteristics as open, less serious and approachable has become an asset for women leaders although subjectivity was also acknowledged. It can also infer that gender roles and gender norms have made relationship closer between women and women (or men and men) than women and men. For example, in women’s focus groups, female participants suggested that they have close relationships with their women councillor and deputy village chief through everyday conversations. Therefore, women leaders can be quicker than men leaders in response to women’s issues as they have more frequent contacts. This can be reflected in the different reactions between men and women’s focus group discussions. For example, many men’s focus group participants were unclear about achievements of women leaders in their commune, while women participants had a lot of compliments for women leaders who have personally helped women villagers or neighbours. Hence, this does not necessarily mean that men are neglected or incapable of women’s issues but gender roles may cause the relationship between leaders and population subject to gender difference.

**Women focal point**

For some, the roles of women leaders in the commune are often described as the women focal point (Chun bongkol strei), which means that local women mostly need to approach women leaders when there are cases of gender-based violence and other women issues. The presence of women authorities is needed in law enforcement on gender-based violence and family dispute resolutions as described by Neary:

(Chanthy, female, farmer, Pra Srae village, interview, July 2015)
Our role is to take actions at the scene when there are domestic violence, rape and violence against women in order to find solutions for victims who are women like us. […] Because they are not working in politics, they do not know what to do, but we are aware of (and understand) the law. We know what to do and can assist them to file a complaint to the authorities to seek immediate intervention. […] The best job for us is nothing more than solving our women’s problems. For example, biologically, we know about pregnancy and birth delivery, so we can advise those who are pregnant for the first time. We encourage them to go to health centre for a check-up with more accurate information and not to believe in pregnancy myths. If we are aware of women’s affairs, we can advise and share information. […] Men might also work in this issue but they may not address the issue well. For women health care, it is better to have women physicians because they know women’s symptoms. Men know about women’s health from the book, for example, how women go through labour, but men never experience it. If the male physicians are well-trained, they know the procedure.

(Neary, female, local official, interview, 2015)

While most participants consider women local leaders as active particularly in women issues, it is interesting to know whether men would overlook women’s needs and issues in the absence of women leaders. According to Neary, men are less familiar with women’s experiences in their community, so she contends that men might not be as capable as women in addressing women and children’s affairs especially in cases where men are not well informed or educated about women’s needs and emotions, for example during pregnancy and birth delivery. In the commune, gender-based violence and domestic violence still persists although it is believed to be decreasing (Interviews, 2015).

It is asserted by some interviewees that women victims tend to be more open with women local authorities than with men when it comes to dealing with gender-based violence such as rape, sexual violence within marriage and other sexual and reproductive health issues as these subjects seem to be a taboo for cross-sex conversation (Interviews, 2015).
On the whole, some participants agree that when there are more women elected or recruited in local government either in political positions or administration positions, it helps facilitate women in the population especially marginalised groups such as the poor to access public services and ask for attentions. Women are assumed to know best about women’s needs. This can imply that regardless of their rank, the roles of women politicians are defined by the concept of gender role which assumes that women’s interests are understood based on other women’s lived experiences throughout time.

In line with this point of view, there have been debates on whether a political representative’s characteristics matter to citizens, and it is suggested in that in Cambodian context, local people would vote for a person rather than the political parties’ ideology (Baaz & Lilja, 2014; Ruedin, 2013). Perhaps, then there could be differences to local politics if the elected political candidates were a man or a woman. For some local participants the presence of women at the local level is significant for women because they assume that women share the same gender identity, so that all women related affairs should be handled by women. Based on the theoretical discussion on intersectionality, this view, however, can be problematic when women should not be considered as homogenous, and hence the assumption that women authentically represent women can be limited (Rai, 2014). Through the previous chapter, it was challenged that the ability of political leaders to effectively make impacts in the community are also subject to their personalities, education and knowledge regardless of gender difference.

6.2.2 Deconstructing gender discourses

According to a liberal feminist perspective, gender equitable laws and policy are important for promoting gender equality (Whitworth, 1994), and women occupying positions in power are ideally the ones who can make key decisions to have such laws and policy in place. But deconstructing gender discourses might be the foremost strategy women politicians in Cambodia have used to resist the stereotypes which underestimate women (Lilja, 2008), so that the number of women in positions of power can be increased. Because of the gender stereotypes which assume that the majority of Cambodian women are not capable (physically and socially) in politics, Cambodian women remain subordinated in the political sphere (Lilja, 2008).

Participants have suggested that the presence of women in politics at the local level contributes to deconstructing gender discourses and this belief is also in line with Lilja
Throughout several interviews, it is noticed that in almost every attempt to describe the roles of women in local politics, participants contrast two discourses, ‘women should belong near the kitchen stove’ [which is traditional] and ‘women nowadays can do anything as same as men’ [which is contemporary]. These two discourses have become key points for analysis of local views about the significance of women’s representation, even if it is a descriptive one. Gender equality, based on their understanding, is about upgrading women’s image which is always relative to men’s image with or without gender equitable outcomes. Based on their views, promoting women’s identities in public spaces is significant in that it deconstructs the discourses which limit the possibilities of what women and girls should normally do in their daily life. Discourses impact highly on women and girls’ opportunities at the everyday level.

**Cultural attitudes toward women and girls**

When there are more women leaders in the commune, more local people agree that women can be competent and productive in their society. Hence, this new perception challenges a society which underestimates women’s potential. According to several participants, women’s presence in the commune council impacts local perceptions on what women can do for a living and for their society, as Phan’s interview also illustrates:

Having women leaders has changed gender norms. I suggest that we no longer say ‘women should belong near the kitchen stove’ or ‘women are useless’. Up to now, women can become the commune chief, district councillors and public civilians everywhere. […] so parents no longer feel that they do not want their daughters to study.

(Phan, male, local official, Pra Srae village, interview, July 2015)

By seeing more women in positions of power, such as commune chief and district chief, Phan suggests that one should not stereotype the roles of women or at least stereotyping should not be overemphasised in some context. In addition, Phan thinks that the familiarity of women in leadership roles which are important roles in their society has indirectly influenced local perceptions on gender roles, as he gives an example in the improvement of education for girls (indirect impacts).
From a popular perspective, women’s presence in decision making positions is assumed to be important for fighting against traditional gender roles which restrict women’s choices of careers. First, women in the positions of power are thought to be more influential in deconstructing the stereotypes, compared to ordinary women (Sokny, female, local authority, Tamau village, interview, July 2015). It can be because in Cambodian society, political leaders may be treated as an iconic figure, and people tend to respect those who have higher social and political status more than the ordinary ones (Öjendal & Kim, 2006). Second, deconstructing stereotypes contributes to parents’ visions and decisions for their daughters’ educational planning. This is because parents might not resist their daughters who want to pursue higher education when they start to recognise women’s roles beyond the reproductive ones (household chores and child bearing). Hence, girls would then have better access to education.

In line with past research (Brickell, 2011; Velasco, 2004), girls may have been discouraged to continue their studies (or pursue higher education) because girls and women were nurtured or expected to become housewives and stay at home. Therefore, there would be no use from enhancing girls’ education. While the lack of gender-sensitive policy and interventions in schools in rural areas might be found as seen in some research (Velasco, 2004), women representatives like Neary may expect, or be expected to fill the gaps. Regarding this, Neary who is a local official talked about the gender norms and her vision about education for girls in the commune that:

As a long term goal, I want women to overcome any challenges in order to be educated, at least they should finish grade 9 (lower secondary school). There are not many women in my generation who are educated. [...] Parents who are farmers have thought that it is useless for girls (daughters) to study, and that girls should only stay at home, cook and look after kids (when they get married); that’s enough. [...] When we (her and others) participate in politics, we have realised that women have rights to employment and education, as do men. Women can be lawyers, police officers and teachers, so women have primary roles like men. [...] I want
to see our society like this; I want to strengthen young women in next
generations and encourage parents to continue supporting their children
(daughters) to get an education.

