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“These Days We Have to Be Poor People:” Women’s Narratives of the Economic Aftermath of Forced Evictions in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

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Abstract

This paper explores the economic aftermath of forced evictions for urban Cambodian women. It is based on an analysis of in-depth narratives of 22 women displaced from five locations in Phnom Penh, the capital city. Evictees' overall post-eviction coping and adaptation proved to be grounded in their economic circumstances, which in turn framed other risk and resilience factors. The nature and degree of economic harm resulting from the evictions varied widely, and followed specific patterns consistent with pre-displacement socioeconomic status, livelihood source, and the degree to which social networks were embedded in their former neighborhoods. Those who worked in the informal sector experienced shocks to their *livelihoods*, especially those who landed in remote locations. Homeowners were more typically harmed in terms of *assets*: they might maintain relatively stable incomes, but lose enormous value of their properties. A third group experienced a catastrophic double blow affecting *both livelihoods and assets*; this group tended to include shopkeepers whose shelter and livelihoods were both tied to their property. There were also some women who reported that forced eviction had had a relatively *benign* impact on them. These narratives were idiosyncratic. However, several explanatory factors emerged, including these women had intact livelihoods, superficial ties to their former neighborhoods, and/or found new housing nearby. I conclude with recommendations, including compensation at full market value for seized properties, and broad urban planning measures to protect and encourage affordable rental housing within the city, proximate to diverse livelihood opportunities. A housing/shelter focus to advocacy, policy, and assistance strategies is too narrow, because it poorly addresses the livelihood crisis experienced by many of the displaced.

Introduction

Forced evictions, that is, “the involuntary removal of persons from their homes or land, directly or indirectly attributable to the State” (OHCHR, 1996, p. 3) are a worldwide phenomenon and often trigger a catastrophic loss of home, livelihood, and community to those are affected (UN-Habitat & OHCHR, 2014). Forced evictions have become widespread in Cambodia since the turn of the century. It has been estimated that as many as 400,000 Cambodians have been uprooted nationwide since 2003 (Licadho and The Cambodia Daily, 2012). Such evictions are highly controversial from political and legal standpoints, and there is a considerable body of literature reflecting these perspectives. However, in-depth analyses of the impact of these evictions on the lives of those displaced are relatively scarce. This paper presents findings from an investigation of the impact of forced evictions on displaced women in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. It is based on an analysis of 27 in-depth narrative interviews conducted with 22 women who had been forcibly evicted from five neighborhoods. The data was collected in 2009-2010 support of a doctoral dissertation (McGinn, 2013). The material presented here is adapted from parts of this dissertation.¹

Literature Review

Forced evictions are a worldwide occurrence, and affected some 10 million people annually during the 2000s (UN-Habitat & OHCHR, 2014). As much as 22% of Cambodia’s land has been sold for economic concessions or other development projects in recent years (Licadho and The Cambodia Daily, 2012). In many cases, the contested property was inhabited or otherwise in use by local populations. “Land grabbing” has become a major political issue in Cambodia (Engvall and Kokko, 2007; Hughes 2008; Sherchan 2015). Forced evictions have been carried out on a large scale in Phnom Penh since 1990 (Ballard and Runsinarith, 2007), fueled in part by rising property values.

Urban evictees are usually resettled in locations on the outskirts of the city. There is no consistent policy, but the usual pattern is for renters to be transported to a remote, barren field where they are given small plots to build basic encampments, whereas homeowners might be given a newly-built rowhouse. Other homeowners may receive a cash settlement (often at far below market value for their property), and some are not compensated at all. These people do not go to designated resettlement areas.

Migration in Cambodia and worldwide is propelled by both pull and push factors (Maltoni, 2007); people leave their hometowns and provinces in search of a better life, or to escape hardship or difficulty. Contexts of forced migration, however, are characterized by extreme stress, including deepened poverty, exposure to violence, social breakdown, and family stress. It is clear from Derks (2008), Lim (2007), and other scholars of internal migration in Cambodia that Phnom Penh serves as a “pressure valve” for the rural poor; the capital city is the destination when livelihoods collapse, or for those seeking opportunity. Living conditions for many in Phnom Penh, however, remain marginal. What then happens when entire urban neighborhoods are displaced? Where do people go, and what becomes of them?

¹ An earlier version of this paper also appeared in a small online journal produced by a Canadian consulting company (EV Research Inc.).

Soto (2011) has commented that “housing, land and property rights affect men and women differently; hence these issues are not gender-neutral and require a gender equality analysis of the problem” (p. 3). In Cambodia, these issues tend not to be official – women have the same legal property rights as men – but they are often the more socially and economically marginalized, and this is likely to be exacerbated in the event of a forced eviction. There are large numbers of female-headed households in Cambodia. Women tend to be overburdened at home, with full care-taking responsibilities for children and the elderly, while also contributing significantly to household income.

The research focus on women is thus advantageous for capturing the overall impact of forced evictions on family systems, functioning, composition, and livelihood strategies - including the separation of households unable to earn sufficient income in peri-urban areas (See Figure 1). The Housing Rights Task Force (HRTF) (2012) argued that the disintegration of community ties especially affects women:

The families build not only their homes, but also a social network of friends and families that ensures their survival. These networks are important to people, especially women, as they can rely on them to support them in their social and economic activities... These relationships are non-quantifiable and carefully interwoven into the fabric of the life of the urban poor and assist greatly in their survival and development. Forced evictions destroy these crucial networks (p. 8).

Despite important contributions to the research on forced evictions in Cambodia, the emphasis in the literature to date has been on political, legal, and urban planning analyses. There has been little in-depth investigation of these evictions from a social impact perspective, or what happens to affected people over time. A fuller understanding of these processes is essential for the design and implementation of informed public policy.

