**Mother, Grandmother, Migrant: Elder Translocality and the Renegotiation of Household Roles in Cambodia**

This paper explores the participation of elder members of Cambodian households in translocal livelihoods. Based on linked, rural-urban fieldwork rooted in a Phnom Penh garment worker enclave, it highlights three aspects of elder translocality in Cambodia. First, it shows that the logistics of older people’s migrations are not predicated directly on physical mobility or lifecycle, as often assumed in the literature, but that these are merely two amongst a variety of factors that instigate nested, longer and shorter term cycles. Secondly, it explores how older members of migrant households engage agentively in ‘supportive’ migrant roles such as childcare, as opposed to passively complying with the needs of their families. Finally, the paper demonstrates how elder members of translocal households – recognising their changing economic and ecological environment – utilise the performance of these duties as a means of retaining status in a marketising context.

1. **Introduction**

Maxim Gorky’s seminal revolutionary novel “Mother” (1906) is the tale of a beaten and downtrodden widow from a factory labouring community who, though the activities of her son, finds meaning and strength in the class struggles of her era. Its core message – uncharacteristically liberal in early 20th century Russia – was that in times of social change even a society’s most marginal members have the power to effect change through altruism and sacrifice. Status, otherwise put, is not fixed by age, but earned by matching ability to circumstance.

Whilst the intervening years have seen such empowering sentiments decay to platitudes in the face of structuralism, post-structuralism, and the cultural turn, the extent to which their object – the eponymous homebound mother – remains excised from the geographic and economic literature on contemporary factory work in the developing world is nevertheless surprising. The mobilities involved may provide a large part of the answer: older mothers and grandmothers tend not to be directly employed by factories and are often spatially dislocated from the family members who are. However, as long recognised within the household (Thieme, 2008; Silvey, 2001), translocality (Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2016; Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013; Brickell and Data, 2011), and ‘left behind’ literature (Yeoh and Huang, 2014; Toyota et al., 2007; Yeoh et al., 2002), such distances often have little impact upon the place of both parties within the community and ‘home’ (Brickell, 2011).

As a result, the lack of attention directed towards the older, non-working, and homebound members of translocal households in migrant societies constitutes a key gap in geographic knowledge. Not only is their presumed lack of an economic role (Burnholt, 1999; Lee, 1980) largely erroneous, but their role in normative change, too, is signally underexplored. As shown herein, both migration systems themselves and the changes to household roles they engender are actively engaged with not only by waged workers, but by carers and supportive family also. Accordingly, this paper adopts a translocal perspective, wherein neither wage earning, nor the type or duration of migration determines engagement in household or community mobility.

Form this standpoint, this paper adopts an emic sampling strategy rooted in the everyday practice of mobile livelihoods to explore the changing nature of the grandparental role in translocal Cambodia. It argues first that non-waged older members of migrant families are key participants in translocal livelihoods systems and that their mobility is defined primarily by the logistical needs of those systems, rather than constraints on physical mobility. Second, it is shown that this participation is not passive or unwilling, but actively engaged with as a means of reasserting the (often financial) value of the grandparental role. Finally, the paper draws on and responds to the work of Rogaly and Thieme (2012) and Cohen and Gössling (2015) to highlight how older people excluded from formal labour resist the marginalising processes of hypermobility (Cohen and Gössling (2015) through “altruistic” behaviour, as a means of retaining status within translocal households and communities.

**Locating Normative Contestation within Migratory Logistics**

Previously viewed (by e.g. Becker, 1974) as a bounded and unitary entity, the household has in recent years come to viewed as far more complex and problematic (Brickell, 2012). An increasingly critical approach within the geographic literature towards boundaries and the compartmentalization of place (Castree, 2004) has begun to strip away both the conceptual and spatial wholeness of the home. As is increasingly recognised, roles within the household are multi-scalar (Jackson, 2014), spatio-temporal (Rogaly and Thieme, 2012) and biographical (Valentine and Sadgrove, 2012) in nature.

Recently, translocality frameworks have further emphasised these characteristics both by emphasising the agentive nature of mobility (Brickell and Datta, 2011) and working to ‘deliberately confuse the boundaries of the local’ (Oakes and Schein, 2006: 20). Building on both the feminist literature (e.g. Harker, 2009; Valentine, 2006; 1997; Valentine et al., 1998) and the ‘left behind’ literature on non-waged members of migrant households, (e.g. Yeoh and Huang, 2014; Toyota et al., 2007; Yeoh et al., 2002), these translocal studies have explored how remittance flows and circular migration patterns (Sakdapolrak, Promburom and Reif, 2014; Parsons et al., 2014) have produced new norms and roles within the household. In particular, norms of femininity (Devasahayam et al., 2004; Huang and Yeoh, 1997) and motherhood (Yeoh and Huang, 2010) have undergone profound changes in response to the shifting household-scale economy.

Concurrently, researchers have sought to link household norms to ‘the geopolitical economy at a global scale’ (Harker, 2009: 320), particularly in relation to globalization (Freitag and Von Oppen, 2010; Oakes and Schein, 2006) and neo-liberalism (Springer, 2011). Nevertheless, largely due to scalar differences, these two elements of translocal behaviour have rarely been considered together even in a Western context. In the global south, where global economic processes tend to be viewed as inward flowing and unaffected by locality ‘due to the assumed rootedness of these processes in “the north”’ (Freitag and Von Oppen, 2010: 3), the impact of culture on economy is still less well examined.

