"Seeds of Sharing": A Feminist Action Research Study of University Student Feminist Activism in Cambodia

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Abstract: The number of female university students is gradually increasing in Cambodia. While Cambodia has focused on women's rights and empowerment for decades, feminism and feminist activism is a neglected area of research. Little is known about Cambodian university student feminist understandings, practices, and activism. By examining one female Cambodian university student's everyday experience conducting feminist action research, this study seeks to center student voice in the exploration of feminism and feminist activism through the research of the second author using a pilot program, Seeds of Sharing. It also explores the method of feminist action research as a way to expand feminist knowledge and activism. This study focuses on interviews and diary entries of the second author during a feminist action research project. The action research project undertaken by the second author included the analysis of the individual interviews of four Cambodian university students participating in the Seeds of Sharing pilot program. Findings reveal that feminist action research can lead to contextually relevant, personal transformations through reciprocal learning, but that explicit feminist theory should be married with deductive learning through multiple cycles of reflection and action. Additionally, while the Cambodian university students

interviewed were more comfortable with the concepts of women's empowerment and women's rights, they participated in grassroots feminist activism under a university system that offers little opportunity for pedagogical expansion of feminist knowledge or large-scale feminist activism.

Keywords: feminist action research, feminist activism, Cambodia, higher education

Introduction

In Cambodia, girls are graduating from secondary schools at higher rates than boys and enrolling in tertiary institutions at increasing rates (Ministry of Education, Youth & Sports, 2017). Cambodian women who attend university often overcome significant barriers to attend tertiary institutions far from home (Keng, 2004; Velasco, 2001). Although girls continue to struggle with access to tertiary education (Williams et al., 2016), there is little discussion of how female university students are contributing to improvements in education through feminist activism, thereby leaving the dominant deficiency discourse surrounding girls and tertiary education unchallenged.

Following genocide and the decimation of the education system by the Khmer Rouge from 1974 to 1979, Cambodia has experienced rapid change in development (Kitamura et al., 2016), with an increasing focus on women's rights, education, and empowerment. The proliferation of organizations related to supporting women and raising awareness about women's issues such as women's empowerment, domestic violence, and gender equality and an expansion of participation and girls' increased completion of secondary education (Ministry of Education, Youth & Sports, 2017) has led to increased awareness of and activism for women's empowerment and gender equality (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2014a). Additionally, while the Government of Cambodia recognizes the importance of higher education, the decimation of academic institutions by the Khmer Rouge has left a nascent university system which is underfunded and suffering from a lack of resources and poor quality of education (Williams et al., 2016).

Cambodian girls and women have experienced important improvements in access to quality education in recent decades (Velasco, 2001, 2004). However, Cambodian women continue to face patriarchal social norms which value men more than women. Although women's education is seen as increasingly important, female Cambodian university students continue to face formidable obstacles in entering and completing tertiary education (Rogers, 2017). Sociocultural expectations, such as those outlined in *Chbab Srey*, or Rules for Girls, place restrictions on women's behavior and

emphasize their roles as wives and mothers. Parts of Chbab Srey continue to be taught in the school curriculum, highlighting the importance of adherence to social norms about women (Anderson & Grace, 2018; Derks, 2008).

Little research has been conducted to explore the experiences of Cambodian women attending universities, and a limited body of literature exists that examines women's issues at the university level (Maxwell et al., 2015). This work considers Cambodian university students' understandings of feminism and feminist activism through examination of the experiences of workshop participants. However, the primary focus of analysis centers around the second author's experiences regarding feminism and feminist activism while conducting an action research project. The action research methodology aligns with the special issue topic in "challenging, decolonizing and reenvisioning researcher-subject positions when working and researching with girls" by placing a Cambodian female student's feminist practice at the center of this research and supporting her voice in exploring feminism and feminist activism. Given the potential of youth, including university students, as agents of change in Cambodian society (Finsen, 2015), methods which serve as a platform for student voice and develop knowledge and skills that can challenge inequitable power dynamics and disrupt patriarchal structures should be more fully explored, developed, and implemented in Cambodia. A lack of opportunities for university-based activism, and a lack of female professors and leaders at the university level in Cambodia (Maxwell et al., 2015), leaves little understanding of feminist practice and activism at Cambodian universities. This research seeks to fill this gap by exploring feminist practice and activism of Cambodian students through an action research project with the "Seeds of Sharing" pilot workshop developed and implemented by the second author.