(Neary, female, local official, Dei Thoy village interview, July 2015)

As Neary’s interview script suggests, the awareness that women can be as capable as men
in many areas such as politics, law and national security (police officers), which were
once believed to be masculine dominated careers, is increasing. As her note would also
reflect, perhaps, she and some other ordinary women from her age did not have any
notions of equal rights between men and women before. Once women like her participate
in politics (i.e. local government) they have access to information and knowledge which
inspire them to change their perceptions about gender roles and promote young women of
the next generations, especially through education for girls. Her enthusiasm about
education for girls, if it is well implemented, will bring about better and equal access to
education for boys and girls in her community.

Research conducted in Bangladesh discusses a similar finding that women’s political
participation may have a significant impact on long-term labour market outcome (Asian
Development Bank, 2015). This is because through women’s political representation,
parents change their perception on what in general women can achieve. Hence, it affects
their belief in children’s education. Parents and daughters are inspired by the presence of
women leaders in their village.

In the Beoun Preah commune context, where socio-economic conditions are complicated,
proposing that this change in education for girls is an outcome of increasing women’s
public visibility can be useful but it can be only a proxy indicator. According to some
participants, the change of attitudes toward education for girls can result from other
factors such as better education services or scholarships which encourage girls to attend
school more regularly. Plus, while school drop-outs currently matters for boys as well,
due to poverty and migration as discussed in chapter four, gender index in school
attainment might not be adequate to indicate that ‘education for all’ has been achieved. In
addition, gender parity in education might not result from the change in gender
stereotypes alone but it can also result from the current perspectives on advancing
family’s living conditions (consumption pressure). In some informal discussions, some
community people demonstrated that they did not feel inspired to invest in their
children’s education because they had seen some students who did not find opportunities
to continue after high school, and they also witnessed some graduates who returned home without a job. As they claimed, this case was not gender-based (Phat, male, farmer, Tamau village, interview, June 2015). Therefore, if it was evident that a student from the village gets a good payoff after they complete their study, there would be an increase in students pursuing their study. However, it should be acknowledged that as an impact from the village programs women leaders have involved, the awareness on the relevance of education for both boys and girls should have been increased. For instance, a female local leader has a vision of what she wants the community to look like. It is mentioned that housewives who are farmers need threshold knowledge to perform their small-scale businesses from home, and women who are garment factory workers could earn more salary if they were better educated compared to others (interviews and female focus group, 2015). As a local official, Neary explains the reasons she thinks education for girls is important as below:

The reasons I want girls to have an education are that: first, they need an education to find a job to support the family. For example, if they work in a garment factory, they can lead 10 or 20 people if they are literate. If you are illiterate, you only sell your physical labour [she refers to unskilled labour]. If you have knowledge, you can be at least a team leader. Second, someone who is illiterate believes other people easily because they are not well informed about the society. They believe in others when they are hooked with money and benefits. If they are educated, they can think a bit more before making decisions.

(Neary, female, local official, Dei Thoy village interview, July 2015)

Based on Neary’s reasons, advancing family’s income can be one of the main motivating factors which urge girls to have access to education. Possibly, the needs for education in a hope that girls can bring back the benefits to family cause parents to be less concerned about the extent to which girls can complete the household chores and mobility for higher education in the city. In addition, education is understood as the ability to think and access information, which is a tool for girls and women to protect themselves from associated risks.
Women leaders and gender-based discrimination

In another issue, women’s participation in politics is resistance to discrimination against women as can be seen in the interview script below:

My opinion is that I want to urge women to participate in politics, so women know more about what’s right and wrong, and then it reduces family conflicts. If women dare to make decisions and dare to challenge, men would think it is not appropriate to look down on women, but he’d rather think that women are wise […]. Women can become commune councils, district councils, provincial committee and also prime minister. Hence, ignorance and discrimination against women will be eliminated in the future.

(Leng, male, farmer, Tamao village, interview, June 2015)

Several participants like Leng believe that women’s presence in local government has contributed to eliminating gender-based discrimination through the process in which women are empowered and able to make decisions. At the family scale, for example, he thinks that when women participate in local politics (either understand about politics or be politicians or political activists), it reduces family conflicts. In his terms, politics is more understood as knowledge about law, morality (what is right and wrong) and obligations of men and women toward each other, so these can help solve problems in the family. On the one hand, the statement above possibly mean that because women are informed about law, women’s rights and their own potentials, they can make decisions more wisely, for example, how to respond to violence against them. In his opinion, change in power relations within a family may result from having legal knowledge as a tool for resistance. On the other hand, it seems to imply that problems such as discrimination against women should rather be started by women as their responsibility to build up their independence. This means that without women’s resistance, perhaps, discrimination against women is still justified in some way. At a larger scale, Leng’s conclusion suggests that women’s ability to present in the formal political structure, for example, as women officials or prime minister, provides a new identity for women, which
was not visible in the past. From his explanation, it means that not only does having women’s presence in political structures become a channel of exercising women’s rights for both ordinary women and women leaders, but it also provides a pathway for other women to follow.

While the findings suggest that women leaders are concerned about family issues and gender equality more than male leaders, some participants point out that men leaders have had played an important roles in promoting gender equality as well. For example, before women were appointed to the head of Commune Committee for Women and Children (CCWC), men had led CCWC activities. Though, from a male local official’s perspective, it was evident that men were struggling in this role, for example, in interventions on gender-based violence as he comments:

In the past, we did not like doing this task (family conflicts) and we always asked women to do it. But now we have established a men’s network to work closely with a women’s network. We work on an issue at the same time. Before, male officials said they were lazy to deal with domestic violence because it was too difficult for them. I do not understand why it was difficult for them. Perhaps, it is like that… when we ask about the causes of violence, they do not tell us everything. Dealing with conflicts is very difficult because there are many kinds of conflicts. For example, forced sex after drinking or rape within marriage, is a cause of violence. You know women are not always having fun, sometimes they have menstruation, but husbands do not understand and force them. If we (the authorities) ask them, some women dare to say this out loud; some will always keep it a secret. But they can share this with women authorities.

(Sithorn, male, local official, Ang Krong village, interview, July 2015)

As Sithorn comments, it means that although men might be concerned about gender equality and gender-based violence, men might be reluctant to go into deeper
conversation with women victims or men perpetrators because the subjects are too sensitive for them. Hence, women fill the gaps of such implementation but it is then possibly suggested by some that gender-based violence should be women leaders’ field of responsibilities. In addition, women leaders might also have gaps in understanding and communicating to the male population. For example, in women’s focus groups, several participants contended that women leaders who organize gender awareness programs find it difficult to invite men in, therefore, in such a program, most of the participants were women. This makes programs less effective if there is only one party involved. As Sithorn notes earlier, in order to effectively address gender-based violence, it needs collaboration from both men and women leaders.

**Questions on equality at home**

Whilst women’s visibility in a public setting may be recognized, it is still problematic to assume that women are equally valued by their family members at home once their social status has been changed. A former woman political activist described her feelings about her family and her pride when she meets villagers:

(សំនួរ៖ តើអ្នកបង្ហាញអំពីគំនិតល្អណាដែលអ្នកស្គាល់អំពីគំនិតមនុស្សមុនសម្រាប់ៗ) អ្នកគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) បង្ហាញអំពីគំនិតល្អណាដែលអ្នកស្គាល់អំពីគំនិតមនុស្សមុនសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពីគំនិតល្អណាដែលអ្នកស្គាល់អំពីគំនិតមនុស្សមុនសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រង គ្រាប់ (ប្រុស) ធ្វើអំពិលសម្រាប់ៗ ឬគ្រប់គ្រ analysed.

