

The Perspectives of Cambodian Government Officials on Gender Inequality in the Workplace

มุมมองความไม่เท่าเทียมทางเพศในที่ทำงานของข้าราชการ
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Abstract

Gender-oriented norms and normative social mindsets continue to divide employment by sex, limiting the growth of women's responsibilities in modern society. The constancy of discriminatory stereotypes about the roles and responsibilities of women and men in family and society is deeply rooted in Cambodian culture. It is continuously maintained by prioritizing men's superiority over women. This qualitative research aimed to investigate the viewpoints of male and female Cambodian government officials regarding gender (in)equality in the workplace and discover the appropriate remedies to address any

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related existing issues. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and non-participant observation. The key informants were six female and six male government officials in Battambang Province, Cambodia. The findings indicated the meaning of gender equality in the workplace as women and men having equal opportunities, rights, and responsibilities. Therefore, males and females should be given equal chances for employment or job placement based on their abilities. In addition, education, mindset, understanding and acceptance of gender in the workplace, opportunity and participation in making decisions, and social support were identified as the important factors contributing to the recognition of gender equality. It was also revealed that inequality did exist in local Cambodian government institutions. The stereotypes and adherence to more traditional gender roles were the main factors negatively impacting gender equality. The data pointed to the need for both men and women to develop a deeper understanding of workplace gender equality and for the Cambodian government to take steps to ensure that both female and male officials comply with gender equality policies already in place.

Keywords: traditional gender roles, gender equality, Cambodian women, workplace inequality, government sector

บทคัดย่อ

ในสังคมสมัยใหม่ บรรทัดฐานและชุดความคิดทั่วไปของสังคมยังคงมีการแบ่งแยกเพศในการจ้างงานซึ่งจำกัดการเติบโตในหน้าที่การงานและความรับผิดชอบของผู้หญิง ภาพเหมารวมที่แบ่งแยกในเรื่องบทบาทและความรับผิดชอบทั้งในครอบครัวและสังคมระหว่างชายหญิงที่ยังคงอยู่เป็นสิ่งที่

ถูกปลุกฝังและหยั่งรากลึกในวัฒนธรรมกัมพูชาด้วยการยกให้ผู้ชายเป็นใหญ่เหนือผู้หญิง การวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาความเท่าเทียมในที่ทำงานจากมุมมองของข้าราชการในจังหวัดพระตะบอง ประเทศกัมพูชา และแนวทางในการพัฒนาความเท่าเทียมในที่ทำงาน รวบรวมข้อมูลโดยการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกและการสังเกตแบบไม่มีส่วนร่วม ผู้ให้ข้อมูลสำคัญ คือ ข้าราชการหญิง 6 คน และชาย 6 คน ผลการศึกษาพบว่า ผู้ให้ข้อมูลสำคัญได้ให้นิยามของความเท่าเทียมในที่ทำงาน หมายถึง ผู้หญิงและผู้ชายมีโอกาส มีสิทธิ และความรับผิดชอบเท่าเทียมกัน ผู้หญิงและผู้ชายควรได้รับโอกาสการจ้างงานที่เท่าเทียมกันตามความสามารถของตน สำหรับปัจจัยสำคัญที่เอื้อต่อการยอมรับความเท่าเทียมทางเพศในที่ทำงาน ได้แก่ การศึกษา กระบวนการทางความคิดความเข้าใจ และการยอมรับเพศสภาพในสถานที่ทำงาน โอกาสและการมีส่วนร่วมในการตัดสินใจ และการสนับสนุนทางสังคม นอกจากนี้ พบว่า ความเหลื่อมล้ำทางเพศยังมีอยู่ในหน่วยงานของรัฐระดับท้องถิ่นในกัมพูชา รวมทั้งทัศนคติแบบเหมารวมและการยึดมั่นในบทบาททางเพศแบบดั้งเดิมถือเป็นปัจจัยหลักที่ส่งผลให้เกิดอิทธิพลทางลบต่อความเท่าเทียมทางเพศ จากข้อมูลนี้ชี้ให้เห็นถึงความจำเป็นของทั้งชายและหญิงในการสร้างความเข้าใจอย่างลึกซึ้งเกี่ยวกับความเท่าเทียมกันทางเพศในที่ทำงาน และความจำเป็นในการดำเนินการของภาครัฐกัมพูชาเพื่อให้มั่นใจได้ว่าเจ้าหน้าที่ทั้งหญิงและชายได้ปฏิบัติตามนโยบายความเท่าเทียมทางเพศที่กำหนดไว้แล้วจริง

