

‘Don’t Grind an Egg Against a Stone’— Children’s Rights and Violence in Cambodian History and Culture

Cambodia is a society with a troubled history, and one that is struggling to find a way between traditional and modern values. This paper considers some of the challenges in promoting children’s rights to protection in such a context. It briefly considers the historical and cultural background, and the possible implications for how different forms of violence involving children are experienced. A feature of the analysis is a method for representing in graphic form the historical circumstances in which different cohorts of children have passed their childhoods. The paper goes on to report findings from a study of children’s experiences and beliefs about different kinds of violence and ill-treatment, in which a survey of secondary school children throughout Cambodia was supplemented by focus groups in selected areas. The paper concludes by asking how children’s views can be effectively expressed in this particular cultural context, and how research based on those views can be used to influence policy and practice. Copyright © 2007 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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The aim of this paper is to explore some of the issues in promoting children’s protection rights in a society whose culture and history present particular challenges to such an enterprise, and where it is arguable that child-adult relations are in themselves problematic. The paper begins with a brief account of recent Cambodian history, and attempts to explore what might be some of the impacts of this history—in particular the ‘Khmer Rouge’ period—on children’s lives. This is followed by an account,

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**‘A society with a
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**‘How children’s
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also necessarily brief, of key features of traditional and contemporary Cambodian culture and a discussion of their implications for child protection.

The main part of the paper presents findings from a study of children’s experiences of violence and ill-treatment in Cambodia today, carried out by the lead author between 2001 and 2004. The research included a questionnaire survey of 1314 school children and a series of focus group sessions with children and some adults. The findings suggest a high prevalence of certain forms of ill-treatment, and a wide range of responses to their experiences on the part of children. The paper concludes by discussing some of the challenges in using findings from the research in practical ways to promote children’s rights in the current social and political context in Cambodia.

Recent Cambodian History and its Impact on Children

The principal source for the following account is Chandler (1992, 2000); where other sources are used these are indicated.

Cambodia’s recent history is strongly associated with violence and conflict. By the nineteenth century, Cambodia’s time as a powerful autonomous state was a distant memory, and Siam (Thailand) and Vietnam were both manoeuvring to take control. In 1863, however, the French established a protectorate which lasted until King Norodom Sihanouk announced independence in 1954. In 1970 Sihanouk himself was replaced in a bloodless coup by Lon Nol, an army commander. Cambodia was increasingly drawn into the war in Vietnam, despite its ostensible neutrality, and in 1973 US forces secretly bombed areas of Cambodia in an attempt to stop guerrilla incursions over the border.

In 1975 a coup by the Communist ‘Khmer Rouge’ established a new regime under the title of Democratic Kampuchea (DK). The aim of the new rulers was rapid and radical change to build a new egalitarian society, and the methods chosen have become notorious for their brutality. The DK regime evacuated the cities and closed down formal education, declaring the abolition of religion and of class distinctions. Denunciation, torture and execution took place on a large scale, much of it carried out by children and young people. It has been estimated that more than one and a half million of Cambodia’s eight million inhabitants—more than 20 per cent of the population—had been killed by a combination of starvation, overwork, disease and execution by the time the regime was replaced (Kiernan, 1996). The Khmer Rouge project of a return to ‘Year Zero’ was promoted by using children as the basis of a new society without memory. Pol Pot, the leader of the Khmer Rouge, said in September 1977 ‘Being young, you are at

the most receptive age, and capable to assimilate what the revolution stands for, better than anyone else' (Locard, 2004, p. 144).

