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The Taboo of Sex Within Gender Based Violence Prevention: Localising The Gender and Development Paradigm in Cambodia

By Elena Robertson¹

Abstract

The Gender and Development (GAD) paradigm emerged out of decades of concerted effort by theorists, practitioners and feminists. GAD has attempted to bring women as individuals into the development institution and while this has no doubt contributed to considerable advances in women's access to education, health care and employment, it has yet to greatly affect gender-based violence (GBV). GBV continues to plague development despite GAD's best efforts. Recent research suggests that this may be linked to the paradigm's inability to address female sexuality in and of itself. Female sex and sexuality continue to be taboo at global and local levels of GAD, where sex is relegated to a public health issue instead of treated as a fundamental aspect of human experience. In this way, women continue to be constructed within the GAD institution as passively sexual beings. In nine semi-structured interviews with local GAD actors in Cambodia, the immediacy of this issue became apparent. Not only do these experts recognize the importance of addressing female sexuality, but they are acutely aware of how their positionality both enables and constrains their ability to adequately broach this issue. During approximately one month of study in Phnom Penh, I conducted interviews with Cambodian GAD actors of any gender working for Cambodian-run organisations. Drawing upon this feminist-oriented research, this paper argues that the omission of female sexuality from GAD is a root cause of the persistence of GBV.

Keywords: Sexual Rights, Gender-Based Violence, Gender and Development, Cambodia

Introduction

'Gender' as a social construct has gained traction in international development within the past several decades. As such, approaches to gendered issues have rightfully changed. Greater efforts are being made to include gender-specific issues in research, theory and practice alike. The move from treating women as simply an 'add-on' to existing development projects in the Women in Development (WID) era has shifted to the recognition that women and men live unique lives that are complicated and constrained by myriad factors. While many laudable changes have occurred since WID, critical feminist theorists and practitioners maintain that the current framework, Gender and Development (GAD) is inadequate to create transformational change.

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One area of particular global concern is the continued perpetration of gendered violence. Gender-based violence is perhaps the most persistent and egregious human rights violation in the world. Not only does it affect roughly one out of every three women, but the fear and threat of violence influences nearly every aspect of women's lives. Gender-based violence (GBV) is the leading cause of death for women between 19 and 44 years of age (True, 2012: 10). Unlike other causes of death such as heart disease, cancer, malaria and car accidents, GBV is the product of social, political, cultural and economic factors. Furthermore, it is entirely preventable on an individual basis: GBV may be the result of societal norms, but it is individuals who perpetrate acts of GBV. Despite its preventability, GBV seems to be an immovable reality. This is particularly frustrating within the field of international development work. When so many other indicators of well-being, such as life expectancy, under five mortality rates,² access to education and paid work, and the codification of numerous rights, have improved (UNDP, 2018), why has GBV continued to be so widespread? What are we, as development practitioners, getting wrong in our prevention efforts?

There is perhaps no better case study for development's intervention than Cambodia. Since the late twentieth century until, quite possibly, 1st August 2018, Cambodia has been the petri dish for the west's development regimes³. Cambodia has received billions of dollars in funding for everything from the construction of roads to the prevention of human trafficking. Despite the enormous financial and human resources poured into the country, gender-based violence against women remains a problem for a significant portion of the country. Gender inequality is thus inextricably tied with international intervention in Cambodia, and it is for this reason that it offers such an interesting case for study. Drawing upon fieldwork conducted in Cambodia for my minor thesis, I argue that the GAD paradigm has inadequately addressed the issue of female sexuality in GBV prevention.

Methodology

As a feminist researcher, I knew I wanted my thesis research not only to bring feminist issues to light, but to challenge the status quo by highlighting Cambodian voices over those of international experts. While living in Cambodia (2014-2016) I realised the disconnect between lived realities and published reports: Cambodian people are rarely, if ever, considered as legitimate sources of knowledge—rather than experience—by the international development community. This is particularly the case for women and men working for locally run organisations. I set out to understand Cambodian GAD workers' opinions on the challenges to gender inequality in Cambodia. I wanted to learn how they, as active agents of change, saw the 'gender' landscape and what they perceived to be the greatest challenges and success within the gender equality movement.

I made this decision in the conscious effort to challenge the presumed hegemony of western development experts.⁴ I wanted to hear from Cambodian people working for Cambodian-run GAD

² This refers to the number of children dying before the age of five years. This is one of the many indicators used to assess human development.

