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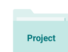

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Women Retail Traders in Cambodia

KYOKO KUSAKABE

This study applies Amartya Sen's cooperative conflict model as a tool to examine gender relations in the household, which in turn determine women's participation in the market and their bargaining position. The research, conducted in early 1997 using interviews with 249 retail traders in Phnom Penh, shows that even though women are gaining economically, there is no corresponding improvement in their bargaining powers. Women continue to view the non-economic contributions of their husbands as more important than their own economic contributions. The social definition of what it means to be a 'woman' is working as an 'undiscussed' force, preventing the issue of the gender division of occupation, with women at the lower end of the social status, from even appearing on the bargaining table.

Conceptualizing Framework

There have been many critiques against treating households as a single unit in economics. The household is not a single unit with a unified utility function coordinated by an altruistic head of household, but consists of individuals with different interests, responsibilities, functions, and perceptions (Hartmann, 1995; Folbre, 1994; Sen, 1990). The household tends to be treated as a unity because of its income-pooling effect. However, resources that enter the household are not distributed equally among members of the household. Their distribution is affected by intra-household power relations reflected in inequality in resource control and the sexual division of labor inside the household. Amartya Sen's cooperative conflict model captures the power relations among actors inside the household. This paper applies this powerful model to assess the bargaining position of women retail traders in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Based on the

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extension of arguments by Agarwal (1994) on Sen's model, this paper adds evidence to suggest other points to be considered in the application of this model.

In Sen's (1990) model of cooperative conflict, members of the household face two different types of problems simultaneously, one involving cooperation (adding to total availabilities) and the other, conflict (dividing the total availabilities among the members of the household). 'Social arrangement regarding who does what, who gets to consume what, and who takes what decisions can be seen as responses to this combined problem of cooperation and conflict' (Sen, 1990: p.129). According to Sen, the outcome of cooperative conflict is a function of well-being levels at the breakdown points, perceived interest, and perceived contributions. Well-being level at the breakdown point refers to how worse off one will be when cooperation breaks down. For example if, in the event of a divorce, the woman is to be worse off compared to the man, she is more likely to accept a less favorable condition in order to sustain the marriage. The perceived interest response suggests that if a person attaches less value to his/her well-being, he/she will give way to other family members' well-being rather than securing her/his own well-being. Sen argues that in traditional societies, acute inequality has been sustained by women who place less value on their own well-being. The perceived contribution response suggests that if a person is perceived to be making a larger contribution to the family, the bargaining solution will be more favorable to him/her. The factor of perceived contribution represents the 'perceived notions of legitimacy regarding what is "deserved" and what is not' (ibid.: p.131). When a person is perceived to contribute more to the household, her/his claim over household resources gains greater legitimacy.

There have been critiques of this model, especially of the 'perceived interest' factor. Agarwal (1994: p.57) argues that it is not that women have a false consciousness about their own well-being. Women are aware of their interests and their overt compliance does not mean that they accept a situation, as evident from their covert forms of resistance. Agarwal also argues that for women, sacrificing short-term interests is sometimes consistent with their long-term interests, since they depend on their families more than men do, especially in their old age. Agarwal therefore emphasizes that women do not show a lack of self-interest; rather, external factors constrain women from pursuing their self-interest. Apffel-Marglin and Simon (1994:33) are also critical of the

notion of perceived interest, but they position their argument from a different perspective. They argue that perceived interest does not take into account women's own sense of self-hood.

As for the perceived contribution response, Agarwal (1994: p.56) points out that the notion of legitimate 'shares' would be broader than 'contribution'. She argues that contribution is only one of the factors that justifies the notion of legitimate shares; among other factors could be needs. Closing the gap between women's actual contribution and social perceptions about their contribution may not, on its own, strengthen the legitimacy of their claim, if the criterion for justifying the shares of individuals is needs rather than contributions. Even when women themselves and other family members acknowledge their contributions, if women think that men 'need' more, a greater legitimacy would be accorded to men's claims to household resources.

