Towards Gender Equality in The Cambodian Labor Market – Gender Gaps Prevent Females from Stable Income Generation

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ABSTRACT

Cambodia has enjoyed a decade of macroeconomic stability and growth and is increasingly integrating with the region. Nevertheless, a few topics remain challenging as Cambodia strives for middle-income status by 2030. One of these is gender disparity in the labor market. While Cambodia has one of the highest female labor market participation rates in Asia, most women still face horizontal and vertical gender inequality. Such gender disparities in the labor market negatively affect the macroeconomic efficiencies of developing countries as well as stable income generation of females. As the social development of modern civilizations is based highly on gender equality, gender stereotypes are likely to prevent Cambodia from transforming into a society of equal opportunity. While a previous World Bank quantitative research report provided statistical insights into gender-related inequality in Cambodia (Gavalyugova & Cunningham 2019), many constraints underlying gender inequality in the labor market remained largely unclear. In order to develop new programs concentrating on increasing female involvement in the labor market, it is necessary to investigate the problems and challenges women face when entering the labor market in Cambodia. To contribute to filling this knowledge gap, this study collected and analyzed qualitative data. Qualitative focus group discussions and key informant interviews were held to gain a deeper understanding of mechanisms underlying gender disparities in the Cambodian labor market.

Contribution/Originality: This study is one of very few studies which have investigated the existing gender gap in the labor market in Cambodia. The study originates a new approach towards understanding the reasons for gender inequality at the Cambodian labor market by using the qualitative method of focus group discussions.
1. Introduction

Cambodia’s transition towards a modern country over the last 30 years is characterized by industrialization, a growing construction boom and a developing service sector. Agriculture still plays an important role with high involvement of women but is declining – compared to other sectors. The living standard has developed towards lower-middle-income status in 2015 and the poverty rate is decreasing since 2007. Whereas 47 % of the population in 2007 suffered from poverty, this rate had fallen to 13.5 % by 2014 (World Bank, 2019). Nevertheless, a high percentage of the Cambodian population still lives just above the poverty line, and about 4.5 million people are considered to be economically vulnerable, what means they have a high risk of falling into poverty (World Bank, 2019). Specially affected groups are low-educated people, people living in rural areas and – when focusing on gender - women. Therefore, gender inequality needs to be declared as major topic in Cambodia and will remain so during the upcoming years. Cambodia has one of the highest female labor market participation rates in the Asian region (World Bank, 2019). However, recent labor market developments are characterized by gender segregation, with female-dominated and male-dominated branches. While women are preferred workers in garment factories, men dominate the construction sector. Inclusive growth seems to be one of the major challenges (Asian Development Bank, 2013).

Care and family duties are still considered to be natural female duties. Quantitative studies stress the low participation of men in household work (Asian Development Bank, 2013) and an insufficient health care system for pregnant women (especially in rural and difficult to access areas) which leads to high mortality rates of mothers and newborns compared to other developing countries (UNICEF, 2021a). This means that women have a high burden of reconciling work and family life. This definitely affects the career decisions of females. Although there have been tremendous efforts in improving the education system in Cambodia, there is still progress to be made. Nearly 8 % of the female population between 15 and 19 years drop out of school before Grade 7. When looking at the age cohort of females between 30 and 34 years, 27 % have no formal education (World Bank Data, 2021). Higher education does not have a long tradition in Cambodia as it was interrupted by the civil war and the negative effects on the civil war on social development. In fact, a contemporary higher education system was established in 1947 through the founding of the National Institute of Law, National Institute of Politics, and National Institute of Economic Science, under the strong colonial influence of the French higher education system, but it was interrupted by the civil war. During the Khmer Rouge period, higher education institutes had to be closed. By the end of the 1990s, when the first re-organization and modernization of the state had been finished, higher education gained more and more interest.