Review of the Literature Feminism in Cambodia

Despite a body of literature detailing women's empowerment and gender equality, research regarding feminism and education in Cambodia is limited (Jacobsen, 2010). Feminism and feminist activism are distinctly absent from literature and scholarship pertaining to women in Cambodia. A rejection of the terms feminism and feminist activism can be historically explained through social upheavals experienced in Cambodia in the 20th century, which charted a path of postcolonial and nationalist movements. With women embodying Cambodian culture and a rejection of colonial concepts of women, feminism is deemed a foreign concept that is antithetical to "true" Cambodian culture (Jacbosen, 2010).

The view of feminism as a foreign idea that is contrary to local culture and values is embraced in many Asian countries, making it difficult for feminism and feminist activism to take root (Roces, 2010). While support for women's empowerment and

equality has been embraced across multiple sectors, girls' and women's access to quality education has become a priority, with women's education being closely linked to national development (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2014a). However, approaches to gender equality and women's empowerment often focus on harmony between men and women (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2014b) and avoid discussions of power and oppression, instead supporting conceptions of making men and women equal (Jacbosen, 2010). In the university system, students can learn about women's rights, empowerment, and equality through informal means, but there are no gender/women's studies majors or departments that might formally expand women's knowledge of feminism and feminist activism.

Feminist Activism and University Students

Research in Western contexts indicate that while many university students espouse feminist ideologies, they are reluctant to label themselves as feminists (Crossley, 2010; Houvouras & Carter, 2008). However, identification as a feminist is also a predictor of increased feminist activism (Yoder et al., 2011). Feminist practices and activism can range from rhetorical large-scale social activism and protests to local grassroots activities such as developing models of feminist leadership and building feminist identity (Baumgardner & Richards, 2005; Sowards & Renegar, 2006). Universities can be contexts in which feminism, feminist leaders, and feminist activism are fostered and developed (Bannerji, 1992), particularly within universities where the study of feminism can be formalized into majors and classes such as women's studies (Stake, 2007).

Feminist activism is differentially defined by scholars, however in teaching feminist activism and practices, there are common aims such as the expansion of awareness of feminism and the acquisition of skills to help build a feminist movement. These goals can be supported through experiential learning processes which allow students to engage in activism while learning about feminist both in and out of a formal classroom experience (Baumgardner & Richards, 2005; Naples & Bojar, 2013). However, little is known about feminist activism and university students outside of Western contexts, particularly in places like Cambodia, which lack formal university courses or paths that teach about feminism and feminist activity.

Feminism and Action Research

Feminist action research has been used as a conceptual and methodological framework and as a means of altering power relationships individually and collectively while including women whose voices are typically marginalized by research processes (Reid, 2004). Conceptual themes foregrounding feminist action research include gender, multiple identities and interlocking oppressions, voice, everyday experiences, and

power. Action research attempts to restructure power dynamics by addressing broad societal oppressions of women and restructuring power in the research process itself (Maguire, 2006) through the voices of women involved in the research and their everyday experiences.

The methodological framework associated with feminist action research often outlines feminist action research as a participatory, community-based strategy for involving women in solving self-identified feminist issues in their own communities, and it usually operates on a larger scale of social activism (Deare, 1995; Gatenby & Humphries, 2000; Reid, 2004). However, action research can also include a single individual, while still including collaboration and participation as a central principle, with cycles of self-reflection informing knowledge and the transformation of practice (Cordeiro et al., 2017). Limited research exists detailing the use of feminist action research with university students, particularly in contexts such as Cambodia. Therefore, the potential of this method for expanding feminist knowledge and awareness, and supporting skills of feminist activism, remains unexplored.

Current Study

Centering student voice was a primary aim of this research. Feminist action research was chosen as a method for supporting this exploration and ensuring that the second author's voice, experience, and analysis formed the basis of this research. Feminist action research seeks to bring a feminist perspective to action research methods in order to de-colonize and reduce "othering" in feminist research (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000). For this reason, feminist action research is well suited for highlighting the feminist experiences of implementing the Seeds of Sharing program.