คำสำคัญ: บทบาทเพศสภาพแบบดั้งเดิม ความเท่าเทียมระหว่างเพศ
ผู้หญิงกัมพูชา ความไม่เท่าเทียมในที่ทำงาน ส่วนราชการ

Introduction

Women's rights and gender equality have increasingly gained more attention in world society nowadays. As one of the sustainable development goals (SDGs), gender equality aims to end

discrimination against women in all parts of the world and ensure their participation in economic growth and development. Nevertheless, inequality between men and women remains a significant problem that continues to exist in economic, social, and political dimensions. With females comprise over half of its 600 million total population, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has designated promotion and support for women's rights as an essential social and cultural development agenda. It is as seen in the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025, where gender equality and empowering women are the association's important targets (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2016). Accordingly, cooperation mechanisms have been established to achieve the target.

Relevant report announced that the average score of ASEAN women's participation in the socio-economic and political aspects was satisfactory (WEF, 2015). In terms of the labor market, gender equality in the overall economy scored 8 out of 10 among ASEAN member countries. Cambodia and Thailand ranked 5th among the ASEAN countries. However, regarding employment, particularly in government organizations, Cambodia had around 300,000 government officials, of which 41% were women. 24% of women worked as deputy chief officers at the general director level (Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA), 2020). Politically, remarkable progress was made in women's representation in elected posts from 16.7% to 25%, such as in local communities at the sub-national level and the national assembly parliament (MoWA, 2020). The number of women holding positions as deputy provincial governor or undersecretary of state also surpassed the targets, which was 17.44% (MoWA, 2020). However, there is still a lack of women serving as provincial governors, secretaries of state, or ministers (ADB, 2013). Based on

the data from MoWA (2020), the percentage of women ministers, secretaries of state, and undersecretaries of state was only 21%. Even though the quota for recruiting female officials was 50%, the number of selected female candidates remained low. Only few applied for the position. The above facts prompted the researcher to study equality in the workplace from Cambodian women's perspectives. The study focused on women in government organizations in Battambang Province, which ranks second in Cambodia in terms of economic and social advancement. Moreover, Battambang is a central city that connects the capital of Cambodia and its neighboring country, Thailand. It is one of the country's centers for business, education, employment, and tourism (NIS, 2013). From an early observation, it was found that only a few women held high-ranking positions in government organizations at the provincial level, as men held the most high-ranking positions. Therefore, a study investigating women's perspectives on gender (in)equality in the workplace would help us gain better understanding about the issue of women at work, gender equality, and essential factors leading to equality in the workplace. The result of the study is expected to enhance gender equality in the workplace and to suggest guidelines for women's development in government organizations. Further, the authors expect that the study can also provide empirical data for related organizations which formulate policy to support women and improve their quality of life. and present more opportunities and social equality for women.

There were several motivations underlying this research. First and foremost was the important roles males have in promoting gender equality in society because women's participation and rights are not acknowledged. Most males have greater influence, especially

in family contexts (CDRI, 1999). Another was that to promote gender equality in society, we need to ensure that the majority of males recognize what the term mean. To achieve this, males should be open-minded and assistive in implementing relevant policies. Understanding men's and women's perspectives would help develop prompt and efficient solutions that could better improve the situation in the organization. Finally, since the decentralization strategy has been implemented in Cambodia, reaching the local level has been the key success.