Methodology and Design

This study utilized narrative analysis to examine the experience of forced evictions on displaced women in Phnom Penh, with a particular focus on the dynamics that underpin their risk and resilience. Qualitative methods are the most appropriate approach to this study because they are best suited to an in-depth exploration of human phenomena, capturing the world-views of those involved and the complexity and contexts of participants’ lived experiences. Grounded in constructivist and inductive enquiry, qualitative methods explore and interpret phenomena and experience in a nuanced and complex way. This study specifically utilized narrative methods, i.e., a “family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form” (Riessman, 2008, p. 11), because stories are a universal means through which individuals interpret and explain their past experiences and perspectives and integrate these into views of the present and expectations about the future.

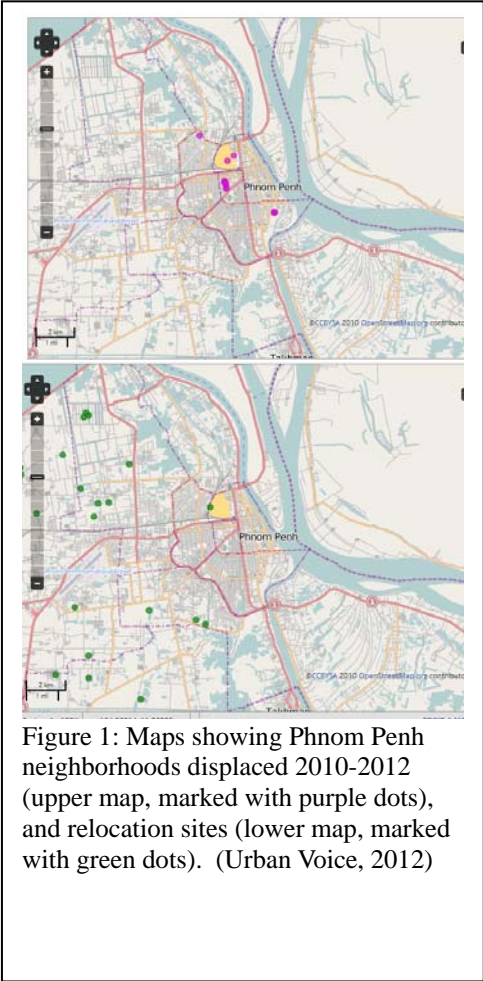


Figure 1: Maps showing Phnom Penh neighborhoods displaced 2010-2012 (upper map, marked with purple dots), and relocation sites (lower map, marked with green dots). (Urban Voice, 2012)

Research fieldwork was conducted in 2009-2010 in the greater Phnom Penh area. Twenty-two women displaced within two years prior to their first interview were invited to share their experiences of forced eviction and its aftermath. Five of the women were approached for a second life history interview, to more fully frame and nest the displacement experience within the broader course of their lives. All participants had lived in one of five evicted central-city neighborhoods: Boeung Kak Lake, Borei Keila, Dey Krahom, Group 78, and Reak Reay. Sampling for the interviews was purposive. I sought to identify a diverse group of women with different backgrounds, experiences, and characteristics that were salient to the issues at hand. Given that this study is of persons who *previously* lived in geographic communities that no longer existed, locating informants was a logistical challenge. “Snowball” or chain-referral techniques were used to identify potential participants.

A small team of Khmer Research Assistants was essential to the success of the study. They conducted the interviews in Khmer, which were audio recorded with permission and transcribed in Khmer verbatim. A written English translation was then prepared, guided by translation protocols outlined by Baker (1992). This translation was then verified by a Senior Translator. “Like weight bearing walls, personal narratives depend on certain structures to hold them together” (Riessman, 1993, p. 18), and are analyzed in terms of overall arc and content as well as what is revealed in particular fragments of monologue and dialogue. After an initial close reading, all the transcripts were meticulously coded and analyzed using ATLAS software. Grounded theory conventions were used to identify, develop, and code passages from the texts; thematic anchors were then grouped into broad categories. Modalities of coping and sources of risk and resilience within and across narratives were identified through an iterative process of inductively-generated explanatory frameworks.

Findings

Overview

The women in this study had disparate experiences, and expressed a diversity of attitudes, outcomes, and explanations for what had happened to them. There is no uniform forced eviction experience, but rather a multiplicity of circumstances as varied as the population of Phnom Penh itself. Nevertheless, some clear patterns did emerge, largely following socioeconomic axes. A second critical factor proved to be the degree to which participants’ economic interests and social networks had been embedded in the geographic neighborhood itself. This factor is only partially associated with pre-eviction economic circumstances.

I document four post-displacement economic trajectories. The nature and degree of socioeconomic harm experienced by participants varied widely. This is a very significant finding, insofar as it contrasts sharply with published news media and NGO reports on the forced evictions in Phnom Penh, which tend to collapse diverse populations together into an artificially uniform portrait. Harm was not universal, and moreover, different families were harmed in different ways – and those with higher socioeconomic status (SES) were also affected, sometimes grievously. A typology of these four socioeconomic trajectories is summarized below. The following sections constitute more detailed discussions and case studies from each category. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of the implications of these findings for advocacy, public policy, and post-displacement assistance strategies.

- *High levels of livelihood harm* are found among those whose ability to earn is tied to a particular locale. While this includes small business owners, this category is especially characteristic of the urban poor who worked in the informal sector prior to eviction. Unable to find affordable downtown housing, they are pushed into destitution after their eviction, because of an inability to find work or income-generating opportunities beyond the city center.