³ 1st August 2018 was the national election whereby the Cambodia People's Party was 're-elected' in what can only (and has been) described as a sham election. For more on the election and what it indicates for Cambodia's future as a 'democracy,' please see York (2018).

⁴ 'western' is purposefully written using the under-case 'w.' This is modelled after Ashlee, Zamora and Karikari who spell 'white' with a lowercase 'w' "as a form of resistance against the assumed dominance of white supremacy" (Ashlee

organisations. This specific sector in Cambodia is quite small. Despite having lived in Cambodia for two years, gaining access to this field was not without its challenges. It was thanks to the generosity of my colleagues at the University of Melbourne that I was introduced to several leaders in the sector, who kindly allowed me into their organisations. It was through this snowballing method that I gained access to my nine interviewees.

Over the course of approximately six weeks, I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight women and one man, all of whom work in the GAD sector. The majority (all but two) of these individuals were well-educated women with university degrees, two of whom held degrees from overseas. Only one of my interviews required a translator: for this interview, an English-speaking NGO staff member acted as translator. All subjects were assigned pseudonyms, and interviews were de-identified.

Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed and analysed using Burnard's thematic content method (Burnard, 1991). Systematic note-taking was an integral part of my research process.

Gender and Development [and Sex]

The Gender and Development paradigm (GAD) came out of decades of feminist activism to change the way women were treated within development practice. Unlike previous iterations that attempted to 'bring women in' to development, GAD attempted to address gendered power relations. No longer would women be simply tacked on to existing projects or targeted in 'women only' initiatives (such as micro-finance), but their concerns would be considered within the broader gender framework. The shift away from discussing 'women' in isolation towards 'gender' changed the way women's subordination was considered. Women's subordination was accepted as the product of social relations between men and women (Kandiyoti, 1988; Parpart, 1993). In order to solidify the concept of gender as more than just a code word for women, Jaquette said that for the first time, "men [were] brought into the process" of explicitly examining gender relations (2017: 247). GAD's approach was ground-breaking in that "its aim was to change the practice of development to prevent inequality between women and men" (Charlesworth, 2014: 2) by investigating how unequal gender relations both create and are reflective of society.

Changing the practice of development away from the top-down approach of previous development theories proved to be a difficult task. Feminist theorists have long critiqued the role of capitalist development and its "adverse impacts on both the productive and reproductive lives of women" (McIlwaine and Datta, 2003: 370) and thus participatory methods and projects became the preferred methods of GAD. This interest in re-orienting development itself was reflected in the contemporaneously popular Post-Development school of thought (see Escobar, 1995a, 1995b; Ferguson, 1994), which challenged the validity of the assumed universality of development.

Rejecting the 'Universal'

The refutation of the assumed universality of development was mirrored in Chandra Mohanty's seminal piece on the false construction of the 'universal' Third World Woman (Mohanty, 1988). Mohanty rejected the assumption by western feminists that "all of us of the same gender, across classes and cultures, are somehow socially constituted as a homogeneous group"

et al., 2017: 102): this grammatical choice has been made here as a form of resistance against the assumed dominance and primacy of western paradigms and knowledge in development.

(1988: 337), saying that there is no ‘universal oppression’ faced by women in the so-called Third World. Women are not oppressed just because they are women—there are a multitude of intersectional factors that influence the women’s experiences of inequality. In the words of Judith Butler, “if one ‘is’ a woman, that is surely not all one is” (1990: 2).

The assumption that gender was the primary reason for all women’s oppression obfuscated the lived realities of women in the developing world. Listening to the realities experienced by women from the global South became a critical component of feminist scholars inspired by Mohanty such as Helliwell (2000), Harcourt (2007), Cornwall (2014a) and many, many others.

Not only had GAD homogenously constructed women, but it had homogeneously de-sexualised women. GAD, and the feminist movement in general, has made great efforts (and rightly so) to characterise GBV not as sexually motivated, but as an expression of power; yet it has incidentally ignored the importance of examining the connection to sex, sexual identities and cultural norms and values. According to Grant, GAD’s focus on power relations has turned a blind eye to the inherently sexual nature of GBV (Grant, 2004). This argument is reiterated in much of Andrea Cornwall and colleagues’ literature on sexuality and development (Cornwall, 1997, 2006, 2014a, 2014b; Hawkins et al., 2011).