Literature Review

In the 1980s, the conceptual framework of Gender and Development (GAD) was established (Tasli, 2007). This philosophy, which advocated equal involvement in the development and emphasized the quality of benefit and control in daily life, concentrated on the effects of development on both men and women. To address the issue of access to and control over resources and power, GAD focused on the social or gender relations between men and women in society. In addition, this ideology put a strong emphasis on improving the lives of those who were less advantaged in the community. In developing countries, women's representation and decision-making were still lacking. GAD's "gender mainstreaming (gender awareness)" strategy sought to enhance the proportion of gender in all contexts and at all levels. UN WOMEN (2014) asserted that to achieve greater gender equality, governments have to not only remove all types of discrimination against women, such as structural, cultural, and historic discrimination, but also ensure that women understand their rights explicitly. According to Conceicao (2020), there is often a "sticky floor" which keeps holding back women from advancing in the workplace. Many women,

indeed, experience barriers at home, workplace, school, and elsewhere that hinder them from realizing their full potential, metaphorically hitting glass ceilings. Ironically, they always find another, more unbreakable ceiling right above them after they break through one.

On the one hand, according to UNDP (2014), the proportion of women in positions of leadership in public institutions remains low. Additionally, even though women have equal access to education nationwide, it is thought that greater representation of women in leadership roles is not necessarily assured. To address the issues of women engaging in decision-making, the public sector, and politics, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has clearly shown several remarkable measures in its NSDP 2019-2023 (RGC, 2019) such as:

- Build appropriate tools to monitor and analyze men's and women's representation and engagement in both politics and decision-making positions,
- Increase women's representation in politics and other key decision-making positions through developing and strengthening policies, legal provisions and programs,
- Boost women's capabilities through capacity-building initiatives to help advance their participation in politics and other forms of government,
- Invest in initiatives that empower and protect women, particularly young women, to ensure equal participation in schools, higher institutions, youth clubs, and other community organizations,
- Build and support a focal point/gender working group in parliament for women to connect with one another and organizations in civil society, and

- Set appropriate metrics to ensure gender parties, and encourage all parliamentary committees to consider gender when making decisions.

In conclusion, Cambodia has taken gender equality into account, particularly in public decision-making. It is as evidenced through the five-year strategic plan of the Ministry of Women Affairs 2019-2023 as well as the NSDP 2019-2023, both of which are in accordance with several major international frameworks.

Objectives

The current study aims to

- 1) investigate and the viewpoints of male and female Cambodian government officials regarding gender equality in the workplace, and 2) discover appropriate remedies to address any existing issues of gender inequality.

Research Methodology

This research used qualitative approach as it attempted to obtain in-depth information from the participants. Thus, interviews were conducted to elicit relevant data on what they understood about gender (in)equality in the workplace. It included their opinions and evaluation of their actual work situations.

The research itself took place in Battambang City, Battambang Province, Cambodia. The selected areas were Battambang Provincial Hall, Battambang Municipal Hall, and four Sangkats (commune). Battambang is the second largest city. It is known as the main area for business, work, education, administration, and tourism. Cambodia's national strategic plan emphasizes

decentralization and contains a de-concentration strategy; therefore, local government institutions (Battambang Provincial Hall, Battambang Municipal Hall, and communes/Sangkats) are an appropriate focus for this study.

1. Key Informants

To obtain in-depth data in a qualitative research, considering the informants' readiness, experience, and status is indispensable. Thus, the criteria for the selection of the research participants were not only women and men working in government organizations in Battambang, but also included the followings: 1) holding a high-ranking position in an organization, and 2) being members of an administrative committee of the organization. Both required having no less than two years of working experience with men and women employees. The author chose high-ranking officers since it was considered important to understand their perception. Due to their strong positions, they would have more authority to make decisions in the workplace and power to adjust policy of the organizations.

With the above criteria, 12 key informants were recruited participants of the study and later classified according to their work levels as follows: three provincial administrators (1 female, 2 males), one member of a provincial administrative committee (1 female), three members of a municipal administrative committee (2 females, 1 male), two commune administrators (1 female, 1 male), and three members of a Sangkat administrative committee (1 female, 2 males).

The inclusion of both male and female participants would reveal different terms of thought about gender (in)equality in the

workplace. This would further enable the researchers to possibly compare the participants' perception, and make conclusion.

2. Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth interviews. Prior to this, the participants were informed of their rights. The researchers then asked for permission to voice record their responses and take notes of important points during the interview. In addition, the researchers requested permission to conduct non-participant observation in the organization's committee meetings. The observation was done to obtain data from actual work situations.

