

## UNDERSTANDING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN CAMBODIA

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During my first trip to Cambodia with the McMaster School, I conducted research on the developing Cambodian Stock Exchange. As an accounting major, I found this experience eye opening and I was able to learn a great deal about business and economics in Cambodia. When I listened to the stories of my colleagues, though, I was shocked to hear about the women that they had met at the Cambodian Women's Crisis Center (CWCC). I could not believe the abuse that these women had been through at the hands of their husbands.

With the experiences from the previous year in mind, I decided to pursue a project that would benefit the women at the CWCC. Since I am also pursuing a degree in Criminal Justice (CJ), I have seen and heard about many victims of domestic violence in this country. I decided to do what I could to use my experiences as a CJ major to benefit these women. My interest in this project stemmed from my desire to understand how Cambodian law enforcement and social service agencies respond to incidents of domestic violence. I then intended to compare the Cambodian responses with what I know of standard response procedures in the United States. There were a number of challenges that I had to acknowledge up front. I knew that both language and culture would be challenges in my project. Since domestic violence is a culturally sensitive issue in Cambodia, it would be a challenge for a male of my size to interact comfortably with female victims of domestic violence.

After talking to my colleagues who were familiar with the issues, I chose to develop a resource manual. The purpose was to develop a document explaining a woman's legal rights and the legal non-governmental organizations (NGO) that can assist women in Cambodia who are victims of domestic violence. This document was developed with consideration for varying levels of literacy and education. It also was developed with sensitivity to the cultural issues surrounding domestic violence. The end product was a resource guide that would provide the women at the CWCC with information about their legal rights and where to find help in the form of shelters and legal aid.

The research questions for this project were: 1) What is the status of domestic violence law in Cambodia? 2) What rights do victims of domestic violence have? 3) What legal and support services are available to domestic violence victims and what is their accessibility? 4) What are the cultural issues surrounding domestic violence in Cambodia?

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

One of the most serious societal problems in Cambodia today is domestic violence. Between 15 and 25 percent of Cambodian women are beaten by their husbands and nearly 74 percent of women know someone who has been a victim of domestic violence (Surtees, 2003). Domestic violence is defined as “assaultive and coercive behaviors that adults use against their intimate partners” (Holden, 2003). These behaviors can cover areas such as physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Domestic violence is a difficult problem to solve, mainly because of the roles of men and women in Cambodian society and a lack of enforcement of existing domestic violence law.

September 2005 brought needed change to Cambodia when the legislature enacted the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and the Protection of Victims. However, as of January 2006 this law had yet to be implemented within the Kingdom of Cambodia (LICADHO, 2006). One positive aspect of this law is that it finally gives a clear definition to domestic violence, which is “violence that happens and could happen towards: husband or wife, dependant children, or persons living under the roof of the house and who are dependants on the household” (LICADHO, 2006). As beneficial as a definition and clear guidelines are, this law will never be effective unless it is implemented and enforced by the Cambodian government.

The new Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and the Protection of Victims does not appear to give any direct rights to the victims of domestic violence. However, the Cambodian Constitution does provide basic rights that can be applied to instances of domestic violence. The Cambodian Constitution states that there is a “right to life, personal freedom and security” and the “right to life, honor, and dignity” (LICADHO, 2006).

While government agencies may be slow to enforce the existing law, several legal aid organizations in Cambodia provide free services for victims of domestic violence. Three of these organizations are the Cambodian Defense Project, Legal Services for Children and Women, and the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO, 2006). Two NGOs that provide direct service support for victims of domestic violence are the Cambodian Women’s Crisis Centre (CWCC) and the Project Against Domestic Violence (PADV). The CWCC provides many support services including shelter, counseling, vocational training, legal representation, and medical care (CWCC Website). The CWCC also helps to ensure a victim’s safety when filing for divorce. In Cambodia, before a woman can file for divorce, she is required to go through marriage reconciliation, which is often dangerous for the woman and does not address the specific risks of an abusive relationship (Surtees, 2003).

