SPEAKER 1: Hello and welcome to the Harvard Center for International Development's weekly podcast. Across the world, people in urban rather than rural areas are more likely to support gender equality. To explain this global trend, Alice Evans has engaged with geographically diverse literature and comparative rural-urban ethnographic research from Zambia and Cambodia. Her research showed that people living an interconnected, heterogeneous and densely-populated areas are more likely to see women performing socially-valued and masculine roles.

Today, on the BSC podcast, Salimah Samji, director of the Building State Capability program at CID interviews Alice Evans, lecturer at King's College London and BSC associate, who discusses how exposure to female empowerment can incrementally erode gender ideologies catalyzing a positive feedback loop and increasing flexibility in gender divisions of labor.

SALIMAH SAMJI: So Alice, I wanted to start with you've done a lot of work on gender and social change in Zambia. Could you just tell us a little bit about what you found, why you did this, and just share your story.

ALICE EVANS: Right. So I think that social change is a slow, incremental, often conflictual process. So to that end, I wanted to study like the long journey. So I went to Zambia specifically because that was the site of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute. So anthropologists have been going there since the 1930s to the 1950s, 1970s, and 1980s, so we have this huge chronology of how gender relations were changing, evolving, particularly with urbanization.

And in the 1950s, urban men in the Zambian Copperbelt could largely provide for their families single-handedly. They could get a job in the mines or local industries, there were state subsidies and services. So they didn't need women to go out and work, they could provide for their families, and they secured respect by providing for their families. So women in those times were largely seen as housewives, you know, limited to small things, only associating in the neighborhood, not being so knowledgeable, not being so worldly. And without ever seeing women demonstrate their equal competence, without seeing women in leadership or employment, people tended to doubt women, so would regard their incursions as risky. [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH], which means she might destroy the village if we let her lead.

So for that reason, we had sort of a negative feedback loop. But that changed in the 1980s with worsening economic security as the price of copper fell, with structural adjustment, men losing jobs, per capita incomes plummeted by a third between 1975 and 1990, and the threat of HIV/AIDS. Meant that by the late 1990s, the average life expectancy was 39 in urban Zambia.

SALIMAH SAMJI: Wow.

ALICE EVANS: So you couldn't rely on a male breadwinner to provide for you. So in that context, there was a sudden crisis and a shot, and people came to perceive women's employment as advantageous. Not that they championed gender equality, not that they had some sort of ideological conversion, but rather that they had to in order to make

ends meet.

SALIMAH SAMJI: It was a need.

ALICE EVANS: Absolutely. So in this context, we saw a rise in female employment in informal markets, going to work at the market, doing anything they could, even going into mining, becoming electricians, engineers, just something to provide for their families, to put food on their table. With user fees also, they had to pay for their children's education. So then we saw a rapid rise in female employment. And there were many sort of studies on gender relations over the 2000s. And these were universally pessimistic. And they were saying, across low and middle income countries that women were undertaking paid work in addition to care work, in addition to community work, how this was backbreaking, how it wasn't changing gender relations, it was just compounding women's burdens, and often generating conflicts in the family because people are uncomfortable.

But I undertook this research in sort of 2011, 2012, 2013. By that time, there had been several decades of prolonged exposure, everyone seen women going out, providing for their families, fighting to provide for their children. And through that exposure, through that prolonged exposure, and it has to be prolonged because on gender stereotypes, we have a thing called confirmation bias where we tend to dismiss an outlier if it disconfirms our stereotype, well, that's just an exception. But if you have a multitude of disconfirming evidence, then you come to question the original beliefs. So it has to be that prolonged, that widespread, and not just seeing women but seeing other people supporting women.

So in urban areas where people can associate, where they see all these women going to the mines, you know, women dressing in their overalls and being so proud in their overalls. And the Zambian Copperbelt wearing these blue overalls and a hard hat, you know, that is the epitome, the symbolism of providing for the family, the strong, incredibly important masculine role. And women were doing that, too. And in Zambia, their slogan of gender equality is [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH], which means "women can do what men can do." And that's what you really hear because it emerges from what they've seen.

SALIMAH SAMJI: It's great. I mean, the image in my mind is so clear. I love it. So are you trying to tell me that this is a universal thing? More employment means more social change?