GAD and [Passive] Sex

Within GAD and development more broadly, sexuality is only ever discussed as something dangerous to women: the act of sexual intercourse is constructed as the site of limitless danger, be it violence, disease, unwanted pregnancy, coercion or lack of autonomy. Indeed, “[a]ddressing sexuality in development often leads to a focus on the negative aspects of sexuality such as disease, violence and abuse.” (Hawkins et al., 2011: 2). Furthermore, GAD’s approach continues to be heteronormative and reliant upon the “stereotype of the brutalising man and victimised women” (Cornwall, 2006: 273). This approach reifies the idea of women as victims of [hetero, male] sex. In this way, women are treated as passive recipients of sex rather than active seekers of sex: women are not encouraged to control their sexuality but to defend themselves against the sexuality of men. Further, men are not asked to consider how they can make sex an enjoyable activity for their female partners, but are warned against harming their partners. This adds to the discourse of inequality.

This construction ignores the issue of women’s sexual agency. Treating sex as a problem rather than as a site of intimacy, love, pleasure and happiness is problematic (Cornwall, 2006: 275). Even within the gender-based violence (GBV) prevention space, addressing sex as something positive is vitally important. The right to exercise control over one’s own body is the most fundamental of all human rights (Hawkins et al., 2011: 6) and one that is inherently violated in the context of sexual violence. When women lack information about sex and sexuality outside the context of ‘harm’, they may find it more difficult to protect their health and make decisions about their lives and bodies (Hawkins et al., 2011: 8).

In contexts like Cambodia, where anachronistic patriarchal norms demand women’s sexual subservience to their husbands, women cannot act upon their right to control their bodies. In fact, they are taught that they do not have this right. It is obviously very difficult to exercise a right if one is unaware of its existence. Violence and the threat of violence affect when, with whom and whether women choose to or choose not to have sex: it is this idea of choice that has been ignored in the heteronormative, fearful relationship between development and female sexuality.

Cambodia

Cambodia's recent socio-political history has created a unique space for GAD. Understanding 'Khmer gendering' and the status of 'gender' in Cambodia requires an overview of the context of gender inequality within this space.⁵

Foundations of Khmer Gendering

The origins of contemporary Khmer gendering have roots in a rich history of folk tales, didactic poetry and religion (Jacobsen, 2012; Ledgerwood, 1990; Lilja and Baaz, 2016). In the 18th century, two didactic poems dictating the code of conduct for women (*Chbap Srey*) and men (*Chbap Broh*) were published. These codes provide "straightforward directions [on] how to behave and how not to behave" by illustrating the disastrous consequences of contradicting the established social (and gender) order (Ledgerwood, 1990: 69). I in no way mean to suggest that 'tradition' and 'culture' are static concepts: they are embedded in the infinite process of being and becoming inherent in every (but perhaps especially in Cambodian) society.

Cementing the Gender Order

The *Chbaps* are still widely known and cited as a cultural more. The *Chbap Srey* is much longer is a list of "direct instructions and prohibitions that apply to women" (Ledgerwood, 1990: 142): women in the *Chbap Srey* are constructed as entirely relational beings whose conduct impacts not only her (and her karma) but her family, husband and community. Women are valorised in their absolute devotion and subservience to their husbands. To do otherwise is to become evil (Ledgerwood, 1990: 100–101): "another kind of girl when she sleeps she turn her back to her husband/we consider as a bad snake and it shouldn't be let into the house" (Wong, 2010: 22). The idea of a woman as not only entirely relational and 'belonging' to her family or husband, but also the idea of good women as sexually relational—that is, never autonomously desiring sex yet being entirely available to her husband—are recurrent themes.

Sexual norms can be summarised in two commonly used proverbs: "ten rivers cannot fill an ocean" and "men are gold, women are cloth" (Ledgerwood, 1996: 143; Schwartz, 2004: 403). The first means that men are, by nature, sexually insatiable: their desire is as limitless and boundless as an ocean and attempting to restrain it is futile. The latter saying refers to sexual purity: if a piece of gold is dropped into a puddle of mud, it can be picked up and wiped clean, all impurities removed; if a piece of white cloth is dropped in mud, on the other hand, it is without value, ruined and irreparably damaged for everyone to see.