In 1997, there were only eight public higher education institutions and nearly no private institutions, but the situation completely changed within the last 20 years: there were more than 70 private higher education institutions in 2018 and 40 public ones. This means an enormous expansion of higher education in Cambodia (MoEYS, 2018). Nevertheless, researchers claim a “worrying situation” (Un & Sok, 2018:1) as there are not enough jobs for academics in the country. Nevertheless, the number of students increased from some 10,000 in 1997 to 219,000 in 2016 (Un& Sok, 2018:2), with 44 % being female. In general, higher education concentrates on associate and undergraduate programs (more than 90%) while masters programs only make up 8.5 %, and doctoral programs only 0.5% (MoEYS, 2018). This rapid increase, raises the question of quality, but also of labor market access of students, especially young females in Cambodia. Female
students seem to successfully participate in bachelor programs (48% of bachelor students are female) whereas the number of women studying in master programs or doing their PhD is much lower. Only 22% of masters students are females and just 5% are furthering their academic career as doctoral students (World Bank Data, 2021). It is important to stress that, considering all the positive developments towards more gender equality, Cambodia can still be characterized as a patriarchal and hierarchical society. Khmer language deeply reflects this by using different language regarding the age and sex of a person. Social status is influenced by wealth, family status and reputation. Women are also socially ranked by fulfilling social norms and expectations. Therefore, young unmarried women must stay close to their families, are not allowed to meet friends on their own and are supposed to marry in their early twenties. Married women have more freedom, but are meant to carry all burdens of family and household work. This might have consequences for labor market access and career development, as the different life periods require different attitudes of women. The existing traditional role models of men and women seem to highly influence the nature of the female and male labor market engagement in Cambodia as well as the benefits they derive from it. This research aims to explore and understand the challenges and constraints women from different social groups are facing, not only with regard to labor market access but also about the social expectations they have to meet.

2. Methods

In contrast to well-known statistical or quantitative research, the qualitative paradigm of empirical social research is dealing with different methodological backgrounds that have one thing in common: they believe that either through interaction or communication people not only influence but shape their social environment (Girtler, 1992). This consequently leads to a different understanding of the researcher's role: while quantitative social research requires the greatest possible objectivity of the researcher, the qualitative paradigm neglects this. The communicative process shapes a relationship between the researcher and the people being examined. The better this relationship is, the more the principle of openness, which is mandatory for qualitative social research, can be realized. Nevertheless, it requires a developed strategy and the use of appropriate research methods to gain high quality data.

Consequently, the sampling process needs to be specially focused. As shown above, the constraints and challenges women face with regard to labor market access in Cambodia require differentiated consideration. Although we talk about women, we have to keep in mind that there are different groups of women in each society. There are, for example, differences between well-educated and poorly educated women, mothers and women without children, women living in rural areas and those who live in cities. Therefore, it was necessary to use a research method that aimed not to understand a single perception, but collective perceptions, thus the modern method of focus group discussions was selected. In contrast to focus groups that are often held in consumer or marketing research (Henseling et al., 2006) or to analyze existing (organizational or political) concepts, the sociological method of group discussions deals with a different approach: focus group discussions aim to explore collective knowledge or experiences of natural groups (Schäffer et al., 2010). The implicit knowledge that people with similar biographies share is what researchers try to identify (Schmillen & Weimann-Sandig, 2018). Focus group discussions concentrate on natural groups who have major socio-demographic indicators in common.
Women working as shift workers in garment production could be named as one group, for example. They share similar work experiences, have related educational backgrounds, and face the same challenges. This makes it possible for them to talk freely within a focus group discussion, although participants do not know each other (Weimann-Sandig, 2014). To achieve this openness, the interviewer has to step back and to define his or her role as a moderate one. The whole discussion process is quite open and unstructured. Major topics are given to participants who decide by their discussions which direction they want to follow. The researcher has a neutral position, meaning answers are not judged as right or wrong and interviewees are not led in a particular direction (Weimann-Sandig, 2014).

In contrast to the well-known theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss 2010) in qualitative research that aims to reconstruct typical cases by identifying contrasting and common issues in individual experiences and perceptions, the research process in Cambodia had to start from a different perspective. The strategy of so-called deviant sampling, which deals with extreme and deviant groups, and enables researchers to define the sample before accessing the field, was used. This more pragmatic strategy had to be used because of the limited research time. While quantitative research tests standardized hypotheses with the help of statistical parameters and aims to achieve a statistical and random sample, qualitative research is used to analyze why and to what extent social problems occur within a certain group of people. Therefore the sampling strategy was influenced by previous, mostly quantitative research on gender and the labor market in Cambodia over the last years, including a study also financed by the UFGE, as well as a detailed literature study. Although Cambodian women show high labor market involvement, it is characterized by a concentration of three major sectors: farming, manufacturing/wholesale and retail trades/services. In addition, the high labor market involvement includes women in informal employment as well as those running their own (informal) micro-businesses or helping as unpaid family members. All these labor market structures had to be considered in the sampling process.