ALICE EVANS: Well, certainly the lack of female employment may curb social change. So for example, I did research in rural Zambia. I lived with a wonderful Zambian family. No electricity, no running water, and in our village, you only ever saw women as wives and mothers. I think there was one nurse, but that, again, a one outlier does an act as disconfirming evidence of the stereotype. So seeing that, expecting to be wives and mothers, affects the kind of investment girls put in their education, affects the investment the parents put in girls education because they don't expect so much to come of it.

So if people never see women in work, then that shapes their aspirations, their expectations, what they think other people will

wives and mothers. So certainly, employment might be a necessary condition for transformation. And I wanted to test that. I mean, I'm totally with you. So I thought let's find a rural area where there is rising female employment and let's see if that will catalyze social change. And that's tricky to find because in most rural areas, the more conservative stereotypes prevail.

But I went to Cambodia. And I went to Cambodia because we've seen a rise in rural garment factories. So because of the high urban price of land, factories have increasingly relocated to rural areas. So I thought, right, let's go there and see what-- let me test this hypothesis. Was Evans 2012 right? Or did she get it wrong?

And what we find is that women are undertaking this garment factory work, and it's economically important, they're providing for their families. It's become even more important in a context of climate change. Because men and women plowing the fields, investing in fertilizer, in agricultural inputs, but then droughts come, and mice come into the fields and eat all the grain, eat all the seeds, and they're left with nothing. Instead, they become heavily indebted. We've seen this over the past three years and it's been really horrific. And for that reason, families have become increasingly reliant on female employment in these rural garment factories. So it's really important.

However, women who go into these garment factories starting at 6:30, finishing sometimes after 8 PM, and they're lacking the space to discuss, to critique, to realize the inequities of their work. Whereas in Phnom Penh, in urban Cambodia, there is that space for discussion, there is that going to cafes, mingling with friends, sharing ideas. But in the rural areas, the cafes are dominated by men. It's men who are sharing ideas, listening to Radio Free Asia, sharing ideas that they've heard on Facebook. Women lack that space for association because they're so the burden of housework, getting-- the huge volume of unpaid care work and paid work. And the limited acceptance of female leisure means that women don't have space to discuss it.

So that's a really interesting finding that I learnt a lot from in Cambodia. That it's not just about seeing women undertaking socially-valued work, but also the importance of association, of gathering. And I think that's always been key--

SALIMAH SAMJI: Absolutely

ALICE EVANS: --for women, right? Gossipping, sharing ideas--

SALIMAH SAMJI: Exactly.

ALICE EVANS: --realizing that another family is doing something different, giving you ideas. But no, that isn't happening.

SALIMAH SAMJI: Absolutely. Great. You've done this really great research also on the consequences of male leadership across Asia and the role of gender relations and collective organizations. I wonder if you can share some of that, or the contrast.

ALICE EVANS: Right. Yeah. So recently, I've been looking at the garment

70% to 90% with some exceptions, but their leaders are mostly men. So if you go to a trade union gathering, you'll see men seated on sort of plastic chairs at the front looking on to a sea of women squatting on the floor. And the men dictate the policy, the men will explain their view because they know what's best. They're more educated, they're more entitled, so they say their views and they will be less likely to listen to women's concerns.

So without that scope for participation and feeling that they're not listened to, feeling that their concerns aren't addressed, feeling that leaders are less responsive, less inclusive curbs women's participation. And we see this from ethnographies from across Asia, from India, from Bangladesh, from Cambodia, and/or Vietnam. But this lack of inclusive leadership actually weakens the trade union movement. Because women don't feel listened to, so they're less likely to engage, less likely to participate. So the key insight there is that if you want strong organizational leadership, if you want everyone to row the boat, they need to feel ownership and shared identity in that boat.

SALIMAH SAMJI: Absolutely. That's fascinating. So where did that take us? We started off in Zambia, moved to Cambodia, moved to Asia and all this great research about how even if you have male-dominated leadership, how do we change, how do we really bring about social change?

ALICE EVANS: Right, that's the tricky question.

SALIMAH SAMJI: And you hear-- you know, every time I hear about these programs, and people are doing sensitization, and they're doing workshops, none of the stories that you have told say anything about sensitization or do a workshop and all of a sudden we're going to change the gender relation dynamic.