I bring up these cultural mores because they were cited by multiple research participants as justification for contemporary sexism and gender discrimination. In no way are these sayings and concepts the defining feature of Khmer or Cambodian identity: as Wong said, "gender is but one marker of identity" in hierarchical societies such as Cambodia (Wong, 2010: 3). Such conceptions have been filtered through the violent twentieth century, undergoing independence, revolution, state-sponsored mass murder, occupation, civil war and imposed democracy. What has emerged on the other side of these events is the product of its history and contemporary context.

⁵ 'Khmer gendering' refers to the way Khmer people (~95% of Cambodia's population) create and legitimise roles for men and women. I use the term Khmer instead of Cambodian to prevent conflation between nationality and culture. Cambodia has a number of indigenous peoples who speak languages other than Khmer and have very different cultural ontologies; there is also a substantial population of ethnically Vietnamese residents (whose citizenship status changes with the whims of the government) with their own distinct culture. These populations are citizens and long-time residents of Cambodia: I therefore endeavour to differentiate between what is a product of Khmer culture vs Cambodian nationhood.

The Khmer Rouge and Modern Cambodia

It is impossible to discuss contemporary Cambodia without at least mentioning the Khmer Rouge, not least because its legacy is evident in so much of today's Cambodia, but also because each of my participants' life stories were shaped by their experiences, losses, and ultimately opportunities that occurred as a result of the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge period (1975-1979) was characterised by the spectacular failure to promote agrarian self-sufficiency under a brutal, extremely violent cadre of self-styled communist leaders. Between the 1970 coup that brought Lon Nol to power, the protracted civil war that culminated in the Khmer Rouge victory in April 1975 and the end of their reign on 7 January 1979, an estimated 1.5-2.5 million people—approximately one third of the population—were killed or died of starvation, overwork or disease (c/f Tyner, 2015). Most important for this paper is the international response and subsequent re-construction in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge.

Contemporary Gender Issues

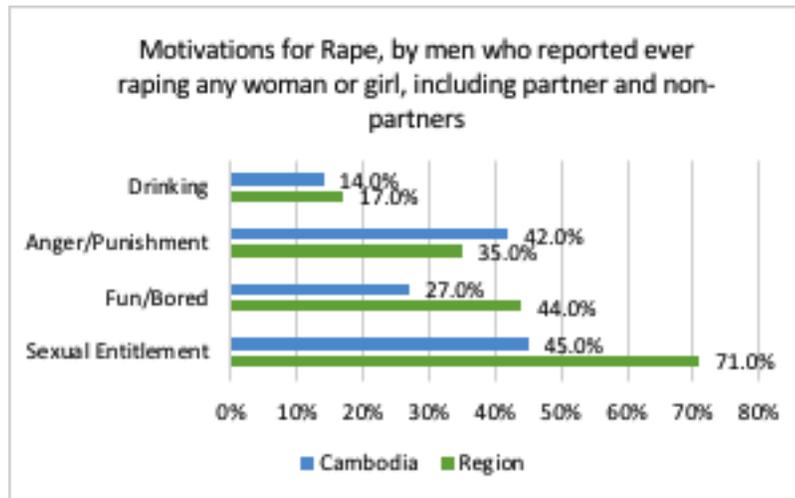
Following the 1979 removal of the Khmer Rouge from power via Vietnamese invasion, the subsequent civil war (1979-1991) and UN occupation/administration (1992-1994), Cambodia briefly flirted with the shadow of democracy. The UN Transitional Authority to Cambodia mission (UNTAC) culminated in 'democratic' elections in 1994 which saw Hun Sen elected Prime Minister. Hun Sen then led a coup to overthrow the coalition government in 1997 and has ruled with increasing brutality and authoritarianism ever since. Much to the disappointment of the international community, the Supreme Court of Cambodia dissolved the main opposition party in late 2017, thus effectively ending any auspices of free and fair elections (USAID, 2017). It is in this fraught environment that Cambodia's gender landscape continues to be shaped by norms, policies and international laws.