The DK regime came to an end in 1979 when growing conflict with Vietnam culminated in a Vietnamese invasion and the installation of the People's Republic of Kampuchea. Many people, fearful of their traditional Vietnamese enemy, fled across the border into Thailand where refugee camps were established. The Khmer Rouge continued to fight on and to exercise influence, particularly in the border areas, supported by China and with a degree of compliance from the US and the United Nations (UN). This continued until the end of the Cold War. In 1989 the Vietnamese army finally withdrew, and in 1993 a new constitution restored Sihanouk to the throne and free elections produced a coalition government (jointly headed by Hun Sen, originally installed by the Vietnamese, who remains Prime Minister today). The UN, foreign aid agencies and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) became highly active in Cambodia, seeking to promote democratic institutions and economic development. These processes have been highly uneven, and although the Khmer Rouge finally broke up in 1996, a decade later the leaders responsible for the atrocities had still not been brought to trial. (At the time of writing there were signs of progress; Kaing Guek Eav or 'Duch' was finally charged by the tribunal in August 2007, and 'Brother Number Two' Nuon Chea was arrested in September 2007.)

The consequences of such a troubled history are many and complex. The Khmer Rouge period in particular represented a massive destabilisation of a society built on close family and community networks. Many children were separated from their families, physically in nurseries, and also emotionally by being told that they had been 'adopted' by the regime. Children and adults were encouraged to denounce their relatives and friends. The traditional family rice pot, an important symbol of cohesion, was smashed.

Realmuto *et al.* (1992) found a high level of traumatic events experienced by Cambodian children during the Khmer Rouge period. Levels of reported exposure to trauma were strongly related to age, in that younger adolescents reported fewer events than older adolescents, but were not related to gender. In epidemiological studies of the population of children of survivors of the Nazi holocaust, the post-conflict situation was seen to be a major factor in recovery. Kadushin (1976, p. 199) found that

'children had varying capacities to deal with potentially traumatic conditions and that these strengths enable them, when provided with a healthier environment, to surmount the damaging influences of earlier developmental insults.'

In the Cambodian context (which must be acknowledged to be different in fundamental respects from the Nazi holocaust), the

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'Massive destabilisation of a society built on close family and community networks'

‘To experience events differently according to their age at different stages in their country’s history’

‘Poor control of aggression in young adults who were children of the “killing fields” may be a contributing factor’

extended period of conflict following the genocide may have caused further developmental insults to children, many of whom are now parents. It is not clear whether these insults have led to more resilience or greater vulnerability.

The impact of traumatic events on children of course varies between individuals, but children will also tend to experience events differently according to their age at different stages in their country’s history. This chronology is shown in Figure 1. Each row shows the age progression of individuals born in a particular year, and each column shows the ages of different cohorts at a particular point in time. In this way it is possible to see the intersection between historical events and life trajectories. For example, a child born in 1968 could have been internally displaced by US bombing at age five, separated from her or his parents by the Khmer Rouge at seven, conscripted into the army or a slave labour team at nine or ten, then as a teenager moved to a refugee camp along the Thai border. Edmunds and Turner (2005) argue that in certain circumstances a shared generational experience can produce radical change. That this does not appear to have happened in Cambodia suggests that although ‘historical or cultural trauma is a necessary ingredient for the development of a social generation’ (pp. 561–562), it may not be a sufficient one.

The chronological figure also enables us to follow life trajectories on into adulthood. For example, that child born in 1968 could have been raising her own children in the 1990s, and may now be the parent of adolescents, or a grandparent. Apart from its lasting detrimental effects on the economic and social infrastructure of children’s lives, the events of the genocide period are likely to have affected the parenting abilities of adults who were children during this period, with a consequent effect on their children’s physical and emotional health. Reviewing studies of holocaust survivors, Sigal (1998) suggests that, though resilient, children of survivors tended to be anxious and fearful with low self-esteem, identity problems and difficulty in controlling aggressive impulses. Research is needed to show whether this is true in Cambodia; while speculative, it is at least possible that poor control of aggression in young adults who were children of the ‘killing fields’ may be a contributing factor in violence and abuse against children and spouses currently.

