

THE ECOLOGICAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS INFLUENCING RE-INTEGRATION VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN PHNOM PENH

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INTRODUCTION

In December of 2004, I first arrived on the doorstep of the Cambodia Women's Crisis Center (CWCC) in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. CWCC is a non-governmental organization(NGO) started by three women whose goal was to provide safe shelter to women who were violently victimized by their husbands or partners. In the words of the founder and former director Chanthol Oung,

We thought we would start a shelter for about ten to twenty women. There had been a terrible case in which a husband had beaten his wife, thrown her out of the house and told her never to return. She went to her parents and after a few days, she returned to him. No support, no legal advice . . . The husband tied the wife and the children up, doused them with gasoline and burned them alive" (Personal Communication, 2007).

From simple origins, the CWCC has grown into a multifaceted NGO with over 100 staff members, hundreds of volunteers, and three centers located in Phnom Penh, Banteay Meanchey, and Siem Riep. Eleven different programs are in place to assist victims of domestic violence, rape, and human trafficking. Legal services, shelter, counseling, community education, and advocacy are among those programs in place for the survivors.

TRAINING PROJECT

The growth of the CWCC in such a short time presents challenges, including those of evaluating personnel and providing meaningful training. At the request of the organization, I developed a seminar on the topic of personnel evaluation. Like organizations everywhere, the external pressure to generate, manage, and report information requires high levels of internal competence and efficiency. Thus, the CWCC is continually updating its approaches to all administrative tasks.

I organized a day-long training session to be attended by the supervisory staff that represented the eleven CWCC programs from the three sites: Phnom Penh, Banteay Meanchey and Siem Reap. CWCC had adopted and

updated a personnel evaluation instrument with the assistance of Shur Huiyap, an Australian who had interned at and later worked for the agency.

The training was designed to utilize the individual experience and knowledge of the staff and to address specific needs and issues that staff have encountered in previous personnel evaluations. Probably the most interesting of the issues raised was related to the topic of fairness and uniform expectations of performance across programs. The differences in the American and Cambodian cultural experiences emerged when discussing the criteria differentiating “good” and “excellent,” and the other gradients as well. What became clear was that standard types of examples and the reference points one would use, such as percentages, lacked explanatory power to many members of the Cambodian group. Also contributing to the lack of clarity was the leap of language from English to Khmer. In the end, we reached a compromise, employing Khmer language qualifiers; for example, “excellent” was changed to “very good.”

RESEARCH PROJECT

During the last two years, as a McMaster fellow I have been conducting interviews with women in Phnom Penh who have been re-integrated into their communities. The purpose has been to provide the CWCC with information about how well the occupational and life skills training provided to clients through the shelter program helps women become self-sufficient. This year’s interviews produced data that was consistent with the themes from the previous year. CWCC clients rated business skills, money management, and personal and legal counseling very highly in contributing to their current stability (Weaner, 2008).

METHODOLOGY

In this research the initial data collection followed an inductive process known as the grounded-theory method. This approach, in contrast to the deductive method in which the starting point is theory and formal hypothesizing, begins with a very general question and a few “sensitizing” concepts to serve as a guide to data collection. The discovery of what the data reveals then leads to theory development. Data collection and analysis are concurrent, and new insights and ideas are verified by collecting additional data (Charmaz, 1983).

Barney Glasser elaborates on this process by stating that the coding of data has two distinct phases. First, the searching phase identifies what can be defined and discovered in the data. Second, focused coding reveals new ideas, issues, and avenues to explore in the data (Glasser, 1978, in Charmaz, 1983).

The searching phase applied to the original set of interviews. In the interviews information was gathered on the clients' marital status, income, type of job, housing, skill and training programs that the clients participated in during their stay at the shelter, and the helpfulness of those programs in their lives after leaving the shelter. The searching phase of coding was stimulated by a client's comment made in the initial set of interviews: "I can't compete with the clothing in the market" (Weaner, Palk, & Grafing, 2007). The inference drawn from this comment is that place of residence and proximity to large city markets and garment factories may exert more influence on the employment choices of women as they move back into the community than the skill training received at the shelter. To verify these ideas, more data was collected from case files from all clients reintegrated during the previous six months and added to the original set of interviews, bringing the total number of cases studied to 22.