3. Data Analysis

The data from the interviews were transcribed and coded following the model outlined by Intaprom (2019). First, they were analyzed line by line in search for primary concepts and keywords. Second, the researchers gathered all of the data and entered them into a computer using NVivo software. Next was to include the subgroup code in the theme. After completing this phase, the researcher began validating all of the information gathered from the individuals. The final stage was to translate data into text, analyze and make interpretation.

4. Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest in this research. The researchers informed the participants and asked for their consents before conducting the interviews and discussion. The participants had the right to withdraw in case they felt uncomfortable.

Findings

1. Current Status of Gender Equality in Government Institutions

Most participants explained that the low percentage of female officers was due to cultural norms, and level of education.

“...In the municipal council, the number of female officials was 2 out of 11 members. It showed that there was a lack of women participating in the council. In the family context, women were not encouraged and offered opportunities to access higher education and work. As a result, they were seen as not being strong enough to participate and join in the public sector...” (Female member of Sangkat administrative committee, personal communication, July 2016)

In terms of power and decision-making, two issues were found: opportunities and discrimination. Female officials were given the same opportunities as their male counterparts to share their ideas and to participate in decision-making. The following are excerpts of the interviews in response to this issue.

“... We were allowed to raise problems in each annual meeting. Moreover, there was no discrimination which regards race and political policies...” (Female member of commune administrative committee, personal communication, July 2016)

“... However, some female officials remained silent once they were asked for ideas or making decisions...” (Male member of commune administrative committee, personal communication, July 2016)

To sum up, based on the interview data, the majority of officials in the government institutions at Battambang City were male. There was still lack of female officials in the institutions. While female officials had equal opportunities to share ideas and take part in decision-making, males performed most of the decision-making duties. Female officials remained passive since they were raised in discriminatory environments. Therefore, most of them did not have sufficient courage to make decisions.

1.1 Women's Empowerment

The results revealed that women's empowerment was made possible for women in decision-making, being given promotions, and enjoying equal opportunities to participate in the council meeting. Right, roles, positions, qualifications, and abilities were essential considerations in determining whether female officials were to be included in the decision-making. Female officials were also involved in the implementation of activities, administrative work, training, and consulting. The results suggested that when more female officials participated in a workshop or training in gender (in)equality, their presence would gain better recognition as valuable humankind. However, it should be noted that even when female officials were provided with more opportunities to participate at the decision-making level in staff or councilor meetings, the number of female officials was still less than that of male officials. This was emphasized by a male member of Sangkat administrative committee.

“...There were 80% of female participants in the workshops or trainings in gender (in)equality organized by the government. It showed that women were more interested in the field than men. Yet, in staff meetings or councilor meetings, male officials

consistently outnumbered female ...” (Male member of Sangkat administrative committee, personal communication, July 2016)

In terms of working conditions, both male and female officials received equal treatment. By the law of the Ministry of Economy and Finance, workers' performance has to be regularly evaluated using a scoring method developed by each department. The method can also be utilized to track their attendance. In order to ensure gender equality, a regulation was made. It states that within a two-year working period, both male and female officials would get the opportunity to be promoted.

“... I was promoted to become a deputy governor since I had done enough work for the institution for so long and had fulfilled all my responsibilities so far. I believed that it was proof of my achievement ...” (Female provincial administrator, personal communication, July 2016)

Even though there was an equal access to promotions, the number of female officials especially in high-ranking positions remained low due to the low percentage of overall female officials. In addition, as in Battambang Provincial Hall, only one female deputy governor was identified. This fact illustrates that women's voices were heard by male officials in the government institutions. Male officials respected the ideas of female officials since they worked closely within the community and found that female officials were more likely to better understand issues regarding women and children such as homecare, women's health, and child-rearing.

“...We established the Committee for Women Affairs and Child Protection in each commune and in Sangkat. The committee helps admonish children who leave school at young

ages and families affected by disasters. And the establishments strived to be reliable and aimed to develop the community and city...” (Female member of Sangkat administrative committee, personal communication, July 2016)

In short, to empower women’s roles in government institutions, women should be encouraged to make decisions, participate in all events, share equal benefits and promotions, and their ideas must be taken into consideration. Furthermore, it was acknowledged that women have more knowledge about their health, children and homecare.