- *High levels of asset harm* are concentrated among those of higher SES. While these people usually have the resources to keep the family out of extreme poverty, compensation packages are far below market values for their properties. Eviction thus represents an enormous loss of the family's (often extended family's) savings and net worth, even when livelihoods are left intact. They also tend to be long-term community residents with strong and meaningful ties to their neighborhoods.
- *High levels of both livelihood and asset harm* are found among more successful entrepreneurs with businesses operating from or near their homes. These families simultaneously lose both valuable properties and significant incomes. Prosperous (or at least secure) families thus tumble into poverty.
- *Benign impact*. Some are, in fact, not particularly harmed by their forced eviction, and a few ironically benefit. It is notable that the pathways within this category are far less consistent than for the others in this typology; many of the narratives are highly idiosyncratic. Nevertheless, there are some factors that help explain why and how some of those affected by evictions are so resilient.

Livelihood Harm

For some of the displaced, evictions triggered a plunge into terrible poverty. Those who were already poor were especially vulnerable. Lives that were described as *pibaak* (difficult) before eviction became *yaab* (very difficult) or *vithania* (wretchedly difficult). Only two described their original circumstances in terms of outright destitution, whereas after the evictions there were many in dire circumstances, without adequate food or other basic necessities.

The process through which livelihoods were so affected – even among those with regular salaries – was much the same as the impetus behind the evictions themselves: soaring property values (and rents) in central Phnom Penh, together with a lack of affordable transportation. Research participants clearly articulated how they were unable to afford to buy – and sometimes even rent – new homes in the vicinity of their previous ones, which were prized precisely because of access to income-generating opportunities. As Reachny² explained,

It's much more difficult than before because we can't earn money here, it's very far, we have to spend a lot of money and time go to Phnom Penh and even though we have our own motorbike, it's very difficult... and it's very quiet even though we would like to set up a business [there are no customers].

Reachny's succinct explanation emphasizes that evictees are willing to work, but they cannot due to lack of customers and high transportation expenses in remote areas.

Location-dependent earning potential crosses socioeconomic lines in Phnom Penh; the poor, professionals, and everyone in between benefits from living near the city center. Those with white-collar jobs were usually able to maintain their livelihoods despite expensive and inconvenient commutes. Many of the poor, by contrast, ended up destitute because their livelihoods collapsed altogether. Phnom Penh lacks public transportation,³ and the modest earnings of the poor in remote locations are swallowed up by transport costs. As Vanna explained:

[My husband] goes and comes back every day. It is not the same as when we lived in

² Pseudonyms are used throughout, and identifying details have been masked.

³ Since 2014, a city bus service has been piloted but its scope is limited and future uncertain.

Phnom Penh. He needs to pay for one liter of gasoline to come back home. [He can't profit] after paying for the gasoline... There is no hope at all!... [In Dey Krahom] I could sell meatballs and fertilized duck eggs on Saturdays and Sundays... What about here? There is no Saturday or Sunday... There is nothing.

Vanna's despair is grounded in her family's inability to make a living. Camped out on a roadside, she was surrounded by other poor people. There were no customers for any goods or services that she could sell, and nobody in this remote location had extra time and income to enjoy. When she regrets that here "there is no Saturday or Sunday," Vanna is not referencing her own leisure. This comment encapsulates how poor people like her are dependent on *neak mien* ("people who have," i.e., the non-poor). It is not a weekend for herself that she needs, but to be amidst those who enjoy them. Her follow-up comment that "there is nothing" indicates that there is nothing left over from others' disposable income for her and her family. Living amidst a concentration of poverty, there is no way for Vanna to earn a living.

Those who received compensation in the form of a replacement property or a small plot in a relocation camp found themselves at a considerable distance from the city.⁴ Even those who rented or purchased new homes usually found themselves far away from their former neighborhoods due to lack of affordable housing. The result was an abrupt, sometimes catastrophic drop in income.⁵ As Sina explained,

[Our income] is less than before!... It's decreased by about 50 percent... When we lived [at Boeung Kak Lake], every Sunday, my husband could be a motorcycle taxi driver whenever we ran out of money... In his free time, he could work at night and could earn some money. There is no night time work here; he does not know where to be a driver here [because there are no customers]; there are only robbers.

Phun, who had previously enjoyed a modest but stable livelihood in Group, echoed these points:

Here, it is ten times more difficult than there... Business doesn't earn; selling this and selling that doesn't work. It is difficult: I have a business; I sell Chinese noodles in the market, but it is not going well... Since moving here, it is just difficult to make money. It is so difficult; nowhere could be more difficult than living here. I am almost crying these days. I used to make a lot of money, and now I don't know what I can do to make money.

Phun had endured repeated hardship over her life: she had repeatedly been forced out of her home for reasons ranging from marital dissolution to communist "liberation" of her family's farmland in Vietnam. And yet, "nowhere could be more difficult" than her current location. Perhaps, of course, she is being rhetorical. She had endured hunger before. However, the effects of poverty were being felt in new and different ways than in her difficult youth. By the time of her life history interview, her youngest daughter had dropped out of school, the family had exhausted assistance from extended family, and a lack of income had forced her household to scatter. It was this that pained her more than

⁴ There were two exceptions in my sample, both of whom had been given units in a new apartment building very near their former homes.

⁵ There is no concomitant drop in expenses in these peri-urban areas. Electricity, water, and food are all *more* expensive, and education and health expenses also increase due to transportation costs. The only thing cheaper is, typically, the land itself.

hunger:

Even when I was renting a place to live before, I had never been in tears; I'm telling you the truth, I had never been separated from my family with one living here and one living there. We always lived together; even when we were *pibaak kraw vethania* ["difficult poor wretched"] all my children and grandchildren were living together, not husband lives here and wife lives there, never. After the eviction, we separated, husband is there, and wife is here.

One of the most striking characteristics of the data is the uniformity of responses about being unable to earn a living on the outskirts of the city. Most assumed that they would continue their usual means of income in the new place and indicated that they were taken aback by the lack of customers. They did not anticipate the extent of the difficulty.