PADV provides information – a key support service for victims of domestic violence. PADV is trying to force recognition of domestic violence as a public issue. To accomplish this PADV produces informational materials on domestic violence. Some of these materials have included a video enacting a survivor's story, a television drama, radio announcements, and the first Cambodian poster against domestic violence (Surtees, 2003). These support services have provided much needed support for victims of domestic violence prior to the passing of the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and the Protection of Victims. This law will now give these services another powerful tool with which to combat domestic violence.

Many cultural issues surround domestic violence in Cambodian society; primary among them are the socially accepted gender roles for women. Women's roles are strictly defined as wives and mothers. They are tasked with the responsibility for the children, their households, and ensuring the success of their husbands (Surtees, 2003). The "Women's Law" in Cambodian culture dictates that females should be passive and subservient to men (CJOAL, 2004). Two more cultural norms add to the gender disparity in Cambodia. The first is that a man's sexual desire is insatiable and cannot be fulfilled by one woman (Swartz, 2004). The second is once a woman or girl has lost her virginity, she is no longer suitable for marriage (Swartz, 2004). These two norms are examples of how women are viewed as subordinate and how their sexuality and actions directly reflect on their position in Cambodian society. This subordinate view also makes many men in Cambodia feel that it is their right to beat their wives for "legitimate" reasons, which generally focus on a woman's failure to fulfill her familial and social responsibilities (Swartz, 2004).

Another cultural barrier is the belief that the problem of domestic violence is a private family matter rather than a public social problem (Surtees, 2003). Two main issues arise from this view of domestic violence. First, by treating domestic violence as a private affair, society can ignore the specific, gendered nature of the violence (Surtees, 2003). In order to appropriately address domestic violence, a society must acknowledge it as a gender status problem – the result of viewing women as second-class citizens. Second, the private and family view of domestic violence implies that the state has no duty or ability to intervene (Surtees, 2003). This view allows police to turn a blind eye to abuse (Swartz, 2004). The passage of the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and the Protection of Victims indicates a change in the government's view of domestic violence from a private to a public problem. However, the law must be enforced by the justice system in order for the societal views on domestic violence begin to change.



### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

My project consisted of researching domestic violence and relevant laws in Cambodia and then developing a document that could be distributed to Cambodian women to educate them on the new domestic violence law. In order to accomplish this, I needed to examine what the domestic violence law in Cambodia is, how it is being enforced, and what rights it gives to women. I then needed to determine the best approach for taking this information and passing it along to the victims of domestic violence while still remaining culturally sensitive. The majority of these questions would be answered while in Cambodia.

Research on the actual text of domestic violence law in Cambodia, and the cultural issues surrounding domestic violence were conducted prior to the trip. I then arranged to meet with Jo-Ann Lim of the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO) to discuss the work that LICADHO is conducting in the area of domestic violence education, training, and legal assistance. I also met with a staff member at the CWCC who is in charge of Community Outreach programs to discuss the education and training it provides. After arriving in Cambodia, I discovered that the training that CWCC was doing made the resource manual I had planned unnecessary. The information was being communicated verbally.

A second purpose of my project involved understanding women and their place in business and the economy of Cambodia. I assisted with conducting a needs assessment for Goodwill International to determine skills women need to be economically successful. I collaborated with Professor Jeff Weaner to interview women who had participated in CWCC programs, lived at the shelter, and had been reintegrated into society. We gathered information on the types of jobs women held, what skills were necessary for those jobs, what skills women wanted to learn, and how women functioned in the economy of Cambodia.

## RESULTS

The goal of collecting this information was to assist Goodwill International in determining areas where they would be able to use money to assist in the development of programs to help women develop job skills and better their lives. The data that was collected, however, raised more questions than it answered. While the skill training in sewing through the CWCC led some individuals into employment at the garment factories, no one interviewed was sewing in the tailor shops. Of the women who were interviewed, more were working and making more money in food sales. Consequently, I determined that additional data needs to be collected from this population in order to fulfill the goal of making empirically-based recommendations to Goodwill International.

## REFERENCES

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