Recent efforts, such as McFarlane’s (2009: 566), to place ‘agency less in the realm of direct causes and more in the realm of sources which come together in particular events’ have, however, begun to provide a useful framework for analysis. Rooted in locally ‘articulated’ conceptions of economic processes (Springer, 2011), such approaches demonstrate how translocal places are re-imagined by their inhabitants either as spaces of freedom from the restrictions of rural life (Parsons and Lawreniuk, 2016b; Bastia, 2011; Shah, 2006) or, conversely, as means to protect traditional values (Ge, Resurreccion and Elmhirst, 2011). However, they have focussed overwhelmingly on those who work within such systems, thereby failing to acknowledge the role of non-waged household members, both mobile and immobile. In particular, the movement of elderly people has been neglected due to:

‘a schematic binary pattern according to which the young are mobile whereas the elderly either stay behind or are left behind. In such a scheme, ageing and old age are often positioned as the local, the surplus, the elsewhere of global connectivities’ (Kunow, 2009: 39)

As Tarrant (2010a: 190) argues, this reflects a research agenda in which older people – and grandparents in particular – ‘remain noticeably under-researched in human geography’ and beyond. Moreover, of particular relevance here, the co-constitutive relationship between age and gender has received similarly little attention, despite having ‘much to offer in terms of thinking about how gender is socially constructed and illuminates the complex power relations of age and gender categories’ (Bartholomaeus and Tarrant, 2015: 351). Thus, whilst the transnational migration (Curran and Saguy, 2013; Pessar and Mahler, 2003) and ‘left behind’ literatures (Huang and Yeoh, 2011; Desai and Banerji, 2008) have done much to explore the interrelationship of gender and mobility, the additional variable of age has rarely been included in these analyses.

Indeed, so effective has been the excision of older people from the migration literature that, as Vullnetari and King (2008: 142) note, ‘a veil has been drawn over this issue’, leaving research in this area ‘surprisingly limited and almost entirely recent’ (Vullnetari and King, 2008: 142). This lacuna derives largely from two premises that underpin the migration literature: first, that older people are ‘relatively unimportant in the economic process’ (Lee, 1980: 131), and second that their migration patterns are so inextricably linked to lifecycle (He and Schachter, 2003; Litwak and Longino, 1987; Lee, 1966) as to constitute ‘an almost universal pattern’ (Fischer and Malmberg, 2001: 357).

Such assumptions mean that the typologies of elder translocality that have emerged in recent years have tended to be constructed on the basis that ‘migration in later life is substantially different from that at earlier ages’ (Wiseman and Roseman, 1979: 324). Consequently, rather than exploring cross-cutting linkages with gender, economics and other key factors in mobilities more generally, the inescapable themes in this literature have been demography, life-course analyses (He and Schachter, 2003; Fisher and Malmberg, 2001; Litwak and Longino, 1987), and physical mobility (Metz, 2000; Burnholt, 1999).

By focusing on elder migrants within the broad context of Cambodian translocal livelihoods, this study seeks both to challenge ‘the compartmentalised nature of age studies’ (Tarrant, 2010b: 190) and elucidate linkages between mobility norms and the economy. Indeed, given that elder household members’ intimate involvement in translocal migrant livelihoods manifests in numerous forms of mobility, this study adopts the perspective that the normative dimension of mobility is not predicated directly upon the physical one. Rather, the processes of normative adjustment associated with translocality operate throughout translocal systems in which various degrees of mobility and immobility are present.

As highlighted in the literature on local (Gaytán and Bowen, 2015; Williams et al., 2014), gendered (Chen, 2013) and ‘articulated’ (Springer, 2011) neoliberalism, discourse is key to this reconstitution of roles and status. Consequently, the persistent narrative that ‘even the most well meaning family can find it hard to look after its older members if they no longer make a direct or indirect economic contribution’ (Wilson, 2002: 659), feeds into a more fundamental structural norm of ‘postmodern ageing’ (Polivka, 2011: 182); ‘that is, old people cause us troubles, so how can we make them responsible for fixing them for us?’ (Asquith, 2009: 266).

Studies investigating reactions and resistance to subjugating discourses of this type – long established as form of power in themselves (e.g. Galtung, 1990, 1969; Foucault, 1991) – have become commonplace in the recent geographic literature (see e.g. Hall and Fenlon, 2015; Kondo, 2009; Peet, 2002), and increasingly linked to the economic context in which they occur (Vinthagen and Johansson, 2013; Bargh, 2007; Scott, 1985). This dual attention to economy and power has underpinned both the postcolonial “histories from below” (Sivaramakrishnan 2005; Ludden 2002; Kelley, 1996) and household literatures (Brickell, 2011b; Hart, 1992). However, it has rarely been applied by either approach to older people who – as in migration studies – have tended to be viewed as passive participants in the processes and contestations of economic development.

Even where older people are acknowledged to take an active role in economic processes, their agency has been habitually dismissed as altruism, a categorisation that broadly transplants the interests of others to themselves. However, as various authors have noted (e.g. Brickell and Chant, 2010; Kabeer, 2007, 1994; Chant, 2002), this concept is both strongly gendered and frequently subjugating in its elision of female and elder agency, ignoring as it does numerous ways in which agency may be expressed indirectly.

Building on Rogaly and Thieme’s (2012: 2095) account of migrants regaining ‘subjective control’ over their ‘lifeworlds’ over time, this paper presents a case for elder translocality as a process of active renegotiation of household roles. Ostensibly “altruistic” actions may therefore constitute practices of normative contestation, rather than reductive self-abnegation, as ‘space and sociality are reconfigured’ by mass movement (Cohen and Gössling, 2015: 1675). Indeed, the extent to which “non-migrant” actors such as these participate in the functioning of a migration system means that the migrant/ non-migrant typology is ill suited to its analysis: all members of a community experience mobility, whether in physical, economic, or normative adjustment. Consequently, it is argued here that a translocal perspective is an essential basis from which to understand the mobility of older people.