Together with a local research firm, 22 focus group discussions were conducted at diverse locations across Cambodia. Each group had a minimum of six, and a maximum of nine, participants. While most discussions were held in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, much emphasis was placed on rural regions. As most focus group discussions lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours, the research material comprises around 2,000 minutes of discussions. It is complemented by 10 key informant interviews with experts in the field of labor market administration, education, vocational education and non-governmental organizations. The analysis of the focus groups emphasizes the organization of discourse as well as the content analysis (Schäffer et al., 2010). In the first step, all focus groups were individually categorized and analyzed. The second step consisted of a comparative analysis. This allowed the identification of key topics and collective perceptions (Weimann-Sandig, 2014; Schmillen & Weimann-Sandig, 2018).

3. Results

Gender inequality in the labor market in Cambodia can be characterized by seven existing deficits for women. Women play a minor role in labor force participation, also their human capital seems to be considered less worthy compared to male. Females in Cambodia carry the main burdens of care work and unpaid domestic work (England, 2005). In addition, they are also suffering from vulnerable employment, lower wages as well as minor social protection.
3.1. The existing gender pay gap demotivates women to be constantly involved into labor market

Cambodia has a relatively high female labor force participation rate. More than 75% of women are working, compared to the regional average of 60% (Asian Development Bank, 2013). Nevertheless, the results of this research underline many factors that limit the extent to which women can enjoy and benefit from their work lives. In fact, only a few respondents within our focus groups are able to earn enough in order to meet their daily needs. Women working in the financial sector and female employees in the garment industry seem to be the only groups that benefit from a stable income situation that enables them to care for their families and to save some money or pay loans, for example for owning a house. When comparing the wages of women and men in the same positions, a clear gender pay gap was mentioned by the participants of the focus groups, regardless of what working sector they belonged to. Therefore different wages for males and females seem to be a general trend in Cambodia, although they are working in same positions. Within the focus groups the male breadwinner model was mentioned as the main reasons for the gender pay gaps: as the males have to generate the family income they have to earn more money. Female wages therefore are generally considered as extra incomes. Although more and more females in Cambodia are working, their income does not give them the freedom to break the cycle of poverty.

Female 4: If men and women are working in the same position, men can get more money than women. It is because they can work more and they do heavy work.

Moderator: How can they work more when they are in the same position?

Female 3: Because they do a lot of overtime and they can carry heavier things and help the team leaders.

Female 4: They get more benefits because they are doing a lot of overtime. We can't do a lot of overtime because we have to go home. But they can't get enough.

(Focus group discussion with female internal work migrants, garment industry)

Besides the existing gender pay gap, missing working contracts are also mentioned by the participants. This gender pay gap is accompanied by an existing gender education gap. In fact, the empirical data proofs that female university graduates do not have the same career opportunities as male university graduates have. Employers, particularly those in small and medium-sized enterprises, hesitate to give young females indefinite working contracts or to provide career development possibilities, equal to those of males. As most young females in Cambodia still feel obliged to start a family in their mid-twenties, employers hesitate to invest in their career development.

Female 4: I also want to add something to the point of gender inequality. Career development is easier for males with university degree than for females. Males are more flexible and can decide to work at different places in order to gather work experience. Women have to face more restrictions, because they always have to care about the family. As long as women are
single, they can’t go anywhere. When we get married, we are obliged to meet the expectations of our family. Even though we want to have a real career, we cannot do it. If we do it, we can’t have a family.

Female 3: Actually women are facing many difficulties. Men are more respected by society. If women live as single, it might be easier. However, people think that men are stronger than women.

Female 2: Yeah, the support of male careers is different. Employers do invest more in the future of male employees. Women can be cashier, teller, and accountant. We hold the basic position. Sometimes we get some support and sometimes not. So, if we do not get any support, we end up being teller until we are 60 years old. (Focus Group Discussion with females working in the financial sector)