Chanthon presents a case study of the process by which eviction from the city center harms a family's livelihood. When interviewed, Chanthon was in her early 50s, married, with three sons in their late teens and twenties. A former renter at Dey Krahom, the family had first been transported with other former renters ineligible for compensation to Damnak Troyeung, some 20 kilometers away. They initially built a shanty settlement along the roadside, for lack of anywhere else to go. After many months, the company moved them to a relocation camp in a neighboring province, where she was interviewed. She had set up a small business selling produce in the camp, where she lived with her chronically-ill husband and one adolescent son. Conditions in the camp were abominable: people had been allocated 4 x 6 meter land plots, on which they had constructed flimsy makeshift shelters. There were inadequate water and sanitation facilities, and no meaningful livelihood opportunities. Residents were desperate and destitute.

Chanthon gave a striking narrative detailing her struggles to sustain herself and her family following their eviction from Dey Krahorn. These passages paint sharp contrasts between their lives before and after, and lay out the burdens she endured. Chanthon began by describing her family's pre-eviction circumstances: "The most convenient place to live in was Dey Krahom because it was near a business area... It was in the city, it was convenient for our businesses, even though we sold only small things, we could get enough profit to eat with." This is a typical description of how Phnom Penh's poor evaluate their circumstances: food security. By contrast, external agencies and advocates concerned with the forced evictions almost always focus on adequate housing.

Chanthon describes her struggles to keep her family fed, first squatting along the roadside:

After the eviction I moved from Dey Krahom to Damnak Troyeung... We didn't have anything to do [to earn money], we went to *bach Trey* [a technique to catch fish in shallow water without equipment]... We didn't have anything to do for nearly a year... [We] sold an old motorbike for \$160... It helped us eat but by the time we arrived here, we were really completely out of cash... [The money from selling that motorbike] helped us for a very long time, nearly one year.

After they were moved to the relocation camp, their circumstances hardly improved. Conditions in the camp were abominable; while they now had possession documents for tiny land plots, there was still no food. Chanthon's neighbors were in similar circumstances, both before and after the eviction:

Everyone lived as I did in Dey Krahom, to sum up, nobody was idle... It was very easy to make money there because it is in the city... [People in Phnom Penh can] spend money

and buy things without feeling bad... We don't have anything here, and we have to be thrifty... Nobody buys our things.

Chanthon emphasizes the past industriousness of herself and her neighbors, as well as the fundamental dilemma of their new lives: a lack of customers. Her comment underscores that they are hardworking people who are not poor because they are lazy, but because there is not enough money circulating in the local economy. If everyone is "thrifty" then nothing is exchanged and commerce grinds to a halt. This is intrinsic dilemma of life in peri-urban areas. In a truly rural location, there would be a farming economy of sorts, and the possibility of wild foods or a small garden. In the city, there is business. But on the outskirts of the city, there is no viable livelihood at all.

Chanthon and her family became dependent on handouts from NGOs and relatives, but those had been exhausted. The consequences of this desperation were deeply felt as Chanthon and her family spiraled into desperation. "I never have any tasty food to eat, nothing, and no one dares to eat anything... How can I save money... I can't find a solution... we don't know how to manage." Throughout, food security is the measure by which the poor evaluate the depth of their own poverty. Chanthon was arguably in a better position than many, insofar as she did have a small stall in the camp's market area, from which she sold produce. But, since her customers themselves could not afford to pay, this business was unsustainable, and she was on the brink of losing her last asset.

Talking about this selling, [here in the camp] there are always people buying on credit... They owed me for a long time like this, and so I had to pawn the deed for my landplot for \$20... If we lose our property, we have to walk out [and become homeless]... There are a lot of households who have lost their property... Poor people become poor because of this... Because poor people are trapped.

The harshest consequence of that entrapment was that Chanthon's middle son had gone off to work on one of the Thai-owned fishing boats, which are notorious for their barbaric treatment of workers. (A second interviewee in this camp had also had sons trafficked to Thailand.) She was also now too far away to visit her oldest son, who was in prison; previously she had often visited him, bringing healthy food for him to eat.

Deepened poverty was also taking its toll on relations within the household, and on her health:

When we don't have [anything, my husband] feels frustrated so he curses his wife and child... I don't know what to do here, I don't have any idea, I don't know what I should sell, I have become old now, my eyes aren't so good, my eyes hurt and are always teary... I don't know what to do since I can't make money, so I just persevere in pain.

In this passage, Chanthon collapses deteriorating family relations, physical health, and poverty, moving fluidly back and forth between the pillars of her despair. The arc of Chanthon's narrative emphasizes a life of hard work, a progressive series of ever-more desperate strategies to feed her family since their eviction from Dey Krahom. She then concludes with a statement of hopeless suffering. Without any viable livelihood, there is nothing left that can be done but "persevere in pain."

Chanthon exemplifies a typical downward spiral toward greater poverty among the working poor who are evicted. Other socioeconomic groups were also affected, however. Several participants who were better off also absorbed serious blows to their livelihoods, but managed to avoid slipping into dire poverty. Regardless of socioeconomic status prior to eviction, every research participant engaged in entrepreneurial activity who went to a location far from the city faced serious difficulties, and

usually crisis. It is probable that the majority of those who live in Phnom Penh work in the informal sector; while current data is unavailable, in 2008 it was estimated that 50.0% of workers in city were self-employed or unpaid family labor, and 85.3% worked in services (EIC, 2008). The greatest threat posed by forced evictions is thus usually not to these families' homes, but to their livelihood capacities.

