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NEGOTIATING FAMILY AND PERSONAL ASPIRATIONS:

FOUR YOUNG CAMBODIAN WOMEN REFLECTING ON CHOOSING A MAJOR

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Negotiating Family and Personal Aspirations: Four Young Cambodian Women Reflecting on Choosing a Major

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Table of contents

Acknowledgements v
Executive summary vi
1. Introduction 1
2. Context and literature review 2
  2.1 Higher education and women's aspirations 2
  2.2 Filial obligations and daughters' roles 4
3. Research methods and description of interlocutors 5
4. Findings: Approaching parental guidance 7
  4.1 Relying on parental guidance 8
    4.1.1 Kravann 8
    4.1.2 Samedy 9
    4.1.3 Young women relying on parental guidance 11
  4.2 Parental guidance as a starting point 12
    4.2.1 Sophal 12
    4.2.2 Pheara 13
    4.2.3 Young women viewing parental guidance as a starting point 14
5. Discussion 15
6. Conclusion 16
7. Recommendations 17
References 19
CDRI Working paper series 22

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Executive summary

Despite recent declines in university enrolment due to the COVID-19 pandemic and other factors, the number of university students has continued to grow in Cambodia. In fact, in its recent Education 2030 Roadmap, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) estimates that there will be twice as many students enrolled in higher education in 2030 as there were in 2018 (MoEYS 2019a, 36). The field students choose as their major when they enrol in higher education orients their pathway into future career opportunities and impacts the country's educated workforce. The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has pushed for more students to enrol in STEM majors especially to contribute to Cambodia's economic development future (MoEYS 2019b). Thus, understanding how students decide on their university major can shed light on how to best support and encourage more women and others from marginalised groups to pursue a pathway through higher education that is meaningful to them and their families. This paper provides qualitative insight into how four young women (Kravann, Samedy, Sophal, and Pheara; pseudonyms) chose their university major by engaging with and reflecting on guidance they received from their parents.

Based on social science literature, two key issues would be expected to impact young women's experiences as they prepare to enrol in university and choose a university major: having role models and fulfilling their obligations to their parents. First, many young women in university today are the first women in their family to pursue higher education, and so they are forging new pathways for themselves with a limited number of role models and potential mentors to guide them. In fact, a 2014 survey of women university students found they were primarily stressed about whether their major would enable them to reliably secure employment after graduation (Kaing 2014). Thus, choosing a major is a significant moment in which women turn to elders, such as their parents, for guidance and help even if the people guiding them have limited knowledge or experience in these systems.

Second, part of young women's calculations for their future also revolves around fulfilling their commitment to their family and caring for their parents as they age in ways that align with Cambodian Theravada Buddhist principles. The fulfilment of a child's moral obligation to their parents—referred to in other contexts as filial piety (Oxfeld 2010; Shohet 2021; Simon 2014; Mills 1999)—changes as they grow from adolescents to adults and includes support in daily tasks but also extends to financial support. Both birth order and gender also influence the kinds of support Cambodian parents expect of their children and children learn to return to their parents (Smith-Hefner 1999, 95). Regardless, children's actions should come from their own intrinsic desire to care for their parents, and so young women must balance performing their appropriate role in the parent-child hierarchical relationship and following their desires to pursue a university major that suits their interests.

Research questions

This working paper considers how young women are incorporating and responding to guidance from their parents in their decision-making process. Specifically, it considers the following key questions:

1) To what extent have young women turned to their parents as a source of guidance when they decided on a university major?
2) How did young women describe their relationship with their parents? How did that relationship get reinforced or change as the young women decided on their university major?

3) To what extent did each young woman feel they could negotiate the guidance their parents gave?

The data in this working paper is a small portion of a larger anthropological dissertation research project. In that larger project, I conducted semi-structured interviews lasting between 90 and 180 minutes each with 62 university students and recent graduates of universities in Phnom Penh over 12 months in 2021 and 2022. Based on common themes and demographic similarities across all my interlocutors, I selected four young women's narratives—Kravann, Samedy, Sophal, and Pheara—to represent the spectrum of experiences my young female interlocutors faced as they chose their major. Their experiences cut across geographic boundaries (Kravann and Pheara grew up in Phnom Penh, Sophal grew up in a district town in Battambang, and Samedy was from a more rural area in Pailin) while the women share a similar birth order position in their families and their parents are employed in jobs associated with the middle class.

The findings section presents each of the four young women's narratives describing how they chose their university major, responded to their parents' guidance, whether they felt the need to negotiate that guidance, and their view of their relationship with their parents. I grouped the narratives into two pairs: one where the women turn to and rely on parental guidance, and the second where the women view parental guidance as a starting point for their exploration. This grouping most clearly shows the similarities and differences across the four young women's experiences. Yet, the boundaries between the two groups remain porous.

Discussion

The two pairs—one relying on parental guidance and the second using parental guidance as a starting point—illuminate common patterns in how my interlocutors negotiated with their parents about what major to pursue. Their negotiation practices also provide insight into how the young women adhere to longstanding gender norms and how they think about their relationship with their parents as a result. For Kravann and Samedy who turned to parental guidance, parents are clearly positioned as hierarchically superior to their children and are put into the position of being the most trustworthy and deeply knowledgeable guides for their children's lives. Both Kravann and Samedy negotiated with their parents about what major they would pursue and, in the end, indicated that their relationships with their parents had shifted and taken on a new tension. Thus, Kravann and Samedy's experiences reflect past literature describing parent-daughter relationships and expectations parents have for their daughters.

For Sophal and Pheara who used parental guidance as a starting point, their experiences demonstrate a different way young women approached both parents' and child's roles in the decision-making process. Their approach was characterized by when they sought out their parents' guidance, a willingness to seek out alternatives, and how they viewed parent-child relationships in Cambodia today. Both Sophal's and Pheara's parents gave them space to think about and make their own decision. As a result, their experiences more closely align with recent survey findings indicating that the responsibility for making significant life decisions is shifting from the parents and onto children (see Eng et al. 2019). Heuveline's (2016) research focusing on marriage residency may point to another possibility: families are willing to adapt longstanding norms for practical reasons, such as employment. It is possible that older generations feel unaware of the changing world of higher education and employment, and so are relying on their children for more input into decisions that were previously directed by parents. However, even if parent-child relationships are changing, all four young women continue to be concerned about choosing a major that suited their interests and could translate

into well-paid, stable employment. Kravann, Samedy, Sophal, and Pheara all want to be sure they can support themselves and their families in the future.

Recommendations

This working paper's findings indicate that building better resources and providing mentorship opportunities would provide support for students and their parents as they decide what major to pursue in university. The resources that students would most benefit from is consistently updated information on universities, the majors they offer, and what jobs students could have after graduation. Building these resources could take three forms: 1) updating the current printed handbook given to Grade 12 students with university input, 2) developing a series of easily accessible, asynchronous online resources, and 3) coordinating a traveling workshop aimed at helping high school students explore their interests and learn to set goals for themselves. A second recommendation would be to host and make publicly available interviews or blog posts highlighting individuals from marginalised groups in a variety of fields of study and careers. The people highlighted could serve as role models for students to learn from as they chart their path and negotiate options with their families that extend beyond their immediate experience. Both sets of recommendations should utilise social media and other asynchronous and easily accessible resources to ensure that students and their parents have access to this information in a variety of formats across geographic areas.