Finally, the paper aims more broadly to integrate insights from the mobilities and migration systems literatures by demonstrating how normative as well as economic and logistical factors play a role in the form and function of migration systems (Parsons and Lawreniuk, 2016a). Not only does such an adjustment help to address the mirrored shortcomings of each perspective – a lack of structural analysis in the former case (Manderscheid, 2014) and a failure to attend sufficiently to emotional and discursive factors in the latter (Doughty and Murray, 2014; Merriman, 2014; D’Andrea, Ciolfi and Gray, 2011) – but it is specifically necessary to understand the significance of elder translocality as a process. As this paper highlights, the logistics of elder householders’ migrations impact directly upon the norms that underpin them, thereby shifting the basis upon which future logistics are calculated. Structural feedbacks to migration, in consequence, are shown to be an emotional, as well as an economic issue.

1. **Methods**

The research underpinning this paper was undertaken between June and August 2015 in Phnom Penh city and Prey Veng province. It comprised 18 urban interviews with elder migrants, 4 urban interviews with spouses not formally employed, 8 interviews with rurally based elder migrants and 3 focus groups were undertaken with older people from a rural sender community. Furthermore, a key informant interview was undertaken with the head of the sender community, making a total of 34 individual or group interviews.

The urban side of the study was undertaken in the Tambon Roung Chat[[1]](#footnote-1) garment worker community in Steung Meanchey, Phnom Penh, a purpose built site incorporating three dozen factories and rented rooms for several thousand workers. It is notable primarily for its proximity to the lethal crackdowns enacted by government forces on minimum wage protestors in January 2014 (Cheang, Teehan and Worrell, 2014). However, inhabitants generally view it as a positive living environment due to the closeness of their accommodation to the factories and a residential security presence.

The sampling process emerged from an earlier project, which revealed a higher than expected number of people present in the Tambon Roung Chat community’s rented rooms during working hours. Whilst the total number of available respondents was small – an issue which constitutes a potential limitation here – this approach nevertheless presented the opportunity to meet a sub-group of migrants that might otherwise prove difficult to identify due to its dispersal: inhabitants of a garment worker community not directly employed by factories. By conducting fieldwork between 12pm and 4pm, informants were identified in two categories: younger female “housewives” who looked after children and relied upon their husband’s income in most cases, and elder migrants, currently residing with working age children.

This latter group was sampled through self-identification because, as Tarrant (2010a: 190) argues, *a priori* categorisations underpin a ‘compartmentalised’ perspective on ageing, which may lead to vital ‘transitions’ being de-coupled from wider circumstances. Thus, following Vullnetari and King (2008) and Dubus (2014), this research adopted an emic perspective on elder translocality, producing a lower mean age – of 59 – than that found in Western focused studies on the mobility of older people, where a definition of 65 tends to be used (Malmberg and Pettersson, 2008; He and Schachter, 2003).

This approach therefore inverts Harker’s (2009: 11) sampling of an ‘a rarely researched “older” group of “young” people’ by investigating what, in global terms, could be described as a “younger” group of “old” people. Nationally, however, the validity of this emically established range is supported by the literature, wherein Dubus’s (2014) age range of 53 to 82 years is notably similar to the 47-83 range encountered here. Furthermore, it concurs with Dubus’s (2014: 185) assessment that, for Cambodians, ‘age is culturally derived and creates expectations for social roles, health, self-identity, and behaviour’. Thus, informants as young as their late forties (in two cases) self-identified as “elder” according to two criteria: first, believing themselves too old to work, and second, their ‘social role transition into grandparent’ (Dubus, 2014: 185), wherein primary childcare responsibilities give way to an advisory and supporting role.

This focus on grandparental mobility has been called for by Tarrant (2010a: 190). However, nuance is crucial in the selection of any such group, as parental and grandparental roles often overlap in practice. In particular, where a grandparent’s youngest children are not yet of working age, respondents may identify more closely with either a parental or grandparental role. This study focussed on those who had consciously adopted a grandparental role – outlined via informant testimonies in section 5.2 and 5.3 – wherein a parent gradually cedes financial and organisational responsibility for the household to their offspring (Dubus, 2014), progressively confining themselves to short periods of agricultural work and complementary childcare. Whilst linkages between migration dynamics and household status (Parsons et al. 2014) required a flexible perspective on such norms – indeed, as outlined below, withdrawal from waged work may be associated with narrative affirmation of the value of unwaged work such as childcare – they nevertheless constituted a useful guide for sampling.

Having identified respondents for interview, the main body of research proceeded via extended, semi-structured interviews lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, depending upon informants’ availability and loquacity. They were structured around four key themes: migratory logistics; community attitudes to migration (in sender and destination areas); the decision making process surrounding migration; and maternal and grandmaternal norms. A final objective of the interview process was to select a site for rural interviews, in which respect the village of Tikrong Yay in Prey Veng province was identified as one where elder translocality was relatively prevalent. A total of 8 interviews and 3 focus groups were conducted here, alongside a single key informant interview with the head of Tikrong Yay village.

As such, whilst the relatively small sample size engendered by the sparse distribution of older migrants in the urban sampling base constitutes a potential limitation, it has been the aim here to supersede these by engaging with a spatially and socially diverse range of stakeholders. Interviews were therefore conducted with both male and female older householders in rural and urban areas, younger mothers, and authority figures, in order to achieve greater balance in the subsequent analysis.