It may be asked whether an effect of the violence of the genocide period may have been to make Cambodians generally more violent. Arensen’s (2003) study of contemporary values in Cambodia found that this was a common view, with comments such as ‘the long war has caused people to be violent and cruel’. The effects of structural violence on children cannot be separated from the effects of interpersonal violence on children. Men who go to war may leave wives without a support structure. Some

children are orphaned, and many are fatherless. Men may return from war traumatised by the violence they have seen and perhaps with a propensity to domestic violence. In a study of 50 women injured in domestic violence in Cambodia, 18% said they had been threatened with a gun, 4% with a bayonet or grenade (Zimmerman, 1994); the research found brutal and sadistic violence against both women and children. In a different context, research with Vietnam veterans in the US found that an estimated one third of male veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder engaged in partner violence in the previous year, a rate two to three times higher than in the civilian population (Jordan *et al.*, 1992).

Cambodian Culture and Traditional Beliefs Affecting Children

Although the genocide and associated events clearly had enormous impact on the lives of Cambodians, for a fuller picture the broader context of Cambodian culture and history has to be understood. There is an understandable but ultimately unhelpful tendency to blame violence, and indeed all Cambodia's ills, on Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, and to look back nostalgically on the past. In fact there is evidence that the traditional culture and environment contained much potential for abuse and ill-treatment of children. The principal historical religious influences on the beliefs of Cambodians are (a) a Hindu-Buddhist world view and (b) an older animistic cosmology which still appears to be influential today. The acceptance often associated with Buddhism contrasts with vindictive elements in the older animistic beliefs. As Hinton (2002, p. 261) argues, young people

‘may internalize various strategies for managing anger, such as prohibitions taught by Buddhism . . . [but] they also learn an alternative moral basis for harbouring resentment and avenging insults that damage their honour’.

Often parents do not encourage conflict resolution through apologising, because this would involve loss of ‘face’ for both the child and the parents.

In traditional Cambodian culture ‘all relations are hierarchically ordered’ (Ovensen *et al.*, 1996, p. 34). This is primarily expressed along the elder-younger dimension (see also Ebihara, 1968). Elders are understood to hold influence and power over children. The power differential between adults and children is marked. An elder (bong) is a person who has authority and status, and younger people are expected to make their bodies physically lower than their elders when they enter a room. Traditionally, children were expected to show complete obedience and devotion to their parents,

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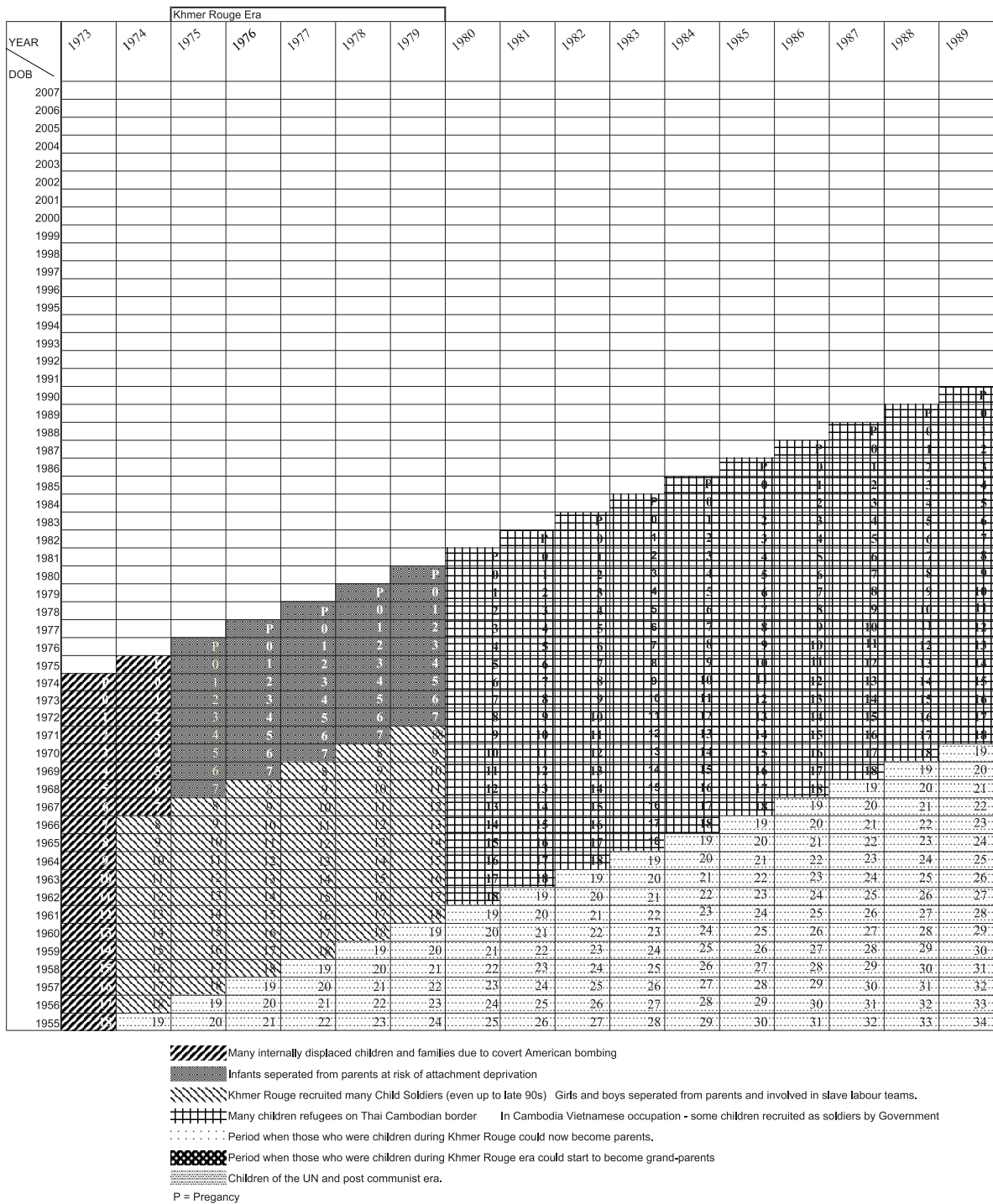