1. Introduction

Over the past 20 years, attending university and completing at least one bachelor's degree has become a goal for a growing proportion of the young Cambodian population. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) has prioritised encouraging young people, particularly women (Grace and Eng 2020), to stay in school and complete university degrees in order to build Cambodia's human resources and further its economic development goals. The growth in the number of universities reflects this trend. In 1997 there were eight universities in Cambodia enrolling approximately 10,000 students per year, predominantly men (Un and Sok 2018). Yet, as of 2022, 132 universities were enrolling nearly 250,000 students annually across all degrees (MoEYS 2023, 153). While bachelor's degree enrolment has declined slightly since 2013 due to a variety of factors, the number of students enrolled in a bachelor's degree programme remains high at over 175,000 students (48 percent) in the 2021-2022 academic year (MoEYS 2023, 153).

Interest in pursuing higher education has been building and has brought with it a host of new social opportunities and challenges young people are navigating today. One such opportunity and challenge is choosing a university major that will translate into a stable and financially rewarding career. This paper particularly considers how young women are managing choosing a major. The Cambodian government considers certain majors, particularly those in STEM fields, well-positioned to contribute to Cambodia's economic development future (MoEYS 2019b). However, a growing body of research has been done to consider how young Cambodians choose a university major that will launch their future career (see Eam et al. 2021; Kao, Chea, and Song 2022; Dom 2019; Peou 2017). Understanding this process can shed light on how to best support and encourage more women and other marginalised groups to pursue higher education in a way that is meaningful to them and their families. This working paper contributes a close qualitative look at young women's decision-making process.

As a growing number of young women become the first woman in their family to pursue higher education, it can be difficult to find advice and information available to them. In the past, children have largely turned to their parents for advice and guidance on how to direct their next steps in life. A recent study conducted by Pov et al (2024) found that parents' guidance continues to play an important role in guiding young Cambodians' choice between the sciences and social sciences track in secondary school. For the young women who are the first in their family to attend university, their parents' limited knowledge of higher education but rich life experience creates competing senses of what possibilities are available to university-educated women (Lay 2022). Young women must negotiate the resulting tension as they choose a major.

In order to promote a diverse educated workforce, it is important to find ways to support and encourage more young women to pursue a variety of majors and career opportunities, including majors that currently enrol mostly men. Doing so requires an understanding of how women incorporate different sources of information and advice into their decision-making process as they choose a major. The possible factors influencing young women's decisions include their interests, what might provide future stable employment, their family members' employment, where in Cambodia they want to live, financial and emotional support from their parents, and what kinds of scholarship opportunities are available.

Research questions

This aim of this working paper is to consider how young women are incorporating and responding to guidance from their parents in their university major decision-making process. Specifically, it considers the following key questions:

1) To what extent have young women turned to their parents as a source of guidance when they decided on a university major?
2) How did young women describe their relationship with their parents? How did that relationship get reinforced or change as the young women decided on their university major?
3) To what extent did each young woman feel they could negotiate the guidance their parents gave?

To answer these questions, this paper will examine narratives from four women—Kravann and Pheara from Phnom Penh, Samedy from a district town in Battambang, and Sophal from a rural area in Pailin—in their early 20s as they reflect on how they chose a major for their bachelor's degrees. In the process, I examine how the young women responded to their parents' guidance, whether they felt the need to negotiate that guidance, and how they view their relationship to their parents. I argue that women are actively renegotiating their roles as daughters in order to participate in higher education. As a result, their actions highlight changes in Cambodian femininity and how to be "good" children to their parents. Choosing a major is just one of many decisions young women must make in their educational journeys and lives. How young women negotiate this one decision illuminates how they may be approaching other significant decisions and can shed light on how to better support university students as they transition from secondary school to university.

2. Context and literature review

I situate the narratives at the heart of this paper in relation to anthropological literature on young women's access to and experience of pursuing higher education. Becoming educated is particularly valuable for upward social mobility because it is considered to dramatically impact family resources, improve social status, and enable individuals to build important social networks (Mellor 2011; Stambach and Hall 2017). Catherine Earl's (2014) ethnography of young Vietnamese women migrating to Ho Chi Minh City for higher education and careers with the ultimate goal of becoming part of the country's new middle class, presents a similar social trajectory to the young women described in this study. However, Fida Adely (2012) also found that Jordanian young women's engagement with education did not translate into the same pursuit of careers and urban middle class life and, therefore, was considered a "paradox." There are multiple possibilities for what women do after pursuing higher education. How Cambodian young women are navigating this relatively new domain and what they hope to come afterwards remains an area of discussion this paper can contribute to by considering the beginning of their experience: choosing a major.

2.1 Higher education and women's aspirations

As young Cambodian women transition from Grade 12 to university, they must navigate a variety of pressures, including their own educational aspirations, changing acceptance of women in higher education, and fulfilling their obligations to their parents. The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has worked steadily to increase access to primary and secondary schools, especially for women (MoEYS 2019b). As a result, more young women

today than ever before have been able to continue their education beyond primary school (Zimmermann and Williams 2015) and have been specifically targeted in recent government policies to increase their participation in school (Anderson and Grace 2018). Today, girls' enrolment at the primary and secondary levels is even starting to rise above boys' enrolment (Chea, Tek, and Nok 2023). Women's increased enrolments extend to higher education as well. According to Cambodia's 2019 census, the total percentage of young women older than 15 years who have pursued post-secondary education has risen from 1 percent in 2008 to 2.2 percent in 2019 while men's participation in post-secondary education has increased from 1.5 percent to 3.5 percent over the same time period (National Institute of Statistics 2020, 45). These increases may seem extremely modest, but just one generation prior, it was very common for women to only have attended primary school, if they were able to attend at all as evidenced in Figure 2 (see Smith-Hefner 1999; Ebihara 2018). Past generations of women who were able to pursue higher education and access upward social mobility were often relegated to teaching (Sen 2020, 26–27). Teaching was considered an "appropriate" profession for women because the half-day structure of schools enabled women to maintain their longstanding role as primary performers of housework while men pursued the full variety of careers promoted by the government at the time (Sen 2020, 27). Today's generation of young women are forging new pathways for themselves, their sisters, and future generations that require significant research and planning. Yet, as pioneers on this pathway, they also have a limited number of role models and potential mentors that have pursued similar paths and can help them navigate their journey to and through university. The availability of scholarships provided by both the government and non-profit organisations has supported women's pursuit of higher education by reducing or removing financial barriers. The RGC has provided support through targeted scholarship programmes aimed at increasing student diversity based on a student's national exam score, gender, socioeconomic status, and hometown (Kao, Chea, and Song 2022, 5). Female students, students from designated poor families, and rural students are given priority in these and similar scholarship programmes. However, the reach of these programmes is fairly limited with government scholarships assisting 15 percent of enrolments, or roughly 10 percent of new students annually, at higher education institutions (Sok 2019, 3). The RGC's push for increased STEM enrolments is also clear as it aims to move from a reliance on agriculture to "higher-value industries" within the Industrial Revolution 4.0 (Kao, Chea, and Song 2023, 90). Expanding access to government scholarships may provide much-needed support for some young women to pursue their desired major and career path.

Students also seek out information about potential university majors and associated career paths to make their decision. Despite the MoEYS publishing a guidebook of information about universities and potential majors, the information in the book about potential career paths for each major is limited with many providing generic possibilities, such as the government or a private company (MoEYS 2017). Yet, information about what major and career possibilities are available to students is precisely the information students want and need to make their decisions. In fact, a 2014 survey of women who had migrated to Phnom Penh to attend university found that knowing and being able to reliably secure employment after graduation was the factor that most contributed to their stress as they decided to attend university (Kaing 2014). The next highest concern impacting young women's pursuit of higher education was whether they were able to consistently afford living costs in Phnom Penh. Surprisingly, even to the researcher, young women were largely not concerned about social attitudes around whether women "needed" to pursue higher education if they were going to become primarily mothers and housewives (Kaing 2014). Thus, young women's choice of major and the career opportunities made available from that major were significant decisions that impacted both the

young women's comfort with pursuing higher education and how they planned their future. This paper builds on this understanding to interrogate how young women manage the various stressors involved in making that decision and how their relationship with their parents may guide the decision-making process.

