‘Doing the work of hearing’: Exploring Cambodian school girls’ educational persistence

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Abstract

This doctoral thesis reports on a qualitative feminist study that explored Cambodian school girls’ educational persistence. The study investigated the multiple sources of support school girls utilised to remain in secondary school in rural Cambodia. This thesis contributes to the gap in existing literature on girls’ educational persistence in contexts of social and material disadvantage, and specifically attends to the dearth of in-depth qualitative studies on girls’ education in Cambodia. The theoretical framework for the study was informed by feminist theoretical perspectives, including post-structuralism, and ‘community cultural wealth’. These perspectives helped frame the methodological approach used; guided the study’s ethical considerations; provided analytical tools; and demanded the reflexivity necessary to work ethically in a cross-cultural context.

Methodologically, this study involved two self-funded fieldtrips to Cambodia in 2014 and 2015, where I worked with 43 school girls, 23 young tertiary women, and seven NGO representatives to collect the ‘data’. The study employed ten different data collection methods, including art-based research methods that emphasised participant-led involvement as well as more traditional researcher-led methods, such as interviews and questionnaires. Other methods used were both participant and researcher led, and included card sorting, self-managed video interviews, and member checks. I used a range of methods in order to ameliorate language barriers and power differentials, with the intention of valorising participants’ voices.

Study findings revealed both the personal agency and vulnerability of school girls in contemporary rural Cambodia. The participants drew on a range of competing discourses when they spoke about ideals of girlhood and girls’ education in Cambodia, including discourses of female domesticity, girls’ and women’s rights, female altruism, and girls’ educational worth. In doing so, the
participants constructed themselves as homemakers and educated individuals, dutiful daughters and independent women, and unconventional females and positive role models. A community cultural wealth perspective provided a nuanced understanding of girls’ educational persistence, and exposed a rich interplay between individual agency and strong familial and community support, which included resourceful friends, caring teachers, and knowledgeable NGO staff. The participants’ agency was evident in their navigation of institutional barriers and resistance to deficit discourses regarding socially and materially disadvantaged girls; whilst their familial and social capitals provided access to vital resources which allowed them to overcome institutional hurdles within the education system and broader society. Based on their own experiences of remaining in school, the participants provided advice for key stakeholders in girls’ education on the necessary actions required to enable more girls to persist at school.
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Presentations from this research


Table of contents

Abstract ii
Acknowledgements iv
Presentations from this research vi
Table of contents vii
List of figures xi
List of tables xii

Chapter 1 Introduction 1
Introducing this study 2
My interest in girls’ education in Cambodia 3
The purpose of this study 4
Key terms used throughout the thesis 8
Educational persistence 8
‘Traditional’ or conventional 8
Income-poor; socially and materially disadvantaged 8
Gender equality 9
Thesis structure 9

Chapter 2 The Cambodian context 13
Introduction 14
Cambodia’s people 16
Cambodia’s economic transformation 17
Establishing Cambodia’s contemporary education system 19
Cambodia’s schooling structure 20
Ongoing issues in Cambodia’s education system and their impact on rural secondary school students, especially girls 21
Teacher shortages 22
Underqualified teachers 23
Teachers’ low salaries 25
Teachers’ high rates of absenteeism 26
‘Tuition’ fees 27
Sparse distribution of secondary schools in rural and remote areas 28
Informed consent, confidentiality, and ethics in practice 91
Working with the girls, young women, and NGO representatives 94
Visual narratives 96
Mind maps 100
Advice posters 101
Card sorting 104
Self-managed video interviews 106
Member checks 108
Jigsaw puzzle activity and questionnaires 109
Interviews 111
Observations and fieldnotes 113
Working with the data 114
Using discourse analysis to explore the multiple constructions of Cambodian girlhood and womanhood 116
Using community cultural wealth and thematic analysis to understand girls’ educational persistence 119
Establishing trustworthiness 121
Enacting reciprocity in cross-cultural research 122
Summary 124
Chapter 6 Multiple discourses of girlhood in Cambodia 127
Introduction 128
Girls and young women (re)defining girlhood in Cambodia 129
(Re)articulating discourses of female domesticity 129
Negotiating alternative discourses of girls’ educational worth 132
Drawing on girls’ and women’s rights discourses and alternative constructions of girlhood (and womanhood) 137
Alternative discourses of girlhood: girls’ subjectivities and practices 140
Discourses of materialism: constructing out-of-school girls as ‘other’ 141
Discourses of female altruistic behaviour: enabling or constraining female identities 144
Summary 147
Chapter 7 Understanding girls’ educational persistence in rural Cambodia 149
Introduction 150
Familial capital 151
| Social capital                                      | 157 |
| Aspirational capital                               | 165 |
| Navigational capital                               | 169 |
| Resistant capital                                  | 174 |
| Summary                                            | 180 |
| **Chapter 8   School girls’ advice to stakeholders in girls’ education in Cambodia** | 183 |
| Introduction                                        | 184 |
| Advice to government                               | 186 |
| Advice to school staff                             | 188 |
| *Advice to school directors*                       | 188 |
| *Advice to teachers*                               | 193 |
| Advice to neighbours                                | 195 |
| Advice to families                                 | 197 |
| Advice to other girls                               | 200 |
| Summary                                            | 202 |
| **Chapter 9 Reflecting on girls’ educational persistence in rural Cambodia** | 206 |
| Introduction                                        | 207 |
| Paying attention to the voices of girls who remain in school | 209 |
| Reflecting on the study                            | 218 |
| Contributions of this study                         | 221 |
| Concluding thoughts                                | 224 |
| *Directions for future research*                   | 225 |
| Epilogue                                           | 226 |
| **References**                                     | 229 |
| **Appendices**                                     | 267 |
| Appendix A: Letter of introduction to education NGOs | 268 |
| Appendix B: Letter of character from previous employer | 269 |
| Appendix C: Information and consent forms           | 270 |
| Appendix D: Recruitment letter addressed to NGO representatives | 282 |
| Appendix E: Interview questions                    | 285 |
| Appendix F: Self-managed video interview questions  | 287 |
| Appendix G: Questionnaire for school girls          | 288 |
| Appendix H: Jigsaw puzzle compare/contrast questionnaire | 290 |
List of figures

Figure 1. Map of Cambodia ................................................................. 14
Figure 2. Data collection methods used in this project ................................ 96
Figure 3. Nick’s visual narrative .......................................................... 98
Figure 4. Chan’s visual narrative ......................................................... 99
Figure 5. Completed mind map .......................................................... 100
Figure 6. Advice poster activity ......................................................... 102
Figure 7. Poster of advice addressed to the government ............................. 103
Figure 8. Poster of advice addressed to other girls ................................... 103
Figure 9. Example of completed card sorting activity .............................. 106
Figure 10. Jigsaw puzzle of an out-of-school girl .................................... 110
Figure 11. Jigsaw puzzle of school girls ................................................ 111
Figure 12. Erika’s drawing of her friends, taken from her visual narrative ....... 158
Figure 13. GG Cola’s visual narrative ................................................... 179
Figure 14. Advice poster to school directors by Erika, A Sang, and Thaily ....... 190
Figure 15. Poster of advice addressed to teachers .................................... 194
Figure 16. Advice poster to families .................................................... 198
Figure 17. Theary’s mother’s new house under construction ....................... 228
List of tables

Table 1. Participant and data collection details for fieldtrips 1 and 2 ........................................89
Table 2. Card sort details ..............................................................................................................105
Chapter 1
Introduction
Introducing this study

Girls’ education is often associated with the adage, “If you educate a boy, you educate an individual, but if you educate a girl, you educate a nation” (author unknown). Girls who obtain secondary education are equipped with skills and knowledge that enable their civic participation, improve their health awareness, and increase their opportunities for formal employment (Rihani, 2006). However, for many girls, especially income-poor girls in rural Cambodia, obtaining an education is fraught with difficulties, including social norms that restrict girls’ participation in formal education (Ministry of Women’s Affairs, 2014a). To understand why some girls endeavour to complete secondary school while many others drop out, this thesis explores income-poor school girls’ stories of educational persistence in a rural Cambodian context. This doctoral research project was driven by the impetus to recognise Cambodian “girls’ unique positions as experts on their own experiences and as identifiers of realistic solutions to address the challenges they and their peers face” when pursuing a formal education (Kirk, Mitchell, & Reid-Walsh, 2010, p. 26). This study foregrounds the voices and educational experiences of 43 secondary school girls and 23 young tertiary women who persisted at their education despite the multiple discursive and material constraints they encountered. Throughout this thesis, I argue that the girls and young women in this study were not passive recipients of hegemonic discourses, but “active co-producers” (Magnusson, 2005, p. 154) who acquired, transformed, and resisted multiple understandings of girlhood and womanhood in relation to formal education in a contemporary Cambodian setting.

Through my involvement in this doctoral study, I have discovered that, “There is both strength and tragedy to be found in contemporary Cambodia, where the contrasts and contradictions are precisely what make it such a fascinating, frustrating and fulfilling country to study” (Brickell & Springer, 2017, p. 1).
this chapter, I begin by stating my motivations for undertaking this inquiry into income-poor Cambodian girls’ experiences of remaining in school. I outline the purpose and aims of this study, and provide a brief overview of the methodological approach I employed. I also clarify the key terms used in this thesis and provide a ‘roadmap’ for its structure.

**My interest in girls’ education in Cambodia**

Greg Mortensen’s book, *Three Cups of Tea* triggered my interest in girls’ education almost a decade ago now. Although Mortensen has since been unmasked as dishonest in his words and deeds, his book enlightened me on the plight of girls wishing to attend school in Pakistan and Afghanistan. After completing his book, I continued to seek out stories about girls’ limited access to, and participation in, education in different parts of the world. For instance, in *Creating Room to Read* by John Wood (2012), I learned of the difficulties girls face when accessing school in countries such as Bangladesh, India, Laos, Vietnam, Nepal, Zambia, and Cambodia, and Wood’s motivations to set up *Room to Read’s Girls’ Education Programme* in these countries. I explored girls’ education in Kenya for my Honours dissertation which set the wheels in motion for my subsequent doctoral research.

During my Honours year, I investigated the available literature on girls’ education and soon discovered a raft of studies on the barriers to, and benefits of, girls’ education globally. But what struck me as odd was that girls seemed to be missing in much of the earlier literature, and there was a distinct lacuna regarding the voices of girls who had completed their formal schooling in spite of social and material barriers. Molly Warrington and Susan Kiragu (2012) were the one exception, and their study of ‘school girls against the odds’ in Kenya sparked a desire in me to explore other stories of girls’ resilience and educational persistence.
My decision to investigate girls’ educational persistence in a Cambodian context was one of fortuitous happenstance. I chose Cambodia after I stumbled upon its poor rankings for gender equality by the World Economic Forum in 2013 (the year before I embarked on my PhD). Added to this, I had also noticed in my reading of available literature that there seemed to be very little research on Cambodian girls’ education (in comparison to other countries). The more I read about Cambodia; the decimation of its education system; the process of rebuilding; and its broader social structure, the more I was drawn to finding out about girls’ experiences of formal schooling in contemporary rural Cambodia. Although I frequently read about the impact the Khmer Rouge had on Cambodia’s education system, I do not focus on the Khmer Rouge era in great detail in this thesis as there is a plethora of work dedicated to this topic (see David Chandler’s *A History of Cambodia* for an overview of the Khmer Rouge’s impact). Instead, in the next chapter, I acknowledge the ongoing effects this era had on Cambodia’s education system and the impact on educational persistence and secondary school completion rates.

The purpose of this study

This study places an “emphasis on listening to girls” (Cobbett, 2014, p. 313) to understand the complexities of girls’ education in contemporary Cambodia. There are two aims to this study. First, this thesis investigates how socially and materially disadvantaged school girls in rural Cambodia navigate various hurdles to remain in school. Second, this study foregrounds school girls’ advice to six stakeholders to indicate what is needed to enable more girls to complete secondary school in Cambodia.

The first aim adds to the wider conversation regarding the multiple voices of materially and socially disadvantaged girls who seek an education (Khoja-Moolji, 2015), and attends to the considerable lacuna in existing literature on
girls’ schooling in Cambodia as identified by Bredenberg, Lon, and Ma (2003) and Rogers (2014). Louise Morley, Fiona Leach and Rosemary Lugg (2009) along with Frances Hunt (2008) remarked on the dearth of research internationally that pays attention to socially and materially disadvantaged groups who maintain educational aspirations and obtain academic success. In her cross-country literature review on school drop outs, Hunt (2008) proposed that small in-depth qualitative studies on retention and motivational factors (among others) may provide a richer understanding of the processes surrounding socially and/or materially disadvantaged students’ access to, retention in, and completion of, formal schooling.

With regard to literature on girls’ education in Cambodia, my search for published literature on Cambodian girls’ education produced only a handful of studies, dating from 1995 to the most recent in 2015. Most of the studies were initiated by organisations or charities working in education in Cambodia. There are two possible explanations for the limited academic authorship of the existing literature. First, as will be discussed shortly, the education system in Cambodia is heavily supported by international donors. Consequently, a number of studies on gender and education in Cambodia are conducted by organisations working in the field of girls’ education or women’s rights. Whilst these studies are often conducted with experienced researchers (see for example Room to Read, 2011), the rationale for the studies is often to assess an existing program implemented by the organisation and/or to secure funding. A second explanation concerns the limited opportunities for research by academics in Cambodian universities. Academic staff in Cambodian universities are paid based only on their teaching hours, relegating unpaid academic research to the select few who can obtain research funding (Om & Walker, 2013), or conduct research with overseas academics.
To fulfil the aims of this study, this thesis considers the following research questions:

1. What do Cambodian secondary school girls identify as the key challenges that make it difficult for girls to remain in school?

2. How do Cambodian secondary school girls overcome such challenges?

3. Which are the most common forms or sources of support utilised by Cambodian secondary school girls who remain in school?

4. What advice do Cambodian secondary school girls offer to other girls wishing to remain in school?

5. What advice do Cambodian secondary school girls offer key stakeholders involved in girls’ education?

This study has been conceptualised based on the academic literature and in consultation with an established Cambodian non-governmental organisation (NGO) concerned with advancing girls’ access to education. Their willingness to broker research relationships for this project is indicative of their recognition of the project’s value. Moreover, the support of Theary\(^1\) as my interpreter and research assistant was vital to enabling my work with the school girls and tertiary women involved in this project. I introduce Theary formally in Chapter Five.

This study comprised of two self-funded fieldtrips to Cambodia during November-December 2014 and May-June 2015. I worked with 43 secondary school girls at two rural schools, 23 young tertiary women from three higher education institutions, and seven NGO representatives from four organisations

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\(^1\)‘Theary’ is not her real name, but is a pseudonym assigned by me. ‘Theary’ means helper or aide in Khmer. All participants’ names throughout this thesis are pseudonyms.
focused on education. Data collection included a variety of research methods that emphasised participant-led involvement as well as more traditional researcher-led methods, such as interviews and questionnaires. The range of methods aimed to ameliorate language barriers and power differentials with the aim of valorising the girls’ and young women’s voices.

The participant-led methods incorporated art-based tasks that ameliorated the ‘interrogation effect’ often associated with more traditional methods, such as interviews (McWilliam, Dooley, McArdle, & Pei-Ling, 2009). The school girls’ drawings or image-making gave the school girls the opportunity to represent their experiences (Leitch, 2008); out of which their stories of educational persistence are recreated in this thesis. The use of visual research methods also allowed me to attend, in part, to the differences and commonalities among the participants in their challenges and coping strategies (Yates, 1990). I also employed a hybrid of participant and researcher-led methods. These entailed a card sorting activity with the tertiary women, self-managed video interviews with the school girls, and member checks of preliminary findings with the school girls and tertiary women. The final four research methods – jigsaw puzzle group activity, paper-based questionnaire, interviews, and observation notes – were predominantly researcher-led.

By examining the multiple discourses of girlhood and womanhood (Chapter Six); identifying how girls draw on a range of resources to persist at formal education (Chapter Seven); and foregrounding the school girls’ advice to key stakeholders (Chapter Eight), this study provides a rich understanding of the participants’ daily contestations between being subjected to discrimination and resisting discriminatory views and practices in relation to their education. In particular, this study highlights the severe barrier income-poverty poses to girls’ continued schooling whilst simultaneously recognising the crucial value of family and social networks to encouraging girls’ educational persistence.
Key terms used throughout the thesis

There are some key terms used in this thesis that require defining. Where possible, I have reviewed the use of these terms in the literature and considered the implications of reproducing some of these terms in this cross-cultural study.

**Educational persistence**

This thesis focuses on girls’ educational persistence which pertains to girls’ ability to maintain and pursue educational goals; in this case to complete upper secondary school. In other words, unlike research on school drop outs, an investigation of girls’ educational persistence looks at the decisions and actions of girls who *remain* in school. Furthermore, I use the term persistence to differentiate from ‘retention’ where the emphasis is usually on the institution’s ability to retain students (Hagedorn, 2005).

**‘Traditional’ or conventional**

The use of ‘traditional’ in this thesis does not equate with antiquated or deficit ideals, views or practices. Rather I use the terms traditional and conventional interchangeably to capture long-established ideals and practices regarding female identities. In this, I take direction from other female researchers (Brickell, 2011b; Derks, 2008; Nich, 2015) who have included the term ‘traditional’ in their research on Cambodian women, including Aing Sokroen’s (2004) Masters’ thesis: ‘*A comparative analysis of traditional and contemporary roles of Khmer women in the household: A case study in Leap Tong village*’ from the Royal University of Phnom Penh.

**Income-poor; socially and materially disadvantaged**

I have used the term ‘income-poor’ to reflect the financial situation of the participants and their families. This descriptor allows me to acknowledge families’ financial poverty without ignoring the wealth of other resources and “assets already abundant in their communities” and families (Yosso, 2005, p. 82).
However, for the girls and young women in this study, the descriptor ‘socially and materially disadvantaged’ best encapsulates their positionings within constraining discourses of girlhood and womanhood. Girls and women in Cambodia are socially constituted to have a lower status and more restricted mobility (socially, politically, and physically) in comparison to their male counterparts (Brickell, 2011b; Derks, 2008; Grace & Eng, 2015; Grace, Liebenow, Luu, & Pendse, 2015; Jacobsen, 2008; Ledgerwood, 1990; Lilja, 2013b; Nich, 2015; Smith-Hefner, 1993; Sokroeun, 2004). As such, girls and women may experience discrimination and domestic violence (Brickell, 2008; Eng, Li, Mulsow, & Fischer, 2010; NGO-CEDAW, 2011; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2014).

**Gender equality**

Lastly, this thesis is concerned with gender equality in education participation. Gender parity is concerned with the quantitative goal of boys and girls achieving equally in all levels of education based on their age-group proportion in the population. Gender equality, on the other hand, is a qualitative goal concerned with the educational equality of girls and boys. Eliminating gender disparity in education is only the first step in achieving gender equality in education. For gender equality to be achieved in education, girls must have:

- the right to education [access and participation], as well as rights within education [gender-aware educational environments, processes, and outcomes], and rights through education [meaningful education outcomes that link education equality with wider processes of gender justice].

(Subrahmanian, 2005, p. 395)

**Thesis structure**

This thesis comprises a total of nine chapters which are compiled in the following order. Following this chapter, I provide some demographic information about
contemporary Cambodia together with a detailed description of the education system in Cambodia and its achievements and ongoing challenges. I outline the main arguments regarding the extremely low secondary school completion rates which include poor infrastructure, issues with quality teaching, and poverty.

In Chapter Three, I focus specifically on girls’ access to, and participation in, formal education beyond primary school level. The chapter is founded on the understanding that, “Girlhood is constituted through multiple and frequently competing discourses, which position girls and young women in different ways” (Griffin, 2004, p. 32). I review the literature pertaining to enabling and constraining discourses of girlhood and womanhood in Cambodia, including discourses embedded in the Chbap Srei (Code for Women). Included in this chapter are details of the material effects of multiple discourses of girlhood on girls’ education, and the mechanisms or sources of support that enable girls to overcome the discursive and material barriers they face. Together, Chapters Two and Three provide a contextual understanding of Cambodia’s contemporary education system and set the scene for exploring school girls’ accounts of remaining in school despite the difficulties they encounter.

Chapter Four describes the theoretical frameworks that guided my research approach. I outline the importance of multiple feminist theoretical lenses which prioritise attention to power relations, reflexivity, and reciprocity. I also draw on understandings of discourse, subjectivity, resistance, and agency, as well as a community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005) as a basis for recognising the resources available to the school girls and tertiary women in this study.

In Chapter Five, I build on the theoretical underpinnings described in Chapter Four and outline the data collection methods used when working with the school girls and tertiary women involved in this project. I also provide an account of
the analytical decisions made when reading the data, and reflect on the ethical consideration of reciprocity in this cross-cultural study.

The next three chapters (Six to Eight) foreground the school girls’ and tertiary women’s voices and experiences of their educational persistence in rural Cambodia. Chapter Six links with the literature on female identities in relation to formal schooling, leadership, and participation in society. The chapter explores how the participants rearticulated, improvised, and resisted multiple discourses of girlhood and womanhood, and took up numerous, often competing, subjectivities as a result. Chapter Seven, guided by community cultural wealth theory, describes the five ‘capitals’ that emerged in the school girls’ and tertiary women’s talk on remaining in school. As such, Chapter Seven sits at the heart of this study on exploring and understanding how income-poor school girls manage to persist at school. Building on the ethos of hearing and learning from school girls themselves, Chapter Eight offers a detailed account of the school girls’ advice to six stakeholders in girls’ education in Cambodia. Their advice highlights the ongoing challenges girls face from within and outside the schooling environment.

Finally, in Chapter Nine, I reflect on the outcomes of this study and consider how the data answer the research questions and speak to the aims of this project. I consider the contributions made by this thesis in relation to literature on girls’ educational persistence and girls’ education in Cambodia; methodological approaches to working with school girls in a cross-cultural context; and the use of the community cultural wealth framework in a Southeast Asian context. I conclude with thoughts on what can be learned from this study and suggestions for future research.

One final note: each chapter of this thesis includes a title page with a photograph taken during my fieldtrips. The photographs add to the visual element of this
study and provide the reader with a pictorial reminder of the research context. I have also included images in some of the chapters to aid in my description of the data collection methods and analysis of the school girls’ creative productions. By including images, I draw attention to two aspects of using visual research methods. First, the inclusion of images provides a visual reminder of the multiple ways social scientists can work with socially and materially disadvantaged young people in an attempt to mitigate power differentials (Thomson, 2008). Second, the selected images represent the socially constructed nature of drawings and photographs. For instance, as the author of this thesis, I carefully selected the images based on what I believed best captured the content of each chapter. The images are also the product of my observations as a visitor to rural Cambodia. I am therefore mindful that just like words, “an image is not a simple window on the world” (Thomson, 2008, p. 9), but is instead contingent on the research context and relationship in which the image is produced.
Chapter 2
The Cambodian context
Introduction

It is important to understand the landscape of Cambodia’s contemporary education system in order to appreciate the significance of girls’ educational persistence in rural Cambodia. Cambodia’s education system has undergone a remarkable transformation after its near eradication by the Khmer Rouge regime in the late 1970s (Sovachana Pou, 2012). Most notably, Cambodia’s education policies, guided by UNESCO’s *Education for All* goals, have had a positive impact on the participation of girls in formal schooling. But whilst more girls (and boys) are gaining access to basic education, girls’ completion rates at

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2 Source: http://www.keyfactorsales.com/cambodiamap.org/images/cambodia-map-tour.jpg
3 As noted in Chapter One, I do not focus on the Khmer Rouge era in this thesis, but I do consider the ongoing effects in relation to education. For a detailed discussion of Cambodia’s history and the Khmer Rouge, refer to David Chandler’s book, *A History of Cambodia* (Fourth edition).
upper secondary level remain very low, particularly for girls residing in rural and remote areas (MoEYS, 2016). In 2016, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) reported that only 15.98% of girls from rural areas completed upper secondary school compared with 33.37% of urban girls (MoEYS, 2016).

A closer look at Grade 12 completion rates, from an educational persistence perspective, highlights the ongoing challenges facing Cambodia in terms of educational development. For instance, from an original cohort of 782,840 Grade 1 students who enrolled in 2001, only 6.3% of these students completed Grade 12 in 2014 (MoEYS, 2014). These vast disparities between Grade 1 enrolment figures and Grade 12 completion figures for the same cohort indicate that only a very small percentage of students demonstrate educational persistence or have the means to circumvent some of the challenges they face when attending school. Moreover, the low progression rates point to severe barriers to secondary schooling in the Cambodian context.

Scholars have raised concerns that the Cambodian education system struggles to adequately serve the educational needs of its large and youthful population (Brehm, 2017; Sovachana Pou, 2012; Sitha, Edwards Jr, Williams, & Kitamura, 2016). Structural issues, such as a shortage of secondary schools in rural and remote areas, as well as quality issues (e.g. teacher shortages, low teacher qualifications, limited teacher professional development, etc.), can negatively impact students’, especially girls’, ability to access and complete secondary school (Benveniste, Marshall, & Araujo, 2008; Dy & Ninomiya, 2003).

In this chapter, I consider the factors that shape students’ access to, and completion of, secondary school in Cambodia, with a particular focus on girls. I begin with some basic demographic information about Cambodia’s people. Where possible, I focus on rural livelihoods in order to provide an understanding of the research context of this study. I then provide a brief overview of
Cambodia’s economic and social development following the Khmer Rouge period, including details of the re-establishment of the education system. Following this, I focus on formal schooling in contemporary Cambodia and the ongoing challenges to quality education provision for all students. In particular, I outline the six concerns that emerge from the literature on education and teaching in Cambodia. They include: (1) a shortage of teachers; (2) teachers’ low educational qualifications; (3) teachers’ low salaries; (4) high teacher absenteeism; (5) ‘tuition’ fees; and (6) the sparsity of secondary schools in rural and remote areas. Where relevant, I consider how these challenges affect materially-disadvantaged secondary school students in rural and remote areas. Lastly, I consider the impact of income-poverty on children’s schooling in Cambodia.

Cambodia’s people

Cambodia has a relatively young population with half of its 16 million people under the age of 24 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2016). The main ethnic group is Khmer (97.6%), with the remainder of the population comprising of Cham (1.2%), Chinese (0.1%), Vietnamese (0.1%), and other ethnicities (0.9%). Khmer is the official language, although English is widely spoken, particularly in the main tourist areas, and is taught in schools. The literacy rate in 2015 (based on individuals over 15 years of age who can read and write) was 77.2% with men having a higher literacy rate (84.5%) than women (70.5%).

Cambodia has a predominantly agrarian population (Marschke, 2017). Although urbanisation has increased over the last two decades, almost 80% of the population still reside in the rural countryside. In the rural areas, subsistence farming or fishing are the main sources of income for many families. But

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4 These figures are based on 2015 estimates cited on the Central Intelligence Agency website https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cb.html
Lawreniuk (2017) and Marschke (2017) argue that sustaining a living from small family farms and fishing has become increasingly difficult in recent years due to forced evictions, climate change, and land lost to big corporations.

According to the Asian Development Bank (2014, p. x) report on poverty in Cambodia, “many families teeter just above the poverty line” and about 90% of income-poorn families live in rural areas. For many income-poor families, poverty is associated with a lack of opportunities, social exclusion, inadequate food supply, limited access to healthcare and education, and a lack of assets for wealth generation (Sothirak Pou, 2012). Unfortunately, many Cambodians struggle to gain stable, salaried employment that can lift themselves and their families out of poverty (Kanol, Khermarin, & Elder, 2013). This is despite Cambodia’s recent economic growth and the creation of new job opportunities.

Cambodia’s economic transformation

Contemporary Cambodia’s “vibrant economy” (Deth, Moldashev, & Bulut, 2017, p. 17) is the seventh fastest-growing economy in the world (based on 2016 figures from the World Economic Forum) (Myers, 2016). This is in stark contrast with the Khmer Rouge’s attempt, during the late 1970s, to convert the country to a rural agrarian economy devoid of trade and capitalism.

After years of conflict and following the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1991, Cambodia began to see significant growth in the agriculture, manufacturing, tourism and construction sectors (Arnold & Chang, 2017). New trade options arose when Cambodia joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in April 1991 and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in October 2004. Presently, ASEAN is Cambodia’s main trading partner and provides an important source of foreign investment to compensate for Cambodia’s own limited domestic financial resources (Deth et al., 2017).
Cambodia’s other two main trading partners are the United States for exports and China for imports. China also provides direct investment, including “large (around US$500 million per annum) and seemingly non-conditional loans, grants, and aid donations” (Deth et al., 2017, p. 22-23).

The development of Cambodia’s export market provided new employment opportunities in the manufacturing sector. The first garment factories were established in the early 1990s, and today, the garment industry attracts a large migrant workforce (Lawreniuk, 2017), comprised mostly of women, many of whom migrate from rural areas (Derks, 2008). Tourism, Cambodia’s third largest sector, has also become an important source of employment. Sharpley and McGrath (2017) report that the tourism sector accounts for approximately 735,000 directly-related jobs (or 8.9 percent of total employment in Cambodia). Likewise, the construction industry has grown as infrastructure needs have increased (Kasztelan, 2016). Phnom Penh, for example, has seen an extraordinary transformation in its urban landscape with the development of high-rise buildings and shopping malls (Percival, 2017).

However, Cambodia’s economic development has been associated with increased social inequality (S. Springer, 2017). For instance, much of Cambodia’s urban beautification and development, particularly in Phnom Penh, has involved forced evictions or involuntary resettlement (Connell & Grimsditch, 2017), adding to the injustices (e.g. homelessness) and inequality experienced by Cambodians living in poverty (S. Springer, 2017). Commentators, such as Sharpley and McGrath (2017), also add that sectors like tourism have made a very limited contribution toward reducing Cambodia’s levels of poverty and improving social development. Whilst these issues are not the focus of this thesis, it is important to acknowledge that the economic development that has occurred
over the last two decades has also exacerbated existing inequalities and introduced a range of new challenges.5

Establishing Cambodia’s contemporary education system

Cambodia’s economic rebuild was associated with efforts to re-establish and strengthen the country’s education sector (Brehm, 2017; Duggan, 1996). Following the effects of the Khmer Rouge regime from 1975 to 1979, Cambodia had to develop its education system “from near zero” (Sitha, Edwards, Williams, & Kitamura, 2016, p. 3), because:

The Khmer Rouge leaders eliminated currency, abolished education, and destroyed key social-cultural institutions including family structure, Buddhism, and economic activities. Hospitals, factories, schools, and universities were closed, books were burned, libraries were destroyed, and a majority of Cambodian’s brightest, talented, and most educated individuals were either eliminated or fled the country. (Sovachana Pou, 2012, p. 295)

The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) began rebuilding its formal education system in the 1980s under a Vietnamese-backed government. But it was not until the signing of the 1991 Paris Peace Accords and the installation of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) that the rebuild began in earnest (Ogisu & Williams, 2016). Cambodia rapidly expanded basic education provision (Sitha et al., 2016), guided by the global Education for All (EFA) campaign (Dy & Ninomiya, 2003; Kim & Rouse, 2011; McCormick, 2012) and assisted by a range of international donors, civil society organisations and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Brehm, 2017).

Contemporary Cambodia continues to rely on foreign aid and organisations to “provide schooling in partnership with the government” (Brehm, 2017, p. 272;  

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5 Please refer to The handbook of contemporary Cambodia (2017) for a more nuanced and extended discussion on political and social challenges in contemporary Cambodia.
McCormick, 2012). Brehm (2017) points out that despite Cambodia’s economic growth, between 2006 and 2012, the government spent on average only 2.6% of its gross domestic product (GDP) on education; far less than its neighbours - Laos (4.2%), Thailand (4.1%), and Viet Nam (5.7%). Ear (2007) argues that high levels of poverty “put great pressure on donors to give even when the governance situation is disappointing. In effect this gives the government freedom to ignore donor pressures and perpetuates poor governance” (p. 78). The continued involvement of donor support includes the provision of NGO schools and NGO-supported schools, amongst a variety of other public and private schools that students may attend, depending on their location and economic status (Brehm, 2017).

Cambodia’s schooling structure

Schools in Cambodia are often categorised according to their geographic location. Remote schools, for example, are those schools located in “isolated areas where communication with and transportation to the schools is difficult and where population density is less than 10 people per square kilometre” (Geeves & Bredenberg, 2005, p. 30). Urban schools on the other hand, are located in cities and large towns, such as Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, and Kampong Cham, and may be supported by a network of roads and accessible communication (Edwards Jr, Zimmermann, Sitha, Williams, & Kitamura, 2014). Rural schools make up the rest, are usually located within smaller villages and may be widely dispersed. The infrastructure of schools varies across the country. Most school buildings are made from concrete or brick, but a small percentage (14%) of schools are constructed of wood or bamboo. And whilst Benveniste et al. (2008) acknowledge that great strides have been made in terms of schooling infrastructure (e.g. improved sanitation facilities), the MoEYS (2016) reports that 67% of state school buildings have floors, roofs, or walls in poor condition.
Cambodia’s contemporary school system consists of six years of primary education (grades 1-6), followed by three years at lower secondary (grades 7-9) and three years at upper secondary (grades 10-12). Basic compulsory education comprises of grades one to nine (Edwards Jr et al., 2014). Article 23 and 31 of the Education Law states that all children are entitled to attend school for free (Ogisu & Williams, 2016).

Students complete national examinations in grades 9 and 12. The results of the grade 9 national examinations determine students’ promotion from primary to lower secondary school (Hayden & Martin, 2011). Prior to 2014, the examinations were susceptible to corruption and cheating by teachers and students (Sitha et al., 2016). But since then, the Minister of Education, Dr. Hang Chuon Naron, has imposed strict regulations regarding the management and conduct of the examination process. This has highlighted other issues pertaining to the quality of education provision in Cambodia (Sitha et al., 2016).

Ongoing issues in Cambodia’s education system and their impact on rural secondary school students, especially girls

Six issues emerge in the literature on Cambodia’s contemporary education system and the “relationships between the teaching profession and educational equity, quality and efficiency” (Benveniste et al., 2008, p. iii). They are: (1) severe teacher shortages, particularly in more rural and remote areas; (2) low educational qualifications of teaching staff; (3) low teacher salaries; (4) high rates of teacher absenteeism; (5) ‘tuition’ fees; and (6) the sparse distribution of secondary schools in rural and remote areas. As will be illustrated here, the factors affecting education quality are often interrelated. For example, teachers’ absenteeism and the practice of charging ‘tuition’ fees have been closely linked to the low salaries paid to teachers. These issues compromise the quality of the education system (Benveniste et al., 2008; Sitha et al., 2016), and hamper
secondary students’ access to, participation in, and achievement at school; making it difficult for many students to persist at, and complete secondary school in Cambodia (Benveniste et al., 2008; Khieng, Srinivasa, & Chhem, 2015; Marshall et al., 2012; Mason, 2009; Tandon & Fukao, 2014).

**Teacher shortages**

First, the core challenge to education quality and provision, especially in rural and remote areas is the scarcity of teachers (Benveniste et al., 2008; Kim & Rouse, 2011). A shortage of teachers remains a legacy of the Khmer Rouge’s execution of the educated populace which included 75% of teachers and 96% of university students (Benveniste et al., 2008).

Consequently, Cambodia has the highest student-to-teacher ratio in East Asia, with the primary school ratio at 51:1 and lower secondary at 32:1 (Benveniste et al., 2008). In some instances, the class size in some rural schools can be as high as 60 students (Khieng et al., 2015). Khieng (2015) and NGO Education Partnership (2014) found that large classes led to difficulties in maintaining effective curriculum delivery and student monitoring. As an example, the NGO Education Partnership (2014) study revealed that teachers at primary and lower secondary schools in Khnar Sanday commune of Siem Reap province had to teach more than one class simultaneously (in separate classrooms). This often involved the teacher leaving one class unattended whilst they provided instruction to another class.

Benveniste et al. (2008); Tandon and Fukao (2014), and the MoEYS (2015), contend that the shortage of teachers may persist as more viable occupations become available to school graduates. Many young teachers revealed that teaching was not their career of choice (Benveniste et al., 2008), and according to Tandon and Fukao (2014) low salaries (discussed below) dissuaded graduating students from pursuing a teaching career. The MoEYS (2015) also admits that
more than 2,000 teachers leave the profession annually (based on 2012 and 2013 figures), many from the “upper secondary level where the attrition rates continue to increase” (p. 6). And whilst 5,000 trainee teachers are recruited annually, there remains a shortage of adequately educated and trained teachers across the country. Kim and Rouse (2011) argue that the urgent need to address a shortage of teachers in Cambodia often undermines the quality of training new teachers receive. This introduces the second challenge facing Cambodia’s education system: the low educational qualifications of teachers.

**Underqualified teachers**

There are two issues regarding the low educational qualifications of Cambodia’s teachers. First, the teaching profession fails “to attract academically sound, committed, and competent students” (MoEYS, 2015, p. 3; Tandon & Fukao, 2014). Second, the training of teachers is compromised by a shortage of experienced trainers, and limited or no in-service professional development opportunities (Benveniste et al., 2008; MoEYS, 2015).

The MoEYS published its Teacher Policy Action Plan in 2015, with the primary aim of improving teaching quality. In the document, the MoEYS (2015, p. 7) contends that the teaching profession has a “low social status” in Cambodia presently, and consequently does not attract academically strong students. For example, 80% of new trainees obtained a Grade 12 examination score of either D or E.

The second issue is that there are discrepancies in teachers’ educational qualifications when comparing urban, rural and remote areas. The low educational qualifications of teachers are more evident in rural and remote areas, because more qualified teachers tend to be placed in urban schools (Kim & Rouse, 2011). There is also a larger proportion of teachers with only primary school level qualifications in remote areas (6.2%) compared with rural (2.4%) and
urban (0%) areas. Teachers with less than the usual minimum qualification of grade 12 were likely the result of the MoEYS’s effort to recruit more teachers to rural schools. Previously, the MoEYS had made exceptions regarding the entry qualifications to teacher training, and allowed students with lower secondary school qualifications (up to grade 9) to enrol in two years of teacher training (Benveniste et al., 2008; Kim & Rouse, 2011; Sovachana Pou, 2012). The MoEYS (2015) has since revised the entry requirements and states in the Teacher Policy Action Plan that all trainee teachers must complete grade 12 before embarking on their training.

Since the 1980s, the level of formal training for teachers has increased, but the MoEYS (2015) admits that the majority of teachers are underqualified. Approximately 80% of teachers do not have a Bachelor of Arts (BA) qualification or equivalent (MoEYS, 2016). Teacher training is “one of the few post-secondary education careers offered for free”, but adequate teacher training is hindered by a shortage of skilled teacher trainers and limited numbers of experienced teachers to oversee trainee teachers (Benveniste et al., 2008, p. 53; McNamara, 2013; MoEYS, 2015; Tandon & Fukao, 2014). Tandon and Fukao (2014, p. 4) add that “teacher trainers work in an environment with little contact, support, or collaboration” and trainee teachers have little opportunity to interact or participate in applied activities.

The MoEYS (2015, p. 7) also contends that there are “almost no opportunities for continued professional growth” or in-service teacher development (see also Benveniste et al., 2008). The MoEYS (2015, p. 7) acknowledges in its Teacher Policy Action Plan that the provision of in-service professional development is “ad-hoc, inconsistent, and unmonitored” providing little incentive to teachers to develop their skills. According to the Teacher Policy Action Plan (MoEYS, 2015), the MoEYS proposes to rectify this gap in teacher development.


*Teachers’ low salaries*

The third challenge, teachers’ low salaries, is inextricably linked to the four other issues concerning teachers. For instance, regarding the low educational qualifications of teachers, Tandon and Kukao (2014) argue that the teaching profession is not attractive to academically strong candidates who can afford to study at university and pursue other better-paid professions. The central concern regarding teachers’ salaries is that, “Teachers who are sole income earners and sustain a family with children are likely to live in poverty if they… rely only on their earnings from teaching” (Benveniste et al., 2008, p. v). Tandon and Fukao (2014) also add that “a typical teacher with more than three dependents would fall below the poverty line. But other professionals earn about five times the poverty line income” (p. 24). To compound matters, teachers experience delays in receiving their monthly wages and some report not receiving their full salary because of “unscrupulous accounting officers” (Benveniste et al., 2008, p. 53).

Low wages create issues with recruiting teachers into more rural and remote schools. On average, teachers in Phnom Penh earn 600,000 Cambodian riel (US$148, NZ$204) per month which is less than other professionals, but teachers in rural areas earn almost half of the salary of urban-based teachers (Tandon & Fukao, 2014). Although there are incentives for teachers to take postings in remote schools, the low salaries make it difficult for teachers to survive without the additional support of family members or a second income (Benveniste et al., 2008).

In early 2015, the government promised to increase teachers’ salaries (Tat & Vong, 3 March 2015). However, after little improvement the Cambodian Independent Teachers’ Association petitioned Prime Minister Hun Sen and the Ministry of Education in October 2016 to again address the issue of teachers’ low

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6 See Benveniste et al. (2008) and Tandon and Fukao (2014) for more in-depth details on Cambodian teachers’ salaries and pay structure.
salaries (Sokha, 2016). Until teachers earn competitive salaries, it is likely that the education system will continue to struggle with some of the associated challenges, including teachers’ high rates of absenteeism.

**Teachers’ high rates of absenteeism**

Teachers’ high rates of absenteeism present another challenge to quality education provision in Cambodia, and are related to teachers’ low salaries. To survive financially, teachers supplement their low wages with other paid work, including farming, sales, and private tutoring (Benveniste et al., 2008; Courtney, 2008; Dy & Ninomiya, 2003; Kim & Rouse, 2011; No, Sam, & Hirakawa, 2012). Teacher absences result in unsupervised classes, because there are usually no substitute or relief teachers available when class teachers are absent, and teacher tardiness accounts for almost 10 percent of lost instruction time over a full school year (Benveniste et al., 2008). Teacher absences seem to be highest at lower secondary level. In one study, 15.6% of teachers were absent on the day of an unannounced visit by researchers (Benveniste et al., 2008). Notably, the study concerned did not explore the possible reasons for the teachers’ absence.