3.2. Women’s labor force participation is restricted by age and motherhood status

Females aged 40 or above seem to be no group that is constantly involved into labor market as they are facing constraints in re-entering the labor market after periods of unpaid family work. In fact, the participants of all focus groups – reported significant difficulties in re-entering the labor market after a period of full-time motherhood. Educational background seems to play a minor role; in difference to international research on labor market participation of mid-aged females it appears more challenging for higher-educated mothers aged over 35 years to step back into labor market than for those with lower education or only vocational training. One reason seems to be the greater flexibility of less-skilled women; as they have to cover daily expenses they are willing to take any kind of work. In contrast, mothers with higher education are more selective and tend to seek employment that is similar to their first jobs when leaving university. As most mothers aged 35 and above seek no chances of getting employed, they show a high willingness to run their own micro-businesses or be self-employed. Most develop their ideas during motherhood and stabilize their businesses when their children are grown up. However, there are significant differences by education level. Better-educated mothers have more successful businesses, as measured by profits and possible savings. Nonetheless, this group expressed a strong preference to become formally employed again, with a stable income and fewer professional responsibilities, as their businesses tend to be very small, informal ‘micro-businesses’ which are vulnerable to failure. Less-educated mothers are interested in running their own businesses because they have few possibilities of acquiring formal employment. Although the threshold for starting an informal business is low, those owned by less-educated women tend to generate insufficient profits to cover daily expenses. These small-firm owners lack knowledge of how to expand their businesses, how to create stable business networks and how to calculate prices in order to generate profits.

The study also reveals that Single mothers are one of the most vulnerable groups in Cambodia. The statistical data about divorces in Cambodia is limited, as getting divorced is still quite unusual within the Cambodian society. Although international research claims an increasing number of divorces, especially in the urban areas as well as a raising number of Single Mothers (Heuveline, 2017), most Single Mothers in our focus group discussions felt socially stigmatized and not accepted by society.
Single Mother 1 [looking at Single Mother 4]: It is okay when you are crying, never mind. We know how you are feeling.

Single Mother 2: How are we feeling? We feel being divorced and this it is a shame.

Single Mother 4: Okay, I will tell you. The reason I got divorced from my husband is that I couldn’t bear the things he wanted to do. I have three children. I sell Khmer cake (num akoa). I spent more than ten thousand dollars to build house. Then he told me that he has a girlfriend and wants the girlfriend to live with us. He said if I can’t accept this condition, he will leave me. So, I decided to get divorced. At this time I was pregnant again and already had two children. Although I financed the house, I didn’t get anything. My husband got the house and the motorbike. Now I try to work to support my children. I do not have a mother and my father to help me. So I decided to go abroad to work in Thailand but I had an accident. My leg was broken. After the birth of the third child my husband came back and persuaded me to start a new relationship and to work for him. One day I found him with his mistress. So I am alone again and hurt and betrayed and have no choice but to live as Single Mother.

(Focus Group Discussion with Single Mothers)

The focus group discussions proof that Single Mothers have nearly no chance to be formally employed or to earn stable incomes, as most employers hesitate to give them permanent working contracts. The empirical data show that Single Mothers are less successful at gaining stable employment and achieving a stable income situation. Instead, most Single Mothers in Cambodia still live under the poverty line (Heuveline, 2017). This is why many Single Mothers decide to migrate abroad for work, which is also documented by other research (Jesuit Refugee Service Cambodia, 2018). The results of the focus group discussions show that Single Mothers are less flexible in being able to work shifts at factories, or in covering standardized working times. The need to care for children and do housework forces seem to look for flexible working possibilities. It is therefore unsurprising that most of the Single Mothers in this study decided to start their own micro-businesses in order to reconcile work and childcare. Although this might be one way to earn the needed income, most participants face problems in getting loans to turn their business ideas into reality due to a lack of guarantors and collateral. This leads to a life of poverty that directly affects the children of single-mother households and may lead to an inter-generational cycle of poverty and low educational background.

Other vulnerable groups of women identified in the study were nearly illiterate women (those who only finished primary school or have one or two years of secondary education) and women with disabilities. These women are not able to find suitable formal employment and often do not have the option of running their own micro-business. They depend highly on family networks to meet their everyday needs. As Cambodia is increasingly becoming a working society and the welfare system is still nascent, it is important to develop strategies to increase the labor participation of these vulnerable groups. Several groups of respondents identified inflexible work arrangements as a constraint to employment, particularly given their home duties. Shift workers in garment factories and in construction (also in health care, which was not examined in this research) find the fixed work hours and expectation of overtime to be inflexible. Several
reported that if they did not comply, they were fired. Most work in Cambodia must be performed on site in offices, factories or companies. Only a few employers provide the possibility of working from home or flexible working hours. The discussion among micro-enterprise owners revealed that motivation among female and male workers increases when they are given the freedom to organize their work or their own responsibilities. In contrast, a lower work motivation was evident in cases where workers felt controlled and powerless.