(Question: After you become a commune council member, do you think your family values you differently from before?) My family (husband) values me. Before, I had little knowledge, but after attending many training sessions conducted by organizations. I know about law and livelihood [how to live well] so my family values me. Plus, when I have an occupation, local people also value me; they know about me more. Whenever I go out and meet them outside they take off their hats (literally) and ask me ‘Nak krou (female teachers or trainers)! What are you up to?’[…] When we conduct village disseminations (awareness raising programs), they call us ‘Nak krou’![The member of Women Political Activist Network][…]

(Sreyleak, female, former WPAN member, Tamau village, interview, June 2015)

For Seryleak, her positionality among local people in her village changed when she started to be involved in commune work through the Women Political Activist Network.
(WPAN) in which she had to present her leadership skills and knowledge to the villagers. WPAN was established by CPWP, a civil society group, to provide support for local women who wish to join formal politics at the commune level, particularly to be elected as commune council members (CPWP, 2012). Sreyleak is proud to be called ‘Nak Krou’, which literally means teachers or trainers and receive respectful greetings (by taking off their hats) by villagers who commute and pass by her. She would not be treated this way if she was an ordinary local woman as she explained. Knowledge and experiences she gained from the WPAN project has empowered her and given her a new image of herself which is, to a certain extent, recognised by her family. However, as noticed in the previous chapter, this same participant argued that while the power and gender relations in the family change when women have their own occupations; these relations are always subject to continuous negotiation such as how much women can afford the family, financially. Economic factor are a bargaining tool for women who wish to do something different from the norm. Below is Dara’s point of view about women’s power through economic empowerment:

(Question: what are your expectations about women in the future?) I think if women become the commune chief, all women community people will be brave to make decision, I mean toward domestic violence against them. The law states that we have equal rights, but now it is not equal. What makes women and men equal is when there is no discrimination and there is behavioural change. If women work outside (earn money), women are recognised by the society so men who are husbands also change their perceptions. Women can do everything as equal as men (for example, construction). Men then are freaking out because women dare to move on. […] [Are economic factors important for changing gender norms?] Yes they are. Khmer people are not like foreigners, people respect those who have more resources. […] But some women are still inferior to men because of the past social norm. For example, those women used to see their mothers respect their fathers, so they tend to follow. […] In one’s life
time, if husbands hurt/hit them 4 or 5 times, it is considered as normal [acceptable]. [...] But I notice that nowadays such a case is rare.

(Dara, male, health centre staff, Pra Srae village, interview, July 2015)

As Dara understood, attitudes and behavioural change are an important strategy to achieve gender equality and it seems that this change is also contributed by women’s economic productivity. Based on his opinion, it seems that claiming for equal rights and status to men relies upon women’s decision making and efforts to move on from subordination. Echoed Sreyleak’s point of view, he believes that once women are economically independent, women are more empowered in relation to men because resources are an important tool to gain power and social recognition. As Dara discussed at first, gender equality has a cross-cutting relationship with class to a certain degree in the Khmer context, or perhaps class (economic power) can be a stronger determinant of power regardless of gender. Ironically, Dara’s interview also points out a case of women’s experience in relationship with abuse in which social status [whether or not women have occupations] does not guarantee equal power relations at home because of the rooted gender norm, which suggests women to be more tolerant toward domestic violence. This behaviour is to protect marriage and it can be passed on from one generation to the next as also discussed in Brickell (2011). Though, he notes that this is not common nowadays. As same as this case, one participant also claimed that in some parts of Ba Phnum district, even though some women hold a public position, they could still experience domestic violence (Sinuon, female, district official, interview, 2015). According to Rendel (1981), although politics are powerful and more women appear in political structures or positions of power, it does not necessarily reflect the gender equality in the society as a whole if women are still seen as powerless in the smallest political unit which is the family.

Theoretically, the Women in Development (WID) approach, in which achieving gender equality by increasing women’s participation was overemphasised, was also criticised because of the similar issue (Razavi & Miller, 1995). It means that if women are only valued based on economic and social status in the society, then it is justified to not value women if the resources and status are removed. By taking these points into account, women’s inclusion in the public sector and economic activities alone may not be an adequate solution to end women’s subordination and suppression.
6.3 Discussions on women’s political representation

There are different forms of political representation. Descriptive representation refers to ‘the extent to which demographic characteristics such as ethnicity, gender or class, are reflected in the legislature’ while substantive representation ensures that the interests of demographic groups being represented are met (Ruedin, 2013, pp. 12, 17). Descriptive representation is important in the Cambodian context since women are underrepresented at all levels of politics, based on data provided by the CMDGs-update report 2011 (Ministry of Planning, 2011). This section provides a discussion on the significance of women’s political representation, opportunities and constraints in increasing the number of women in the commune council and how feasible the gender-sensitive measures such as gender policy and gender quotas are in the commune context, based on perspectives of key participants including the political party leaders.

6.3.1 Political representation of women

Gender norms remain an obstacle for increasing the number of women in decision making positions such as in commune councils (Öjendal & Kim, 2014). In Boeung Preah commune, there are only three women councillors out of eleven commune councillors while the proportion is more narrowed in other communes, such as Ba Phnum district (NEC, 2012). All of the three women are assigned to the positions as commune council members which are the secondary roles in the commune council organizational chart. In Boeung Preah commune, a list of political party candidates is decided by votes from political party members and some of its political constituency (Interviews, 2015). Learning from different perspectives on the roles of women, it seems that women are not always discriminated in politics except women find it challenging because of the double burden. However, the commune election results show that women have been underrepresented. In Ruedin (2013)’s framework of variables influencing political representation, besides cultural attitudes and political context, candidate supply can limit the vote choice for citizens (Ruedin, 2013). In an attempt to understand about participants’ visions for women’s representation in the future, some aspects of candidate selection were discussed.

Political candidate list

Explaining the limited number of women presenting in the commune office, it is claimed that the stubborn gender norms still cause some people to believe that electing women is
It has been studied before that gender norms can affect local people’s vote choice in commune/sangkat elections so political parties hesitate to nominate women into the political candidate list (Öjendal & Kim, 2014). However, in Boeung Preah’s case, not many women have been voted for during the candidate selection, which is internally conducted by political parties. The below interview resembles the ideas of several people including Phan who is one of the political gatekeepers:

Phan believes that men still outnumber women in most competitions including staff recruitments for any local-based projects in the commune. From the perspective that Phan could tell, stereotypes which are linked to the preferred characteristics of political agents limit women’s opportunities to compete with men, regardless of the evaluation of merits. For example, by saying women cannot work anytime like men, it refers to the idea that women are not always available by two reasons. First, it is because women need to be considerate of her family members and choose family interests over collective interests, so women are not available for commune matters all the time. Second, women are not supposed to travel at night because it is widely known that women are more at risk from criminal acts. Surprisingly, enabling women to work in a safe environment and to balance
their workload between home and work have not been mentioned by most participants. Apparently, these become women’s burdens that women need to accept and deal with. Another issue is that Phan likens local understanding of equity for women in everyday life to equity for women in the political arena by depicting a situation in which women would not be offered the seats which already belonged to men on a public bus or taxi. This scenario reinforces a case that was discussed in a male focus group discussion that women may not be given a chance to show their potential because men would want to remain dominant over as longer term as possible. One of focus group participants contended that: 

Although the participant in the quote believes that women candidates are not discriminated by major people in the commune, he is less optimistic that women will be elected as a commune chief or assigned to any primary roles because men would want to remain dominant in this sector. In response to whether or not the number of women candidates affects political decisions during the commune elections, Phan stressed that to be nominated for the top positions women need to be qualified in a number of criteria including education and behaviour. He said:
The number of women candidates does not influence election results. But it is important that when we nominate women, we can choose women who have just enough educational background, but we make sure that she has good behaviour and living conditions. As long as that person has the ability to work and has good living conditions, we can nominate her and it will not be a problem (for the political party’s popularity).