Fortunately, though the number of female officials is less than that of males, in each meeting, women were allowed to raise ideas, and their opinions were heard. However, most of the decisions remained in the hands of men because they occupied most high-level positions. Moreover, female officials were lack of confidence to express their ideas.

1.2 Dissemination of Information about Gender Equality

Dissemination of information about gender equality appeared to be widespread throughout Cambodia, particularly in rural areas. Racism did not present as a factor. Furthermore, in the RGC, issues of gender equality were widely discussed in workshops and meetings. At sub-national level, a rectangular strategy involving women in each department was created to support and fund capacity-building programs for women and to disseminate information about gender equality.

2. The Perspective on Gender Equality in Government Institutions

The study found essential data related to gender equality in the workplace from the perspectives of Cambodian women. For the majority of participants, the meanings of "gender equality" were:

Women and men should have equal opportunities, rights, and responsibilities in all parts of life. Women and men should have equal chances for employment or job placement based on their abilities.

Important factors for recognition leading to gender equality in the workplace are education, mindset, understanding, and acceptance of gender equality in the workplace, opportunity, participation in decision-making, and social support...

2.1 Education

Cambodian women have been encouraged to work according to gender stereotypes and perspectives of family and society, which hinder the development of their role in modern society. Some families ignore the importance of being educated. They disallow women to pursue higher education and work outside their homes. Child marriage is still practiced although the legal age for marriage is 18. Gender-based violence against girls including bullying has also caused higher school absence rates and withdrawal from personal and family matters.

Highly educated women would be better valued and have more opportunities to occupy high-ranking positions. Women should gain more knowledge, job skills, and research skills.

“...I have been working there for more than five years, and I could see how this society works. There was a time when a young girl came to me and asked me to help her get married at

an early age. She was not ready and had just turned 16 years old. This is wrong according to the law. We helped her by educating her parents...” (Female member of commune administrative committee, personal communication, July 2016)

“...To step up to a higher position, women should develop their potential. They should have various skills to create more opportunities at work...” (Female member of the municipal committee, personal communication, July 2016)

“...I was appointed as a deputy provincial governor because I had worked for a long time and my work performance was well-accepted. So, there was no doubt about my appointment...” (Female provincial administrator, personal communication, July 2016)

2.2 Mindset

One of the challenges female government officials faces is the old mindset that women have and men’s viewpoints of women who work with them. It was found that some female government officials thought that they were not as strong as men and could not do the work as well as men do. This makes them worried and causes a lack of confidence in performing their jobs more efficiently. They avoid taking risks, which makes them seen as insecure and inferior in decision-making compared to men. Some men draw a line between males and females due to the glass ceiling: women are considered weak both physically and emotionally. Such discrimination affects women’s capacity to be empowered. This finding illustrates the concept of the glass ceiling, which is vertical discrimination against women within organizations. In addition, gender blindness in the

national laws involving the absence of a precise definition of gender-based discrimination contributes to the barrier of dealing with discrimination against women in the workplace. It includes being assigned to and elected for positions. Hence, the participants suggested that women should change their mindset toward themselves, build self-confidence at work, be encouraged to express their opinions related to work, and make decisions based on relevant data in order to improve equality in the workplace. So, women can gain more opportunities to work and get promoted to higher positions. This will help change their colleagues' perceptions, reduce gender gap, and develop a good attitude toward working with men. This is one way that will lead to equal opportunities in the workplace for women.