The literature and assistance strategies concerning forced evictions in Phnom Penh tends to conflate all displaced persons into an undifferentiated category, and also to focus on shelter and housing to the exclusion of more salient stressors. My evidence, by contrast, suggests that the chief eviction crisis concerns livelihoods, and this is particularly true for those who are already poor. While adequate shelter is of course necessary, it is entirely insufficient to compensate for the loss of previous homes and communities. Indeed, numerous participants who were given new flats or rowhouses reported that they were living in superior housing to that which they had been displaced from, but their overall circumstances were much worse. Meanwhile renters – who constitute most of the poorest, and who are also largely excluded from compensation packages – consistently framed their crisis in terms of income. For those working in the informal sector, livelihood capacity is nested in economically diverse urban settings in which there are customers with disposable income. The dominant approach to addressing forced evictions in Phnom Penh through focus on shelter and housing fails to address this.

High Levels of Asset Harm

Not all of those who are displaced by forced evictions in Phnom Penh are poor or live in slum areas. “Upper poor,” middle class, and professional families are also affected, many of whom assert that they already hold or are eligible for full legal title. In some cases, the chief wage-earners in these families held office jobs, and owned vehicles so that a new extended commute was more an inconvenience than a complete catastrophe. However, these families too experienced significant financial harm as a result of their forced eviction, although in a different way: loss of assets.

The compensation packages that are offered (typically, US\$8-10,000 or a new rowhouse in a distant location) are uniform within a given neighborhood, i.e., all those who are eligible receive the same compensation.⁶ When there are two houses within a single compound, or multiple households are present, extra compensation packages should be available, although study participants indicated that this process is fraught with problems. The amount of financial compensation is invariably not enough to purchase any but the most marginal property in Phnom Penh. The compensation packages thus disenfranchise – sometimes massively – homeowners. As Naree explained:

We didn't have any choice, they gave only \$8,000 to the people... Some people were smarter than us so that they got two compensations, but I who am married with children and so ignorant, we had a big house, but we got only \$9,500... We got as same as those who had a small cottage, because we were honest... My house was very big, twice or three times bigger than other households, but they gave me only a small amount.

Here, Naree expresses her anger at how unfair the compensation process was. She asserts that there was no opportunity to negotiate a fair price, but then she emphasizes that those with savvy dishonesty did succeed in securing more. The implication is that the company could have – and indeed did – pay more but refused to. This exacerbates her sense of injustice. Naree paints the

⁶ There is no specified government policy that specifies certain compensation packages, but this is typically what is offered in the city.

compensation process as deeply corrupt and unfair, disenfranchising those who deserved to be treated fairly, while rewarding others who cheated.

Cambodians typically live in extended family units, and there are often a multitude of relatives living together in a large home or compound. Living amongst those who are financially secure may be “country cousins” pursuing better education or employment opportunities, with few resources of their own to fall back on. A home may also represent years (if not decades) of the entire savings/investment of an extended family. The loss of this home thus represents a financial crisis, even when livelihoods remain largely intact. This group also tends to be especially attached to their homes and communities in other ways, and experience intense psychological distress over its loss.

The case study for this group is Dawy, a remarkable woman who had grown up amidst genocide and war, which claimed the lives of her parents. Dawy spent much of her youth in an orphanage and then a Thai refugee camp, which she describes as “a kind of prison” where she was forced into an arranged marriage while still a teenager. Despite little formal education and no family support, she had managed through a combination of luck and pluck to get ahead, learn some English, and secure a white-collar office job with a decent salary. She had also been actively involved in anti-eviction efforts in her former neighborhood, Reak Reay.

Dawy began by explaining her early years in Reak Reay, where she had lived since 1997. “I bought that land for \$400, and then I built the house.” She emphasized how she and her neighbors had physically built their community: “At first, we didn’t have a proper road going to the house. [Access] was too difficult so we neighbors needed to raise some money, and we also got some support from an NGO to build a road.” She goes on to describe how it came to be under threat of eviction. She asserts that “the authorities and company started to *samleung* [greedily gaze at] my community.” Here, Dawy has emphasized her and her neighbors’ rights to their land, both because of fair acquisition (i.e., she bought it) and because they had physically improved it (built roads) with their own money and labor. The company, by contrast, is characterized as greedy. She goes on to explain how the compensation she was offered was unfair, especially since her house was of superior quality. “My house had tile floors, a zinc roof, and walls. We could say that my house had a better look than others’... So I couldn’t accept the price.” We can implicitly see here that uniform compensation packages are divisive in the community. The better-off had much more at stake when it came to asserting rights to more compensation.

Dawy had been very involved in community mobilization to oppose the eviction, which she described in detail. Appeals to the city government were met with ominous responses:

One day the city governor came to my community. I asked him directly, I said “Please, Uncle! I can’t accept this price because my house is big and the other houses are small. Why do big and small houses get the same price?”... He answered me, he said “Be careful, eating big food can choke you”... It was hard to solve, after he said like this.

Dawy went on to describe giving up her struggle, because “it was not easy,” “we were afraid of them,” “I felt tired,” and “I needed to work at my office.” This was a bitter pill for her to swallow indeed. She asserted that “I did the math. I had more than 100 square meters so how much money should I get? That’s \$70 - 80,000 dollars! We tried to the best of our ability but we got only \$23,000.” Following an angry tirade, Dawy concludes more quietly, and with comments that stand in stark contrast with Chanthon and the others discussed in the previous section:

We weren’t happy because the original value of our house was 2 or 3 times more... I think it didn’t affect my livelihood much because I have a job and my husband also has a

job... It is not affected, but I am far from my work place... In short, I am not how things would be if I didn't have a job.

Dawy does not share the livelihood crisis described in the previous section. Nevertheless, we see here how even when a forced eviction does not threaten livelihoods, financial effects can be very serious, and very deeply felt. The eviction was financially harmful to Dawy and her family despite the fact that she and her husband both had held onto their jobs, as their compensation was far less than the value of their home.