Figure 1. Life stages of children brought up in different eras

‘Girls have traditionally been inferior in status’

‘Thirty years later, this view was echoed by children’

‘The tension for girls caught between conflicting influences is much greater’

‘Popular karaoke videos, shown on TV and in cafés, contrasts with the hard pornography’

although this generational subordination might be mitigated by affection between parents and children and by mutual interdependence. A Khmer proverb, ‘You cannot cut water, you cannot sever the flesh’ emphasises the importance of close family bonds. While caution is needed in using proverbs to help understand a culture, they do often provide graphic illustrations of conventional ways of thinking.

Traditional belief systems are highly gendered, and the impact is very different for boys and girls. In some respects girls are highly valued; for some parents having a girl as the first baby is a sign of prosperity, because they will soon be able to help with housework (Rodier, 1989, p. 10). In general, however, girls have traditionally been inferior in status, reflected in the proverb ‘Girls are not as long legged as boys—they can only go to the stove and back.’ At the same time, Cambodian villagers traditionally expressed special concern for daughters, who were thought to need more protection and surveillance. From adolescence, girls were ‘constantly warned not to stray from the security of the village or to go anywhere without an escort’ (Ebihara, 1968, p. 128).

Sarun (1973) described one of the roots of the Khmer mentality as ‘purity’:

‘When a single woman loses her purity, she generally believes that her body has no more worth, having lost its essence. Her life becomes meaningless, and she sometimes tries to end it through suicide’.

Thirty years later, this view was echoed by children who participated in the research described in this article. A young woman was traditionally seen to have a duty to remain a virgin, out of ‘gratitude’ to her parents (Ponchaud, 1977). One proverb says ‘Boys are like gold, girls are like cloth’—gold can be washed clean, but once cloth is stained it is ruined. This contrasts with the boy or young man who is seen to be drawn to women as ‘ants are to sugar’, who cannot help himself but to be engaged in sexual misconduct (Tarr and Aggleton, 2001). Whilst boys’ relative freedom and independence have not changed significantly between traditional and modern values, the tension for girls caught between conflicting influences is much greater. The pressure to remain a virgin remains but the opportunities to engage in sexual conduct, and the risk of being raped (see below), appear to be higher. However great the influence of the genocide on values, the influence of modernity may be even greater.