3.3. Existing gender stereotypes and childcare burdens prevent females from creating modern working biographies

The Cambodian society generally seems to follow traditional role models. Marriage means the most important event in the life of a woman. The discussion across focus groups stressed women's differential expectations of time use across the life cycle. While single women want to work to earn enough money to meet their individual interests and needs, marriage heavily influences the life course of a woman. At this time, not only childcare, but also the care of elder relatives, is their focus. Married women feel socially obligated to reconcile work and family issues; indeed the traditional behavior of most families prioritizes women's role as mother and caregiver. This was discussed among members of all focus groups and could explain the high labor market drop out of married women. As the mother is seen as the person most responsible for the development of the children, most women feel that their families or in-laws are critically observing their compliance with this role. The female focus group participants report that they are subordinate to men in all aspects of their lives. The role of a married woman is that of obedient and caring wife. Subordination is noticeable in all areas of life. Although in most families there are double incomes, wives have to ask their husbands when they want to spend money, while husbands decide on their own. There are few families where the wife manages the family income and makes her own spending decisions. Women depend on their husbands when they want to change their appearance. Being accepted by their husbands seems of utmost importance to all discussants.

Female 4: It is our tradition that the wife must listen to the husband. If we want to buy something, but our husband says it is not useful we don’t buy it. Am I right?

Female 7: Yes.

Female 4: If we decide to buy on our own, we will have an argument within the family. Not only with our husband but also with the parents and parents-in-law.

Female 7: Yes, that is true.

Female 4: According to our tradition, the wife needs to be more patient than the husband. The husband does not have to ask his wife for any decisions. For example, my husband buys what he wants.

(Focus group discussion 20, Female internal work migrants, Garment industry)
This also means that wives are more willing to minimize their own needs and wish to satisfy their husbands. Female participants feel that their husbands’ work has greater meaning. Husbands do not have to focus on family or care issues but can fully concentrate on their jobs, while women’s income is seen as an additional one and therefore negligible. Care and family duties are still regarded as natural female duties in Cambodia. Quantitative studies stress the low participation of men in household work and an insufficient health care system for pregnant women (especially in rural areas) which leads to high mortality rates of mothers and newborns compared to other developing countries (UNICEF, 2021b). This means that women have a high burden of reconciling work and family life. This affects the working possibilities of females, regardless of their educational background. Especially in the urban regions females are not able to be constantly involve in the labor market, as they have no extended family networks they can rely on when searching for private childcare. Labor market involvement of fathers and mothers tends to fall most heavily on mothers. As most fathers still hesitate to take care for their children and labor policies provide no possibilities for fathers to reduce working times because of family care work, Cambodian females still are carrying the main challenges regarding the reconciliation of work and family care. In fact, most females within the focus group discussions reveal that employers in Cambodia still consider childcare a private responsibility, despite global evidence that vital and healthy economic growth needs a vital, healthy and well-educated workforce.

Female 7: We have to leave our children when they are only three months old and we need to continue working. We need to leave our children with their grandparents. This means that the grandparents have to take care of everything. This is because most factories do not provide childcare services. Few factories that do have childcare facilities enable women to breastfeed their children. Instead we have to buy milk because our children are far away. For a mother this is a very difficult time.

Female 3: Also, small children get sick very often. And then the child is far away in our home village and we are in Phnom Penh. We have to worry all the time and feel terrible. But as we need the money, we have to do this.

Moderator: Is it possible for you to leave the workplace when your children get ill?

Female 4: Whenever the child gets ill, we have to ask the team leader for permission to leave. Most team leaders do not give this permission.

Female 7: In our group we have 20-25 people and there is one group leader. When we ask for permission to leave because our children are ill, she blames us in front of the other team members. When we have a free day to care for our children, we have to be aware that the wage is cut.

Female 4: Yeah, wage cuts are normal.

Female 3: We can have two days off.