(Phan, male, local official, Pra Srae village, interview, July 2015)

From female perspectives, on the one hand, there are no reactions on how decision making for candidate selection is made. On the other hand, women agree on the remaining gender norms which still limit their ambitions and ability to take over from men. This is reflected in one female commune councillor’s expression of her role:

The ability to join a commune council depends on your performance in political party’s matters; that means if you are active, you might be selected as a candidate, if you are not active, you are not selected. […] I sometimes stay at the political party until 11pm and ride my motorbike back home. My daughter said ‘you are alone and doing party’s work. I’m afraid that if someone hates you, they can attack you by just a birdshot right through your eye, and nothing’s left for you’. […] I asked the party to put women at least on the 2nd rank on the candidate list but I still got this lower rank. […] The decision is made based on how active you are in the party, for example, the commune chief needs to be so active. He/she is always available when someone needs them. We, women do not dare to do this because we feel scared. I can only stay late at night sometimes when
there are tasks allocated from the party. It’s only once or twice per month. The active person, like the commune chief, is also knowledgeable as he can remember anything. […] There is no discrimination against women but I am scared of working at night. I always tell people that I do not want to be on the top, I would rather choose to have lower positions. Also, I’m old now, I want to retire but they don’t allow me to.

(Chenda, female, local official, Pra Srae village, interview, June 2015)

For Chenda, she agrees that active political activists deserve the top rank and this is difficult for women to compete. The working environment, especially at night, does not encourage women political activists to be outstanding because of two identities: being a political activist and being a woman. Though, she feels that it is reasonable to have lower ranks on the political candidate list. Another woman activist agrees that men are still superior to women, even at the everyday level, and does not consider this as suppression as she said:

I want the party to have women candidates on the upper list just because I do not want to see men candidates on the upper list all the time; there should be some women. Now, they alternate between men and women. […] But men still rank first. Actually, men and women have equal rights as stated by the country. In the family, it is not equal; men are still superior to women, both in living and speech, men are still superior to women. This is not suppression but we are women, we still respect men like that.

(Sokny, female, local official, Tamau village, interview, June 2015)

Chenda and Sokny’s expressions probably make sense because some Cambodian women who have been exposed to stereotypes and subordination for a long time would already assume these as a truth even if they were qualified in terms of knowledge. This is found in Lilja (2008) study which contends that “subordinated groups may also have chosen to perform a subaltern identity and thereby legitimise injustices by referring to their out-bid competence. For example, Cambodian women have difficulties in seeing themselves performing a political identity” (Lilja, 2008, p. 33). Some participants claim that the lack of confidence should not be considered as women’s intrinsic value or being influenced by
social norms, but women are not well educated (male focus group, 2015). Linking this to chapter 4 which discussed historical disadvantages for women in education, participants have positive visions about women’s participation in politics in this generation with a condition applied: the opportunity cost. While some participants blame on the gender norms and cultural attitudes few participants suggest that historical context also contributes to why there would be an excuse about underrepresentation of women candidates or vote choice.

Local people might support the women candidates but it depends on generations. People from previous generations may not vote for women because of the social norms and the legacy of the Pol Pot regime. [...] In Pol Pot regime (Khmer rouge regime), women (who had positions of power) were accountable for many deaths of Cambodian people. It is because women were spying and reporting about people to Angkar [organization established by Khmer rouge]. But, I don’t blame women because those women were not well educated. I think women in this generation are more educated. And young people in this generation may vote for women but elder people will not vote for women.

(Phat, male, local official, Tamau village, interview, June 2015)

Under the Khmer rouge regime, secrecy was an important issue as learnt in Baaz and Lilja (2014) so that spying can be a serious issue. In his interviews, Phat stated that it is hard for people from previous generations who have suffered from the Khmer Rouge regime to trust in women’s leadership in some political contexts. In contrast to seeing women as soft and gentle as discussed in chapter four on femininity and masculinity, women can be viewed as dangerous and the one who can only join the mission of organization (Angkar) without caring for local people.

Although he believes that women and men in this generation may have similar educational backgrounds and are both qualified for standing as candidates, Phan, as a political party leader does not ascertain that it can boost women’s participation especially at the decision making level, as he said:
I am not sure if women in this generation are interested in the commune council work because as a local official, I know that this job is more difficult than working in other institutions. We have to be responsible before citizens as well as our superior units. So we have to handle the tension between the bottom (citizens) and the top (government), which means that we are pressured because we cannot satisfy both at the same time. Unlike working in education or health services, working as local authorities is difficult. For example, when the country had a civil war, local authorities became the main target because we are responsible for the state work. Like in 1970, when there was a coup, the first ones who had troubles included the commune chief, district governors and other people with important roles. Not many people want to have this role (commune councilors), if they do, they would rather go for higher positions or technical positions.

(Phan, male, local official, Pra Srae village, interview, July 2015)

Phan’s interview means that even if in this generation women are better educated, women might not be interested in politics at the grassroots level because of the social stigma from the civil wars in the past regime. This can be applied to both women and men.

6.3.2 Gender policy and quotas

While more women have become courageous to participate in politics, the chances of women being nominated with the winning slot on the candidate list rely upon political parties’ decisions, mainly the political party gatekeepers. In Cambodia, it has been suggested that integrating gender policy in political parties and the use of gender quotas in commune/sangkat elections should be reinforced to increase women’s participation in local politics (Chan & Chheang, 2008; Öjendal & Kim, 2014). In literature, quotas can be an effective measure to insure that descriptive representation is boosted, and it can be applied on both genders. There are many types of quotas including voluntary party quotas, statutory or legal quotas and reserved seats (Ruedin, 2013, p. 26). In this context,
voluntary party quota is discussed. The gender quota, even if implemented, is decided by political parties, which is voluntary during the candidate selection process. Although gender quotas can be useful, this initiative may be impractical for some reasons according to my participants. When interviewing political party leaders in Beoung Preah commune, it seemed that there were no clear documents which show a commitment to increasing women’s numbers in the commune councils but each political party claimed that they have willingness to promote women in local politics. For example, participants whose roles are the leaders of commune or district political parties have put some efforts in speaking about women’s participation but have not shown a clear gender policy in the political parties. In relation to understanding gender policy of the political parties, Sokbun said that his party had commitment to promote women, which is inspired by government’s policy and NGOs initiatives. However, he does not determine any rules or targets:

We do not set any nomination rules, such as to alternate between men and women on the candidate list. We only focus on how active they are. In each commune, we have identified some potential women who can stand at the second, third or fourth rank on the political party list, but it is rarely the fourth. […] Nominating women for the first rank is a little bit harder to do. […] Actually, there are women who are qualified but it is difficult for women to implement their jobs at night. If women are elected as the commune chief or deputy chief (chum tub), we are afraid that they cannot work regularly. In fact, we have had women as commune chief before, and from our experience, women have limited ability in dispute resolutions (in-court or out-of-court) because they are not good at negotiations… in other words, they speak less, and the disputing parties cannot accept it.

(Sokbun, male, district official, Ba Phnum district, interview, July 2015)

Sokbun’s interview reinforces the earlier claim that even though women are encouraged to join politics, women have rarely gained the top positions, and in the case of Boeung
Preah, there have never been any women commune chiefs elected before (interviews, 2015). Based on Sokbun’s opinion, his political party has not identified any qualified or intellectual female candidates to rank on the top list. Hence, gender quotas are not practical from his perspective since the political party decides on who should be nominated based on merits. As discussed in the historical context, it is argued that women politicians in Cambodia have rarely gained positions of power without help from the relationship with political elites (Frieson, 2001). While in this research, nepotism is not clearly evident, decision making in candidate selection may still be influenced by the political gatekeepers (Interviews, 2015). From other political party’s perspectives, gender quotas may be implemented in the future:

In the future, perhaps gender quotas can be implemented. If we want women to be elected, we need to nominate them at the top rank or alternate between men and women on the political candidate list. […] if we do not alternate the list, we cannot achieve gender balance. […] There have been more women elected as commune chief up to 2013, while we didn’t have any women before. I think political party policy is being developed. […] In Beoung Preah commune, there will be more women because we did not have any women before and now we have some women. So in the future, it is possible to increase women as long as they are qualified and knowledgeable. Now men and women are not so different in terms of educational background, so the next generations can make change.

(Phan, male, local official, Pra Srae village, interview, July 2015)

As same as Sokbun, Phan believes that gender quotas can be implemented but with a condition that candidates have acceptable merits. In line with what Phan suggested, education and merits of political candidates are important, and for this reason, to some participants both male and female, they cannot compromise leadership quality with gender equity for women. That means, achieving gender equality only in number is counterproductive in their opinion. However, Phan is more optimistic about finding candidates as he accepts that in the next generation, men and women can be equally
competitive in terms of educational background. Noticeably, if gender norms still exist, women will still be considered as secondary.

