Making sense of 'gender': From global HIV/AIDS strategy to the local Cambodian ground

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ABSTRACT

Interventions aiming to promote gender equality are a common feature of global HIV/AIDS policies. To develop effective interventions, it is important to understand how globally established concepts (e.g. 'gender') are (re)interpreted and legitimated locally. This paper examines what happens when the concept of 'gender' hits the local ground in the context of an internationally funded HIV/AIDS intervention in Cambodia.

Interviews with participants reveal that 'gender' is itself understood to mean equal rights. Some elements of this concept are rejected as inapplicable in Khmer society, while others are hybridised with existing knowledges. The analysis demonstrates how relational, symbolic and material dimensions of the place into which HIV/AIDS programmes intervene shape not only what 'sense' participants make of new knowledge, but also their capacity to use it. Further, the paper argues that to achieve the desired health-enhancing outcomes, international health organisations must avoid essentialising local spaces as static and 'traditional'; rather, they must attend to and build on the ambiguities of existing knowledges and the changing dynamics of the places they enter.

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1. Introduction

In diverse regions of the world, gender inequalities have been linked to the aetiology and impact of HIV/AIDS, through, *inter alia*, women's limited ability to control the conditions of sexual relationships, unequal access to testing and treatment and the burden of care (Ashburn et al., 2009). As such, 'gender' has become an established feature of global HIV/AIDS discourses and policies (Mannell, 2010). Gender norms and inequalities are an important influence on reproductive health behaviours (Campbell, 2003), and one strategy widely used within HIV/AIDS interventions aims to challenge and change norms that may undermine gender equality (UNAIDS, 2008). However, while gender equality may be a 'global' concept insofar as it is promulgated by development agencies/institutions with global reach, there remains significant debate surrounding how to conceptualise and operationalise gender equality within health development (Cornwall and Edwards, 2010). Much contestation surrounds claims about cultural or regional differences in what constitutes gender equality, and the difficulties that arise where international and local organisations hold different understandings of 'gender' (Mannell, 2010). The applicability in

Asian or African contexts of a Western, liberal feminist perspective on gender equality that emphasises autonomy and independence has been questioned (Oyewumi, 2004; Cornwall and Edwards, 2010). Critiques have also been levelled at the proliferation of essentialising 'gender myths' *within* the world of development agencies (Cornwall et al., 2007; Molyneux, 2007).

Equally important, however, is how notions of gender or gender (in)equality are understood and interpreted by those whose gender norms and identities are being targeted by HIV/AIDS interventions. This is not simply a question of characterising existing gender norms, but of understanding how the concepts and knowledge introduced through health programs intersect with existing knowledges and 'acquire a local life' (Pigg, 2001, p. 483). That is, what happens when globally established strategies and concepts meet the local ground? Understanding the processes through which knowledge is appropriated, transformed and legitimated in the place of intervention is essential if programs aiming to tackle gender inequalities and improve reproductive health are to achieve their desired outcomes.

This paper examines the collision between 'global' and 'local' knowledges about gender in the context of an internationally funded HIV/AIDS intervention in rural Cambodia. While Cambodia has a national gender mainstreaming policy, amongst rural populations the concept of gender remains relatively novel. This paper asks how programme participants make sense of 'gender/gender equality'. This is a question above all about the processes

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of the production and circulation of knowledge as it moves across institutional and cultural boundaries. Focusing on the geography of knowledge in this way draws attention to the historically and spatiality contingent nature of knowledge, and so the role of place in mediating the appropriation and interpretation of new knowledge (Davies et al., 2004). The analysis therefore pays particular attention to the relational, symbolic and material contours of the intervention context in shaping the sense participants make of new gender-related knowledge. The aim is not to evaluate the impact of the intervention on gender norms and behaviours, but, in following the idiographic method (Sato et al., 2007) to provide insight into the processes that mediate the interpretation, appropriation and transformation of knowledge as it moves from the global to the local. Insight into these processes contributes to our understanding of the complex relation between (global) programme policies/strategies and their (local) impact, and in turn the development of more effective health interventions.