Meanwhile the pirate video industry has given access to a wide range of entertainment, from Hollywood movies to highly explicit pornography. The romantic dialogue between ‘strong’ man and ‘naïve’ woman in the popular karaoke videos, shown on TV and in cafés, contrasts with the hard pornography in back-street ‘coffee

shops', which include scenes of sex involving children and animals as well as violent rape. In research by the Child Welfare Group (2003) using a representative group of 677 secondary school children in Phnom Penh and three other provinces, 51 per cent (62 per cent of boys and 39 per cent of girls) reported that they had seen pornography in videos or magazines. Video shops displayed pornography openly in 49 per cent of 133 observed locations, with no legal restrictions on their purchase by children. Research by Fordham (2005) on 100 youth aged 12–18 years in Kandal Stung, a rural provincial town close to the capital, found that 82 per cent of boys and 84 per cent of girls had encountered pornographic materials, usually books or films.

This points to a stark contrast between a traditional culture that places great emphasis on protecting girls from sexual activity, and modern influences that suggest very different attitudes. Indeed, research by Bearup (2003) suggests that gang rape may be a relatively common behaviour among young men. They report that, in a survey of secondary school pupils, a third of boys said they knew others who engaged in the practice known locally as 'bauk', but only about 13% recognised it as rape, or as being wrong because the women did not give permission.

Children's Rights and Legislation to Protect Children

Cambodia ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) on 15 October 1992, and the 1993 Constitution makes explicit reference to the UNCRC. Article 19 of the UNCRC requires states to protect children from

'all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation including sexual abuse while they are in the care of parents or other carers'

and in 1994 the UN Committee emphasised that corporal punishment is incompatible with the Convention. Other UN instruments acceded to are the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (1985), the UN Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency (1990) and the UN Rules for the Protection of Juveniles of their Liberty (1990). Cambodia ratified the UN Convention Against Torture in 1992 but has failed to implement it fully. In 2007, the Government also signed an additional international human rights treaty, the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture, which contains further obligations to prevent torture.

Cambodia's report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 1998 said that 'the practice of striking children by way of family chastisement' is widespread but that there was no law

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'Corporal punishment is incompatible with the Convention'

‘The “Prevention of Domestic Violence and Protection of Victims Law” was passed in 2005’

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expressly forbidding it (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2000a, paras 75 and 124). The concluding observations of the Committee emphasised the lack of enforcement of existing legislation. Concern was expressed at the:

‘insufficient awareness of the scope and harmful consequences of mistreatment and abuse of children, including sexual abuse, both within and outside the family; the insufficient resources, both financial and human, to prevent and combat child abuse; and the insufficient care and rehabilitation measures, including facilities available for child victims of abuse.’ (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2000b, para. 42)

The ‘Prevention of Domestic Violence and Protection of Victims Law’ was passed in 2005 (http://www.apwld.org/pdf/cambodia_dv_victims2005.pdf). Domestic violence can include violence against dependent children, and violence is defined as that which affects life (that related to homicide), physical integrity (with or without weapons) and torture or cruel acts (including psychological, emotional and physical harms exceeding morality and the bounds of the law). The law puts an obligation on authorities to take action but because there is no clear definition of which ‘authority’, no particular body has assumed responsibility for enforcement.

Rape and indecent assault are illegal under the 1992 UNTAC Criminal Code (drafted by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia and adopted by the Cambodian Supreme National Council) and also under the 2001 Law on Aggravating Circumstances relating to the Felonies. Rape is a criminal offence, defined as ‘any sexual act involving penetration committed through cruelty, coercion or surprise.’ Indecent assault is a misdemeanor, defined as ‘sexually offending another person of either sex by touching, caressing, or any other sexual act not involving penetration.’ Indecent assault is punishable by a term of imprisonment of one to three years; sentences are doubled where the victim is less than 16 years of age. The Prevention of Domestic Violence and Protection of Victims Law passed in 2005 states that violence includes violent sex, sexual harassment and indecent exposure.