6.3.3 Commune council: decision making and ways to address gender issues

In this section, the chapter explores the gendered outcomes within local politics and the extent to which women leaders can use their positions of power to make change. As stated earlier, women’s presence in positions of power at the local level is significant in that it deconstructs gender stereotypes and addresses women’s issues in public services and law enforcement.

Women were described as women’s representatives and their dominant field of work involves dealing with the interests of women and children in which social and cultural experiences can relate. Although men are not occupying the roles of women and children’s affairs at the moment, it is also clear that men local leaders have expressed their support for having women’s presence in leadership and the extent to which they can collaborate for the economic and social well-being of their community people.

However, the degree to which women can exercise their power in the political structure in order to make important decisions such as commune development planning remains unclear. First, not all women councillors are assigned to important roles in the commune council as Vorn suggested:

What women do depends on what our leader (boss) instructs them to do. They work on many tasks, not just one. They tried their best but it is difficult to say which task she is good at. In the commune, women councillors have a similar performance and their performance is limited. As I said, women do not want to do this job because they do not
understand it well. It seems that they are not skilful in anything yet. It is difficult to say….maybe most of the work they have done well is related to social factors. For example, she is good at cleaning and clearing the mess around the commune office even if I did not say it’s their job. It’s their preference. And another thing is that they are good at mobilising the political constituency and good at information outreach.

(Vorn, male, local official, Pra Srae village, interview, July 2015)

To a certain degree, the specific outcomes of women’s political representation are not visible for some despite positive visions expressed by a number of participants who are leaders and local ordinary people. For example, as a male counterpart, Vorn finds it difficult to talk about the roles and expertise of women from his political party, and he also finds that women’s performance is very limited. In this explanation, he also stressed that not all women affairs are allocated to women from different political parties. In this case, what some women commune councillors actually do is different from what others expect women to do, for instance, women can be seen as good at cleaning the office area (domestic role) while other qualities are not fairly emphasised.

Second, throughout the interviews, most perspectives on the roles of women leaders reflect more on women’s ability to perform the assigned roles and less on women’s ability to advocate for developing commune policy which affects the well-being of local people especially marginalised groups. For example, the whole commune council do not have adequate executive power in decisions on budgeting. This is a common issue for all local government that decision making at the local level is subject to the central and provincial levels as studied in the challenges of D&D reform in Cambodia (Blunt & Turner, 2005, p. 79). Therefore, it would be challenging for women to advocate for initiatives which enhance women’s needs due to both the gender barrier and other systematic barriers.

The commune budget which is allocated to operating the Commune Committee for Women and Children (CCWC) work plan would be more proportionate to its importance, if it was claimed important by the commune leaders. It is mentioned that women representatives who are responsible for this task have limited financial support. However, many of CCWC tasks duplicate with the gender awareness activities sponsored by NGOs and development partners, which helps make the mission in progress (interviews, 2015). It is also argued that CCWC related tasks provide women representatives more opportunities for training and extra financial support from outsiders, but the decisions on who among women representatives should have these opportunities remains in doubt.
It has been studied that women might be discriminated against by their male counterparts, but women also have different privileges among other women depending on which network they belong to (Öjendal & Kim, 2014).

The largest proportion of the commune budget is to be spent on infrastructure as also found in other studies (Kim & Henke, 2005) rather than other long-term sectors for human development such as improving education and health services. In some studies, it is argued that some commune councils make decisions on their commune development without local participation because they claim that citizens are not interested in commune development planning (The Khmer Institute of Democracy, 2007). The interviews with local officials in Boeung Preah commune, however, show that infrastructure is requested by local citizens. Responding to the question on how the commune council decides on its commune development priorities, one of the commune leaders said:

We, as leaders, identified the needs of local people but I also conducted meeting to discuss the needs (commune development priorities). Then local people said that the road condition was not good. […] In 2001 and 2002, we tried to explain that we had a commune fund for developing any areas that local people want, so they said they wanted roads, water and irrigation, and schools. As requested from most villages, we had to build schools, roads and irrigation systems. Overall, we have commune development planning with local people in order to identify the problems.

(Phan, male, local official, Pra Srae village, interview, July 2015)

As observed, the most noticeable development efforts in the commune as well as other surrounding communes include infrastructure, schools, and irrigation systems. Although social development which involves women’s needs and women’s issues are given less emphasis, the leader further explained:
Developing infrastructure benefits women and children. For example, small children can ride a bicycle to school without parents’ accompanying when there are good roads. Before, it was more difficult. Now small children can ride their small bicycles so it reduces the workload of women who are children’s mothers or guardians. All projects benefit local people especially women and children. […] Without infrastructure, parents find it difficult and perhaps children cannot go to school. […] For women who are doing farming, good roads facilitate them in rice harvest and collection (which are traditionally women’s responsibilities). Before, women worked really hard to transport the rice. Now, we often say men work harder because women cannot carry big bags of rice for scaling but men do all these things. So, good roads help women a lot in their farming roles.

(Phan, male, local official, Pra Srae village, interview, July 2015)

While the focus on women’s needs and gender equality might be not prioritised in the commune budget’s plan, Phan relates the priority in developing infrastructure to the benefits of community people especially women and children in a different way, which is indirect. For example, infrastructure provides better transport for women to perform their economic activities and makes school and public services accessible for them. In addition, he specifically noted before that this decision was made upon local people’s request and it was participatory. In this case, a question which can be possibly asked, though, would be ‘who participated in this planning, and whether or not women representatives and women beneficiaries have a voice in this?’

Another point to be considered, while a large proportion of the commune budget is reserved for physical development schemes such as roads, water systems and buildings, current social development scheme such as education awards and health care allowance for women have been sponsored a lot by a number of development partners and NGOs. These public services are well organized and the commune council has had a good reputation on that. While the effort of the commune council in operating these services smoothly should be credited, the commune council and their operating partners could not oversee any possibilities to maintain the services yet, in case their development partners phase out the projects. Regarding this, a participant contended:
As Dara expresses, he’s concerned about the continuity of the health allowance scheme for the poor and women who need birth deliveries, but this is subject to the commune’s ability to propose a budget to the government or use some amount of annual budget to cover the costs for those who cannot afford it. Not only women commune councillors who have no influence on such decision making, but the whole local government’s decision making is subject to their superior management including district, provincial and central government (Interviews, 2015). This issue has been a struggle in the decentralisation process for a long time, based on a report from COMFREL (2007).

6.4 Conclusion

In conclusion there are different perspectives on how women should play a role in local politics and how women’s political representation can be promoted. Some people appreciate women’s presence in positions of power as they believe this brings change to their community to a certain level, while some others still suggest a more authentic representation.
According to findings, there is an increase in the number of women political activists and women supporters. However, women have rarely been on the top list in Beoung Preah commune and some other communes in Ba Phnum district. In relation to why women have rarely been on the top list of political candidates, there are different reasons, one of which is the absence of gender policy while the root causes come to gender norms and candidates supply. In terms of gender policy, there are no rules either for political parties or the election process to determine how many women must be elected. Responding to the questions regarding the feasibility of gender quota applications in candidate selection processes, answers include “yes” and “no”. Based on the previous chapter discussion, finding eligible women to be appointed as political candidates is claimed to be one of the challenges the political parties have in achieving gender equality in the political process. However, as the original aim of promoting women’s political participation is to articulate the needs and concerns of women and marginalised people as participants suggested, the number of women representing in the local government is not an end in itself. That means women leaders need adequate power, resources and support from men to play their roles and gendered outcomes need to be measured.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

As previously informed in the introduction chapter, the main question of my research project is how the roles of women in local politics are understood by local people, local leaders and other local actors. I expected to study this main question by looking into how local participants conceptualise the roles women can and should play in local politics and local development, the political representation of women, equitable solutions for women and who should be involved in the process.