2.2 Filial obligations and daughters' roles

As mentioned in Kaing's (2014) survey, part of young women's calculations of their future also revolved around fulfilling their commitments to their family and caring for their parents as they age. The repayment of obligation to one's parents is commonly referred to as filial obligation or piety. There are a variety of expressions and definitions of filial obligation across Asia, including in China (Oxfeld 2010), Thailand (Mills 1999), Vietnam (Shohet 2021), and Indonesia (Simon 2014). Within Cambodia, practices of filial obligation relate to Cambodian Theravada Buddhist principles that children are forever karmically indebted to their parents because they birthed and cared for them as they grew up (Smith-Hefner 1999, 95). Throughout a child's life, they become more responsible for returning their parents' care in both big and small ways, including completing household chores or providing housing. The concept of children being obligated to their parents also socializes children into an understanding that the family is a hierarchy where their parents occupy a high position. As children grow up, they are instructed explicitly and implicitly in how to effectively demonstrate their position within the hierarchy and show respect to their parents and other elders, which enables them to effectively engage in a variety of social settings.

The kinds of care practices expected of sons differ from those expected of daughters. As young women progress through adolescence, they are typically expected to take on more responsibilities to complete household chores or care for younger siblings, among other tasks. Additionally, some Cambodian parents more closely adhere to longstanding ideas that a family's reputation is expressed and maintained, in part, through their daughters' behaviour (Ledgerwood 1990). Parents who follow these norms provide more heavy-handed guidance, particularly for significant decisions, and are more likely to closely monitor their daughter's behaviour, such as when and where she socializes with friends. This approach to parenting demonstrates the on-going social importance of teachings from the *chbap srey* (Anderson and Grace 2018; Klahaan 2021) as well as parents' concern for women's safety in a changing world (see Sen 2020, 29; Smith-Hefner 1999, 121).

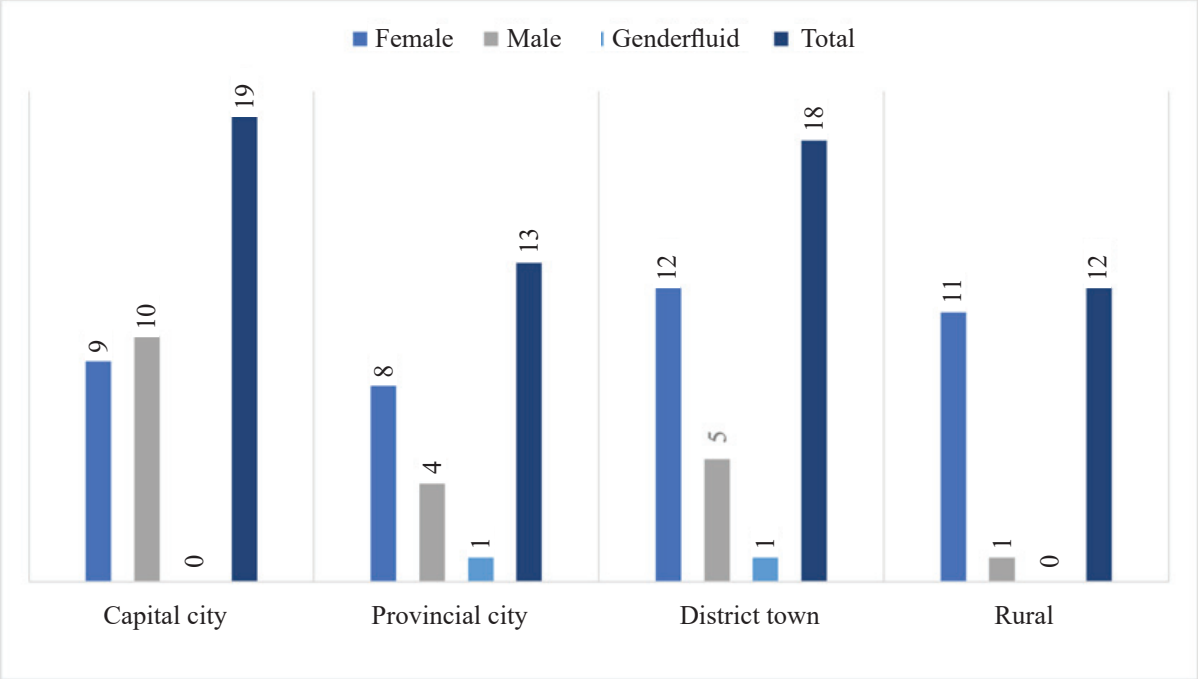
Birth order is another factor potentially influencing parents' attitudes and expectations of their daughter as well as the kind of obligation she may experience. The oldest child is also often expected to begin to support, either financially or emotionally, their family much sooner than their younger siblings might be expected to (Ebihara 1974, 327). Therefore, young women, especially oldest or only children, are likely particularly mindful of how they are going to repay their debt and fulfil their obligations to their parents. As a result, their desire to choose a financially stable career, and thus, the right university major could be especially strong. It is important to note that even within the Cambodian filial obligation framework, parents are not supposed to force their children to do anything. Instead, their children's actions should come from their own intrinsic desire to care for their parents (Smith-Hefner 1999, 96). As a result, young women must balance demonstrating their appropriate role in the parent-child hierarchal relationship and following their own desires when choosing a university major that will provide for them and their family in the future. However, how to fulfil one's filial obligation is changing alongside increased participation in education as more opportunities for stable employment become available to today's generation of young Cambodians. How these

changes manifest in young women's decisions about what major to pursue is addressed in the narratives that follow.

3. Research methods and description of interlocutors

This paper presents one portion of a larger anthropology dissertation project, which focuses on how attending university impacts the ways Cambodian university students think about their next steps in life. The dissertation project included 12 months of ethnographic field research in Phnom Penh between 2020 and 2021 that included 62 in-depth semi-structured interviews each lasting between 90 and 180 minutes with 40 women, 20 men, and 2 gender fluid people. I met interlocutors through the snowball method by reaching out to my network of university lecturers, organisation leaders, women's dormitory programmes, and other contacts around Phnom Penh. During the interviews, I gathered an educational life history of each interlocutor about their experiences and memories from their earliest experience in school through the present day. I approached the interviews using Cheryl Mattingly's (2010) concept of narrative as key to understanding how people frame their experiences in the world and particularly focused on what Ann Swidler (2001) termed moments of "debate" between different "cultural repertoires" within those narratives to understand the challenges young women face to their ideas or proposed pathway, among others. The moment of debate highlighted in this working paper is the moment young women chose their major.