Several studies have found a strong link between teachers’ levels of absenteeism and students’ attendance and achievement (Benveniste et al., 2008; KAPE, 2008; No et al., 2012; Sao, 2012). Parents in a study on school drop outs cited teacher absences as the main reason why their children did not attend school every day (KAPE, 2008). Benveniste et al. (2008) also found that students’ attendance declined when their teachers’ absences increased. Students’ absences as a result of teachers’ high rates of absenteeism are associated with poor academic performance and an increased likelihood of students dropping out of school (KAPE, 2008; Kim & Rouse, 2011).
'Tuition' fees

The fifth issue concerns the practice of teachers charging students ‘tuition’ fees for instruction. This practice has been attributed in part to teachers’ low salaries (Benveniste et al., 2008; Kalyanpur, 2011; Kim & Rouse, 2011). In Cambodia, the extra instruction is referred to as regular private tutoring; known as “rien kuo thoemda” (Brehm, 2017, p. 273). Regular private tutoring is conducted by mainstream teachers in their school classrooms with the same cohort of students, and offers an extension of the core curriculum (Brehm, 2017; Nguon, 2012).

These ‘tuition’ classes can also be viewed as “forced private tuition” as students may be coerced into attending the sessions by their teachers (Brehm, 2017, p. 279; Dawson, 2010). In other words, the supplementary tutoring is not an optional source of learning for students, but as Edwards Jr et al. (2014) argue, it is an actual necessity if students wish to succeed at school. Teachers’ “status as knowledgeable and respected community members” has been greatly eroded as a result of this practice (Czymoniewicz-Klippel, 2017, p. 330; Tan, 2008). However, some teachers argue that aside from supplementing their salaries, extra tuition is often necessary to address the constraints of reduced curriculum time and crowded classrooms (Brehm, Silova, & Mono, 2012; Dawson, 2010).

The process of charging a tuition fee disproportionately affects materially-disadvantaged students, particularly in rural areas where income earning opportunities are lower (Edwards Jr, Zimmermann, Sitha, Williams, & Kitamura, 2016). Students who cannot obtain additional tutoring miss out on learning key content needed for tests and examinations (Bray & Seng, 2005; Edwards Jr et al., 2014), and ultimately miss out on a full education (Kluttz, 2015; McNamara, 2013). Students’ ability to do well and their decision to remain in school is often tied to their ability to access tutoring activities (Ogisu & Williams, 2016). For rural school students, their access to secondary schooling is compounded by their geographical location.
Sparse distribution of secondary schools in rural and remote areas

Finally, the sparsity of secondary schools in rural and remote areas creates a barrier to student access (Benveniste et al., 2008) and attendance (KAPE, 2008). The distance between students’ homes and schools means that Cambodian students travel on average between 3.1 and 7.7 kilometres to their local secondary school; with longer distances being more common in rural and remote areas (Benveniste et al., 2008). Given that most school-aged children reside rurally (Kim & Rouse, 2011), challenges accessing school are likely to be widespread. Students’ educational needs may not be met due to a lack of nearby schools and/or safe transport options.

Researchers in the KAPE (2008) study on dropout and retention in Kampong Cham province found that students in school mentioned commuting to school as a major concern. Long distances are the greatest hurdle, but in some instances, poorly maintained roads or difficult terrain is also an issue. For example, students at one rural school remarked that commuting the short distance to their school in the rainy season was often incredibly difficult (KAPE, 2008). Similarly, Edwards Jr et al. (2014) found that students’ low transition rates from primary to lower secondary school in rural and remote areas was attributed in part to transportation difficulties. The authors reported that whilst commuting distance was a challenge on its own, the issue was often aggravated by a family’s limited financial resources and inability to purchase a bicycle to make the commuting distance more viable.

For girls, the long distance to school is compounded by risks to their safety, such as sexual abuse or harassment (Hill & Ly, 2004; Rihani, 2006; Velasco, 2001). In some studies, parents of girls expressed concern about the risk of abduction (MoEYS, 1998), and cited travelling long distances as a reason for withdrawing their daughters from school (Velasco, 2001).
Where homes are widely dispersed, some secondary schools provide boarding facilities. But as Edwards Jr et al. (2016) found, boarding facilities were not always available, leaving students and parents with very little choice when trying to access school beyond primary level. Where boarding facilities were available, the question of financial resources overwhelmingly influenced a family’s decision to continue sending their daughter (or son) to school (Edwards Jr et al., 2016).

**Income-poverty and schooling in Cambodia**

Outside of the education system, income-poverty is the main barrier to educational attainment (Filmer & Schady, 2008; KAPE, 2008; No et al., 2012). Despite the provision of free basic education, students are unable to pay for school uniforms, study materials, transport, or tuition fees without adequate financial resources (Edwards Jr et al., 2014). The cost of schooling increases with each grade, with tutoring and pocket money for snacks and study supplies, noted as the most common costs amongst higher grade students (Bray & Seng, 2005).

Income-poverty also drives parental decisions where financial constraints may mean that girls (and boys) drop out of school to contribute to the family income or perform household duties (KAPE, 2008; Stromquist, 2001; Velasco, 2001). Poverty is particularly salient for rural families who have experienced landlessness due to ‘land grabbing’ (referred to as economic land concessions) by the government (Lawreniuk, 2017). In these circumstances or when financial resources are scarce, family members are pressured to seek livelihoods elsewhere; often to the detriment of children’s schooling (Bylander, 2014; C. Y. Kim, 2011; Kluttz, 2015).
Cambodia has one of the highest rates of child labour in Southeast Asia, and children’s engagement in work is a symptom of poverty and a core barrier to educational persistence (C. Y. Kim, 2011; National Institute of Statistics, 2015). According to the Cambodian National Institute of Statistics (2015), girls aged 6-17 years of age mentioned ‘contributing to the family income’ as the main reason they did not attend school. It is relatively easy for girls and boys with limited education to seek paid work because Cambodia’s growth sectors – “agriculture, textiles, and tourism – have no great need for highly skilled or educated human resources” (Ogisu & Williams, 2016, p. 15). The garment factories in particular are one example of paid employment available to girls without a full education (Derks, 2008).

But as Kluttz (2015) and Czymoniewicz-Klippel (2011) argue, child labour is not solely related to families’ income-poverty, but also influenced by a lack of opportunity. As indicated in this section, the ongoing challenges and differences in schooling provision between urban and rural areas in terms of access, quality, and completion rates exacerbate the inequalities that exist between people who are income-rich and income-poor (Kluttz, 2015; UNESCO, 2014).

**Summary**

Rural girls’ educational persistence must be understood in relation to formal education provision in Cambodia. Despite Cambodia’s rapid economic growth, its education system struggles to adequately educate the large school-aged population (Brehm, 2017; Sovachana Pou, 2012; Sitha et al., 2016). Ongoing supply issues create barriers to girls’ (and boys’) full access to, and participation in, secondary school, particularly in rural areas.

In this chapter, I have highlighted six structural issues that present challenges to ensuring all children’s access to, and participation in, school. First, rural secondary school students may experience overcrowded classrooms due to a
shortage of teachers in these areas (Benveniste et al., 2008). Large classes reduce teachers’ availability to work with individual students and can affect the quality of instruction provided to students (Khieng et al., 2015). Teachers’ low educational qualifications also affect the quality of instruction, and the teaching profession reportedly does not attract academically-strong candidates (MoEYS, 2015; Tandon & Fukao, 2014). One of the central reasons for teaching’s lack of appeal is the meagre wages paid to teachers. Teachers who have dependants are likely to live in poverty if they rely solely on their teaching wages (Benveniste et al., 2008; Tandon & Fukao, 2014). Consequently, teachers supplement their wages with second jobs and/or by charging ‘tuition’ fees to their students (Benveniste et al., 2008; Courtney, 2008; Dy & Ninomiya, 2003; Kim & Rouse, 2011; No et al., 2012). Teachers’ engagement in other paid work results in high rates of teacher absenteeism (Benveniste et al., 2008; No et al., 2012; Sao, 2012) which has been linked with poor student attendance and high dropout rates (KAPE, 2008). Teachers’ high absenteeism and practice of charging tuition fees prevents income-poor students from fully accessing the curriculum (Edwards Jr et al., 2016). Students in rural and remote areas may also have to negotiate long commuting distances (Benveniste et al., 2008; KAPE, 2008) and unsafe roads (Velasco, 2001), due to the sparse distribution of secondary schools in some of these areas. Finally, outside of the education system, family circumstances with regard to income-poverty and child labour are also a major hurdle to school attendance and persistence (Bray & Seng, 2005; KAPE, 2008; C. Y. Kim, 2011).

Cambodia has made great quantitative strides in terms of providing schools and increasing enrolment rates following the Khmer Rouge regime (Sitha et al., 2016), but “massive qualitative deficiencies” plague Cambodia’s contemporary education system (Ayres, 2000, p. 441). Poor teaching quality and inadequacies in school provision across the provinces perpetuate inequalities for Cambodia’s large youth population, many of whom live rurally (Kim & Rouse, 2011). Quality
issues have consequently been associated with low completion rates, high dropout rates, and parents and students questioning the intrinsic value of formal education (Kluttz, 2015). In the next chapter, I extend my discussion here and consider the discursive and material constraints to girls’ schooling, paying particular attention to Cambodian discourses of girlhood and womanhood and how these may shape girls’ educational persistence.
Chapter 3
Girls’ education in Cambodia
Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed the broad educational landscape in Cambodia; specifically, the ongoing challenges facing Cambodia’s education system. I now turn to the focus of this study: girls’ educational persistence in Cambodia. To understand Cambodian girls’ educational persistence, this chapter considers the various barriers girls face when accessing and participating in school, including constraining discourses and the material implications of discursive constraints. I also explore the various forms of support that may enable girls to overcome various barriers and remain in school.

There is relatively scant research that explores girls’ access to, and participation in, education in Cambodia. The exceptions are a handful of earlier studies on the status of girls and education (e.g. Fiske, 1995; Gorman, Dorina, & Kheng, 1999; MoEYS, 1998; Velasco, 2001), two more recent theses on female university students’ experiences (Nich, 2015; Rogers, 2014) and a growing volume of ‘grey literature’ from donor agencies and NGOs in Cambodia. Despite these limitations, in this thesis, I was reluctant to draw on literature from elsewhere in Southeast Asia. I felt that extending the literature to further afield, and drawing comparisons between Cambodia and its neighbouring countries, risked providing an inaccurate account of Cambodian girls’ nuanced experiences of schooling. Instead, I drew on available pertinent literature to provide an understanding of girls’ education in Cambodia, and girls’ educational persistence specifically.

In order to locate relevant literature, I performed searches via online databases that index education research, such as ERIC, ScienceDirect, and Web of Science, as well as Google Scholar and theses databases. I began with a narrow search using the terms ‘girls’, ‘education’ or ‘school’ and ‘Cambodia’. This approach delivered only a few relevant studies, so I then searched using broader terms
such as ‘women’ and ‘gender’. I also ‘searched outward’ from the few relevant studies I was able to locate. There is a small collection of research published by Cambodian academics, but I had difficulty obtaining full text copies of some of this work both from New Zealand, and via online requests to libraries in Cambodia. In particular, I was unable to obtain a copy of Aing Sokroeun’s (2004) Masters’ thesis: ‘A comparative analysis of traditional and contemporary roles of Khmer women in the household: A case study in Leap Tong village’ from the Royal University of Phnom Penh and relied on information from her abstract published online and references to her study in other literature.

With regard to literature on girls’ educational persistence and sources of support in the Cambodian context, I could not locate any literature on how Cambodian girls persevere at school. I was however able to locate a few studies on Cambodian university women’s experiences of overcoming obstacles to pursue further education (Nich, 2015; Rogers, 2014; Room to Read, 2011). In this chapter, I corroborate this literature with other relevant studies on girls’ education in Cambodia that mention sources of support, usually in the form of practical assistance (Fiske, 1995). Also, to supplement the (scant) Cambodian literature on secondary school girls’ persistence, I draw on literature concerning school girls’ educational persistence or coping mechanisms elsewhere (for example, Abuya, Onsomu, & Moore, 2012; DeJaeghere, 2016; Warrington & Kiragu, 2012).

In the first section of the chapter, I explore the discursive constructions of Cambodian girlhood and womanhood that, some argue, contribute to material constraints that shape girls’ and women’s education, mobility, and identities in Cambodia (Brickell, 2011b; Derks, 2008; Grace & Eng, 2015; Jacobsen, 2008; Lilja, 2008). I scrutinise the didactic text, the Chhap Srei, as part of the discriminatory social institutions that dictate the rights and opportunities available to Cambodian girls and women. Next, I extend my discussion in Chapter Two by considering the material and physical barriers that girls face when pursuing
formal schooling in Cambodia. In the final section, I explore the various sources of support that girls may draw on and employ in order to persist at school.

Contradictory discourses of girlhood and womanhood in Cambodia

Discourses of girlhood and womanhood in Cambodia are complex, contradictory, and fluid (Brickell, 2011b; Derks, 2008). This section examines the multiple identities of the contemporary girl or woman in Cambodia and how she negotiates and disrupts constraining discourses of girlhood and womanhood. Literature from the Cambodian context highlights how girls and young women attempt to maintain harmony within their families by being “dutiful daughters and altruistic women” whilst at the same time achieving independence and gaining knowledge through educational attainment and paid formal employment (Rogers, 2014, p. 88).

To explore the contradictory discourses of girlhood and womanhood in Cambodia, I begin with details of a didactic text, the Chbap Srei (Code for Women), which critics argue constructs a particular image of girls and women that restricts their possibilities, including their access to education. The Chbap Srei features frequently in studies on gender relations in Cambodia, and has been considered with regard to Cambodian women’s identities (Brickell, 2011b; Sokroen, 2004), mobility (Derks, 2008), status and power (Jacobsen, 2008), domestic work load (Brickell, 2011a), political participation (Kraynanski, 2007; Ledgerwood, 1996; Lilja, 2008, 2013b), female altruism (Brickell & Chant, 2010), and participation in education (Grace et al., 2015; Nich, 2015; Rogers, 2014; Smith-Hefner, 1993).

Constraining discourses of girlhood and womanhood

In Cambodia, women are considered the ‘bearers’ of cultural identity. Female identity is thus “intricately bound up with ideas of culture and tradition, and
resistance to change in this area is therefore connected to notions of ethnicity and nationalism” (Jacobsen, 2008, p. 278). Didactic texts, commonly expressed in the form of normative poems and proverbs, are one set of sources associated with the construction of female identity and status in Cambodian society (Brickell, 2011b; Derks, 2008; Jacobsen, 2008; Lilja, 2013b). One set of texts in particular, the Chbap (Codes of Conduct), are designed to offer guidance regarding appropriate behaviour, and as such, there are Chbap for women, men, children, monks, and other groups of people (Chandler, 1984).

The Chbap were written between the 14th and 19th century, and influenced by Theravada Buddhism, a conservative strain of Buddhism. There are three versions of the Chbap Srei that exist, although according to Jacobsen (2008), the authorship of some versions is disputed. The most widely known of the Chbap Srei manuscripts7 is the version written by former monk, Min Mai (Jacobsen, 2008). The narrative of this edition of the code is from the perspective of a mother giving her daughter advice on the proper comportment of a young woman and expectations of her behaviour as a future wife. The advice states that a woman should know:

…how to speak – not too much or too loud; walk – not in such a way that one can hear the skirt rustle or that it makes the house tremble; sit – with legs crossed, neatly; and work – devotedly and without a moment of distraction. (Derks, 2008, p. 43)

The Chbap Srei discursively constructs Cambodian girls and women as shy, quiet, and gentle (Grace et al., 2015; Ledgerwood, 1990) and emphasises the importance of preserving a virtuous image (Derks, 2008). For instance, the virtuous woman or srei krup leakhana is advised not to bring shame upon her family, is not

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7 An abridged version translated into English is available online at http://carpediemilia.over-blog.com/article-21656482.html
materialistic, and takes the necessary measures to preserve her reputation and
virginity (Jacobsen, 2008). Girls are advised against frivolous socialising (daeleeng) (Derks, 2008). Grace and Eng (2015), in their discussion of the influence of the Chbap Srei on girls’ schooling, note that this advice is inferred in the expression: “Don’t go for a walk to somebody’s house” (n.p.). Hoefinger, Ly, and Srubn (2017) elaborate, explaining that,

“Good girls” maintain their honour by staying close to home, wearing
conservative clothing, avoiding alcohol and, most importantly, remaining
virgins until marriage; those who do not are deemed “bad girls”. (p. 318)

In other words, according to social discourse in Cambodia, girls who do not engage in socialising outside of the family home are less likely to connect with individuals who may corrupt girls’ moral behaviour (Czymoniewicz-Klippel, 2017).

In addition to the prescribed proper behaviour of women in general, the social ethics of wives described in the Chbap Srei are particularly constraining. Wives are advised to be obedient and loyal to their husbands, and to not disagree or raise their voice against their husbands (Sovann, 2014) regardless of their husbands’ misdemeanours (Jacobsen, 2008). Keeping the peace within the home is the responsibility of women and is described in the Chbap Srei as containing the three fires (or sites of potential conflict); namely, parents, husbands, and others (Brickell, 2017; Derks, 2008). Wives are expected to quell conflict within the home and maintain harmony with others outside of the family home (Derks, 2008).

Critics of the Chbap Srei argue that the code constructs girls and women in a way that promotes female passivity, lowers their status, and restricts their mobility in comparison to their male counterparts (Brickell, 2011b; Derks, 2008; Grace & Eng, 2015; Grace et al., 2015; Jacobsen, 2008; Ledgerwood, 1990; Lilja, 2013b;
Nich, 2015; Smith-Hefner, 1993; Sokroeun, 2004). Cambodia’s high rates of
domestic violence and discrimination against women have been linked to the
discourses embedded in the *Chbp Srei* and other didactic texts (Brickell, 2008;
Eng et al., 2010; NGO-CEDAW, 2011; Organisation for Economic Co-operation
and Development, 2014).

Discourses of girlhood and womanhood are intimately tied up with notions of
domicity (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005), and Grace and Eng (2015) argue
that the *Chbp Srei* contributes to the socialisation of girls as homemakers,
through its emphasis on the woman’s role within the family and home. This view
is supported in Katherine Brickell’s (2011b) study of discourses on ideals and
practices of Cambodian women, where one older male participant, Teng, claims
that, “In Khmer culture men aren’t allowed to cook and do the laundry” (p. 448).
Consequently, it is often difficult for many girls and women to break from the
“discursive domains of domestic inequality” (Brickell, 2011a, p. 1353). And, as
more girls and women take up employment outside of the home, they often face
the ‘double burden’ of fulfilling the tasks of homemaker and child carer, along
with the demands of paid employment (Brickell, 2011a; Maxwell, Nget, Am,
Peou, & You, 2015).

In addition to girls’ informal ‘schooling’ in the code at home, girls are also
exposed to the *Chbp Srei* at school. The Min Mai version of the *Chbp Srei* is
taught in grades 7 to 9 as part of Khmer literature studies (Derks, 2008; Grace et
al., 2015). The Minister of Women’s Affairs, Ms. Ing Kantha Phavi, claimed in
2006, that the inclusion of the *Chbp Srei* in schools was “more a matter of
national identity, rather than a factual subject to be analysed or discussed in
class” (United Nations, 2006, n.p.). However, when in 2007, the Ministry of
Women’s Affairs pushed to have the *Chbp Srei* removed entirely from the school
curriculum, the government rejected the request. Instead, an abridged version of
the text is now taught instead of the full-length poem.
Grace et al. (2015) argue that in Cambodian schools the *Chbap Srei* is taught to students without any critique, which complicates students’ understandings of gender equality. The authors conducted focus group interviews and surveys with students, teachers, and female programme advisors at three Caring-for-Cambodia sponsored schools, to examine their views on gender equality and the inclusion of the *Chbap Srei* in the curriculum. The authors noted that teachers and students considered the *Chbap Srei* to be a text that is representative of Khmer culture and Khmer ideals of respect. Almost all the teachers supported the inclusion of the *Chbap Srei* in the curriculum and believed that teaching the *Chbap Srei* did not negatively influence perceptions of gender roles or equity. Yet, the teachers and students drew on constructions of the ‘quiet’ and obedient female whose role included a sound knowledge of housework (Grace et al., 2015), echoing precisely the same views on girls held by teachers almost 20 years prior in a study on girls’ educational status (MoEYS, 1998). Grace et al. (2015) also found that whilst 16.4% of students disagreed that a good woman is one who follows the rules in the *Chbap Srei*, the remainder of the cohort still believed that girls should follow the advice of the code, and majority of the teachers were still in favour of including the full version of the *Chbap Srei* in the school curriculum.

However, the literature also reveals that through education and engagement in the formal employment sector, girls and young women draw on alternative discourses of girlhood and womanhood in Cambodia.

**Counter discourses of girlhood and womanhood**

Girls and young women are exposed to counter discourses of girlhood and womanhood that disrupt the *Chbap Srei* construction of the ideal woman. These counter discourses are present in societal expectations of girls and women, promoted in mass media and women’s rights campaigns, and articulated by educated young women who question the relevance of the *Chbap Srei* to their modern lives. The presence of counter discourses of girlhood and womanhood
and the emergence of alternative discourses of the ‘ideal’ woman converge to form a messy, and contradictory, construction of women’s gender roles in Cambodia.

First, Judy Ledgerwood (1996) and Mona Lilja (2013b) argue that there is an incongruence between Cambodian society’s expectation of women in their daily lives and the shy, gentle Cambodian girl and subservient wife portrayed in the Chhapa Srei. Whilst women are discursively constructed as passive, they are also expected to be hardworking, intelligent, strong, and economical (Ledgerwood, 1996; Lilja, 2013b). Women are usually in charge of the family finances and are respected for their household management skills. Consequently, decision making within the household is often made by both parents and not solely by husbands (Jacobsen, 2008). Similarly, school girls negotiate contradictory discourses of girlhood. They are required to be strong, brave, and vocal in order to overcome socio-cultural and logistical barriers to their education (Grace & Eng, 2015), whilst simultaneously viewed as sweet, shy, vulnerable, and weak (Derks, 2008; Grace et al., 2015; Jacobsen, 2008; Ledgerwood, 1990).

Second, women’s increasing engagement in Cambodia’s growing economy has shifted the discursive and physical boundaries of women’s mobility. Young unmarried women are increasingly allowed to move away from the ‘traditional’ working environment of the home or farm lifestyle to work in the cities (Derks, 2008; Sokroeun, 2004). For instance, more than 80% of the garment industry workforce is female; these are mostly under-educated or uneducated women from rural areas (Arnold & Chang, 2017; Ing & Ghebreab, 2012). Women are also increasingly taking up positions in the male-dominated construction sector in order to support their families (Kasztelan, 2016). Derks (2008) notes that young migrant women’s mobility is often contingent on their ability to send remittances home and thus fulfil the role of dutiful daughter.
A third source of counter discourses may be found in the promotion of women’s rights and gender equality by NGOs and in government policies (Jacobsen, 2008, 2010; Sokroeun, 2004), including Neary Rattanak IV, the five-year strategic plan for gender equality and the empowerment of women (Ministry of Women’s Affairs, 2014b). The media and women’s increased access to digital information provide another source of alternative constructions of girlhood and womanhood (Brickell, 2011b; Derks, 2008; Sokroeun, 2004). The Cambodian media for example, is moving away from depicting women solely in domestic roles, and is instead portraying women as participants in a modern society (Derks, 2008; Jacobsen, 2008). Likewise, the increased presence of strong role models like female politicians (Lilja, 2008) and women activists (Lilja & Baaz, 2017) is providing girls with alternatives to notions of women as submissive, quiet, and tied to the domestic sphere (Rogers, 2014).

Lastly, young women are questioning the relevance of the Chbap Srei to their lives in contemporary Cambodia. Aing Sokroeun (2004) explored ideals of Cambodian womanhood and how these ideals are changing. She interviewed 36 women of various ages and the young women conceded that the rules were too constraining, and that it was impossible to abide by all the codes. In another study, young women also challenged the purported benefits of following the rules prescribed in the Chbap Srei, because “obedience to prescriptive codes of conduct is not necessarily rewarded with a harmonious or violence-free household” (Brickell, 2011b, p. 447). These young women in Brickell’s study negotiated constraining ideals of womanhood. In the next section, I consider how such negotiation plays out in girls’ and young women’s everyday lives.

Negotiating contradictory discourses of girlhood and womanhood

Scholarship on gender roles in Cambodia highlights how young women are rearticulating discourses of girlhood and womanhood through political
engagement (Ledgerwood, 1996; Lilja, 2008, 2013b; Rogers, 2014); higher education (Brickell, 2011b; Nich, 2015; Rogers, 2014); and employment outside the home (Derks, 2008; Sokroen, 2004). Girls’ and young women’s negotiation of constraining gender roles is most evident in the contexts of education and mobility (Brickell, 2011b; Derks, 2008; Nich, 2015; Rogers, 2014; Room to Read, 2011).

In this section, I draw on key studies that have illustrated women’s disruption of the confining discourses of womanhood (and girlhood) described above. A caveat worth noting here is that these key studies have predominantly featured young Cambodian women’s negotiation of discursive practices; the voices of adolescent girls are not present in the literature.

In studies that have explored discourses of womanhood in Cambodia, female participants have resisted the construction of women as dependent wives and homemakers. In qualitative studies by Chea Nich (2015) and Anna Rogers (2014), young Cambodian women indicated that they favoured independence over the confining roles of ‘homemaker’ and ‘wife’. Rogers’s (2014) study used photo-voice and interviews to explore the perspectives of six female university graduates. The women described the values of self-sufficiency, independence, and equality, as taking precedence over any social pressures to marry. Likewise, Nich (2015), a Cambodian graduate student, found that the six young university women in her study had managed to defer marriage in favour of further studies with the support of their family. One participant in her study, Sorya, also stated that she intended to retain her financial independence even after getting married (Nich, 2015). But, whilst the young women in both studies received encouragement from family members, they also had to continuously negotiate society’s expectations of young women, resisting calls for marriage and thus disrupting the types of discourses of womanhood promoted in the Chhap Srei.
Although the studies described above suggest that, under certain circumstances, young women are able to circumvent expectations of marriage, disruptive discursive practices within the domestic domain may be more difficult (Brickell, 2011a). In studies by Brickell (2011a) and Rogers (2014), domestic work and child care were predominantly seen as the work of women, but exceptions were sometimes made if women engaged in income generation activities outside the home and could not fulfil their duties or the husbands were unemployed (Brickell, 2011a; Rogers, 2014). Brickell (2011b) also found that some young educated women and men were more inclined to negotiate the division of labour within the home and question the ‘old’ ideals of (domesticated) womanhood.

Studies by Brickell (2011b) and Derks (2008) found that women were also negotiating conventional ideas of women’s (im)mobility. Instead of remaining within the confines of the family home as promoted in the Chbap Srei, young women migrated to urban centres to seek paid employment (Derks, 2008). Women also increasingly had access to motorised transport (motorbikes) to commute to work (Brickell, 2011b). In this regard, Truitt (2008, p. 7) argues that the motorbike can be seen as a “metaphorical seat for gendered mobility”; both physical and socioeconomic.

Annuska Derks’s (2008) study focused on female migrant workers and their negotiation of gender roles. In-depth interviews with female garment factory workers, street stall owners, and sex workers revealed the growing trend of women, often single and young, moving away from the parental home to take up paid employment in Phnom Penh and other urban centres. In these instances, parents made concessions concerning the boundaries of their daughter’s mobility outside the home. However, such concessions were complicated as they were often based on expectations of female altruism in the form of remittances sent home. Some young women stated that they felt compelled to financially support their families; echoing young women’s education and employment
motivations in other studies (Nich, 2015; Rogers, 2014). But Derks (2008) also discovered that some of the young women did not seek employment for purely altruistic motives. She argues that women’s agency should not be overlooked in the context of women’s migrant work and the performance of female altruism.

Female altruism, as a moral obligation, is encoded in the *Chbap Srei* (Brickell & Chant, 2010). Women’s devotion to their husbands, children, and parents is strongly emphasised in the code; whereas the *Chbap Proh* (Code for Men) has only one reference regarding men’s responsibilities to their wives. Brickell and Chant (2010) argue that with the *Chbap Srei* still included in the school curriculum, young “Cambodians are growing up with ‘acceptable’ notions of femaleness – including altruism” which act as a constraint on female gender roles and education outcomes (as discussed in Chapter Two). But as signalled previously, Derks (2008) argues that the young women in her study were not necessarily constrained by notions of female altruism. Instead, they cited personal goals, such as “desires for material gain, a “modern” lifestyle, or adventure” away from village life, alongside sending money to family members as reasons for seeking paid employment (Derks, 2008, p. 57).

Young women also negotiate constraining ideals of womanhood within the context of education, as revealed in studies by Brickell (2011b); Nich (2015); Rogers (2014) and Rogers (2014). Brickell (2011b, p. 454) contends that education provides girls and young women with the necessary skills to question the impact cultural constraints have on girls’ and women’s identities, and the “role of Khmer culture in the contemporary period” (p. 454). As an illustrative example, the female university students in the studies by Nich (2015) and Rogers (2014) used their educational attainment to convince conservative community elders about alternative possibilities for young women that did not entail settling down as a married housewife. In doing so, the young women were able to pursue their
university education, and in some cases, won the admiration of previously sceptical elders.

However, whilst “autonomy of the individual is a central theme in Khmer socialization”, female autonomy sits in tension with the need to maintain virtuous ideals of womanhood (Smith-Hefner, 1993, p. 151). This tension extends to the context of girls’ education. In Cambodia, children’s education attainment is seen as a way of bestowing honour on a family, although for girls, their schooling is contingent on them not engaging in any “improper behaviour” (Fiske, 1995, p. 50). In research conducted in the Cambodian context, young women who moved away from home to pursue further education often encountered hostility and confrontation from extended family members and neighbours (Nich, 2015; Rogers, 2014; Room to Read, 2011). In these studies, family or community members either believed that the young women placed a financial burden on their families, which contravened the appropriate behaviour of a dutiful daughter and altruistic female (Brickell & Chant, 2010), or called into question the virtuous qualities of female students who lived away from home (Brickell, 2011b). To illustrate the latter, a male participant in Brickell’s study on discourses of ‘ideal Cambodian womanhood’ stated that, “a Khmer girl living alone [may be] compared to a toilet, reflecting the idea of migrant women as lacking in moral hygiene” (Brickell, 2011b, p. 452).

Finally, research suggests that older women in Cambodia both promote and resist the ideals contained within the Chhap Srei. Older Cambodian women in Sokroeun’s (2004) study believed that conforming to the rules of the Chhap Srei provided happiness within the household, but in Brickell’s (2011b) study on ‘ideal womanhood’, they were readily dismissive of traditional codes of conduct. Smith-Hefner (1993) explains that mature Cambodian women “typically begin to distance themselves from the shy restraint thought virtuous in young girls” (p. 151). Brickell (2011b) argues that one possible explanation for this shift is that
older women have demonstrated their ability to raise children and run a household in a respectful manner. In other words, they have maintained ‘proper’ comportment and no longer need to conform to the strict ideals reserved for younger women (Brickell, 2011b). Another explanation could be that the women’s mature age has conferred greater status on them in accordance with Khmer custom (Derks, 2008). But regardless of the reasons, there appears to be a ‘murky’ understanding of when and how women perform ideals that constitute them as srei krup leakkhanna (women with good qualities) as suggested in the Chbap Srei.

The following section considers the literature on the material implications of discursively constructed gender roles in relation to girls’ secondary schooling in Cambodia.

Material barriers to girls’ education in Cambodia

Research and NGO literature identifies several material barriers to education for Cambodian girls. These include: girls’ high domestic workload (Fiske, 1995; KAPE, 2008; Keng, 2003; MoEYS, 1998; Velasco, 2001); lack of parental support or encouragement (Keng, 2003; MoEYS, 1998; Nguon, 2011; Nich, 2015; Velasco, 2001); high opportunity costs to families, in terms of lost labour and contributions to family income (Velasco, 2001); early marriage (Nich, 2015; Velasco, 2001); risks to safety when travelling to school (Fiske, 1995; MoEYS, 1998; Nich, 2015; Velasco, 2001); inadequate school facilities, such as toilets (Velasco, 2001); and insufficient positive female role models (Velasco, 2004). These barriers sit alongside broader concerns within Cambodia’s education system, including teacher shortages, teachers’ inadequate qualifications, insufficient secondary schools and informal ‘tuition’ fees (as described in Chapter Two). This subsection explores the challenges facing girls’ education
specifically, by considering the material effects of gendered discourses and their impact on girls’ educational participation.

**The material implications of discursive constraints**

Discourses of girlhood and womanhood that emphasise domesticity and a woman’s role as wife and mother manifest in material constraints that hinder girls’ educational participation. Research and NGO literature from the Cambodian context suggests that whilst poverty is an indirect barrier to education, the predominant barrier to girls’ participation in school is their disproportionately high engagement in domestic chores and sibling care (Fiske, 1995; KAPE, 2008; Room to Read, 2011; Velasco, 2001). In Cambodia, where “domestic work and child care are overwhelmingly the responsibility of women” (Ing & Ghebreab, 2012, p. 284), girls perform the bulk of household chores (Grace et al., 2015; National Institute of Statistics, 2015). According to Czymoniewicz-Klippel (2017), Cambodians view domestic chores as preparation for adulthood and children who help with household chores also demonstrate “piety toward their parents” (p. 327). Unfortunately, the extra time girls take to perform these domestic duties negatively impacts their schooling attendance and learning (The World Bank, 2005; Velasco, 2001) and can lead to girls dropping out of school altogether (Hunt, 2008; KAPE, 2008).

Four studies on the status of girls’ schooling in Cambodia highlighted girls’ domestic chores and sibling care as key issues in relation to girls’ low school attendance (Fiske, 1995; KAPE, 2008; MoEYS, 1998; Velasco, 2001). Fiske (1995), on behalf of the Asian Development Bank, conducted the first study on the status of girls’ education in Cambodia. He drew on interviews and questionnaires with parents, teachers, and school directors from 15 villages, to explore why girls drop out of school more frequently than boys. Fiske (1995) described the strong association between women and their role in the family and noted that girls were socialised from a young age into performing household chores, including
looking after younger siblings. He concluded that together, material poverty, girls’ engagement in domestic work, and parents’ preference for educating boys, contributed to girls’ low enrolment and high dropout rates.

Similarly, respondents in the CARE\textsuperscript{8}-supported Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (1998) survey of girls’ education overwhelmingly viewed housework and sibling care as duties performed by girls; and teachers cited minding siblings as the most common reason for girls’ absences from school. More recent studies have observed that girls’ involvement in domestic duties persists as an obstacle to schooling attendance and performance, and the assumption that girls “should learn everything in the house” still dominates discourses of girlhood (Grace et al., 2015, p. 23; KAPE, 2008). However, whilst students in a study on school attrition overwhelmingly cited chores at home as a barrier to girls’ school attendance, parents differed in this regard (KAPE, 2008). Instead, parents were more concerned with the poor quality of education and the real and opportunity costs of sending children to school.

Parental expectations and attitudes can have a powerful effect on girls’ self-esteem, sense of personal obligation, and options for participation in society (Croll, 2006). For example, parents’ discriminatory attitudes, or low perceptions of girls’ educational needs, social worth, and abilities (in comparison to boys), were found to have a negative impact on the educational opportunities of girls in Bangladesh and Malawi (Chisamya, DeJaeghere, Kendall, & Khan, 2012). Likewise, in a study by Keng (2003), girls’ schooling in Cambodia was negatively impacted by parents’ lack of encouragement, and low parental academic attainment. In another study, the negative attitudes of some family members and villagers regarding girls’ schooling was the main obstacle to six young Cambodian women’s pursuit of higher education (Nich, 2015). Nich (2015) noted

\textsuperscript{8} The acronym, CARE, stands for Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere. CARE is an international humanitarian organisation.
that opponents of girls’ education believed that girls’ primary role was to help
the family through domestic labour or paid employment. Those opposed to girls’
education believed that further education added no value to women in their
roles as wives and homemakers. The Ministry of Women’s Affairs (2014b)
echoed these sentiments and cited “negative social attitudes towards girls’
education, illiteracy and low levels of parents’ education” as the foremost
challenges to educating girls (p. 8).

Finally, early marriage can pose a challenge to girls’ schooling beyond primary
level (United Nations Population Fund, 2015). NGO literature points to a
growing concern regarding early marriage and adolescent pregnancies, and
earlier studies (Fiske, 1995; Velasco, 2001) reported that early marriage was
considered a challenge to girls’ education. Some of the young university women
in the studies by Nich (2015) and Rogers (2014) indicated that they faced
pressures from family or elders to marry (Nich, 2015; Rogers, 2014), but none of
the Cambodian participants in the Room to Read (2011) study reported such
pressures. However, an absence of current academic literature makes it difficult
to ascertain whether secondary school girls today face pressures to marry early.

Factors supporting girls’ educational persistence in Cambodia

Girls’ educational persistence is facilitated by multiple sources of support that
overcome gendered and structural constraints. After reviewing the available
literature from Cambodia and elsewhere, I have categorised such supports as
follows: familial support, community support, and personal attributes.

Familial support derives from parents, siblings and extended family members,
and involves the provision of emotional support through words of
encouragement, financial support, and academic support. Female students may
also draw on the support offered by their community, including peers or
teachers who provide advice and examples of positive role models. Finally, aspirations and self-determination are examples of personal attributes that foster girls’ pursuit of an education. In the following section, I explore each of these sources of support in turn; beginning with familial support.

**Familial support**

Parents, siblings, and extended family members are a vital source of emotional and financial support for girls to stay in school. Studies in both Cambodia (Nguon, 2011; Nich, 2015; Rogers, 2014; Room to Read, 2011) and Tanzania (Okkolin, 2013) found that family members played a pivotal role in sustaining young women’s retention at university, by providing encouragement, helping them to imagine future possibilities, and assisting financially. Similarly, secondary school girls in a Tanzanian study (Posti-Ahokas, 2014) expressed a view that immediate and extended family members were a crucial source of emotional or psychological support and financial assistance.

Family members’ emotional support is critical in overcoming deficit discourses regarding girls’ educational worth. For instance, in a five-country study which included Cambodia by the non-profit organisation, Room to Read (2011, p. 7), parents’ encouragement, and support for girls’ education, gave “emotional strength” to young women who chose to pursue further education. Families’ emotional support may involve parents and family members who “perform[...] their gender in unconventional ways” to enable girls/young women to “imagine alternatives and persist in their education” (Rogers, 2014, p. 53). In some cases, such ‘unconventional performances’ may involve reducing the allocation of domestic chores to girls, in order to allow them to focus on their studies (Eng, 2012; Nguon, 2011).

One body of scholarship in education argues that parental education affects the likelihood that children will persist at school, because educated parents are more
likely to foresee the beneficial outcomes of educating their children (Hunt, 2008; Nguon, 2012). In rural Cambodia, for instance, the number of years a child would be enrolled beyond Grade 4 was positively affected by her/his parents’ level of education (Keng, 2004). But other scholars challenge this assumption and contend that Cambodian parents with little education may also strongly advocate to have their children educated (Edwards Jr et al., 2014; Sao, 2012). With regard to girls’ education specifically, Fiske (1995) and Sao (2012) found, whether parents were farmers with little formal education or educated teachers, if education was highly valued within the home, then girls tended to persist at school. Similarly, studies in both Cambodia (Nich, 2015; Rogers, 2014; Room to Read, 2011) and Tanzania (Okkolin, 2013) have found that some parents who had received limited formal schooling themselves, supported their daughter’s university education emotionally, and where possible, financially.

In other words, parents who value education may enable girls to circumvent obstacles to educational attainment. Sokcheng Nguon (2011) extends this argument and asserts that parental aspirations and involvement in school activities may play a more important role than parents’ educational or socioeconomic status. In her Cambodian study, girls who were high achieving tended to have parents who held high expectations for their daughter’s education outcomes; regularly discussed schooling matters with their daughter; reduced their daughter’s domestic chores to allow her to study more; encouraged their daughter to attend private tutoring; and consistently provided words of encouragement.

The second vital source of support offered by families is financial assistance. As mentioned in the previous chapter, financially-constrained families often find it difficult to fund the additional costs associated with education; namely study materials, uniforms, tuition fees, and transportation costs (Edwards Jr et al., 2014). Scholarships often cover some of these expenses, but in instances where
young university women do not receive study scholarships, their families are essential in raising funds for their studies (Nich, 2015; Room to Read, 2011). This often involves great sacrifice.

In financially-constrained families, older siblings are sometimes encouraged or volunteer to drop out of school to supplement labour at home or seek paid employment to subsidise the family income (Edwards Jr et al., 2014; Kluttz, 2015). In Rogers’s (2014) study, older siblings sometimes took it upon themselves to support younger sisters with their study fees, and in one instance, a family with six daughters used a stepped approach to funding their studies. In other words, the eldest sister provided financial support to the second eldest sister, who then funded the next sister, and so on (Rogers, 2014).

Aside from offering financial assistance, siblings may provide emotional support in lieu of parents’ encouragement (Rogers, 2014); or they may offer practical advice and strategies for navigating gendered and material constraints (Warrington & Kiragu, 2012). In a study on girls’ retention in Kajiado district, Kenya, siblings, and brothers in particular, played a pivotal role in providing financial support for their sisters’ studies or actively petitioning parents to allow the girls to receive an education (Warrington & Kiragu, 2012). Extended family members such as grandmothers, aunts and female cousins, were also amongst the network of key people who were critical to enabling the girls to remain at school. Other key people in this study who were identified as supporting girls’ access to school included members of the community, such as NGO representatives, the local chief, police, church leaders, and teachers.

**Community support**

Community support comprises the network of individuals outside of a girl’s family who help her remain at school, either directly through advice and academic support, or indirectly in the form of role models. Girls and young
women navigate structural and discursive constraints to their education with the additional aide of supportive friends (Okkolin, 2013; Posti-Ahokas, 2014; Rogers, 2014), teachers (Kim, 2007; Posti-Ahokas, 2014; Warrington & Kiragu, 2012), and NGO staff (Room to Read, 2011; Warrington & Kiragu, 2012).