This qualitative study has been based on the lived experiences of key participants including community people, women leaders and political gatekeepers in Beoung Preah commune. Based on debates in the literature and addressing the historical context, these voices are significant in a hope that local knowledge can be practical, useful and constructive to inspire changes in policy and practice in the cause of gender equality of that place.

This chapter then provides a reflection of how women’s inclusion and gender equality in politics means to development and for the context of Cambodia. First, it provides a key summary of my research findings and discussions and how these help answer my research questions above. Then, it discusses the significance of the research including research implications in which the existing comments on the WID and GAD approach to development can also be reinforced. After reflecting, further investigations in the field are suggested. Because research is shaped by methodological framework and positionality, I also discuss the limitation of the research and my ability to reflect on the positionality issues at the end of this chapter.

7.2 Summary of key findings

Here, I discuss a number of key findings as demonstrated in this thesis. This thesis investigated how political opportunities for women and men are understood at the commune level by understanding the political importance of gender roles and gender stereotypes such as masculinity and femininity in local politics, and also other intersectional factors influencing women’s decisions to join (or not join) politics.
The contemporary discourse on gender roles was explored, as well its implications for women seeking employment, education and social recognition. It is found that gender relations at both the family and societal level influence the presence of women in formal political structures. For example, the extent to which women can become effective leaders and hold senior positions is associated with their level of education, choices of career, livelihood and power negotiations within the locus of households and their society. These factors either impose opportunities or challenges for women to effectively participate in politics, but women’s dreams depend on women, family and society’s perceptions on gender roles.

It is suggested that while oppressive practice of gender roles and gender norms throughout a Cambodian society like Boeung Preah commune still remains influential, there are also some arguments which allow the study to deconstruct the discourse of women’s subordination. For example, gender norms are seen as changing due to the impacts of globalisation, migration and mobility. While gender norms and gender stereotypes are still influential, the attitude and behavioural change toward household chores and responsibilities, gender-based violence and women’s rights in the community are also acknowledged to a certain degree. This change has resulted from the society’s connection with a modern society in the city and elsewhere through the domestic migration and cross-border migration as well as the information and communication technology from which they gained knowledge of their society, law and politics. It is stated in the discussion that knowledge is a tool for negotiation and force for change. Through migration and better access to higher education, it is suggested that men and women have portrayed new images of themselves, wishing for a better life. The thesis also found the interconnection between the economic power and women’s ability to negotiate for education opportunities and employment opportunities outside the home and these opportunities might adversely affect the extent to which gender roles can be interchangeable.

In addition to the knowledge of gender roles discussed in the literature, exploring local knowledge on femininities and masculinities is very significant as it contributes to understanding local attitudes toward promoting women’s participation in local politics. In discussion of masculinities and femininities, the extent to which the discourse has changed was not investigated but findings show that how local participants conceptualise
masculinities and femininities in relation to political leadership is different from individual to individual. This perception partially influences on participants’ choices in electing political candidates although other conditions such as educational background, personalities and experience of political candidates are also taken into account.

Women’s femininity and men’s masculinity discourses which were used to explain the gender disparity in political participation can be seen differently in Beoung Preah commune. In addition, women might now find themselves more familiar to politics, and to an extent, women fit in the ideal characteristics of an effective political leader. In literature, Cambodian women have been struggling for political participation because politics seems to be masculine field to which women are not belong (Lilja, 2008). Although this perception might still exist, it is found that some of feminine attributes usually prescribed on women such as ‘soft, open and not drinking alcohol’ have made some local participants optimistic about women’s leadership in local politics due to a shift in ideal attributes of political leaders. Though, the danger of stereotyping men or women was also a concern. Plus, it can be drawn from the discussion that such perceptions of femininities and masculinities may positively influence women’s opportunities but the extent to which women should become the top leaders for example, the commune chief, remains unclear.

The reasons behind women’s decisions and motivations for them to continue political career were also explored. Within gender stereotypes which hinder women’s political opportunities, the innate ability of women to be rational was not emphasized in this text, but the gender roles in which women are positioning has led to women and men not being on the same page.

The factors which may also constrain women’s political opportunities include low incentive for commune staff, poor economic background and unfriendly political culture. Although the economic and political factors may also matter for men, these intersectionality issues might be barriers for women more than men for two reasons according to participants. First the ability for women to escape from subordination at home depends on their ability to compromise household responsibilities with economic productivity, while it is less concerning for men. If women could not provide enough care for the family, there is higher tendency toward disagreements in the family than if it was men. Second, it is suggested that gender roles make women more cautious than men to
confront with political tension as women might be more concerned with family’s emotions while men are encouraged for collective interests. However, according to both men and women who are occupying political positions in this study, it cannot be generalized that all women are restricted except that there is a convergence that women might have more family and household burdens. As I can understand from Brickell (2011)’s analysis, it is very challenging to change the deeply rooted mind-set the society holds about women as a dutiful mother and daughter from one generation to the next.

Then, this thesis not only attempted to understand the ability of women to exercise their agency to participate in local politics, but it also discussed the gendered outcomes for the commune when the political structure started to be gender-inclusive.

It explored different perspectives on what roles in local politics women can play for the benefits of their family and their community, and on why these roles are important to them. From the findings, women politicians and women supporters are both important for bringing about change.

The research found that there is an increasing use of discourse that women should be included in the political structure although the possibility for women to reach the top positions is still weak in progress. The expected outcomes by bringing women in politics are understood differently. One among the purposes of promoting women’s political representation is to bring justice and employment opportunities for women, and women were assigned to women and children affairs because it is assumed that women have similar social and emotional experiences associated with women’s gender roles.

The thesis also discussed local perspectives on how gender equitable outcomes such as interventions against gender-based violence and domestic violence, equitable health scheme for women and the poor and improved education for girls can be brought to the community through the perspectives of women leaders. In addition, it discussed how research participants think these efforts can be collaborated by men leaders and other local actors such as schools and health centre.

One important point discovered in the chapter is that while some participants are very optimistic about the presence of women leaders even at the top positions, others also expressed that even if there are influences from the government’s gender policy and stakeholders, to a certain point, it is challenging to compromise women’s inclusion with
the reputation of political parties and the efficiency of local government. This means that women should not be added into the institutions just for the purpose of increasing number. Hence gender policy and gender quotas can be useful measures but may be not practical at the present time. Though, it can be challenged by some participants that women’s visibility in leadership positions affects gender inequality at everyday level, and if that could not happen in the first place, there would not be any means to break the cycle of inequality.

Because the aim of having gender-inclusive political structure is to bring a better treatment for marginalised people especially women, children and the poor, it is very important to assess these outcomes. It is proposed to have further investigations on the extent to which women leaders can use their executive power to make change and how the whole local government institution namely commune council can advocate to their superior levels to articulate local needs and concerns. It is found that there are more political will and initiatives for gender inequitable outcomes in speech more than in written documents or in practice in a more sustainable way. While women leaders are given privilege to lead CCWC action plans, there is no strong budget support for this task to be accomplished effectively. The ability of commune council itself to make decision in development plan is subject to the approval of their superiors. Plus, perhaps the extent to which gendered-outcomes can be achieved depends on how local leaders including men and women conceptualize the most important development scheme for their local, if the decision is not participatory and inclusive.

7.3 Research significance and areas for further research

This thesis has provided great insights into understanding the positions and status of women in Beoung Preah commune, not just in the political sphere but also the domestic sphere. It has answered to my research questions by outlining different perspectives of local people on women’s roles in politics and problematizing the notions of gender roles, femininity and masculinity, gender equality, women’s inclusion and related assumptions and the extent to which gender inequitable initiatives could be brought onto the policy table regardless of the gender difference of political representatives. How the research questions are addressed is based on evaluations of these insights.
Through this thesis, GAD perspective was predominant. In line with the significance of GAD approach to development (Razavi & Miller, 1995), the findings chapters have shown that in order to address gender inequality whether in social or political development, there is a need for changing gender relations at the ground level no matter how long it takes. Without doing this, gender inequality would still remain the struggles in the development process. In addition, bringing men into addressing gender equality in politics is significant, just as it has also been successfully done to prevent gender-based violence and HIV epidemic. However, gender relations are complicated and subject to race and culture as discussed earlier, therefore, intersectionality and particular issues of the third world should also get our attention (Young, 2008).