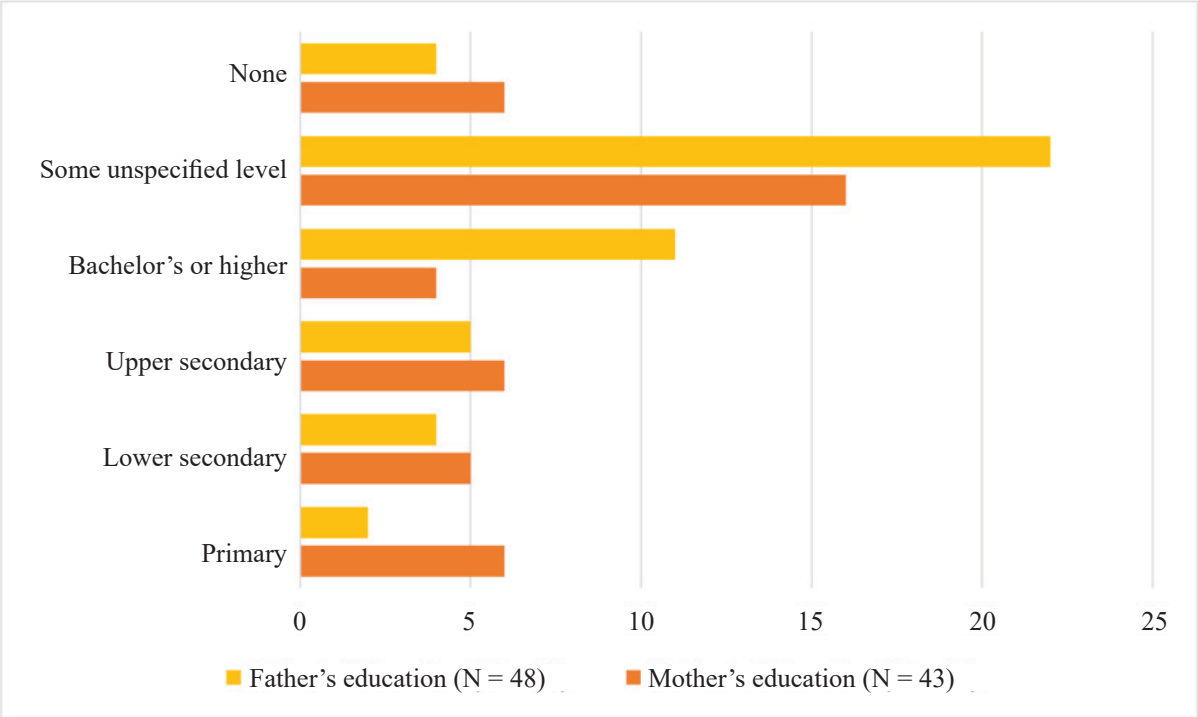
Figure 1: Home town locale by gender (N=62)



For this working paper, I selected 4 young women's stories who provide a typical representation of the narratives from the 40 young women I interviewed. Each interview was transcribed and analysed using a descriptive coding strategy (Saldaña 2014). Initially, deductive codes (e.g., family life, motivations for attending school, marriage, adulthood, and dating) were used and later expanded to include inductive codes concerning filial obligation, student employment and volunteering, sexuality, choosing a major, and scholarship opportunities, among others. This working paper focuses on the themes that emerged around filial obligation and choosing a major. I use narrative to highlight key features of the young women's experiences that emerge through their retelling of and reflection on choosing a major.

As evidenced in Figures 1 and 2, the four interlocutors discussed in this working paper (Kravann, Samedy, Sophal, and Pheara) provide a typical representation of my total group of interlocutors, particularly in terms of where they grew up (home town) and their parents' educational experience. My interlocutors came from a variety of home town locales, including Phnom Penh, major cities in provinces, district towns, and rural areas, located in 18 of Cambodia's 25 provinces. As Figure 1 shows, the largest number of interlocutors (19 people) reported their home town was Phnom Penh while the next highest number of interlocutors (18 people) reported growing up in a district town, which they described as a smaller town that often had its own primary and secondary schools within walking distance or a short bicycle ride from their house. The smallest number of interlocutors reported coming from a rural area where they described living close enough to a primary school but needing to travel much further or rent a room in a town to attend secondary school. I focus on this demographic aspect because the level of access a family has to school could impact their willingness and ability to support their daughters' pursuit of education (Heng 2022).

Figure 2: Parent's highest level of education



Parents' level of education also provides insight into how they understand their children's pathway through school and the kinds of supports they can provide. During the 62 interviews, I gathered information about my interlocutors' parents' highest level of education when they knew or remembered this information. One possible factor contributing to the range of parental attitudes my interlocutors described could be their parents' experience with schooling. As shown in Figure 2, the majority of my interlocutors' parents (44 fathers and 37 mothers) had attended school at some point. Only 4 fathers and 6 mothers had not attended school at all based on my interlocutors' knowledge. Overall, my interlocutors' fathers had participated in school longer than their mothers with 11 fathers and just 4 mothers having completed their bachelor's degrees. The trend in my data of men continuing their schooling longer than women is consistent with Cambodian social expectations that men should provide for their families financially (Jacobsen 2011). One way to access stable, well-paid jobs is through certifications earned through schooling, which could include a range of careers from teaching to the military.

Similarly, my interlocutors reported their parents had a range of occupations, including educator, service professional, manager, farmer, vendor, small business owner, civil service, and the military or police. An important assumption made by my interlocutors and their parents was that there is a direct correlation between a university major and intended career path (see also Dom 2019). For example, majoring in economics could directly translate into employment at the Ministry of Economics and Finance. At times, this assumption caused disagreements or anxiety about choosing the "right" major and how parents viewed their children's potential career path, which Kaing (2014) also discussed at length.

Although this working paper presents a very small segment of the university student population in Phnom Penh and focuses on just four young women, those women whose narratives I present below provide a representation of the variety of experiences my interlocutors faced. One source of this variety is that the four young women came from different hometown geographic locations. Pheara and Kravann were born and raised in Phnom Penh with the potential to access the city's wide array of resources. Sophal was from a district town where resources were more readily available and access to primary and secondary schools was relatively easy. Finally, Samedy was from a more rural area where she had to travel further to access secondary school and had more limited access to information about education meaning that she had to seek out information more actively. While their hometowns differed, their experiences demonstrate the range of possibilities among parents who have similar kinds of jobs and income levels but different access to resources.

Additionally, the young women's position in the family and their family's socioeconomic status created points of similarity that facilitated comparing their narratives. First, three of the four young women are the oldest or only child in their family meaning they assumed more responsibility to care for other family members and were the first to navigate going to university. They may eventually become a guide for their younger siblings or cousins to follow in their footsteps, but in the meantime, the oldest child in the family must figure out solutions and seek out other sources of guidance for themselves. Second, these four young women's parents are all employed within the range of what is considered middle-class jobs that do not require large amounts of manual labour, such as farming[1]. All four of the young women's parents' jobs, which span from police officer to vendor, provide a moderate level of income for their families to generally afford necessities and extra class fees for their children.

4. Findings: Approaching parental guidance

This section presents Kravann's, Samedy's, Sophal's, and Pheara's narratives of how they decided on their current university major. Each narrative provides a short description of the young woman's family, how they described their relationship with their parents, and how they decided what university major to study. The narratives show how each young woman reacted to and interpreted their parents' guidance in the decision-making process. Finally, they conclude with the young woman's reflection on her experience and how she thought her relationship with her parents was maintained or changed in the process.

Based on the young women's experiences, I have grouped the narratives into two distinct categories: one where the women turn to and rely on parental guidance, and the second where the women view parental guidance as a starting point for their exploration. I group the narratives

1 Here I draw on Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty's (2012) definition of a globally recognizable "new" middle-class as having a common vision for upward mobility through entrepreneurship and consumption that is interpreted through local historical and cultural concepts. In Cambodia, this definition would include service, civil service, and clerical jobs reference here.

in this way to clearly show the similarities and differences across the four young women's experiences. However, the boundaries between the two groups are still porous. How young women responded to their parents' guidance and what they chose to do afterwards highlights the spectrum of possibilities young women have to negotiate the longstanding norms around parent-daughter relationships.