The notion of perceived contribution seems to have an implicit focus on economic contribution. This can be seen in Sen's (1990) emphasis on women's involvement in the 'so-called "productive" activities and in earning from outside' (ibid.: p.148). However, contribution is not necessarily always in economic terms. One can contribute to the family in non-economic terms, such as in status and connections. If the family gains social respect through a member of the family, that member is perceived to be contributing more to the family than mere economic earnings. It is only under intense poverty or intense gender inequality (such as in cases where women are prohibited from participating directly in any cash earning activity), that the perceived economic contribution itself might improve the bargaining power of women in the household. When women are already earning cash, the perceived economic contribution itself does not make much difference to the notion of legitimate shares.

It is argued here that the notion of legitimate shares should take into account not only perceived contribution or needs but also the socially expected behavior of women and men. Whether the claim is perceived to conform to the definition of women's and men's interests and roles influences the appropriateness of the claim and determines whether she or he socially 'deserves' the claim. This brings us to Sen's original notion of legitimacy, that the notion of legitimacy is closely related to the nature of social technology that sustains the 'naturalness' of the established gender system (1990: p.132).

How is the notion of legitimate claim sustained in our daily lives? One such method is described by Fenstermaker, West and Zimmerman (1991: p.290) as 'doing gender'. They contend that gender is an interactional accomplishment -- 'the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions, attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category' (West and Zimmerman, 1987, quoted in Fenstermaker, West and Zimmerman, 1991: p.294). To be a woman or a man and to engage in such extended and absorbing courses of action is to *do* gender. To do gender is not always to live up to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity; 'it is to engage in action *at the risk of* being held accountable for it' (ibid.: p.294). In other words, those who do not conform to socially defined roles or masculine and feminine expectations have to face the consequences of going against the grain. Since women (as well as men) are expected to *do* gender, they will be punished for claiming something that does not fit in with such courses of action. Even if the claiming of a particular household resource or a particular social arrangement is unfavorable to woman, she is socially coerced into accepting such arrangements, no matter how unequal and unfavorable it might be for her.

Such socially expected roles of women and men affect not only the bargaining outcome, but also what is bargained about. Agarwal (1994: p.58) argues this point by quoting the term 'doxa' from the French sociologist Bourdieu. The term refers to the realm which is accepted as a natural and self-evident part of the social order, which is not open to questioning or contestation -- the realm that is 'undiscussed, unnamed, admitted without argument or scrutiny'. In Bourdieu's schema, the change in what constitutes 'doxa' would come about 'when the dominated have the material and symbolic means of rejecting the definition of the real that is imposed on them' (ibid.: p.59).

A similar notion of such subtle power is discussed by Lukes (Kabeer, 1994: pp.224-227). Lukes noted three types of power. The first is defined as the capacity of an actor to affect the pattern of outcomes against the wishes of other actors and asks the question 'who prevails in decision-making?' The second type of power is the ability to confine decision-making to 'safe' issues, and to exclude certain issues from the decision-making agenda. For example, as Kabeer (1994: p.225) explains, the assignment of domestic responsibilities to women is so deeply institutionalized in household rules and

practices that it appears non-negotiable. The third type of power prevents open conflict between dominant and subordinate groups by shaping wants, needs and preferences in such a way that both parties tend to accept their role in the existing order. 'Power relations may appear so secure and well-established that both subordinate and dominant groups are unaware of their oppressive implications or incapable of imagining alternative ways of "being and doing"' (Kabeer, 1994: p.227).

As Agarwal (1994) argues, what is bargained about is already an outcome of power relations. It is the work of the second and third types of power distinguished by Lukes that determines whether a particular issue will be on the bargaining table or not. Sometimes there is seemingly no conflict, and women also perceive that they are cooperating to keep the household going. Household domestic work is a typical example. Women's responsibility for domestic work is assumed to be so natural that it is not contested.