Maynard (1995) mentions that to a certain degree, feminists discuss what causes women’s subordination in society and development processes but it would be useful to explore how these causes take place and why. In my thesis, I am very interested in how realistic it is to address gender inequality in politics and education if in some cases, politics and education are not accessible for everyone regardless of their gender. For example, women might participate in sectors which provide them opportunities to escape from family poverty regardless of what their dreams and passions are. As we can observe in CMDGs, promoting education for all, alleviating poverty and good governance all need to go at the same pace.

This research aims to advocate for more women’s inclusion in local politics by bringing more attention to the lived experiences, problems, opportunities and challenges of women who wish to join politics or are already in the positions of power, and what is happening behind what the statistics can show for Beoung Preah commune. As it was also suggested, the ability of young people to negotiate power and resist gender norms are expected to pave the way for the future local government in its effort to bring about a gender balance in the structure. Therefore, a further study on the roles of young men and women in local politics could be very interesting. In addition, because the policy and practice at the local level is influenced highly from the national level, it is important to explore gender inequality in politics at the national level. Therefore, I think further research could focus on gender issues at the national level such as women’s subordination in politics at the national level and the extent to which having women policy makers (national assembly or ministerial level) impact the structure at the local level.
7.4 Research limitations

In line with the concept of philosophical world views and positionality, I have to acknowledge that this research aims to contribute to a better understanding of my participants’ knowledge, but there can be some gaps. This is because the information I have gathered and the way I have interpreted it (on behalf of them) are subject to my research skills, my cultural fluency, my feminist standpoint and my identities as a student abroad, a former NGO worker, a woman and a friend of some local participants.

From my reflection, this research is not different from other research in that it must have had limitations due to a number of factors. Positionality as I have mentioned, is a popular topic in research learning, particularly in relation to ethical and participatory research (Chacko, 2004; Sultana, 2007). Positionality is referred to “aspects of identity in terms of race, class, gender, caste, sexuality and other attributes that are markers of relational positions in a society rather than intrinsic quality”, and these attributes create unequal power relations which can affect research results differently (Chacko, 2004, p. 52).

However, I tried my best to deal with my positionality issues that I could identify. As a student and a researcher in training, interviewing and focus group facilitation skills can be limited but I was confident that it improved with time and I gained an increasing level of trust. To cope with cultural fluency, I repeated the questions. To avoid judging, I pretended that I knew nothing. I kept clarifying my identities as much as I could to avoid any doubts. To help me use the most authentic representation of participants, I integrated Khmer script in the process.

To sum up, the scope of this study is to contribute to the existing knowledge about the roles of women in local politics in Cambodia, within the case of Beoung Preah commune. It is a small research project for the master’s thesis which is not intensive enough to understand the whole Cambodian context but I believe that my participants’ point of views, voices and experiences are worth to learn.

7.5 Final thoughts

This qualitative study is not only a way of empowering my participants’ knowledge; it has empowered me as a student and as a citizen who will be responsible for making change in my own country as Sok has also expected:
I am happy to see young women nowadays work hard for education and those also include my daughter (who also studies abroad). Please continue working hard and complete your study as I hope that once you graduate you will come back to serve the country, to be a woman leader and to bring peace to the country. I feel grieving to see some young women nowadays end up having to rely on rich and meritorious men to survive.

(Sok, male, farmer, Ta Mau village, interview, June 2015)

For Sok, education is a key area for change. The Image 5 below demonstrates a typical scene of little girls going back home after school at noon time. These girls are striving for their own future and are believed to be change-makers in their community.

*Image 5: Little girls travelling home from school, Pra Srae Village*

*Source: Sokunthea Koy (2015)*

From this study process, I have made connections with people I have met whose experiences are valuable for me to connect what I have studied with the real world. From the process, I have learnt to put myself in my participants’ shoes by carefully listening and believing. This research also empowers my research participants to build confidence.
to speak and to be aware of the importance of their knowledge. As Phat expressed below, he found this study process as an opportunity to raise local voices and concerns and share his personal views and experiences.

(Phat, male, farmer, Ta Mau village, interview, June 2015)

I hope that this research knowledge can contribute to further theses on women in politics as well as discussions which might benefit the community in the future. At a personal level, this work will be a great asset for building my career development as a future development worker and researcher.
# APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Ethics Approval from the Human Ethics Committee

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## MEMORANDUM

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<thead>
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<th>Sokunthea Koy</th>
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<tr>
<td>COPY TO</td>
<td>Marcela Palomino-Schalscha</td>
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<tr>
<td>FROM</td>
<td>AProf Susan Corbett, Convener, Human Ethics Committee</td>
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<td>14 May 2015</td>
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**SUBJECT**

**Ethics Approval: 21942**  
How women's roles in local politics are understood at the commune level in Cambodia: the case of Boeung Preah Commune

Thank you for your application for ethical approval, which has now been considered by the Standing Committee of the Human Ethics Committee.

Your application has been approved from the above date and this approval continues until 1 January 2016. If your data collection is not completed by this date you should apply to the Human Ethics Committee for an extension to this approval.

Best wishes with the research.

Susan Corbett  
Human Ethics Committee
Appendix 2: Participant information, consent and confidentiality

Participant Information Sheet for a Study of “How Women’s Roles in Local Politics are Understood at the Commune Level: the case of Boeung Preah Commune”

Researcher: Sokunthea Koy, School of Geography, Victoria University of Wellington

(For Interviewees)

I am a Masters student in Development Studies at Victoria University of Wellington. As part of this degree I am undertaking a research project leading to a thesis. The project I am undertaking is to better understand the local perspectives on women’s empowerment in local development, particularly on the importance of having women as same as men in decision making positions. This research project has received approval from the Victoria University Human Ethics Committee.

I am inviting men and women as local people, local actors, community leaders, political party representatives in Boeung Preah commune, and NGO staff working in women issues to participate in this study. Participants will be interviewed at their homes/offices or other preferred places with a set of questions and some probing questions. The topics of the interviews will be relating to interviewees’ thoughts about the roles of women leaders in their commune at the present, participants’ expectations, concerns and suggestions and other related issues. Please note that participation is voluntary.

It is very important for participants to feel comfortable and safe to provide honest responses as much as possible. Should any participants feel the need to withdraw from the project, they may do so without questions at any time before 15th July 2015. Please let me know in person or via my contact details at the bottom of the page.

It is envisaged that the interview will take about one hour long. During the interview, voice recording and notes will be needed for documenting purpose. All the responses will form the basis of my research project and will be transcribed, translated, analysed and put into a written report without names. Some participants’ responses will be quoted at length without stating names and individual identity. All materials collected will be kept confidential. No other person besides me, the transcriber, and my supervisor, Dr. Marcela Palomino-Schalscha, will have access to notes, recordings, and transcripts in this research. The thesis will be submitted for marking to the School of Geography and deposited in the University Library. Recordings and transcripts will be securely stored and destroyed after 5 years of the conclusion of the research in case references are needed for future publications in academic or professional journals and/or dissemination at academic or professional conferences in the future.