To ensure that feminist university student voice was at the forefront of the research, the data collection process was reflective and iterative. The second author developed the research protocol, collected the data, and collaboratively analyzed the data with the first author in order to reflect upon how this research project will inform her own feminist activism. Both authors collaboratively wrote the manuscript, centering the second author's voice and experiences in the presentation of the results. In this way, this research challenges the researcher-researched positions that this special issue seeks to examine, by placing the second author at the center of the research process and amplifying her voice in activism and research.

Seeds of Sharing Pilot Project

Seeds of Sharing is a one-day workshop and six-month mentoring pilot program developed and implemented by the second author and a female university colleague. The aim of the program is to support and empower the female founder of a small local

English school in a small village outside of Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The pilot workshop has an empowerment focus, which was delivered through support in grant proposal writing, clarifying organizational components involved in school management, and training in social media through the creation of a Facebook page. The mentoring system pairs the English school founder with a female university student in this study, who continues to support the founder of the school for six months. The development and maintenance of a Facebook page is also a part of the mentoring process, which was monitored by the facilitator and two other university students who joined the project as guest speakers and mentors. The three-hour workshop was implemented in late June 2018.

Using a feminist action research framework, we explored following questions.

- How do university students in Cambodia experience feminism and feminist activism?
- What are the lived experiences of a female Cambodian university student undertaking feminist action research?

Methods

To capture the experiences of feminist activism by the university students in this study, two qualitative methods were employed. A total of six interviews were conducted: four individual interviews with university students participating or supporting the Seeds of Sharing project and two interviews with the second author before and after the action research began. The second author also kept a reflective diary during the action research project. The diary entries and individual interviews of the second author are the primary focus of data analysis, though the results from the interviews with the Seeds of Sharing participants are also included. This section outlines the participants of the study, the procedures employed in the research design, the instruments used, and data analysis.

Researcher Identity

The first author is a graduate student in the United States who has been involved in research in Cambodia for several years, primarily researching gender and education. Although she has spent a substantial amount of time in Cambodia, as a White female born and educated in the United States, she recognizes her limited experience with Khmer culture, language, and women's issues. Additionally, the first author recognizes that her experience with Western feminist literature and concepts of Western feminism were at the root of initial interest in the research project. Therefore, the first author attempted to provide support to the second author, in the way of feminist and

methodological literature, while supporting her own exploration of her feminist practice and activism.

The second author is an undergraduate student attending one of the universities in Phnom Penh. Born and raised in rural village of Siem Reap province, she experienced cultural challenges along her educational journey to university. Believing that only education can brighten her future and improve women's situation in Cambodia, she was motivated to pursue higher education and be the first girl from her community to study in Phnom Penh. Being a female in a conservative Cambodian society, the second author has been discouraged from speaking her voice, and even expressing opinions in her university class. Moreover, the second author has learned that gender inequality has caused problems among women, especially domestic violence. Based on her experiences, she hopes to contribute her input in this research to raise awareness of girls' education.

Seeds of Sharing Workshop Participants

Study participants were chosen based on their participation in the Seeds of Sharing workshop. The workshop included 6 participants of the Seeds of Sharing Program implementation team. One workshop facilitator chose not to participate in the action research project, resulting in five action research project participants. The Seeds of Sharing Program team included the English school founder and her brother, who constituted the school administration team, and three Seeds of Sharing program facilitators, including a media coordinator, a mentoring facilitator, and the team leader (the second author). The team leader and another university student facilitated the workshop while the school founder, her brother, and the media coordinator and mentoring facilitator participated in the workshop. All participants were students attending three universities. Participants were majoring in different fields including psychology, international relations, management and communications, and computer science.

While some of the five participants were involved in women's rights and empowerment activities, some had no experience with such activism. University students who were involved in the development and facilitation of the Seeds of Sharing workshop were also engaged in leadership organizations or leadership positions at a university level. When asked whether they considered themselves feminists and/or feminist activists, two female students and one male student stated that they were feminists and feminist activists. One female student had not heard of feminism or feminist activism but described herself as a supporter of women's empowerment, and when feminism was described, she stated that she was likely a feminist/feminist activist.