“...Some female government officials consider themselves weak and cannot do good work compared to men, which makes them hesitating to do a good job. Women should change their mindset and build self-confidence...” (Female member administrative committee, personal communication, July 2016)

“...Women tend to be employed in lower positions and low-skilled jobs, and seldom in management positions...” (Female member of Sangkat administrative committee, personal communication, July 2016)

“...If you want to increase the number of women in decision-making positions, you should start with changing their mindset so that there will be no more barrier to increasing the number of women in the higher positions...” (Male provincial administrator, personal communication, July 2016)

2.3 Understanding and Acceptance of Gender Equality in the Workplace

According to the participants' viewpoints regarding gender equality at work, one crucial issue is that men do not see and realize the importance of gender equality in the workplace as women do. Men view it as a matter that relates only to women. As a result, they do not try to understand it, which is an obstacle to fostering the development of gender equality in the workplace in Cambodia. This was evidenced by the fact that only a small number of men attended workshops related to gender equality organized by various organizations. In 2019, there were five workshops on gender equality conducted by the Ministry of Women's Affairs in Battambang Province. It was found that over 80% participants in the workshops held by government organizations were women. Thus, it can be said that males lack understanding of gender equality and perhaps refuse the concept. Consequently, they are passive in promoting gender equality.

Regarding the work context, such as in meetings of committees, more men were observed than women. In a discussion of a high-level council committee of Battambang Province, out of 11 committee members, only two females were elected to become members of the committee. Males' lack of understanding and acceptance of gender equality could be a strong obstacle to promoting gender equality in the workplace. Understanding the issue will indeed impact bringing more women into higher position levels. Once men understand, they will fully support and encourage women to participate in any important meeting, not only those related to gender equality.

In addition, more of them will be willing to join in fostering gender equality at sub-national level.

“...In a seminar concerning gender equality organized by the government sector, 80% participants were women. This showed that more women than men were interested in the issue of gender equality...” (Female provincial administrator, personal communication, July 2016)

“...It is true that in my village whenever we invite people to come for a discussion on gender issues or something related to gender, we will only see female participants. This could be concluded that there was a lack of understanding of the theory of gender equality...” (Female member of Sangkat administrative committee, personal communication, July 2016)

“... Women are mainly concentrated in a few sectors, usually with less social and economic value. Female participation is weak in informal, long-term, high-skilled and high-demand training programs in sectors such as construction and mechanics, where jobs are higher paid and more valued...” (Male member of commune administrative committee, personal communication, July 2016).

2.4 Participation in Decision-making

The participants stated that very few women working in government institutions had participated in high level decision-making. In 2018, only one woman became the Provincial Governor out of 24 provinces and 17.44% women held positions as Deputy Provincial Governors. Women face several issues participating in public and political spheres, especially workplace discrimination at the sub-national level.

According to the participants, social support motivates women to develop themselves and increases their work productivity. Women need more motivation and encouragement from male colleagues, the government, and the community to develop their work to attain better results.

Besides men's contribution, social support from the law, policies, and strategic plans have imparted the raising of awareness on gender equality in all sectors. Some examples are educational system and vocational training through improved physical foundation, access to and chance for literacy and coaching, enhanced social point of view, and more favorable circumstances for women involved in all levels across the sectors. However, the policies and strategic plans are set up; there are gaps in executions at all levels. Organizations and human resources of gender mainstreaming remain weak at the sub-national level.

“...In the administrative committee, there are two women out of the total of 11 committee members. One reason for a limited number of female committee members is their families do not support them to be highly educated, and that causes women’s lack of qualifications for working in the government sector...” (Female member of Sangkat administrative committee, personal communication, July 2016)

“...Only unmarried or divorced women can be successful in terms of working or getting promoted. This point was raised when I discussed with my colleague the success rate of women in jobs...” (Female member of commune administrator, personal communication, July 2016)

“...Hierarchical social structures and patriarchal political culture build an environment that holds women’s ability to become equal partners in the workplace. The old mindset still considers women as subordinates who cannot engage in politics and make a decision in a senior position. ...” (Male provincial administrator, personal communication, July 2016)

3. Challenges to Gender Equality

Challenges to gender equality include the existence of an old mindset of female officials and the impact of the views of male officials toward their female colleagues in government institutions.

“...Some female officials think they are weak; they could not do things well like men could. That is what makes them feel hesitant to perform their job well. Women could not turn around the stove...” (Male member of Sangkat administrative committee, personal communication, July 2016)

Some males held the perspective that there was a boundary between a female’s work and that of a male. They were not open to notions of gender equality and rarely attend trainings and/or workshops related to gender equality. It was particularly true of many men in the older generation. These men were not helpful and discouraged female officials. Some male officials thought that gender equality focused solely on women; therefore, they reasoned, only women should deal with this problem. This attitude led to less vocal negotiation, decision-making, and work implementation on the part of women.