Girls who remain in school benefit from a strong network of friends and classmates. Friends and peers can provide emotional support (Okkolin, 2013), and academic support (Rogers, 2014), including the sharing of resources (Nich, 2015; Room to Read, 2011). According to the young Cambodian women in Rogers’s (2014) study, high school friends were empathetic, and often sought collegial strategies, for example, creating informal study groups to help each other overcome academic challenges, or to circumvent tuition fees. The role of friendships in girls’ educational persistence is an important consideration because friendships may “provide a basis for critiquing dominant power constructs at a more covert level” and enable girls to “engage in mutually helpful behavior” (Dyson, 2010, p. 483). Moreover, a strong peer group may contribute to students’ intentions to remain at school (No et al., 2012). In a study by KAPE (2008) on student drop out in Cambodian schools, friendships were cited as an important aspect of going to school and contributed to girls’ retention. The authors explained that the girls who mentioned that they were happy at school also reported that they intended to complete their schooling (KAPE, 2008).

Female teachers, as positive educational role models, have been cited as one source of encouragement likely to influence girls’ school attendance in Cambodia (Bredenberg et al., 2003). But there is almost no literature available on teachers’ involvement in girls’ educational persistence in Cambodia. One exception is the study on young university women in Cambodia by Room to Read (2011). In the study, one participant, Sokhai, mentioned that whilst at high school, her teacher provided guidance concerning further study options and purchased the necessary course application forms for Sokhai. In some instances,
teachers played a direct role in preventing girls from dropping out of school. In two Kenyan studies (Abuya et al., 2012; Warrington & Kiragu, 2012), for example, teachers played an instrumental role in supporting girls’ educational persistence by counselling girls on how to remain in school and in some instances, helping girls to avoid early marriage by negotiating with parents.

Community support may also include NGOs that support girls’ education through scholarships and programmes. In Cambodia, where alleviating the direct costs of schooling is a primary concern to families, scholarships for materially-disadvantaged girls are a popular solution (Edwards Jr et al., 2014; Filmer & Schady, 2008; Fiske, 1995; Velasco, 2004). Moving beyond secondary school, the offer of a scholarship is often critical to young women’s decisions to pursue further studies (Maxwell et al., 2015). Reportedly, the most disadvantaged girls benefitted most from scholarship programmes, like that offered through the Japan Fund for Poverty Reduction (JFPR), which led to a 30% increase in girls’ sixth grade enrolment and achievement rates (Filmer & Schady, 2008).

Room to Read (2011) in Cambodia, and Warrington and Kiragu (2012) in Kenya, found that young women received emotional support and guidance from NGO staff in cases where family members could not or were unable to provide such assistance. Moreover, scholarship-sponsored female students reported a psychological benefit to receiving financial aid in that they “often felt extra motivation to succeed because they did not want to disappoint benefactors” (Room to Read, 2011, p. 38).

**Personal attributes**

The girls and young women in the studies on educational persistence have some personal attributes in common, namely self-determination, courage, resourcefulness, dedication, and strong educational aspirations or a goal-
orientated nature (DeJaeghere, 2016; Nich, 2015; Okkolin, 2013, 2016; Room to Read, 2011; Warrington & Kiragu, 2012). Other characteristics that may explain educational persistence are students’ positive self-esteem, sociability, and strong academic ability (No et al., 2012).

Okkolin (2013), in her study of highly-educated Tanzanian women, identified common characteristics amongst her participants, notably intellectual aptitude, studiousness, and motivation to excel academically. Motivation and self-determination were also very evident in Nich’s (2015) Cambodian study, but unlike the Tanzanian women, the young Cambodian women were motivated by the sense of injustice they experienced as young, materially-disadvantaged, rural, women. They expressed their anger at being discriminated against, and their determination to seek independent financial security as well as challenge gendered expectations and norms (Nich, 2015).

In a study of young tertiary women in five countries (Cambodia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, India, and Mauritania), Room to Read (2011) reported that determination, goal orientation, and courage were common traits amongst the study’s participants. The participants were determined to change their own and their families’ living conditions through securing an income as a result of their qualifications. Hence, they were goal orientated and had the ability to focus on their ambitions, but they also possessed courage and a “keen sense of independence” to pursue their academic goals (Room to Read, 2011, p. 20).

Correspondingly, Warrington and Kiragu (2012) argue that despite their youth and vulnerability (at times), girls and young women are agentic in that they develop self-reliant strategies to pursue their educational aspirations. Likewise, Joan DeJaeghere (2016) adds that girls’ educational aspirations and agency are pivotal to girls pursuing their studies. For example, in her study, girls at a vocational training centre in Tanzania pursued their studies by actively
demonstrating the practical skills they learned during lessons to their families and community members. Their demonstration of the tangible outcomes of their education helped allay criticism from others and demonstrated the educational worth of girls (DeJaeghere, 2016). In other words, the capacity to aspire enabled the girls in these studies to visualise possible outcomes and install strategies in an attempt to realise the benefits of education (also see Appadurai, 2004; Khoja-Moolji, 2015).

Summary

To appreciate the complexity of girls’ educational persistence in rural Cambodia, this chapter has provided a contextual understanding of the discursive and material constraints girls face when pursuing post-primary education. My review of the literature has highlighted three gaps in research on girls’ educational persistence in Cambodia. First, aside from a few more recent NGO studies, there has been a hiatus in investigating the status of girls’ education in Cambodia. Given that girls’ completion of secondary school is extremely low (MoEYS, 2016), it is important to understand the current challenges girls face in remaining at school. Second, Hunt (2008) in her detailed literature review on girls’ attrition rates, identified a paucity of research on girls’ retention, and called for more qualitative investigations of girls’ persistence to help inform stakeholders about the factors that help girls remain in school. Third, literature on discourses of womanhood in Cambodia has focused primarily on adult women’s negotiation of gendered constraints and the voices of adolescent girls are largely missing.

In this chapter, I have discussed the constraining discourses of girlhood and womanhood in Cambodia espoused in didactic texts such as the *Chbap Srei*, and how these relate to girls’ restricted participation in education. Scholars argue that discourses of Cambodian womanhood embedded in the *Chbap Srei* restrict
women’s identities (Brickell, 2011b; Sokroeun, 2004), mobility (Derks, 2008), status and power (Jacobsen, 2008), political participation (Kraynanski, 2007; Ledgerwood, 1996; Lilja, 2008, 2013b), and participation in education (Grace et al., 2015; Nich, 2015; Rogers, 2014; Smith-Hefner, 1993). Discourses of womanhood in Cambodia are also intimately tied up with expectations of female altruism (Brickell & Chant, 2010) and the role of women as foremost a housemaker, wife, and childbearer (Brickell, 2011b; Derks, 2008; Lilja, 2008).

However, discourses of girlhood and womanhood in Cambodia are not static, but are instead messy, and even contradictory. Cambodian women are exposed to counter discourses in the media (Brickell, 2011b; Derks, 2008; Sokroeun, 2004), women’s rights campaigns, and in the display of positive, strong female role models, including female activists (Lilja & Baaz, 2017), politicians (Lilja, 2008), and highly educated young women (Nich, 2015; Rogers, 2014).

Constraining discourses of girlhood and girls’ educational worth have material implications for girls wishing to pursue post-primary schooling. Discourses on girls’ and women’s domestic roles inhibit female identities beyond that of wife and mother and restrict girls’ imagined future possibilities, particularly in relation to further education. Notably, girls’ engagement in domestic chores and sibling care negatively impacts girls’ school attendance (Fiske, 1995; KAPE, 2008; Room to Read, 2011; Velasco, 2001). These constraints limit girls’ participation in education and sit alongside the broader barriers that exist within Cambodia’s education system (described in Chapter Two).

In the last section of this chapter, I have reviewed the small volume of literature on girls’ educational persistence. Studies in Cambodia (Nich, 2015; Rogers, 2014; Room to Read, 2011) and elsewhere (e.g. Abuya et al., 2012; Burridge, Payne, & Rahmani, 2015; Warrington, 2013; Warrington & Kiragu, 2012) have revealed that a network of individuals, including family, friends, teachers, and
community members, can provide girls and young women with emotional and instrumental support to overcome gendered and material constraints. Some of these studies also alluded to certain personal traits, such as self-determination, courage, resourcefulness, and aspirations to explain girls and young women’s educational persistence. Overall, the studies noted that girls and young women’s personal characteristics, along with various familial and social contacts can facilitate academic attainment despite material and discursive constraints (DeJaeghere, 2016; Nich, 2015; Okkolin, 2013; Rogers, 2014; Warrington, 2013; Warrington & Kiragu, 2012).

My study was developed in response to two gaps in the existing literature on girls’ education: a lack of attention to the status of girls’ schooling in contemporary Cambodia, and to girls’ educational persistence specifically. My aim was to explore school girls’ experiences in relation to their persistence at secondary school in Cambodia. Specifically, I hoped to provide a nuanced understanding of the multiple factors that enable girls to overcome hurdles and complete secondary school in the Cambodian context. Methodologically, I also aimed to foreground the voices of girls and young women, since these are largely absent from existing research into girls’ schooling in Cambodia.

In the next chapter, I outline the theoretical framework that underpins my study, and the methodological approach I used when working with the girls and young women involved in this study.
Chapter 4
Theoretical framework
Introduction

My investigation of girls’ educational persistence in Cambodia was informed by multiple feminist theoretical perspectives, including poststructuralism, and ‘community cultural wealth’. These perspectives helped frame the methodological approach used; guided the study’s ethical considerations; provided analytical tools; and demanded the reflexivity necessary to work ethically in a cross-cultural context.

I begin this chapter with a discussion of the importance of recognising multiple feminist lenses when conducting cross-cultural research. I also discuss the underpinning concerns of feminist research, namely power relations, reflexivity, and reciprocity. Following this, I consider discourse, subjectivity, resistance, and agency as conceptual tools for understanding the “historical, cultural, social, and discursive patterns through which oppressive or dominant realities” (Gannon & Davies, 2012, p. 73) constitute girlhoods in Cambodia. I conclude with Tara Yosso’s community cultural wealth (2005) which provides a framework for investigating the various resources available to Cambodian girls within their communities. The community cultural wealth framework allowed me to consider the material realities of school girls’ lives alongside the discursive realities affecting girls’ education in Cambodia. Community cultural wealth and feminist research share similar aspects in that they both question dominant discourses of knowledge and power, and are concerned with highlighting agency and seeking transformative practices or empowerment. First though, I begin with a discussion of the importance of multiple feminist lenses in cross-cultural research, and consider feminism and women’s rights in relation to the Cambodian context.
The importance of multiple feminist lenses in cross-cultural research

In this study, I drew on, and was informed by, multiple feminist lenses. I was mindful that the authority of an ‘outside’ researcher in a cross-cultural context is often strongly contested (Scheyvens & Leslie, 2000; Skelton, 2009). Therefore, to engage reflexively in my research with income-poor girls and young women, it was important that I understood the criticisms of Western/Eurocentric feminism and the arguments of Third World, transnational and Asian feminisms. Notably, multiple feminist lenses made me cognisant that women are not positioned equally, and therefore, feminist research needs to be mindful of the differences that do exist in order for a range of women’s (and girls’) voices to be heard (DeVault & Gross, 2012).

Chandra Mohanty (1991b) challenged the homogenous grouping of women that prevailed in much Western feminist literature at the time. Her arguments are instructive in relation to my own research. Mohanty (1991a) provided a powerful critique of the assumption that women are “a cross-culturally singular, homogenous group with the same interests, perspectives, goals and similar experiences” (p. 33). Bunch (1987) made a similar claim, arguing that defining or categorising women as one homogenous group ignores differences of “race, class, sexual orientation, colonialism, poverty, religion, [and] nationality” (p. 303). To Mohanty (1991b), ‘Third World’ women are often constructed as powerless and victims of patriarchy by Western feminist discourses. These discourses position Western feminists as subjects whilst Third World women “never rise above the debilitating generality of the ‘object’ status” (p. 71).

Likewise, Third World girls are positioned as “victim[s] in need of rescue” (Weems, 2009, p. 57); this positioning is evident in campaigns that call for “Western support for girls’ education in the ‘developing world’” (Cobbett, 2014; MacDonald, 2015, p. 1).
In contrast, Ranjoo Herr (2014) describes Third World feminism as focusing on, and recognising the activisms of Third World women in their own local and national contexts. She explains that Third World feminism “aims at generating descriptively reliable feminist analyses by Third World women themselves of Third World women’s diverse forms of oppression and different modes of resistance on the ground” (p. 2). Herr’s contention is that Third World feminism is crucial to understanding the local context and adds to a nuanced understanding of women’s lives, especially when used in conjunction with a transnational feminist approach.

In response to the criticisms raised by Mohanty (1991b), “relationships across and between nations” (MacDonald, 2015, p. 2) developed in the form of transnational feminism. Transnational feminism, like Third World feminism, challenges Western feminism’s homogenous view of women, but differs in that transnational feminism is interested in women’s networks and organisations that extend beyond the local and national context to a transnational level. In my study, I draw on transnational feminist perspectives to recognise transnational women’s organisations that operate in Cambodia. My consideration of transnational feminism in this study is also influenced by the imperative that transnational feminism is “undertaken ethically and with an awareness of the unequal power dynamics that characterise the globalised world” (Saeed, 2012, p. 1, emphasis in original). With this in mind, it is necessary to consider the specificities of feminist ideals to the Cambodian context.

**Feminism, and sethi neary (women’s rights) in Cambodia**

During much of the twentieth century and in many parts of Asia, feminism was disliked by Asian women activists on account of its association with ‘Western’ ideals. (Western) feminism was seen as “aggressively individualistic, anti-male,

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*I acknowledge that the term ‘Western’ is a social construction but it is also a powerful explanatory lens when working in a cross-cultural context (Said, 1978).*
anti-children, and therefore anti-family” (Roces, 2010, p. 1). Those who followed feminist ideals were seen as copying Western ideas and were thus considered non-Asian. However, during this period, Asian women activists in their respective countries defined their own versions of feminism (Moghadam, 2015; Roces, 2010). Consequently, there is no homogenous definition of Asian feminism, as activists in each country adopted aspects of feminist thinking pertinent to their own local contexts (Roces, 2010).

In the Cambodian context, feminist politics coincided with French colonial rule, which led to a view of feminism as a Western (and/or colonial) concept and “not ‘really’ Cambodian” (Jacobsen, 2010, p. 208). Political leaders in Cambodia believed that feminism would erode traditional Cambodian culture, particularly as historically, Khmer culture and identity were believed to be embodied by women (Jacobsen, 2010), and strongly tied to the “purity of Khmer women” (Smith-Hefner, 1993, p. 147). According to Trudy Jacobsen (2010), feminist ideals in Cambodia are still “perceived as a Western import that will destroy Cambodian culture” (p. 220).

However, contemporary Cambodia has been influenced by feminist ideas. And although there is no Khmer word or phrase for feminism, there are expressions for women’s rights (setthi neary) and working for women (satrei sch twer) (Jacobsen, 2010). The uptake of feminist ideas was first evident in 1990 when Khemara, the first Cambodian non-governmental organisation was established with a focus on women’s advancement in leadership. Khemara drew on Western feminist ideas and was influenced by the prevailing awareness of human rights at the time (Jacobsen, 2010). Like elsewhere in Asia, there were a number of organisations established in Cambodia between 1990 and 1994 that had a women’s rights aspect to their mandate. Support for women’s rights was further buoyed by Cambodian women returning to their homeland from Western countries with newly assimilated ideas of gender equality and feminism.
Exploring girls' educational persistence | Chapter 4

(Jacobsen, 2010). Today, women’s rights and gender equality are espoused in policy documents (e.g. Neary Rattanak IV: Five year strategic plan for gender equality and women’s empowerment) and NGO mandates; providing a source of alternative discourses of girlhood and womanhood in Cambodia (as discussed in Chapter Three). In my study, transnational feminism and Third World feminism help provide a framework for understanding the multiple facets of Cambodian girls and women’s forms of oppression and mechanisms for resistance.

I now outline the conceptual tools of feminist research theory and praxis relevant to my project; namely power relations, reflexivity, and reciprocity. These tools formed the foundation of my methodological approach which I discuss in the following chapter.

Power relations, reflexivity, and reciprocity

A feminist approach to research considers issues such as power relations and authority, as well as the role of ethics and reflexivity in the research process. For this study, a feminist approach to research provides me with “a set of practices and perspectives that affirms differences among women” (DeVault & Gross, 2012, p. 207); whilst seeking to bring about social change (Bhavnani & Talcott, 2012; Hesse-Biber, 2012).

Feminist research, like other qualitative research, is concerned with the power differentials present in the research relationship. To address power relations in research, feminist researchers aim to establish relationships with their research participants which are based on empathy and mutual respect (Pillow, 2003). Power relations cannot, however, be totally eliminated from research practice because of the presence of cultural, class, and racial differences between researchers and the researched (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012a). Instead, the
exercise of power can be examined via reflexive practices whereby researchers question the authority of the knowledge they produce, and are held accountable to the people they conduct research with (Faria & Mollett, 2016; Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012a; Pillow, 2003).

Reflexivity enables a feminist researcher to be sensitive to issues of power through an examination of power dynamics and authority. Reflexivity allows me, as a researcher, to continually acknowledge, question, and understand how my personal background, location and beliefs affect my approach to this research project (England, 1994; Faria & Mollett, 2016); from the initial research design stage and formulation of research questions to the analysis, writing up, and dissemination process (Hesse-Biber, 2012). A reflexive stance also enables me to scrutinise my relationship with my participants, interpreter and NGO hosts; resulting in an approach that offers room for negotiation and dialogue; whilst at the same time recognising that reflexivity does not wholly resolve the issues of power or difference (Ang, 2003).

Reciprocity is another key feature of feminist research and was an important component of this study. Reciprocity engages in promoting social change or transformation through knowledge gained and disseminated to others (England, 1994; Hesse-Biber, 2012). Reciprocity in this study takes the form of knowledge-building. Knowledge-building through feminist research provides a platform for discussion, future action, and change with the aim of empowerment for women and other marginalised groups (Bhavnani & Talcott, 2012). Knowledge-building as a form of reciprocity was achieved through the dissemination of research findings from this study - as a way of giving back to the researched community. I provide greater detail of my engagement in reciprocity (and dissemination) in the next chapter.
Reciprocity in the form of knowledge-building can also empower those who are being researched through the use of collaborative theorising (Bhavnani & Talcott, 2012; Lather, 1991). Co-production of knowledge in a research setting allows for different perspectives to come together for a single purpose (D. Richardson, Laurie, Poudel, Townsend, & Shakti, 2015); in this case, my study involved knowledge building through attention to the voices, knowledge and experiences of Cambodian school girls and female tertiary students who persist at their education. In addition to the co-production of knowledge, the participatory elements of this study (discussed in Chapter Five) offered participants an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and understand how disadvantages in their community can be challenged (Opie, 1992).

To explore how Cambodian girls and young women position themselves and are positioned discursively, I utilised feminist poststructural concepts of discourse, subjectivity, resistance, and agency.

**Discourse, subjectivity, resistance, and agency**

The poststructural tools of discourse, subjectivity, resistance, and agency allowed me to explore the nuanced positioning of girls who persist at school in Cambodia (see Chapter Six). In my study, I was guided predominantly by feminist poststructuralism (Weedon, 1987), but also drew on the work of Foucault (1980) and Hall (2001). Poststructuralism provided this study with a theoretical framework that recognised the fluid relationship between income-poor school girls’ status in rural communities and their subjective experiences of resisting constraining subject positions. Given that “there is no one way in which girls as a group, or as individuals, can be fixed in our understanding” (Jones, 1993, p. 159), a discursive view of girlhood allowed me to consider the interplay of context, dominant discourses, social practices and the implications of power (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006).
In this thesis, I use the term ‘discourse’ in reference to the multiple ways we talk about, think about, or represent various subjects or topics (Hall, 2006). I understand discourses as being:

complex interconnected webs of being, thinking and acting. They are in constant flux and often contradictory. They are always located on temporal and spatial axes; thus, they are historically and culturally specific. We are always already constituted with discourse, and discourses operate on and in us simultaneously through constituting desires and modes of reasoning.

(Gannon & Davies, 2012, p. 73)

Through this definition, Gannon and Davies draw attention to the fluidity of discourses over time and within/across different contexts. For instance, the school girl identity in Cambodia is not singular and pre-existing, but is instead ever-changing and ambiguous, according to who is speaking and the discursive context in which they speak (Wetherell, 2001). Consequently, the resulting constructions of identity provide “both limitations and possibilities for what […] girls in these contexts can do and be, and how they can understand themselves” (Jones, 1993, p. 159). In particular, an examination of the multiple discourses of girlhood in contemporary Cambodia allowed me to consider how school girls may be constrained or enabled in what they say, do, and feel (Willig, 2008).

An examination of discursive practices also allowed me to consider school girls’ and tertiary women’s subjectivities in this study; notably, their multiple identities, behaviours, and understandings of the world (Gavey, 1989). Carla Willig (2008) adds that subjectivity considers “what can be felt, thought and experienced from within various subject positions” (p. 117). Moreover, an analysis of how the school girls constructed themselves highlighted their discursive relationship with others and positioning of themselves and others (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004; Brown, 2011; Hall, 1996; Wetherell, 2001); namely,
girls who were not in school and school-aged girls working in paid employment (e.g. garment factories) (see Chapter Six).

Another important consideration in my study was that of girls’ and young women’s resistance to dominant discourses in the Cambodian context. As Bacchi (2005) explains, some discourses are referred to as dominant (or hegemonic) in order to draw attention to the power they exert, and to highlight how dominant discourses operate in ways that privilege certain individuals or groups (Foucault, 1980; Hall, 2001). Dominant discourses establish “the boundaries of what is acceptable and appropriate” (Carabine, 2001, p. 275) and attention to discourses highlights how power and knowledge combine. But whilst discourses produce or transmit power, they can also undermine and expose unequal power relations; making it possible to consider other possibilities (R. Mitchell, 2009). In other words, discourse or “language is not monolithic. Dominant meanings can be contested, [and] alternative meanings affirmed” (Weedon, 1987, p. 73).

Discourse and power are relevant to my study because power can only be fully understood in the context of resistance (Foucault 1978, as cited in Mohanty, 1991). In other words, “resistant counter-discourses of the apparently subordinated” (Paechter & Clark, 2015, p. 3) require attention when exploring how income-poor school girls endeavour to remain in school despite the challenges that may make this difficult.

Mona Lilja (2013b) suggests that in the Cambodian context, women’s resistance to dominant restrictive discourses occurs through discursive practices and concrete representations. Concrete representations, proposes Lilja (2013b), offer a way to challenge dominant discourses to the extent that the latter may be altered. Resistance in the form of concrete representations may involve the use of language (Hall, 1997), as well as images and signs to represent meaning (Lilja, 2013a). In the case of challenging gendered power relations in Cambodia, Lilja
(2008) argues that visual or concrete representations challenge the dominant discourses more effectively than oral representations. For instance, in rural areas, the dominant discourse of women as non-political was called into question when female politicians visited villages. According to Lilja (2013b), the women politicians attracted more attention because they visually challenged the dominant discursive ‘norm’ of women as apolitical. With respect to my study, the presence of female students in their school uniforms was one concrete representation that challenged dominant discursive constructions of girls as not requiring formal education (see Chapter Seven).

Finally, this study also considered agency in relation to discursive constructions of girlhood and school girl identities. Agency in this thesis is defined as the thoughts and actions taken by girls and young women to circumvent obstacles, disrupt gender norms, and aspire for new possibilities (DeJaeghere, 2016). My understanding of agency is based on the notion that agency is not free of discursive constructions of the self, but rather it is the ability to recognise, “resist, subvert and change the discourses themselves through which one is being constituted” (Bacchi, 2005; Davies, 1991, p. 51). More importantly, I recognise that agency can take the form of observable actions and subtle demonstrations of negotiation, subversion, and resistance that highlight girls’ and young women’s “sense of agency, or ‘the power within’” (Kabeer, 1999b, p. 438). Agency (and resistance) as conceptual tools are also pertinent to Tara Yosso’s community cultural wealth theory when exploring girls’ educational persistence.

**Capitals within a community**

Similar to feminist perspectives, community cultural wealth is concerned with the material realities of marginalised groups, and recognises both material and discursive constraints and people’s agency in relation to these. Yosso (2005) developed ‘community cultural wealth’ as a framework for foregrounding the
resilience of students who were represented in dominant educational discourses in the USA context as ‘underperforming’. Yosso identifies six forms (or capitals) of community cultural wealth based on the work of other researchers interested in marginalised groups’ academic resilience (see Yosso, 2005, for further details). The six capitals extend Bourdieu’s (1997; 1990) capitals theory and attend to the often “unacknowledged or unrecognised” multiple forms of capitals that marginalised students bring with them to the classroom (Yosso, 2005, p. 70). Community cultural wealth has been used widely to explain the academic success of Latino/a students with respect to the institutional and social barriers they face and overcome when pursuing an education in the USA. Although Yosso (2005) approaches the use of community cultural wealth through the lens of critical race theory, which I do not draw on in this study, her framework offers a useful way of thinking beyond discourses of disadvantage in relation to Cambodian girls’ schooling.

Community cultural wealth challenges the notion that marginalised groups lack valuable resources or ‘capitals’ in their societal contexts. In my study, community cultural wealth theory allowed me to consider how income-poor girls employed various resources within their communities to overcome multiple challenges to their schooling. In addition to examining the participants’ agency, a community cultural wealth perspective allowed me to recognise the social and structural constraints that shaped girls’ everyday lives. In order to explain how I used this framework, I will now introduce the five ‘capitals’ that guided my study. I have not included a discussion on linguistic capital as this capital did not emerge as pertinent to girls’ educational persistence in Cambodia.

Firstly, aspirational capital “refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Aspirations are fostered within families and social contexts (Luna & Martinez, 2013), and include the hopes and future desires of the girls’ parents.
and the girls themselves. Yosso (2005) describes aspirational capital as a form of resiliency, because despite an individual’s current circumstances, they continue to pursue dreams even if these may not be attainable. Aspirational capital draws on research which showed that Chicanas/os in the United States had the lowest academic outcomes, but retained high aspirations for the future (Gandara 1982; 1995, as cited in Yosso, 2005). A study of Pacific students’ achievement in New Zealand conducted by Roy Nash (2000) arrived at similar conclusions. Although the term ‘aspirational capital’ was not referred to specifically in Nash’s study, he did identify how parents and students held high aspirations for the future despite the students’ tendency to underachieve academically (Nash, 2000). In another study conducted in the USA, college students from disadvantaged backgrounds also attributed high aspirations to their motivation to continue their studies (Luna & Martinez, 2013). And as discussed in the previous chapter, girls’ and young women’s ability to maintain educational aspirations was associated with their ability to remain in school (DeJaeghere, 2016; Nich, 2015; Okkolin, 2016).

The second capital, familial capital, refers to the cultural knowledge which is nurtured within the family network and carries a sense of history and kinship (Yosso, 2005). Family members often provide “educational aspirations and moral lessons” as well as “encouragement in the forms of advice, stories and hard work” (Luna & Martinez, 2013, p. 6). Familial capital is encouraged and developed through immediate family members and extended family ties, and children are able to learn about caring, coping, morals and good behaviour through the modelling of adults. The concept of familial capital is informed by research into the communal bonds of African American communities (see Yosso, 2005). Similarly, communal bonds have been observed in Cambodian villages where villagers rely on each other for shared labour and resources (S. Kim, 2011); community members contribute resources to schools (Bray, 1999); and extended
family members provide “emotional and material support which can facilitate children’s school performance” (Nguon, 2012, p. 215).

**Social capital** builds on the familial network and extends Bourdieu’s (1990) definition to include peers and the networks of people who can provide emotional as well as instrumental support (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Yosso, 2005). Social capital in this sense recognises how families and individuals are able to mobilise help and support through the social networks they have established or which they have access to. For example, accessing scholarship information or seeking out fellow students or “organisations for support” can assist in educational persistence (Luna & Martinez, 2013, p. 8). Yosso’s (2005) extension of the definition of social capital supports Sin-Kwok Wong’s (2002) contention that we should recognise relationships beyond the parent-child dyad when exploring educational success.

The fourth capital, **navigational capital**, concerns the “skills of maneuvering through social institutions” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Navigational capital examines the resources that enable students to navigate their way through environments that were not designed with minoritised groups in mind. In other words, students are able to steer their way through hostile educational environments where, despite the stresses that they may endure, they are able to maintain high levels of achievement (Yosso, 2005). Moreover, navigational capital recognises individual agency along with the presence of social networks for gaining access to necessary resources, and may explain how some Cambodian girls succeed in an education system despite the material and gendered constraints they encounter.

The skills and knowledge acquired from challenging inequality constitute **resistant capital**. Yosso (2005) developed the concept of resistant capital from influential historical sources, including Paulo Freire (1970, 1973), who affirmed
behaviours and attitudes that challenged the status quo. Yosso took her definition of resistant capital from Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2000) who described resiliency as “a set of inner resources, social competencies and cultural strategies that permit individuals to not only survive, recover, or even thrive after stressful events, but also to draw from the experience to enhance subsequent functioning” (p. 229). The intergenerational transference of knowledge is the foundation of resistant capital. For instance, mothers from minoritised groups may teach their daughters to become resistors of inequality and oppression (see Robinson & Ward, 1991; Villenas & Moreno, 2001, as cited in Yosso, 2005), and as a result “these young women [may learn] to be oppositional with their bodies, minds and spirits in the face of race, gender and class inequality” (Yosso, 2005, p. 81). In Cambodia, evidence of resistant capital can be seen in women politicians and activists who challenge the predominantly male domain of politics (Lilja & Baaz, 2017).

Summary

I drew on a range of theoretical tools to inform my overall approach to this project and guide my investigation of girls’ educational persistence in Cambodia. These included feminist research theory and practice; a feminist poststructural perspective that considered discourse, subjectivity, resistance and agency; and community cultural wealth theory to explore the resources available to Cambodian school girls. For this study, multiple feminist perspectives also shaped my research approach and allowed me to consider “new possibilities for understanding girls’ socialisation, or the ‘production of girls’, in ways which go beyond seeing girls primarily as ‘disadvantaged’ and socialised within oppressive patriarchal structures” (Jones, 1993, p. 157).

An understanding of Third World and transnational feminisms highlighted the importance of a non-homogenous view of women’s differently lived
experiences. Both bore relevance to my study because Third World feminism considers the activisms of Third World women in their own local and national contexts, whilst transnational feminism is interested in women’s networks and organisations that extend beyond the local and national context to a transnational level. Moreover, an appreciation of the criticisms of Western feminism enabled me to engage in “emphatic listening” (Khoja-Moolji, 2015, p. 17) with the participants in my study to better understand the nuanced differences of Cambodian school girls’ educational milieu.

In this chapter, I also explained my use of ethical principles drawn from feminist literature which emphasises the importance of being mindful of power relations in the research relationship, and exercising reflexivity and reciprocity. Feminist ethical considerations were the cornerstone of my research design, which I discuss in greater detail in the next chapter.

In the final two sections of this chapter, I outlined the conceptual and analytical tools employed in my study. First I paid attention to ‘discourse’ or the multiple ways we talk about, think about, or represent various subjects or topics (Hall, 2006). For my study, an examination of the multiple discourses of girlhood in contemporary Cambodia allowed me to consider how school girls may be constrained and enabled in what they say, do, and feel (Willig, 2008). As such, the conceptual ideas of subjectivity, resistance, and agency enabled me to explore the multiple positionings of income-poor girls who pursue an education (see Chapter Six). I also explained my use of community cultural wealth as a framework for thinking beyond discourses of disadvantage, and exploring the various sources of knowledge, skills and support available to income-poor girls in Cambodia. Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth framework aligns with feminist perspectives in that it is also concerned with the material realities of marginalised groups, and recognises both material and discursive constraints and people’s agency in relation to these. The multiple conceptual lenses used in
this study thus contributed towards a richer exploration of girls’ agency and vulnerability when persisting at school. In the following chapter, I describe how some of the theories outlined here helped shape the methodological approach utilised in this study.
Chapter 5
Working with school girls and young tertiary women in Cambodia
Introduction

This chapter discusses my approach to working with the Cambodian school girls and young tertiary women involved in this study. As indicated in Chapter Three, there appears to be a paucity of qualitative research exploring girls’ experiences of schooling in Cambodia and even less reporting on the support factors that enable girls to remain in school. My methodological approach intended to address this gap in the literature.

This study comprised of two self-funded fieldtrips to Cambodia during November-December 2014 and May-June 2015, and involved ten data collection methods with different groups of participants (see Table 1). Data collection included art-based research methods that emphasised participant-led involvement as well as more traditional researcher-led methods, such as interviews and questionnaires. I also employed a hybrid of participant and researcher-led methods, namely card sorting, self-managed video interviews and member checks. The range of methods aimed to ameliorate language barriers and power differentials in order to valorise the girls’ and young women’s voices.

Each data collection method attended to one or more of the following five research questions that guided this study:

1. What do Cambodian secondary school girls identify as the key challenges that make it difficult for girls to remain in school?

2. How do Cambodian secondary school girls overcome such challenges?

3. Which are the most common forms or sources of support utilised by Cambodian secondary school girls who remain in school?
4. What advice do Cambodian secondary school girls offer to other girls wishing to remain in school?

5. What advice do Cambodian secondary school girls offer key stakeholders involved in girls’ education?

To explain how I went about addressing these research questions, I have structured this chapter as follows. First, I outline how I established the research relationship, and introduce Theary, my research assistant, and the participants. In this section, I provide details about gaining procedural ethics and access to the research ‘field’. The second section, provides a rationale for the data collection methods employed in this study; followed by a detailed account of how I worked with different groups of participants. In the third section, I describe how I first analysed the data using discourse analysis to gain an understanding of the discursive milieu regarding girlhood and girls’ education in Cambodia. I then applied thematic analysis to investigate girls’ sources of support (guided by community cultural wealth capitals theory) and key themes in the school girls’ advice to stakeholders. I conclude the chapter with thoughts on enacting reciprocity in cross-cultural research.

The research relationship

I begin my discussion of the research relationship by examining my ‘outsider’ position. I discuss how I established contacts in Cambodia to help facilitate my study on girls’ educational persistence before introducing Theary, my research assistant and interpreter. Following this, I introduce the girls, young women, and NGO representatives who were integral to this study. I also discuss the process of gaining formal ethical approval, including obtaining informed consent and ensuring confidentiality. I return to the discussion on ethical considerations in
greater detail at the conclusion of this chapter, although I have included ethical reflections throughout the chapter, where pertinent.

**My position as a non-Cambodian researcher**

From the inception of this study, I was aware, as a non-Cambodian researcher, that there are “myriad dilemmas and complicated power gradients” when researching in a cross-cultural context (Desai & Potter, 2006b, p. 34). In the literature on cross-cultural research, there is much discussion about who has the right to conduct research with whom (see Bishop, 2005; Pain, 2004; Scheyvens & Storey, 2003; Skelton, 2009).

Unlike other researchers working in the Cambodian context, such as Trudy Jacobsen, Katherine Brickell, and Annuska Derks, I have not had extensive experience of living in Cambodia. Consequently, I do not have Khmer language skills nor a rich understanding of the Khmer context afforded to those who have immersed themselves in Cambodian culture. As a wife and mother residing in New Zealand (and with no external funding), the possibility of living in Cambodia for an extended period of time was simply not feasible. Although I have lived in other parts of Southeast Asia, and travelled in Cambodia previously, I was cognisant that my positionality as an ‘outsider’ could provoke some criticism and/or contribute to the limitations of this study. I took specific measures with these possibilities in mind, as I explain below.

First, I established contact with a well-established Cambodian NGO working in the education sector, where I sought their affirmation and guidance (see the following section for a detailed discussion). Although my actual time in Cambodia was relatively brief (a total of six weeks collecting data), my relationship with my Cambodian contacts and primarily, my research assistant, Theary, has been long and ongoing. I did and continue to draw on these relationships to clarify and verify any details I am unsure of, whilst at the same
time acknowledging that occasionally, research challenges or “difficulties cannot be resolved through communication, no matter how complex the dialogue” (Ang, 2003, p. 192). I have relied on “honesty and negotiation” (Skelton, 2009, p. 402) as well as mutual respect to address the power relations associated with my privileged background. During my time in Cambodia for instance, I was cognisant that showing genuine respect for the Khmer people and their customs was important for facilitating trust and enhancing understanding (Desai & Potter, 2006b; Scheyvens & Leslie, 2000), and also for ensuring researcher safety (Czymoniewicz-Klippel, Brijnath, & Crockett, 2010). I therefore, relied on the guidance of Theary and other NGO staff regarding local etiquette and social cues.

Second, from the outset of this project, I aimed to work with girls and young women in Cambodia to understand how girls can be supported to remain at school. Reciprocity was thus a key component of my research approach, and the participatory elements of this research provided the girls and young women with an opportunity to share their experiences and opinions of remaining in school. One of the benefits often overlooked in many research projects is that participants are given the opportunity to be listened to by an attentive and captive audience i.e. the researcher. This is particularly true when carrying out research with remote communities or with girls and women who often may not have an opportunity to express their views or opinions publicly (Kiragu & Warrington, 2012; Scheyvens & Leslie, 2000).

Third, an integral part of working with the participants of this study was my negotiation of the power differentials associated with my positioning as a non-Cambodian researcher. I was cognisant that I could slip between ‘outsider’ and ‘insider’ identities whilst working with the girls and young women in this study (Skelton, 2009). On the one hand, being female and sharing a similar ‘student’ status as a university student, may have created an environment whereby the
girls and young women felt more comfortable to respond freely and openly (Oakley, 1981). On the other hand, my ethnicity, lack of Khmer language skills, and privileged background positioned me outside the participant group.

Although my lack of Khmer language skills posed a barrier to communicating directly with many of the participants, my ‘outsider’ position also seemed to encourage the participants to provide detailed information about their experiences (Scheyvens, Scheyvens, & Murray, 2003). In other words, they did not assume that I was privy to information pertaining to the local context as they might have done with a local researcher (Skelton, 2009). Scheyvens (1995) suggests that another advantage of a language barrier is that it can provide focus group participants with privacy and space to discuss their answers amongst themselves before offering their final answer to the researcher. I observed this type of participation during group discussions, and it highlighted how power in the research relationship does not always reside with the researcher.

Finally, to address power differentials in this study, I focused on developing a strong rapport with my participants and my research assistant, Theary. I shared stories and information about myself and New Zealand to encourage their knowledge sharing (Desai & Potter, 2006b). Through self-disclosure and careful listening, I endeavoured to create a non-threatening environment that encouraged open discussion and valued the participants’ and Theary’s contribution to this project. The establishment and maintenance of the research relationship was therefore crucial to conducting this cross-cultural study.

Establishing a research relationship in Cambodia

To undertake this study, I established and maintained a research relationship in Cambodia. I use the term ‘relationship’ instead of sample or site as suggested by Thomson (2015), who argues that the latter dehumanise and objectify the people and area being researched. Furthermore, the term ‘relationship’ best describes
the relations of trust, respect, and negotiation involved in this study between myself and all those involved. To establish my research relationship in Cambodia, I initially sought the assistance of a reputable locally-run education NGO knowledgeable in girls’ education.

I utilised a social media discussion forum to gather recommendations of education NGOs operating in Cambodia. After compiling a list of possible NGOs, I visited their webpages and reviewed their organisations’ goals and any published research or annual reports. I then proceeded to contact the various directors of each organisation, outlining the aims and intentions of my study. I offered to share my findings with any participating NGO in exchange for logistical advice and support (see Appendix A for a template of the letter of introduction).

I initially had three positive responses from the NGOs I contacted. My follow-up correspondence resulted in the commitment of one NGO that was willing to support my study logistically. My key contact at the NGO, Sonisay, provided me with all the necessary information leading up to my first fieldtrip to Cambodia in November 2014. Sonisay also connected me with a small internationally-run education NGO that provides scholarships to young women who wish to study at university. In this thesis, to differentiate between the two NGOs supporting my study, I refer to them as the locally-run NGO (the former) and the internationally-run NGO (the latter).

The research relationship established during this study was fundamental in providing me with guidance, advice, access, and context-specific information. I have intentionally not named the NGOs involved in this project as I wish to ensure confidentiality of the parties involved; and more importantly the

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10 Sonisay is a manager at the locally-run NGO. Sonisay is not her real name, but one that I have assigned to her in order to protect her identity and that of the organisation she works for.
participants’ confidentiality. However, it is important to acknowledge that the locally-run NGO was vital in providing information about schools; supporting and advising on the recruitment of participants; and providing guidance around cultural concerns and logistics. It is also important to acknowledge the involvement of Theary, my research assistant, who was critical in facilitating my work with the participants across linguistic and cultural barriers.

**Introducing Theary, my research assistant**

I met Theary through my relationship with Sonisay at the locally-run NGO. Sonisay felt that Theary would be best suited to assist on this project because of her local knowledge and personal experiences of educational persistence in Cambodia.

Theary was raised primarily by her mother. She has two older sisters, but is the only sibling to have completed secondary school. Theary was a scholarship recipient whilst at secondary school, and later earned another scholarship to study at university. She graduated from university shortly before my first fieldtrip in November 2014. At the time of this study, she was an employee of the locally-run NGO, and worked as an assistant to Sonisay on the girls’ education programme. Theary has a good level of English language skills, and great interpersonal skills; although prior to working with me, she did not have previous work experience as an interpreter.

Desai and Potter (2006a) mention the importance of an interpreter’s knowledge of the local context and her position and status in the community when conducting cross-cultural research. I was therefore fortunate that Theary agreed to assist me in this study, because her first-hand knowledge of girls’ education in Cambodia, her personal experiences of educational persistence, and her connection with the girls and young women in this study greatly enriched my understandings of the local context and subject matter.
Theary was a peer to many of the young women in this study, and well known within the various local communities. To exemplify, Theary is a past pupil of one of the participating schools and knew the school director and many of the teaching staff. As a recent graduate of the local university, she also knew all of the university students who volunteered to participate in this research. Lastly, Theary’s work at the local NGO meant that she had a working relationship with the second participating school and had conducted workshops with many of the school’s students. These close connections between Theary and the research community facilitated an environment of ease and trust when working with each group of participants.