One male student said he was not a feminist or feminist activist. Their ages ranged from 20 to 23 years.

Procedures

Two sets of interviews were conducted for this research. The first set of interviews were with the second author before and after the Seeds of Sharing workshop. These interviews were conducted in English by the first author. They lasted between one and two hours and were occurred online via the Zoom video conferencing platform. The pre- and post-workshop interviews were conducted in May 2018 and August 2018 respectively. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

The second set of interviews included face-to-face interviews with the four other university students, including the English school founders, in and around Phnom Penh Cambodia who were either recipients of the Seeds of Sharing workshop or were supporting the implementation of the workshop. Interviews with four university students, who participated in the workshop, were conducted face to face by the second author in Khmer, the participants' native language, and lasted between 45 minutes to one hour. All interviews were recorded for later transcription. The interviews were then translated into English by the second author. Consent for interviews and recordings was obtained from all participants.

To support data triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1988), the second author also kept a diary of her experiences as a feminist activist while implementing the Seeds of Sharing workshop and this action research project. Diary entries were written at least twice a week between May 2018 and August 2018. Interview protocols for participants, excluding the second author interviews, were prepared by the first and second authors and were translated into Khmer by a professional translator. IRB approval was obtained for all interview protocols and four initial diary questions.

Instruments

Individual Interviews

The interview protocol for the second author included questions pertaining to changes in understandings of feminism and feminist activism as a result of undertaking action research related to the Seeds of Sharing pilot program. This interview protocol sought to evaluate changes in the second author's knowledge of feminist activism and plans for future feminist activism as a result of implementation of the "Seeds of Sharing" action research project. Individual interview protocols for workshop participants were developed by the first and second authors to assess an understanding of feminist activism of Cambodian university students. Interview protocols included questions related to knowledge of concepts of women's empowerment and feminism; feminism

and education in Cambodia, including policy and practice; as well as feminist activism undertaken by university students.

Diary Entries

The diary entry protocol was developed by the first and second authors with the intention of allowing the second author to freely document her own experiences with the Seeds of Sharing project and her experiences as a feminist activist, while also providing four general diary entry questions for guidance and support of the research goals. Diary entries were written in Google Docs, and the first and second author could comment on entries and comments. This approach established a "conversation" between the first and second authors, through which diary entries developed dialogic components of an individual interview.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed in two phases. Interviews from participants in the Seeds of Sharing pilot project were analyzed to answer the first research question (How do university students in Cambodia experience feminism and feminist activism?) and to serve as opportunities for reflection for the second author regarding Cambodian university students' feminism and feminist activism. Data were analyzed using content analysis in which transcriptions of interviews were coded (Saldana, 2016). These codes were then further analyzed to build categories and themes, resulting in several broad themes reflecting university students' understandings of feminism and feminist activism (Corbin et al., 2014).

To answer the second research question (What are the lived experiences of a female Cambodian university student undertaking feminist action research?), diary entries and pre- and post-workshop interviews with the second author were coded separately, after implementation of the Seeds of Sharing workshop and data collection and analysis related to the pilot project. Data were analyzed using the same methods as above through line-by-line coding, followed by the creation of categories and themes to represent participant meaning.

Both authors were involved in the coding of all documents to support researcher triangulation and increase trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1988), although the first author primarily played a supporting role in analysis. Additionally, the use of diary entries and interviews in documenting the second author's experience of action research as a feminist activism methodology allowed for triangulation of the findings and supported trustworthiness in data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1988). Findings primarily centered around the second author's experiences with feminism, feminist activism, and feminist action research. The second author's diary entries provided the largest amount

of regularly collected data, and the pre- and post-interview data served to triangulate these findings. Seeds of Sharing pilot program university student interviews supported broader understandings of feminism and feminist activism among these Cambodian university students. Finally, findings were shared with a researcher outside the project, who provided feedback on analysis and results.

Results

Data analysis revealed two overarching themes related to feminist activism and action research. The first theme centered around the second author's experience with feminist action research and revealed a transformation in feminist understanding and activism through the process of feminist action research. Supporting this theme were the categories of reciprocal learning through action research, moving from belief to practice, and individualism within collectivism. The second theme revealed feminist activism undertaken by university students, including the second author, which circumvent systematic structural and cultural barriers to large-scale and universitysupported feminist activism through individual and collective forms of activism. In the following sections, the second author narrates the findings in the first person, with the hopes of centering her voice in the findings of this research.