One of the key points that Dawy highlights is her experiences during Cambodia's protracted war, and how very hard she had worked to overcome the suffering and poverty that characterized her childhood and youth. Her home and property represented all that she had achieved since then. As Dawy more explicitly discussed in her later life history interview:

When I had my own house, even though it was not very nice, it was a shelter that I had for my children's warmth... It was a small house, but it was our property. And when [the eviction] happened like that, if it were you, wouldn't you be *cheu jab* ["pain catch," i.e., hurt emotionally]? We worked very hard, saved money to build a proper house to live in; finally, they came to scream that it was their land and we had to leave. At that time, we were very *cheu jab* because I am a Khmer and I had - I said at the Phnom Penh Municipality that, I am a Khmer just like you are, we have had the same fortune. For example, during the Pol Pot regime, you were forced to leave your house, like my family. But now, why is it that I am living in a small community, a small neighborhood, why is it like that again?... This is very important, more important than our property. I have a right to dignity, to live in dignity, but they came to force us like animals... We worked until our backs sweat to earn money to buy that house to live in, then they came to say that we had no right to live on that land!

Dawy remained outraged by her loss. All this is made more difficult because of her own personal history of grief, loss, desperate poverty, and helplessness during the war and its aftermath. The eviction had badly disrupted a life course characterized by overcoming the trauma of the war years. She feels the injustice very deeply and personally. Dawy is particularly indignant that she was not treated as an equal by authorities despite the fact that they were all Khmers, who had shared the same "fortune" during the Pol Pot regime. She also repeatedly evokes the language of human rights, declaring that "this is very important, more important than our property," and her speech is full of emotional resonance. Dawy is not parroting language learned in an NGO workshop; she speaks from her heart. Although she and her family remained financially secure following their eviction, the loss of their home was a terrible blow indeed.

Other middle-class and "upper-poor" participants' families had also been destitute after the war, and had struggled to climb out from dire poverty to reach a basic level of financial security. The material expression of this security after so many years of struggle was their physical home. Phenomenal amounts of work and care had gone into building or purchasing homes ("we worked until our backs sweat") which, even when very modest, symbolized what had been overcome. This group of people also tended to be very attached to their neighborhoods as communities, and have dense social networks that were embedded in it.

We also see in Dawy's narrative interesting hints of how social stratification and power hierarchies divide communities, particularly between those who stand to lose more (have a "big house"), compared to those who do not (i.e., a "small house"). Echoes of this are found throughout

the narratives: those with more at stake in terms of absolute levels are more prosperous and have stronger legal claims, whereas those who are poorer tend to be disengaged from legal proceedings and community action, instead emphasizing the need for alleviation from poverty in general. Moreover, the social networks of these two groups do not overlap, and they describe their neighborhoods in rather contrasting ways. While there were expressions of solidarity, on the whole there tended to be considerable disconnect between these two groups on many levels. Some were even dismissive of the others. Sina was satisfied with the compensation she received for her meager dwelling at Boeung Kak Lake, and she was unconcerned about the disenfranchisement of wealthier neighbors, characterizing them in unflattering terms. “Some people who are greedy, they may think that [the compensation] is small for them, but for my group, [our houses] were only 5 or 6 meters [long] anyway, we don’t want more.” Meanwhile, the homeowners were often dismissive or critical of neighborhood renters and other poor as troublemakers: “They drank and fought with each other... They⁷ made noise, they never thought about their futures.” The interests, attitudes, and social networks of those harmed in terms of livelihoods versus assets are thus very different.

Homeowners with higher SES and some sort of steady income were protected against falling into extreme poverty. On an absolute level, they indeed have more resources and are in better circumstances. On a relative level, however, they lose much more insofar as the value of their confiscated assets are very considerable. Anti-eviction efforts within Cambodia often conflate the very different populations who are very poor, and those who legally own their properties. My data demonstrates that these two groups are very different, with different outlooks and orientations. Homeowners and renters may live side-by-side, but their situations and interests are divergent. The dominant discourse of anti-eviction efforts in Cambodia – both community-based as well as national in scope – adopt a property rights perspective, highlighting legal ownership of land that is subverted by the state without fair compensation. This is certainly true, and the perspective of the ‘asset harm’ trajectory is consistent with this discourse. They are only one sub-population, however, and do not by and large encompass the very poor, either pre- or post-displacement.

High levels of Both Livelihood and Asset Harm

High levels of both livelihood and asset harm were found among more successful entrepreneurs with businesses operating from or near their homes.⁸ These families thus simultaneously lost their home and their business. Once-prosperous (or at least secure) families thus tumble into poverty. This double loss represents nothing short of a total catastrophe.

The case study for this trajectory is Sorya, a young unmarried former resident of Dey Krahom. Prior to her forced eviction, she lived with her extended family in a large home that served as a base for multiple businesses, including renting out pushcarts to snack vendors, moneylending, and running a small coffee shop and convenience store on the premises. They were denied any compensation and left in a state of destitution. The family physically scattered; Sorya herself was left to support her aging mother on marginal earnings, first as a domestic housecleaner and then as a community outreach worker for an NGO. She was also homeless for a time, before finding a place she could afford to rent (\$30 per month), in a slum, alongside an open sewer. Twenty-three at the time of her interview, Sorya was one of the only participants who had actually been born and raised in Phnom Penh. She exhibited especially strong emotional ties to her former home and community. The condition she was left in was

⁷ Naree used the pronoun *via*, which is reserved for animals; using this term to refer to people is very insulting.