Law vs. Reality

Cambodia is a member of the United Nations and receives funds from the World Bank (although this funding has been variously withheld in the recent past); it has signed and ratified numerous international treaties and conventions such as the UDHR and CEDAW along with its own domestic legislation (Jacobsen, 2008; UN Women, 2015: 27). Despite its public pledges to support gender equality, Cambodia ranks 143 out of 188 countries on the Gender Development Index (UNDP, 2015: 222). Women continue to experience economic, emotional and sexual violence at the hands of intimate partners. Brickell notes that "contemporary Cambodia is characterised by a hiatus between the daily realities of violence suffered by women and girls and the rhetoric of rights espoused in (inter)national legal frame-works" (Brickell, 2016: 294). This dichotomy is not only negotiated by women (and men/sexual and gender minorities) but is evident in the quantitative data.

A regional study published in 2013 compared data on GBV perpetrated by men across eight sites in six South/Southeast Asian countries (Fulu et al., 2013). The study found that not only is GBV widespread in Cambodia, but that patterns of violence are different in Cambodia than in other sites around the region. In all sites in this report 'sexual entitlement' was the primary reason men gave for perpetrating any kind of rape against a woman or girl; in Cambodia, however, this was very closely followed by 'anger/punishment': 45% of Cambodian men cited sexual entitlement while 42% cited anger/punishment (Fulu et al., 2013: 44). Cambodia was the only site where first and second 'reasons' for perpetrating rape were separated by such a small margin.

Figure 1: Self-Reported Motivations for Rape (taken from Fulu et al., 2013:44)



The study found that women more often agree with gendered statements affirming female subordination than do men: 81.7% of women and 65.1% of men agreed that if a woman does not ‘fight back’, forced sex is not considered rape; 50.3% of women and 42.3% of men agreed that a woman cannot refuse to have sex with her husband (Fulu et al., 2013: 53). The latter idea was repeatedly identified by my research participants as a particular challenge for gender equality and GBV prevention. These examples suggest that ideas around women’s bodily autonomy (or lack thereof), sex and marital duties are deeply ingrained in the female psyche.

The romanticised view of the gentle, quiet, devoted *srey krup leak* (perfectly virtuous woman) has grown out of centuries of rich history. Khmer society is no different than any other in that ‘culture’ can be perverted to justify any number of human rights violations. It is within this space, where Khmer identity is constantly being produced and reproduced, that GAD programmes operate.

Cambodian GAD Actors & the Trouble with Sex

What follows is one part of my minor thesis findings. In this case study, I discuss the role of talking about sex as a component of GBV prevention: this is a tricky line to walk. I in no way want to suggest that women are responsible for preventing the violence that men perpetrate. We are not. The perpetration of violence is always the choice and responsibility of the perpetrator. Victims/survivors are never to blame. What I aim to demonstrate is the importance of talking about sex in a way that tells women and men that women have bodily autonomy, that women have sexual desire outside the confines of the marital bedroom or heterosexual relationship, and that women have the right to actively seek and enjoy sex in just the same way that men do. I believe that if we continue to treat sex as something that ‘happens’ to women, men and women will continue to see sex as something that men control. If men control sex, it occurs on their terms: ideas of consent and desire are much harder to discuss if exclusively under the purview of men. Normalising the idea of female sexuality would, I believe, do away with much of the ‘grey area’ of implicit consent. This is particularly important in cultures where the act of marriage is understood as eternal consent; where once married, a husband is granted control over a woman’s body.

This belief was hardly a spark of an idea before I began my field research, but in speaking with Cambodian men and women it became clear that the spark deserved to become a fire. I am deeply indebted to Andrea Cornwall and her colleagues for providing a rigorous framework through which to consider my findings.

The Socially Constituted GAD Actor

Drawing upon Fenster's idea of 'space' as culturally constructed (1999), the GAD space in Cambodia is one where women can transgress gendered boundaries. Leadership, outspokenness and protest are not qualities that factor into the traditional image of the Khmer woman, yet the women who participate in the GAD space, be it as directors of NGOs or participants in dialogue groups, develop alternative modes of 'being' women (Lilja and Baaz, 2016: 309) that contest traditional imagery.

This means that the women involved in the GAD space are an irremovable part of the culture that they are working to change. They are not only affecting change but affected by the very issues they are struggling against. They are constantly positioned between 'old ideas' and new ambitions. Should a (female) NGO worker digress too far away from these 'old ideas,' she risks losing her identity as a Khmer woman—and with it, her integrity as an agent of change. Bopha, a young woman in her mid-twenties, voiced the frustration she feels when working for gender equality:

“I say, ‘I’m going to change perceptions but I cannot myself do it? I have to change myself [the way I act]?’ ...[People believe] a woman leader should wear a long skirt, and a very good shirt that does not reveal anything, but look at the men! Sometimes they wear shorts or t-shirts, why they can be the leader, but why not women? And if I myself go...wearing very traditional clothes, when will it change?”