ALICE EVANS: Right. So yeah, absolutely. I mean, the default mechanism for donors addressing gender is let's sensitize them, let's raise awareness. And that's not just gender, but it's human rights, governance reforms.

SALIMAH SAMJI: Absolutely.

ALICE EVANS: We want to galvanize interest in maternal health. Let's hold a workshop on maternal health. But very rarely are these programs evaluated. Most programs will just say, well, how many people came to our workshop? 100. Therefore, we tell the donors out. No one ever looked at the consequence--

SALIMAH SAMJI: Outputs only, no outcomes.

ALICE EVANS: Absolutely. And that's the case across the board with awareness raising with workshops. Very rarely do people evaluate their effectiveness. So I thought let's do that. So in Zambia, everyone is taught and examined on gender equality as part of their civics education program which is mandatory. There are also various NGO workshops, so I spent three months in Zambian schools sitting every day, listening to these civics education classes on gender. And I interviewed older people who'd been to these classes. I interviewed

Uniformly, everybody downplayed, dismiss, or had forgotten this, you know, one-class event. Because we develop our beliefs based on our observations of the world. If we see everyone in our cities, you know, women going to work, women being employed, women being supported, that's the world that we come to expect, and we expect others to support. A half day a single lesson, whatever, doesn't change how we think that will be perceived or be discriminatory. So let me tell you an example from one time I was sitting in a Zambian school, and we were learning about human rights. The teacher was writing them up on the blackboard and the students were out-learning dutifully. But the neighboring class was being naughty. They were being very, very noisy because they were unsupervised as is the case with pervasive absenteeism.

So the teacher went to the next door classroom and she beat the lot of them. Then she came back to lecture the class about human rights. And I talk to the students afterwards, and I said, you know, what do you think? They were like, these rights, we know that they're not real. We know that this is just something to learn, to write down, to understand for the exam. It's not real life. And it's the same for gender sensitization. If the teacher just tells you these abstract words but you don't see them being upheld, you don't see female leaders, you don't see people supporting, listening, and learning from women scholars, how is your mind, how is your beliefs, your behavior going to change, particularly in a rural area where you're not seeing these?

Now, that said, gender sensitization could be important in conjunction with spaces for participation. If you're also seeing women at work, then you can reflect. Association is important, going back to what we were saying earlier, it's a mistake that we should be focusing on it so heavily. Really, the overwhelming research highlights the importance of collective organizing, horizontal mobilization, and importantly, publicizing successful mobilization. Seeing that women can secure gains by mobilizing successfully because whether women mobilize or not, and this group is for collective organizing more broadly, depends on their expectations.

If they see they can be successful, if they perceive the state as responsive, as capable, as tolerant, as delivering, then they're more likely to mobilize. We always say this, people mobilize then they secure responses. The state's going to listen, right, so we mobilize more. So it's that positive feedback loop.

So how do we trigger that positive feedback loop? How do we get into that chicken and egg scenario? We shift expectations. We publicize successful mobilization. We provide credible reasons for hope. So that's what's really key.

Then also gender quotas. The wonderful rainbow Mark Murray, professor of Queen Mary in London, she said instead of thinking about quotas for women, what we need to do is quotas to curb men's dominance. Shift it. Flip it back. So think about, we've got 80% male leaders, you that's a situation written in our politics. Let's curb that dominance. See it that way. Think about restraining men's over-representation. See a little bit differently.

SALIMAH SAMJI: I like the reframing.

ALICE EVANS: Yes, marvelous.

SALIMAH SAMJI: It is. Thanks, Alice. This has just been amazing, sitting here and inspiring. And I think a lot of things that you've said ring true for me. Nothing in my own personal life has changed without that observation. There have been even in terms of my own leadership development when I have seen other women in these positions and said, I want to be like that. It has given me like the hope to be that.

And I can totally understand that in the absence of seeing this or having this discourse, and I know that the public space, whether it's gossiping at the base level or sharing ideas amongst women, saying, oh no, they did it and this is how they did it, just helps you do things differently or think that, aha, it's possible. And I think it's that creating that realm of possible, that really is a game changer.

So thank you so much for this podcast.

ALICE EVANS: As a true. Thank you.

SPEAKER 2: If you want to learn more about CID's research and events, please visit cid.harvard.edu. See you next week.