⁸ By contrast, those discussed in section 4.2.1 (“livelihoods harm”) worked in the informal sector at a more basic level, often selling from pushcarts or giving manicures in a neighboring market and so forth. This section concerns more prosperous small business rather than petty trade.

exacerbated by the violent nature of the forced eviction from Dey Krahom; her family lost all their valuables and possessions in the process.

Sorya paints a stark portrait of her life before and after her forced eviction, emphasizing the toll on “my body and my heart,” that is, both physically and emotionally.

Comparing my situation now with the one in Dey Krahom, every day is difficult for my body and my heart. Before, I had a business, a house and enough utilities... But, now I rent a house, I do have a job but it's not permanent... After I left [Dey Krahom], I worked at the Korean's house [as a housecleaner] for only \$60 per month, and that money was for everyday expenses, including food, and it was not enough... So, my living is not like it was before. Before, when I opened my eyes in the morning, I saw money coming in, because I had a shop. Now, when I open my eyes, I don't know where the money is... [The eviction] has affected the children's education, my mother's health and everything. We were successful in our business, it was growing, suddenly everything was destroyed. That made our lives *don daap* [in terrible, hopeless conditions, everything lost].

Sorya's house and all of her family's possessions had been destroyed when her neighborhood had been bulldozed, which she experienced as a traumatic event. In the above passage, we see Sorya struggling with the enormity of what she had lost, and how to cope with her newly-impooverished state:

At Dey Krahom... we could earn over 100,000 [Riel per day, ≈US\$25]... Before we used to sleep on a mattress, we used to have an air conditioner and fans. If we still had our dignity, if we had money, we couldn't live in a poor person's place, but these days we have to be poor people, so we have to adapt... I look around and see [I have] nothing; I feel pity for myself when I look around and have nothing... I cannot [solve] because I don't know how to think to do another way... I am alone, I cannot depend on others, I depend only on myself.

Sorya struggles with managing poverty and the indignity of life following her forced eviction. She also expresses an association between having nothing and being alone, moving fluidly between poverty and isolation. She is unable to solve her problems, unsure how to exist in her newly-impooverished state, and deeply mistrustful. Sorya's example also underscores that there is overlap between the livelihood-harm and asset-harm groups. It is also a reminder that some households are denied any compensation whatsoever. Sorya's circumstances represent a “perfect storm” of risk factors despite her being quite prosperous and having strong social networks prior to her eviction. All were grounded in Dey Krahom, however. Sorya's extended family all lived there, and all of their livelihoods were tied to it. Their assets were entirely within the form of local property and businesses. Even their possessions were destroyed with their homes. Sorya's entire extended family lost everything that they had, including each other. They had to separate and scatter across Phnom Penh.

Benign Impact of Forced Eviction

Some families were not particularly harmed by their forced eviction, or managed to recover fairly quickly. A few actually came out ahead. It is notable that many of these women's narratives are highly idiosyncratic. Sina's story presents perhaps the best example. The chief reason why “I am not angry that they evicted me and I am also happy to live here” is that “when we lived [at Boeung Kak

Lake, my husband] picked fights the same as now... and he had girls, he's a womanizer... But now it seems less... I don't know why, maybe he doesn't have a lot of money anymore so he doesn't have many girls." Despite a great deal of inconsistency from one narrative to the next, several factors help explain why and how some women "landed on their feet." These include:

- Livelihoods were unaffected, or they were able to quickly find new jobs. (Konthy: "What is better [here than at Boeung Kak Lake] is having a factory near the house.")
- Solid social support and/or benefactors in the new location. (Bopha: "I live nowadays thanks to that old woman, I tell you the truth... [The family living next door] gives me soup every day").
- Limited personal or financial investment in the evicted house or community. (Sokhan: "I heard that somebody bought the land [where we rented a house] and whatever, but I didn't pay it any attention... I thought, why ask about other people's matters?")
- Availability of new housing nearby. (Pola: "Oh there were some [difficulties], like moving, and I was tired, moving around it was tiring, but I am happier [now].") Pola was living only a few blocks from her former residence in Borei Keila.)
- New housing is of equal or superior quality. (Bopha: "Yes, [this house is] more developed than before. I got a cement house; it's more developed but I myself have not developed." [laugh])
- Matter-of-fact attitude: (Sokhan: "Of course I [lost money], but what could I do; when it's lost it is my money, but when I earn profit it is also my money; that's what I think.")
- Presence of other more salient/pressing issues in their lives. (Pola: "I always go out wandering, my family, it's like a violent family... I do not want to talk [to my husband], I never stay at home.")
- Miscellaneous idiosyncratic reasons (Dina: "Now that we live only just three people, me with my younger brothers, it is another way of life. Because at Boeung Kak, I was under my older brother's supervision whether I liked it or not, I got pressure from my big brother. Living here, I am the biggest").

It is difficult to select a single case study narrative from this group, because these narratives are so thematically diverse. The chief lesson might be that while some do not experience more than temporary disruption of their lives, the reasons and pathways are disparate but maintaining livelihood capacity is essential.

I chose Sokhan to represent the group of neutral/improved outcomes *not* because her narrative encapsulates this group's pathway – this group is too diverse and idiosyncratic for that. Indeed, Sokhan's narrative stands out as unique in several respects. I have chosen it because she best represents a model of resilience, and because she had specific decisions and characteristics that cushioned her family from the crisis their forced eviction could have become. Her example is thus the one that best presents a model that is of relevance to policymakers and practitioners.