2. Theoretical framework

To analyse these knowledge processes, I draw on theories of dialogicality and social representations (Jovchelovitch, 2007; Marková, 2003). In emphasising the socio-genesis of knowledge, social representations theory foregrounds the role of context in shaping the knowledge that emerges (Moscovici, 1984): it is through the dialogical relations between persons *situated in specific social and historical contexts* that representations are produced, sustained and circulated. To further elaborate *how* context mediates the production and consumption of knowledge, it is useful to consider the relational, symbolic and material contours of specific places (Campbell and Cornish, 2010).

With regard to knowledge processes, the relational context encompasses the dialogical relations between *Ego* (self) and *Alter* (other), through which representations of the object at hand (e.g. gender) are co-constructed. *Alter* does not necessarily stand for an individual other, nor co-present others. The dialogical relations between *Ego-Alter* can refer to communication within and between groups or institutions as well as different kinds of absent or generalised *Alter* (such as a soldier's Khmer community) (Marková, 2003). Thus in examining the processes of 'making sense' of new concepts, the analysis must focus not on *individual* speakers or groups, but on both the *Ego and Alter* implied in the assertion of a particular meaning. On one hand, this invokes Bakhtin's (1986) concept of *addressivity*—to whom is the assertion of a particular meaning (directly/ indirectly) oriented (the researcher, the NGO trainers, the speaker's husband)? On the other, we must consider what kind of influence this (co-present/ absent) *Alter* exerts—what kind of recognition is expected (or feared) in asserting a particular representation?

These relational dynamics are interrelated with the symbolic context—the representations, norms and worldviews circulating within a given place. The existing knowledges and beliefs into which new information is to be inserted will shape the way participants appraise, interpret and evaluate that information. Moreover, these existing representations are bound up with identities and ways of life, which may in turn be threatened, disrupted or enhanced by the introduction of competing representations (Jovchelovitch, 2007). For example, representations of femininity are not only an epistemic description, but serve to guide gender-appropriate behaviours, are entangled with a certain view of the social world, of how it is ordered and what it means to be female in a given society. Equally, how people engage with and interpret new ideas reflects their material interests and the practical exigencies of their everyday life—such as the need to secure a livelihood or access services. It is important therefore to

also consider the material and symbolic projects of participants, and the extent to which new knowledge is evaluated as potentially enhancing or undermining those projects.

Reflecting the heterogeneity of the social world, distinct modalities of knowledge can coexist, creating a polyphasic representational field (Moscovici, 1974/2008). At the group level, differing representations will be elaborated by different groups in disparate contexts (Bauer and Gaskell, 1999). Furthermore, since individuals are simultaneously members of multiple social groups and active in varying social contexts, different representations can coexist within the same social groups and individuals (see e.g. Gervais and Jovchelovitch, 1998). However, not all social groups are equally equipped to maintain or promote their own representations, identities and projects (Foster, 2003). In addition to material power, the symbolic power to command recognition from others is crucial. Thus the analysis will also consider how asymmetries in material and symbolic power shape participants' responses to programme teaching.

Before outlining the methods and analysis in detail, I first describe the intervention and case study context.

3. The Cambodian context

After almost forty years of violent conflict and a decade of geopolitical isolation, a fragile peace was brokered in Cambodia in the early 1990s. Since then, a huge and sustained influx of international development assistance, economic growth and the impact of globalisation have wrought significant changes to Cambodian society. Nonetheless, limited livelihood security and a lack of respect for human rights continues to characterise the experience of many Cambodians (World Bank, 2009; Downie and Kingsbury, 2001). Buddhism remains the dominant religion.

Despite recent socio-economic changes and growing efforts by both civil society and political institutions to tackle gender inequalities, Cambodia is still typically described as a patriarchal society, characterised by pervasive gender inequalities (MOWA, 2008). Academic and practitioner literature also repeatedly links 'traditional' Khmer gender norms to contemporary trends in HIV/AIDS prevalence (e.g. Bühler et al., 2006; Franklin, 2002). HIV/AIDS prevention efforts initially focused on 'high risk' groups such as soldiers and sex workers. More recently, with almost half of all new infections occurring in married women, there is increasing focus on the vulnerability of married women, particularly those with partners in high risk groups (NAA, 2008).