If you have any further questions or would like to receive further information about the project, please contact me at +855......................(Cambodia number) or +6421234567 (New Zealand number) and sokunthea@vuw.ac.nz or Dr. Marcela Palomino-Schalscha, at the School of Geography at Victoria University at mpschalscha@vuw.ac.nz

Sokunthea Koy

(Translation in Khmer is provided on the other side)
Translation of participant information sheet
ការការណ៍ដូចជាការធ្វើសិក្សាគ្នាទូទៅ និងការស្វែងរកកម្មវិធីដែលប្រឈមនៅក្នុងវគ្គបេស្អាតដែលធ្វើដូចជា ការប្រឈមដែលមិនមានទេ នឹងក្លាយជាការធ្វើសិក្សាយកម្មវិធីដែលប្រឈមនៅក្នុងវគ្គបេស្អាតដែលធ្វើដូចជាពេលនេះ។

ការប្រឈមដែលប្រឈមនៅក្នុងវគ្គបេស្អាតដែលធ្វើដូចជា ការប្រឈមដែលមិនមានទេ នឹងក្លាយជាការធ្វើសិក្សាយកម្មវិធីដែលប្រឈមនៅក្នុងវគ្គបេស្អាតដែលធ្វើដូចជាពេលនេះ។

មិនប្រឈមដែលប្រឈមនៅក្នុងវគ្គបេស្អាតដែលធ្វើដូចជា ការប្រឈមដែលមិនមានទេ នឹងក្លាយជាការធ្វើសិក្សាយកម្មវិធីដែលប្រឈមនៅក្នុងវគ្គបេស្អាតដែលធ្វើដូចជាពេលនេះ។

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CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

(For Focus Group Discussion)

**Title of project:** How Women’s Roles in Local Politics Are Understood at the Commune Level in Cambodia: the case of Boeung Preah Commune

I have been given and have understood an explanation of this research project. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I may withdraw myself from this research project **before the group discussion begins** without having to give reasons.

I hereby consent to information or opinions which I have given being attributed to me in any reports on this research. By signing on this form, I agree to take part in this research and understand that:

- My voice will be recorded by investigator during the group discussion.
- The group responses will form the basis of this research project and will be transcribed, translated, analysed and put into the project reports and the investigator’s thesis as stated in the participant information sheet.
- I will keep all information and comments shared by participants in the focus group discussion confidential to this group’s participants only.
- The information I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher, the supervisor and the person who transcribes the tape recordings of our group discussion.
- The published results will not use my name.
- The tape recording of interviews will be wiped 5 years after the conclusion of the project unless I indicate that I would like them returned to me.
- The data I provide will not be used for any other purposes or released to others without my written or oral consent.
- I can request for the results of the discussion and/or research when it is completed.

**Signed:**

**Name of participants:**

**Date:**
Translation of focus group consent form

Translation of focus group consent form

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CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

(For Interviews)

Title of project: How Women’s Roles in Local Politics Are Understood at the Commune Level in Cambodia: the case of Boeung Preah Commune

I have been given and have understood an explanation of this research project. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I may withdraw myself (or any information I have provided) from this project before 15th July 2015 without having to give reasons.

I hereby consent to responses including information/opinions/comments which I have given being attributed to me in any reports on this research. By signing on this form, I agree to take part in this research and understand that:

- My voice will be recorded by the investigator during the interview
- All my responses will form the basis of this research project and will be transcribed, translated, analysed and put into the project reports and the investigator’s thesis as stated in the participant information sheet.
- The responses I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher, the supervisor and the person who transcribes the tape recordings of our interview.
- The tape recording of interviews will be wiped 5 years after the conclusion of the project unless I indicate that I would like them returned to me.
- The published results will not use my name.
- The data I provide will not be used for any other purposes or released to others without my written or oral consent.
- I can request for the results of the research or my transcript when it is completed.

Signed:

Name of participants:

Date:
ប្រការការប្រការការប្រការ

ប្រការការប្រការ

ប្រការពីការប្រការការប្រការ

Translation of interview consent form
Transcribing Confidentiality Agreement

Project title: How Women’s Roles in Local Politics Are understood at the Commune Level in Cambodia: the case of Boeung Preah Commune

Principal Investigator: Sokunthea Koy

I, ____________ Samedy Lim __________, agree to ensure that the audio recordings I transcribe will remain confidential to _______ Sokunthea Koy ___ and myself.

I agree to take the following precautions:

1. I will ensure that no person, other than the principal investigator hears the recording.
2. I will ensure that no other person has access to recording and transcribed documents on my PC.
3. I will delete the files from my PC once the transcription has been completed and copied to the principal investigator.
4. I will not discuss any aspect of the recording with anyone except the principal investigator.

Signature: Lim Samedy
Date: 01 June 2015
Appendix 3: Authorization letter and administration

Requesting for authorization letter and district approval
Supporting letter from supervisor

Dr Marcela Palomino-Schaft
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2 June 2015

To whom it may concern,

RE: Letter of support for Sokunthea Koy

I am writing this letter of support for Sokunthea Koy who is doing her Master’s thesis on “How women’s roles are understood at Communes Level: The case study of Boeung Preah commune” under my supervision.

Sokunthea Koy is a Master student in Development Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. As a part of her master’s degree programme, she aims to conduct a research titled above in June and July 2015, leading to her thesis writing.

The main objective of this research is to explore local perspectives on gender equality in local politics, particularly, the important roles of women as commune councillors or community leaders in Boeung Preah commune. The research is significant in that it hopes to contribute to a better understanding of issues relating to promoting women’s participation in politics as well as how the current efforts by local actors could be improved. This research proposal has been approved by the Head of School and Human Ethics Committee of Victoria University of Wellington.

I am confident that you will be impressed with her research value and allow her to conduct her data collection in your territory.

Yours sincerely

Dr Marcela Palomino-Schaft
Supervisor
Lecturer in Human Geography and Development Studies
Victoria University of Wellington

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Appendix 4: Question guides

**Focus group question guide**

*(2 hours including refreshment)*

- Introduce myself and ask participants to introduce themselves to the group (family, occupation…) and discuss consent form and confidentiality.
- Ask the following questions (with probing questions as identified in the conversation)
  
  **Phase I**
  1. Do you think there are women leaders in your commune? If yes, what are their roles?
  2. Do you know any of them? How close you are?
  3. What kinds of work do these women do every day? At home and at work? (Discuss with the person next to you)
  
  **Phase II**
  4. As you can observe or think, what motivates women to participate in politics (political parties, village programs or commune council)?
  5. How about what discourages them not to join politics?
  6. If you (for male FG: your wife or daughters) are mobilized to join politics or commune work, would you like to join? If yes, raise your hands, and then if no, raise your hands? (discuss in group ‘Yes’ and group ‘No’, and share your ideas altogether)

- Ask if participants would like to have few minute break, then:

  **Phase III**
  7. Then, in order to become a leader, what can women do or prepare? What do they need?
  8. In your opinion, are women suited in politics? What are your arguments?
     Do you think women and men leaders have different or similar attributes? What are they?
  9. What do you expect women leaders to do for your commune? (eg: commune chief)

  **Phase IV: relaxing question**
  10. Have you heard about the terms “gender equality”? What do you think it means? Can you give example from your everyday activities?
  11. Closing remarks

**Interview question guides**

*(1 hour)*

- Introduce myself and ask participants about their general information (family, occupation…) and discuss consent form and confidentiality.
- Ask everyone the following questions:
  1. What are the roles of women leaders?
  2. What are the motivations and challenges of women leaders?
  3. In your opinion, what do you think contribute to the limited number of women elected in commune council?
  4. Do you think having women’s presence in politics important? How? Has it contributed to change of gender norms in your village?
  5. Do you expect that women will participate more in politics?
  6. What roles do women leaders do best?
  7. Are women leaders and men leaders different? How?
- Ask specific participants the following questions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Local officials/district officials | 1. How do you notice change in your commune over the past 10 years? (development)  
                                  2. Do you have gender policy in your political parties?  
                                  3. Is gender quota realistic to you?  
                                  4. How do district level support local level on women’s performance?  
| Women leaders               | 5. What kind of support do you need?  
                                  6. How do you work with CCWC and other men counterparts?  
                                  7. How does your family support you?  
| Health centre               | 8. What are the important issues regarding women’s health and health in general?  
                                  9. How does having women’s presence in the commune help addressing women issues? Especially in health?  
                                 10. As your role is CCWC member, how do you collaborate with commune council to address gender issues?  
| School                      | 11. What are the important issues about students’ attainment especially girls?  
                                  12. How do you notice change in gender norms regarding education?  
                                  13. As your role is CCWC member, how do you collaborate with commune council to address issues related to girls’ education?  
                                  14. What do you expect to happen in the future?  
| Local people                | As in focus groups                                                          |
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