4.1 Relying on parental guidance

The narratives in this section demonstrate how my interlocutors approached guidance from their parents as information that should be relied upon. While both Kravann and Samedy had different reactions and results as they decided on a university major, they both relied on their parents to guide their journey from secondary school to enrolling in a university degree programme. Often their parents' experiences and perspectives led them to direct their daughters towards a field or job they felt would be best for them. How the young women reacted to their parents' guidance is illustrated in the narratives that follow.

4.1.1 Kravann

At the time of our interview, Kravann was a 19-year-old woman who grew up in Phnom Penh and lived with her mother and maternal grandparents. Her father and older brother lived in another house in Phnom Penh, and her father had attended some school before training to become a chef. Kravann's mother had gotten her bachelor's degree and was working as an accountant making a steady income that was enough to support Kravann and her grandparents but meant that Kravann needed to secure a scholarship to afford university tuition. Within this living arrangement, Kravann developed a close relationship with her mother and described to me how she had always "told her everything" up until recently. Kravann did not interact much with her father and older brother, on the other hand, but her father still provided guidance at key moments, such as choosing a major.

When it came time for Kravann to choose a university major, she had initially wanted to pursue engineering because she greatly enjoyed her science classes and they felt "easy" to her. However, when she approached her parents to get their support for pursuing a degree in engineering, her mother was against it. Instead, Kravann's mother told her to pursue accounting, like she had done. Kravann's father flatly told her no because she was a girl and, he reasoned, women would not do as well in their studies or complete the work of an engineer. Kravann was annoyed by her father's refusal to acknowledge her desire and aptitude for studying engineering and expressed her confused frustration during our interview. Her parents clearly were not supportive of what Kravann wanted to study.

At the same time, Kravann told me that she did not feel confident making this important decision about what major she should study on her own. For instance, when asked about whether she would be interested in learning more about other possibilities, Kravann stated, "I need a recommendation [about where to learn more about this topic], but from *who*? I don't know." She both felt that she did not have access to the information she needed and was confused about who outside of her family might help her. Thus, Kravann followed her mother's wish to enrol at a private university in Phnom Penh to secure an office job in the future. Instead of accounting, though, Kravann enlisted her aunt's help to negotiate with her mother to study something other than accounting that would still enable her to secure a steady job in an office. Kravann's aunt suggested political science, and so Kravann followed her advice and secured a full scholarship. Negotiating a small change from accounting—something she knew she did not want to study—to political science was what she felt comfortable doing. Ultimately, she

was enjoying her studies in political science and found the classes she was taking interesting. When I asked her why she had picked political science as a point of negotiation, she replied simply, "I don't know. I just followed my family."

Kravann had interests that clearly differed from her family's and their knowledge of what jobs would be "good" for her. In fact, several times in the interview, she expressed a desire to pursue a second bachelor's degree in some field of engineering. The main problem, Kravann felt, was that she had no one to recommend activities or connections that she could pursue, as indicated in the quote above. Yet, when I offered some information about what I had found about engineering programmes during our interview, Kravann was minimally interested and appeared content with following her mother's guidance. Securing trustworthy, reliable guidance was the most important factor influencing Kravann's decision about what major to pursue. Her mother had walked a similar path to what Kravann was now aiming to do herself: she earned a bachelor's degree, secured a stable job as an accountant, and was able to support her family with that income. Kravann followed her mother's and aunt's guidance because their life experience was familiar, and she trusted their advice. Yet, Kravann felt her relationship with her mother beginning to shift. Lately, Kravann felt that she could not and should not share as much about her life and interests with her mother. She felt that her mother was "strict" in a way Kravann did not always find helpful, such as joining Kravann when she socialized with friends. However, she still valued her mother's guidance above all else.

4.1.2 Samedy

Samedy was a 20-year-old woman from Pailin who grew up in a district town and lived with her father, mother, and a brother who was 4 years younger than her. Samedy's mother sold goods at a nearby market and had been able to attend school through Grade 9. Her father, on the other hand, had completed Grade 12 before going into the military for a short time and then established his own small business that he continued to run at the time of our interview. Samedy did not have much of a relationship with her mother, and she described her father as understanding but stern, especially concerning her education. While she would not describe her relationship to her father as close, he also did not feel distant or cold to her. Her father enrolled her in a private primary school near their house until she reached Grade 6, and then she attended the local public secondary school.

Samedy liked her science classes and had an aptitude for maths but was not sure what she wanted to study in university. None of the jobs she knew about appealed to her. During Grade 12, Samedy was studying hard in preparation for the Grade 12 National Exam and was provided with a booklet describing possible majors and career options when she came across a major called digital design. She was enamoured with the major because it integrated her love of design with technology and coding, and so Samedy sought out information about universities in Phnom Penh that would enable her to study digital design.

When Samedy told her parents that she was interested in pursuing a degree in digital design, her father and grandfather assumed that she would become an artist who made a small, inconsistent salary, and so they were against the idea. However, her mother told her that she should do whatever she wanted, but her opinion seemed to have a smaller impact on Samedy's trajectory. Samedy remembered, "My dad said digital design is not a good path because it's hard to find work. But I don't know why he thinks that. I think he has an old-fashioned idea about artists." Instead of becoming an artist whose life might be difficult, her father reasoned, he pushed her to become a doctor. Despite scoring well in her science classes that would enable her to pursue a career as a doctor, Samedy had no interest in medicine. Samedy felt her father's "old-

fashioned" ideas were holding her back from her dreams and the opportunities that awaited her in Phnom Penh. Yet, she also needed her family's support—financially and socially—to pursue her bachelor's degree in Phnom Penh, which was an 8-hour trip from her hometown. Thus, when she came to Phnom Penh in 2019, she lived with her uncle (her father's brother) and took preparatory classes for university entrance exams, specifically for the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Health Sciences. At the time, Samedy felt that she should and must follow her father's guidance because he too had graduated from Grade 12 and had the life experience to guide her. She felt that it was only right to follow what he suggested and doing so was common-sense. It was simply what was expected of her in the same way, she explained later, that she did not wear shorts outside of her home because her grandparents thought doing so was inappropriate.

Even while following her father's guidance, Samedy continued to look for opportunities to study digital design and pursue her goals. In fact, she kept looking for options to study digital design while simultaneously studying for, and eventually passing, the Faculty of Medicine's entrance exam. Samedy was preparing herself for the long road ahead to become a doctor that included 6 years of general study in the Faculty of Medicine before continuing for 2 more years to be able to practice medicine. If she wanted to specialize further, she would need to complete a residency training programme for 3 or 4 more years. When Samedy explained to her father that she would be spending the next 8-12 years studying to become a doctor, he quickly changed his mind. Instead, he reasoned, Samedy should become a pharmacist, which only required 4 years of study before being able to practice. There was just one problem: the entrance exam for the Faculty of Pharmacy had been held at the same time as the Faculty of Medicine's, and so Samedy could no longer pursue that option. At first glance, she did not have any options remaining to pursue a bachelor's degree that year. Yet, while she was studying for the Faculty of Medicine's entrance exams, she saw an advertisement from a university that had degrees in digital design and decided to take the entrance exam—just in case. Samedy ended up passing the exam earning a full scholarship to study at this university for her 4-year degree in digital design that had scheduled time for paid internship opportunities. Thus, she was able to still enrol at university without waiting despite her father's supportive, if misguided, advice.