Personal Transformation Through Action Research

Research as Activism: Reciprocal Learning

Feminist action research served to expand and transform my understandings of feminism and feminist activism through reflection and meaning-making through data analysis. As I learned more about the process of action research, described as an "active" or "fresh" form of research, interviewing and data analysis were an important part of my learning, through which the analysis of the language of the participants gave me a deeper understanding of feminism in Cambodia. For example, as I recorded in my diary:

> One way that it impacted me was the interview part and the coding. I learned from that process what it means and how does it relate to women's empowerment and feminism. So, like analyzing the language and meaning of content, it influenced my thinking as well.

My diary entries also allowed the space for the assimilation of new information and selfdiscovery through the process of reflection. Cycles of analysis and reflection were important in my process:

Because we use the diary, this explains our everyday experiences toward the project that we are doing. And then we come back to the diary and read the diary and reflect what it means to us and also, we analyze the data from the diary to make conclusions about what we have learned and to evaluate the success of the project.

Importantly, the action research process also became a form of feminist activism with reciprocity of learning as a valuable result of undertaking feminist action research. As I learned from the research process, I was also able to impart more information regarding feminism and feminist activism and to advocate the importance of these issues during interviews with other university students involved in the Seeds of Sharing project, which was discussed in both my final interview and my final diary entries. This is particularly important given that all university students interviewed cited knowledge about women's empowerment, feminism, and feminist activism as a major barrier to advocating for solutions for women's issues.

So, I think that the interviews played an important part to provide the knowledge (for participants). It's something that they can learn from. Not just that we get the information from them, but they learn something too.

The impact of this process was highlighted when a male participant stated at the end of the interview, "I am going to be a feminist and be more than just 50% because I also have a sister and my mother is female and of course I have female friends." The reciprocal learning process, in which interviewer and interviewee engaged in conversations about feminism and feminist activism, led to a transformation in the way that the I viewed feminist activism.

From Feminist Belief to Activism

Through the cyclical process of researching and reflecting, applying new information gained regarding the problem at hand, and undertaking further research through additional interviews, I experienced an important transformation, shifting from a belief in the importance of feminism, which initially I struggled to define, to embracing feminist practice and activism within the Cambodian context. In my initial interview and early diary entries I discussed feminism as a belief to be discussed, and I thought that discussion was my main form of practicing feminism and feminist activism. While I identified as a feminist and feminist activist, I also admitted, "I haven't really gotten involved in any feminist activist activities, but feminism is one of my values." Prior to my experience with feminist action research, also I felt that my role and activities as a feminist and activist were in "supporting and encouraging" women and by raising my feminist voice in classroom scenarios. For example, I once stated my opinion against

Chbab Srey in a university class, but I was discouraged to do so in the future by my peers.

In my final interview and final diary entries, I continued to value voice, support, and encouragement as feminist activism, but I continued to struggle with how I might navigate the cultural expectations of the conservative Cambodian society, and how I could more effectively engage in feminist activism. During the action research project, I expanded my own vision for feminist activism, stating, "I think that we are reaching the goals (of the project) because I have seen myself understand more about feminism, women's empowerment, and what I should do more and continue doing." I also envision my feminist activism through my leadership capacity and my future career goals as a female professor:

> So, I really want to be a professor, and one of the motivations that keeps me working hard is that in the future I am going to be teaching and meeting a lot of students and that is the moment that I can think of working with female students and empower them and just to be on their side because I don't have that experience in my university life.

A substantial difficulty that I face after conducting this research is how I can apply this newfound understanding of feminism and feminist activism to the Seeds of Sharing pilot project. However, as I continue to engage in mentorship and the expansion of the project, this path of activism might become clearer, particularly through engaging in future cycles of action research.