1. **Contextualizing Age and Work in Migrant Cambodia**

In demographic terms, the Cambodia which has emerged from the long shadow of the Khmer Rouge atrocities is a much changed one. With up to 2 million of the formerly 7 million strong population killed either by American ordinance during the 1960s and 1970s (Owen and Kiernan, 2007) or starvation and murder during the four year Democratic Kampuchea administration, the kingdom’s population was much diminished. Furthermore, the period 1975 to 1979 impacted also upon the demographic recovery of the population: census figures produced in the aftermath attest to ‘a one-third decline of fertility during this regime (Heuveleine and Poch, 2007: 405).

The ‘substantial “baby boom”’ (Heuveleine and Poch, 2007: 405) that followed was therefore a ‘phoenix’ like regeneration (Heuveleine and Poch, 2007: 405). The Kingdom’s current population is exceptionally young in profile, with more than 65% aged under 30 (Brickell and Springer, 2017) and only 4% over 65 (The World Factbook, 2016). Consequently, much thought has been expended on the best means to ‘harness the demographic dividend’ (Beyenne, 2015) by placing this vast cohort of young adults and prospective workers into productive work. The answer, as demonstrated elsewhere amongst the “Asian Tiger” economies, has been investment in labour intensive export industries such as the garment industry (Beyenne, 2015), a sector which has ‘skyrocketed’ from ‘humble beginnings’ in 1995 – when total exports were valued at only $27 million – to almost $6 billion in today (ILO, 2015: 1).

The growth of this industry has engendered huge changes in national livelihoods. Indeed, beyond the 700,000 workers it employs (ILO, 2015), the garment industry stands at the centre of a much broader process of labour redistribution. Outside the industry itself, the number of workers employed in related occupations such as construction, petty trade, transportation and entertainment (Parsons, Lawreniuk and Pilgrim, 2014) have been estimated almost to match the size of the factory working population (EIC, 2007).

The combined impact of these various sectors has been such that 1 in 3 Cambodians of working age was recently estimated to be a migrant (NIS, 2010) in the sense that their current employment is spatially removed from their place of birth. In itself, this indicates a vast structural shift, as a recently overwhelmingly agrarian nation takes to the city in search of work. However, even this figure misrepresents the situation: neither short term, cyclical, migrants, nor unwaged migrants are fully accounted for, leaving a vast structure of supportive and emotional (Mackay, 2007) migration largely unexamined.

Indeed, as recent research on translocality in Cambodia has shown (Lawreniuk, 2017; Parsons, 2017; Parsons, 2016; Brickell, 2011a, 2011b, 2008), the impact of mobility on socio-cultural roles (Elmhirst, 2007) and household organisation (Heuveleine, 2017) means that the entire household is often involved in the migration even of a single migrant. Consequently, the economic changes engendered by the growth of the modern sector have brought equally significant social changes, as Cambodians draw on a complex variety of historical norms – particularly in relation to gender (Lilja and Baaz, 2017) – to rationalise and perform new roles in the household and community.

Many of these changes – such as the rising status of women and young people due to their greater income generation capacity (Parsons and Lawreniuk, 2016b; Bylander, 2015; Elmhirst, 2007) – are positive. However, as shown in numerous cases at various stages of development, the corollary is diminished status for those unable to earn (Polivka, 2011). The most significant victims of this process have tended to be those who are too old to work, leading to chronic poverty and deprivation amongst the older population even in the global north (Asquith, 2009). In rapidly developing societies such as Cambodia, this marginalisation is increasing, as socio-economic changes act ‘to undermine those social processes that protected status and material well-being in old age’ (Heslock and Gorman, 2002: 9).

Observers of this process note its strong associations with wealth, as well as the social mechanisms – such as kinship and marriage – that stratify wealth (Vincent, 1995). Consequently, the shift in influence over these practices away from rural areas (Parsons and Lawreniuk, 2016b; Yagura, 2012) highlights how older peoples’ status is dually threatened by development in Cambodia. Indeed, the few studies focussing upon the livelihoods of Cambodian older people (Dubus, 2014; Knodel and Zimmer, 2013; Zimmer, 2008; Zimmer et al., 2008; Knodel et al., 2005) support this narrative of stasis and marginalization. Nevertheless, what follows seeks to offer an alternative perspective, highlighting instead how older people resist progressive economic irrelevance, regaining or maintaining status by renegotiating traditional household roles.

* 1. **Challenging the Dichotomies of Elder Translocality: Migrants who Stay and the Economy of Care**

Whilst typologies of elder translocality take a variety of forms, the various models purporting to explain movement in “post-work” life acknowledge the plurality of the field only rarely. Thus, whilst elder migrants have been argued to migrate in accordance with their physical abilities (Metz, 2000), their life cycle (Burnholt, 1999), or their proximity to kin members (Glaser and Grundy, 1998) amongst other factors, they are generally viewed as doing so in response to only one of these, rather than a combination. Moreover, there remains a pervasive assumption that older people’s mobility is unilinear; a final adjustment to changing conditions, rather than a process of ongoing movement.

Such preconceptions fail to fit the elder migrants of Steung Meanchay, whose rural-urban migrations are complex and often long term. For example, several informants reported regular cycles involving urban stays of ‘two or three days every one or two months’ (Ngyuyen, 60, 22/07/2015) beginning in later life. Furthermore, these were linked to both economic and physical factors:

‘I’ve been coming here for ten years, for two or three days every one or two months. Previously, I sold fruit like mango and other things in front of the factory, but since getting sick I stopped. [Now] I come to Phnom Penh for treatment as well as to see my daughter’ (Ngyuyen, 60, 22/07/2015).