Initially, Theary’s role involved translating documents, such as the information and consent forms, from English to Khmer (conducted via email). However, once I began my fieldwork in Cambodia her role evolved into one of interpreter and research assistant. Theary was invaluable in her role as research assistant. For instance, as research assistant, she negotiated access with all the participants; assisted with the distribution and explanation (in Khmer) of relevant materials during data collection; collaborated with me during particular stages of data analysis; and handled practical aspects, such as arranging transport to the schools. In this instance, the remote location of the schools deemed it necessary to employ a driver who was familiar with the local area.

I formally acknowledged Theary’s involvement in this project through financial reimbursement and a letter of reference. I approached the director of the locally-run NGO (Theary’s employer) for advice regarding an appropriate salary for Theary’s work as a research assistant and interpreter. I also ensured that any other sundry costs (including meals) associated with her role as research assistant/interpreter were compensated.
Theary’s role as interpreter/translator was pivotal in allowing me to work with the girls and young women in this study. Before I move on to describing the next stage of this study, I will briefly discuss the interpretation and translation process and considerations involved in this cross-cultural research project.

**Translating and interpreting**

This study was both cross-cultural and cross-language research. In this section, I focus primarily on the interpretative work of Theary when working with the participants and the data. However, I am cognisant that translation does not only occur in research when a language barrier exists between researchers and their participants (Desai & Potter, 2006a; Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012b). All research involves multiple forms of translation as researchers try to understand the social group or phenomenon they are investigating and try to communicate this understanding to others. In other words, “Translation is more than a technical exercise; it is also a social relationship involving power, status and the imperfect mediation of cultures” (Desai & Potter, 2006a, p. 172).

The difference between cross-language research and other research lies with the interpretative power of interpreters/translators. The researcher requires a critical understanding of the deliberations and decisions made by translators during the translation process (McWilliam et al., 2009; Skelton, 2009). There is often a vocabulary mismatch and at times a creative element to the translator’s role of providing cross-cultural meaning (Fujishiro et al., 2010; Maclean, 2007; McWilliam et al., 2009). To address the complexity of working across languages and cultures, Temple (1997) advises researchers to continually reflect on, and engage in, discussion with interpreters about the various perspectives and possible meanings associated with the participants’ talk. To do so, I consulted Theary frequently either in person when I was in Cambodia or via Skype and email correspondence following my visits. I also referred to my other NGO contacts at times when I required a different perspective or further clarification.
Interpretation and translation in this study involved simultaneous interpretation when working with the participants and translation of the participants’ text-based data (e.g. jigsaw puzzle activity worksheet) and audio data (including video-based interviews). Theary translated and transcribed the participants’ written and oral data, except for the visual narratives and mind maps. For these two forms of data, Theary and I collaborated, whereby, she read the participants’ Khmer text aloud, translated it into English verbally, and I audio-recorded and wrote analytic memos. These collaborative interpretation sessions were less time-consuming for Theary (an important factor given that Theary was working full-time) and afforded us with the opportunity to clarify and unpack the details provided by participants. Theary was often able to provide illustrative examples to further explain or support a participant’s claim. Notably, most of the tertiary women spoke in English, and Theary assisted only when more complex ideas and in-depth discussions took place.

I am however mindful that in this thesis, I am “talking for others in a language and culture which they may not understand, and in which it may be impossible to express their original meaning” (Maclean, 2007, p. 784). Whilst I took certain measures to ameliorate interpretation concerns (as described above), I acknowledge that there are limitations to working in a cross-language context. I discuss these in further detail in Chapter Nine.

After establishing a research relationship in Cambodia, the next stage of this project involved gaining formal ethics approval, which I discuss next.

**Gaining procedural ethics**

I obtained approval from the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee to carry out this research (reference code 14/142). I was mindful that “what appears ethical research practice in one culture may not be so in another” (Skelton, 2009, p. 399), so I consulted with my contacts at the two participating NGOs prior to
submitting the ethics application. The NGOs confirmed that they followed ethical practices in their research that were similar to those required by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee. To ensure participant safety, the locally-run NGO required that I provide a letter (Appendix B) from my former employer attesting to my sound character and ability to work with young people. I also provided these details to the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee along with a health and safety risk assessment for myself and information about safeguarding my participants’ wellbeing.

I ensured that information about the project was accessible to the participants. I produced information brochures and consent forms (Appendix C) in the Khmer and English languages. To verify that the translated documents (e.g. consent forms and worksheets) reflected the English versions, I cross-checked selected statements using online translation tools such as Google Translate and Stars21.com.

The information and consent forms included details about the importance of voluntary participation and the participants’ right to withdraw from the study at any time. I consulted with my contacts at the two NGOs regarding access to the participants and forwarded the information and consent forms to both NGOs in advance of my fieldtrips. This allowed my NGO contacts to utilise the information contained within the two documents during the recruitment of the girls and young women in this study.

*Introducing the girls, young women, and NGO representatives*

I originally planned to only work with secondary school girls in grades 11 and 12, but upon Sonisay’s suggestion, the participant group was extended to include female tertiary students. In total, I worked with 74 participants from four different education sectors: secondary school, university, vocational training,
and education-focused NGOs. Table 1 introduces each group of participants and the work conducted with them during both fieldtrips.

Table 1. Participant and data collection details for fieldtrips 1 and 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant details</th>
<th>Education institution</th>
<th>Data collection methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22 school girls - high school A</td>
<td>Medium-sized rural school</td>
<td>Fieldtrip 1: Walking interviews, Jigsaw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4 absent – fieldtrip 2)</td>
<td></td>
<td>puzzle activity, Visual narratives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 school girls – high school B</td>
<td>Large rural school</td>
<td>Fieldtrip 1: Self-managed group video</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 vocational students</td>
<td>Provincial vocational training centre</td>
<td>Fieldtrip 1: Member checks, Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 absent – fieldtrip 2)</td>
<td></td>
<td>discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 female university students –</td>
<td>Small urban university</td>
<td>Fieldtrip 1: Card sorting activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>university A</td>
<td></td>
<td>Fieldtrip 1: Group interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4 absent – fieldtrip 2)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Fieldtrip 2: Member checks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 female university students –</td>
<td>Large urban university</td>
<td>Fieldtrip 2: Member checks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>university B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 female NGO representatives</td>
<td>Medium-sized locally-run education NGO</td>
<td>Fieldtrip 2: Card sorting activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 male NGO representative</td>
<td>Locally-run child development NGO</td>
<td>Fieldtrip 2: Member checks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 female NGO representative</td>
<td>Small locally-run education NGO</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 female NGO representative</td>
<td>Locally-run education NGO collaborative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first fieldtrip took place in November and December 2014, and the second, in May and June 2015. I worked with 43 secondary school girls (grades 9 – 12) from two rural schools in south eastern Cambodia, of which 32 were scholarship recipients; four students from a regional vocational training centre; and 15 female university scholarship students. The second round of data collection included an additional five female university scholarship students from a large urban university. The tertiary students ranged in age from 20 to 27. I also interviewed seven NGO representatives working in the education sector with the aim of gathering contextual information regarding girls’ education in Cambodia.
Sonisay and Theary played a pivotal role in recruiting the secondary school girls, vocational students, and the 15 young university women. Sonisay identified two rural state-run schools based on their differences in teaching resources and school management. High school A, a medium-sized school had a newly-appointed school director and was still in the process of establishing ties with the locally-run NGO; whereas high school B had a long-established relationship with the NGO staff. High school A was more remotely located and appeared more under-resourced than high school B; with broken floors in some classrooms, no electricity, and an unmanaged, very limited library. High school B, on the other hand, had a science lab donated by US Aid, and a new classroom block with whiteboards. Both schools only had two latrines (one for boys and the other for girls), and no ceiling fans in the classrooms.

The vocational students came from a provincial training centre specialising in teacher training and nursing courses and 15 of the 20 university women came from a university in a small urban centre specialising in banking, finance, and management degrees. The additional group of five young women from a large urban university were recruited with the assistance of the lead co-ordinator of an internationally-run NGO offering university scholarships to income-poor female students. All the young tertiary women in this study were scholarship recipients and were provided with dormitory accommodation, study materials, uniforms, and additional training courses such as English language lessons as part of their scholarships.

I recruited some of the NGO representatives via email and initially targeted 16 NGOs based in Cambodia involved in either education, community development, or women’s rights. Representatives were invited to choose either a face-to-face interview in Cambodia, an interview via Skype, or an email interview (Appendix D). I received six positive replies to my invitation, but only three of these responses resulted in actual interviews – two email interviews and
one Skype interview. I was able to recruit a further four NGO representatives
during my fieldtrips. In total, I interviewed seven NGO representatives from
four different organisations (including the locally-run NGO involved in this
project), and was able to gather their perspectives on girls’ education in
Cambodia as ‘contextual’ data (Mathison, 1988).

The recruitment of participants for this study would not have been possible
without the kind assistance of NGO staff, Theary, and student representatives,
and for this, I am extremely grateful. They also assisted with some of the ethical
considerations in this project.

**Informed consent, confidentiality, and ethics in practice**

The process of gaining informed consent is considered a critical element of
protecting research participants from undue harm, but does not always transfer
well to cross-cultural research contexts (Czymoniewicz-Klippel et al., 2010). One
criticism is the inappropriateness of written consent for settings where
participants may be illiterate (Czymoniewicz-Klippel et al., 2010; Skelton, 2009).
However, illiteracy was not an issue in this study and all participants provided
written consent. The requirement that participants needed to be over 16 years of
age meant that parental consent was not required according to the guidelines of
the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee. However, I did produce
information pamphlets in Khmer in the event that any parents/caregivers
requested additional information.

Informed consent was negotiated with all participants during our initial
meetings. Also, during each meeting Theary and I regularly checked with the
participants that they remained willing to participate. For example, at the
beginning of each session, we inquired whether any of the participants had other
commitments, such as class tests or meetings, and made allowances accordingly.
Theary and I also reminded the girls and young women that they could choose
not to answer particular questions. Much of the data collection methods enabled the participants to work autonomously in this regard.

Another concern in this study was the maintenance of confidentiality. I understand confidentiality to mean “(1) not discussing information provided by an individual with others, and (2) presenting findings in ways that ensure individuals cannot be identified (chiefly through anonymisation)” (Wiles, Crow, Heath, & Charles, 2008, p. 418). Although confidentiality is considered important by ethics committees, Rundstrom and Deur (1999) argue that this may not always be what participants want. Instead, they argue that participants should be consulted on whether they wish to be identified or not as they may want to lay claim to the information they share.

In this study, I offered the NGO representatives the option to use either their own names or a pseudonym. But, with regard to the girls and young women, I elected to protect their identities by using either self-assigned nicknames or pseudonyms that I chose. Where participants did not chose a nickname, I referred to a list of Khmer names and their corresponding meanings to select culturally-sensitive pseudonyms for the participants. I also removed any identifying details from the participants’ transcripts and erased names from any digital copies of the visual materials. However, during the formal write-up of the findings, I used a mixture of pseudonyms and generic labels such as ‘school girl’ or ‘tertiary student’ when the speaker was not identifiable in the data (e.g. group discussions).

Despite my attempts to protect the identities of the participants, some participants may have ‘outed’ themselves inadvertently. At the end of my first visit at high school A, some of the girls who participated in this study wanted to have their photograph taken with me. Some of the students had a smart phone and so a succession of photos was taken. I had already explained to the girls that
I had no intention of publishing the photos I had taken, however I had little control of how and where they published their photos. Consequently, photos of me with some of the participants were published on Facebook by some of the girls in this study. Although the photos were untagged, this event was an example of an unforeseen switch in the power relations. In my various attempts to protect the anonymity of the girls, I had failed to recognise their own agency (Czymoniewicz-Klippel et al., 2010).

There were two further ethical dilemmas related to informed consent; namely the participation of three school girls who were under the age of 16, and the unintentional recruitment of a male tertiary student. The former resulted when two Grade 9 students (aged 14 and 15) and one Grade 10 student (aged 14) volunteered to participate. After conferring with Theary about the recruitment of these students, we established that they had willingly volunteered to participate and wished to take part in the project. I did not seek official consent from the parents because it would have been logistically difficult (Czymoniewicz-Klippel et al., 2010); and I viewed the participants as “competent decision makers” (Skelton, 2008, p. 30) who were not coerced into participating.

In the case of the male participant, an NGO staff member initially invited four female vocational trainees to participate in my study. However, on the day of the scheduled interview one participant was unable to attend and recruited one of her colleagues, a male nurse, as her replacement. Upon meeting the male participant, I informed him of the focus of my study, and offered him the option to withdraw. He explained that he still wished to participate. He contended that the interview would be a good experience to practise his English-speaking skills, and added that he felt he was able to offer information about the challenges girls in his village faced when accessing school. However, the focus of this study was on female students’ experiences of remaining in school. I was thus concerned that the presence of a male participant may constrain the group dynamic during the
interview. There appeared to be no evidence of constraint, as the women spoke freely. The male participant chose not to participate in the second round of interviews, which provided an opportunity for an all-female environment in that instance.

In the following section, I explain how, via a variety of data collection methods, I went about working with the girls and young women in this study. I begin by explaining the rationale for choosing participatory data collection methods.

**Working with the girls, young women, and NGO representatives**

This study incorporated participatory (participant-led) research methods with more traditional (researcher-led) methods of data collection as a means to facilitate and gather school girls’ and young women’s perspectives on girls’ education in Cambodia. There were ten methods of data collection in total. The participant-led methods included the school girls’ art-based activities, namely visual narratives and advice posters, as well as a mind map task. The researcher-led methods included paper-based questionnaires, interviews using open-ended questions, observations, and fieldnotes. A hybrid of participant-led and researcher-led methods were also used and included a card-sorting activity, self-managed video interviews, and member checks. Figure 2 illustrates the range of participant-led and researcher-led data collection methods used in this study.

There were three main reasons for incorporating a range of research methods in this cross-cultural study. First, my use of participant-led methods, specifically, the art-based methods, sought to encourage a less censored and ‘freer’ voice (Kirk et al., 2010; Wall, Hall, & Woolner, 2012), and provide access to spaces in the girls’ lives, such as their homes, that were “physically inaccessible” (Allan & Tinkler, 2015, p. 6). In other words, as Mandrona (2016) suggests, the use of visual methods in my study worked toward making the usually invisible school
girls’ lives ‘visible’. Second, the variety of methods allowed me to attend to the pros and cons of conducting cross-language research. Although the researcher-led interviews (and other oral discussions) allowed me to delve deeper into certain topics, they required Theary as an intermediary. The participant-led methods, on the other hand, provided a level of autonomy to the participants where they could express themselves unhindered by language barriers. And finally, the participant-led methods helped mitigate time constraints and issues with establishing rapport with a large group of participants but allowed for rich data production. In other words, the participant-led methods allowed the participants to self-reflect, collaborate in groups, and express themselves creatively with little interference from me or reliance on a translator (in some instances).

Aside from the group discussions with one small group of vocational students, my work with the school girls and tertiary women was conducted in contexts familiar to the participants. For the school girls, we worked in the schools’ science laboratories, libraries, or available classrooms, and when I met with the university women, we gathered in their dormitory common rooms or study rooms. These spaces enabled the participants to work in a familiar and comfortable context, in some respects, addressing the unequal power relations inherent in this study (McWilliam et al., 2009). The group interviews with the vocational students were conducted in a meeting room at the locally-run NGO’s office. All oral data were audio-recorded, with the consent of the participants, for translation and transcription.

My discussion below begins with the participant-led methods and follows the continuum toward more researcher-led involvement (see Figure 2).
Visual narratives

The secondary school girls created visual narratives during the first fieldtrip. The visual narratives are best described as personal posters that combine images (mainly drawings) and text to tell a story of educational persistence. The central purpose of including drawing as a research method was to encourage participation and inclusion in order to facilitate the sharing of ideas between the school girls and me (Wall et al., 2012). Drawing as a research method provided a medium that was engaging and varied (Keefe & Andrews, 2014; Punch, 2002), and “facilitated the rich exploration” of the school girls’ “reflections, perceptions, and views” on schooling in Cambodia (C. Mitchell, Theron, Stuart, Smith, & Campbell, 2012, p. 19). My decision to incorporate drawing as a research method was also driven by a youth-orientated lens where a shift from word-centric data collection engaged the school girls and valued their expressions on the topic of focus (McWilliam et al., 2009).
The activity aimed to gather girls’ personal experiences of remaining in school, and addressed research questions one, two and three regarding the common challenges girls face and the sources of support available to them. The task included a variety of art materials (e.g. coloured poster paper, pens, pencils, craft paper, and glitter) and a set of 11 questions (in Khmer) (Appendix E) to guide the task. The questions investigated challenges to schooling and the mechanisms used by girls to overcome such challenges. C. Mitchell et al. (2012) argue that the use of specific prompts provides structure to a drawing task and helps contribute to richer data generation.

Although the questions are best described as researcher-led, the completion of the activity was more participant-led, because the school girls were free to choose which (if any) questions they wanted to answer. They decided how they wanted to answer the questions; whether it be through images, bullet points, sentences, or a combination of responses. Theary and I were available if anyone had a question, but mostly we remained in the background and allowed the girls to socialise and create uninterrupted. The autonomy and control thus rested more with the participants than with me as the researcher.

Below, Nick’s (Figure 3) and Chan’s (Figure 4) visual narratives provide an example of how the girls used drawings and often a combination of English and Khmer text to create their visual narratives. In Chan’s case, she chose to answer a number of questions in full written text on a separate piece of paper which she attached to her visual display.

The visual narrative activity produced abundant data regarding the girls’ personal experiences of remaining at school. The girls’ engagement and detailed responses support the argument by Wall et al. (2012) that visual methods of data collection enable reflection and allow for “non-obtrusive observation” (p. 225).
Drawing as a research method requires a leisurely pace to provide the participants with plenty of time to reflect on their experiences (C. Mitchell et al., 2012). The school girls at both schools became engrossed in their visual narratives, to the point that Theary and I adjusted our schedule and negotiated a later completion time with them. In my study, the activity took a total of two hours to complete. At the conclusion of the activity, many of the girls were very proud of their final creations and took photos of each other with their completed visual narratives.
As indicated above, the visual narratives activity involved a high level of participant engagement and autonomy, but I am also cognisant that art-based research methods can provoke a level of anxiety in participants if the aim of the task is not carefully explained or the art materials are unfamiliar (C. Mitchell et al., 2012). I therefore actively sought Theary’s feedback after working with the school girls, and she shared some of her concerns regarding drawing as a research method. Theary explained that whilst the school girls enjoyed the visual narratives – indicated by their willingness to devote extra time to the task - a lack of art-based opportunities in school meant that drawing did not come naturally to them, and Theary believed some girls found the activity “difficult”. She added that “if we give the paper (questionnaire) to complete, they can give the answer a lot” because the school girls were more familiar with text-based responses in their classroom environment. Theary’s observations helped inform my approach...
when working with the school girls again during the second round of data collection.

**Mind maps**

The mind maps (Figure 5) were part of the second round of data collection with the school girls, and informed the content of the advice posters (discussed below). Although Theary and I outlined the aim of the mind maps and provided initial instruction, this activity was mostly participant led. The function of the mind maps was to enable groups of school girls to collectively brainstorm a range of strategies key stakeholders could or should employ to support girls’ education in Cambodia (research questions four and five). I identified six stakeholders - girls, families, government, teachers, school directors/principals, and neighbours - based on relevant literature and preliminary findings from my first fieldtrip.

![Completed mind map](image-url)
In small groups of four to five students, the school girls discussed the barriers to girls’ education and came up with suggestions as to how each stakeholder could help mitigate these challenges. As with the visual narratives, the school girls led the activity whilst Theary and I remained on hand in case they required any clarification. Figure 5 above is an example of a completed mind map, and illustrates the breadth of ideas produced by the girls in this study.

The school girls then used the information from the mind maps to create posters of advice targeting each of the six stakeholders.

**Advice posters**

The school girls’ advice posters were completely participant led with regard to content and design. The content was based on the girls’ own collaborative words of advice (from their mind maps), whilst the design involved individually creating and producing posters (which did not rely heavily on drawing skills) (see Figure 6).

The advice posters formed part of the “civic dissemination” process of this study (C. Mitchell et al., 2012, p. 26). As C. Mitchell et al. (2012) suggest, participants’ creative productions (posters in this case) can facilitate the dissemination of study findings at the community level. The advice posters thus aimed to provide the school girls with the autonomy to appeal to various stakeholders in their own voices, unaltered by me. To achieve this, the school girls’ advice posters were digitally copied and presented to the participating NGOs for use with their community awareness initiatives and other promotional material relating to girls’ education; allowing the NGOs to communicate with the other stakeholders targeted in the advice posters.
The aim of dissemination was explained to the girls at the outset, and thus provided a rationale for producing the posters. Keeffe and Andrews (2014) argue that adolescent participants value research methodologies that illustrate how their contributions will be used and valued. In this study, the school girls understood that they had the opportunity - via their advice posters – to engage in the broader conversation on girls’ education. This may explain why the girls took great care in designing their posters, resulting in a variety of creative pieces espousing words of advice (see Figures 7 and 8 as examples).
Figure 7. Poster of advice addressed to the government

Figure 8. Poster of advice addressed to other girls
The activity worked as follows: First, Theary and I divided the girls into six groups and assigned one stakeholder and one completed mind map to each group. This resulted in approximately three to four girls per stakeholder (at each school). Each school girl produced a poster for the stakeholder assigned to her group. This allowed for personal expression and a quieter reflective task after the previous collaborative mind map activity. The mind maps were circulated around each group during the activity to ensure that the girls had access to a range of ideas/advice. The end result was a collection of advice posters based on collaborative knowledge-building and participant autonomy (C. Mitchell et al., 2012).

The following three data collection methods were a hybrid of participant-led and researcher-led methods.

**Card sorting**

Card sorting formed part of the group interviews (discussed below) with the female tertiary students. I incorporated the activity as a device to stimulate discussion on support factors relating to girls’ educational persistence (research question three) (Arthur, Mitchell, Lewis, & McNaughton Nicholls, 2014). The cards reflected sources of support I gleaned from similar studies on girls’ and women’s educational persistence (for example, Okkolin, 2013; Warrington, 2013; Warrington & Kiragu, 2012).

Table 2 provides details of the card sort information. For my second fieldtrip, I updated the card sorting activity based on the young women’s feedback during the first round of data collection. I used the revised cards with five university women associated with the internationally-run NGO.
Table 2. Card sort details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fieldtrip 1: card sort</th>
<th>Fieldtrip 2: revised card sort</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ambition</td>
<td>ambition/self-determination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intelligence</td>
<td>intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>supportive parents</td>
<td>good friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good friends</td>
<td>learning support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good teachers</td>
<td>financial support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>financial support</td>
<td>good teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>study support</td>
<td>encouragement/motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>study resources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The activity, whilst orchestrated by me, involved a degree of participant-led autonomy. For example, I provided each of the young women with a set of cards containing the list of support factors. I also supplied a set of blank cards on which the participants could add any other factors that were pertinent to their personal experience of remaining at school. This allowed the participants to somewhat ‘personalise’ their card sort. I then asked the young women to arrange the cards in a hierarchical order that best illustrated the sources of support important to them (see Figure 9 for an example).
Once the young women had arranged their cards, they took it in turns to explain their selection criteria. This mode of inquiry took on a less structured approach as each question was determined by the information provided by the young women. The data from this activity and the associated discussions helped enrich my understanding of how girls are supported to stay at school, and informed the findings discussed in Chapter Seven.

**Self-managed video interviews**

The self-managed video interviews were conducted with the secondary school girls during my first fieldtrip, and involved a combination of participant and researcher-led involvement. The participant-led elements involved the school girls’ ‘management’ of the interviews, including who posed the interview questions, who answered, and who video-recorded the interviews. The
researcher-led aspect pertained to the interview questions that guided the task. I developed the self-managed interviews to create a research environment “without the presence of the researcher”, which Belk and Kozinets (2005) argue allows participants to be “more spontaneous and self-directive in their behaviours, showing what is important to them rather than the researchers” (p. 130).

The school girls worked in four groups. Each group was allocated an iPad and a copy of the interview questions in Khmer (Appendix F for English version). Theary and I demonstrated how to operate the iPad’s video recorder and checked the sound quality of the microphones. We encouraged the girls to find a quiet place within the school grounds where they could conduct their interviews. Each group was given autonomy to decide on the different roles required for the activity. The roles included camera operator, interviewer(s), and interviewees; and each girl decided on which role she preferred to perform. Theary and I took it in turn to monitor each group during the set-up phase in order to ensure the microphones were capturing their voices adequately. Thereafter, the girls were left to self-manage the interview process which included selecting the interview questions of their choice.

There were two concerns regarding the use of self-managed video interviews. First, unlike traditional interviews where the researcher is able to clarify a point or delve deeper into a topic of interest, the self-managed video interviews did not provide me with the opportunity to immediately follow-up on any of the information the girls provided (Rome & Hawkins, 2015). Despite this limitation, the self-managed video interviews followed the ethos of participant-led methods and offered the girls control of the interview process without any interference from me as the researcher (Belk & Kozinets, 2005; Rome & Hawkins, 2015), and again circumvented the need of an immediate intermediary. I was instead able
to address key themes or points of difference from the video transcripts during the member checking phase of the second fieldtrip.

Second, the transcription of the videos was *very* time-consuming for Theary, and in hindsight, it may have been more productive if we had collaboratively translated and transcribed the video interviews. In other words, Theary could have played the video, paused and translated segments whilst I simultaneously transcribed her verbal translation. This approach may have reduced the time taken to transcribe the video interviews *and* also allowed us to discuss, clarify, and corroborate our own understandings of the school girls’ messages.

**Member checks**

I engaged in member checking with the school girls and young tertiary women during my second fieldtrip. Member checks refer to seeking participants’ feedback and/or comments on interview transcripts, preliminary findings, or a draft of the research report (Thomas, 2017). In my study, the member checks aimed to engage the participants in collaboration regarding the study’s findings (Kiragu & Warrington, 2012). Collaboration as a form of reciprocity has the ability “to build more useful theory […] and empower the research” (Lather, 1991, p. 64), and contributes towards the trustworthiness of the findings of this study (Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001). The member checks centred on the participants’ input and feedback, but the sessions required a researcher-led approach (see Figure 2).

The member checks were conducted in a group setting. The group environment facilitated greater dialogue and a collective understanding (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012b) of the social constraints experienced by, and support factors available to, the girls and young women in this study. I sought the participants’ feedback on the main themes to emerge from our work together. Theary was invaluable in the facilitation of these discussions as she gently encouraged the
girls and young women to confirm or challenge my preliminary findings. The member check discussions were audio recorded with the consent of all the participants, and later transcribed.

The following three forms of data collection were predominantly researcher-led and are best described as more traditional methods of qualitative data collection.

**Jigsaw puzzle activity and questionnaires**

I employed group and individual paper-based questionnaires with the school girls. The group-based questionnaire, named the jigsaw puzzle activity, was used during the first fieldtrip as an ‘ice-breaker’ to introduce the research topic (T. Skelton, personal communication, July 30, 2014) and mitigate the power differential between the school girls and me (Prosser, 2011). The second questionnaire (Appendix G) was issued during the second round of data collection and acted as an additional source of member checking concerning support factors and the school girls’ outlook regarding gender equality in Cambodia. Both questionnaires were more researcher-led than the previously discussed methods, although the jigsaw puzzle activity did encourage some participant collaboration and required no further input from me beyond providing instructions for the activity. Below, I focus on the jigsaw puzzle activity as the second questionnaire involved little more than the distribution and collection of a paper-based questionnaire to the school girls.

The jigsaw puzzle activity provided an unobtrusive way to introduce the focus of the project, and allowed the school girls to warm-up to the topic of educational persistence (Punch, 2002). The activity performed the role of visual elicitation, and was informed by empathy-based research methods (Lehtomäki et al., 2014). Empathy-based stories or narratives aim to capture the social and cultural context of the research topic and the positioning of participants based on the participants’ reaction to an exploratory script (Lehtomäki et al., 2014). Similarly,
the jigsaw puzzle images aimed to stimulate and capture the school girls’ understanding of the social and cultural context surrounding girls’ education via third person observation/narration.

Figure 10. Jigsaw puzzle of an out-of-school girl

The jigsaw puzzles consisted of images of either out-of-school girls (working or caring for younger siblings, Figure 10) or girls in school (Figure 11). I sourced the images from the public domain, and selected them based on the activities they portrayed and partial anonymity (i.e. no schools or landmarks were identifiable).

I created machine-cut cardboard jigsaw puzzles (Figure 10) as well as less complex, laminated, hand-cut puzzles (Figure 11). A questionnaire (in Khmer) accompanied the jigsaw puzzles with questions pertaining to out-of-school girls and girls in school (Appendix H).
The school girls in this study worked in groups of 3-4 and collaborated in discussing the possible daily activities and personal traits of the girls depicted in the images. I encouraged each group to swap jigsaw puzzles and thereby enabled the participants to compare images, discuss the corresponding questions, and reflect on the differences between girls in school and out of school.

**Interviews**

I conducted group interviews (maximum of six participants each) with young tertiary women and individual interviews with NGO representatives (see Appendix E for interview questions). The group interviews with the tertiary women provided an opportunity for them to discuss their own experiences of persisting at school and to take part in broader discussions. Punch (2002) asserts that a group situation helps with prompting memories and discussing broader issues. I found this to be the case in all instances, as the young women were able to listen to each other and confer regarding issues relating to girls’ education. For
example, one young woman insisted that a lack of parental support was not an issue concerning girls’ schooling, but her peers disagreed with her based on their own observations and insights.

The group environment also allowed the women to confer (mostly in Khmer) over the following two questions: ‘What are the most common reasons for girls to drop out of school, or what are the most common challenges for girls’ education in Cambodia?’, and ‘What advice do you have to offer girls who want to stay at school?’. The language barrier in this instance shifted the position of power to the participants, allowing them space to discuss their ideas before sharing their opinions with me via Theary’s interpretation (Scheyvens, 1995).

The interviews with NGO representatives investigated their perspectives on girls’ education in Cambodia and helped inform my contextual understanding of the research topic. All the interviews were conducted in English, and the participants were given a choice of interview formats. In total, I conducted one Skype interview, two email interviews and four face-to-face interviews with NGO representatives from seven different education-focused organisations. All the interviews, aside from the email interviews, were audio recorded for transcription.

I encountered one “ethically important moment” (Guilleman & Gillam, 2004, p. 265) during the group interviews with the young tertiary women. During my first fieldtrip, one young woman became upset when describing the sacrifices her family had made to enable her to continue her studies. At the time, I asked (via Theary) if she would like to take a break from the interview, but she declined and said she was happy to stay. I felt awkward for putting her in this position and made an effort to thank her and chat with her after the group interview. This event reminded me about the difficulty of managing the interview process in a cross-language context. Although I was able to discern from young woman’s
body language that she was emotional, my lack of Khmer language skills meant that I was not able to immediately understand the details of why she was upset, nor was I able to offer any immediate comfort. The language barrier also meant that I was unable to offer her comfort or support directly and had to rely on Theary as an intermediary. I reflect on the issue of conducting cross-language research in greater detail in Chapter Nine.

**Observations and fieldnotes**

The last methods of data collection, observations and fieldnotes, were solely researcher-led. I observed and composed fieldnotes during my fieldtrips and after any online correspondence with NGO staff or Theary. The observations and fieldnotes helped contextualise the information gathered from participants. Some observations were moments of “accidental ethnography” Fujii (2015, p. 525) which provided additional insight into education in Cambodia. For example, I experienced first-hand the distracting noise of nearby ceremonies – a challenge to learning that was frequently mentioned by the school girls. I observed the difficult terrain the girls (and boys) had to negotiate on their way to school, and the poor condition of some of the classrooms, such as no electricity and broken flooring. I came to understand why Theary and many of the school girls refrained from using the toilet facilities at the schools. The toilet doors often did not close or lock properly, and there were no facilities for the disposal of sanitary products. These observations helped put into perspective the daily challenges the students faced in their pursuit of education (Kiragu & Warrington, 2012).

I enriched my observations at the two schools by inviting the participating girls to give me a tour of their school grounds; also known as a walking interview (Evans & Jones, 2011). However, in this study the walking interview was an observation activity rather than an ‘interview’ as such. I did not audio record the walking interviews as I wanted to create an informal and less intimidating
context and completed/wrote notes afterwards. I also engaged in informal conversations with the teaching staff during my visits to the schools. These conversations helped enrich the data by providing insight into the teaching conditions at rural schools in Cambodia. Reflecting on observations written in my fieldnotes encouraged me to question my assumptions regarding the research context and the participants (Pillow, 2003; Williams, 1990). For example, during the visual narrative activity with the school girls from high school B, one of the girls decided to play music on their smart phone whilst everyone worked on their creative projects. One of the songs was by pop star, Lady Gaga, and soon there was a lively discussion in English and Khmer about the song’s lyrics, and other music including Korean pop. The event prompted me to revisit my assumptions of girls’ rural lives as ‘isolated’, and revealed the intricacies and heterogeneous nature of rural girlhood in contemporary Cambodia, particularly with increased access to technologies (J. Richardson, 2017).

Working with the data
In this section I outline how I analysed the data to understand the school girls’ and tertiary women’s experiences of educational persistence. I employed discourse (Chapter Six) and thematic analysis (Chapters Seven and Eight) to answer the five research questions that guided this study. Data analysis included not only the systematic coding of data via HyperResearch software, but also a messier process that included (re)writing, thinking, and questioning (Augustine, 2014; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014).

Given the multiple sources of data in this study, I undertook the following steps to prepare and then read the data. As noted earlier, all verbal and text-based data produced in Khmer were translated into English by Theary. I retained Theary’s interpretative word sequence, ignoring errors in syntax if the overall meaning was easily understood. However, for the purposes of readability, selected quotes
underwent a “little skilful editing” during the formal write-up of this thesis (Poland, 2003, p. 634). Next, I compiled full transcriptions of all the participant data, individually labelled according to the data collection method and participant group (e.g. Visual narratives transcript_High school A). These transcriptions included analytic memos pertaining to illustrations in the school girls’ visual narratives. Following this, I assigned the transcripts to one or more of the five pertinent research questions. This helped organise relevant data and guide the type of analysis required. Then, depending on the aim of the research question, I used discourse or thematic analysis to analyse the data. I coded manually and electronically using HyperResearch software. Analysis in this thesis involved multiple readings of the transcripts where I moved “back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation” (Merriam, 2009, p. 176). The analytical process also included collaboration with Theary and member checking with the participants (Harrison et al., 2001) (see earlier); discussions with my supervisors and doctoral peers (Mathison, 1988); and consultation of available literature.

Data analysis took the form of writing in different genres such as analytic memos, observations and fieldnotes, transcribing interviews, jotting down thoughts and updates in my personal thesis journal, and through the formal process of thesis writing. These different writing tasks stimulated thoughts and reflection, identified connections between theory and data, and raised critical questions about my observations and assumptions (Augustine, 2014).

I began my investigation of the data by using discourse analysis to explore the multiple constructions of Cambodian girlhood and womanhood.
Using discourse analysis to explore the multiple constructions of Cambodian girlhood and womanhood

Discourse analysis, in this study, provided a tool for understanding the broader societal discourses as play (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004; Foucault, 1980; Taylor, 2014; Willig, 2008), including both the possibilities and limitations surrounding school girl identities. For this thesis, discourse analysis attended to the participants’ multiple constructions of girlhood and the school girls’ and young women’s “differently-lived and differently-constituted” educational aspirations and experiences (Khoja-Moolji, 2015, p. 2). As noted in Chapter Three, the material effects of constraining and enabling discourses of girlhood and womanhood in contemporary Cambodia influence girls’ educational persistence. Foucauldian discourse analysis permitted an investigation of these material effects which are discussed in Chapter Six.

To explore discourses of girlhood and womanhood in relation to education, I was guided by the six stages of discourse analysis proposed by Carla Willig (2008). The stages proposed by Willig entail the identification of: (1) discursive constructions, (2) discourses, (3) action orientation, (4) positionings, (5) practice, and (6) subjectivity which provided a methodical approach to identifying multiple discourses of girlhood and womanhood in relation to education. Moreover, I was able to explore the “participants’ subjective experience” of taking up the school girl identity and alternative ideals of girlhood and womanhood that emerged in the data (Willig, 2008, p. 117).

First, Willig (2008) suggests that the researcher identify both direct and indirect references to the topic of focus, which in this study included all references to constructions of girlhood and womanhood. I used a mixture of descriptive and in vivo coding (also known as literal or verbatim coding) to initially read the data (Saldana, 2009). This granted me an initial understanding of the participants’ discursive constructions of girlhood, womanhood, and girls’ education. The art-
based methods also allowed for a richer exploration of the participants’ discursive constructions of girlhood and womanhood. For example, I was able to apply discourse analysis to the girls’ visual narratives by paying attention to the “drawings as social constructions” (C. Mitchell et al., 2012, p. 31). HyperResearch software permitted the coding of images in addition to text-based transcripts.

Then, within the coded data, I focused on the different discursive themes used to discuss girlhood and womanhood. Discourse analysis allowed me to identify dominant discourses of girlhood/womanhood as discussed in the literature (see Chapter Three). But I was also able to attend to the ‘outliers’. As Fine and Weis (2005) point out, it is critical to recognise the contradictions and variations that exist within a group, and in this study, attention to contradictory discourses illuminated the ‘messy’ and heterogeneous nature of contemporary Cambodian girlhood and womanhood (Brickell, 2011b; Derks, 2008; Lilja, 2013b). In order to ‘hear’ the dominant and subordinate narratives about income-poor girls’ experiences of being a school girl, I read and reread the transcripts multiple times, knowing it was vital that I was familiar with the data (Carabine, 2001).

Willig’s third stage of discourse analysis attends to the speaker’s motives for various constructions of the topic or object. Here, discourse analysis allowed me to examine the school girls’ and tertiary women’s responses to, and negotiations of, both the local context and broader discourses of girlhood and womanhood (Wetherell, 2003). Attention to the “action orientation of talk and text” (Willig, 2008, p. 116) in the participants’ data, enabled me to gain a clearer understanding of the participants’ promotion and resistance of certain ideals of girlhood in relation to schooling. For example, the participants’ use of a women’s rights discourse sanctioned their arguments on the importance of education for girls. Similarly, the participants’ references to constraining discourses of girlhood and womanhood allowed them to attribute responsibility to community members
who did not understand the value of education. In effect, girls could deflect responsibility from themselves and attribute it elsewhere where most appropriate.

Next, I considered the subject position(s) of the participants based on their various constructions of the discursive object (Willig, 2008). This stage of the analysis let me examine how the school girls and tertiary women positioned themselves and others, and how they were positioned by others (Cameron, 2001). How the school girls constructed themselves discursively was influenced by their relationship with, and construction of, others (Wetherell, 2001). For example, they positioned themselves in opposition to girls who were not in school and elders who do not value formal education. They were also simultaneously positioned positively, by supportive individuals, such as family members, and negatively, by opponents of girls’ education.

During the fifth stage of discourse analysis, I examined the relationship between discourse and practice. Willig (2008) explains that “discursive constructions and the subject positions contained within them open up or close down opportunities for action” (pp. 116-117). I used this stage of discourse analysis to investigate what actions of being and doing are possible for school girls within the discourses of girlhood and womanhood that emerged in the data. I was able to attend to “narratives of agency” (Mandrona, 2016, p. 5) and resistance in regard to girls’ educational persistence, whilst simultaneously exploring the impact of discursive constraints on girls’ everyday lives.

Finally, I examined the participants’ subjectivity with regard to “what can be felt, thought and experienced from within various subject positions” identified in the data (Willig, 2008, p. 117). During this stage, I speculated about the possible experiences of the school girls and tertiary women depending on the subject positions they articulated. My use of discourse analysis was further enriched by
drawing on my observations and fieldnotes and personally transcribing the interviews and discussions held with the school girls and tertiary students. I was therefore able to ‘re-hear’ their voices (Khoja-Moolji, 2015) and gained a nuanced understanding that “many girls are both victim and agent” (Mandrona, 2016, p. 5). Throughout the process of conducting the discourse analysis, I wrote. I wrote analytical memos where I reflected on what I had noticed and questioned my assumptions. My analysis continued through the multiple versions of the formal write-up of this thesis. The writing process was integral to my analysis and thinking (Augustine, 2014).

**Using community cultural wealth and thematic analysis to understand girls’ educational persistence**

As noted in Chapter Four, community cultural wealth recognises the ‘capitals’ or resources and knowledge present in a community that enable marginalised students to succeed academically. In this study, I explored the presence of five community cultural wealth capitals - aspirational, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital - as a way to understand girls’ educational persistence in the Cambodian context (see Chapter Seven). I drew on Yosso’s (2005) theory of community cultural wealth to guide my identification and interpretation of each capital. In addition, I referred to Nora Luna’s and Magdalena Martinez’s (2013) study of Latino college students’ educational experiences as a useful exemplar for undertaking data analysis deploying a community cultural wealth lens.

To examine the various community cultural wealth capitals (or themes), I applied values coding during the first cycle of data analysis. Values coding “explores cultural values and intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences” (Saldana, 2009, p. 90). Values coding helped focus my attention on the school girls’ and tertiary women’s values, beliefs, and attitudes, including those of their family members and communities as relayed by the participants. For example, a school girl’s hopes for the future were coded as future
goals/dreams and were situated within the theme of aspirational capital. The coding of other values and their associated capitals required more detailed analysis and ‘reading around’ the data. For instance, when I explored navigational capital, I considered both the obstacles and the solutions provided by the participants, following Luna and Martinez’s approach (2013). Close, reflexive reading of the participants’ accounts also revealed the richly complex ways the capitals were intertwined rather than mutually exclusive of each other (Yosso, 2005).