Female 7: Yeah, formally we can. But when we ask them for permission, they don’t allow us to leave.
4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study improve our understanding of constraints underlying gender disparities in Cambodia’s labor market and in general within Cambodian society. Economic growth as well as employment growth in Cambodia have not been inclusive for females. The qualitative research could identify individual constraints and challenges of different female groups in Cambodia. The empirical results stress that gender inequality is not only economic or labor market involvement. It is the way how roles of females as well as males within a country are defined and developed. The OECD calls gender equality a “moral imperative” tied to political, economic and cultural norms that have to be changed (OECD, 2012). As we can see from the focus group discussions it is also a central key to personal well-being, accepting biographies and happiness of females – not only in Cambodia but all over the world. When talking about gender equality at the labor market we also have to concentrate on eliminating existing educational gender gaps. Wasting years of higher education for girls and young women by providing no career development strategies does not meet the demands of developing countries. Realizing real gender equality means guaranteeing females equal educational possibilities, special career development strategies and – most important – strategies to reconcile work and family duties. A re-thinking of traditional role models where namely females are defined as homemakers, raising children without any own income isn’t suitable anymore. Gender equality therefore means to provide men and women an equal chance to contribute both at home and in the workplace. A discussion about political changes as well as new labor policy and innovative instruments of family policy seems necessary. At the political level, one could think of reforming Cambodia’s legal environment by implementing and enforce anti-discrimination policies. The Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia states that “all forms of discrimination against women shall be abolished. The exploitation of women in employment shall be prohibited. Men and women are equal in all fields especially with respect to marriage and family matters…” (Article 45). This is a very important step towards greater gender equality. Nevertheless, there remains room for improvement in Cambodia’s legal environment and the implementation and enforcement of existing laws. At the moment, the labor law allows mothers to have 90 days maternity leave which they can take some days before giving birth and after. However, Cambodia does not have a family policy that comprises paternity leave or discusses benefits for fathers to stay at home for a certain period at time. Still, the traditional role models define males as main breadwinners of families. This discriminates new family models like Single Mothers. In addition, gender inequality should be addressed with regard to pension systems; as Cambodia is currently developing pension systems in order to prevent poverty during old age (ILO, 2019) there needs to be special programs for women, especially Single Mothers who have no extended family protection. Currently, women suffer because they earn lower incomes than men and this leads to lower pension entitlements. Empirical data proves that women suffer from more life cycle risks than men, and therefore pension systems should include care time as work time, as happens in many other countries. The data show that women are more willing to establish their own micro-businesses, which is currently not included under the pension ideas. Many women seem to be unsuccessful in their small-scale business due to some factors that include lack of inclusive financial services, lack of knowledge on financial literacy, limited market opportunity and lack of access to new technology. Because most micro-businesses do not provide enough income
to achieve financial reserves and they can be falling back to poverty; it is most important to protect this group of women.