Individualism Within Collectivism

An important and profoundly personal transformation was a reckoning of feminism and feminist activism within the collectivist and patriarchal nature of Cambodia culture and society. Through the research process, I also began to question the effectiveness of the advocacy of feminism and feminist activism as participants challenged the ability of feminism to represent Cambodian culture. This concern centered around a belief of feminism as extreme and the potential for ostracizing oneself from community and society. This contradiction with Cambodian culture threatens the ability to expand others' awareness of feminism and feminist activism. As I explained in my final interview:

> Rather than being too extreme, and at the same time you are isolated from other people, and there is no way that you can be connected to people and to get closer to them and explain to them about the problem.

This statement highlights the collectivist nature of Cambodian society, in which the "greater good" supersedes the needs of the individual, and the importance of

resisting exclusion and being ostracized for feminist beliefs, practices, and activism. For three university students whom I interviewed, feminism was an unknown concept. For one participant, who labeled herself a feminist, the term was deemed a Western concept. I also take this stance as I described, "I don't think that it comes from the East but it comes from the West, to describe people who have a strong belief in women's capacity." This was a conclusion that I drew as a result of my interviews with the other university students. Yet all university students were familiar and relatively comfortable with the term women's empowerment.

Even women's empowerment was often described by the other students as an individual act, or something that women could achieve. Perhaps with the help of others, women could become empowered through self-motivation, self-confidence, perseverance, and particularly through applying themselves in educational endeavors.

All students whom I interviewed cited traditional stereotypes about women as a limitation to women's empowerment, particularly regarding education. They also deemed it an individual woman's responsibility to challenge traditional stereotypes and saw this as a form of feminist activism and supporting women's empowerment. Statements such as "family and people around do not encourage her daughters or women to pursue higher education or joining in big events because they think that women cannot go around a stove" (an old Khmer proverb meaning women are supposed to be in the in kitchen making food and looking after kids at home) were expressed by all participants. Challenging these stereotypes was considered an individual endeavor that should be taken up by women who are feminists or who support women's empowerment in order to drive collective social change. This individualism, however, gains approval when it falls within the expectations and beliefs of the greater society. One male participant went so far as to assert that only women who follow the rules of Cambodian culture and society deserve empowerment, stating:

> I have many female friends, but I value only those who work hard and are proactive in team work. For those who are careless and don't work and like to party, I don't support them. If we want to empower women we should also look into what kind of people they are.

While he was alone in expressing these views, the notion of feminist activists working within sociocultural expectations became a central concern of mine, as expressed in my final interview. Ultimately, I drew two primary conclusions from my interrogation of feminism and feminist activism within the Cambodian context. First, the wholesale adoption of feminism and feminist activism as the solution to women's issues in Cambodia should be rejected, as "one thing that I observed from that was that even though feminism is good, but I think that it is not effective if we take all the Western ideas and put them into the Eastern ideas." Accordingly, since the concept is adopted

from the Western world, it can cause conflicts with expectations, culture, and practices of Cambodian society and culture. Therefore, taking the activists' methods from the West may not be effective in Cambodian culture, which can be a means to be protective of women's bodies and the way women behave in the society. As I see it, "We are in a conservative society, like most of Eastern nations, so I think that if we want to make that idea effective, just make it under the culture, under the concepts of our culture." As I explored this idea throughout this project, I concluded that this means that activists should not have attitudes or behaviors that are disliked by the society, such as by using her body to wear inappropriate clothes or having tattoos just to show people that she is a feminist. Instead of making impacts, she could be criticized and rejected by the society.

I do believe that there is a way that she can follow Cambodian culture and promote feminism at the same time, although I am continuing to explore this path and my role in it. Supporting this newly developed reasoning, I found that culture can change over time and that it can also be used as a resource in making a positive transformation for women. As culture is a mindset that people strongly value and believe in, if feminism is promoted within the culture it will be more influential. This understanding of culture and feminism could be further interrogated and examined through several rounds of the action research project which would allow for further learning and reflection opportunities.