During the second round of analysis, I systematically worked through all the coded data to identify subthemes within ‘aspirational capital’, ‘navigational capital’, and so on. I was thus able to identify common messages, strategies, values, etc., pertaining to each of the five capitals as well as any contradictions or ‘outliers’. In this study, it was important to pay attention to the heterogeneous experiences of rural school girls’ educational persistence. The contesting messages were as important as the dominant recurring themes (Khoja-Moolji, 2015).

I also utilised thematic analysis to investigate the core messages contained within the participants’ advice to stakeholders (Chapter Eight). I mostly worked with the school girls’ mind maps but included all other relevant data pertaining to the participants’ advice to stakeholders (e.g. the school girls’ jigsaw puzzle activity and tertiary women’s advice to other girls). I collated all the translated school girls’ advice to stakeholders into one document using an Excel spreadsheet. I then manually coded the data, preferring the tactical element and sense of control gained from “manipulating qualitative data on paper and writing codes in pencil” and colour (Saldana, 2009, p. 22). The visual display of the coding process provided a global understanding of the multiple (and sometimes overlapping) concerns regarding girls’ education specifically, and gender equality in the Cambodian context. Whilst I was attuned to the dominant
discourses of gendered prejudice, I also attended to the “excesses and seepages” in the school girls’ expository advice “that signalled different kinds of alliances” (Khoja-Moolji, 2015, p. 3) to better understand the contested landscape of girls’ educational persistence in rural Cambodia. I also engaged in methodological reflexivity during analysis to establish trustworthiness in this study, as I explain below.

Establishing trustworthiness

Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, and Davidson (2002) argue that trustworthiness incorporates the authentic representation of participants’ perspectives where “the findings are coherent in the sense that they ‘fit’ the data and social context from which they were derived” (p. 723). My efforts to ensure trustworthiness in this study were intertwined with reciprocity and reflexivity concerns, since I was and I remain answerable to those I researched and engaged with during the research process (Harrison et al., 2001; hooks, 1984). I engaged in methodological reflexivity by collaborating with Theary during the data analysis to ensure my interpretations were culturally and linguistically appropriate (Caretta, 2015). Also, as noted earlier in this chapter, I took a range of measures to address power differentials inherent in the study. In this thesis, I have endeavoured to provide a detailed and accurate account of the research process to allow others to make comparisons to another context if they choose to do so (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, the aim of this research was not to achieve generalisable results, but instead to report on the discourses and experiences of the girls and young women in this study.

To ensure trustworthiness in this study, I undertook the following measures whilst engaging in “reflexivity as a methodological tool to better represent, legitimise, or call into question” my data (Guilleman & Gillam, 2004; Pillow, 2003, p. 176). I carefully considered and described my feminist positioning and the theoretical framework guiding this study (Chapter Four) and the
methodological steps taken to ensure credibility, dependability, and confirmability (this chapter). During the analysis of data, I regularly consulted relevant literature concerning girls’ education to corroborate my findings and note disjuncture. The use of more than one source of information or triangulation to verify the qualitative findings in my study also entailed member checks with the participants and corroboration with Theary, my research assistant (K. Springer, 2010). But more importantly, triangulation in my study involved the identification of contradictions, inconsistencies, and similarities in the data to build a meaningful understanding of my topic of focus (Mathison, 1988). To aid this, my analytical decisions were guided by Willig’s (2008) comprehensive description of the six stages of discourse analysis, and Yosso’s (2005) detailed description of community cultural wealth capitals. Discourse analysis also enabled me to reflect on my assumptions and the research context and thus acknowledge that my interpretations of the data as unavoidably situated (Merriam, 2009).

As part of my reflective practice, I engaged in discussions and workshops with colleagues and my supervisors to gain feedback on my analytical decision-making. I also took every opportunity to share my findings and gain valuable feedback on my research by presenting at departmental seminars and national and international conferences. Finally, I was guided by the “interrelatedness of reciprocity and trustworthiness” (Harrison et al., 2001, p. 325), which I discuss in greater detail now.

**Enacting reciprocity in cross-cultural research**

In Chapter Four, I explained that reciprocity is a valued characteristic of feminist research and enables “researchers to give something back to their participants” (Harrison et al., 2001, p. 323) which ideally addresses power differentials in the research relationship (Scheyvens & Leslie, 2000). In this study, I engaged in
smaller acts of reciprocity, such as, providing refreshments during interview sessions, sharing personal information with my participants, presenting each participant with a certificate of participation from the University of Otago, and returning the school girls’ individual visual narratives (after analysis) in keeping with the ethical considerations of visual data ownership (Wall et al., 2012).

I also engaged in ‘larger’ acts of reciprocity, including giving something back to the school communities for allowing me to work with their students. As a qualified ESL (English as a second language) instructor, I offered to teach English to the senior classes at the participating high schools. Sonisay from the locally-run NGO sought approval from the schools’ directors. I created my own materials and lesson plans, and taught two classes at each school during both visits in 2014 and 2015 (a total of eight lessons). The lessons also afforded me the opportunity to observe the participants in their classroom environment, and to further develop my relationship with the school directors and teachers.

Reciprocity in this study also took the form of collaboration or knowledge-building (Scheyvens & Leslie, 2000). As mentioned earlier, I engaged in member checks with the participants during my second fieldtrip. Harrison et al. (2001) explain that “by asking participants to examine field notes and early analyses, researchers can give back something to their participants and engage in member checks as a means of ensuring trustworthiness”. In other words, collaboration in my study attended to power differentials and trustworthiness by seeking the girls’ and young women’s input regarding the interpretations made and the coherence of the findings (Fossey et al., 2002).

Lastly, in this study reciprocity involved my formal acknowledgement of the NGOs’ support for the study. This took the form of civic dissemination via a report on the key research findings and digital copies of the school girls’ advice posters following the formal submission of this thesis. The report included
recommendations for how girls can be supported to remain at school based on the school girls’ advice. The knowledge contained within the report along with the advice posters may then be disseminated to other stakeholders via local community-based campaigns aimed at raising awareness about the importance of girls’ education.

Summary

My methodological approach to working with the school girls and young women in this study was underpinned by “a worldview that values student voice”, collaboration, reflection, and agency (Keeffe & Andrews, 2014, p. 358; Scheyvens et al., 2003). I recognised the girls and young women as experts in girls’ educational persistence, and as “active co-producers” (Magnusson, 2005, p. 154) in this project. Consequently, I chose elements of participatory research methods (along with more traditional research methods) as a way to provide a non-hierarchical and interactive approach to working with the girls and young women (Kindon, 1995; Pain, 2004; Wall et al., 2012).

In total, this study incorporated ten methods of data collection which were either participant-led, researcher-led, or both participant and researcher-led. My use of multiple methods of data collection (including art-based methods) enabled me to: (1) creatively engage the participants in the topic of discussion, (2) navigate language barriers during data collection, and (3) attend to time constraints when working within the participants’ study timetable. I utilised participant-led methods with the school girls in this study. These consisted of visual narratives that incorporated drawings and text, mind maps, and advice posters. The participant-led methods centred on participant autonomy and recognised the school girls as “active subjects” with a range of distinctive perspectives and opinions on girls’ education in the Cambodia context (Leitch, 2008, p. 38).
My analysis of the corpus of data included discourse analysis and thematic analysis. Using Foucault’s (1980) notions of discourse, knowledge and power (also see Taylor, 2014), I followed Willig’s six stages of discourse analysis to explore “social dynamics and individual subjectivities” (R. Mitchell, 2009, p. 79) in relation to income-poor school girls and their education in Cambodia. As noted in Chapter Three, the material effects of constraining and enabling discourses of girlhood and womanhood in contemporary Cambodia influence girls’ educational persistence. Therefore, discourse analysis allowed me to investigate the material effects that both limited and facilitated the school girls’ and tertiary women’s educational opportunities (discussed in the next chapter).

Community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) on the other hand provided a conceptual framework that allowed me to read the data through a ‘valuing capitals’ lens. I applied a thematic approach that focused on the beliefs, values, attitudes, strategies, and resources of the school girls, tertiary women, their family members and social contacts present in the data. The structure of my analysis for Chapter Seven reflects the five capitals that emerged in the data as pertinent to the participants’ abilities to remain in school. The findings in Chapter Eight were also the result of thematic analysis where my central focus was on the school girls’ advice/recommendations to six stakeholders in girls’ education in Cambodia. Analytically, I paid attention to the ‘collective voice’ present in the school girls’ mind maps of advice to demonstrate the challenges that were most pressing to them, but I also considered the contradictions and voices that ‘stood out’ from the others among the group (Khoja-Moolji, 2015).

In the final section of this chapter, I have reflected on the reciprocal elements of the cross-cultural study. Reciprocity was a cornerstone of my approach to working with the school girls and young tertiary women. As such, I incorporated small acts of giving back to the participants (e.g. certificates of participation, and refreshments) as well as more substantial acts of reciprocation, such as teaching
Exploring girls' educational persistence | Chapter 5

English at the participating schools, civic dissemination (through the school girls' advice posters), and formal reporting to the participating NGOs.

In the following chapters, I present the results of my work with the school girls and tertiary women involved in this research project. In Chapter Six, I describe the multiple discourses of girlhood in Cambodia and contemplate the material effects of these discursive practices on girls' educational persistence in rural Cambodia. In Chapter Seven, I draw on community cultural wealth to explore the factors that help girls remain in school, and finally I present the school girls' advice for how various stakeholders in Cambodia can assist girls to persevere at school (Chapter Eight).
Chapter 6
Multiple discourses of girlhood in Cambodia
Introduction

The importance of education to me [is to]: avoid difficult work/hard labour; avoid ignorance; gain knowledge; get a good job; earn a high income; have morality; become an important person in society; [develop] critical thinking; become a good wife and good mother; [make] my family very happy.

(Excerpt from school girl, Srey Khouch’s visual narrative)

This chapter explores the multiple discourses of girlhood and womanhood embedded in the school girls’ and tertiary women’s talk. Their talk (which included all visual and audio data) revealed the tensions and ‘blurriness’ of performing, often simultaneously, ‘conventional’ and ‘unconventional’ gender roles. As such, there was no “coherent ‘self’” (Lilja, 2013b, p. 25) in the participants’ discursive constructions of themselves as school girls and young tertiary women. Instead, the school girls, (like Srey Khouch above) and tertiary women in my study, constructed themselves as homemakers and educated individuals, dutiful daughters and independent women, unconventional females and positive role models. An understanding of the tensions and negotiations inherent in discourses of Cambodian girlhood allows me to answer the following two research questions: ‘What do Cambodian secondary school girls identify as the key challenges that make it difficult for girls to remain in school?’ and ‘How do Cambodian secondary school girls overcome such challenges?’.

In this chapter, my considerations of ‘girlhood’ in Cambodia are informed by “an understanding of the ‘girl’ not simply as something that someone is (a question of being and ontology), but as something that one is discursively constituted as” (Eisenhauer, 2004, p. 79, emphasis original). I am therefore interested in the relationship between discourse and how the school girls and tertiary women in my study felt (their subjectivities), could act (their practices), and the material implications of their experiences (Willig, 2008). To reveal the dynamics of girls’ subjectivities in contemporary Cambodia, I begin by
discussing how the girls and young women in my study simultaneously resisted and reinforced discourses of female domesticity. I then examine how, by drawing on a rights discourse, the girls and young women articulated enabling discourses of girlhood and womanhood, and how disruptive subject positions opened up “possibilities of resistance” to them (Paechter & Clark, 2015, p. 1). Following this, I draw attention to the role of difference (Hall, 2006; Lilja, 2013b) in the participants’ discursive constructions of girlhood, notably, how the participants in my study positioned out-of-school girls and working girls as ‘other’ (Gavey, 1989). Finally, I argue that the school girls and tertiary women reinforced and interrupted discourses of female altruism in ways that demonstrated autonomy and pride in assisting others.

**Girls and young women (re)defining girlhood in Cambodia**

As noted in Chapter Three, restricting and enabling discourses of girlhood and womanhood are embedded in a multitude of texts including the *Chbap Srei* (Code for women); national and international media; government policies; and women’s rights advocacy work. In the following sections, I describe the participants’ (1) (re)articulation of the discourse of female domesticity, (2) negotiations of discourses of girls’ educational worth, (3) use of girls’ and women’s rights discourses, (4) possibilities for action based on alternative discourses of girlhood and womanhood, and (5) constructions of out-of-school girls as ‘other’.

**Rearticulating discourses of female domesticity**

In this study, the girls’ and young women’s negotiations of discourses of female domesticity revealed the dominant social construction of women in Cambodia as wives and homemakers, but also the possibilities for manoeuvre regarding domestic work. The discursive construction of girls and women as homemakers and the constraints of domestic work on girls’ education dominated the
participants’ talk in this study. As mentioned in Chapter Five, all the school girls and tertiary women came from rural families where according to Pheakdei, an NGO representative, parents commonly,

...prioritised to the girl to be at home because they think that the girl has more advantages than the boy. She can do like cooking, like taking care of the family. It’s not like the boys. They think that the boy should get high education and the girl should not. (Interview)

The following quote from a group of school girls in my study illustrated how girls are socialised into the roles of homemaker and caregiver as part of their gendered identities within the family (Jacobsen, 2008).

Before the girls go to school, they always get up early in the morning to take a bath, cook meals, and clean the house. When they come back from school, they cook meals, take the animals to the stable, look after their younger brothers and sisters, and feed the animals. (High school A, puzzle activity)

NGO representative, Sonisay added that, “Parents really push, or we can say take advantage of the children, especially girls because girls grow quickly”. For those girls who remained in school this meant juggling the demands of schooling and household duties or risk dropping out of school (KAPE, 2008; Velasco, 2001). But, arguably, discourses of female domesticity are not confined to the Cambodian context. As Aapola et al. (2005) asserts, domestic chores are still predominantly carried out by girls and women globally, even in supposedly egalitarian societies. According to Pheakdei, an NGO representative, in Cambodia, there may however be a discrepancy between income-poor rural girls’ domestic duties and girls of wealthy urban families. She believed that girls from wealthy urban families were less likely to be called upon to do domestic chores because:

parents in the city, they are well educated, most of them are well educated so they don’t have many children, and they can have, uh, like you
say...housemaid...to take care of the children or they have their parents who are old enough to stay at home [to mind the children]...and if they have money they can send their children to the baby centre. (Interview)

In this study, gendered domestic duties were not confined to the family home, but included the school context. According to one group of school girls, “when she (a girl) arrives [at school] she must clean up her class” as part of her daily routine at school (High school B, puzzle activity). Similarly, Miske, Meagher, and DeJaeghere (2010) found that female students were recruited to clean classrooms in some Cambodian schools. Yet as other studies (see for example, Dunne, 2007; Rajagopal, 2009) highlight similar practices are not uncommon elsewhere in the world where gendered roles characterise classroom behaviour.

In my study, however, the school girls reframed discourses of domestic obligation in the school environment in a manner that revealed their own sense of agency. Three school girls expressed a positive attitude towards performing domestic chores in the school environment. They said, “I like cleaning and organising my classroom”, “I like growing flowers [and] cleaning the courtyard”, and “I like growing vegetables, looking after the school garden and the environment in my school” (High school B, self-managed video interviews). And during my initial walking interviews with the school girls, I observed that they were eager to show me classrooms that had been decorated with art work and various colourful murals in the school yard.

One possible reading of the girls’ positive statements such as “I like decorating my school” (High school B, self-managed video interview) is that the girls took pride in their school. Their investment in creating a positive, clean environment reflected their attitudes towards schooling. This idea is supported by one school girl’s comment, when she said that the clean school environment “makes students want to study” (High school B, self-managed video interview). In other words, the school girls in this study were able to reframe their domestic duties
as a demonstration of their dedication to studying. The question remains however, whether boys as well as girls share this sense of pride and thus perform domestic roles in the classroom. Some men in Brickell’s Cambodian-based study (2011) strongly believed that household chores, such as cooking and cleaning, remained the realm of women, not men. Often boys are allocated chores outside the home whilst girls are seen as working inside the house (Grace et al., 2015), but as evident in the preceding quotes, girls also enjoyed working outside in the school garden.

While the girls’ positive attitudes to maintaining their school environment may be indicative of their sense of pride in participating in school, their domestic responsibilities at home, were also clearly a heavy burden that restricted girls’ time for study and homework. As Grace and Eng (2015) argue, the roles promoted in the Chbap Srei position girls as responsible for domestic chores, and as a result, domestic duties are identified in other studies as one of the challenges girls face in pursuing an education (e.g. Glick & Sahn, 2000; KAPE, 2008; Munene & Ruto, 2010; Mungai, 2012; Velasco, 2001) (see Chapter Three). I discuss barriers to girls’ education in further detail in the next two chapters.

**Negotiating alternative discourses of girls’ educational worth**

Participants in my study suggested that discourses of girls and education in contemporary Cambodia are changing: “In the previous time, girls were not allowed to have better education. However, this concept has changed. Girls seem to be much more involved in education. Rights to education are being promoted” (Leakena, NGO representative, email interview). Most of the tertiary women agreed that in comparison to previous generations, discourses of girls’ educational worth had altered somewhat. University student, Irin, asserted that,

In the previous century only boys can get an education at the pagoda, girls can’t. They just...when they are adults, they marry. But now it’s changing and you know at university right now, there are many women studying.
my opinion, I think that the culture is changing and all those in the rural areas now they start to know about the advantage of getting knowledge. And now like us, we are from the rural area but we can get a scholarship and now we are role models who get higher education at university. So we can share our story and our knowledge to other girls. (University A, group interview)

Most of the school girls and tertiary women in this study believed it was important to shift away from ideals of womanhood that constructed women as “shy, ignorant, vulnerable, [and] industrious” (Derks, 2008, p. 44, emphasis added), and that formal education provided them with “critical thinking” skills to “make good judgements about information or people” (Thaily, visual narrative). School girl, Noy, added that education:

Helps me achieve a goal in the future, avoid being uneducated, helps me improve my society, change my life – to get money to help myself and family. Students who have a high education can avoid drugs – changing to have a good future. (High school A, visual narrative)

Noy’s view of the benefits of education correspond with Brickell’s (2011) argument that education gives students the opportunity to think beyond the dominant discourses dictated to them. In other words, education can become a tool of empowerment for girls and women, by allowing them to question and challenge the hierarchies of authority. An illustrative example of this is Theary’s questioning of the relevance of the “31 actions for the best (good) woman” (srei krup leakkhana). She contended that she agreed with only a handful of ‘rules’.

Tracy: Are women still supposed to follow the rules?
Theary: Maybe old people still talk. But for the young generation they don’t accept it.
Tracy: Do you and your mother ever talk about the Good Woman rules?
Theary: My mother still accept some points because she used to advise me to follow it. It’s a general knowledge. We can say it is Khmer traditional concept.
We should protect old achievement of writer. Although we don’t accept some points, but it still has some important points too.

Tracy: So, which points are important to you?

Theary: I like some point of it like - should not be a gossipmonger; show gratitude to people who help us; don’t commit adultery; do good things or sharing something to poverty people; don’t like to visit or sit at neighbour’s house for long time. Only 5 points that I like! (Skype correspondence)

Theary’s contentions echoed those of the women in Sokroeun’s study (2004) where older women were inclined to accept all the codes of conduct, whilst younger women followed some codes and ignored others. However, in Brickell’s study (2011) on ideals of womanhood, older Cambodian women were more inclined to reject “fictitious models of the ideal woman” (p. 446). A possible explanation for the older women’s resistant attitude is that they had successfully demonstrated their childrearing and homemaking abilities and thus were less subject to social enforcement of the codes of conduct (Ovesen, Ing-Britt, & Ojendal, 1996). Whether it is older or younger women who “questioned the relevance of the Chpab11 Srei to modern life” (Jacobsen, 2008, p. 286), the participants in my study believed that deficit discourses of girls’ educational worth restricted possibilities for contemporary girls and young women.

Instead, the school girls and tertiary women in my study recognised the boundaries of female identities in Cambodia and “attempt[ed] to transform them” (Andreotti & Dowling, 2004, p. 610) through careful negotiations of alternative discourses of girlhood (and womanhood) and education. This included examples of the tertiary women’s resistance of marriage in favour of pursuing further studies, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

Ary: All parents think that the girls should stay at home and do the housework. If the girl is, I hear from the old generation they say that if the

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girl has a lot knowledge they will write the letter to contact the boys. (Laughs)
It's the traditional.
Tracy: Okay, so they don't want you have any boyfriends?
Thavary: That was before.
Chanvatey: But for me, I heard that some old generations say that if the girl study a lot and until old age, they cannot get a good boy to get married.
(All laugh)
Tracy: I heard this too. If you get too old
Chanvatey: Yeah
Tracy: I don't know what old is, but they say if you study for too long you will get too old and you won’t find a husband.
Ary: Yes
Chanvatey: Yeah, so now they worry that I cannot get a husband
Tracy: And do you want to get married?
All: No, not yet! (Female students from university B, group interview)

The girls and young women in my study resisted discourses that construct women as primarily wives and mothers. When asked if they wanted to get married, the group of university women unanimously said “No, not yet!” and Ary went on to explain that, “when they (the girls) get married, they can’t go anywhere that they want. They have to take care of their children, their husband”. She was reluctant to relinquish her independence. Likewise, Theary and Sikha, who were both single and working for an education NGO at the time of data collection, explained how they enjoyed being independent and not accountable to a boyfriend or husband (fieldnotes).

However, as unmarried young women pursuing an education, the tertiary women in my study had to also negotiate the boundaries concerning their mobility. As discussed in Chapter Three, discourses of girlhood and womanhood are intimately tied up with constraints on female mobility. As Leakana, a NGO representative, explained: “Girls seem to be perceived [as] bad when they live far away from their family...girls should live close to their
family” (email interview). Brickell (2011b) describes it as “geographical promiscuity” (p. 452), when young single women pursue higher education or employment that takes them away from the family home.

The concern over unmarried women’s mobility was evident in Rachany’s statement about finding work near her family home. Rachany was pleased that her tertiary qualifications “can help me find the job [that] is near to my home…I can work near…so I can stay at my home, with my family” (university A, group interview). Rachany, through her new job, was able to achieve individual autonomy which is a “central theme in Khmer socialization, but it is tempered – particularly in the upbringing of girls – by an equally insistent concern with face” (i.e. family honour) (Smith-Hefner, 1993, p. 151). Rachany’s ability to remain at home with her family therefore, maintained the honour of her family whilst at the same time employment opened up a new subject position for her as a highly educated young woman. In other words, young women, like Rachany, drew on competing discourses to negotiate the identities of dutiful daughters and autonomous young adults (Aapola et al., 2005; Derks, 2008). This is exemplified in the following statement by university students, Thavary and Ary, who like the young women in Derks’s (2008) study, believed unmarried young women could uphold conventional qualities of ‘being good’ whilst living independently:

Tracy: Because you are single and...staying in the dormitory, do they [other people e.g. neighbours] see you as being bad girls or do they see you as good because you are studying to help your family? Or both, good and bad?

Thavary: Good

Ary: Good

Tracy: Good, yeah? Why?

Ary: Because we receive a lot of knowledge. (Female students from university B, group interview)

Most of the participants in this study took up similar subject positions to those expressed by Thavary and Ary above. They believed that their formal education or improved knowledge provided alternative female identities that
encompassed a higher status within the community. As Pich, a university student elaborated, “If we have high knowledge, we will be a great person or we can increase our job [opportunities]...and we will become a famous person or role model person in [our] community” (university A, group interview). Similar to the young Cambodian women in the United States-based study by Smith-Hefner (1993), Pich, negotiated alternative discourses of girlhood and education through her higher education and future employment opportunities, and in turn positioned herself as someone who would be respected within her community. In this study, I also explored the school girls’ and tertiary women’s positionings as respected community members in relation to discourses on girls’ and women’s rights.

Drawing on girls’ and women’s rights discourses and alternative constructions of girlhood (and womanhood)

As noted in Chapter Five, 55 of the 66 female students in this study were recipients of a scholarship provided by either local or international NGOs. Sonisay, an NGO representative working with many of these girls and young women believed that whilst constraining ideals of girlhood and womanhood were promoted in the teachings of the Chbap Srei in lower secondary school,

The whole Chbap Srei poem does not influence girls or women [...] because there are many NGOs working toward gender promotion and women’s rights, as well as the Ministry of Education Youth and Sport. (Interview)

In other words, Sonisay believed that some of the constraining codes on girls’ and women’s conduct were counteracted by discourses on women’s rights and gender equality, often promoted by NGOs and the government. Noy, an NGO-scholarship school girl, simultaneously referred to constraining ideals of girlhood and espoused a women’s rights discourse in her discussion on study support and girls’ education. First, Noy stated that,
The most important support factor for me is receiving good advice because we will try studying, respect parents and old people. If we have docile character in all action like; sleeping, walking, standing, sitting, speaking to older people, our family will have full happiness. (High school A, questionnaire)

Noy’s reference to girls’ “docile character” is promoted in the Chbap Srei which includes the quiet nature of women who do not ‘rustle their skirt when walking’ (Derks, 2008). Grace et al. (2015) noted in their study on gender and the Chbap Srei in schools that teachers viewed quiet and docile as favourable female characteristics.

Yet, when Noy discussed the importance of girls’ education and participation in Cambodian society, she adopted a women’s rights discourse:

When girls have high education and a good job to do, the girls and women in Cambodia will have a good future. But if parents do not give girls the opportunity to study, girls and women will have difficulties when they have their own family...The women who do not have knowledge, the men will look down at them and they will not have equal right the same as boys or men. The boys and men always participate a lot more than girls and women in social activities or the work place. (High school A, questionnaire)

According to Romani (2015), NGO-sponsored girls, like Noy in my study, are exposed to an NGO-based rights discourse which they may take up and utilise in order to find leverage in their communities. In Noy’s case, evoking a rights-based narrative enabled her to highlight some of the inequalities girls and women experienced in Cambodia, namely, a lower status than boys and men, and limited opportunities for participation in society. In other words, a rights-based discourse supported the participants’ argument for girls’ education.
Similarly, Monica, another NGO-scholarship beneficiary “leverage[d] NGO-inspired gender narratives” (Romani, 2015, p. 2) to disrupt normative constructions of girlhood in Cambodia:

> All girls do not think that we are so weak than boys. We must think that all the things that boys can do, we are the girls can do the same too. So if we think like that, it makes us will be stronger and stronger. (High school B, self-managed video interview)

Monica, in this instance, challenged the notion that girls are weaker than boys – a construction promoted in the Chabp Srei (Derks, 2008; Grace et al., 2015; Lilja, 2013b), and was admired for her stance by one of her peers, Nick: “I have a role model in my life too. Her name is ‘Monica’. She is a girl who is very brave. She can do many things that the boys can do, and she is a smart and clever student” (self-managed video interview). In this example, Nick’s friendship with Monica opened up a new possibility for Nick to explore “alternative subjectivities” (Aapola et al., 2005, p. 130) through resisting deficit constructions of female identities.

Finally, Thavary, a university student, asserted that local and international media programmes provided her with alternative female identities.

> I study law because I want to know about the law in Cambodia or other countries, and help women who don’t know about law and help my family and I want to work for an NGO or...in development, for women. [...] Yeah, because when you see a movie and watch TV and listen to the radio you can see women in countries, in USA, talk about the law. (University B, group interview)

Thavary highlighted how educated women in the media could be role models for other women. The literature supports Thavary’s argument and reports that contemporary Cambodian media has departed from “advertising and television programming [which] reinforce ‘traditional’ stereotypes of gender roles wherein
women are relegated to the domestic sphere” (Jacobsen, 2008, p. 278). Instead, it now portrays women more frequently as “symbols of progress and modernity” (Derks, 2008, p. 13), thus opening up new possibilities for their subjectivities and practices (Willig, 2008). Additionally, increased access to social media in Cambodia may have opened up the dialogue further regarding subversive discourses of contemporary female identities (Seiffert, 2015, July 3).

Alternative discourses of girlhood: girls’ subjectivities and practices

The participants’ discursive constructions of girls’ educational worth positioned themselves as positive role models within their communities. The girls and young women attributed communities’ attitudinal shifts regarding girls’ education to the girls’ and young women’s articulation and demonstration of the benefits of education, including their active engagement in community volunteer projects. For example, Akara, a teacher trainee, explained how previously, “Some neighbour [said] ‘oh stop study, go to work, you can earn money easy and early than you still keep your study’. But then when [the neighbours] saw I have a good job, especially I become a teacher like this. I will get a salary every month. [They say] ‘Yes’” (Akara, teacher trainee). Akara was similar to other tertiary women in this study who shared their experiences of being good role models who “can change the neighbours’ idea” (Rotha, vocational student, group interview).

Sikha, a graduate and NGO employee, also relayed how her neighbours’ view of girls’ educational worth had changed. Sikha explained that before she graduated from university, her neighbours frequently questioned her motives for studying given her family’s financial constraints. But after she started working at a local NGO, her neighbours were “so happy with me, and can change their opinion, and then they send their daughters and their grandson or granddaughter to study” (interview). Sikha added that her older siblings were also sceptical about the material benefits of her higher education. “But now I can change my sister
and brother’s opinion, because now I can get a job […] and get a salary that can support my family”. Lilja (2008, 2013b) suggests that ‘concrete representations’ of successful women provide other young women and girls with something to aspire to, and in turn challenge communities’ conceptions of gender roles.

As positive role models of the benefits of education, the participants in this study challenged deficit discourses about girls’ education and gender roles. As Chariya, a university scholarship recipient explained, “Now my neighbours admire me. They change their minds. And they said that, ‘I don’t want to stop my girl’. They want their children to study like me” (Law student, group interview). Similarly, the school girls in this study aspired to “become good leaders, good role models for women of younger generation” (High school A, puzzle activity). In some instances, the NGO-scholarship school girls and tertiary women actively sought opportunities to act as positive role models, for example, through voluntary community work. They were able to develop their communication and leaderships skills by contributing to NGO-led projects, such as student council representation, study skills workshops, and village-based health and hygiene information workshops. In other words, by drawing on discourses of girls’ educational worth and taking up enabling subject positions, the school girls and tertiary women extended their own and others’ possibilities for action (Willig, 2008), providing alternative constructions of girlhood and womanhood (Lilja, 2013b).

**Discourses of materialism: constructing out-of-school girls as ‘other’**

In this study, the school girls’ and tertiary women’s identities were constructed through difference and distinctions (Gavey, 1989; Hall, 1996; Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). For instance, the school girls and tertiary women constructed ‘other’ girls, who had dropped out of school, as deficient in knowledge and support. They described out-of-school girls as “lonely”, “ignorant”, and goalless, and out-of-school girls who earned a wage as driven by materialistic ambitions.
Discourses of materialism emerged in three ways in the data. First, the participants remarked that girls who get work lure other girls to work, as two university students explained:

[When young women go to] work in a garment factory and then they go back home, they have new clothes, new hair, new face, beautiful face, and have a smartphone and have money. So it makes the feeling of [other] girls want to stop study because they would like to earn much money to find new materials or new supplies, new something. (University A, group interview)

Sometimes the friends of the girl say that you should stop study and go to work with me, and study is not important. Education is not good for you and when you go to work, we can earn much money and we can buy new things like smartphone, iPad, like this. (University A, group interview)

Second, the participants suggested that parents are influenced by the immediate benefits of their daughters’ engagement in paid employment (i.e. money), so that schooling becomes a lower priority.

[The girls] can earn a lot of money to support their family. Before they have a small house but when one girl, one child goes abroad [...] they send the money to the parents to build a big house. This can affect to other families. ‘Wow, why I invest my daughter to study for 12 years but earn nothing, so I should stop her and get her to find the money and then I will have a big house like others. (Pheakdei, NGO representative, interview)

Third, some participants suggested that media representations fuel girls’ desire to leave school. NGO representative, Leakana, stated,

Many girls seem to be much attracted by foreign cultures and this vandalises Cambodian culture and it has a negative impact on education as well. They are likely to pay less attention to education because I feel that they are obsessed with the flow of other cultures. (Email interview)
These concerns align with an observation made by the Cambodian Ministry of Women’s Affairs (2014b), which described an “increasing level of materialism in society” (p. 8), that, combined with strong economic growth, lured young girls (and boys) away from school.

Despite the economic benefits gained by girls and their families, the participants did not view the out-of-school girls as altruistic, but instead constituted them as *srei aht leakkhanna* (women with no good qualities). According to the *Chbap Srei*, women with no good qualities are often considered to be loud, gossipy, and *materialistic* (Jacobsen, 2008) (see Chapter Three).

The participants in my study drew a distinction between altruistic behaviour when “[a girl] stops study because she would like to earn income or money to support her family” (Nakry, management student), and materialistic motives. They considered girls to be materialistic if they “[go] to work at a garment factory and then come back home and their hair is straight and their clothes are new, and they have many, many, things” (Leap, vocational training student). Leap, and others in this study, saw girls who dropped out of school as challenging the strong values they placed on education. However, my participants could also be read as echoing discourses of female altruism and dutiful daughters – the view that a girl or young woman who spends her wages on personal goods has less income to send to her family, and therefore, may not fulfil her role of altruistic daughter.

In the final section of this chapter, I explore the tensions between female altruism and economic empowerment. In particular, I question whether discourses on girls’ economic altruism are enabling or constraining girlhood in Cambodia.
Discourses of female altruistic behaviour: enabling or constraining female identities

The girls and young women in my study directly linked their education attainment to their future career prospects or income earning potential. Most notably, their talk overwhelmingly drew on a discourse of economic altruism; echoing similar income-earning motives to the female Cambodian migrant workers in Derks’s (2008) Phnom Penh-based study and the young female graduates in Rogers’s (2014) Cambodian study (e.g. a focus on sending remittances to their families).

The girls and young women’s references to economic altruism can be seen as constructing girls as an ‘untapped’ resource, or as drawing on a neoliberal perspective of development and empowerment (MacDonald, 2015). Alternatively, the girls and young women can be read as echoing the socio-cultural expectations of women, including those promoted in the Chhao Srei (Brickell, 2011b; Brickell & Chant, 2010; Derks, 2008). Kabeer (1994) argues that altruism is often ascribed to the work of women, particularly in regard to family; and girls are socialised into performing altruistic behaviour.

In my study, the school girls and tertiary women indicated that helping their families financially was a driving force in their educational pursuits. University student, Punthea, said,

> I want to increase the living of my family so I decide to study. I think education is important for me because I can find a good job to do when I finish university and I can earn much income to support my family.  
> (University A, group interview)

Kabeer (1999a) maintains that women’s economic altruism, such as that expressed by Punthea above, accentuates women’s disempowerment, because women in some cultures have limited opportunities to invest their money
elsewhere, resulting in mothers and daughters utilising their income for the welfare of their children and families. Brickell and Chant (2010, p. 154) also add that girls’ and young women’s desire to support their families financially can come with a personal cost as their “immense economic, as well as time obligations” may obscure any personal benefits of a formal education. But in my study, economic altruism did not necessarily seem to involve a wholly selfless act.

Rather, in my study, discourses of female economic altruism also seemed to offer up alternative subject positions for my participants as economically independent career women. As Brickell and Chant (2010, p. 150) noted in their study, in my study, female altruism seemed to fulfil “self and collective interests”, where girls and young women could fulfil a sense of duty whilst enjoying new freedoms, such as increased mobility, independent living, and autonomy. As school girl, Chavy, explained, “In the future, I want to earn a lot of money to support my family and my community and myself” (visual narrative, emphasis added). Likewise, Rachany, a finance student, stated that whilst her family had benefited from her education, she too had benefitted economically, socially, and emotionally.

I am from a very poor family and have no father, but now, I and my mother work hard and try to study and help each other. Now I have high knowledge at university. I have my own job and so my family is proud of me, and everyone who lives around my house always looks up to me. (University A, group interview)

In other words, by pursuing an education, the tertiary women in this study were able to fulfil the roles of dutiful daughters and independent career women. This was illustrated in the following quote by university student, Chariya, who reinforced personal and collective interests when she drew on discourses of female altruism:
I want to be a lawyer or work in an organisation and I want to help all women to study like me. And then I want to help myself and my family because nowadays I see all the women that are in poor family. I am from a poor family too, so I want to help them like me. (University B, group interview)

Finally, to illustrate how female altruism can be read as enabling for girls and young women, I reflect on my time spent with Theary, my research assistant.

Theary performed a ‘dutiful daughter’ role through economic altruism but this did not restrict her social or physical mobility. At the time of my fieldtrips, Theary rented a small room in the city with two other young female graduates who also worked in the city. Theary had her own motorised scooter, mobile phone, and laptop supplied by her employer. She spent time with female and male friends, went out for meals at the local market, and occasionally enjoyed karaoke. From my observations and interactions with Theary, she was neither shy (Ledgerwood, 1996) nor “soft and weak” (Smith-Hefner, 1993, p. 142), but was instead well-informed and confident, conversing freely with others regardless of age or gender. Theary was also extremely proud of her ability to support her mother financially. She sent remittances to her mother regularly to help with living costs and schooling for her nephew. When I visited Theary’s family home during my second fieldtrip, she was excited to show me the new concrete toilet and shower block she had built for her mother. Previously, her mother had no out-building and washed from a bucket drawn from the well.

While Theary’s example, and others mentioned above, do not preclude the possibility that some girls or young women may have felt duty-bound to support their families (Bylander, 2014; Derks, 2008), their narratives suggested that female altruistic behaviour also offered the girls and young women “a sense of pride and identity” (Brickell & Chant, 2010, p. 150).
Summary

This chapter has highlighted the complex, multiple, and sometimes contradictory discourses of contemporary Cambodian girlhood and womanhood. The girls and young women in my study (re)articulated and carefully negotiated “putatively traditional ideals of Cambodian womanhood” (Brickell, 2011b, p. 437) in ways that opened up multiple subjectivities. Their talk revealed that “discursive domains of domestic inequality” (Brickell, 2011a, p. 1353) placed restrictions on their study time as well as their identities. For example, dominant discourses of female domesticity confined female identities to wife, homemaker, and childcarer. However, the girls and young women in my study revealed how they successfully manoeuvred the boundaries of female domesticity to pursue their studies, and in turn, revealed alternative subjectivities and practices for girls who pursue an education.

This chapter also considered how the school girls in my study (re)articulated female domesticity discourses in their school environments in ways that allowed them to ‘own’ their domestic actions. Rather than positioning themselves as imposed upon, the school girls constructed themselves as dedicated, proud female students who enjoyed decorating their learning environments. Following on from this, the tertiary women in this study explained their own careful negotiation of discourses of girls’ educational worth. They spoke of rejecting the conventional view that further education was superfluous to Cambodian women’s roles as wives and homemakers. In particular, some of the tertiary women described their mediation of the codes of conduct for women promoted in texts such as the Chbap Srei. For example, they had chosen to defer marriage in order to pursue further study, and used their formal education to question constraining gender discourses.
In addition, my participants drew on a women’s rights discourse to challenge deficit views of girls’ educational worth and constraining ideals of girlhood and womanhood. Most notably, the tertiary women’s demonstration of the tangible benefits of formal education, namely their employability, manifested in an attitudinal shift within their communities regarding girls’ education. For example, the tertiary women explained that some of their neighbours had stated their new desire to send their own daughters to school. The tertiary women viewed themselves, and were viewed by their neighbours, as positive role models. Conversely, the participants in this study spoke of out-of-school girls in deficit terms. My participants represented out-of-school girls as materialistic and non-altruistic; positioning them as srei aht leakkhanna (women with no good qualities).

This chapter has also illustrated how the girls’ and young women’s individual goals were intertwined with their altruistic desires to help their families and communities. However, embedded in my participants’ talk of altruistic behaviour was another subject position, that of the ‘educated, independent, (future) career woman’. Discourses of female altruism in this study encompassed both personal and collective interests which lent a sense of agency and autonomy to the school girls’ and tertiary women’s altruistic behaviour. My participants represented their own altruism in ways that disrupted the (self-sacrificing) constraints often associated with female altruism (Kabeer, 1994, 1999a).

In the next chapter, I explore, via a community cultural wealth lens, how the girls and young women in this study utilised a range of familial, social, and personal resources to persist at school.
Chapter 7
Understanding girls’ educational persistence in rural Cambodia
Introduction

In this chapter, I use Yosso’s (2005) notion of ‘community cultural wealth’ to investigate socially and materially disadvantaged girls’ and young women’s educational persistence. As noted in Chapter Four, community cultural wealth recognises the knowledge, skills, and abilities of “socially marginalised groups” (Luna & Martinez, 2013, p. 2) and draws attention to how marginalised individuals, such as the school girls and tertiary women in my study, circumvent the institutional barriers they encounter. Specifically, a community cultural wealth lens enables me to address my third research question: “Which are the most common sources of support utilised by Cambodian secondary school girls who remain in school?” To answer this question, this chapter presents an analysis of the girls’ and young women’s familial, social, aspirational, navigational, and resistant capitals with regard to their educational persistence.

In my participants’ accounts, community cultural wealth was evident in richly complex ways, and the capitals were intertwined rather than mutually exclusive of each other (Yosso, 2005). However, for analytic purposes in this chapter, I have separated each form of capital in order to illustrate how each was evident in my research data. First, I explore how the school girls utilised familial capital to access, and remain at, school with a specific focus on families’ provision of ‘non-monetary’ resources. I then discuss how social capital, derived from friends, teachers, and NGO staff, operated in lieu of, or in addition to, familial capital. Following this, I describe the participants’ aspirational capital which included personal goals, collective aspirations pertaining to their families and communities, and altruistic desires. I then discuss navigational capital and the multiple strategies school girls employed to overcome various obstacles to their schooling. Finally, I consider the school girls’ and young women’s behaviours and attitudes that disrupted or recast constraining gender norms as examples of resistant capital. As noted in Chapter Four, I do not examine linguistic capital in
this study. Although the participants’ narratives alluded to increased aspirations based on their English language acquisition, linguistic capital was not pertinent to their continued participation in school, unlike familial capital, to which I now turn.