3.1. The case study context

Reflecting these trends, the case study programme is an HIV prevention programme targeting soldiers and their wives. Using peer education, the programme aims to increase reproductive health knowledge, service use and discussion amongst military couples in rural areas. The intervention was designed and is managed by an international non-governmental organisation (NGO), and an expatriate consultant wrote the peer education curriculum. Two local NGOs implement the programme, training peer educators and assisting them during peer education sessions.

Central to the programme strategy is an emphasis on challenging local norms of masculinity and femininity, which programme staff argue undermine couples' reproductive health. The curriculum includes specific sessions on the concept of gender and on domestic violence, while also integrating messages of gender equality across the range of reproductive health topics. These messages promote the value of recognising equal rights for men and women, while emphasising the damage that 'tradition' can cause to families' health (Aveling, 2010).

Table 1
Individual interviews.

	Individual interviews	Military camp	Duration	Age range (years)
Soldiers' wives	10	Ax3; Bx4; Cx3	1 h 10 min–1 h 36 min	39–47
Soldiers	6	Ax1; Bx2; Cx3	1 h 16 min–2 h 9 min	41–48

3.2. The participants

Most soldiers who participate in programme activities are lower ranking soldiers, with an average salary of approximately $25–30/month; soldiers and wives work to supplement this through subsistence farming, small-scale vending or paid labour. About 50% of soldiers and their wives are illiterate or read with difficulty (programme baseline survey). Despite being relatively isolated from NGO and government services, participants already had some knowledge about HIV/AIDS and reproductive health before the programme began (Lynch, 2003).

4. Methodology

Semi-structured individual interviews (16) and focus groups (9) were conducted with 31 soldiers and 27 wives (see Tables 1 and 2). To maximise diversity (Gaskell and Bauer, 2000), participants were selected from three different military camps and varied in rank, socio-economic status and level of education. Wives and soldiers were interviewed separately for reasons of gender-sensitivity in the Cambodian context. Focus groups and individual interviews covered different but overlapping topics, and took place in participants' homes or communal areas in the camp. Individual interviews sought to gather information about informants' lives and their views of the programme. Focus groups were used to explore issues of debate relevant to the intervention—traditional conceptions of Khmer masculinity and femininity, the notion of 'gender', 'faithfulness' and domestic violence.

Individual interviews were conducted with a Khmer research assistant interpreting; focus groups were conducted completely in Khmer (by the research assistant) so as not to disrupt the naturalistic flow of conversation that is their hall mark. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and Khmer transcripts were translated by a professional translation company.

4.1. Analysis

Data were analysed in two phases, both supported by Atlas.ti. The first sought to map relevant representations using thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001). These were representations of Khmer masculinity and femininity and of 'gender' (which for Khmer participants was seen as a separate concept). These deductively identified themes were then elaborated using inductively identified sub-themes. The resulting thematic network was used to explore the relationships between coded themes.

The second phase used dialogically driven coding (Aveling and Gillespie, 2008; Gillespie, 2006) to analyse the Ego-Alter dynamics evident within representations and so provide insight into the relational dynamics of representation. The concept of addressivity was used to identify which co-present or absent Alters participants' utterances were oriented to. This included (but was not limited to) the researcher, whom, as a white Westerner, participants often associated with foreign NGOs. While at times interviews thus reveal an orientation to an absent programme/NGO Alter, even attempts to provide a programmatically 'correct' answer can be revealing about how participants have interpreted programme messages.

Table 2
Focus groups with soldiers and soldiers' wives.

Focus Group	Camp	Number of participants	Duration	Age range (years)
Wives 1	A	5	1 h 34 min	25–44
Wives 2	B	7	1 h 48 min	21–47
Wives 3	C	6	1 h 51 min	20–53
Wives 4	C	6	1 h 36 min	37–56
Soldiers 1	B	6	54 min	30–45
Soldiers 2	A	5	1 h 52 min	38–55
Soldiers 3	A	6	1 h 6 min	32–43
Soldiers 4	C	5	56 min	32–58
Soldiers 5	C	5	51 min	33–41
Total	3 Different	51		20–58

4.2. Findings

The findings are presented in three sections[1]: representations of 'traditional' Khmer gender norms; representations of the concept of 'gender'; analysis of how participants accommodate this novel concept within existing knowledges.