4. Remedies to Address the Issue of Gender (In)equality

The results suggested that remedies to address gender inequality should include a focus on increasing women's knowledge, working skills, and research skills.

“...Some officials should build up their abilities, knowledge, skills, research, and experience. Not many women could do that. I encouraged them to improve those special skills; therefore, they could be promoted quickly...” (Female member of the municipal administrative committee, personal communication, July 2016)

The development of critical thinking skills was also viewed as essential for women in order to enhance their capacities. As a result of the tradition and culture, women are often softer and more likely to be frustrated with everything. Fewer women are willing to take risks, and this may hesitate them to make a decision.

A work engagement strategy should be developed by the government. It was found that some female officials quit working in international companies. Therefore, the strategy to develop the working conditions is one of the solutions to overcome this problem. Salary paid to government employees is relatively low compared to that given to international organization workers. It makes men and women less attracted to work for government-based institutions.

“...It would be better if women themselves throw away the stereotype or old mindset. Besides working as a teacher or other government officers, they shall join in the parliament or the senior position...” (Male provincial administrator, personal communication, July 2016)

To address this issue, the government played a role in offering critical support to encourage women to participate in events such as training and workshops, and to represent governmental institutes. Moreover, the government established a plan to widely promote gender equality, especially in rural areas.

“...From my perspective, for those who work as a leader in the country, especially male officials, they should follow the fundamental policies to encourage and support female officials to complete their tasks...” (Male member of Sangkat administrative committee, personal communication, July 2016)

Discussion

The results of the study indicate that Cambodian men and women acknowledge gender equality in the workplace, focusing on equal opportunities. Women and men should have employment equality based on their abilities. It was revealed that education, mindset, understanding, and acceptance of gender equality in the workplace, participation in decision-making, and social support are the main factors leading to equal opportunities and equality in the workplace for women. This is congruent with the report of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 2013, which specified the increasing employment rate in the public sector in Cambodia, and that women should be given both soft and hard skills to gain confidence in all subsectors (ADB, 2013). It also corresponds with recent studies which indicate that education is one major factor in empowering women to achieve gender equality (Alexander & Welzel, 2007; Karam, 2013; Reeves & Baden, 2000). However, for women to be recognized, they should improve their self-confidence by changing their mindset to develop their potential. They should

leave their comfort zone and raise their voices in the decision-making process.

Mindset is one of the key factors influencing human capability development. Previous research indicated that people with a growth mindset believe that their abilities can develop over time, encourage themselves to seek opportunities to gain new knowledge, strengthen their skills, and relate to challenges (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Similarly, Rahim, et al. (2019) stated that a growth mindset and lifelong learning enable women to realize their abilities and potential to embrace both professional and domestic challenges. Accordingly, to promote gender equality, women should grow their mindset to make themselves talented and recognized.

External factors the participants considered necessary in the development of women's potential are understanding and acceptance of gender equality in the workplace, opportunities and participation in decision-making, and social support. These factors would promote equality in the workplace for Cambodian women. This is in line with the findings of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in 2014. The findings reported that other main factors which are also obstacles for the progress of gender equality for Cambodian women include lack of self-confidence and lack of support from families and community (USAID, 2014).

Conclusion

The study outcomes indicate that opportunity is the key to achieving gender equality in the workplace for Cambodian women, especially in Battambang Province. To lead gender equality in the workplace, Cambodian women need better and

higher education and self-confidence. One way possible to actualize this is through changing their mindset. They need to adapt to and be ready for the new challenges in society. Additionally, women's and men's understanding and acceptance of gender equality in the workplace and social support are needed. All these aspects are keys to developing and improving gender equality in the workplace for Cambodian women, and to increasing the number of women at the decision-making level. Therefore, the more voices from women are heard, the more solutions will be reached to include all related people. In addition, the data suggest that both men and women need to develop a clearer understanding of and appreciation for the issues impeding gender equality. The data also suggests that the government should take a more active role in ensuring that both male and female officials adhere to government policies and regulations as they pertain to gender equality.

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