Beyond the financial support from her scholarship, Samedy still needed her family's permission to stay in Phnom Penh in order to live with her uncle, which would be significantly less expensive and safer than trying to find her own apartment. So, over the course of the next month, she enlisted the help of her older male cousin, who was working in another technology-related field, to help Samedy convince her father that she would be able to find well-paid jobs in digital design after graduating. Her strategy of negotiating with her father by sharing information about her future career prospects through her cousin did eventually work. However, Samedy did not know if her father ultimately supported and believed in her chosen field of study. She told me that the experience of choosing a major left her feeling disconnected from her parents and reflected on her feelings during our interview in a dejected tone saying, "What am I supposed to do with that? I can't tell if they support me or not!" Her parents did encourage her in small ways, such as always sending her back to Phnom Penh with food when she was able to visit, but her relationship with them had subtly shifted. Regardless, at the time of our interview she was excited to be testing her skills as a digital designer in an internship she had just secured and was looking forward to her future career.

4.1.3 Young women relying on parental guidance

From the literature on parent-daughter relationships in Cambodia and among Cambodian Americans, it would not be surprising if all my young women interlocutors followed their parents' guidance with minimal negotiation. Children's position as deeply karmically indebted to their parents coupled with the sense that parents are their children's primary observers and hold the life experience needed to guide them on their path puts parents in an exceptional position (Smith-Hefner 1999). Not only are parents positioned as hierarchically superior to their children—a concept that gets built up throughout a child's life—but within this kind of framework, parents are also positioned as being the most trustworthy and deeply knowledgeable guides for their children's lives. Kravann's experience choosing her major largely adheres to these longstanding norms. Despite initially wanting to pursue engineering as a possible university major, her parents' rejection of her major choice appeared to be directed by both their expectations of what was appropriate for women to study as well as what they thought would bring her long-term job security as well (i.e., being employed in an office). Even through Kravann's own retelling of the experience, her mother's concern for her daughter to be able to get a stable, well-paid job in the future was clear by the direction that she pushed Kravann. As Kaing's (2014) survey data showed, young women are similarly concerned with the uncertainty of being able to find well-paid employment in their field of study. Additionally, Kravann's reluctance to seek out alternatives—through me or through her own networking efforts—indicated that she trusted the direction her mother gave her, even if it was not exactly what she had envisioned. The source of the guidance was just as, if not more, important to Kravann as she ultimately pursued a similar major.

Samedy's experience negotiating with her father to pursue digital design instead of becoming a medical doctor like her father wanted also points to the reluctance some young women may have in choosing an alternate pathway. Longstanding norms around femininity presented through the *chbap srey* require "good" daughters to be obedient and fulfil their obligations to repay their parents (Ebihara 1974). Thus, some young women feel like they need to follow their parents' guidance, which is what Samedy did at the beginning of the decision-making process. Because she needed her father's financial support to secure housing and he recommended that she get a degree in medicine, Samedy felt that she should study for the University of Health Sciences entrance exam. However, Samedy did not neglect her desire to pursue a degree in digital design, which served her well when her father changed his mind about her becoming a doctor. To continue obeying her father's guidance would have meant waiting another year to pursue a degree in pharmacy. Samedy's solution to this new problem was to enlist an older, male member of her family who had experience in a similar field to explain her situation to her father. She was not ignoring her father's feelings or their relationship, but instead explained and advocated for herself to pursue this new career path of digital design. In fact, she largely adhered to the longstanding norms by convincing her father that a career in digital design would allow her to secure well-paid, stable employment in a similar way as if she were to become a doctor. Even while negotiating and coaxing her father to accept her chosen path, she remained focused on upholding her position within their family hierarchy and being a "good" daughter.

Even as Kravann and Samedy largely abided by the longstanding expectations of daughters, they also described how their relationship with their parents had become more tense. After deciding on their university major, Kravann and Samedy both indicated they felt a shift in their relationship with their parents. Kravann described how she was increasingly unwilling to share her thoughts and feelings with her mother in the same way that she had in the past. Her reluctance to be open with her mother about all aspects of her life was altered in the process of

deciding her major and future career path. Meanwhile, Samedy had previously felt supported, though in a more distant or stern way, by her father to pursue her studies. However, she felt the kind of support her father gave her shift in the process of pursuing a degree in digital design. Samedy was able to successfully negotiate studying what she originally intended—albeit after preparing to study to become a doctor—but the result was not what she had hoped for. She did not know if her father truly supported her or if he had just acquiesced to her and her cousin's persistent advocacy. Both young women express a sense of friction with their parents that was not entirely present before deciding on a university major. In their cases, even "good," obedient daughters were able to negotiate with their parents' guidance to a certain extent. Thus, Kravann's and Samedy's experiences reflect past literature describing parent-daughter relationships and the expectations parents have for their daughters.

4.2 Parental guidance as a starting point

Another way my young women interlocutors utilised their parents' guidance was as a starting point for their university major decision. When this occurred in the narratives, there was a distinct difference in how the young women approached both their own and their parents' roles in the decision-making process, including when they listened to their parents' guidance, a willingness to seek out alternative guidance, and how they viewed parent-child relationships in Cambodia. Sophal's and Pheara's narratives illuminate this alternative form of engaging with parental guidance that, I would argue, is distinct from Kravann's and Samedy's experiences discussed above.

4.2.1 Sophal

When we met, Sophal was a 22-year-old woman from a rural town in Pursat and was an only child who had lived with both of her parents. Both of Sophal's parents were teachers, meaning that they had done well in school and passed the required teacher training courses, and thus, were very familiar with Cambodian schools. As a result, her parents encouraged her from a young age to study as much and as well as she could. With all her parents' attention focused on her, Sophal reasoned, she was able to develop a close relationship with her mother and shared many of her thoughts and dilemmas with her. Sophal described her father, on the other hand, as more cautious and concerned for her safety but still supportive of her goals.

As she progressed in school, Sophal came to love her maths classes, and she also began to seek out leadership roles. She became "class leader" in secondary school where she led her classmates in special school events and even acted as a teaching assistant helping her classmates to understand assignments. Sophal thought her inclination to seek out leadership roles in her school meant that she should become a teacher, which her mother encouraged saying that it was a stable job that would provide secure income. While Sophal agreed with her mother's assessment, she also felt a thought tug at her that she "could be more than that" meaning that she wanted to make more of an impact in her community and society. Sophal was not sure what "being more" might look like when she was in high school, however. Without a clear sense of alternate options, Sophal followed her mother's guidance to become a teacher and applied for scholarships to major in mathematics. The choice felt easy to her because she would be following in her parents' footsteps towards a known, stable career, which felt like the right thing to do at the time. Alongside the tuition scholarship to study mathematics, Sophal also sought out and received a scholarship for a dormitory programme that introduced her to people from across Cambodia studying a variety of majors at different universities around Phnom Penh. However, Sophal's first year did not go as planned.

Within the first month of her first-year courses for her mathematics major, Sophal realised that her major did not fit her or her aspirations for the future. She told her mother about her concerns, and her mother encouraged her to find what she wanted to study instead. Sophal began talking with her fellow dorm residents, learned more about their majors and classes, and researched the various universities in Phnom Penh. She explored psychology, physics, sociology, English literature, and even global affairs before settling on changing her major to international relations. Two years into her new major, Sophal felt much more at home in what she was studying and was starting to get an idea of the kind of impact she wanted to have in her community. She no longer wanted to be a teacher, and she felt that she was turning her aspiration of being a leader into other future possibilities that were coming into sharper focus. When I asked about what her parents thought of her change in major (and career trajectory), she replied that they supported her and wanted her to "do what she can" in a way that was understanding and gave Sophal room to decide what she wanted to do next.