Familial capital

Familial capital refers to the communal bonds of families, immediate and extended, and the wealth of “emotional, moral, educational and occupational” knowledge that can be passed onto children (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Through family, children learn coping strategies modelled by their kin (Yosso, 2005), which may explain how the participants in this study obtained the necessary resources needed to negotiate the discursive constraints described in Chapter Three and Six and overcome the structural barriers mentioned in Chapters Two.

Familial capital in this study emerged in two prominent ways. First, families who valued education encouraged educational persistence and imparted ideals that challenged deficit discourses of girls’ educational worth. Second, family members, particularly siblings, modelled examples of “caring, coping and providing” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79) when they supported their sisters’ education.

The girls’ and young women’s talk revealed that their families instilled a positive attitude towards formal education. Nearly all the participants spoke of coming from a “poor family” where most of their parents were farmers or labourers with only partial primary level education. A few parents were teachers, but none of the parents had studied at tertiary level. Yet, despite their limited educational achievement, parents promoted the benefits of schooling.

They (my parents) understood a lot about the usefulness of study, but at that time, my parents must finish their study at a low level. So, my parents tried to explain to us children about the importance of study. So, children are really
interested in studying. (School girl, high school B, self-managed video interview)

Given that parents and caregivers in Cambodia are the primary decision-makers regarding school attendance (Nich, 2015; Room to Read, 2011), families’ positive educational values were critical to the girls’ participation in school. According to a group of school girls, families communicated that they valued education through “giv[ing] the girls a warm house (loving home); encourag[ing] the girls to study; and giv[ing] the girls good advice to help solve problems” (jigsaw puzzle activity). Sometimes this involved general encouragement to study. Chariya, a law student, for example, described how “They (my parents) said to me, ‘Don’t worry, you only try to study’. They were so happy when they saw me try to study”. Other participants described their parents as providing advice: “[They] provided good advice to me to fight and try to study more” (school girl, high school B, self-managed video interview). Parents also communicated their value of education by negotiating the constraints of female domesticity. Mom, a school girl, explained, “My parents give me the chance to study. They don’t stop me from studying to do housework or help with some other work” (high school B, questionnaire). In Mom’s case, familial capital involved her parents placing more importance on her studies rather than her ability to fulfil domestic duties. Mom’s narrative echoed the findings of two studies (Eng, 2012; Nguon, 2011) where Cambodian girls were more likely to do well at school if they were not allocated domestic chores that interfered with their schoolwork.

Familial capital in the examples above thus included ‘non-monetary’ resources – advice, encouragement, emotional support – which the school girls and tertiary women felt were important to their remaining in school. In some instances, the

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12 As noted in Chapter Five, some of the quotes used in this thesis derived from group data collection activities where the speaker was not identifiable. In these instances, the generic markers of ‘school girl’ or ‘tertiary student’ have been assigned.
participants’ families were considered as “unconventional” (Rogers, 2014, p. 63) by others in the community. Ary’s aunt, for instance, stopped sending her children to school because of financial constraints and thought Ary’s parents were unusual in their continued support of Ary’s schooling:

My aunt’s children dropped out of school. They (my aunt and uncle) did not allow their children to go to school which is the opposite from my family. And they asked why my parents allowed me to go to school when my family’s situation is also poor. (Law student, university B, group interview)

Although Ary’s aunt apparently questioned the benefits of formal education, familial capital in this study did include extended family members, such as grandparents, aunts, and uncles who imparted additional knowledge and advice. Most notably, uncles emerged as active promoters of girls’ educational engagement. In Noy’s case, her two uncles stepped in during times when she felt despondent about her studies:

I have two uncles who support and encourage me to study. One uncle is a teacher so he knows about the value of studying, so he encouraged me to study more and more. So when I feel like I don’t want to study or feel hopeless, my uncle always motivates me. And my other uncle stays in Siem Reap, and he encourages me to study too. (School girl, high school A, member check discussion)

Noy’s uncle’s knowledge and skills as a teacher and her other uncle’s encouragement provided her with an additional source of motivation beyond that of her immediate family. Other examples included Kaliyan’s uncle who advised her about which major to pursue at university, and Irin’s uncle and aunt who paid for her extra English language tuition whilst she was at secondary school. In yet another example, Monica’s uncle (who is of similar age to Monica) shared academic knowledge with her whilst they were both studying at school.
When I studied in grade 5 or grade 6 I used to ask the exercise from my uncle... At the time I always asked him because I was so stupid so I wanted to practise (laughs). And he always explained to me about this and about that.

(School girl, high school B, member check discussion)

Monica’s relationship with her uncle and the other girls’ and young women’s talk about various family members draws attention to ‘non-monetary’ resources, such as encouragement, wisdom, skills, and social contacts as promoting girls’ educational persistence.

Familial capital in the form of siblings’ sacrifices provided the participants with “lessons of caring and coping” (Listman, Rogers, & Hauser, 2011, p. 285) and emerged as the second dominant example of familial capital in this study. More than half of the school girls and tertiary students, including Theary, my research assistant, had siblings who had financially supported their schooling. But this financial support had often come at a price. As Edwards Jr et al. (2014) point out, in Cambodia it is not uncommon for older siblings to drop out of school in order to financially support middle or younger siblings’ schooling. Sam Neang’s sister, for example, forfeited her own schooling to help Sam Neang’s further studies: “My supporters are my parents, [but] especially my sister because she stopped study to go to [work in the] factory to support my study” (finance student, university A, group interview). Sam Neang went on to say, “I want to cry when I talk about my sister.”

Likewise, the young tertiary women who had had similar experiences were acutely aware of their siblings’ sacrifices. During a group interview, Pich became upset when describing her sibling’s support. Theary, my research assistant, explained that whilst Pich was in “grade 7, her younger sister dropped out [of school] because she (the younger sister) must go to work to earn [money] and support Pich’s studies, and her older brother tried to earn money to support her too”. Theary went on to explain that the other young women said, “that they
only listen but they want to cry because their story is similar” (university A, group interview). The emotional and financial sacrifices made by siblings also dominated Rogers’s (2014) study of six university women in Cambodia. She noted that siblings filled the void, emotionally and financially, when parents were either unable or unwilling to support their daughters.

Contrary to other literature which reports that boys are generally favoured over girls when financially constrained parents need to make the decision about who to send to school (USAID, 2006; Velasco, 2001), some girls and young women in this study described how their brothers had dropped out of school and sought paid employment in order to support their sisters’ education. For example, Theary (my research assistant) explained that:

Pich’s younger brother gave up school because he would like to help the family, so he migrated to work in Korea. And because she studies at university and no one can earn much money to support her family, he decided to stop school…the family didn’t want him to stop study, but he decided by himself.

Pich’s younger brother was one of many young Cambodian men seeking migrant work to support their families (Bylander, 2014). UNESCO (2015) reports that in low-income countries, “many boys leave school early due to poverty and the obligation or desire to work” (p. 27), but the young women’s accounts in my study suggest an additional motive; that is to support their sisters’ schooling. Thavary described how her three brothers did not complete their schooling, but instead “They found work to find money for me and my younger sister” (Law student, university B). Akara, a teacher trainee, explained the motive behind her brother’s decision to fund her education:

My older brother used to study in the same class with me. But he stopped studying since he was in grade 7. He went to earn money to support my study because my mother cannot support me at all…He doesn’t want me to meet
difficult things. He wants me to study a lot because he thinks that it is not easy for a girl to find a job outside. But for him, he is a man. So, it is easier to find a job outside. So, he decides to stop studying for me. (Vocational training centre, group interview)

The sacrifices made by participants’ brothers, like those of Thavary and Akara, challenged the altruistic discourse that is predominantly assigned to Khmer women (Brickell & Chant, 2010), and problematised the construction of girls rather than boys as the bearers of “goodness and selflessness” (Cobbett, 2014, p. 313). Thavary and her younger sister were able to continue their schooling due to the altruistic behaviours of their brothers whilst Akara’s brother was cognisant of broader gendered constraints regarding limited employment opportunities for women in Cambodia. His decision to support her schooling disrupted the dominant discourse that ascribes emotional labour and care work to women (Brickell & Chant, 2010). Notably, only one comparable Cambodian study makes specific reference to brothers’ involvement in girls’ education (see Rogers, 2014).

Familial capital thus enabled girls’ educational persistence through the nurturing of educational values; access to resources of extended family members; and demonstration of caring and coping. Familial capital included ‘non-monetary’ resources such as encouragement, reduced domestic chores, and advice, and was valuable in facilitating girls’ participation in school. Familial capital also addressed the participants’ financial struggles as immediate and extended family members provided various sources of financial aid to support girls’ ongoing access to school. A notable finding in this regard was the sacrifice made by siblings, often to the detriment of their own schooling. Brothers, in particular, displayed a duty of care which ran counter to discourses of female altruism (Brickell & Chant, 2010) and complicated patterns of gender inequality regarding secondary school retention in Cambodia.
In the next section, I consider how social capital emerged in the data, and the resources that community members made available to the girls and young women in this study.

Social capital

The term ‘social capital’ refers to the resources provided by a person’s social and community network, beyond the family context (Yosso, 2005). In my study, social capital included the work of close friends, teachers, and NGO staff in facilitating participants’ access to education. Such people were a source of extra knowledge, encouragement, and advice, and at times, shaped the participants’ and their families’ perceptions regarding the value of education.

In this study, social capital emerged in two distinct ways with regard to supporting the girls and young women to continue their studies. First, in some instances, social and community networks provided crucial support for girls to remain in school when familial capital was insufficient (or inaccessible), for example, by promoting the value of education or providing access to additional resources, including emotional support. Second, social capital provided instrumental resources not available within the participants’ families. These resources allowed the participants to overcome institutional hurdles within the education system and broader society. I begin by exploring how friends, teachers, and NGO staff promoted educational values that contributed towards participants’ ability to pursue their studies.

All of the girls and young women described the vital role friends played in supporting their access to education. The participants’ friends at school and at tertiary level were a valuable, and sometimes crucial, source of emotional support (e.g. through words of encouragement, guidance, and lending a sympathetic ear), academic knowledge, and advice. The close bonds of
friendship were evident in the school girls’ drawings (see Erika’s example below) and the girls’ and young women’s use of *bong srey* (older sister) and *oun srey* (younger sister) when referring to their friends.

According to the participants, school was both a place of learning and an important site for developing friendships and “solidarity together” (school girl). Good friends at school modelled positive behaviour and attitudes regarding education. Ri Mara Sorfea (a school girl) explained that, “[Good friends] don’t negatively influence me, [instead] they motivate me to study hard, they help me with my problems, and we have good conversations together” (high school A, visual narrative).

![Figure 12. Erika's drawing of her friends, taken from her visual narrative](image-url)
The participants in my study reiterated other studies’ (KAPE, 2008; No et al., 2012) findings that friends created a positive learning environment, encouraging students to attend school more regularly.

In addition to socialising, friendships in my study sometimes included advocating girls’ rights. Some girls described how friends had intervened when they were at risk of giving up their studies. An illustrative example of this was the intervention of Monica’s friends when she contemplated dropping out of school. Monica’s parents “didn’t understand about education” and provided “no encouragement”, but her friends convinced her not to give up her schooling.

Sometimes I want to drop out because of the situation in my family. In my family, there is violence between my father and my mother. Because my father always drinks wine, so when he drinks wine, and when he comes back from the farm he always makes a quarrel. Even though my family has violence like this, I don’t drop out because of my friend. My best friend helps me. When I have a problem like this means that I am not alone. I take this problem and discuss with my friend. And then they explained to me, “Monica, you should not stop studying or drop out of your studying because it is important for you. Even though your family is poor, you should not drop out. If you drop out, how will you support your family?” So I think about their advice to me. (High school B, member check discussion)

Monica’s story highlights how social capital can compensate for familial circumstances that threaten girls’ ongoing access to school. Monica’s friends positively shaped her attitude towards education, prompting her to consider education as a benefit, rather than a cost, for her family.

For GG Cola, a school girl and orphan, social capital was pivotal to remaining at school because it operated in place of any substantial familial capital. With no parents to guide her, GG Cola emphasised how she relied heavily on her friends for encouragement and academic support, saying that if she did not have friends
to help her it would be extremely difficult to do well at school. The vital role of social capital in lieu of, or in addition to, familial capital is captured in school girl Dara’s remark: “Our friends take care of each other and give warmth to us at school after our family” (high school B, visual narrative).

Friends’ warmth and support seemed to be even more important after the young women moved away from home to pursue their studies. Both groups of university students lived in donor-sponsored dormitory accommodation where four to six women shared a room, and “sometimes, shared food or study materials” (university A, group discussion) with each other. In this context, the tertiary women’s friendships and solidarity were amplified by their communal living arrangements. The young women’s roommates provided a source of knowledge and additional support in the absence of daily face-to-face contact with family members.

After friends, teachers at the state-run schools also contributed towards the participants’ and their families’ perceptions regarding the value of education. Sikha, for example, benefitted from her high school teacher’s intervention when she dropped out of Grade 9: “When I stopped studying my teacher went to meet at my home. She told me that ‘Sikha, you don’t do like this’” (university graduate and NGO representative, interview). Sikha’s teacher told her to seriously consider her future and the possibility of obtaining a university scholarship. Sikha took her teacher’s advice and returned to school, and later obtained a scholarship to study accountancy at a local university. Although Sikha’s mother was supportive of her education, Sikha returned to school following her teacher’s additional advice and expression of emotional support.

Teachers also promoted girls’ commitment to education when they enabled them to imagine alternative futures beyond being a wife and mother. Previous research has noted that female teachers are often key career role models for rural
school girls in Cambodia (Bredenberg et al., 2003). In my study, Irin (a management student) was inspired by the presence of a female English teacher in her village, because in “my village there are few people that get higher education like her…and she can earn money from her teaching”. Irin’s English teacher helped her envisage a possible future role for herself, and Irin’s family encouraged her to follow the example set by the teacher. Although Irin did not become an English language teacher, she did develop strong English language skills and secured a job at an NGO shortly after graduating from university.

The second way in which social capital emerged in my study was through the provision of instrumental resources not available through familial capital. In this regard, through social connections, families provided a source of social capital as well as familial capital. For instance, Ary’s parents’ social networks provided her with alternative resources that assisted her educational goals. She explained,

> When I finished high school, my parents didn’t have money to support me to go to the university, but the lucky thing was that my father’s friend knew this organisation [NGO scholarship provider] and he brought me to study here (in Phnom Penh). (Law student, university B, group interview)

In other words, Ary’s father’s friend provided access to additional resources outside of Ary’s immediate and extended familial network. Similarly, Samphy’s father, a teacher trainee, utilised his local connections within the teaching community to enable Samphy to occasionally attend free tuition classes. Samphy’s teachers would waive the ‘tuition’ fee in recognition of her father’s role in the teaching community. Ary’s and Samphy’s stories allow us to consider the role of social capital in navigating financial constraints, where access to free tuition and scholarships was crucial for these girls and young women to continue their education.
Overall, social capital in this study pertained to the participants’ own social networks and their access to resources that were not available within or through their families. For example, in some cases, supportive teachers went beyond their formal job description and allowed participants to bypass the ‘informal’ tuition fee that often excluded them from classes. Rachany, a finance student, described the caring behaviour of her teachers:

The teachers at my school are very kind. When I have no money, the teachers do not take money from me. They give me study for free because I’m from a poor family...and especially the teachers say that you are a good student you always try to study, I think you should come to study with me, I don’t care about money. (University A, group interview)

Five other students also spoke of their teachers’ generosity, countering the representation of Cambodian teachers in some literature as corrupt and uncaring (Dawson, 2010). In some cases, teachers offered direct financial support. For example, Mach (a finance student) said, “[When I was at school], my teacher taught part-time for me like biology, chemistry, Khmer literature for free, and sometimes my teacher gave some money to me”. Teachers’ generosity provided the school girls with instrumental support to continue studying whilst providing reassurance that they were not alone in their pursuit of education (Yosso, 2005). As Sam Neaung’s experience further highlights:

I have a good teacher and director in high school. He (the director) knows me, he supports me, he motivates me all the time. If...when he meets me he pays money for me to eat breakfast...and my teacher, she loves me. She comes to my house to meet my parents...sometimes she tells my mother that I am a good student so she loves me the same [as a] sister, so I am really happy. (University A, group interview)

Sam Neaung’s school director provided access to monetary resources and emotional support, while her teacher also strengthened her familial capital by
sharing Sam Neaung’s academic achievements with her parents. The literature constructs Cambodian teachers as corrupt based on their practice of charging informal fees (see Chapter Two), but like Brehm (2016), the participants in my study contended that some teachers avoided charging some (especially income-poor) students informal fees, where teachers were aware students could not pay.

Within and beyond the school context, NGO staff further facilitated the participants’ educational persistence by imparting additional information, and providing the participants with additional sources of social capital. As noted in Chapter Five, all of the tertiary students and 75% of the secondary school girls were beneficiaries of scholarship programmes which placed them in frequent contact with NGO staff. NGO staff facilitated life skills workshops, provided information about scholarships, and interacted with girls in their local communities. For example, Chanvatey (a law student) learned coping strategies from an NGO staff member, which were pertinent to her continued studies:

> When I studied in high school […] I know sister [name] from Mondulkiri province and she is indigenous people and when she did training in the community she shared a lot of idea about the background of education that she studied in Phnom Penh. She spoke about how it was difficult for her and it was challenging and how she resolved the problem. I was interested and I want to follow her and I hope that I can become like that in the future.
> (University B, group interview)

Chanvatey’s interaction with the indigenous NGO worker allowed her to gain relevant knowledge about how a marginalised, indigenous female like herself could overcome societal constraints. In remote areas, social capital operated to provide knowledge and resources that families may have been unable to provide.

NGO staff also utilised their own social capital to overcome the gendered employment constraints faced by some of my participants. There are limited
formal employment opportunities for women in Cambodia (Ing & Ghebreab, 2012) and the prevalence of nepotism is a concern for many young graduates from rural areas who have no social connections in the business sector (Kluttz, 2015). To overcome such barriers, staff at the locally-run NGO devised a programme to introduce female graduates to the business community:

We invited them (local businesses) to have a meeting and then we promoted our (female scholarship) programme to them and they felt that [our NGO] supports the poor girl so when they had an opportunity to have new staff, they came to [us]... and we sent them the name list of our students and they gave priority to our students. (Pheakdei, NGO representative, interview)

The female graduates’ social capital increased as a result of this intervention, and nearly all of the young women I interviewed from the small urban university had secured full-time employment when they graduated in 2015.

In summary, in my study, social capital emerged in girls’ access to support from friends, teachers, and NGO staff. Yosso’s social capital permits a deeper exploration of students’ social networks and how these may facilitate participation in school. Friends emerged as a particularly important source of emotional and instrumental support which compensated for deficiencies in familial capital on certain occasions. In this regard, my study contrasts with other studies of girls’ and women’s educational persistence where friends are absent or not mentioned (e.g. Burridge et al., 2015; Warrington, 2013; Warrington & Kiragu, 2012). The participants also accessed social capital through their connections with teachers and NGO staff who provided them with necessary information, and additional models of “caring and coping” (Listman et al., 2011, p. 285). In my study, girls’ accounts of teachers’ support for them to remain in school contested other research which reports that communication between schools and parents is rare in Cambodia (Sao, 2012).
The following section focuses on how friends, teachers, NGO staff, and family were also a source of aspirational capital for my study’s participants.

**Aspirational capital**

Aspirational capital refers to people’s aspirations and hopes for the future (Yosso, 2005). Aspirational capital is fostered within familial and social networks through encouragement and the presence of role models. Parental aspirations in this study included a desire for daughters to escape poverty and hard manual labour by securing “a good job”. The girls’ and young women’s aspirations also included a desire for a professional career, but tended towards “collective aspiration[s]” (Conradie, 2013, p. 210), for example, financially supporting their families and assisting others in their communities. My participants also expressed wider community aspirations, including altering women’s role beyond the realms of wife and homemaker, and promoting women’s leadership. In my study, participants’ determination to pursue their education was shaped by their future hopes and goals.

All of the participants spoke about their ambitions for the future, and noted how goals had motivated them to remain in school. In their visual narratives, the school girls portrayed their future selves as doctors, teachers, policewomen, nurses, tour guides, and engineers; whilst in the card sorting activity, three-quarters of the young tertiary women rated ambition as most important to their continued studies. For many of the participants, aspirational capital was closely bound up with their familial capital. For example, Mliss (an accountancy student) said,

> I live only with my grandparents. So my grandmother told me that I must continue my studies… and if I study hard I can get a good job to do in the future because my family is very poor. So if I don’t study, then I still am poor more (remain poor)… and when I finished high school, my grandmother
wanted me to take a scholarship exam to get a scholarship… I decided to participate… and now I achieved this. (University A, group interview)

Mliss’s narrative illustrates how community cultural wealth is based on multiple forms of capital. Mliss’s aspirational capital was nurtured by her grandmother’s belief in the value of education. Mliss also benefitted from her grandmother’s knowledge about available scholarships (which she may have gleaned from NGO staff who visited the community) and encouragement to participate in the scholarship process (social capital). And Mliss, like other girls and young women in this study, was encouraged by family (familial capital) to develop her own aspirations. In contrast to Mliss’s example, Kaliyan’s argument was that girls and young women needed to maintain educational aspirations as a tool of resistance and perseverance in the event that family circumstances changed:

If we do not have ambition, then when our family says we should stop studying… we will stop. But if we have ambition, we can give them the reason why we study… And so our family will say, ‘oh yes, we support your idea!’ (Accountancy student, university A, group interview).

As noted in the previous chapter, the girls’ and young women’s aspirations were primarily but not solely embedded in a discourse of female altruistic behaviour, such as improving their family’s financial situation. However, the participants’ aspirations also included a desire to contribute toward their local communities:

In the future, I want to be a teacher. I want to share my knowledge with the young generation. (Chavy, school student)

She wants to share all knowledge that she has to the children. And especially, she wants to develop her community and she wants the children to be good people in the future. (Leap, teacher trainee)
The tertiary women, in particular, hoped to use their acquired knowledge and skills to address a range of issues. The law students wanted to “help all women to study” (Chariya); Rotha (an agricultural student) wanted to promote organic farming methods; Mach (a finance student) hoped to understand the economy in order to “increase people’s living” conditions; and others like Irin (a management student) wanted to “help the people” by working with an NGO. Participants’ altruistic motives were often underscored by a sense of responsibility and empowerment, as Chanvatey (a law student) explained,

I am the first woman who can study law in my community and I see so many problems that many people in my community, they don't know about the law. So I think when they have problem they don't know how to protect themselves. So I think when I study law and I know about law I want to work in an organisation or I want to be a lawyer so that I can help myself and I can help them too. (University B, group interview)

Chanvatey’s sense of privilege as “the first woman who can study law” in her community provided an imperative to use her knowledge and status to assist those who “don’t know how to protect themselves”. Her desire to assist others or make a positive change was shared by most of the participants who had experienced marginality based on their economic and/or gender status. Similarly, Shenila Khoja-Moolji (2015) also found in her Pakistani-based study that school girls aspired to help their families and communities through their academic achievements. Her study and the findings in my thesis extend Brickell and Chant’s (2010) discussion of family-centric female altruistic identities to include community-focused altruistic identities.

Lastly, the girls’ and young women’s aspirational capital challenged dominant gendered discourses in Cambodia that construct women predominantly as wives and mothers (see Chapters Three and Six). Their aspirations for enabling female identities were underpinned by a women’s rights discourse (discussed in...
detail in Chapter Six). Irin, a management student, stated emphatically, “A woman now has equal right like a man. We are women, but we have to be strong and we have to do like a man. We can get an education like a man”. Irin’s aspirations, based on a women’s rights discourse, included new possibilities where “a woman can also be a leader” (Irin, management student).

The participants contested the deficit view that, “Girls are perceived as [too] weak to work in a high position” (Leakana, NGO representative). Instead, they imagined alternative subject positions as women leaders where, for example, they could “run a business by [themselves]” (Nakry, management student). As the school girls stated, “Most girls would like to be a good leader and have power in the family and society”. Female leadership in Cambodia, however, remains low with women making up less than a quarter of political constituents, and representing only 13% of the country’s judges (Ministry of Women’s Affairs, 2015). Not surprisingly, Samphy, a law student, acknowledged that it would be a challenging task but she wanted “to be a judge” in the future. Like the young university women in Nich’s (2015) Cambodian study, many of the participants in my study were driven by a sense of injustice and a desire for change.

To summarise, in my study, aspirational capital facilitated participants’ and their families’ views of new possibilities through educational attainment. Aspirational capital was evident in the participants’ desire to provide financial stability for their families as well as to bring about change at a community and broader societal level. The girls’ and young women’s aspirational capital was also indicated through their use of a women’s rights discourse, where they positioned themselves as future leaders in Cambodia. In conjunction with familial and social capital, the participants’ aspirational capital allowed “for openings in agency to occur even when faced with gendered constraints to aspirations” (DeJaeghere, 2016, p. 1). In other words, their aspirational capital spurred the
girls and young women to develop strategies and seek assistance to overcome barriers to their education, namely, to draw on navigational capital.

Navigational capital

In this thesis, navigational capital refers to the girls’ and young women’s acquired skills and knowledge that enabled them to circumvent the barriers to girls’ education. Navigational capital may also help to explain how the girls and young women negotiated the constraining discourses discussed in Chapter Six. Navigational capital recognises “individual agency” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). As a concept, navigational capital aligns with DeJaeghere’s (2016, p. 4) argument that “agency is socially constructed”. Participants’ navigational strategies involved “people [finding] solutions” in order to continue their education (in the words of Ri Mara Sorfea, a school girl). The participants’ use of navigational capital contested the view of girls and young women as “passive victims” (Cobbett, 2014 p. 311), enabling them to overcome three physical hurdles to accessing education: the distance to school, poor quality teaching, and informal ‘tuition’ fees. I explore each of these in turn, beginning with the obstacle of commuting long distances.

As discussed in Chapter Two, rurally-situated secondary schools are sparsely distributed, resulting in long commuting distances that often deter students from attending school (KAPE, 2008; Velasco, 2001). Law student, Chanvatey, for instance, had to travel “at least 7 or 8 kilometres” from her home to school each day prior to entering university. For girls, travelling alone for long distances was “not safe” (Irin, management student), because, “In the rural area they don’t think about the accident, traffic accident because the way is not busy, but [they worry] for the bad man, the bad person” (Theary, research assistant). Safety concerns is a key reason why many girls drop out of secondary school in Cambodia (Fiske, 1995).
The school girls in my study revealed navigational capital with their development of a ‘safety-in-numbers’ approach. “If we go to study, we walk with a lot, many, students so it’s safer than if we go alone” (Many, finance student). Many went on to explain that, “If our friends stop studying [and] nobody goes to study with us, then we stop too, because if we go alone it’s not so safe”. In an earlier study, No et al. (2012) highlighted the positive relationship between school friends and school attendance. In my study, friends galvanised support to create a fear-free environment en route to school as well as within school.

To cover the long distances to school, students in Cambodia usually travel by bicycle, but not all families can afford a bicycle for each child. Whilst some students rely on their siblings to assist with transport to school (Edwards Jr et al., 2014), the school girls in my study relied more often on their friends to overcome the hurdle of commuting long distances. They revealed navigational capital in their pooling of transportation resources. As one school girl stated, “My friends at school always assist me to stay at school. For example, when I do not have a bicycle, they always come to fetch me to school” (high school B, self-managed video interview). The school girls either physically navigated their access to school by ‘share-riding’, or by financially contributing toward transport costs, as Nakry (a management student) explained, “I lived on the island...sometimes my friend paid some money for me for the ferry”.

Once at school, girls had to overcome the second barrier to education: poor quality teaching (discussed in Chapter Two). Whilst the participants were very appreciative of their teachers, the school girls did remark that it was difficult to do well at school “when the teachers don’t stay in class” (Dara, high school B, visual narrative) and “our teachers are not clear with their exercise, so they don’t know how to explain for us to understand” (Monica, high school B, visual
narrative). High rates of teacher absenteeism and poor teaching instruction have been associated with low student attendance and enrolment rates in Cambodia because parents often question the value of sending their children to school when little learning appears to take place (C. Y. Kim, 2011; Kim & Rouse, 2011).

Girls overcame the issues of poor quality instruction by initiating self-study groups or “study club[s]” where more competent students taught others. Law student, Chavanty, reflected on her time in school, saying, “After the class, [...] we can [take] time to teach each other. For example, if I know Maths, I teach them Maths and they teach me chemistry”. The school girls also informally assisted each other with homework exercises, for example, one said: “My friends can assist me to stay at school and help me to do homework. Because sometimes, I can discuss with my friends when I wonder about my homework” (high school B, self-managed video interview). Consequently, the girls were able to still gain academic knowledge when teachers were absent or teachers’ instructions were inadequate. As another school girl explained, “Our friends are our teachers because sometimes we do not understand all things. So, we need them to help us for explaining to do homework or an exercise when we have difficulty to solve it” (high school B, self-managed video interview). These navigational strategies echoed those used by the young women in Rogers’s (2014) study, who also experienced academic support from their high school friends.

The school girls also devised tactics to address the lack of academic assistance available from their parents or guardians. Cambodian parents commonly do not offer academic support to their children (Keng, 2004; Sao, 2012), because in some cases there is “nobody who has high knowledge or high education so nobody can help [us] to do homework” (Punthea, finance student). Where parents could not assist them, the participants sought the assistance of siblings. As two school students stated:
I will help to teach, do homework with my younger or older brothers and sisters if they do not understand. My siblings do the same for me too. They help to teach some homework that I cannot do or understand which is related to a formula or theory. (High school B, self-managed video interview)

For me, when I have free time, I and my sibling always do homework together to improve my knowledge more than before. (High school A, self-managed video interview)

Research on Cambodian students’ academic success (Eng, Szmodis, & Mulsow, 2014; Nguon, 2012; Sao, 2012) has predominantly focused on parents, but as with familial capital, the girls’ narratives also highlighted siblings as an additional source of academic support (navigational capital) within the home. Siblings’ support in navigating academic hurdles has not been mentioned in other studies on girls’ educational persistence (Nich, 2015; Rogers, 2014; Warrington, 2013; Warrington & Kiragu, 2012), but in my study, participants suggested that siblings assisted in addressing poor teaching instruction at school by providing educational assistance in the home environment.

Navigational capital was also evident in the university students’ accounts. One illustrative example pertained to the way in which one group of young women addressed their poor computer skills. Most university students are expected to have computer skills in order to complete assignments or conduct research. However, as the tertiary women explained, many teachers are unskilled in this area, and many young rural women are disadvantaged through limited access to computer skills (Nich, 2015). The young women at a small urban university were able to overcome this hurdle with the aid of their friend, Irin. Irin, a management student, developed a keen interest in computers when she moved to the city for her tertiary studies. With the help of an encouraging teacher, she excelled in her computer course and after class “she would go back to the dormitory and always showed other friends what to do with a CV or something.”
And then she formed a group called WTech club – Women in Technology” (Pheakdei, NGO representative). Irin’s success in forming the study group culminated in a donor-sponsored computer lab with ten computers for the young women to use, thus allowing the young women to further develop their computer skills.

The third barrier to education was the presence of informal ‘tuition’ fees. The school girls in this study devised two navigational strategies to evade the informal ‘tuition’ fees. First, the school girls or their friends would appeal to their teachers to forfeit the ‘tuition’ fee. Akara (a teacher trainee) said, “When we would like to study extra class [tuition classes] and we have not enough money, our friends go to ask or discuss with the teacher, and [the teacher] say ‘oh, free for her’” (group interview). Alternatively, the girls would negotiate a way to access the ‘tuition’ classes for free. As Mliss (an accountancy student) explained about her school days,

If I did not have money to pay the teacher, I asked the teacher if I can collect the money [for her/him]. So if I went to collect money from other students, I did not [need to] pay money for the extra class. (University A, group interview)

Mliss and Akara’s friends’ use of navigational capital demonstrated their agency in school contexts, challenging the image that is often associated with girls in Cambodia as passive (Ledgerwood, 1996; Smith-Hefner, 1993).

The second approach to circumventing the informal ‘tuition’ fees involved the participants pooling resources together. Girls who could afford to attend the tuition classes would later disseminate the lesson materials to their friends who had missed out.

When I studied at high school I had no money to study part-time with the teacher but my friends have the money and they study part-time with the
teacher. [Then] my friends teach me...And my friends say that I should come to study with them and they can teach me about something that I don't understand and I don't [need to] spend money. (Neary, management student)

For many of the girls, financial constraints were an ongoing challenge, but Neary’s example illustrates how girls drew on navigational capital by working together to ensure that those who were financially excluded from classes could still access education.

To conclude, the girls’ and young women’s navigational capital played an essential role in enabling them to circumvent barriers such as distance from school, poor quality teaching, and informal ‘tuition’ fees. They worked with friends and siblings to increase their access to education, and negotiated with teachers (sometimes, on behalf of each other) when financial constraints prevented them from accessing learning materials. The girls’ and young women’s accounts revealed a high level of agency, but this was exercised within, and in conjunction with, a supportive social network. In the next section, I explore how my participants also asserted new constructions of girlhood and womanhood through their use of resistant capital.

**Resistant capital**

Resistant capital appeared in my study when girls and young women revealed behaviours and attitudes that disrupted or recast constraining gender norms. It was also evident where the participants exercised agency while supported by familial capital, which functioned as a “protective factor” (Listman et al., 2011, p. 285). In particular, resistant capital was evident in the girls’ and young women’s articulation of alternative discourses of girlhood and their “ability to use multiple identities” (Trueba, 2006, p. xiv) as discussed in Chapter Six. In this chapter, I briefly examine other examples of the girls’ and young women’s oppositional moves that challenged the status quo (Yosso, 2005).
First, the participants resisted the construction of girls as ‘weak’ or ‘shy’ (Grace et al., 2015; Smith-Hefner, 1993) by displaying a strong sense of self-determination to remain in school. With refrains like “we must fight” and “I never give up”, the girls and young women actively reconstructed their identities as strong and resilient. They promoted the idea that a girl’s trajectory can be altered through “hard work” and “self-determination”. As Nakry (a management student) emphatically stated, “Every way that I can continue my studies, I should do. I must do”.

Second, the participants resisted deficit views regarding materially disadvantaged girls’ participation in education. In her narrative, Rachany (a finance student) mentioned how other people looked down at her because of her family’s socio-economic status. However, this served only to galvanise her determination to complete her studies:

> I have my own ambition to study at university, so although I am from a very poor family, I have no parents and other people look down at me, I never care. I don’t care about this. I think only that I want to have a high knowledge, I want to study. So I must do everything to continue my study. I do for myself.  
> (University A, group interview)

Similarly, other participants expressed a desire to defy neighbours’ negative views of girls’ education. Management student, Irin, described how her neighbours’ questioning of her motives for attending school spurred her on to succeed academically: “Everybody around me didn’t want me to study, but I did the opposite!” (group discussion). Rotha (an agricultural student) and GG Cola (a school girl) were also resolute that they would ignore protests from neighbours and continue their schooling:

> The neighbours said that I should stop study. If I study high level, I still cannot get a good job. They say like this, but I never consider this. I just listen to them, but I don’t think about it and I still kept studying until I passed my
exam and came to study at [tertiary level]. (Vocational training centre, 
member check discussion)

My neighbours always say, “[GG Cola], you should stop study because study 
is not necessary. It’s not important. You are poor so you should stop study 
and earn money”. But I think that their thinking is not good so what they say 
is what makes me have the willingness to keep going to study, more and 
more. (High school B, member check discussion)

GG Cola disagreed with her neighbours’ way of thinking and thus resisted any 
pressure to drop out of school. Likewise, Rotha deflected calls from her 
neighbours to give up her studies by ignoring their protests. Rotha went on to 
explain that she continued to ignore her neighbours’ protests even when she had 
to cycle a return trip of 80 kilometres each week to attend her vocational training 
course. Rotha, GG Cola, and many of the other participants reinforced their 
understanding of women’s rights (setthi neary) and positioned themselves 
counter to a view of girls as not worth educating.

School girl, Monica, and her friends went one step further, enacting resistance to 
deficit views of girls’ education by intervening when their friend dropped out of 
school. Monica explained that they spoke to their friend and then approached 
her parents to “especially give some advice to her family” in order to get the girl 
back into school. Monica and her friends took up resistant subject positions. 
Their ability to do so was often linked to their familial and social capital. For 
instance, when law student, Chariya, told her neighbours, “No, I don't want to 
get married - I want to study”, she had the full support of her parents. “My 
parents they said to me you said right, we want you to study. We don't want you 
to stop your study”, she said. In other words, Chariya’s parents consciously 
raised their daughter as a ‘resistor’ (Yosso, 2005).

The girls and young women also participated in physical displays of resistance. 
Lilja (2013b) argues that physical displays of resistance are a mechanism that

Page | 176
allows women to challenge gender inequality and alter preconceived notions of women’s role in society. The girls and young women accomplished this with the daily donning of a school uniform. They felt that a uniform was an important marker of their identity as school or university students.\textsuperscript{13} Ary said, “I think that they should have a uniform to identify them that they continue to study” (law student, university B, group interview). The participants also argued that the cost of the uniform was not a significant barrier to accessing school. Instead, the cost of the uniform was an expense they could bear as long as they could be identified as students.

In addition, the participants described modelling resistance to other young girls. As two university women stated:

\begin{quote}
Before we give advice to the girls, we, ourselves should be a good role model for girls...The girls can look at us and place us as a role model. And more thing, we should be a proud person for the girls, so the girls see we are a clever person and we do many, many, things in society. (Neary, university A, group interview)

We have overcome all the hard things and we can achieve our goal so girls should consider us as role models...because everyone here met a difficult thing but we can achieve so we say [to other girls], ‘If we can do, you can do too!’. (Kaliyan, university A, group interview)
\end{quote}

The young university women viewed themselves and were viewed by others as examples of success and models of positive educational outcomes. It seemed that through their physical presence in their communities, they were producing powerful new discourses and material possibilities in relation to girls’ education. As role models, Neary believed that young women like her who had successfully studied at tertiary level,

\textsuperscript{13} In Cambodia, students wear uniforms from primary through to tertiary level education.
...should share some ideas like how to make a timetable...and how to study easy without stress so the [younger] students can follow her and...they can get high scores in class and what they want to be in the future they can achieve. (University A, group interview)

Neary suggested that educationally successful girls and young women had a special responsibility to impart their knowledge about how to succeed, and model resistance to constraining gender roles and practices.

One caveat is necessary regarding the girls’ and young women’s use of resistant capital. The examples above may give the impression that the girls and young women could easily overcome institutional or other constraints that limited their access to education. But as school girl, Chavy, explained, “Sometimes we have stress and feel stressed”. The participants discussed stress related to ‘big issues’ such as financial constraints, “health problems” (Ah Ly Ya) and “violence in the family” (Chavy), and smaller issues, such as noisy classmates or neighbours (Ri Mara Sorfea & Tigercoco) or “not knowing algebra” (Anchaly). In Figure 13 below, GG Cola beautifully illustrated her state of mind concerning financial stress.

In her drawing, GG Cola depicted herself in a contemplative stance, head bowed and question marks floating up in the ‘thought bubbles’ above her head. As mentioned earlier, GG Cola was orphaned at a young age and at the time of this study, she lived with her older brother and sister (who are included in her drawing). GG Cola expressed (in the pink star attached to her visual narrative) that financial worries plagued her family. She said, “My brother and sister, they are farmers every day. They [do] not have a job to do so they can’t find money for feed their children and me to study”. Some of the other school girls’ drawings also illustrated the everyday difficulties of remaining in school with images of money (financial constraints), a clock (time constraints), and a sad, ill person (health issues and absenteeism).
To sum up, resistant capital allowed the girls and young women to challenge deficit views of girls’ education and constraining perspectives on the roles of women. Through exercising resistance, strength and self-determination they were able to stay in school. The girls’ and young women’s resistance was both discursive (reflected in how they spoke about themselves and schooling), and material (evident in their physical displays of going to school, wearing a uniform, and modelling the outcomes of their educational attainment). The participants were thus, active in positioning themselves as school girls and tertiary students who were capable of being, and had the right to be, in school and university.
Summary

In this chapter I have presented an overview of the sources of support utilised by Cambodian secondary school girls and young tertiary women who persisted at school. I drew on the girls’ and young women’s narratives about remaining in school which revealed a rich interplay between individual agency and strong familial and community support. The participants’ agency was evident in their navigation of institutional barriers and resistance to deficit discourses regarding income-poor school girls. However, the school girls did not exercise agency in isolation, but within a network of supportive family members, resourceful friends, caring teachers, and knowledgeable NGO staff.

All of the participants emphasised the importance of family to their continued studies. Familial capital was evident where family members (immediate and extended) stressed the value of education and provided access to vital resources, such as funds, time, and study materials; with the aim of supporting girls’ educational goals. Most notably, siblings played a pivotal role in financially supporting the participants’ schooling, often to the detriment of their own education. Brothers’ support for their sisters’ education contrasted with discourses which assume altruism is the sole preserve of girls and women (Brickell & Chant, 2010).

Friends, teachers, and NGO staff provided social capital, which operated in two distinct ways: in place of, or in addition to, familial capital; and as a source of instrumental resources not accessible via the participants’ familial capital. These resources allowed the participants to overcome institutional hurdles within the education system and broader society. In particular, friends emerged as an essential source of support when family where either unwilling or unable to support girls to remain in school. By highlighting how friendships supported girls’ educational persistence, my study contrasts with other research, which has
overlooked the role of friends in relation to girls’ education (e.g. Burridge et al., 2015; Nich, 2015; Warrington, 2013; Warrington & Kiragu, 2012).