Thus, elder migrants explained that they planned mobility patterns not only according to their own abilities, but also based on their usefulness to the translocally spaced components of their household. In some cases, this meant engagement in shorter migration cycles than their formally employed counterparts (see Parsons and Lawreniuk, 2016a): certain elder migrants reported migration cycles as rapid as weekly, ‘going every Saturday morning and returning every Sunday afternoon in order to take care of my other children and bring them money’ (Thorn, 54, 21/07/2015). Moreover, considerations such as these generated migration patterns which combined nested shorter and longer term elements, either pre-planned or spontaneously engendered in relation to a number of inter-related factors. Bo, for example, a woman of 83, explained that:

‘I came here a year ago to look after my grandson and granddaughter…[Since then] I have only returned [to my home village] 4 times to visit my children. Each time I stayed 3 days.

My daughter came here in 2013, because she had no job [in the home village]. But I couldn’t come before because I didn’t know that there was work I could do here so she came alone. At that time the money she could earn could only support her household. There wasn’t enough to share with her mother.

[I came here] to take care of [my daughter] because she lives alone and if she got sick or something in the night then nobody would even notice. It was my daughter’s idea. She told me that I had no job in the home village, but maybe I could find work here. At that time I agreed with my daughter’s idea so I came here. I like it here, so I will stay until I am too old and have to go back to the home village’ (Bo, 83, 24/07/2015).

As Bo’s testimony demonstrates, elder translocality involving Tambon Roung Chat is neither uni-linear, nor distinct from labour migration. Indeed, as highlighted in the case of begging migrants (Parsons and Lawreniuk, 2016) and migration systems more generally (Parsons et al., 2014), the distinction itself is invalid. Most mobility patterns operate according to both economic and emotional factors and exactly the same holds true amongst elder migrants: those in question may be motivated to migrate by ‘miss[ing] my daughter’ (Bo, 83, 24/07/2015), but the prospect of an economic role – or a change in household economic circumstances – is often necessary to resolve the situation.

Moreover, the economic forces guiding elder translocality derive not only from destination areas, but sender regions also, where changing farming conditions have significantly altered the dynamics of the household economy in recent years. Rice farming in particular, long the key staple of rural livelihoods in Cambodia, has been challenged by two interlinked forces: firstly, the changing climate for agriculture, which has rendered small holder rice production an unreliable livelihood (Bylander, 2016; MoE and BBC, 2011; Norm, 2009) due to the rising frequency of droughts and floods (Oeur et al., 2012); and secondly, the rising price of rural labour (IBRD and World Bank, 2015), which has rendered the traditionally practiced transplanting method – labour intensive, but low cost – non-viable in many areas. Indeed, these concerns were persistently articulated by migrants such as Sarun (57, 29/07/2015), who explained that:

‘People in this village just farmed rice…[but]…most people now prefer not to farm because there is no rain. As you can see now, there are lots of tractors and things so some people can do farming easily, but for those who can’t afford them it’s hard for them to make money, so they prefer to go to the city instead and work in construction or in a factory or something’.

Although the majority of people in Sarun’s position – grandparents and life-long farmers in rice growing communities – remain in their villages even once their children have migrated for work, their non-movement is far from the passive model that has tended to characterise the elder migration literature (Kunow, 2009). Far from being “left behind” by their children, both male and female household elders reported a high level of involvement in the decision making process of their offspring. Thus, as Sarun (57, 29/07/2015) continued:

‘10 years ago or more… I told my children that if they don’t work then they won’t have any money for their children, so they asked me if I could look after [my grandchildren] while they went to work. I agreed, but at that time it was very hard work because it was two children under one year old. [Nevertheless] it wasn’t really my daughter persuading me, but me persuading my daughter. I explained that if she loved her children then she must go to Phnom Penh and find work to feed them’ (Sarun, 57, 29/07/2015).

Elder migrants’ decision whether to migrate or remain at home may therefore be seen not only as collaborative, but also subject to ongoing re-negotiation in view of sender and destination conditions. As exemplified in Bo’s (83, 24/07/2015) case, for instance, economic or informational changes may lead migration decisions to be reassessed over time. Similarly, nested shorter and longer term cycles both figure in the migratory planning of elder migrants who explained, for instance, that they ‘return to the village to go to wedding parties and ceremonies, but will return [longer term] to look after my grandson’ (Pram, 15/07/2015). In many cases, furthermore, migration plans of this sort include more than a single member and explicitly reference both demographic and economic factors in their analysis:

‘I will stay here until my grandson is old enough; I haven’t thought about it very specifically. I have to go back sometimes to farm, but I will also come back [here, to Phnom Penh] to look after my grandson. When I go back to farm I take my grandson with me as his parents have to work’ (Wa, 58, 14/07/2015).

Thus, to classify only those older family members who spend a majority of their time in the city as migrants would be to grossly misrepresent the complex translocality of their households. Not only do the majority of those who raise their children primarily in their home villages participate in regular migration cycles, often as rapidly as ‘2 or 3 days every 15 to 30 days’ (Bouen, 30/07/2015), but even those who rarely leave the village retain an ongoing translocal role expressed via telecommunications, remittance flows, and decision making power. Consequently, although they may physically travel less often, they nevertheless constitute an integral part of the migration system of their children.

Viewed thus, the experiences of both elder migrants in Phnom Penh and rural “non-migrants” demonstrates the strong inter-linkages between the mobility of those directly involved in modern sector income generation and that of those who are not. So intimately intertwined are the movements of those who migrate to earn money and those do so in pursuit of emotional or logistical outcomes, that to separate the two would constitute a false dichotomy: the economic dimension of mobility is merely one amongst several, with earned income comprising an even smaller proportion.