The social definition of womanhood determines the legitimacy of the claim in a bargaining situation, as well as the bargaining topic itself. The legitimacy of the claim over household resources is not only determined by the perceived economic contribution to the household, it is also influenced by whether the claim is socially sanctioned or not. This means that even if women gained economically, the legitimacy of their claim does not improve if their claim is not culturally sanctioned.

In the following sections, the working of the social definition of womanhood in the cooperative conflict model is demonstrated by using the case of women retail traders in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. It is argued that (1) the perceived contribution is not only economical, but also non-economical, such as in terms of status; (2) legitimacy of the claim is shaped not only by perceived contribution, but also by women's perceived sense of womanhood i.e. how eager women are to conform to the socially expected role of women; and (3) such a perceived sense of womanhood prevents the gender division of occupation from being challenged or bargained.

Women retailers are themselves the main income earners in their households in Phnom Penh. By examining their perception of their business and family, this article attempts to unfold the working of the 'undiscussed' power, in Bourdieu's term, that influence women's bargaining position. The article is based on a series of face-to-face

interviews conducted with 249 women retail traders in Phnom Penh over a period of three and a half months in early 1997, using semi-structured guidelines. Of these, 176 female traders were selected from four public markets, 28 from among women small shop owners in four commercial areas, and 45 were women street vendors and hawkers in three squatter communities. Retail traders were divided into several groups according to where their business was located and what they were selling. Respondents were randomly selected from each of these groups. The respondents were asked why and how they started the present business, their life history, their perceptions of their business and hopes for the future for themselves and their children. But before going into an analysis of the interviews, a brief introduction on Cambodia is given in order to outline the context for the discussion.

Economic Changes in Cambodia: Women in Business, Men in Government

Historically, since independence in 1954, Cambodia followed a rudimentary form of parliamentary democracy. In 1975, the Khmer Rouge occupied Phnom Penh, and declared the establishment of Democratic Kampuchea (DK). During the Khmer Rouge regime, the entire population was forced to go to rural areas and engage in collectivized agriculture under a radical Maoist doctrine. Heavy labor, starvation and lack of healthcare left many people dead. It is estimated that at least one million people died during this period (Mysliwiec, 1988). There was no market, no private property, no currency, and no schools. In 1979 this holocaust ended with the Democratic Kampuchea governing junta being overwhelmed by the dissident faction of the Khmer Rouge supported by the Vietnamese army. The People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) was established, which declared it would follow authentic socialism, in line with that of USSR and Vietnam.

However, because of the scarcity of material as well as human resources, the new Cambodian government could not, and did not, copy the socialist system of USSR and Vietnam wholesale. For example, because of its lack of ability to obtain and distribute basic necessities, and because the government did not want to give any impression of

association with the former Khmer Rouge, family-based small private economic activities were permitted (Vickery, 1986).

In 1989, the PRK decided to start up a process of market liberalization. Such change was forced by the financial crisis stemming from the stoppage of financial assistance from the Council for Mutual Assistance (CMEA) countries, who themselves were suffering economic difficulties. With market liberalization, Cambodia suffered high inflation. The inflation rate reached 200 percent in 1991, although from 1992 onwards the rate has been kept relatively lower (UN/ESCAP, 1995: p.52). Already low government salaries further decreased in real value under high inflation. On the other hand, expenses for services such as education increased, partly due to the government's lack of expenditure in this sector. These factors worked to increase the need for cash income. And women who were previously full-time housewives or government employees started to take up retail trade.

Even though no statistics are available to confirm the claim, it is said that during the 1960s, wives of government employees were generally full-time housewives. In interviews, respondents confirmed that in the 1960s, one family could comfortably live from the income of a single person working in the government. This changed after 1979, and many wives of government employees became petty retail traders while their husbands retained their government positions.