Feminist Activism Among Cambodian University Students: Activism Under the System

Voicing feminist concerns and organizing feminist activism through official universities is a challenge in Cambodia. I have often had difficulties in voicing my own feminist ideals at the university level, including classes which were headed predominantly by male university professors but attended primarily by female students in my female-dominated major. There is a lack of support regarding feminism and women's empowerment, as there are few female professors in my department. With little to no organized opportunities for feminist activism, i.e., feminist organizations on campus or other student gatherings, I, and the university students whom I interviewed, turned to a student-level approach to feminist activism, which allowed female university students to support one another. Participants in this research did not discuss organizing on a larger scale as important for feminist activism in Cambodia. In fact, as I stated in my final interview:

> In Cambodia, it is not like in the U.S. where students can write a petition to the state and you know do some sort of big event. One thing that I have observed that is possible is that being outspoken and outstanding and involved more in society, and in the event and in the workshops, you start asking questions. So, in

the workshop you can share your opinions. So be brave and talk about what you think and what you believe in, and people start to recognize you and they are interested in what you say. They start to think and that this is like changing.

While a number of university students in this study engaged in a variety of grassroots activities to support feminism and women's empowerment, we found that their main activities fell under two distinct categories: individual opportunities for feminist activism and collective opportunities for feminist activism.

Individual Feminist Activism

The university students in this study frequently cited the need for, and the opportunity to, provide support for women's empowerment and feminist activism through role models, leadership, and individual mentorship or guidance of other women. All students in this study discussed the lack of or perceived lack of female role models in villages and at the university level, while most students stated that being a good role model was an effective way to empower girls and women and engage in feminist activism. In my experience, this engagement in activism was linked to being a female leader, which was frequently cited as being intimately tied to women's empowerment and feminist activism. In diary entries and interviews, I discussed being a leader or referred to leadership 22 times as important for feminist activism and activists. In being a strong female leader, women can serve as role models and can show others that women can lead. When discussing why I was learning coding through a technology workshop, I stated in my diary, "As a female leader, we should know everything!" Other university students valued the potential impacts that could come from leadership, such as being able to give back to their communities. The importance of "giving back" as a means of feminist activism and as a way to support women's empowerment was important to these university students. The school owner who received support from the Seeds of Sharing project stated:

> There are many students who are willing to come back to their community and give back what they learn, share knowledge, or do research about the needs of the community so I think that our youth keep doing it even though they do not have financial resources, but they still can come to share their knowledge like your team (Seed of Sharing) as an example.

Although analysis revealed distinctly individual approaches to feminist activism, there was also a focus on collective feminist practices and activism by the female university students interviewed. These collectivist approaches are not unique to the Cambodian context but are important given the collective nature of Cambodian society and the lack of opportunities for large-scale activism through the university experience.

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Collective Feminist Activism

Beyond individual efforts related to feminist activism, the university students whom I interviewed also discussed collective approaches to support women's empowerment and each other, which included workshops, networks, and collaboration. Most university students, including myself, discussed the importance of workshops as opportunities for learning about women's empowerment, feminism, and feminist activism. Although there is a lack of feminist organizations at my university, I have attended a number of workshops, which I discussed in my diary. I view the Seeds of Sharing workshop as an opportunity that serves as feminist activism. Another university student interviewed suggested that "workshops that bring social topics or new regulations for them in the rural area so that they can have knowledge (about women's empowerment)" are an important approach toward expanding women's awareness of feminism. In the absence of organized feminist university organizations or gatherings, these workshops provided the me with an opportunity to learn more about women's empowerment and feminism and women's issues abroad, as well as to network with other women. They also gave a platform for my own voice through the opportunity to ask questions or make comments. After attending a workshop, I wrote in my diary about the impact of these feminist networks:

> I have been meeting many female professional these days. So, I feel empowered by their presence. I am not alone to do things for my dreams and to do more to help empower other women. I hope Seed of Sharing will worth beneficial for (the English school owner).

In rural areas, an inability to connect with these workshops and with other women was seen as an important barrier, and even an opportunity for men to support women further. The value of workshops as a means of connecting women to knowledge and feminist/women's empowerment ideas was discussed across all participants.

Finally, collaboration was cited as a means of feminist activism. This included collaboration between men and women seeking to solve problems together, as well as policy makers, and in particular female policy makers, collaborating with university students via research in order to create relevant policy to support female university students. In my final interview, I suggested:

> There is potential to collaborate by doing research. Before making policy, it is important to understand what is the issue. What problem are we solving first? So, if we want to make policy regarding university students, or something like that, it is best to hear some voices from the university students, especially the female ones.

I did not recognize this potential collaboration in my initial interview, in which I struggled to identify policy related to feminism or women's empowerment. Instead, this was an important evolution of my understanding through this feminist action research project.