Indeed, in mobility terms, wage earning may even be a constraining factor. The lack of restriction placed on elder migrants by formal work means that, rather than exhibiting less frequent or substantial movement, elder household members tended to demonstrate a higher frequency and greater variety of mobility than their waged family members. Furthermore, as the following section demonstrates, they adopt this mobility burden actively, so that their children might benefit from lower mobility income generation in the modern sector.

* 1. **Asserting Value in a Non-Financial Role: Monetising the Good Grandparent Narrative**

Unlike younger migrants, who tend to focus on the practical and economic benefits of city life, older migrants committed to regular or extended urban stays almost ubiquitously reported a longing for natural surroundings. As several complained, for example: ‘I really miss my home village; my home, the land and the livestock I used to look after; I miss the fields; I was born there’ (Pue, 58, 23/07/2015). Often, the very same qualities which younger migrants viewed as symbolic of modernity and wealth – modern materials and urban layouts in particular – were viewed as distasteful by their parents, who lamented that ‘in my village, the environment is more open, more natural; here it is neat, artificial’ (Pan, 68, 14/07/2015).

However, such complaints should not be taken to denote low agency. Translocal grandparents such as these are willing participants in their household’s movement and are often the instigators of their own or their children’s mobility. As one rurally based grandfather explained:

‘The family were in a bad way, so we raised the idea that if we look after the children then they could go to find work. The children agreed; my wife made the offer and they accepted’ (Sim, 59, 29/07/2015).

By speaking about the difficulties of their role, then, older members of translocal households seek to convey not unwillingness, but the integral value and necessity of their participation in a familial migration system. Indeed, when describing the importance of their activities, they tend to do so not with reference to abstract norms and values – family loyalty, or duty, for instance – but via a narrative wherein their role is not merely pastoral, but financially essential. As several explained, their participation and engagement in the migration patterns of their children was the only means by which both of their grandchildren’s parents could work:

‘It’s very important [to do this]. These are my grandchildren. If I don’t take care of them, who will? [My children] have nowhere else to send them and they’d have to come back and look after them themselves’ (Sambo, 60, 29/07/2015).

Although most saw themselves as too old to work directly, then, elder migrants framed their efforts as constituting a quantifiable monetary contribution to the household in view of counterfactual alternatives. In a translocal environment which has been increasingly monetised by remittances (Parsons, 2016), debt (ADB, 2014) and the need for agricultural inputs (Bylander, 2015), this constitutes an active reframing of the grandparent role in light of changing financial imperatives. Indeed, some were able to cite a specific figure for their childrearing work, with reference to others in the community who had charged a monthly fee to look after the children of their neighbours. For instance:

‘My daughter called me to come and take care of my grandson, but I was keen to come and help my daughter too. If I hadn’t come here, then my daughter would have to hire somebody to look after the child. She did this before for four months. They paid 150,000 riel [$37.50] per month, but that woman had to go home to her home village to take care of her mother’ (Nahri, 54, 24/07/2015).

Notably, a similar financial value was attributed to child rearing services even within the household, where village based elder migrants reported clearly definable differences in the remittances of those children who had left their grandchildren with them and those who had not. As one explained: ‘the child who left her son with me sends me 100-150,000 riel [$25 -$37.50] per month, but the rest just send money on Pchum Benh and Khmer New Year. If you don’t look after their kid then that’s all they give, but if you do then they send money every month’ (Bouen, 68, 30/07/2015).

However, this work was not only of financial benefit to elder members of translocal households. Almost all interviewees reported improvements in their status within the household, community, and village as a result of their engagement with migration. As they explained, their work within the household is ‘very important’ and gains them and others like them ‘a lot of respect’ (Sambo, 60, 29/07/2015) from people who are ‘amazed that [they] are old and can still look after children’ (Sarun, 57, 29/07/2015) and who ‘admire [them] for how hard they work to raise children and still earn income’ (Sawouen, 29/07/2015). Moreover, as a grandmother who lived with her daughter elaborated, age and gender norms may interact under such circumstances, as duties are transferred directly from daughter to mother:

‘People [like me] are respected for doing this. People say “very good, she is helping”, so it helps both of us [for my daughter] to work in the factory. [Doing this] is important now, because in my village only the men go out to work, so if the women can look after the children then it’s ok, but if a grandmother can look after the children then both can go out to work, so compared to the people whose grandmothers don’t look after the children it’s much better’ (Sopheap, 22/07/2015).

As such, the tone of the praise received by both urban and rurally based elder migrants is not simply complementary, but underpinned by an appreciation of the non-traditional nature of their role. As one explained, for instance, whilst it is ‘kind of traditional’ to do so, grandparents were never previously expected ‘to look after the grandchildren for so long: just for a few hours a day, not days, months, years’ (Sawouen, 29/07/2015). Similarly:

‘This was always grandmothers’ work, but it has become harder for us since our children started to work in the city because now we have to look after the children, the house, and the fields all on our own’ (Sawouen, 29/07/2015).

Despite its novelty, the growing importance of this variant on the grandparental role was not only espoused by grandparents themselves. Several younger women bemoaned their lack of somebody to undertake childrearing duties in their home village, explaining that they had been forced to give up work as a consequence. Just as the migrant grandmothers themselves had explained, this meant a substantial loss of income and a period of privation within the nuclear household, often until children are old enough to ‘earn a living’ (Sophorn, 35, 14/07/2015).

Consequently, for various reasons ranging from ‘my parents having died already’ (Housewife, 17/07/2015) to their ‘being too old to take care of [a child]’ (Sophorn, 35, 14/07/2015), numerous young mothers found themselves waiting years ‘for my children to grow up until I can go back to work’ (Housewife, 17/07/2015). Under such circumstances, migrants bitterly bemoaned the lack of a healthy elder relative to assist in their migration. Indeed:

‘My mother could never take care of my child because she was always sick and when the baby was one year old, she died…If you have [a grandmother to help raise the children] everything seems very easy. You can send the child to them and then both of you can work’ (Tida, 23, 22/07/2015).