5. 'Traditional' representations of masculinity and femininity

Both male and female participants gave consistent descriptions of the 'traditional' ideal for Khmer women, which closely echo the *chbap srey* (moral code for women) and constructions of the *srey kruap leakhana* (virtuous woman) documented in folk tales, proverbs and contemporary research (e.g. Derks, 2005). According to participants, a woman's primary role is to manage the household, take care of the children and her husband's needs. Good wives are also expected to 'follow' their husbands' instruction, including satisfying his sexual desires:

> They want us to go to the west, then we go to the west; if they want us to go to the east, then we go to the east. (WFG1).

Women are also expected to be "calm, courteous and polite to everybody" (wife) and always show respect to their husbands. Even if her husband is drunk or maltreats her, a wife must not cause others to look down on him by criticising him or "taking the fire outside the house" (complaining to outsiders).

Another important characteristic of the virtuous woman is 'purity': women are expected to be virgins before marriage and faithful to husbands after marriage. Going out socially may provoke gossip and accusations of impurity, which can damage both a woman's reputation and that of her family. However, in other respects women are charged with ensuring family prosperity by managing household finances, educating the family and providing sound advice to their husbands.

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[1] Soldiers' focus groups are numbered SFG1-5, and wives focus groups WFG1-4. Where possible, individuals are identified by pseudonym, and otherwise referred to as 'soldier' or 'wife'. Quotes from individual interviews are labelled as 'wife' or 'soldier'. 'Interviewer' in focus group extracts is the Khmer research assistant.

Traditional 'ideals' for men were more ambiguous, perhaps reflecting more stringent application of standards for women than men (Franklin, 2002). One clear element is that men are expected to be the bread winners. Another is that men 'educate' or 'lead' their wives, reflecting an authoritarian role as the head of the family:

It's good when wives listen to husbands' guidance. Wives should follow this and avoid disrupting the family. (SFG1)

While an 'ideal' man is expected to value and respect his family, much ambiguity surrounds acceptable socialising behaviours. Discussions amongst both men and women point to certain 'norms' in the sense of common behaviours. These include going out with other men to drink, gamble or 'go outside' (dow krow) for sex.

If [soliders] are at the border or in the jungle, they feel bored. When they are permitted to visit home, they always go directly to find girls. They drink alcohol and have sex outside more than with their wives. (SFG5)

However, the acceptability of this behaviour is less clear. For example:

Heang: If you want your family to have happiness, you must be faithful and have only one partner.
Soldier: Yes, I think that's right. We can do it, we have right to do it, but when we do it we know it might cause problems. (SFG2)

These views are characteristically contradictory. On one hand, soldiers say they should be faithful, but on the other, they have a 'right' to 'dow krow'. Further ambiguity is introduced by the view that "faithfulness means understanding how to protect ourselves [use condoms] wherever we go" (SFG1). Thus for some soldiers and wives, if a husband uses a condom 'outside', "we can still call him a good man" (wife).

Such contradictory views point to the influence of different Alters. Amongst men, group socialising, drinking and sex-seeking may be valued behaviours that reinforce group bonds. In contrast, from their wives' perspective, these behaviours 'cause problems' and should be 'kept secret' (soldier). Such assertions may also reflect an orientation to a programme Alter: the programme promotes both faithfulness and condom use.

However, both men and women accept that 'ideals' are almost impossible to achieve, for anyone: "If we want full criteria, no one can meet those criteria" (SFG5). Yet while participants acknowledge that transgressions are common, there is a strong sense that 'tradition' still functions as an ideal that guides behaviours, especially for women.

5.1. Participants' representations of 'gender'

Before attending the programme, most had either never heard the word 'gender' or had heard the word but did not know what it meant. Lacking a Khmer translation, the English word punctuated the flow of Khmer[2]. In essence, participants understand 'gender' to mean 'equal rights':

It's related to rights, especially when women's rights equal men's, this is called 'gender'. (SFG4)

My definition is that there is equality between men and women. (WFG1)

These definitions imbue the word itself with the programme's aim in teaching participants about 'gender', implying the presence of a programme Alter.

Participants interpret 'equal rights' as men and women being able to do the same things. This applies to public roles (e.g. women can also be 'high ranking officers', SFG3) and domestic roles. Participants also say 'gender' means men and women can do the same in terms of social and sexual behaviours—if men can go out, so can women; if men enjoy sex, so too can women.