The irony of needing to adopt traditional dress in order to maintain legitimacy in combatting traditional norms was not lost upon research participants.

The need to maintain legitimacy as a Khmer woman in the process of working to change this very concept was reiterated throughout interviews: it was explicit when I attended an NGO workshop in a rural Eastern province. The leader of the workshop was a young woman—an identity that, generally speaking, holds almost no authority in Cambodia. The facilitator was younger than the participants yet was able to use her identity as a Khmer woman to constitute herself within the broader struggles of the group. By dressing in formal, traditional attire she demonstrated her position as a respectful and demure woman; by sharing personal anecdotes and joking with participants, she oscillated between her various identities as a confident leader and demure Khmer woman. There were multiple occasions when the facilitator needed to correct something she had said; instead of immediately self-correcting, she would cover her mouth with her hand, quietly laugh, and bow her head.⁶ In this way, she navigated between the inherent tensions of needing to be of the society, a legitimate member of the group, and establishing herself as a knowledge authority as well.

This vignette is just one example of how local GAD actors use their 'Khmerness' to maintain legitimacy. If the facilitator had, for example, appeared in front of the group wearing denim jeans and a vest-top, it is unlikely they would have regarded her as 'one of them,' but would have seen her as an outsider whose knowledge did not apply to their context. The ability of these

⁶ Khmer women often cover their mouths while speaking, eating or laughing to show respect.

actors to maintain contextual and cultural situation is of the utmost importance, especially when discussing taboo topics such as sex and sexuality.

Sex Talk

Even for the socially constituted and embedded GAD actor, inspiring conversations around sex and sexuality is troublesome. So ingrained are norms that prohibit pre-marital sex and desire that many GAD actors echoed Socheata's declaration: women "dare not to speak in group discussions. She is scared" that bringing up issues such as domestic violence or sexuality will hurt her reputation. In fact, women who advocate 'too strongly' for gender equality or women's rights are seen as foreign or western—they are no longer considered Khmer because their behaviour is un-Khmer.

As such, the process of creating an environment where women feel safe discussing their experiences, concerns or questions is a long process. As Bopha describes,

"Young women keep silent until they meet [in the dialogue group] four or five times and know each other more. They start to talk about their family issue[s], but about sexual desire or health or marital violence, they still don't talk much about it."

As noted earlier, voicing an interest in or experience with sex is a problematic issue for all Khmer women but reputation-threatening for unmarried women. Khmer women are thus in the best position to change stereotypes around Khmer women: who else could so effectively navigate the complex web of social norms and cultural mores?

They Do Not Dare: Young Women and the Taboo of Sex

In a world where pre-marital sex is akin to dropping a white cloth in mud, the ability of (particularly young) women to discuss or ask questions about sex and sexuality is severely limited. As Mkhize and Njawala have argued, men are more likely to have "greater control over when, where and how sex takes place" in contexts where male pleasure supersedes female pleasure (2016: 384). This is no doubt the case in Cambodia, where women are actively discouraged, through cultural mores like the *Chbap Srey*, from talking about sex, let alone female sexual pleasure.

"In our society, woman is not allowed, is not encouraged to talk openly about [sex], to explore her body, to ask her husband what she want, thing[s] like this. It's really hard for us. It's very important, for my view...sexuality is a part of life." –Sovanna

In the process of conducting interviews, it became clear that sex is the elephant in GAD's room. Time and again, interviewees returned to the idea of women's sexual autonomy and unwillingness/inability to exercise control over their own bodies as one of the greatest challenges to gender equality in Cambodia. This is perhaps most relevant to the context of marital rape: as one prominent gender activist said, women must "just accept when husband need sex, you like or you don't like, you cannot express."

On several occasions participants posited that it is this culturally enforced silence that perpetuates much of domestic violence and marital rape. In her role as a dialogue coordinator, Somaly has first-hand experience with the way women struggle to understand their bodily autonomy within marriage:

“Some women, they don’t know how to exercise their right on having sex. It mean[s] women stay quietly, or something like that...because in their mindset, women cannot actively [seek/have] sex. If the woman actively having sex, the men will think that the women have more partners before marriage...so, because of this mindset, women cannot exercise their rights.”