The lamentations of housebound women such as these emphasise how even grandmothers and grandfathers primarily resident in their home villages constitute key figures in the systems and cultures of migration. Indeed, in an environment in which ‘the problem [of drought] has become very serious, with ‘this year and last year, no rain’ (Sor, 29/07/2015), all family members – not simply those the right age to enter the modern sector – have needed to change their behaviour to adapt. Consequently, the newly arduous roles adopted by elder migrants were viewed not as an unwanted burden, but as a welcome means of responding to the new realities their household faces. Thus:

‘If we don’t have grandchildren to care for, old people just stay at home. We have no other work to do. It may be easier to live, but the feeling is worse: if we don’t look after children, then the children can’t work and we feel bad about that’ (Sarun, 29/07/2015).

In this way, the older family members who participate in the migration patterns of their children are not playing a new role, but a reframing an old one according to their changing economic and ecological environment. Moreover, as the narratives of praise above highlight, there is also a crucial social dimension. With this in mind, what follows shall outline the processes by which elder migrants contest and reformulate the norms of their livelihoods in order to regain status in their household and community.

* 1. **Renegotiating Household Status: Contesting Marginality Through Altruism**

Older people in Cambodia have traditionally maintained a relatively high status in their communities (Ross, 1987). As well as holding authoritative positions within local organizations such as the commune council and the pagoda committee until late in life (Pellini, 2007, 2004), they have habitually maintained significant control over household affairs, only gradually ceding this to younger and higher earning family members as they slowly taper off their agricultural duties. Indeed, as various authors (Elmhirst, 2007; Bernasek and Bajtelsmit, 2002) have noted, the right to make decisions within the household is closely linked to household contributions.

It is largely for this reason that women working in the garment industry have seen a notable upturn in their rural status in recent years (Bylander, 2015; Parsons et al., 2014), gaining greater decision making power within the home as their regular remittances become an ever more important element within translocal livelihoods. Moreover, these changes have generally been viewed positively even in rural communities, which have tended to accept women’s changing roles in view of the economic service they render. Whilst some informants commented negatively upon this process, arguing that ‘it’s not a good change because…women shouldn’t be so far from their home (Sor, 54, 29/07/2015), such complaints were relatively rare. Far more commonly, respondents lauded how ‘women now have more power than before and know a lot [too]’ (Sarun, 22/07/2015). Similarly:

‘It’s traditional for women to look after their children; it’s happened like this for a long time. But back then they didn’t need to go far from their homes [to work]. Back then, women worked at home and in the fields, [but] no one has any problem with factory women or [working] mothers today. Women’s lives are better now: they have more knowledge, they can go to school, and even if they’re illiterate then they can go to work in a factory’ (Puc, 58, 23/07/2015).

Comments such as these echo the well established connection between income generation and status. However, as the testimonies above highlight, it is not only direct income generation, but also income facilitation that can impact upon a person’s social standing. In-kind and pastoral work appear also to have a significant impact in this respect, not only in the wider community but also within the household, where elder migrants and their children now ‘consult with each other to make decisions’ (Puc, 58, 23/07/2015). Similarly, as a grandmother who had raised her daughter’s child for three years explained:

‘I’m important to my daughter and my daughter is important to me. If I refuse to take the child then everybody loses: my daughter cannot work and nobody can make any money. It’s difficult [for me to look after the child] but earning money is necessary [and] I feel respected for helping like this. We respect each other’ (Pram, 49, 30, 07/2015).

Indeed, the remoulding of older people’s traditional roles within migrant households has in large part been a response to the changing role of their daughters, from whom child rearing duties have been transferred either fully or in part. Informants noted that ‘traditionally, grandmothers never take care of their grandchildren, because they have their mother to look after the child, but traditionally mothers don’t work either’ (Pram, 49, 30/07/2015). Thus, elder migrants explicitly recognise that the normative changes they are enacting in their own role are necessitated by changes in the nature of another, in order to preserve not only livelihoods, but also balance within the household.

This continued commitment to child rearing under the rapidly changing circumstances of their translocal livelihoods constitutes an active response to Cambodia’s economic change. Households have not remained stubbornly attached to the specific duties and characteristics of traditional roles, but have shifted their emphasis in order to adjust to the conditions of a ‘new society’ (Sawoeun, 29/07/2015) both directly and indirectly, through consideration of their relatives’ roles. A dynamic and relational perspective on roles underpins this acceptance. As respondents explained, one change within the household necessitates another:

‘[Traditionally] we don’t have to look after the grandchildren for so long, just for a few hours whilst their parents are in the fields! ...It’s not traditional for mothers to work either [though]; only in this new society. It wasn’t usual for women to go so far away from the village, but no one discriminates against them now because it’s normal’ (Sawoeun, 29/07/2015).

However, this relational attitude towards household roles does not denote acquiescence to all new forms of social organisation. In some cases, grandparents may actively challenge urban practices. For instance, some urban based grandmothers reported strong opinions, willingly impressed upon their relatives, concerning the union led minimum wage negotiations that were ongoing at the time of interview. As one explained:

‘I see with my own eyes that the huge unions are always protesting this that and the other, but they never get anything…[done, so], in general, we can understand our daughters going to the protest to oppose problems related to food or wages, but mostly we discourage them’ (Chas, 15/07/2015).