There were several reasons in favor of such an arrangement. First, it became necessary to have at least one person take up an employment that would bring in sufficient income for the family because it was no longer possible to sustain a family on the meager salary from the government. Even if both husband and wife worked in the government, their combined salary was not enough to cover daily expenses and children's education. On the other hand, the retail trade sector was growing under market liberalization. Market liberalization allowed land transactions. More foreign organizations and companies could now operate inside Cambodia. Opportunities for import and export activities had also grown. These conditions combined to create a *nouveau riche*, a growing middle-class whose purchasing power has increased considerably in recent years. The increasing migration to Phnom Penh from rural areas and refugee camps also pushed up consumption in the capital.

Retail trade was also an inviting option because income from retail trade could work as a safeguard against inflation as savings are stocked in the form of goods that can absorb inflation through pricing. It did not require much capital or skills to start up. And purchasing goods from wholesalers had become easier after market liberalization.

At the same time, however, it was also important to have at least one person in the family working in the government. This was a safeguard against business failure. It also provided the business with connections and information. Women traders felt that there was less likelihood of harassment from other government officers if one of their own family members was in the government. Sarom[1], a shop owner whose husband works in the government said, 'If there is no one in the family working in the government, they (government officers in charge) will think that we do not know about the law, and try to take advantage of us.'

Having one family member in government was also important for status reasons. Cambodia is a hierarchical society (Ebihara, 1968; Ledgerwood, 1990; Mabbett and Chandler, 1995; Martin, 1989). Ever since the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the society has been divided strictly into three classes: royalty, bureaucracy and peasantry. Merchant were outcasts, dominated by the Chinese and the Vietnamese. As merchants were integrated into the social hierarchy, some of the larger entrepreneurs received a status higher than ordinary government officials, though they still remained below bureaucrats. And petty merchants were generally accorded a lower status than government officials (Martin, 1989). Thus, having at least one person working in the government meant the family had a higher social standing than merchants. This was reflected in the interviews. Sopheap, another shop owner whose husband is a government officer said, referring to another family, 'That family is rich, but no one works in the government. So, neighbors do not respect them.'

But these explanations still beg the question as to why women, and not men, took up business. Several reasons can be found for this gender division of occupation. First, men by and large had better promotion prospects than women. This was partly because women typically had lower education than men. Even with the same level of education, men got promoted faster and occupied higher positions in government than women (personal communication by the Under Secretary of the Ministry of Women's Affairs,

1997). Therefore, in terms of connections and information, it was more advantageous for men to remain in the government.

Second, retail trade was traditionally seen as a woman's occupation. In his report on his visit to Cambodia in the thirteenth century, Chou Ta-Kuan (1992) described women dominating domestic retail trade in market places. He noted, 'For this reason a Chinese, arriving in the country, loses no time in getting himself a mate, for he will find her commercial instincts a great asset' (p.43). Folk tales also describe women as market traders (Ledgerwood, 1990). Ovesen, Trankell and Ojendal (1995: p.9) analyzed why Khmer women, and not men, engaged in trade. They concluded that it is 'related to the relatively lower cosmological position, and thus the relative symbolic impurity of women, compared to men.'

Women retail traders themselves gave various reasons why women and not men went in for petty retail trade. As Nary, a retail trader said, 'If a man is to do business, he needs more capital, since men would not do petty trade like women. Retail trade also allows women to combine household responsibilities and income earning more easily than if they were working in formal employment.' In shophouses, for instance, women could look after their house and children while also doing business. Traders in market stalls also said that it was easier to do their own business as they could shut their stall whenever required. However, in practice, market stall traders do not close their business so easily. They come to sell goods even when they are not feeling well, and they bring their children to the market if they have to look after them.

Third, women and not men go into business because 'one strong determinant of women's status is the status of her husband' (Larsson, 1996: p.12). As has been discussed above, it is important to have at least one person in the family working in the government to maintain/enhance family status. Since a woman is not judged only by her conduct and achievement but also by the position of her husband, it is important that the husband has a government job. This works to the woman's advantage as well, both in terms of securing her business and increasing her family's status.