Interpretations of 'gender' also incorporate a legal aspect through associations with laws about human rights and domestic violence. For example, women have the right to seek protection from the authorities, as this wife explains:

Now there are human rights, women have the same rights as men. When [he] commits violence on me, there is a law. (WFG2)

A third element of participants' interpretation of 'gender' relates to respecting each other's rights within the marital relationship: husbands cannot have all decision-making power (including in relation to sex), and couples must be patient and tolerant of each other's mistakes.

Interviewer: How do you apply gender?
Pisey: Let's say when I am angry with my husband, I try to be patient. This is gender.
Kannika: Example—my husband turns to be considerate with me. No matter how hard our family life is, we have to help each other and understand each other. (WFG1)

All participants agreed that 'gender' (equal rights) was a 'good idea'. However, it is clearly viewed as a 'foreign word' (WFG4) associated with international NGOs: there is no Khmer word for 'gender', it is 'their policy', introduced because "they want us to be good" (soldier).

6. Accommodating the challenge of the new

Representations of 'gender' conflict with Khmer gender ideals in numerous ways. The following sections explore how participants attempt to accommodate 'gender' within the 'established geography of meanings' (Jovchelovitch, 2008).

6.1. The clash with tradition and rejection of 'equal rights'

Some aspects of the 'equal rights' interpretation of gender conflict with what participants say is possible or appropriate in the context of their everyday lives, "even if we have the same rights" (WFG4). Women's responses to the idea that 'men and women can do the same' suggest that, while they welcome help from their husbands, they are reluctant to relinquish the responsibility of managing the household. However, the area which provoked the strongest clash with tradition concerns social behaviours that would threaten a woman's 'purity'. On this issue, both men and women were resolute that, although men can go out (including 'go out' for sex), women absolutely cannot: they can neither have additional lovers, sex before marriage nor behave in ways that could create such suspicions. For example:

Interviewer: So men can go out, but women can't?
Soldier 1: According to Khmer tradition, if it allows, they can, but our tradition does not allow it. When women go to a party, they can go with their relatives or friends, but can't change their lover or hug or sit very close to other men like in foreign cultures. It is not good to see.
Interviewer: What do you think about this?

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[2] Gender, underlined, indicates use of English within otherwise Khmer speech.

Soldier 2: Women also have rights to do so, but it is not acceptable because it is against Khmer tradition. (SFG3)

Interviewer: I have one doubt. Just a moment ago we said that husbands can go out. Can wives go out too or not?

Wife: No.

Roath: We are Khmer women. We can't do like men. We have the same rights as them, but we can't go out.

Interviewer: Why?

Davy: Because we're Khmer woman.

Interviewer: What do you mean by saying "because we are Khmer woman"?

Davy: Because the *chbap srey* does not allow women to do so.

Akara: In spite of these equal rights, we couldn't do it. Even if we, women, really did so, we couldn't reveal the truth. We're afraid that people in society would see us as bad women.

Davy: We're not like women in other countries. (WFG2)

As these examples illustrate, it is because women are *Khmer* that the notion of 'equal rights' is rejected in this regard, a point underscored by the contrasts made with 'foreign' women. Arguably, the stance these participants take represents a choice not to exercise the 'right' to go out, given the potentially negative judgements of their Khmer community. What is pertinent to this discussion is the influence of the Khmer community—other in mediating their responses to new knowledge.

6.2. Accepting the new alongside the old

However, like the Cambodian socio-economic context, cultures and traditions are not static phenomena. Discussions of women's right to participate in the public sphere – e.g. in education, politics or the economy – indicate no opposition. Indeed, many participants highlight that not only *can* women participate, but many currently *do*.

Discussions of domestic violence also indicate increasing acceptance of victims seeking help and legal protection from authorities—implying an acceptance of women's right to 'take the fire outside'.

Akara: I have to inform other people because I'm afraid of more serious problems. I'm not afraid of it being said that I take the fire outside. Because there are organisations coming to teach us as well as our husbands about human rights. (WFG2)

These views perhaps reflect not only a single programme session on domestic violence, but the current nationwide anti-domestic violence mass media campaign, which many participants mentioned during the focus groups.