Sophal had initially agreed with her mother that being a teacher would suit her personality and interests. However, her mother's role in guiding Sophal's decision transitioned to one where she validated what her daughter had learned as she talked to her fellow dorm residents and explored her options. Sophal's mother's opinion was still helpful, but it was no longer central to her decision. She explained to me, "I'm the only child so I have to be responsible for my parents more than some of my friends. I'm the youngest in my family so I have to help my parents complete chores around our home." The process of exploring her options and learning what was best for her enabled Sophal to pursue a path that she desired while also fulfilling her responsibility to her parents. She clearly respected their guidance in finding her path, but their experience was just one of several sources of guidance she turned to in her decision-making process. Sophal's parents' experience helped direct her into university, but she needed to find other sources of guidance once she reached that goal and began her studies.

4.2.2 Pheara

When I met Pheara, she was a 23-year-old young woman who was born and raised in Phnom Penh and lived with both of her parents and younger brother. She loved living with her family and having her aunts, uncles, and cousins nearby. She even described living with her parents as "warm," which belied the relaxed, supportive relationship she had with them. Her father had attended school through Grade 7 and now worked as a police officer while her mother had attended school through Grade 6 and ran a stationery store prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. While their experience in school may have been limited, Pheara's parents encouraged her and her younger brother to study further.

Pheara only had fond memories of her experience attending the local public school where she especially enjoyed her maths and science courses. In secondary school, her father encouraged her love of science by moving her to a more well-known public school that he said had "more encouraging" teachers that would support her interests. Pheara's love for the sciences continued to grow, and by the time she reached Grade 12, she was torn with whether to follow her love of biology to become a doctor or pursue engineering. Her father encouraged her to pursue studying medicine because she did particularly well in her biology and chemistry classes, but otherwise left the decision to Pheara. Instead of making the decision by herself, she decided to prepare and take the entrance exam for the University of Health Sciences (UHC) and another university's engineering programme using the test results to decide. Ultimately, her plan worked well. The entrance exam for the engineering programme was two months before the entrance exam for UHC. When Pheara found out that she had passed the engineering entrance

exam, she realised how overjoyed she was to study engineering. Her joy in passing the exam was clear evidence to her that becoming an engineer was the right path, and so she dropped the idea of becoming a doctor and never took the UHC entrance exam.

Pheara's father respected and supported her decision to study engineering. As Pheara recalled, "My father used to tell me that I'm good at biology and chemistry, so I should become a doctor. But now he says nothing. He just tells me to follow my heart and be what I want to be." Pheara did not recall her mother offering any particular guidance and her father was very open to Pheara deciding what she wanted to study based on her interests and passions. Thus, her relationship with her parents remained the same as it had been before she decided what major to pursue. When asked whether she thought other parents in Cambodia might feel the same, she stated:

> I think in the past, parents forced their children to follow them and study what their parents wanted them to study at university. But now it's changed. Parents don't force their children [to study a particular subject]. If the parents force them, at first their children would follow their guidance and study what they're told to at university. But afterwards, the children might not love that career and so they'll change to another job. So, I think forcing children to study a particular major is a waste of time. Parents used to be children too, so they know how it feels when they cannot do the things they like and must follow what their parents want them to do. Allowing their children to do what they want to do is good for the parents too!

In the above quote, Pheara claimed that her parents' actions were becoming "normal." Their supportive and encouraging attitude is indicative of larger changes in how children are expected to fulfil their filial obligations to their parents.

4.2.3 Young women viewing parental guidance as a starting point

As shown in the narratives above, Sophal and Pheara only highlighted their parents' guidance at the beginning of their retelling. Sophal, for instance, was drawn to leadership roles in school, and so saw her mother's suggestion to become a teacher as a valid option because she felt that she did not know what else was possible. She did initially pursue that path, but the sense that she could "do more" stuck with her and redirected her path once she arrived in Phnom Penh. Similarly, Pheara acknowledged her father's suggestion that she consider becoming a doctor by preparing for the entrance exam for the University of Health Sciences. However, she only took his guidance as a starting point for her exploration and instead let her reaction to her entrance exam results dictate the final decision. By utilising their parents' guidance as suggestions or starting points, both Sophal and Pheara continued to perform, instead of strictly adhering to, their role in the family as hierarchically inferior to their parents. Their inferior position in the parent-daughter relationship came in the form of having limited life experience or knowledge of the possibilities available to them and, similarly to Kravann and Samedy, wanting to be "good" daughters. However, that performance begins to fade in importance as their narratives continued.

The fact that Pheara and Sophal seek out alternative sources of guidance in their decision-making process is a second key feature distinguishing their narratives from those of Kravann and Samedy. Pheara's alternative source of guidance at this point in her narrative is herself. She explored what studying engineering would be like and decided to let her entrance exam results decide for her. In fact, she even stated, "My father doesn't say anything anymore," which indicates her impression that her father is willing to side-line any guidance he can give and prioritise what Pheara wants for herself. Sophal, on the other hand, sought out multiple

sources of guidance among her peers at the dormitory to gather information about the available possibilities based on her interests. After gathering information, she then made her decision based on it. In Sophal's retelling of the process, her mother heard and supported her during the process but was not actively involved in the final decision. Instead of negotiating with their parents, like Kravann and Samedy had done, Sophal's and Pheara's retelling of their experience indicate they assumed their parents were there to support them rather than maintain their hierarchically superior role in the family.

Sophal's and Pheara's narratives of their experiences illuminate a possible shift in who is responsible for important life decisions, such as choosing a university major and future career path. I would argue that both Sophal and Pheara had parents who were more willing to follow their children's lead when it came to deciding on a university major. The fact that neither of them described a shift in their relationships with their parents after they made their decision provides insight into how both young women and their parents are approaching this situation. Sophal described how her mother continued to support her even as her goals changed while Pheara continued to describe living with her parents as "warm" and giving her a sense of comfort. Both of their reactions indicate that their parents approached what could have been interpreted as disobedience from their daughters by instead providing them room to make the decision for themselves.

5. Discussion

Each of the young women's narratives presented above respond to the central questions of this paper in ways that fall along a spectrum of possibilities. Some of their experiences and feelings align with what other studies have found, particularly regarding the parent-daughter relationship. Yet, others' experiences more closely align with previous research on parent-daughter relationships and the expectations for women both within and outside of the family. The extent that each young woman relied on her parents' guidance varied across each of the four narratives. However, they all turned to their parents for guidance when they began to decide what university major to pursue. Additionally, the young women's relationships with their parents took different forms and were altered or reinforced in the process of deciding their major. Altogether, the narratives provide a sense of how young women are navigating changes to their relationship with and responsibilities to their parents. Yet importantly, the types of experiences Kravann and Pheara had were only shared by a handful of my interlocutors, and instead, many of my interlocutors shared more in common with either Samedy's or Sophal's experiences.

I divided the narratives into two groups to highlight: 1) how much negotiating they did with their parents, 2) what that negotiation tells us about their adherence to longstanding gender norms, and 3) how the young women think about their relationship with their parents as a result. In summary, Kravann's narrative demonstrated how parental guidance can be negatively felt but ultimately followed. Samedy's experience convincing her father to support her in pursuing her desired major (digital design) indicates that some young women feel comfortable negotiating and changing their parents' initial rejection of their desired major and career path. By contrast, Sophal's and Pheara's experiences in choosing their major largely did not revolve around negotiation or compromise. Instead, their parents' guidance was used more as suggestions for where to begin their search, and they decided how to proceed from there. The fact that more young women were willing to negotiate (like Samedy) or had parents who supported them changing their paths (like Sophal) speaks to a change in how parents and daughters are interacting with each other as they make significant decisions.