Active and analytical engagement of this sort, concerning an industry of which they are not directly a part, demonstrates how older people contribute to decision making on a translocal, rather than merely a household basis. Indeed, rather than living passively within their urban environment, these translocal grandparents watch and judge; advise and participate. Where necessary, moreover, they actively resist perceived injustice, as the mother of a garment worker, and part time food seller explained:

‘I dislike the security guards [here]. They won’t let me sell [food] outside the house or anywhere in this compound. I sell porridge and pork to workers at lunchtime [and] if they catch me then they take me away and move me outside. But I am not afraid of them, I oppose them and make my stall here every day. Now I am too old, so I am not afraid any more. I’m old, so I don’t care about dying’ (Thorn, 54, 21/07/2015).

Thorn’s statement is notable not only for the power of its defiance, but for the reinterpretation of the traditional grandmother’s role that underpins it. By migrating, working, and actively opposing the authority of the area, she is deviating not only from the traditional function of a grandmother – ‘only taking care of the grandchildren’ (Chantuon, 55, 21/7/2015) – but also from that of older women – ‘to just stay at home’ (Hey, 53, 21/07/2015) – and of women generally, who Thorn herself argues ‘should be very polite and conform to the rules and the [women’s] law[[2]](#footnote-2)’ (Thorn, 54, 21/07/2015).

In place of these, she has adopted the more general principle that the role of a grandmother is ‘to look after the family – the children and grandchildren – and to make them better’ in order to justify her defiance, viewing her struggles with security as a means of ‘never thinking about [herself and] just giving herself for her children and grandchildren’ (Thorn, 54, 21/07/2015). Otherwise put, she adopts what she explicitly argues is a highly non-traditional role in several respects: argumentativeness, non-conformity, working, and travel from the home, in order to pursue what she views as the paramount duty of the grandmother to ensure the wellbeing of her family.

Thus, the distinction between norms of behaviour: what people do; and normative principles: why they do it, is key. Like migrant women more generally, Thorn has privileged the second of these, deviating from behavioural norms in order to conform more closely to what she views as the core moral principles of her role. She resists both authority and tradition in pursuit of her family’s benefit, using her age as a justification for the hardships she endures.

Moreover, whilst Thorn’s case is perhaps unusually explicit in its direct contestation of institutional practices, older people’s translocal mobility is in itself an act of normative renegotiation. Indeed, not only does the migration of older people constitute a greater deviation from traditional household duties than that undertaken by their sons and daughters, but those who undertake it are contending with a far broader and more fundamental force: the progressive marginalization of non-waged household members engendered by the transition to modern sector work (Springer, 2011; Polivka, 2011; Asquith, 2009)

By participating in the migration process of their household, elder migrants are forging themselves a new role for a new society. Rather than acceding to structural irrelevance as modern sector income comes increasingly to dominate household livelihoods, elder migrants adopt new and non-traditional roles in order to retain their status as caregivers. In doing so, they abandon certain dimensions of their roles in order to protect others, thereby actively reconstituting the social institutions that define them through narrative, movement and work. Thus, though largely excluded from formal work, they have developed alternative means of fulfilling their obligations of grandparental care; they have, otherwise put, used altruism as a means to contest marginality within a monetising household.

1. **Conclusion**

By examining the livelihoods and perspectives of older and non-working members of a Phnom Penh based migration system, this paper has sought to elucidate the roles played by non-waged and non-migrant householders in translocal livelihoods systems. Moreover, by demonstrating how generational and gendered marginality are generated in dynamic interaction with mobility, it has argued for an agentive interpretation of these roles. As the cases explored here demonstrate, even those unable to generate formal earnings may gain ‘subjective control’ of their livelihoods over time (Rogaly and Thieme, 2012: 2095) by renegotiating the practice of their household roles in a translocal context.

Indeed, the findings of this paper support a perspective on migration – and migrants – as being defined not only by spatial and economic mobility, but also mobility within the conceptual realm of norms, practices and status within the household. From this standpoint, the paper has sought to demonstrate that resisting marginality may mean fighting norms with norms; actively referring to and performing certain “altruistic” roles in order to oppose the redundancy of others. In this way, far from being passive (He and Schachter, 2003; Burnholt, 1999), secondary (Glaser and Grundy, 1998), or simply immobile (Fisher and Malmberg, 2001) members of a migration system, elder householders constitute key agents of translocal mobility.

As well as providing the basis for a more mobile and agentive perspective on the mobility of older people – and specifically grandparents, a small but signiﬁcant population that remain ‘noticeably under-researched in human geography’ (Tarrant, 2010a: 190) – one of the key lessons derivable from the elder householders of Tambon Roung Chat industrial park and Tikrong Yay village concerns the widely noted process of marginalisation experienced globally by older people in mobile and marketising societies. As shown here, these changes are not necessarily passively acceded to, but may be actively challenged in numerous subtle and complex ways.

Thus, whilst women like Thorn protest actively, struggling physically and vocally for the right to help her family, alternatives are equally valid. Like Gorky’s “Mother”, many non-waged migrant women (and men) renegotiate their roles and gain status not through confrontation, but through actions that may appear altruistic. They therefore contest marginality indirectly, challenging the marketisation of their households by demonstrating the ongoing utility of a complementary alternative rooted in care rather than currency.

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1. The name of this community, together with all other names in the manuscript, has been changed. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The women’s law [*chbap srey*] referred to here is the traditional set of guidelines for female behaviour in Cambodia. It includes a number of specific guidelines, according to which, ‘women are expected to be silent, cooperative, and secondary to their husbands, obeying decisions made by him, caring for household affairs, and raising children’ (Miedema, 2011: 5). It is the partner to the men’s law [*chbap bros*] which delineates family responsibilities and characteristics, including ‘bravery, strength and discipline’ (Ibid.). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)