However, not all women were confident in the protection of the law, and some still felt the threat of social sanction carried more weight. For example, in contrast to other women in focus group two, Davy, who shared heart-rending stories of maltreatment by her husband, and who at 45 would likely remain alone, felt she had no choice but to stay with him and protect him from being "looked down on" by others: "I can't leave him. I have to suffer". Moreover, the other women then rallied to her defence, praising her for being a 'virtuous woman'.

Another example of the accommodation of 'new(er)' ideas alongside 'tradition' is the 'alternative' definition of 'being faithful': the incorporation of condom use into an 'ideal' male behaviour is indicative of the widespread familiarity with condoms and the visible impact of a maturing AIDS epidemic on military families (Lynch, 2003).

6.3. Anchoring the new into existing cultural frames

The theme 'respecting each other's rights' appears to be anchored within the framework of Theravada Buddhism. Interpretations of respecting each others' rights as being tolerant, respectful, 'cool' and non-violent resonate strongly with the duties and obligations stated in the Buddhist precepts for moral conduct (see e.g. Keown, 1998). Some participants made direct links between this approach to avoiding violence and the teachings of the Buddha:

I would adhere to the Buddha's words which tell me to be cool. I would walk away from his anger. (WFG4)

Women in particular also show more creative manipulations of 'traditional' ideals in their effort to incorporate the concept of equal rights. For example, folk tales and proverbs portray the 'virtuous woman' (*srey kruap leakhana*) as being obedient to her husband, yet also advising him and ensuring family prosperity (Ledgerwood, 1994). Female participants draw on these ambiguities to justify their 'right' to argue back to their husbands:

Kannika: For me, I tell my husband off some.
Pisey: Yes, that's right. We have to blame him so that he can contribute to the household.
Interviewer: But this can't be regarded as the act of a good woman, right?
Kannika: No, a wife must know how to advise her husband. If the husband knows only drinking alcohol, the family will be poor. (WFG2)

In such ways, participants creatively use ambiguities inherent within 'tradition' to restate contemporary concerns and projects, while still preserving the integrity of a known way of life.

7. Discussion: the uneven 'local' ground

The analysis reveals a polyphasic field in which new knowledge of gender – itself understood to mean equal rights – is engaged in a variety of ways: some elements are rejected as inapplicable to the lives of Khmer, while others are accommodated alongside or anchored in and hybridised with existing knowledge. These varieties of polyphasia reflect not only differences between individuals, but also the contours of the symbolic, material and relational dimensions of the 'local' place in which they are positioned.

In part, contradictory and heterogeneous responses reflect orientations to different *Alters* (others). One clear distinction is the orientation to (co-present or absent) programme *Alters* versus community *Alters*. Gender equality 'makes sense' in relation to programme *Alters*, particularly foreigners. In contrast, the *Alters* implied in discussions of Khmer gender ideals are women's husbands, fellow soldiers or generalised others in their community. In orienting to these *Alters*, some elements of gender equality are rejected, since without recognition from community *Alters*, efforts to assert equal rights may carry little weight, or even be damaging. In a context of extreme poverty, women in particular fear both the emotional and *material* consequences of abandonment, divorce or the loss of wider social ties as a result of transgressing traditional expectations.

Rejection of elements of 'gender/equal rights' is also tied to the symbolic context and participants' efforts to sustain a distinctively Khmer way of life. In Cambodia's hierarchically structured society, fulfilling cultural expectations in accordance with moral codes (*chbap*) and Buddhist beliefs in *dharma* and *kharma* is believed to not only protect individual social status, but also social order and harmony (Chandler, 1996; Ledgerwood, 1990).

This concern for social order and harmony may be all the more heightened in a post-genocide, post-occupied state; indeed, following this period there were pervasive fears that Khmer culture itself would be lost (Frieson, 2001).

However, it is also clear from the analysis that what it means to be Khmer is not static, but changing and ambiguous. With the influx of international assistance, rapid economic growth and attendant socio-cultural changes, participants are only too aware that "today's society is not like the old generation" (wife). Thus although the 'traditional' gender ideals described here may leave both men and women vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, these *ideals* are not the only significant contextual influence. Some issues participants associate with 'gender' (e.g. condom use, employment) are less novel than the concept of gender itself, and appear to have already been integrated into Khmer culture to some extent. Moreover, as military families struggle to survive on government wages of $25–30/month, and in the visible face of an AIDS epidemic, traditional ideals may come second to the struggle for livelihood security.