Conformity to Social Definitions of Womanhood

Even though retail business is socially ranked lower than a government job, and women carry the double burden of domestic work and management of their business, they appear quite happy with this arrangement. Most of the interviewees (78 percent) replied that they were satisfied with their businesses. Seventy-two percent of them said that they felt successful in their businesses, and nearly 60 percent of them said that by doing business, their position in the household had improved. It is apparently not the size of business that affects their sense of success. For while only 61 percent of the shop owner-traders considered themselves successful, smaller business owners were more positive. A majority (92.3 percent) of perishable item traders and 87.9 percent of non-perishable item traders in the market stalls considered themselves successful[2]. Further, more respondents among those who had expanded their businesses considered themselves successful, while some shop owner-traders, even if they had expanded their businesses[3], felt they were not successful (only 57 percent among those who expanded business in shops considered themselves successful). Among street vendors, 48.3 percent considered themselves successful, but the rate increased to only 50 percent for those who had expanded their businesses. What factors made women feel positive about their business? Is it linked to the social definition of Khmer women as *srei grop lakkhana* (virtuous) and their *siddhi* (rights)?

Women's engagement in business did not allow them to transgress the socially defined roles for virtuous women which urged them both to respect man's higher status in the family and also to work for the family's economic and social standing. The so-called traditional 'codes for women', which were meant to teach girls 'good manners and of tradition' (Thierry, 1978 in Ledgerwood, 1990: p.85) are called *chabap srei* in Cambodia. Images of 'good' women are also seen in folk tales and proverbs. Ledgerwood (1990) has examined images of Khmer womanhood, and pointed out that the ideal woman is the 'virtuous' woman:

> The successful Khmer woman, the woman who is able to accomplish what she wants done, the woman who is valued by society, is not discussed as being 'strong' or 'powerful', but as 'virtuous'. Women are not spoken of as good or bad but as possessing every virtue; the epitomy of Khmer womanhood is the 'perfectly virtuous woman' (*sri gráp lakkhaná*). Status for Khmer women is

> discussed in terms of the realization or non-realization of ideal images (Ledgerwood, 1990:24).

By studying Khmer literature, Ledgerwood has come up with some descriptions of *srei grop lakkhana.*[4] The *srei grop lakkhana* is quiet and controlled in her movement and speech:

> So the virtuous woman is beautiful but also soft and sweet, quiet and obedient. She always shows proper respect to her 'higher' husband. And by possessing these qualities, she creates within the household a safe, protected environment into which the husband can escape and from which he can draw strength (ibid.:p. 103).

Unmarried *srei grop lakkhana* are virgins. 'To the extent possible, young women should stay at home and should never go out alone' (ibid.: p.110). A good wife must prepare delicious food, be responsible for the upbringing of children, and must manage the household well.

But the *srei grop lakkhana* does not have only a quiet and obedient or subservient image. There are also active, enabling and independent images that can lead the family to prosperity. The *srei grop lakkhana* not only keeps the house comfortable, but also determines the prosperity of her family as evident from the proverb, 'Wealth is there because the woman knows how to save and be frugal; a house is comfortable and happy because the wife has good character' (Fisher-Nguyen, 1994: p.100). Ledgerwood describes the importance of women's virtue for the family's financial success as illustrated in a folk tale '*Ma Yoen':*

> The story shows that the destiny of the husband depends on the virtues of his wife. The *sri gráp lakkhaná* in the story is not afraid to work hard, she is intelligent and thrifty, immediately spotting the problem so long neglected by the first wife. She is of 'good heart', sharing the daily catch. In the forest, she demonstrates that she is an excellent cook by providing a meal as good as any at the palace. She shows business acumen by knowing the value of precious items, as well as how to set prices, how to do shipping and marketing, and how not to be cheated by other merchants. And she is her husband's prime adviser. It is because of her suggesting that he changes professions… [and] comes to be in the service of the king (Ledgerwood, 1990: p.108).

Thus, virtuous women have the ability to influence men's social standing. As the saying goes, 'The rice seedling draws the dirt to it in clumps; the woman supports the man' (Fisher-Nguyen, 1994: p.100). These two images seem to contradict each other, but they coexist through a change in emphasis given under particular circumstances by particular people (Ledgerwood, 1990).