The need to collaborate with men in feminist activism was also important to the female university students whom I interviewed. While these female students discussed the need for men to serve as allies and to become part of the solution, the male students whom I interviewed only discussed decreasing negative sexual behaviors, for example not harassing women, as the primary way that men could collaborate with women and solve women's issues. Female students in this study recognized the need to strengthen male university student involvement in feminist issues and collaboration with feminist activists, although the practices involved in this collaboration remained elusive.

Discussion

This work contributes to a body of literature that examines feminism and feminist activism among university students. The findings highlight the impact of feminist action research on one female Cambodian university student's understandings of feminism and feminist activism through research conducted during a pilot grant writing workshop and mentoring system at an English school in rural Cambodia. Findings include a process of reciprocal learning about feminism and feminist activism between the second author and participants in the action research project, a transition from feminist beliefs to a focus on feminist activism, and the need to consider the balance of individual feminist activism within the collectivist nature of Cambodian society. Additionally, grassroots feminist activism was revealed in the everyday experiences of the Cambodian student participants as a means to learn about feminism and engage in activism in the absence of opportunities for large-scale activism such as protests, political lobbying, and university-based feminist organizations. These grassroots activities include individual and collective approaches to activism, which circumvent a university system that silences feminist voices through lack of discussion, few female professors to support explorations of feminism and feminist activism, a lack of courses in women's studies, and teacher-centered pedagogical practices.

This study supports findings that feminism is often considered a foreign or Western concept (Jacobsen, 2010; Roces, 2010), but our work also indicates that students are not averse to the label of "feminist" when engaged in a discussion of the concept of feminism. This finding is important, as embracing the label of feminist has been linked to increased feminist activism (Yoder et al., 2011) and indicates that Cambodian university students could be open to embracing a form of feminism which

interrogates and challenges traditional stereotypes and cultural expectations while respecting and maintaining the collectivist aspect of Cambodian culture. This work highlights grassroots feminist activism, such as workshops and networking, which are also found in "Western" feminist activism (Baumgardner, & Richards, 2005; Sowards & Renegar, 2006), suggesting that feminism and feminist activism are not as foreign as Cambodian university students initially might believe. Strengthening feminist beliefs and activism through research could be a key to amplifying student voice and shifting gendered power dynamics on a larger scale. However, doing so would require contextually relevant information about the tenets of feminism and feminist activism along with support in developing activism which centers student voice, and Cambodian culture, while challenging power dynamics. For example, local, student-developed resources and research, such as feminist action research, should be undertaken with more university students in Cambodia.

In this endeavor, balancing the individual and the collective must be carefully addressed, as adherence to dominant social norms can reproduce power inequalities. Yet wholesale rejection of values in a collectivist society can have serious implications for feminist activists and feminism. Expectations of individual action to alleviate the collective problem of women's oppression can hold women individually accountable for larger social change and could mask the need for changes in the collective social system (Fitzsimmons et al., 2018). While we found that feminist action research helped transform certain aspects of knowledge of feminism and feminist activism, the tension between individualism and collectivism remained unresolved. A major limitation of this work was that, due to time constraints, a single cycle of action research was undertaken in this study. Multiple rounds of feminist action research would better support university students who are undertaking similar research to work through the tensions of feminism and sociocultural expectations, such as reckoning the individual within collectivism.

This project also highlights a need for substantial infusion of accessible feminist theory into the feminist action research process—an important lesson learned in this process. As Frisby and associates (2009) cautioned,

> The danger of not drawing on existing feminist theories in action research in deductive ways is that some of the sources and consequences of gender inequalities may be overlooked, misunderstood, or difficult to name because of entrenched power hierarchies within a community. (p. 16)

This reminder is especially important given the reciprocal learning revealed in this study. Cycles of deductive and inductive feminist theorizing through feminist action research with Cambodian university students could reconcile or reduce the tension between

feminism, individualism, collectivism, and sociocultural expectations. This possibility highlights an area of future research. Adding feminist action research to the feminist activist "toolkit" of Cambodian university students will strengthen their ability to engage in the interrogation and dismantling of inequitable power dynamics and support them in creating a more equitable Cambodian society.

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