Chapter 20

Rice Plus and Family Solidarity: Rural Cambodian Widows’ Economic Coping Practices

Susan Hagood Lee
Boston University, USA

ABSTRACT

Widows find their lives suddenly upended when they lose their husband. Widowhood is particularly hard in rural areas, where widows are often the poorest of the poor. This study looks at the economic practices of a sample of rural widows in Cambodia who supported their households with a “rice plus” strategy. They relied on rice grown on their own land supplemented by microenterprises that raised cash to fill the hunger gap. Children’s labor and cooperation were essential to maintaining the widowed household. A widow with many children managed better than a widow with few or no children. Most widows with daughters were better off than widows with sons who moved away after marriage. Cambodian practices such as gender role flexibility and women’s economic participation helped widows cope after their husband’s death, while the devaluation of women’s labor made life harder.

INTRODUCTION

Widows find their lives suddenly upended when they lose their husband. They have to deal with emotional grief at the loss of their life partner, the distress of their children, and the practical necessity to provide for the family on their own. Since women commonly earn less than their husband, widowhood means the loss of substantial family income. Women typically have fewer occupations open to them, and they pay less than those dominated by men. Widows have to navigate this gendered economic terrain and carry on in the face of diminished expectations for the future.

In the developing world, many people live in rural areas and rely on subsistence agriculture to provide for their family. When a rural subsistence farmer dies, his wife and children are left in very challenging circumstances. Gender role expectations often drastically restrict the economic options available to widows who may lose their land and other economic resources. The result is that rural widows and their children are often among the poorest of the poor (Chhoy, Touch, Kham, & Prak, 1995; Davenport,
Widows predominate among older women in most societies due to the common patriarchal practice of men marrying younger women. Since men die at a younger age on average than women in most countries, many older people are widows. In developing countries, many younger women lose their husbands to illnesses, accidents, and war and must raise their children on their own.

It is often assumed that widows are cared for by extended family and have no need to work. In impoverished settings, however, many families are too poor to take in needy relatives or may be unwilling to support them. Some widows have little extended family available and by necessity must fall back on their own resources. Families may expect widows of working age to support themselves and their children. The outcome is that many widows must work for their living. The need to provide for their children, together with a gendered occupational structure that restricts opportunity for women, make the economics of widowhood an important social problem in developing societies.

This paper examines the economic coping practices of rural widows in Cambodia, looking at rice agriculture as the main source of food and the use of microenterprise income to fill the annual hunger gap. The author details the extent to which rural widows rely on their immediate family, and the variations in practice by age, ability, and family composition. The paper presents several women as exemplars of the diversity of ways widows cope in rural Cambodia. The data is taken from a larger study that explores widows’ coping practices in detail including access to land, education, and credit (Lee, 2006).

**RESEARCH CONTEXT**

**Widows’ Work Options**

Widows’ work options depend on work conditions for women in general. Women’s work in low-income countries, as in the developed world, is valued less than men’s work and is paid less (Owen, 1996). Women typically have fewer job options than men and are concentrated in a few occupations (Chen, 2000; Owen, 1996). Regions vary in their cultural expectations of women, including work activity. In some developing regions, women are secluded and discouraged from working outside their home. Indian women in certain castes, for instance, may be seen as bringing dishonor on their family if they venture outside their home for work (Chen, 2000). Among some groups, such as the Maya in Guatemala, women do not work in agriculture (Green, 1999). In other areas, women may do agricultural work but are prohibited from plowing, an exclusively male activity (Chen, 2000; Owen, 1996).

These restrictions on women’s work activity have an acute impact on widows. Widows who have been secluded or who have not earned income previously may be forced to undertake new activities for which they have few skills. In some cultures, women do not talk with unrelated men and may have great difficulty conducting ordinary business transactions as well as negotiating for price or credit (Chen, 2000; Owen, 1996). In occupations where women and men work in complementary roles, widows must find ways to compensate for the lost labor of their late husband. Widows typically turn first to sons old enough to step into their father’s role. The oldest son has particular importance in Hindu and Confucian cultures (Chen, 2000; Lopata, 1996). In the absence of suitable male children, widows may hire male labor (Chen, 2000; Green, 1999; Lee, 2006). For widows with little cash, however, paid assistance is
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