The reasons given by women retail traders on why they think their *siddhi* (meaning 'rights' in Khmer) has improved reflect these images of *srí gráp lakkhaná*. Most women replied that it is the increase in freedom that made them feel that their rights had improved. This can be seen in such comments as:

> 'I don't have to think about my husband's opinion when buying things.'
> (Srei, a vegetable hawker. Her husband is a community worker.)
>
> 'If women have independent income, women have more freedom. When my husband and sons want something, I can buy it for them.'
> (Chanda, a gold trader in market stall. Her husband has retired and is staying at home.)
>
> 'If women have more income, women's *siddhi* (rights) improves. I give my husband pocket money.'
> (Chantha, a grocery trader in a market stall. Her husband is a soldier.)
>
> 'Earlier, when I was a full-time housewife, I used to *klaat* (to fear, to revere) my husband. But now I have my own income, I do not feel like that anymore.'
> (Chariya, a watch trader in a market stall. Her husband sells medicine.)

Their sense of improved *siddhi* (rights) can be attributed to their freedom as well as their improved ability to maneuver household finances. As Ledgerwood (1990) points out, managing household finances is a matter of pride for Cambodian women. A business income enables her to perform this task better.

Another aspect that the respondents cite to show their improved *siddhi* is the recognition they receive from others, both family members and neighbors.

> 'If one has a business, she is more recognized than one who is dependent on a husband's income.'
> (Kalyan, a medicine trader in a shop. Her husband is doing business with her.)

> 'If I have my own income, other members of the household will not *rok rʉang* (to look for trouble) with me.'
> (Seth, a grocery trader in a market stall. Her husband works for a private company.)

The emphasis here is on the industriousness of women. They are doing business; they are not sitting idle at home. The statements show the efficacy that is of central importance to being 'virtuous' women. Thus, women emphasized their freedom in having a business of their own – the freedom to buy things for their families and give their husbands pocket money. The more financial power they had, the better they could perform the role of *srei grop lakkhana*, and increase their value in the eyes of their family and neighbors. Therefore, even if the business is small, if they are able to realize the image of *srei grop lakkhana* by supporting the household, respondents felt positive about themselves and their business.

It might be argued that these points are simply 'good' values in general terms, and probably have nothing to with the ideal image of *srei grop lakkhana*. However, women traders are themselves acutely conscious of conforming to the ideals of Khmer womanhood. Leung, a grocery trader in a market stall said that in the 1960s women could be 'virtuous' only by keeping the house in good order. Nowadays, women have to both keep house and run a business in order to be called 'virtuous'. Those respondents who replied that their *siddhi* (rights) did not improve by having their own business generally put more emphasis on the subservient image of *srei grop lakkhana*. They said that women managing household income was a traditional arrangement, and women's control over household income was the same regardless of whether they were in business or not. Some respondents completely rejected the idea that women improved their *siddhi* (rights) in the household *relative to men*. A sweets and fruits hawker said that no matter what, a wife would always be regarded below her husband. Her husband was a construction worker, and though her income was more stable than his, she did not find this fact contributing to improving her *siddhi*. She was, in fact, very eager to explain to me that in Cambodian tradition, women are considered inferior to men. A ceremonial clothes trader in a market stall, who had a handicapped husband, also said that though

business gave women more freedom, they still had to act in deference to their husbands' wishes.

Women's Bargaining Power in the Household

Has the arrangement of women in retail business and men in government changed women's bargaining power in the household when compared to women being full-time housewives or working in the government? Overall, women's fall-back position has improved, since they have a higher income than before. Ninety percent of the interviewees said their earnings covered almost all household expenses. For women traders in middle-class families whose husbands are in the government, their income from business covered nearly 100 percent of all household expenses; they could even give their husbands some pocket money. (The income contribution of husbands became more important in poorer households where men worked as manual laborers.) However, divorce was viewed as the worst option for these women, since divorced women have a low social standing. Respondents feared being 'looked down upon' (Ledgerwood, 1990). In this sense, then, women's fall-back position has not improved even though they would not be resourceless/destitute when cooperation breaks down.