The remaining three capitals were fostered within familial and social networks, and were intertwined to some degree. The participants’ aspirational capital was supported by family and community members’ encouragement to remain in education. The participants’ aspirational capital revealed both personal and “collective aspiration[s]” (Conradie, 2013, p. 210), including a focus on: financially supporting families, assisting others in the community, and altering deficit notions of girlhood and womanhood, especially the belief that women cannot be leaders. The school girls’ and tertiary women’s aspirational capital underpinned their navigational and resistant capitals; where they saw personal ambition as a tool of resistance and perseverance. Navigational capital enabled the participants to overcome three barriers to education: long commuting distances, inadequate teaching instruction, and informal ‘tuition’ fees. The participants often navigated these obstacles with the assistance of friends, but also demonstrated their own agency in the process. Individual agency, however, was most evident in the participants’ accounts of resisting deficit views of income-poor girls’ participation in education (as illustrated in Chapter Six).

Resistant capital also included physical displays of resistance such as attending school, wearing a uniform, and modelling the outcomes of their educational attainment. Overall, the participants’ accounts supported Yosso’s (2005) argument that income-poor families and their daughters (or children) are resourceful, and in my study, were able to promote girls’ education through the provision of non-monetary resources, such as strong social connections, educational and career aspirations, and the capacity to resist deficit perspectives.

In the following chapter, I extend the concept of community cultural wealth by considering the participants’ words of advice to key stakeholders involved in
girls’ education in Cambodia. The aim of the next chapter is to identify the roles and actions required of various stakeholders to enable girls to succeed ‘against the odds’ at secondary school. Specifically, I examine the community approach needed to foster girls’ ability to remain in school, bearing in mind the tensions surrounding multiple discourses of girlhood and womanhood discussed in Chapter Six.
Chapter 8
School girls’ advice to stakeholders in girls’ education in Cambodia
Introduction

In the previous two chapters, I explored the factors that constrained girls’ schooling, and how girls negotiated, resisted or circumvented multiple discursive and material constraints. In this chapter, I recognise the participants as experts in girls’ educational persistence. By doing the “work of hearing” (Jones, 2004, p. 64), I foreground the girls’ and young women’s voices to address my final research question: ‘What advice do Cambodian secondary school girls offer stakeholders involved in girls’ education?’

In this chapter, I draw on data from my second fieldtrip, including the school girls’ mind maps and advice posters (see Chapter Five), as well as group discussions with the young tertiary women. I worked with 11 groups of school girls at the two participating rural schools. Each group consisted of three to four students. The school girls were asked to articulate their advice to other girls and five stakeholders – families, neighbours, teachers, school directors, and the government – involved in facilitating girls’ access to education. For the tertiary women, I engaged in open discussions regarding their advice on how other girls could be helped to remain in school. All direct quotes are derived from the school girls’ advice, except where noted (e.g. some quotes from the young tertiary women have been included and are cited as such).

In the following sections, I focus on the various stakeholders’ roles in constructing girls as worth educating and promoting discourses of girls’ educational worth in Cambodia. I also explore the school girls’ advice to stakeholders regarding discursive and material barriers to girls’ education. Specifically, I foreground the school girls’ suggestions as to how the Cambodian government, teachers, school directors, families, and neighbours may promote the value of education and support girls to remain in school. Finally, I consider
girls’ agency and vulnerability in relation to these stakeholders’ (in)actions in relation to girls’ education.

Before considering the research findings, it is necessary to add one stipulation regarding the stakeholders in girls’ education in Cambodia. In this chapter, I do not consider the role of NGOs, a key stakeholder group in relation to girls’ education. This is because during the initial round of data collection, the participants established that the NGOs already actively facilitated girls’ access and participation in schooling through the provision of scholarships and dissemination of the benefits of education at the community level. Secondly, researchers like Ear (2007) and McCormick (2012) have signalled that the presence of NGOs and the provision of international funding abdicates the Cambodian government from taking full responsibility for providing adequate schooling facilities. To illustrate this point school girl, Rika, stated that,

In Cambodia, education is limited because some girls and women want to continue their study but they do not have the possibility to study and the government does not pay deep attention to this factor, but except non-governmental organisations. (High school A, questionnaire)

Therefore, in this chapter, I focus on the role of government rather than NGOs in relation to gender equality in education.

I turn now to the participants’ advice to the government of Cambodia, followed by their advice to school staff, neighbours, families, and finally, other girls. I have structured the chapter in this way - beginning with a macro level focus - in order to highlight how structural or institutional influences may shape the actions and beliefs of other stakeholders at a micro level.
Advice to government

The participants’ central focus in their advice to government was to address the structural inadequacies that hindered the education sector. Specifically, the school girls advised the government to address material constraints, including poor infrastructure in remote areas, low teacher salaries, and poor overall governance (e.g. corruption). They also positioned the government as the primary stakeholder responsible for addressing gender discrimination.

First, the need to address poor infrastructure dominated the school girls’ advice to the government. Seven of the 11 groups of school girls advised the government to “build schools in remote areas [so that it will be] easy for children to go to school” (Chavy, Lorran, Chivy, Nick, & Ka Ka), and “provide accommodation or dormitories to students from remote areas or poor students who do not have the capacity to rent rooms” (Tigercoco, Srey Khouch, & Nita Koko). The girls also advised the government to provide adequate infrastructure such as “roads in remote areas to [allow] easy access for people living in [these areas]” (Chea, Dara, Jorani, & Davi). The school girls’ call for the government to address poor access to schools in rural and remote areas is not surprising. This issue has been raised numerous times in other studies on Cambodia’s education system and yet remains unresolved (see for example, Benveniste et al., 2008; Fiske, 1995; KAPE, 2008).

The school girls’ second piece of advice concerned the government’s need to address teachers’ low salaries. Six groups of school girls advised the government to “increase salaries for employees at education institutions” (Davi, Tara, Srey Pov, & Ta Ta). As mentioned in Chapter Two, teachers’ meagre salaries have been connected with high teacher absences and the practice of charging ‘tuition’ fees to students. The participants were acutely aware of the repercussions of teachers’ low salaries on students’ academic access and achievement (see
In their advice, the school girls, therefore, implored the government to address this barrier to education.

At a broader governance level, almost half of the school girls signalled that the Cambodian government needed to “abolish corruption” (Chavy, Lorran, Chivy, Nick, & KaKa) or at least “respect the anti-corruption law” (Monica, Ah Ly Ya, GG Cola, & Ant), as well as “educate people to respect the law” (Bopha, Botum, Mom, & Chan). Some of the school girls also signalled that better governance of the education sector was required where the government should “be more strict within the education sector (e.g. eradicate cheating on exams)” (Davi, Tara, Srey Pov, Ta Ta). As noted in Chapter Two, some changes have already occurred in this regard, with the implementation of anti-cheating policies and practices for Grade 9 and 12 national examinations.

The school girls focused on the government as the primary social actor responsible for shaping national rhetoric on gender equality. They implored the government to “promote girls’ education”; “promote women’s rights”; “create gender equality”; “reduce discrimination in society” and “provide priority to girls to get positions at work the same as men” (various school girls). School girl Ri Mara Sorfea’s observations reiterated the need for the government to address gender inequality in Cambodia. She stated that,


nowadays, the government provide equal rights between men and women by saying that the man can do something, the women can do too. But in remote areas, there is no promotion of girls’ and women’s rights because they don’t understand about the outside world. They always think about working a little and stay in traditional ways. They don’t think about a different future for the girls or women. (High school A, questionnaire)

In their advice, the school girls emphasised the need to confront injustices faced by girls and women in Cambodia. According to Noy, Chy Chy Ratana, & Ri Mara Sorfea, these injustices included exclusion (“Give girls a chance to participate in
developing the country”); harassment (“Advise the community to avoid violence against girls/women”); and exploitation (“Reduce sex trafficking of girls”). The school girls’ advice revealed the potential vulnerability of girls and women, and demonstrated that in order for girls’ and women’s full participation in society to be achieved, then “changing the institutional roots of gender inequality should be high on the policy agenda” (Branisa, Klasen, & Ziegler, 2013, p. 262).

Advice to school staff

The school girls’ main advice to school staff centred on the need to create a positive learning environment. The girls called for school directors to “reform the schooling environment so that students feel interested in going to school” (Tigercoco, Srey Khouch, & Nita Koko); improve communication and dissemination of advice; and eliminate gender-based discrimination. The school girls also advised teachers to improve their communication with students. Additionally, the school girls suggested teachers improve their teaching strategies; provide emotional support in the form of encouragement; and avoid discrimination against income-poor students.

Advice to school directors

First, nearly all of the groups of school girls in my study suggested that school directors need to take responsibility for improving the school environment. In particular, they advised school directors to provide academic incentives and better learning opportunities for students. For instance, Davi, Tara, Srey Pov, and Ta Ta, suggested that school directors should “provide awards to motivate outstanding students”. According to Theary, the schools she worked with did not give out awards to recognise students’ academic achievements. Yet, two groups of school girls felt that schools should “provide a gift to outstanding students” (Ri Vera, Alic, & Ann) as a way to motivate students to study hard.
Another group suggested that school directors should “create and add more study programmes such as music, art, singing, technical drawing, and music materials (e.g. guitars)” (Erika, A Sang, & Thaily), implying a shortage in art-based subjects at their school. At the same school, Tigercoco, Srey Khouch, and Nita Koko asked school directors to ensure that schools “have enough testing materials for teachers and students to learn about the lessons”. It was not clear what ‘testing materials’ the school girls referred to, but it may be possible that the school was short of curriculum materials (e.g. textbooks) or assessment materials, or both. In this case, the girls’ school was ‘more rural’, had recently appointed a new school director, and according to Theary, did not have strong ties with the local office of the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport. I also observed that this school’s library books had been discarded in the corner of one of the administration rooms, soiled and not easily accessible. These factors may have impacted the girls’ schooling experience and thus shaped their advice to school directors. In this regard, the girls’ advice could be read as relevant to government, and not just school directors, as it highlights the need to recognise and address the material constraints faced by rural, remote, and/or resource-poor schools.

As part of the school girls’ focus on improving the learning environment, they advised school directors to “create main rules to provide strict school organisation” (Chavy, Lorran, Chivy, Nick, & KaKa) and “be strict with school rules” (Bopha, Botum, Mom, & Chan). According to the school girls, schools needed more structure and tighter management. The school girls remarked that the learning environment was often not ideal because when teachers failed to turn up to class their students would play loudly outside, disrupting any classes that were being taught. In other words, girls’ (and boys’) learning opportunities were hindered by poor governance and management; a factor which needed to be addressed in order to keep students in school.
Erika, A Sang, and Thaily’s advice poster below (Figure 14), visually captures the overall sentiment of how the school girls viewed ideal school directors; namely, as benevolent, professional, and knowledgeable. In their drawing, the school director is smiling, wearing a button-up shirt and long trousers, and posing in a stance that implies guidance and authority. The fact that the school director is male is not surprising given that “school directorship remains a strongly male-dominated post” (Benveniste et al., 2008, p. 18; MoEYS, 2016).

![Advice poster to school directors by Erika, A Sang, and Thaily](image)

Figure 14. Advice poster to school directors by Erika, A Sang, and Thaily

The second central message to emerge from the school girls’ advice was their positioning of school directors as disseminators of advice and knowledge. The school girls implored school directors to “provide advice and good ideas to students” (Chavy, Lorran, Chivy, Nick, & KaKa) or “create seminars at school
for sharing knowledge” (Davi, Tara, Srey Pov, & Ta Ta). The school girls’ advice indicated that knowledge sharing or mentoring was not common among school directors and students. My interview with NGO representatives, Pheakdei and Chaya echoed this point. Pheakdei stated that students often “feel hopeless” because there is often no career counselling or advice about study strategies available to students. The young tertiary women reinforced this point and stated that students often had no goals to help guide their learning and subject choices. The lack of adequate guidance at school left some students with few sources of educational or career advice, particularly if their families were not equipped with the necessary knowledge or experience of further education. Edwards Jr et al. (2014) correspondingly argued that students in Cambodian high schools receive little or no career guidance or further education advice to pursue their aspirations.

The school girls added that school directors needed to improve their level of communication with families and report on students’ absenteeism. Such concerns were also highlighted in Sao’s (2012) study, which found that, aside from monthly student ranking reports, other communication between schools and parents is rare. The school girls in my study suggested that better school-home communication is needed. Evidence of the benefits of school-home communication was highlighted in the previous chapter with the example of Sikha’s teacher who convinced Sikha to return to school after she had dropped out due to her mother’s illness and inability to work. Moreover, Benveniste et al. (2008) suggested in their Cambodian study that education quality may be improved through regular communication between schools and students’ families whereby schools would be more accountable to parents regarding school expenditure and teacher performance. School-home communication could also further help develop families’ understandings of the value of
education – a concern that emerged in the school girls’ advice to families and neighbours.

In their advice to the government (above), the school girls mentioned the need to address community level violence against women and girls. In their advice to school directors, the girls exposed the seepages of gender-based violence into the school environment. Most notably, Noy, Chy Chy Ratana, and Ri Mara Sorfea suggested that school directors “should tell boys to reduce violence against girls”.

Theary, my research assistant, explained that attacks on girls by male students were not uncommon within schools. She provided one example that took place just two weeks prior to my second visit. According to Theary, a male student had brutally attacked his girlfriend whilst at school. It was unclear where the teaching staff were when the incident took place. The girl’s friends were unable to successfully intervene, but one of her friends was able to video-record the abuse on a mobile phone. The victim’s friends then provided the video footage to local police who subsequently arrested the male student. Whilst this example of violence at school highlights the need for school staff to work proactively to foster safe environments for girls and all students, it also demonstrates girls’ creative capacity to respond to gender-based violence when school staff fail to do so.

The school girls in my study highlighted the need to address a range of specific discriminatory practices at school. For instance, Noy, Chy Chy Ratana, and Ri Mara Sorfea advised school directors to not “discriminate against girls” and instead “give girls a chance to participate in programmes the same as boys”. Other school girls suggested that school directors need to address gender inequality in education by “provid[ing] good opportunities for girl students before boy students [and] creat[ing] a woman consultant to make it easy to
discuss girls’ issues” (Erika, A Sang, & Thaily), as well as “find scholarships for
 girl students” (Ri Vera, Alic, & Ann). The girls’ advice revealed their views of
 Cambodian school settings as currently favouring boys, marked by gender-
 based discriminatory practices, and providing few women role models or
 mentors for female students.

Advice to teachers
The school girls’ advice to teachers focused on teaching quality, role modelling,
 emotional support, and discriminatory practices. All the school girls touched on
 the subject of teaching quality. They requested that teachers address (teacher)
 absenteeism - “Teach students full time” (Tigercoco, Srey Khouch, & Nita Koko);
 inadequate instruction - “Tell students about the key points of the homework
 and how to resolve the exercise” (Bopha, Botum, Mom, & Chan); and poor
 classroom management - “Respect the rules when teaching, don’t be late”
 (Anchaly, Rika, & Na Na). They suggested that teachers should alter their
 teaching approach to ensure that it was more informative and student focused.
 In particular, seven groups of school girls advised teachers to “explain to the
 students clearly” (Bopha, Botum, Mom, & Chan). Monica, Ah Ly Ya, GG Cola,
 and Ant challenged the teacher-centred approach used in many Cambodian
 schools and stated that teachers should “provide students with a chance to share
 their opinion”.

In addition, the school girls advised teachers to “be good role models for
 students” (Bopha, Botum, Mom, & Chan). This advice can be understood in two
 ways. First, the school girls reinforced the perception that teachers are “role
 models of proper behaviour” (Czymoniewicz-Klippel, 2017, p. 329). But their
 advice to be good role models also indicated that some teachers were not viewed
 in this light by some participants; a sentiment that has been echoed by parents
 in other research on education in Cambodia (see for example, Tan, 2008). The
 importance of teachers’ positive role modelling was underscored in the school
girls’ advice that teachers should provide emotional support and reinforce the value of education. For instance, Chea, Dara, Jorani, and Davi advised teachers to “encourage students who drop out to return to school”, and Monica, Ah Ly Ya, GG Cola, and Ant suggested that teachers “help students when they encounter a problem, like when they have a financial problem”. Ultimately, the school girls asked teachers to “have good communication with students” (Srey Much, Lara, Champei, & Tam) where teachers “follow up on students’ studies and absenteeism and find out about the family situation to know what difficulties [the students] may have in their home life” (Erika, A sang, & Thaily). In other words, the school girls urged teachers to be both advocates for their students and advocates of education.

Figure 15. Poster of advice addressed to teachers

In the anonymous poster above (Figure 15), these sentiments are portrayed in the illustration of a teacher giving clear instructions in front of the
blackboard/whiteboard, and another teacher smiling and looking kindly upon a school girl. The school girls’ advice about the importance of a compassionate relationship between students and teachers is emphasised in the heart-shaped symbols that contain the words of advice: “Students need teachers to explain more (elaborate)”. Other text in the poster reiterated the student-teacher relationship with regard to good role modelling, encouragement, and strong communication skills. At first glance, the drawing of a girl sweeping appears to reproduce the female domesticity discourse described in Chapter Six. But the accompanying text advised teachers to encourage students to “Keep the environment clean”. This advice echoed the sentiments expressed by the school girls during the first round of data collection regarding their pride in having a clean and attractive environment for learning (Chapter Six). Likewise, it reiterated the views of students in a study on attendance and dropout by KAPE (2008), who remarked on the poor condition of their schools’ environments, and added that a clean learning environment would improve their ability to study whilst at school.

Finally, the school girls advised teachers not to “discriminate according to gender and class or status” (Ri Vera, Alic, & Ann) and “not favour only one student” (Tigercoco, Srey Khouch, & Nita Koko). In particular, three groups of school girls at the same school advised teachers “[not to] discriminate against poor students”. Their advice thus highlighted the gendered and class-based constraints rural girls faced within the school environment, and their advice to neighbours (next) echoed similar concerns.

**Advice to neighbours**

The central message in the school girls’ advice to neighbours was the need to offer collaborative support for girls’ education. Notably, all but one group of school girls suggested that neighbours should provide emotional support in the
form of encouragement, motivation, and guidance “about how to be good students, friends, etc.,” (Monica, Al Ly Ya, GG Cola, & Ant). The school girls also called for neighbours to recognise the value of education rather than discouraging children from studying.

In order to garner support for girls’ education, the school girls advised neighbours to reject their deficit views of girls in relation to education and fixed ideas of gender roles. For instance, Tigercoco, Srey Khouch, and Nita Koko reported that neighbours would tell “people who are studying to stop studying and get married or to find a job”. The school girls challenged neighbours regarding girls’ educational worth and instructed them “not [to] look down at girls who are studying” (Noy, Chy Chy Ratana, & Ri Mara Sorfea). Correspondingly, neighbours were advised to reject constraining ideals such as “the idea [that] women cannot do anything or go far away from home” (Davi, Tara, Srey Pov, & Ta Ta).

According to the participants, neighbours who lacked an understanding of the value of education (see Chapters Six and Seven) circulated “negative comments and ideas towards those who [were] studying” (Tigercoco, Srey Khouch, & Nita Koko). The school girls suggested that families should instead work together to promote the value of education. For instance, neighbours could “inform parents if children don’t go to school” (Bopha, Botum, Mom, & Chan); “advise students’ families to keep students in school and not drop out” (Monica, Ah Ly Ya, GG Cola, & Ant); and “convince girls’ parents and explain about the difficulties that will happen if girls have no knowledge or high education” (Erika, A Sang, & Thaily).

In their advice to neighbours, the participants reconceptualised the reciprocal nature of rural life in Cambodia (S. Kim, 2011) by suggesting a collaborative community-based approach to improving school attendance. As an example, the
young tertiary women suggested that school or tertiary graduates could run workshops in their home villages about study skills and timetabling. This would provide children with necessary study strategies as well as access to some positive role models in their neighbourhood/village. According to four groups of school girls, a collaborative approach may even include villagers who “help each other when they have problems” (Tigercoco, Srey Khouch, & Nita Koko) as well as material support where neighbours “help share some study materials when students have none” (Anchaly, Rika, & Na Na) or “motivate students by buying study materials [for them]” (Anchaly, Rika, & Na Na).

Advice to families

The school girls overwhelmingly advised families to provide emotional support, or (as one group put it) “power of heart’, encouragement, motivation, and strength” (Anchaly, Rika, & Na Na) to girls (and boys). They also underscored that families need to provide material support (i.e. money and study supplies). Four groups of school girls believed families need to avoid discriminatory or constraining practices that negatively impact girls’ (and boys’) schooling. Notably, the school girls’ advice to families focused on the needs of all children and only mentioned girls specifically when they suggested that families contest constraining gender practices or ideals.

First, the school girls advised families to provide children with motivation, guidance, and a “love [for] studying” (Monica, Ah Ly Ya, GG Cola, & Ant). They drew on a discourse of nurturing which was emphasised in some of the school girls’ poster designs, such as Figure 16 below. In Figure 16, the advice was placed within the shape of a colourful flower where one interpretation could be that parent’s nurturance and motivation may help girls (and boys) flourish at school.
According to the school girls, motivation may include families’ encouragement of children’s school attendance and promotion of strong study ethics. For example, Monica, Ah Ly Ya, GG Cola, and Ant suggested that “when the children are not studying or being lazy, parents should tell them to study hard”. The school girls added that families should take a more active role in their children’s education. They said that families “should follow-up on children’s studies” (Bopha, Botum, Mom, & Chan); “coach children and explain what the children do not know” (Erika, A Sang, & Thaily); and “help children with their homework” (Chea, Dara, Jorani, & Davi). The latter piece of advice may be
difficult for some parents who do not have an adequate level of education to assist their children’s studies (see Chapter Two). It may also require a cultural shift in the way parents involve themselves in their children’s education because Cambodian parents generally do not provide academic support to their children (Keng, 2004; Sao, 2012; Smith-Hefner, 1993).

Regarding families’ involvement in material support, all but two groups of school girls urged families to “provide money for children to go to school” (Anchaly, Rika, & NaNa) and “support study materials” (Monica, Ah Ly Ya, GG Cola, & Ant). Another form of material support highlighted by five groups of school girls was families’ provision of time. The school girls suggested that families “provide children with time to study” (Davi, Tara, Srey Pov, & Ta Ta). The girls noted that families could achieve this by “reduc[ing] children’s housework when they are studying” (Chea, Dara, Jorani, & Davi) and not “allow[ing] children to do migrant work that will impact their studies” (Tigercoco, Srey Khouch, & Nita Koko). See Chapters Two and Seven for a discussion of Cambodian youth’s engagement in work, including the predominance of working away from home.

Lastly, Tigercoco, Srey Khouch, and Nita Koko, along with three other groups of school girls focused on advising families to “not do anything that will impact negatively on children’s studies”. Things that the girls identified as having a negative educational impact included family violence, early marriage, child labour, and gender discrimination. School girl, Chavy, explained that “[some] family living is miserable [with] family violence. [And] the family don’t consider and give value to the future of girls and women”. Families were thus advised to “not use violence in [the] family that impacts the girls’ future” (Noy, Chy Chy Ratana, & Ri Mara Sorfea), and to “not allow children to get married too young” (Erika, A Sang, & Thaily). The school girls were also concerned about parents or guardians who “think about traditional ways” (Noy, Chy Chy Ratana, & Ri Mara.
Sorfea) and the impact this ideal has on families’ decision making regarding girls’ continued schooling.

To illustrate families’ constraining ideals, Noy, Chy Chy Ratana and Ri Mara Sorfea drew on an old Khmer expression which states that women cannot do anything except move around the kitchen. Theary explained that the saying infers that women have limited capacity outside of home-related roles. Brickell (2011b) also noted that references to women’s domesticity were used by her Cambodian participants when they described women’s roles and (im)mobility. However, the school girls in my study dismissed the construction of girls/women as housebound and suggested that family members do the same. Ultimately, the school girls instructed families to give up constraining ideals of girlhood or womanhood in order to emotionally support girls’ schooling and reinforce the value of education.

Advice to other girls

The school girls drew on competing discourses in their advice to other girls wishing to remain in school. Their advice provided suggestions as to how girls can survive in school and push for change. Specifically, they advised other girls to develop a strong study ethic and demonstrate good “moral behaviour”. In addition, the school girls called for other girls to be brave, vocal and self-determined, characteristics that contest the usual submissive traits embedded in discourses of Cambodian girlhood (see Chapter Three).

The need for girls to have a strong study ethic dominated the school girls’ advice to other girls; all groups advised other girls to “study hard”. In particular, the school girls provided practical advice on how to develop a strong study ethic. For instance, they suggested that girls “should pay attention when studying” (Bopha, Botum, Mom & Chan) and “avoid distractions - focus on the task” (Davi,
Tara, Srey Pov, & Ta Ta). Monica, Ah Ly Ya, GG Cola, and Ant also suggested that girls should use their available time wisely, for example, advising girls to “prepare a study schedule” and “use break time to study” as a way to maximise the amount of time available for revising. The girls’ advice to use lunch or break times to study may reflect their own strategies to overcome the time constraints they highlighted in their advice to families.

Some participants gave advice that aligned the need to develop a strong study ethic with good “moral behaviour”. The participants suggested that school girls who are dedicated to their studies could maintain honour and be srei krup leakhana (a woman with good qualities) (Jacobsen, 2008). Tigercoco, Srey Khouch, and Nita Koko advised girls to “[not] waste time going for a walk or do something that has no advantage”, saying, “Girls, you should use your time to study and research the lesson and address your weak points”. Here the school girls reinforced the idea that socialising outside of the home was inappropriate but reframed the restriction as an opportunity for girls to develop their study skills. The school girls’ advice about study ethics reflected the belief that daughters can bestow honour on their families if they demonstrate a high level of dedication to their studies (Fiske, 1995; Ledgerwood, 1990); (also see Chapter Three). A similar view was held by other young educated Cambodian women in comparable studies who had deferred marriage and motherhood in favour of academic attainment (Brickell, 2011b; Nich, 2015; Rogers, 2014).

Considering the school girls’ apparent concern with women’s rights and gender equality in their advice to other stakeholders, it was surprising that they advised other girls on moral behaviour concerning female comportment. For instance, the school girls advised other girls to “have morality” (Monica, Ah Ly Ya, GG Cola, & Ant), “keep honour” (Srey Much, Lara, Champei, & Tam), and “avoid being materialistic” (Tigercoco, Srey Khouch, & Nita Koko). The school girls’ advice on maintaining morality can be read as contradicting their advice to other
stakeholders where they contested constraining gender ideals and practices. Perhaps the school girls’ promotion of “moral behaviour” articulated a way of finding leverage in local communities. For instance, if school girls demonstrated “respect for old people” (Chavy, Lorran, Chivy, Nick, & Ka Ka) and/or “good charity” (Monica, Ah Ly Ya, GG Cola, & Ant) then community members may be more accepting of girls who study. Moreover, their rejection of materialistic behaviours supports their earlier narratives on the negative effects materialism has had on girls’ continued schooling (see Chapter Six).

In contrast, seven groups of school girls advised other girls to “be brave” and resistant; characteristics that are in stark contrast to the ‘weak, quiet girls’ discourse embedded in discourses of Cambodian girlhood (Grace & Eng, 2015; Lilja, 2013b, p. 40). The school girls in my study advised other girls to “be brave to participate in any programme”; “be brave enough to ask questions when you are unsure”; and “be brave enough to share your opinion”. The participants’ remarks reflected their positioning as school girls who were brave on a daily basis as they navigated various obstacles to their schooling.

Summary

Overall, the school girls tackled a range of issues in their advice to six stakeholders involved in girls’ education. Their advice covered discursive and physical barriers to girls’ participation in education and society. The school girls’ words of advice highlighted the vulnerability of girls’ lived realities. But their advice was also frank and pragmatic, and demonstrated the girls’ agency. The girls’ advice can be considered as a form of “activism that creates new narratives about contemporary Cambodia” and girls’ place therein (Lilja & Baaz, 2017, p. 309).
First, the primary message in the school girls’ advice to the Cambodian government was the need to address poor infrastructure issues. These included the lack of secondary schools and adequate roads in remote areas, low teacher salaries, and poor overall governance of the country and education sector, including corruption. The school girls’ focus on education quality signalled the significant inadequacies that hampered students’ access to, and participation in, secondary schools in more rural and remote areas, as discussed in Chapter Two. In addition, the school girls drew on a girls’ and women’s rights discourse and charged the government with the responsibility of implementing policies to address gender-based injustices nationally.

Second, the school girls advised teachers and school directors to eradicate discriminatory practices, improve communication between staff and students, and ultimately create a positive learning environment for all students. The school girls advised school staff to abandon discriminatory practices that favoured boys and wealthier students. The school girls thus inferred that girls from income-poor families faced ‘double’ discrimination in school; namely, gender-based and class-based discrimination. In this regard, the school girls’ advice seemed at odds with the findings of other studies in Cambodian schools. In particular, the participants’ voices provided a counternarrative to the observations made by Grace et al. (2015) in their research on students’ and teachers’ attitudes toward gender equity in Cambodian schools. Grace et al. (2015) noted that teachers did not participate in any discernible discrimination when interacting with students within the classroom. The authors also argued that this lack of discrimination was despite the teachers’ strong held belief that the Chbap Srei should still be taught in schools. However, in my study, the school girls’ advice signaled that they had experienced various forms of discrimination in school.

In their advice to neighbours, the school girls drew on girls’ and women’s rights discourses with a specific focus on girls’ rights to education. The school girls
advised neighbours to adjust their negative views of girls’ educational worth and formal education. The school girls advocated instead for a collaborative community-based approach to improving school attendance, whereby neighbours provided encouragement, advice, and even material support to girls (and boys) who study.

The school girls called upon families to provide vital emotional support to all children wishing to attend school. The school girls believed that families needed to value education and emotionally invest in their children’s schooling. They also instructed families to allocate the necessary material support (i.e. money and study supplies) needed to access school. Additionally, families were advised to stop participating in discriminatory or constraining practices that negatively impacted girls’ (and boys’) schooling. This included gender-based discrimination such as allocating girls domestic chores in such a way that reduced their availability to do school work or requiring girls to marry too young). The girls also advocated for an end to family violence and child labour.

Lastly, the school girls addressed other girls and their advice revealed the complexities of what it means to be a school girl in contemporary Cambodia. For instance, they advised other girls to be brave and resistant, but also suggested that they should conform to constraining ideals of female comportment. First, other girls were advised to fully participate in the curriculum and share their opinions within the classroom. To do so, required other girls to be “brave enough” to resist constraining societal expectations of girls. The ‘brave girls’ discourse was powerful as it signalled the participants’ negotiation of discriminatory practices at school. The participants’ suggestions that girls should share their opinions and ask questions in class indicated that this was not necessarily normal or easy. Girls’ reservation in class discussions was observed in a Cambodian study by Grace et al. (2015). The authors noted that girls were more reticent than boys, less likely to offer up their opinions and needed to be
called upon by teachers to participate in class discussions. Boys on the other hand, actively participated and “were more likely to raise their hand to voluntarily ask or answer a question” (Grace et al., 2015, pp. 25-26). The school girls in my study sought to change girls’ constrained classroom participation. They called upon other girls to find their own space within the classroom by speaking out, and in doing so, to challenge society’s preference for quiet, docile girls (Derks, 2008).

Yet, the participants’ promotion of a brave, outspoken girls’ identity was complicated by their advice to other girls to maintain their families’ honour and their own morality. These contradictory messages can be read as reflecting the ‘messiness’ of girls’ subjectivities in contemporary Cambodia or their negotiation of multiple discourses of girlhood and womanhood (see Chapter Six).

In the next chapter, I extend my discussion presented here and consider what can be learned from the experiences and advice of girls and young women who persist at school. I also make suggestions for future research on girls’ educational persistence.
Chapter 9
Reflecting on girls’ educational persistence in rural Cambodia
Introduction

Girls’ educational persistence and Cambodian school girls’ experiences of accessing and participating in formal education are two underexplored areas of research. This research project has attempted to add to the knowledge on these two topics by investigating the resources that enable socially and materially disadvantaged secondary school girls to navigate multiple discursive and material constraints to girls’ schooling in rural Cambodia. This cross-cultural, feminist study recognised the 43 school girls and 23 young tertiary women who participated in this study as experts on girls’ educational persistence and as co-collaborators in the knowledge building of this thesis.

Contemporary Cambodia presented an axiomatic context for exploring income-poor girls’ educational persistence. The country has undergone remarkable economic growth since the Khmer Rouge regime in the late 1970s, but the education system has struggled to accommodate and adequately educate Cambodia’s burgeoning youth population (Brehm, 2017; Sovachana Pou, 2012; Sitha et al., 2016). Although near gender parity has been achieved at primary level (MoEYS, 2016), extremely low Grade 12 completion rates and meagre transition rates from primary to secondary school are a grave concern of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (2016) and other commentators on education in Cambodia (Benveniste et al., 2008; Brehm, 2017; Edwards Jr et al., 2016; KAPE, 2008).

As discussed in Chapter Two, in Cambodia there are six notable structural issues that inhibit children’s access to, and participation in, school. In rural areas, these structural issues are often more prevalent than in urban areas, leading to lower enrolment and completion rates for rural children (MoEYS, 2016). Teaching quality is the most notable concern and includes issues such as a shortage of teachers, especially in rural areas (Benveniste et al., 2008; Khieng et al., 2015),
unqualified teachers who have little opportunity to participate in professional development programmes (Benveniste et al., 2008, p. 53; McNamara, 2013; MoEYS, 2015; Tandon & Fukao, 2014), and high rates of teacher absenteeism (Benveniste et al., 2008; No et al., 2012; Sao, 2012).

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (2015) noted in their *Teacher Policy Action Plan* that insufficient numbers of graduate students elect to train as teachers and that the teaching profession fails to attract academically-strong candidates. One of the central reasons for teaching’s lack of appeal is the meagre wages paid to teachers. Teachers who have dependants are likely to live in poverty if they rely solely on their teaching wages (Benveniste et al., 2008; Tandon & Fukao, 2014), and often have to supplement their wages with second jobs and/or by charging ‘tuition’ fees to their students (Benveniste et al., 2008; Courtney, 2008; Dy & Ninomiya, 2003; Kim & Rouse, 2011; No et al., 2012). The ripple effect of teachers’ low wages is that teachers’ engagement in other paid work results in high rates of teacher absenteeism (Benveniste et al., 2008; No et al., 2012; Sao, 2012). Teachers’ high absenteeism has in turn been linked with poor student attendance and high dropout rates (KAPE, 2008). Teachers’ practice of charging tuition fees to supplement their salaries also limits the opportunities for income-poor students to access instruction and learning (Edwards Jr et al., 2016).

In addition to concerns with teaching quality, secondary school students’ attendance is hampered by long, and often unsafe, commuting distances (Benveniste et al., 2008; KAPE, 2008; Velasco, 2001). For income-poor students, insufficient financial resources combined with families’ reliance on children’s labour create a major hurdle to school attendance and persistence (Bray & Seng, 2005; KAPE, 2008; C. Y. Kim, 2011). For girls, school attendance and participation is often exacerbated by constraining discourses of girlhood and womanhood that
place an emphasis on female domesticity and question girls’ educational worth (see Chapters Three and Six).

The combination of poor quality instruction, inadequate infrastructure, income-poverty, and constraining discursive practices prevent many girls from transitioning to, and completing, secondary school in rural Cambodia. There is evidence of dwindling educational persistence; from an original cohort of 782,840 Grade 1 students (enrolled in 2001), only 6.3% of these students completed Grade 12 in 2014 (MoEYS, 2014). It is therefore imperative that we learn from those students who remain in school (see Hunt, 2008).

Paying attention to the voices of girls who remain in school

Guided by an ethos of doing the ‘work of hearing’ the school girls’ and tertiary women’s stories (Jones, 2004; Khoja-Moolji, 2015), this thesis has sought to explore the following five research questions:

1. What do Cambodian secondary school girls identify as the key challenges that make it difficult for girls to remain in school?

2. How do Cambodian secondary school girls overcome such challenges?

3. Which are the most common forms or sources of support utilised by Cambodian secondary school girls who remain in school?

4. What advice do Cambodian secondary school girls offer to other girls wishing to remain in school?

5. What advice do Cambodian secondary school girls offer key stakeholders involved in girls’ education?

The school girls and young tertiary women whose voices are captured in this thesis demonstrated their resourcefulness and agency during their involvement
in my study, whilst simultaneously highlighting the precariousness of educational access in rural Cambodia, and at times, vulnerability of girls who pursue an education. In order to do justice to the complex milieu of income-poor school girls’ educational journeys, this thesis has: (1) examined the multiple discourses of Cambodian girlhood and womanhood and how these impact girls’ schooling; (2) explored, via a community cultural wealth lens, how income-poor school girls managed to circumvent barriers to their schooling; and (3) foregrounded the school girls’ words of advice to six stakeholders in girls’ education to reiterate the changes required to better facilitate girls’ access to schooling. Overall, the findings provide a comprehensive overview of the discursive and material barriers to girls’ schooling in rural Cambodia and highlight the various mechanisms utilised by income-poor girls, their families and social contacts to remain in school. In particular, the findings confirm that whilst income-poverty is an immense barrier to girls’ continued schooling, “supportive families and social networks can encourage school persistence” (Zuilkowski & Betancourt, 2014, p. 475).

In Chapter Six, I examined the complex, multiple, and sometimes contradictory discourses of contemporary Cambodian girlhood and womanhood. The manifold ways the school girls and tertiary women spoke about their lived realities revealed that “understandings are multiple and shifting rather than unitary and fixed” (Cameron, 2001, p. 157). The girls and young women in my study spoke of dominant discourses of female domesticity that restricted female identities to that of wife, mother and homemaker. But they also revealed how they rearticulated and carefully negotiated these and other constraining ideals of girlhood and womanhood to enable alternative identities to emerge as educated school girl, vocational student, and university woman.

Most notably, the school girls in my study improvised the female domesticity discourse in a way that allowed them to ‘own’ their domestic actions. For
instance, within the school environment, girls may be called upon to sweep and tidy up their classrooms (Miske et al., 2010). However, in my study, the school girls reframed their domestic actions to produce an alternative view of female domesticity in the school context. They positioned themselves or girls who cleaned their school environment as dedicated, proud students who enjoyed improving their learning environment. The school girls’ improvisation of a dominant and constraining discourse revealed their agentic subjectivities (Andreotti & Dowling, 2004). In other words, the school girls (and young tertiary women) were not passively recounting their attitudes and beliefs but actively deploying versions of their experiences (Wetherell, 2003) in ways that reflected the contradictory cultural narratives about girlhood and girls’ educational worth in the Cambodian context.

The tertiary women in my study also negotiated the boundaries of the female domesticity discourse through their own careful production of a ‘girls’ educational worth’ discourse. They spoke of rejecting the conventional view that further education was superfluous to Cambodian women’s role as wife and homemaker. Specifically, some of the tertiary women described their mediation of the codes of conduct for women promoted in texts such as the Chbap Srei. This included deferring marriage in favour of pursuing further studies, and using formal education as a means to question constraining gender discourses. Many of the participants drew on a girls’ and women’s rights discourse to challenge deficit views of girls’ educational worth and circumvent constraining ideals of girlhood and womanhood. Most notably, the tertiary women’s demonstration of the tangible benefits of formal education, namely their employability, seemed to have manifested in an attitudinal shift within their communities regarding girls’ education. For example, the tertiary women explained that some of their neighbours had begun supporting their own daughters’ schooling. The tertiary women’s demonstration and promotion of the benefits of formal schooling,
combined with their neighbours’ shifting perspectives of girls’ educational worth, opened up a new subject position for the tertiary women; that of positive role model.

The girls’ and young women’s endorsement of girls’ educational worth was intimately tied up with their altruistic desires to help their families and communities. An initial examination of the discourses of female altruism in this study connected the school girls’ and tertiary women’s desires for academic attainment to income-earning potential, and a desire to support their families. While apparently taking up an altruistic subject position, the girls and young women also positioned themselves as educated and independent (future) career women. In other words, the school girls’ and tertiary women’s articulation of discourses of female altruism in this study revealed both personal and collective interests highlighting a degree of agency and autonomy, which exceeds the restrictions often associated with expectations of women’s altruistic behaviour (e.g. Kabeer, 1994; Kabeer, 1999a).

The participants drew distinctions between their own economic altruism and that of out-of-school working girls. The school girls and tertiary women drew on discourses of materialism when they spoke of girls who had dropped out of school to seek paid employment. They constructed out-of-school girls as non-altruistic and as srei aht leakkhanna (women with no good qualities), due to the girls’ perceived preoccupation with (personal) material possessions. The school girls and tertiary women in my study positioned out-of-school girls negatively because they had pursued short term material gain over an education.

Throughout this study, the school girls and tertiary women demonstrated a strong belief in girls’ educational worth and the benefits of formal education. Their accounts of remaining in school revealed a rich interplay between individual agency and strong familial and community support. In Chapter Seven
I drew on a community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005) to investigate the various sources of support or ‘capitals’ that enabled the school girls in my study to avoid dropping out of school. In this thesis, five of the six community cultural wealth capitals emerged in the school girls’ and tertiary women’s narratives of remaining in school. Linguistic capital was not included in this study because the ability to speak an additional language was not essential to remaining in school in Cambodia, although participants’ strong English language skills were connected to their career aspirations. Familial, social, aspirational, navigational, and resistant capitals emerged strongly in the data, providing nuanced insights into the factors that supported the school girls’ and tertiary women’s educational persistence.

All of the participants emphasised the importance of family to their continued studies. Familial capital in my study was provided by immediate and extended family members. Family members espoused the value of formal education and provided encouragement and advice (non-monetary resources). They also provided access to vital resources such as money, time, and study materials. The school girls and tertiary women recognised that families, (or parents), as gatekeepers to girls’ education, were key facilitators in allowing girls access to school. The findings also revealed that the participants’ siblings were particularly important actors in supporting their sisters’ continued schooling. Siblings played a pivotal role in offering financial assistance, often to the detriment of their own education. Most notably, brothers chose to give up their own schooling to seek paid employment that would prevent their sisters having to drop out of school.