Yet material and symbolic changes are *uneven*. What constitutes a ('new') legal right can be, as shown, very different from what participants' community may see as 'right' (acceptable) behaviour. Thus the threat of social sanction may outweigh the potential benefits of exercising this right (e.g. to 'take the fire outside' and seek legal protection from domestic violence). However, the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable are not rigidly defined, but in a shifting, negotiated tension that creates an uneven middle ground and makes potential responses from community—others to new ideas uncertain. In addition to the uncertainty of potential responses, individuals are unevenly positioned within that symbolic and material field: as focus group two illustrated, individuals are not equally equipped with the emotional, social or material resources to risk social sanction from pursuing new projects of 'equal rights'. Moreover, amongst women and men whose past and present experience is dominated by violations of their so-called legal 'rights', many have little confidence in the protection of authorities.

The heterogeneity of participants' responses and the polyphasic representational field described reflects not only the way in which specific socio-historical contexts shape the interpretation of new knowledge, but also the agency of participants in using that knowledge as a resource with which to pursue different projects, in relation to different *Alters*. Apparent contradictions between 'gender'/equal rights, and 'tradition' may be experienced not so much as a conflict, but as a question of flexibly drawing on different representations to negotiate a shifting and uncertain social and material world. Crucially, however, this 'local' world, and their positioning within it, also constrains individuals' differing capacity to exploit new knowledge resources to pursue their projects.

8. Conclusion

This paper has examined what happens when the concept of 'gender' – so prominent in global discourses of HIV/AIDS – hits the local ground amongst rural, Cambodian military families. In concluding, I turn to the question of how this understanding of the 'local' can inform global strategies for tackling gender inequalities and promoting reproductive health.

The analysis demonstrates how the place into which HIV/AIDS programs intervene shapes not only what 'sense' participants make of 'gender', but also the capacity of participants to use new knowledge about 'equal rights'. The importance of recognition from community *Alters*, clashes with existing, locally-valued knowledge and traditions, and the material conditions of participants' lives mediate the impact of health-related messages, demonstrating that globally established concepts such as gender cannot simply be transposed into new places without taking careful account of the context of women and men's lives.

Moreover, these findings speak to *how* health programmers and policy-makers should conceptualise the places into which they intervene. Rather than rely on a static conceptualisation and essentialised reifications of 'tradition', it must be recognised that the 'local' is already in some senses 'globalised': global forces, from trade to international health campaigns, have already begun to transform the local landscape. It is to these *changing, dynamic* local contexts that global strategies must be tailored. As the agency of these participants suggests—a more fruitful approach may be to exploit and build on changes and ambiguities that already exist within the symbolic context. Equally, this analysis suggests that anchoring novel concepts in existing cultural frames (such as Buddhist precepts) may be a more effective means of communication. In the Cambodian context, this may be particularly useful with regard to the notion of 'rights', in contrast to other contexts where there is a stronger historical precedent for rights-based discourses (e.g. Cornish, 2006).

The significant role of *Alters* underscores the importance of community-based interventions, rather than targeting only 'high risk' groups: participants need to have confidence that (new) behaviours or practices will be recognised and accepted by significant others. Further, these findings highlight the social and material value of existing knowledge and traditions in maintaining relations with others; thus rather than simply challenging existing norms, interventions need to support the collective elaboration of alternative, positive masculinities and femininities. The constraints of the material context on risking social sanction by transgressing existing norms also reinforce calls for education programs to be accompanied by structural interventions that address factors such as economic (in)security or protection by authorities (Gupta et al., 2003).

Finally, it must be remembered that the knowledge contained within global policies on HIV/AIDS or gender is no less a reflection of the context in which *it* emerged, than are the 'local' (re)interpretations described here. In this sense, the 'global' is also 'local'. Thus in seeking to develop locally appropriate interventions, it may be useful to begin by reflecting on how the relational, symbolic and material exigencies of the places in which international policies are formed have – perhaps unhelpfully – shaped the concepts and ideas they contain.

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