It is important to note that the young women's experiences do not map neatly into distinct geographic areas. Kravann and Pheara both grew up in Phnom Penh while Samedy and Sophal grew up in Pailin and Pursat, respectively. Thus, it is important to consider the constellation of factors contributing to how much young women turn to, negotiate, or find alternatives for their parents' guidance. Their reaction to parental guidance provides insight into how young Cambodian women could be renegotiating their relationship with their parents in ways that relate to broader social changes.

How Sophal's and Pheara's parents provided space for their daughters to make their own decision aligns with the findings of a recent cross-generational survey that considered how different generations viewed who has responsibility for making significant life decisions (Eng et al. 2019). The survey indicated that a growing proportion of Cambodian parents expect and support their children as the primary decision-maker at important moments, such as deciding on a major and career path. The cross-generational survey, which surveyed respondents in Phnom Penh and several provinces, found that 57 percent of youth respondents and 53 percent of adult respondents over 30 years felt that young people should make their own educational decisions. By contrast, 41 percent of youth and 45 percent of adult respondents felt that parents should make the final decision (Eng et al. 2019, 17). Relevant to this discussion, it also found 77 percent of youth and 73 percent of adult respondents agreed young people should be the final decision-maker in employment decisions (Eng et al. 2019, 17). These results indicate a willingness among the older generation to cede more decision-making responsibility to the younger generation. The survey's findings are particularly important here because it shows that Cambodians across generations are willing to renegotiate longstanding norms for parent-child relationships, including how family hierarchy is maintained.

Heuveline's (2016) research on how marriage residency is decided in contemporary Cambodia may point to another possibility. Today, families are willing to adapt longstanding norms for practical reasons. For instance, previously it was common, if not expected, for the husband of a newly married couple to live with his wife's parents. However, changes in employment and where a new couple have access to jobs make this arrangement much more flexible. It is possible that older generations feel unaware of the changing world of higher education and employment, and so are relying on their children for more input into decisions that were, in the past, decided primarily by parents. We can see evidence of this tendency clearly in Pheara's narrative, but it is also evident in how Sophal described her transition to a new major after researching more possibilities. Yet, as we see in Kravann and Samedy's narratives, whether young women feel that they can make their own decisions is unevenly distributed even among families with similar socioeconomic class backgrounds. Further research with parents of young Cambodians pursuing higher education is needed to further understand how parental attitudes might be changing as their children's social world changes.

6. Conclusion

Through the four narratives above, the pressures young women face as they decide what major to pursue in university are shown. The literature indicated that women faced pressure around considering their own educational aspirations, changing acceptance of women in higher education, and fulfilling their obligations to their parents. Based on this literature, young women would be expected to largely follow their parents' guidance in order to perform their role as a "good" daughter. They would also seek out a university major and career that would provide stable, well-paid employment so that they could begin repaying their obligation to their parents both in financial and social ways. The four narratives that followed demonstrate how young

women are approaching their university major decision, the level they seek out parental input, and how their relationship with their parents influenced their decision-making process.

From the four narratives, the young women's responses to these questions fell into two groups. The first, including Kravann and Samedy, regarded their parents' guidance as more of a mandate that they needed to follow. As a result, they both described needing to negotiate with their parents to pursue a major they agreed with. Their relationship with their parents also shifted during this process. Kravann described concern about whether she should continue to be close to her mother, and Samedy described being confused about whether her father supported her decision. Kravann's and Samedy's experiences show their willingness to follow longstanding norms for "good" daughters who are obedient and understand their position in the family hierarchy as lower than their parents. The second group, including Sophal and Pheara, utilised their parents' guidance as a starting point from which they gathered additional information. Sophal used her community of dormitory residents to find additional information about other majors while Pheara utilised her reaction to her entrance exam results to guide her down a path that she was excited to pursue. In their retellings of this process, both of their parents operated in the background as supportive characters. Sophal's and Pheara's narratives provide evidence of a recent cross-generational trend in Cambodia for young people to take more responsibility for and initiative in making important life decisions. Yet even within this possibility for change in the parent-child relationship, all four of the young women remained concerned with choosing a major that allowed them a future career with well-paid, stable employment so they could support themselves and their families.

In some ways, the young women's path to university mirrors their path towards adulthood. The kind of life they hope to have in the future is actively being built in the present as they decide on a university major that will, hopefully, turn into a career that will enable them to support their family, including their parents. The experiences of young Cambodians may align or diverge from current theories of emerging adulthood (Arnett 2014) and waithood (Inhorn and Smith-Hefner 2021). How university-educated young Cambodians navigate these changes and their experiences in doing so would be a fruitful area for further quantitative and qualitative inquiry. Additionally, future research centring parents' perspectives would provide additional key information into how different generations view education, employment, and adulthood as Cambodia continues to undergo rapid societal change.

Further research on this topic should focus on addressing some of the key limitations in this study. First, while this study's methods provide in-depth qualitative insight into the difficulties young women are facing, it is limited in scope to only a small subset of the thousands of current university students. A broader survey eliciting narratives from more students, especially those enrolled in medical and other STEM majors, is vital to understand how to encourage more students to enrol in STEM majors and pursue STEM careers. Second, given that men's enrolment in higher education is currently ebbing (Chea, Tek, and Nok 2023), a second study focusing on young men would be timely and provide a more complete picture of parent-child relationships in Cambodia today.

7. Recommendations

Based on the young women's narratives above, this working paper can also provide recommendations for how to support female students to pursue a variety of majors. Having a diverse, educated workforce is key to Cambodia's continued economic and social development as outlined in the MoEYS Education Strategic Plan for 2019-2023 (MoEYS 2019b, 14–15). Each of the four young women struggled with obtaining accurate and helpful information

about what majors and career options are available to them. Therefore, my recommendations centre around providing updated information to Grade 12 students and building mentoring resources that students across geographic areas would be able to access.

I provide three recommendations for how to ensure students have updated information about universities, their majors, and potential career paths. First, it is imperative that MoEYS revises and updates the current handbook given to Grade 12 students, especially for those who have limited access to digital resources. Information about current local and national universities, the majors they offer, and information about potential jobs for each major would all be welcome additions. Universities should also be involved in this update to ensure the most accurate information possible. Second, developing a series of easily accessible, asynchronous online educational resources, such as YouTube videos or other social media posts, describing the options available to students is vital. Developing these resources would not only help young Cambodians as they transition from secondary school to university but would also be key to helping parents understand what career path their children are interested in and why. Resources specifically around STEM majors, including natural sciences, engineering, and IT, should be prioritised to attract more students to these fields and help them communicate potential career options to their parents. Third, a traveling workshop series aimed at helping high school students explore their interests and learn to set goals for themselves would provide much-needed support for students to choose a major. By making this a traveling workshop, students like my interlocutors who come from a variety of geographic locations would be able to access information and build the confidence they need to research their options.

A second set of resources highlighting individuals from marginalised groups in STEM fields would provide excellent role models for students to learn from as they chart their path and negotiate their options with their families. Again, utilising asynchronous and easily accessible formats, such as YouTube, Telegram, or other social media, to disseminate interviews with these role models or short narratives about what their daily work looks like would be fundamental to reach young Cambodians around the country. Distributing these resources to school leaders and teachers would better ensure they reach students. Providing students and their parents with as much information about what university majors can do in their future careers will help ensure students look beyond a certain set of jobs. It would also provide a helpful resource to teachers as they help their students navigate the transition. Students would be more likely to explore the wide range of possibilities available to them after graduation instead of following a prescribed pathway.

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