Sokhan was a middle-aged married woman with children, some of whom had grown and others were still studying. The entire household worked in the family business of roasting and selling bananas and yams; they also had two renters living with them. At the time of her interview, they netted up to \$10 per day after expenses, 6 days per week. On Sundays, she diligently attended church and rested; she had become a Mormon a decade before. Sokhan was a no-nonsense woman with a keen eye for business and a strict policy of staying out of other people's trouble. In fact, she denied that she had been evicted from Reak Reay at all, instead explaining that her landlord had sold the house to the company. As a renter, she had not been eligible for any compensation, although she had received \$80 to help with moving expenses. She had initially moved to an area where she felt she

could afford the rent, and then set about re-starting her family business. Like many others, she discovered that her business was not viable in the new location. The difference is that she had not over-extended herself in setting up a new household and was able to “cut her losses.” Having avoided getting trapped in debt, Sokhan made a careful and strategic decision to move again to a location where she felt confident she could earn more, even though the rent was much higher. She proudly concludes that “since [we moved a second time], my business has done very well.”

Sokhan does acknowledge difficulties: “No one helped [us move twice]; we came by ourselves and it cost a lot, but that is okay.” She emphasizes that she and her family are happy and well, and she expresses thankfulness for all that they have. “We were tired [from moving], but we didn’t argue; my family didn’t do that. Because, I tell you the truth, my family believes in Christianity... My children are doing fine, my business is going well, God blesses me and provides me with enough to eat, little by little.” She focused on hard work and satisfaction with what she had.

Several points stand out in Sokhan’s account. Probably the most important is that she prioritized her business over comfortable housing for her family. Among my entire sample, Sokhan is the only one who did so. Although the rent in this second location was substantially higher than it had been at Reak Reay, business was thriving and so, therefore, was her family. This is perhaps the most important lesson that can be learned from Sokhan’s narrative. If business prospers, housing can be improved at a later time. The reverse approach did not succeed for other participants. Most had over-extended themselves in sorting out their housing, and then were caught by surprise when their livelihoods failed.

A second critical factor is that Sokhan had a strong but diffuse social network which remained exceptionally intact after the eviction. Her network of both moral and material support was concentrated elsewhere. She was also strategic in her social relations, and she steadfastly avoided getting involved in other peoples’ problems. Her sister, for example, owned a home in Reak Reay, but she said, “I don’t know what went on with her, it wasn’t my business... For me, I didn’t own a house, I didn’t care, I was on my own.”

The social network that Sokhan does engage in is the Mormon Church. While Sokhan expressed spiritual dedication, she also highlighted the many practical benefits of membership, namely that the church pays for all hospital and funeral expenses for its members. Sokhan is thus embedded narrowly and carefully within a social network that extends emotional resources as well as a financial safety net, and does not risk taxing her own family’s poor but stable existence. This is very different from the obligations of reciprocity and exchange that other participants used to describe their social ties. This social network is also unique insofar as it operates entirely independent of her geographic neighborhood. While this hardly represents a “model” to follow, it is a notable characteristic. By contrast, those whose support systems were deeply embedded in their geographic communities had no one, as well as nowhere, to turn to.

The example of those with relatively benign displacement experiences is important, as they represent modalities of resilience.. This final trajectory marks an important contrast with the one that preceded it (harm to both assets and livelihood), while also confirming one of its chief findings: that the degree to which people are economically and socially embedded in their neighborhoods is enormously influential. The narratives of the ‘benign impact’ trajectory are diverse, idiosyncratic, and seemingly unrelated to pre-displacement economic circumstances. We do, however, consistently find that these women had social and economic ties external to, and often independent of, their neighborhoods. Thus the strength and concentration of social networks represents an enormous influence on post-displacement outcomes.

Conclusion

I have outlined how forced evictions in Phnom Penh affect women's socioeconomic status. I have demonstrated that forced eviction does not represent a uniform threat: harm is distributed unevenly, and different people are impacted differently. While relatively prosperous landowners are typically more harmed in terms of the value of their assets, the poor tend to be more harmed by loss of livelihood capacity. Some suffered a catastrophic double blow to both. There are also cases where the eviction was relatively benign event; these women were typically able to maintain their livelihood and housing quality, and had superficial ties to their former neighborhoods. Renters had the most mixed outcomes, encompassing both the most and the least harmed among all the informants. The diversity of issues and outcomes has important implications for policy and programming. In particular, it is clear that the uniform compensation packages in Cambodia are often very poorly suited to individual circumstances.

Most of those affected by forced evictions are remarkably resilient in the face of considerable hardship. However, the poor are especially reliant on living in proximity to those with more means, because they represent customers, clients, and sources of credit. The poor, when removed from diverse neighborhoods and concentrated together, find themselves destitute. When there is not enough money circulating in the local economy, norms of reciprocity and mutual assistance are of little relevance: there are no resources to share. They need to live in mixed-income environments with diverse livelihood opportunities in order to manage.

Some of those affected by forced eviction do indeed "land on their feet." The narratives of these "positive deviants" are eclectic and idiosyncratic. However, a handful of factors characterized many in this group, including uninterrupted livelihoods; new employment or successful business in new neighborhoods; compensation exceeding the value of the former home; new residence being nearby the former one; matter-of-fact, stoic attitude; higher education and financial resources; intact social and economic networks independent of former neighborhood; and unhappiness in their previous home.

Policy and discourse surrounding forced evictions in Cambodia often focuses on the issue of housing and shelter. In this study, however, livelihood capacity overwhelmingly emerged as the most salient issue. The women's voices rise almost in unison surrounding income. The best approach to compensation packages would be for homeowners to be awarded full current market value for their properties. Displaced renters, on the other hand, would benefit from broad urban planning measures to protect and encourage affordable rental housing districts within the city, so that they can remain in proximity to sources of informal-sector income. There was also a very high demand expressed for ongoing livelihood programming and, more indirectly, for subsidized public transportation. Sorya, however, best captured the sentiments of the evicted women: "My solution is that, I want other NGOs to help us. Actually, I don't have any solution to these problems. In my mind, I only want my house and land back."

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