Women's perceived interest, as has been discussed in the first section, is a debatable issue. Women traders whose husbands are government officers perceived that it was in their interest to help their husbands maintain their jobs as government officers. They are aware of their own interest and well-being, but they also perceive that maintaining the present gender division of occupation is the way to sustain this well-being. The issue here are the external, social constraints, as argued by Agarwal (1994). In the case of these women retail traders, the external constraint are an occupational structure that does not offer promotional prospects to women, and a social system that measures the status of a woman through her husband's social status.

As for women's perceived contribution to the household, the women traders were actually meeting all the household expenses, and therefore earning cash income did improve their perceived contribution to the household. However, it should be noted that even though women knew that they contributed more to the household than their

husbands, they did not feel that their husbands were contributing less in any way. The husbands were deemed to be contributing in terms of political/business connections, information and prestige. For women, keeping their husbands in government jobs was not only beneficial for their business as a safety net and a source of information, but this also had positive implications for family status. For many women traders, such status contribution was perceived as being as or even more important than their economic contribution. When asked why her husband did not help in business, a woman trader, Chandara, whose business income covered all household expenses said, 'Men have to work (*tveka*[5])'. Her reply revealed the value she placed on her husband's government job. All these statements go to show that it is necessary to recognize contribution both in terms of cash earnings as well as in terms of social status. The improvement in economic contribution does not necessarily improve women's perceived contribution relative to others, since contributions can be in non-economic terms as well. Especially for women who are above the subsistence level and place a premium on social status, such a non-economic contribution to the family is vital.

Thus, the social definition of womanhood is also preventing the issue of gender division of occupation from coming up on the bargaining table. It would be socially unacceptable to see fault in the arrangement of women in business and men in government. And if women choose not to start a business, they are seen as lacking in industry and initiative. Several women traders, in fact, said they started up their business because relatives told them to do so to make themselves useful. Also, if women insisted on carrying on with their government jobs despite financial constraints, they would be seen as irresponsible. Thus, the social arrangement of men in government and women in business was seen as being so 'natural' that it was not even considered an issue that needed bargaining. In short, the social definition of womanhood works here as an 'undiscussed, unnamed' power that determines the gender division of occupation, making women feel satisfied with the existing arrangement, and preventing the issue from being challenged.

Conclusion

Women in retail trade in Phnom Penh have improved their economic standing by running their own businesses, but their bargaining power in the household does not seem to have improved correspondingly. Their economic achievement is 'discounted' by the social definition of womanhood which allows women to remain content with limited social standing and therefore less bargaining power. Economic independence is often considered to 'empower' women. However, this study of Cambodia's retail traders has shown that this does not happen to *all* women. For middle class women who live in an environment where the socially expected roles of women are stricter, economic independence alone does not change their bargaining power. Even when they would not be economically worse off by divorce, and even when they perceive that they are contributing to the households economically much more than their husbands, they do not feel 'empowered'. Their husbands' status contribution is considered to be as or more important than the wives' economic contribution. This implies that increased economic independence is not a panacea for all women. In order to 'empower' women and increase their bargaining power in the household, women's economic autonomy should be accompanied by an effort to challenge the social definition of womanhood.

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[1] The names of all interviewees have been changed for this article.
[2] Aside from the social definition of womanhood that is discussed in this article, several other reasons can be given for the difference in perception of the business between shop owners and market traders. One of the reasons can be because shop owners place more emphasis on business performance, and it might be the case that a drop in sales of shops has been bigger than for markets during the economic slowdown in 1997. See Kusakabe (1999).
[3] Expansion of business includes changing items sold to those that require more capital, or investing more on the place of business, such as changing from street vending to market stall or market stall to individual shops.
[4] In my survey, some people called this *srei grop leak*.
[5] *Tveka* literally means 'to work' in Khmer language, but when referring to different types of occupations, it means to work in the government.

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