Beyond the familial network, the school girls and tertiary women relied on social capital, available through friends, teachers, and NGO staff who supported their access to necessary resources to remain in school. In this study, social capital operated in two distinct ways: in place of, or in addition to, familial capital; and
as a source of instrumental resources not accessible via the participants’ familial capital. These resources allowed the participants to overcome institutional hurdles within the education system and broader society. First, friends were an essential source of support when the school girls’ and tertiary women’s families were either unwilling or unable to offer emotional or material support. According to the school girls, good friends at school modelled positive behaviour and attitudes regarding education, but also on occasion, advocated girls’ right to an education. Some of the school girls described how friends had intervened when they were at risk of giving up their studies. Friends’ warmth and support appeared to be even more important after the young women moved away from home to pursue their tertiary studies. At tertiary level, social capital operated in lieu of familial capital. In this instance, the tertiary women’s dormitory friends were able offer advice and emotional support in the absence of daily face-to-face contact with family members. Similar research does not examine the role of friends in supporting girls’ education (e.g. Burridge et al., 2015; Nich, 2015; Warrington, 2013; Warrington & Kiragu, 2012). However, my findings indicated that friends played a pivotal role in enabling girls to emotionally, physically, and materially navigate the barriers to schooling.

After friends, teachers who established contact with households also contributed towards the participants’ and their families’ perceptions regarding the value of education. Teachers encouraged the school girls’ commitment to education by modelling alternative female identities beyond that of wife, mother, or homemaker. In some cases, supportive teachers assisted the school girls in bypassing the ‘informal’ tuition fee that often excluded them from classes. Five of the participants also described how their teachers had offered direct financial support; countering the representation of Cambodian teachers in some literature as corrupt and uncaring (Dawson, 2010). NGO staff further facilitated the scholarship-sponsored participants’ educational persistence by imparting
additional information in the form of life-skills workshops, and providing the participants with additional sources of social capital through community networking opportunities.

The remaining three capitals – aspirational, navigational, and resistant - were fostered within familial and social networks. All of the participants spoke of their goals or desires for the future, which included both personal and “collective aspiration[s]” (Conradie, 2013, p. 210), and remarked that their goals had motivated them to remain in school. The school girls’ and tertiary women’s aspirational capital allowed them to imagine other possibilities resulting from academic attainment. These included gaining paid employment, financially supporting their families, assisting others in the community, and altering deficit notions of girlhood and womanhood, such as the belief that women cannot be highly educated and in paid employment.

The school girls’ and tertiary women’s aspirational capital underpinned their navigational and resistant capitals. In other words, their personal ambition acted as a tool of resistance and perseverance. In this study, navigational capital enabled the participants to overcome three barriers to education: long commuting distances, inadequate classroom instruction, and informal ‘tuition’ fees. The participants often navigated these obstacles with the assistance of friends – again highlighting the valuable role of friendship in girls’ educational persistence. For instance, the school girls’ utilised navigational capital to develop a ‘safety-in-numbers’ approach to travelling unsafe roads, and a bicycle ‘share-ride’ approach to address transport issues. Once at school, the school girls in this study, circumvented poor teaching instruction and teacher absenteeism by initiating study clubs with friends and peers. They relied on knowledge sharing to access core curriculum materials or attend to gaps in their learning. Study clubs also allowed income-poor students to navigate the barrier of informal tuition fees.
The school girls’ and tertiary women’s individual agency was most evident in their accounts of resisting deficit discourses of income-poor girls’ participation in education (discussed in Chapter Six). Resistant capital in this study also included the school girls’ and tertiary women’s physical displays of subversiveness such as attending school and tertiary institutions, wearing a uniform, and modelling the outcomes of their educational attainment. Their oppositional moves challenged the status quo, allowing them to take up alternative female identities that were strong, self-determined, and resilient. Overall, the participants’ accounts supported Yosso’s (2005) argument that income-poor families and their daughters (or children) draw on a range of resources or capitals to persevere at school. In my study, girls’ educational persistence was supported through familial, social and personal non-monetary resources, such as a strong belief in the benefits of formal education, encouragement, knowledge, advice, aspirations, and the capacity to resist deficit perspectives.

A key component of this study encompassed gathering the participants’ perspectives on what is required of other stakeholders to assist girls’ education in Cambodia. The school girls’ mind maps and posters of advice highlighted a range of issues. The school girls’ advice to six stakeholders – government, school directors, teachers, neighbours, families, and other girls – acknowledged discursive and physical barriers to girls’ participation in education and society, and suggested ways to address these.

The school girls’ central message to the Cambodian government was the need to address poor infrastructure issues, notably insufficient secondary schools, poorly maintained roads, low teacher salaries, and corruption. In addition, the school girls drew on a girls’ and women’s rights discourse and appointed the government with the responsibility of implementing policies to address gender-based injustices nationally. Within the school environment, teachers and school
directors were advised to eradicate discriminatory practices, improve communication between staff and students, and ultimately create a positive learning environment for all students. The school girls advised school staff to abandon discriminatory practices that favoured boys and wealthier students. The school girls thus inferred that girls from income-poor families faced ‘double’ discrimination in school; namely, gender-based and class-based discrimination. Similarly, the school girls advised neighbours to adjust their negative views of girls’ educational worth and formal education. To achieve this, the school girls suggested a collaborative community-based approach to improving school attendance whereby they instructed neighbours to provide encouragement, advice, and even material support to girls wishing to attend school. The school girls called upon families to emphasise the value of education and to emotionally invest in their children’s schooling. They also suggested that families allocate the necessary material support (i.e. money and study supplies) to girls to support their access to school and cease discriminatory or constraining practices (e.g. assigning girls a heavy domestic workload and suggesting girls marry young) that negatively impacted girls’ schooling.

Lastly, the school girls’ advice to other girls exposed the complexities of what it means to be a school girl in contemporary Cambodia. School girls in my study appealed to other girls to be brave and resistant; to fully participate in the curriculum; and to share their opinions within the classroom. The ‘brave girls’ discourse was powerful as it signalled the participants’ own negotiation of discriminatory practices at school. But embedded in their advice to other girls to be brave, the school girls also reinforced constraining discourses of girlhood regarding morality and mobility. Whilst the school girls reinforced the idea that socialising outside of the home was inappropriate, they reframed the restriction as an opportunity for girls to develop their study skills, by staying home and revising their schoolwork.
Findings in this study unveiled myriad discursive and material constraints to girls’ secondary schooling (and tertiary studies) in contemporary rural Cambodia. However, the school girls’ and tertiary women’s narratives also highlighted how they successfully circumvented the obstacles to their schooling. In doing so, the school girls’ and tertiary women’s narratives made visible the complexities and contradictions of their subjectivities (Mandrona, 2016); highlighting the need for a heterogenous view of girlhood in Cambodia when considering girls’ access to education.

Reflecting on the study

This study set out to achieve two aims. The first was to gain an understanding of how socially and materially disadvantaged school girls from rural Cambodia overcome various hurdles to persist at, and obtain, formal education. Second, this study sought school girls’ advice on how stakeholders in girls’ education can facilitate higher secondary school completion rates for girls in Cambodia. In this section, I consider the extent to which these aims were met and reflect on the limitations of this cross-cultural study.

To address the first research aim, the theory of community cultural wealth was deployed to valorise the multiple resources (including non-material resources such as encouragement, beliefs and values) present in students’ familial and social networks (Yosso, 2005). By drawing on a community cultural wealth lens, I was able to identify the hurdles to girls’ schooling as well as the navigational mechanisms employed by school girls, their families, and their social contacts to facilitate educational persistence. When compared to similar studies on girls’ retention in education (Abuya et al., 2012; Okkolin, 2013; Warrington, 2013; Warrington & Kiragu, 2012), attention to community cultural wealth unmasked the significance of familial and social relationships and personal factors (aspirations, determination, resistance, etc.,) that supported girls’ educational
persistence. As a result, this study was able to highlight the emotional, financial and material resources the school girls and tertiary women drew on via parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, friends, teachers, NGO staff, and occasionally, neighbours. As noted in the section above (and discussed in detail in Chapter Seven), attention to community cultural wealth in this study revealed how school girls negotiated and circumvented issues that threatened their access to education provision, including long and unsafe commutes to school (Benveniste et al., 2008; KAPE, 2008; Velasco, 2001), informal tuition fees, high rates of teacher absenteeism, inadequacies in teaching instruction (Benveniste et al., 2008; No et al., 2012; Sao, 2012), and income-poverty (Filmer & Schady, 2008; KAPE, 2008; No et al., 2012).

In Chapter Eight, I addressed the second aim of this study which was to seek the school girls’ advice on how stakeholders in girls’ education can reduce the discursive and material barriers to girls’ schooling. Using a collaborative knowledge building approach (including mind maps and posters of advice), the school girls suggested how the government, school directors, teachers, neighbours, families, and other girls could support girls’ access to, participation in, and completion of, secondary school. By recognising the school girls as experts in girls’ education, this study has highlighted the diverse issues facing girls who wish to complete their formal schooling. From a Third World feminist perspective, the school girls’ advice offered insights into the local context, providing a nuanced understanding of Cambodian girls’ (and women’s) “diverse forms of oppression and different modes of resistance on the ground” (Herr, 2014, p. 2).

In addition to Third World feminism, this study was informed by multiple feminist lenses, including transnational feminism, Asian feminisms, and an appreciation for women’s activism and rights in Cambodia (see Chapter Four). These lenses guided my research ethics and informed my “awareness of the
unequal power dynamics that characterise the globalised world” (Saeed, 2012, p. 1). Furthermore, these multiple feminist lenses guided my development of a predominantly participant-led research approach. In the remainder of this section, I reflect on my work with the school girls and tertiary women and consider the limitations of this study.

In Chapter Five, I described how my methodology was underpinned by “a worldview that values student voice”, collaboration, reflection, and agency (Keeffe & Andrews, 2014, p. 358; Scheyvens et al., 2003). I explained how I utilised ten methods of data collection that, where possible, reduced the researcher-participant hierarchy, and involved interaction (Kindon, 1995; Pain, 2004; Wall et al., 2012). These methods of data collection incorporated participant-led, researcher-led, and a hybrid of participant-led and researcher-led methods (see Figure 2, page 96 for further details). The central purposes for choosing multiple methods of data collection in this study were to facilitate greater participant engagement regarding the topic of inquiry, enable participant autonomy as a mechanism to address power differentials, and to mitigate language barriers and time constraints during data collection.

Despite this study’s research approach, my lack of Khmer language skills was the greatest drawback regarding my immediate understanding of the participants’ talk. I was comforted by Melina Czymoniewicz-Klippel (2009) who admitted that her newly acquired Khmer language skills did not mitigate communication issues with the children in her Cambodian study, but I was acutely aware that a cross-language study was wrought with multiple layers of ‘translation’ and ‘interpretation’ (McWilliam et al., 2009). I was cognisant that words do not have equal meanings when translated, and some concepts are not easily and directly translated into another language (Fujishiro et al., 2010; Maclean, 2007; Temple, 1997). Theary, for example, would have made her own decisions regarding how to reframe my words and the participants’ statements.
As such, Theary was critical to the research data collection and production, shaping the analysis through her identity and experiences (Squires, 2009; Temple & Young, 2004).

In turn, I undertook my own interpretation of the participants’ words (or data) to gain an understanding of their experiences, opinions, or advice. Alcoff (2009) outlines the complexities of speaking for others, and suggests that researchers should be accountable and responsible for what they say of others and the actual effects of the produced words. As part of my methodological approach to these issues of translation and speaking for the school girls and tertiary women, I incorporated member checking during my second fieldtrip, and consulted and corroborated with Theary during the data collection and analysis stages of this study (Temple, 1997) (also refer to Chapter Five for more details). In addition, the school girls’ posters of advice (in Khmer) were provided to the participating NGOs as a mechanism that conveyed the school girls’ own words, unaltered by me. Finally, as I mentioned in Chapter Five, Theary is not a certified translator or interpreter and therefore the quality of the translation may be questioned (Squires, 2009). However, Allison Squires (2009, p. 283) points out that a translator who is “known and trusted” by the community or participants is advantageous. In this regard, Theary was the ideal candidate to assist me in this study. She had experience and knowledge of persisting at school, and had established a strong rapport with many of the participants through her role at the locally-run NGO.

Contributions of this study

This thesis on income-poor school girls’ educational persistence makes three important contributions regarding the study of girls’ education in Cambodia. First, as indicated above, this study addresses the paucity of qualitative research on girls’ educational persistence or retention (noted in Chapter Three). It also
addresses the lack of research attention to girls’ education in Cambodia. Second, from a theoretical perspective, this study applied Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth framework to a geographical context outside the North American context where studies using community cultural wealth have been based. Third, my study makes a methodological contribution in its use of visual and participant-led data collection methods to explore girls’ experiences of accessing and participating in school in Cambodia. I elaborate on these three points below.

There is copious literature on the barriers to girls’ education globally and the challenges facing Cambodia’s contemporary education system (see Chapters Two and Three). Yet, as noted in Chapter Three, income-poor girls’ educational persistence has received relatively little research attention. In her cross-country literature review on students dropping out of school, Hunt (2008) called for small in-depth qualitative studies on retention and motivational factors to provide a richer understanding of the processes surrounding students’ access to, retention in, and completion of, formal schooling.

In the Cambodian context, the extremely low transition rates from primary to secondary school level and the poor Grade 12 completion rates (MoEYS, 2016) alert us to the need to understand how some students endeavour to complete their upper secondary schooling when so many fail to do so. As noted in Chapter Three, three recent studies in Cambodia (Nich, 2015; Rogers, 2014; Room to Read, 2011) have explored how young tertiary women circumvented gendered and material constraints to further their education. My research findings depart from these in that I have attended to the void in research on Cambodian school girls’ experiences of remaining in school and their use of multiple sources of support.

This leads me to the thesis’ second contribution. The research reported here adds to the body of work which utilises Yosso’s community cultural wealth
framework. My study, in a Southeast Asian context, applies community cultural wealth to a new setting in order to explore the multiple strengths income-poor girls draw on to remain in school and challenge gendered constraints. As explained in Chapter Four, previous studies utilising a community cultural wealth framework have overwhelmingly been based in a North American context with a focus on Latino or Mexican students’ academic achievements.

Other studies on Cambodian students’ academic achievement (Eng, 2012; Keng, 2004; Nguon, 2011) have paid attention to parents’ access to resources. Community cultural wealth is helpful because it facilitates a focus on *school girls’* use of resources to circumvent, adapt, improvise, succeed and resist within gendered and discriminatory social structures. This study highlights how a community cultural wealth framework helps us to understand how subordinate groups of students navigate discursive and material constraints to their education.

Moreover, in this study, the use of a community cultural wealth framework allowed me to explore the school girls’ inner resources (beliefs, desires, attitudes, etc.) as well as their access to familial and social networks that helped garner vital financial, academic and emotional resources. For instance, attention to community cultural wealth highlighted the valuable role friends played in enabling girls to circumvent various obstacles and resist deficit discourses on girls’ educational worth. As mentioned in Chapter Seven, friends were mentioned only briefly in previous studies of Cambodian tertiary women’s academic experiences (Nich, 2015; Rogers, 2014) and have either been absent or overlooked in other studies on girls’ educational persistence (Abuya et al., 2012; Okkolin, 2013, 2016; Warrington, 2013; Warrington & Kiragu, 2012). In my study, friends provided social capital, and supported the participants’ access to resistant, navigational, and aspirational capitals. In my study, a community cultural wealth framework provided a ‘valuing’ lens that revealed the multi-
faceted and interconnected factors that enabled the school girls to remain in school against the odds.

The third contribution of this study is methodological. From the outset, in this study, I aimed to incorporate methods of data collection that supported participant autonomy, mitigated power differentials, and encouraged participant engagement and expression (Kindon, 1995; Pain, 2004; Wall et al., 2012). These included visual narratives and advice posters that encouraged responses via drawings, symbols, and text; mind maps to prompt group brainstorming ideas; card sorting to stimulate reflection and discussion (Arthur et al., 2014); self-managed video interviews to provide a collegial atmosphere free from researcher interference (Belk & Kozinets, 2005); and a jigsaw activity as a way to introduce the research topic and gently build rapport. A shift from word-centric data collection worked towards engaging the school girls and valuing their perspectives on the topic of girls’ education in Cambodia (McWilliam et al., 2009).

Concluding thoughts

The 66 upper-secondary school girls and tertiary women who participated in this study were the exception rather than the norm as girls who stayed in school in rural Cambodia. They formed part of a very small percentage (16%) of rural female students who manage to complete all 12 grades of formal schooling (MoEYS, 2016). Their stories of remaining in school add to the small collection of studies on girls’ education in Cambodia (Fiske, 1995; Gorman et al., 1999; MoEYS, 1998; Velasco, 2001) and equally scant literature on girls’ educational persistence generally (Abuya et al., 2012; Okkolin, 2013; Warrington & Kiragu, 2012). This study also adds to broader conversations on educational attainment in Cambodia and how the prevailing concerns might be addressed (Benveniste
et al., 2008; Brehm, 2016; Edwards Jr et al., 2016; Sitha et al., 2016; Tandon & Fukao, 2014).

The school girls’ and tertiary women’s multiple negotiating strategies and sources of support revealed the agency and vulnerability of Cambodian school girls. By analysing the multiple discourses of girlhood and womanhood, identifying how girls drew on a range of resources to stay in school, and foregrounding their advice to key stakeholders, this study has examined the participants’ daily negotiations of, and resistance to, discriminatory views and practices. With the support of family, friends, teachers, and NGO staff, the school girls and tertiary women drew on, and promoted girls’ educational worth and women’s rights discourses in order to pursue their studies. Most notably, the tertiary women found leverage in their communities through their physical demonstration of the benefits of education, and promoting emancipatory discourses of girlhood and education. Finally, this study engaged in the act of civic “dissemination as a potential agent for social change” (Van Blerk & Ansell, 2007, p. 313) through the production of a key findings report for the participating NGOs, and the dissemination of the school girls’ advice posters. This thesis and forthcoming publications will allow its ongoing dissemination.

**Directions for future research**

My research findings highlight several areas where future research is needed. First, future research could further explore the role of friendships inside and outside of the Cambodian school environment. In Chapter Seven, I discussed how friendship as a form of social capital often compensated for familial capital. Future research could explore in more depth the role of friends in helping girls remain in school, including through face-to-face relationships, and through other means, such as social media (e.g. Facebook friendships). Knowledge gained from such research would add to existing Cambodian studies that have touched on friendship and retention in schools (KAPE, 2008; No et al., 2012).
Future research could also explore the role of boys or men in girls’ educational persistence. In Chapter Seven, stories of brothers’ sacrificing their own schooling dominated the school girls’ and tertiary women’s narratives on educational persistence. A study of the boys or men who support their sisters’ education would provide informative counter-stories regarding gendered roles in Cambodia. Such a study could involve in-depth interviews with male supporters of girls’ education, and explore the discursive underpinnings of their actions.

Finally, future research is needed to investigate the issues identified by Cambodian girls themselves. In this study, I have highlighted how girls’ voices are largely missing from existing literature on girls’ education in Cambodia (see for exception, Velasco, 2001). Moreover, existing literature on girls’ education in Cambodia includes predominantly ‘grey literature’ from donor agencies and NGOs whose rationale is often to assess an existing programme and/or secure funding. Such research may not be participant driven. Although I included participant-led data collection methods in my study, my overall research aims were researcher led. A participant-led inquiry would create opportunities for girls in school and those wishing to rejoin school to drive a research agenda themselves. For example, researchers could invite girls’ suggestions regarding the challenges most pertinent to them, and what they see as needing to be ‘researched’ and/or changed. Furthermore, participants’ meaningful involvement in the analysis of the Cambodian social and educational context could facilitate a deeper understanding of how girls can be assisted to remain at school (for examples of research approaches, see Lehtomäki et al., 2014).

Epilogue

A year after my last fieldtrip, Theary provided me with an update on how some of the school girls and tertiary women were doing. She reported that all the young tertiary women (on scholarships from the locally-run NGO) had
graduated and obtained employment. Here is an extract from Theary’s email (dated 20/06/2016):

For the university students, some of them got married, engaged and have children. And few of them are still single the same me! :-D (I’m kidding! :) ) Everyone have job to do (Private, public, NGOs and personal job...). Many students changed their job from one place to one place. We can keep contact with only some friends because other friends changed phone number and don’t tell us. I am so proud of other students that they have a very good job and get high salary. I and Alumni team plan to support 3 girl students to study at university in 2016 to 2017.

Theary also explained that Monica and GG Cola from high school B had successfully won scholarships to study at university.

Monica got a scholarship from Ministry of Education Youth and Sport. She is studying in Phnom Penh. :) For GG Cola, she got a scholarship from Ministry of Education Youth and Sport, too. But she is studying in Kampong Cham. GG Cola always participates with NGOs. She has many social activities. Both of them have a very good major and skill.

Monica and GG Cola’s achievements are a testament to their personal drive and strong support network. Monica was the student who had almost given up her schooling because her father’s drinking and violence distracted her from focusing fully on her studies. It was thanks to her close friends, that she managed to persist and complete Grade 12. Similarly, GG Cola relied heavily on her friends’ support as her two older siblings struggled to support her schooling after their parents died. GG Cola appears to be building on her network of contacts by engaging in volunteer work with local NGOs.

Theary also mentioned that at high school A, “some students are studying but some students finished high school already. They are very happy and enjoy their
study. A few of students are being teacher trainees” (email correspondence, 20/06/2016).

Lastly, Theary recently shared her own exciting news - the construction of her mother’s new house (pictured below). At the end of 2016, Theary left the NGO she had been working with and took up a new position with an institution that provides full scholarships to income-poor students wishing to study software engineering.

![Figure 17. Theary’s mother’s new house under construction](image)

Through her permanent contract with her new employer, she was able to secure a loan from a micro-finance institution. She explained that it will take her about four years to pay off the loan. Drawing on a female altruism discourse, but also demonstrating her own agency, Theary added, “I know it will be hard for me, but I want my mother to have a good place to live for her life” (email correspondence, 03/04/2017).
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Exploring girls' educational persistence | References


Appendices
Appendix A: Letter of introduction to education NGOs

Dear ____________,

[Insert name] recommended I contact you. I am a postgraduate student at the University of Otago in New Zealand, and am about to embark on my doctoral studies. I am writing in the hope that my proposed project will be of interest to you, and that we may be able to work together in some capacity.

In the wake of the EFA programme and Millennium Development Goals, there has been a lot of focus on the barriers to education, especially girls’ education, but very little research has looked at the factors that support educational attainment in girls. I am aware that there are a number of challenges facing girls (and boys) in Cambodia wishing to access schooling beyond the initial primary school level; poverty being the main factor. Yet, despite the various hurdles there are girls who continue on to secondary school level and succeed academically. I am interested in understanding what support mechanisms facilitate the academic achievement and resilience of girls at secondary school in Cambodia.

The aim of my project is to gain knowledge of the various sources of support available to successful secondary school girls, and thereby identify possible programmes or tools to support the academic attainment of other girls in the community. I do not intend to conduct my research with no added benefit to those involved. Instead, my intention is to provide girls and the local communities with an opportunity to highlight the available resources within their families and communities that may enable educational success for others.

In order for me to successfully conduct my research, I am currently establishing contacts in Cambodia in the hope of obtaining the support and advice of local organisations. [NGO’s name] conducts significant research and work in the education sector in Cambodia. Therefore, I would welcome the opportunity to discuss my proposed project with you.

Thank you for your attention and I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,

Tracy Rogers

University of Otago, College of Education
Appendix B: Letter of character from previous employer

28 March, 2014

To Whom It May Concern:

Tracy Rogers has been employed as a casual teacher at the University of Otago Language Centre since May 2009, latterly on an occasional basis as she has devoted herself to tertiary studies. Her duties have involved teaching English to young adults who have come from a variety of different backgrounds, with different needs and learning styles.

Tracy is a very reliable, conscientious teacher. She works very well with her colleagues, responds well to direction and requests from management and brings a commitment and enthusiasm to the classroom that is appreciated by the students.

I have no hesitation in recommending Tracy as a person of very good character who could work well with students of all ages. I would be very happy to provide further information if required.

Yours faithfully,

Dr. Paul Baker
Head of Academic Programmes
University of Otago Language Centre
Appendix C: Information and consent forms

Consent form for secondary school girl participants (Grades 11 – 12).

I have been told about this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered in a way that makes sense.

I know that:

1. Participation in this project is my decision, which means that I do not have to take part if I don’t want to and nothing will happen to me if I do not take part. I can also stop taking part at any time and don’t have to give a reason.

2. Anytime I want to stop, that’s okay.

3. Tracy will audio record me so that she can remember what I say. This recording will be securely stored.

4. It is okay if I do not want to answer a few questions.

5. Tracy can answer any questions that I have.

6. Details from the conversations with Tracy will be seen only by Tracy and her supervisors. They will keep whatever I say private.

7. I will receive a small gift as thanks for helping with this project.

8. Tracy will write up the results from this project for her University work. The results may also be published and talked about at conferences. My name will not be included in negotiations or Tracy’s report.

9. Tracy will give me a copy of this report if I ask her.

☐ Yes, I agree to take part in this project.

..............................................  ...............................................
Signed                                            Date
កិច្ចព្រមពព្រៀងសព្ាប់កុរៈដែលច្ូលរួមសាាស៍ពៅវិទ្យាល័យ(ថ្នាក់ទ្យី១១-១២)។ បានជុំបារួចមកព ើយអុំរីគពព្ាងពនេះពើយសងឃឹមថ្នអាកទុំងអស់គ្នា។ បនយល់អុំរីគពព្ាងពនេះផងដែរ។ សុំណួររបស់ខ្ញុំទុំងអស់នឹងព្រូវបានបអូនៗទុំងអស់គាព្លើយព្មេះព្រង់។ ខ្ញុំយល់ថ្ន ១. ការច្ូលរួមពៅកាញងគពព្ាងពនេះគឺជា ការសពព្មច្ច្ិរតរបស់ខ្ញុំវានន័យថ្នខ្ញុំនឹងមិនច្ូលរួមពទ្យព្បសិនពបើខ្ញុំមិនច្ង់ច្ូលរួមក៏គ្នមនអវីពកើរព ើងច្ុំព េះខ្ញុំដែរព្បសិនពបើខ្ញុំមិនច្ូលរួម។

2. ខ្ញុំអាច្បញ្ឈប់ករច្ូលរួមរបស់ខ្ញុំពៅពរលណាចបា នពោយមិនចុំបា ច្ព្បាប់មូលព រុជា មុន។

3. Tracy នឹងថរសុំពលងរបស់ខ្ញុំែូច្ពនេះអវីដែលគ្នរ់អាចច្ង់ចុំបា នគឺជា អវីដែលខ្ញុំបាននិយាយ។

4. ការថរសុំពលងនិងការករ់ព្ាពនេះនឹងព្រូវរកាយា៉ាងសុវរថិភារនិងងជាការសុរ់។

5. Tracy និងទ្យទ្យួលបានវរថញអនុវរីយ៍ឬអុំពណាយបនតិច្បនតួច្សព្ាប់ការជួយគពព្ាងពនេះ។

6. Tracy ងពរៀបពរៀងលទ្យធផលអុំរីគពព្ាងដែលគ្នរ់បានព្្វព្ជាវពនេះជា ពសៀវពៅសព្ាប់កិច្ចព្បជុុំ។

7. Tracy នឹងរកាទ្យនៅររ៌ានដែលខ្ញុំនិយា យជា ការសុរ់និងជាលកខណេះឯកជន។

8. Tracy និងមូលផ្អែមរឳងសារពេះក្នុងការប្រកួតប្រជែងអំពីការប្រកួតប្រជែងក្នុងការកិច្ចព្បជុុំអារម្មណ៍ Tracys ។

9. Tracy និងអាចប្រកួតប្រជែងក្នុងការរឹបរឹង បរួសុីមិនឃីតាការ

.......................................................... ..........................................................
ទូរសមរកដ្ឋាន ការរបៀប

Page | 271
Any questions?

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How are girls supported to stay in secondary school in Cambodia?

Thank you and I look forwarding to talking with you.

*This study has been approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research you may contact the Committee through the Human Ethics Committee Administrator (0800 479 8269). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.*
Information about this project

HI,

My name is Tracy Rogers. I am from the University of Otago in New Zealand. This project is part of my doctorate degree in education studies.

What is this project about?
I would like to find out from secondary school girls:

What you think about your secondary education?
What are the main challenges in gaining an education?
How you overcome these challenges?
What advice you would offer other girls wishing to pursue an education?

Who can take part in this project?
Girls in grades 11 and 12 are invited to participate.

A female translator will be available during the project.

What will I have to do if I take part in this project?
This project has two parts. If you choose to take part in this project, in part 1 you will be invited to:

○ choose a creative way to identify and explain your challenges in gaining an education and how you overcome these challenges.
You will be able to choose between writing a journal, drawing a picture, taking photographs, creating a presentation, or designing a poster.
○ take part in individual or group discussions about how you are supported to stay at school.

In part 2, you will be invited to:

○ make suggestions about how other girls can be supported in gaining an education.

How will the information be collected?
The discussions between you and I will be audio recorded to help with writing up the report. Notes from our discussions will also be made.

What will happen with the information collected?
The information from this project will be written up in a report which will be available in the University of Otago library in Dunedin, New Zealand. You will be able to see this report if you wish. Information from the project may also be published or shared with other people at conferences.

Some of the suggestions you make may also be given to your school and to help with their girls’ education programmes.

All recorded information will be safely and securely stored by Tracy until the end of the project or longer if required.

Will my real name and personal information be used?
Your real name will not be used in the project report. You may choose a 'codename' that can be used in the project report. Only your age and grade may be used in the written report or in presentations about the project.

Participation in this project is your decision
Appendices

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Research Project: How are girls supported to stay in secondary school in Cambodia?

**Information sheet for tertiary students**

My name is Tracy Rogers and I am a doctoral student from the University of Otago in New Zealand. I am interested in finding out about the various factors that provide support to girls in secondary school in Cambodia.

**The aim of this project**

The aim of my project is to better understand how and why some girls persist at school despite the various challenges they may face. The findings from this project will provide knowledge about how girls can be supported in gaining a secondary school education.

**The types of participants**

I will be primarily interviewing secondary school girls in Kampong Cham province to gain their insights into their secondary schooling experience.

I would also like to interview you about your secondary school experience and your current studies. If you are happy to talk to me, then I would like to invite you to participate in a brief interview.

**The interview details**

Participation in this project is voluntary. If you choose to take part, I will ask you some open-ended questions about your secondary school experience and how you were supported in your schooling. The interview should not take more than 30 minutes.

**Information collection and storage**

If you choose not to be named in the published findings, then I will not use your real name in my report.

Any audio recordings or raw data will be securely stored and accessed by me and my supervisors only. All raw data will be securely stored until no longer required.

**The purpose of the information being collected**
The results from this project may be published and will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand). A report will also be provided to two Cambodian education NGOs for reference with their girls’ education programmes.

If you would like a copy of the findings, then these will be provided to you.

*Please note that you may withdraw from participating in this project at any time during the project without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.*

If you have any further questions, please contact either:

**Tracy Rogers**  
Doctoral candidate  
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*Thank you for your time*
Exploring girls’ educational persistence | Appendices

Research Project: How are girls supported to stay in secondary school in Cambodia?

Consent form for university students

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:-

1. My participation in the project is entirely voluntary;

2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage;

3. Personal identifying information (incl. audio recordings or email transcripts) will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for at least five years;

4. The results of the project may be published and will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand) but every attempt will be made to preserve my anonymity should I choose to remain anonymous;

5. A copy of the final report will be available to me if I am interested.

I agree to take part in this project.

................................................................. .................................................................
(Signature of participant) (Date)
Research Project: How are girls supported to stay in secondary school in Cambodia?

Information sheet for NGO representatives

My name is Tracy Rogers and I am a doctoral student from the University of Otago in New Zealand. My project investigates what factors provide support to girls in secondary school in Cambodia.

The aim of this project

The aim of my project is to better understand how and why some girls persist at school despite the various challenges they may face. The findings from this project will provide knowledge about how girls can be supported in gaining a secondary school education.

The types of participants

I will be primarily interviewing secondary school girls in Kampong Cham province to gain their insights into their secondary schooling experience.

I would also like to interview individuals working at education NGOs. If you are currently working for an education NGO and have some experience with girl’s education or gender equity in education, then I would like to invite you to participate in a brief interview.

The interview details

Participation in this project is voluntary. If you choose to take part, I will ask you some open-ended questions related to the current status of girls’ education in Cambodia. The interview should not take more than 30 minutes.

You may choose to participate in one of the following types of interviews:

1. A face-to-face audio recorded interview conducted during my visit to Cambodia (details to be confirmed)
2. A Skype audio recorded interview conducted at a time that suits you
3. An email interview where you are able to respond to questions in writing at a time that suits you

Information collection and storage
If you choose not to be named in the published findings, then a pseudonym will be assigned to you. I may ask you to provide details about your company position and number of years of employment. You may, however choose not to provide this information. Any audio recordings or raw data will be securely stored and accessed by me and my supervisors only. All raw data will be securely stored until no longer required.

**The purpose of the information being collected**

The results from this project may be published and will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand). A report will also be provided to two Cambodian education NGOs for reference with their girls’ education programmes.

Every attempt will be made to preserve your anonymity, but with your consent, you may choose to retain your real name to attribute the contributions you have made. If you would like a copy of the findings, then these will be provided to you.

*Please note that you may withdraw from participating in this project at any time during the project without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.*

If you have any further questions, please contact either:

Tracy Rogers  
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*Thank you for your time*
Research Project: How are girls supported to stay in secondary school in Cambodia?

**Consent form for NGO representatives**

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:

1. My participation in the project is entirely voluntary;

2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage;

3. Personal identifying information [incl. audio recordings or email transcripts] will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage until no longer required;

4. The results of the project may be published and will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand) but every attempt will be made to preserve my anonymity should I choose to remain anonymous.

5. I, as the participant: a) agree to being named in the research, ☐  
   OR  
   b) would rather remain anonymous ☐

6. I choose to participate in one of the following interview types:  
   a) face-to-face interview ☐  
   b) Skype interview ☐  
   c) Email interview ☐

I agree to take part in this project.

........................................................................................................ \hfill .................................................................
(Signature of participant) \hfill (Date)

........................................................................................................
(Printed Name)
Appendix D: Recruitment letter addressed to NGO representatives

Subject: Research Interview from the University of Otago, New Zealand.

Dear _____________,

My name is Tracy Rogers and I am a doctoral student at the University of Otago in New Zealand. I gained your contact details via (insert source) and wondered if I could interview you as part of my study.

Project aim
I am conducting research in Cambodia on how secondary school girls are supported to remain at school despite the challenges they may face. The aim of my project is to gain knowledge of the various sources of support available to secondary school girls in Cambodia, and thereby identify possible strategies to help support the academic attainment of girls wishing to pursue an education.

Participant details
In order for me to successfully conduct my research, I will be interviewing secondary school girls when I visit Cambodia later this year. I would also like to hear the perspectives of people, such as yourself, who work within the education sector.

Project details
If you are happy to participate in my project, I will ask you some open-ended questions related to the current status of girls’ education in Cambodia. These are provided below. You can either choose to answer the questions via email (your response will be understood as indicating your informed consent), or if you prefer, you can answer them via a phone (or Skype) interview at a time that suits you. If you would prefer to participate in a phone or Skype interview, this should not take longer than 30 minutes.

Information collection and storage
If you are happy to answer the questions below, you choose to use your real name or a pseudonym (every attempt will be made to preserve your anonymity, if you so wish). You can answer as few or as many questions as you like, and you can ignore any that you would rather not answer. I will store your information securely, but please be aware that the security of information sent electronically cannot be guaranteed. If you would like to be interviewed instead of responding via email, I will record our conversation and store the recording until it is no longer required for the project. My supervisors and I are the only people who will have access to the ‘raw’ data, although, if you would like to be interviewed, a transcription typist may be employed to transcribe our conversation.

The purpose of the information being collected
The results from this project may be published and will be available through the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand). A report will also be provided to two Cambodian education NGOs for reference in relation to their girls’ education programmes.

If you would like a copy of the findings, then I will be happy to provide this to you. Please note that you may withdraw from participating in this project at any time during the project without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

Questions
(If you are happy to respond in writing, please insert your responses to the questions below, and send them to me via return email. If you would prefer to make a time to speak with me via phone or Skype, please let me know via email.)

I am happy for you to refer to me by name: YES/NO (delete non-applicable response)

If NO I would like to be referred to using the following pseudonym:_____________

1. What is your role in your organisation?

2. How long have you worked for this organisation?

3. Have you been involved in any specific girls’ education programmes? If yes, please describe.

4. How would you describe societal attitudes towards educating girls in Cambodia?

5. What do you think are the biggest challenges to girls’ education in Cambodia?

6. Are you aware of any particular success stories regarding girls’ education in Cambodia? If so, can you tell me a little about them?

7. Do you think that societal attitudes in Cambodia are changing regarding gender roles and educating girls? Please explain.

8. What other changes would you like to see in the Cambodian education system?

9. How could the Cambodian government make it easier for parents to send girls to secondary school?

10. Do you have any other thoughts concerning girls’ education in Cambodia?

Thank you very much for your time. I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,

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Doctoral supervisors

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Appendix E: Interview questions

(All questions were provided in English and Khmer)

Interview questions for secondary school girls

Walking interviews

Initial walking interviews that take in the school and community will be conducted to build rapport with the girls and to gather observation notes of the girls’ learning environment. These will take place after introducing myself. The questions below are intended to be used as conversation prompts and to help me get to know the girls and their school.

1. Can you show me around your school and tell me about the different facilities?
2. How many students are at your school? Are there more boys or girls?
3. What do you do during a ‘normal’ school day?
4. What are your favourite subjects? Can you tell me why?
5. Where do you eat lunch?
6. What do you do during your breaktime/lunchtime?
7. Does the rainy season affect your daily routine at school? In what ways?
8. Do you ever meet students from other schools and do activities together? Why or why not?
9. What sports or activities do you do at school or after school?

Prompts for visual narratives

The girls will be invited to tell their story about getting an education. They will be able to create an image/poster to convey their thoughts about their school experiences, challenges, and sources of support. Each girl will be given the questions below to help guide them. They will also be given the equipment that they need to complete their chosen activity.

1. Why is education important to you?
2. Who are the most important people in your life with regard to your education?
3. Is it important to have good friends at school? Why or why not?
4. Who helps you with your school work?
5. What things help you to do well at school?
6. What things make it difficult to do well at school?
7. How does your teacher help you with your studies?
8. Can describe an example when it was difficult to do well at school?
9. How did you overcome this problem? Who helped you?
10. What things make it easier to go to secondary school?
11. What things make it more difficult to go to secondary school?
Interview questions for university participants

1. Please introduce yourself and tell me what you are you studying?
2. Why did you choose to study this major/vocation?
4. Do you have a role model? Who is she/he?
5. What factors helped you stay at secondary school?
6. What do you think are the most common reasons that girls don’t go to secondary school?
7. What are some of the challenges you had at secondary school? Or, what made it difficult to remain in school?
8. What advice could you offer other girls who want to study at secondary school, teacher training or university?
9. What do you hope to do when you finish your studies?

Interview questions for NGO representatives

1. What is your role in your organisation?
2. How long have you worked for this organisation?
3. Have you been involved in any specific girls’ education programmes? If yes, please describe.
4. How would you describe societal attitudes towards educating girls in Cambodia?
5. What do you think are the biggest challenges to girls’ education in Cambodia?
6. Are you aware of any particular success stories regarding girls’ education in Cambodia? If so, can you tell me a little about them?
7. Do you think that societal attitudes in Cambodia are changing regarding gender roles and educating girls? Please explain.
8. What other changes would you like to see in the Cambodian education system?
9. How could the Cambodian government make it easier for parents to send girls to secondary school?
Appendix F: Self-managed video interview questions

In groups of 4-5, the school girls will conduct their own interviews using the questions below. Each girl will decide whether she wishes to be an interviewer, interviewee, or cameraperson. They may choose which questions they wish to ask and answer. (Questions were provided in Khmer)

1. What do you like about school?
2. What age were you when you started school?
3. Did your parents go to school?
4. Do you have any brothers or sisters at school?
5. If you have brothers or sisters at school, do you help each other with homework?
6. Why is education important to you?
8. Do you find having friends at school helps you to stay at school and do well? Why?
9. Do you have a role model? Who is she/he?
10. What do you think are the most common reasons that girls don’t go to secondary school?
11. What are some of the challenges you’ve had at secondary school? Or, what has made it difficult to remain in school?
12. Are there any support groups or programmes available to secondary school girls? If so, what are they and do you use them?
13. Do you think female teachers are more supportive of girls’ education? Why?
14. Do you think male teachers are more supportive of girls’ education? Why?
15. Do you think all girls should finish secondary school? Why?
16. What advice could you offer other girls who want to study at secondary school?
17. What do you hope to do when you finish secondary school?
Appendix G: Questionnaire for school girls

(Questionnaire was provided in Khmer)

Name: ___________________________

I would like to know who helps you to stay at school. Please give me information about the support factors in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support factors</th>
<th>Who gives you this support?</th>
<th>How do they give you this support?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study support/homework</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation/encouragement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial support/money</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study supplies/materials Uniform, bicycle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other support (your ideas)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Which support factor is the most important to you? Why?

________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________

What do you think about the future of girls and women in Cambodia?

________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
Appendix H: Jigsaw puzzle compare/contrast questionnaire

Two jigsaw puzzles were provided to set the scene of girls’ education benefits and challenges. The girls were encouraged to compare the two images (jigsaw puzzles) and discuss the characteristics of a girl in school and a girl out of school.

The following questions attend to the images and each group were given a worksheet (questionnaire in Khmer) to complete.

**Jigsaw puzzle – girl in school**

1. Do you think the girls are happy? Why or why not?
2. Why do they go to school?
3. How do the girls get to school each day?
4. What do the girls learn at school?
5. What do the girls do before/after school each day?
6. What do the girls hope to become in the future?
7. What are their favourite subjects?
8. Who are the most important people in the girls’ lives? Why?
9. How do the girls get their school uniform and pay for their school fees?

**Jigsaw puzzle – girl out of school**

1. Do you think the girl is happy? Why or why not?
2. What does she do every day?
3. Why is she not at school?
4. What are her hopes for the future?
5. Does she have any positive role models?
6. Who are the important people in her life?
7. What can help her go to school?