At the labor policy level innovative labor policy reforms are needed. Gender inequality in the labor market and wage employment is still seen as one of the most challenging policy fields in Cambodia. The empirical data finds that women face more constraints of being involved in the labor market than men. In order to encourage more females to reconcile family and work, new working policies that facilitate flexible forms of work, such as part-time or home-based work and jobs with flexible working hours would be recommended. New work concepts have been successfully tested in Europe. They show that shift work provides possibilities for flexibility. In order to implement new working policies, it is necessary to introduce new management concepts. As a first step, the training of responsible managers in factories could be a way to shape a new understanding of work and to develop new working policies in Cambodia. Time management, as well as modern human resource strategies would be two considerable fields that could help narrow the gender gap in Cambodia. Flexible shift systems would enable women to concentrate on work and family issues. This would particularly benefit the growing number of Single Mothers who are particularly challenged in reconciling job and care duties. While enterprises would have to invest in these new strategies, the outcomes would be beneficial within a short period of time: decreasing absence of mothers, higher work performance and increasing work motivation are just three advantages. With regard to health protection for women, the garment industry has already implemented some best practice examples of health care programs for pregnant women. Nevertheless, 74% of the factories still fail to set up functioning and accessible nursing rooms (ILO, 2019). The best practice examples could be used to place health care programs in all work sites. Empirical data shows that the construction sector is one where women face significant gender inequality and suffer from sexual harassment.Studies show that such harassment in the garment industry is also significant (CARE LRCW Project, 2019). Therefore, establishing gender-sensitive working policies in the construction sector is highly recommended. Mandatory separate dressing rooms are one example. Women should not be seen as additional working assistants, but should be considered as having the same job opportunities as their male colleagues. Another recommendation is to strengthen the client-orientation of labor market intermediation services and labor market monitoring and analysis. Cambodia has successfully established a National Employment Agency in Phnom Penh. As the agency continues to develop its labor market information system, it will be helpful to include relevant data useful to employers and employees. Job seeker profiling should be improved and new strategies should be developed to reduce vacancies and find the right people for the right jobs. There is a lack of gender-sensitive job profiling with regard to the different life cycles of men and women. The National Employment Agency could be the institution that sharpens the perceptions of employers towards more gender equality and gender-equal working policies. In order to develop new strategies, it would be necessary to strengthen the relevant training of placement officers and management staff. Training could include developing operational protocols to standardize job placement. Currently, the National Employment Agency has had limited success in cooperating with high schools. A national program should be established to strengthen career guidance activities, not only for pupils but also for their parents. Empirical data shows that particularly female high school graduates rely on family counseling and the influence of family members. As most females above 40, especially mothers and Single Mothers are facing extreme difficulties to be constantly employed they are seeking for their own microbusiness. By strengthening the micro-entrepreneurship of females the full potential of women as micro-entrepreneurs could be realized. While
micro-businesses provide more flexibility for the reconciliation of family and work, it is necessary to address the unpaid care and domestic work burdens of women in self-employment or micro-businesses. Therefore, a gender-sensitive approach to entrepreneurship support programs (for example taking into account that a large number of female beneficiaries of these programs aim to work from home) should be adopted. The provision of finance and training for women owned and operated micro-businesses needs to be expanded. Empirical data show that particularly less-educated women are often highly motivated to establish their own micro-business, but are more likely to fail. Therefore, training for less-educated women should be expanded by teaching them basic management skills. As women are less likely to create their own networks, they need governmental support. Examples from Malaysia proof the positive results of special micro-entrepreneurship programs for females (Schmillen et al., 2019). With regard to family policy, a re-thinking of traditional role-models is mandatory. Females in Cambodia still carry the main burdens of family care by experiencing working days of 16 hours or more. The Covid-19 pandemic has not narrowed but widened this gender inequality (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2022). The well-being of mothers is at a certain risk. Health care protection system as an integral part of labor politics have been already mentioned above. Another solution is to expand the quality and quantity of childcare services to ensure the continuous and productive labor market participation of a larger number of women and their well-being. Empirical data show that women need to have childcare services near their work places (World Bank, 2020). There is an absent of public childcare facility and quality service operation in Cambodia, of which results childcare constraints to both formal and informal working parents. Only small number of private childcare services are available mostly at urban areas and the service fee is only accessible by parents who have good incomes. Empirical data show that many mothers, especially Single Mothers, and mothers who have low incomes can't effort private childcare services. This financial challenge causes many mothers quite their job because they can't balance childcare and work. Lack of childcare options is known as one of the major challenges that women lose their employment opportunity, decent work and career growth comparing to men. The empirical data also show that women who have higher education seem to be able to turn back to grab employment opportunity after their maternity leave comparing women who have lower education. The government of Cambodia has community pre-schools at different communities to receive children aged three to five years while infants and toddlers aged three to thirty-six months do not have care and education services developed for them. Therefore, it is recommended to establish company or community-based kindergartens or nurseries with quality standard. A high percentage of mothers in Cambodia has reservations about institutional childcare and must be convinced that their children will not suffer from social or emotional negligence when visiting a kindergarten. In other countries, especially in Europe, early childhood education has been set up as an educational program – both for educators and for children. Different paths have been developed to meet the demands of families. One central aim is to have a minimum number of skilled professionals in all institutions, rather than relying on assistants. Family day care in Europe is seen as an additional care possibility for parents, but caregivers also need a minimum qualification and constant training on the job to attain their working permit (Schoyerer & Weimann-Sandig, 2015). With regard to the empirical results of this study, it could be helpful to identify different paths of childcare in order satisfy both rural and urban needs and to give mothers the freedom to concentrate on their employment. From an educational point of view, the expansion of childcare could create new work fields and offer new working possibilities for both – males and females. At last, new strategies of family policy could also address gender norms and attitudes among employers and the wider population. Introducing new role models of men and women
means to encourage fathers to take care of their children. Therefore, new laws on maternity and paternity leave could be helpful. In detail, the results of the study show that there is huge variation in the duration of maternity leave, the ability to stay away from work during the last weeks of pregnancy, and the standards for breastfeeding or caring for ill children. Nationwide standards help to rise the health of both – mothers and newborns. Paternity leave would reduce gender inequality not only within the present generation of parents but also for the following generations, as it helps to dissolve existing gender stereotypes. Dissolving gender stereotypes might be one of the central keys to implement stable working careers of females in Cambodia.

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