In the searching phase of coding the original data, the trainings identified as most valuable were those pertaining to business and money management skills. Piquing some curiosity in the original data was the small number of women employed in sewing, whether independently or working in the factories or with private tailors, as there is no lack of those employment opportunities in Phnom Penh. Because sewing is one of the highlighted skills



offered through the shelter program, I anticipated finding a larger proportion of women employed in that activity, but only 13% of my sample was so employed. The 2007 statistics indicated that only 7% of the women went into some form of sewing-related job after leaving the shelter (Cambodian Women's Crisis Center, 2007).

RESULTS

It is clear that clients perceive business skills as the most valuable of the trainings because these skills cut across all economic endeavors. The average monthly wage for the women studied was \$51, with the garment workers making \$45 (not including overtime). Nearly all earnings clustered around that figure. That aside, there are some interesting patterns that emerged from the data. In part, residence was related to the type of economic activity. However, the biggest determinant of residence was whether a woman had reconciled with her husband or divorced him. Seven of the eight women who had reconciled returned to their prior residences. Five of the seven women who were divorced had new residences. Of the seven singles, four of which were minors, four returned home and three had new lodgings.

CLIENTS RETURNING TO PRIOR RESIDENCES

The data analysis showed that thirteen (59%) clients returned to living arrangements in which they had previously been abused. Eleven of these homes were not near a garment factory, and only one of those clients was involved in sewing privately. Significantly, her home was not close to a market, meaning there was limited competition and she could earn a living sewing for her neighbors. Another client had also attempted to start a private sewing business, but she was located close to a market and couldn't earn enough, so she started selling fish at the market. The two women whose previous residences were near garment factories were both running food businesses (small restaurant and a fruit stand) that catered to the garment workers, so the garment factories indirectly supported their activities.

CLIENTS FINDING NEW RESIDENCES

Of the nine (41%) clients who sought out new residences after leaving the shelter, three took up residence near garment factories and operate businesses that take advantage of the flow of people working there. It is also noteworthy that there are no competing markets in the vicinity of these women's businesses. Two women were employed in the garment factory and acquired their new residences after securing employment there.

Of the remaining four, two moved away from Phnom Penh. Another woman relocated in the city with her husband and is a scrap picker. And finally, one

woman moved close to a market to sell food, using cooking skills learned at the CWCC.

CONCLUSIONS

The economic activity undertaken by the women is influenced not only by the training they receive at the CWCC shelter, but also by demographic, marital, and environmental factors, specifically proximity to or distance from markets and factories. There is little differential in earnings among the various undertakings by these women, so it appears that the choice of occupation is based less on income difference or even skills training than on the opportunities that exist in their proximal environment and the demographic factors that affect mobility.

A clear ecological theme emerges in this data. Namboodiri (1988) states that there is a natural interdependence not only among the production, distribution, and consumption activities and the populations involved, but also the relationship with the environment. In the case of Phnom Penh, the demographic status of former clients affects their ability to be mobile. Women who reconcile with their husbands are not mobile and usually return to their previous residences and rely on the immediate environment for employment options.

The potential options are again determined by the proximity of markets. The presence of a market offers some types of opportunity, such as food vending, and limits others, such as private sewing. Specifically, the data suggests that private sewing is non-competitive with manufactured goods readily available and less expensive at the markets. Conversely, the absence of a market in one's immediate vicinity creates opportunities.

The women who have divorced have geographic mobility and tend to seek out economic opportunities offered by the markets or by the garment factories. They relocate nearby, with the market once again offering a number of opportunities and the garment factories providing a flow of workers or pool of potential consumers for a variety of businesses, particularly in the food service sector.

IMPLICATIONS

Based on this research the CWCC needs to (1) continue to strengthen the business skills component of the shelters' training programs; (2) improve reintegration plans by including realistic assessments of the ecological and demographic factors affecting economic opportunities for individual clients; and (3) further consider and plan for businesses where women might

produce products independently at home and sell to a central distributor, thereby neutralizing disadvantages presented by demographic or ecological limitations to sustainable employment. This report was shared with the Executive Director of the CWCC, the Secretary General, and the Coordinator of the Reintegration Program for Phnom Penh in Phnom Penh, Cambodia in June of 2008.

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