It became apparent that local actors see a link between the ability to express sexual desire and the ability to reject unwanted advances. It is not just the issue of women feeling unsure of how to express desire, but the idea that they have been acculturated to believe that they should not have sexual desire. It is not uncommon for Cambodian women to grow up thinking that sexual desire is only for men. This mindset is a two-way street: not only does it prevent women from exercising their rights to sex, but it prevents them from exercising their rights from sex. If women cannot have desire for sex independent of their husband’s initiation, it stands to reason that women do not have the freedom assert their right to not have sex.

As said by Hawkins et al., sex and sexuality are about more than just harm and danger: “sexuality is about pleasure, control and empowerment” (Hawkins et al., 2011). This sentiment was echoed in the retelling of an anecdote by Somaly, who works at an NGO that coordinates men’s and women’s discussion groups. Somaly provided the example of a couple that had joined the women’s and men’s groups, respectively, and the changes that these conversations had initiated in their marriage:

After having sex [the husband] ask his wife, ‘are you feeling good’ or something like that, and the woman say ‘not yet’—[she] start[ed] to say not yet! And then the man complete [her] needs! And then they are happy in having sex! And so [she] want to have sex again. And she is not afraid when the husband wants to have sex.

This example shows the potential for discussions about sex as the site of pleasure: for this couple, sex was transformed from a site of fear to a site of enjoyment and intimacy. On the outside, this example may seem like little more than a success story for the NGO’s programmes. However, upon further consideration, it becomes obvious that this anecdote represents an enormous transformation.

In order for this couple to transform sex from a male-dominated site of fear, they had to do away with centuries of gendered socialisation. The very fact that the wife in this story was able to tell her husband that her needs were not met is revolutionary: women do not talk about sex, let alone about desire or orgasms. How often do we, as women, face this question with trepidation and dishonesty? In asserting her right to pleasure, this woman threw off the yoke of the *srey krup leak* and embraced her right to control her body.

Conclusion

This is the type of radical transformation we require in the effort to end GBV. Addressing sex only in terms of its capacity to do harm to women reifies dangerous notions of female passivity and relationality. Promoting healthy sexual relationships within the intimate partner space is, of course, important—but it is equally if not more important to talk about sex outside of these societally acceptable confines. Drawing upon the unique strengths of local actors to negotiate these

tensions is the best, if not the only, way forward. It is high time GAD addresses sex, head on. Sex and sexuality need to be talked about as a normal part of the human experience, not as an aberrant behaviour. Changing the ideas and norms that underpin widespread GBV is imperative. Men (and women) need to see female sexuality as something as individual and autonomous as male sexuality—as something that women control and have the right to; men do not control female sexuality. Men do not have dominion over where, when and how sex happens, but need to see themselves as half of the equation. I firmly believe, as do my research participants, that the only way this can be done is to integrate sexuality into GAD.

The GAD approach crumbles when it comes to female sexuality. Sexuality is inherently a development issue, yet there exists no plan of action for addressing it in and of itself at the global or local level. GAD has produced invaluable work on (and against) the structures that perpetuate inequality. It is time to address the role sex, as an act, plays into these structures. Sex and sexuality are, of course, deeply embedded within their specific cultural contexts. The ways in which gender inequality manifests through attitudes towards female sexuality are different for different women: women in rural Cambodia, for instance, face different challenges than women in Phnom Penh. Ensuring that a culturally-sensitive and contextually-appropriate approach is taken to addressing these variations is of the utmost importance. That being said, the idea of addressing female sex and sexuality through the lens of gender equality goes against most cultural traditions. Creating pathways through which to challenge these harmful cultural norms will take the cultural sensitivity, expertise and patience of the GAD activists who are part of these specific contexts.

The women and men I met are taking bold, radical action to bring female sexuality into the spotlight—it may not look like the radical action western feminists want, but it is the radical action that Cambodian women (and men) need. Empowering local GAD actors through training, but more importantly funding, is vital. Women like Bopha and Somaly know how to navigate the minefield of cultural taboos in a way that we, as outsiders, can never fully understand. Changing the reality of GBV from the outside in has not been effective. Drawing upon existing expertise and indigenous knowledge to change it from within is the only chance.

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