Article 35 of the UNCRC says that States parties shall take all appropriate measures to prevent the abduction or sale of or traffic in children for any purpose or in any form. This is re-enforced by the Optional protocol to UNCRC on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, which was also ratified by the Royal Government of Cambodia in 2002. The Royal Government of Cambodia Law on the Suppression, Kidnapping, Trafficking and Exploitation of Human Beings 1996 provides that any person who commits acts of ‘debauchery’ with a minor below 15 years, even where there is consent, or who buys a minor from a person or pimp, shall be subject to imprisonment of 10–20 years. Cambodia also acceded to the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child

Sexual Exploitation and Child Pornography in 2002, but this has not yet been fully implemented.

Children's Experiences of Violence in Contemporary Cambodia

The research reported here was planned by Tearfund, a Christian NGO based in the UK, as a contribution to understanding how violence affects Cambodian children's lives. It was subsequently endorsed by the Child Welfare Group, a network of international and local child rights organisations. It was conducted by the lead author while employed by Tearfund. The British Embassy in Phnom Penh contributed to funding, as did several other international NGOs (World Vision, World Hope and Justice for Children International).

The principal methods used were: (1) an anonymous questionnaire-based survey of 1314 school children aged 12 to 15 years (roughly 50 from each province in Cambodia); (2) a series of seven focus groups with children in selected provinces. There were also three focus groups with selected adults, but these are not reported here. The children who took part in the survey were identified by the head teachers of the five participating schools in each province; local education departments were asked to choose five schools from across their province, but in practice often chose schools close to the provincial capital. Heads were asked to choose a representative group of children, and were specifically urged not to pick out the 'clever' children; however, they did select literate children, except in one province where there were not enough literate children in the age range (in this case peers assisted non-literate children to complete the questionnaires). The children who took part in the focus groups were identified by local NGOs in each community, and were usually children with whom the NGO staff had an existing relationship. Because the research team did not directly control the selection of participants, it cannot be assumed that these groups were wholly representative of children across Cambodia; however, the numbers involved (around 1400) give some assurance of wider validity.

Care was taken to ensure children were not further exploited by adopting a rigorous design, maintaining anonymity and providing opportunities for follow-up where possible. Informed consent was obtained as far as possible. Since children attending the focus groups were recruited by local NGOs, and the school surveys were arranged by the education authorities in the provinces, this mainly consisted of ensuring at the start of every session that children understood that they did not have to answer any question if they did not wish to do so.

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The research looked at six different types of violence involving children as victims or as perpetrators—corporal punishment in the home and in school, sexual abuse and trafficking, bullying in school and ‘gang’ violence (of whom adults might be the victims). A series of pictures was commissioned from a Cambodian artist, which depicted these different types of violence. These were used as visual prompts in the questionnaire, where children were asked if they had ever experienced these forms of violence directly or indirectly, and also to stimulate discussion in the focus groups. The aim in both cases was to elicit children’s experience and understanding of different kinds of violence and ill-treatment.

If we refer back to Figure 1, the children who took part in the research were born at the end of the period of Vietnamese occupation and spent their childhood in the years of UN influence and increasing Westernisation. Their parents on the other hand would have been born during the Vietnam War and would have experienced the Khmer Rouge period as children. While the research did not enquire into children’s individual backgrounds, it is likely that many children in the study population would have parents with memories of extremely traumatic experiences.

The reported levels of violence experienced and observed were substantial (Table 1). Of the whole sample, 43 per cent had personally experienced physical punishment by parents at some point in their lives, 29 per cent had experienced physical punishment by teachers and 37 per cent bullying by peers. In reference to sexual abuse, 16 per cent reported being touched on the genitals since their ninth birthday and a remarkable 22 per cent claimed to have witnessed the rape of a child by an adult.

It is noteworthy that in almost every category of violence, boys reported a significantly higher lifetime prevalence than girls. This applies even to those reporting direct personal experience of ‘rape’, although not to those who said they had witnessed such an event. These figures of course should be read in the context of extreme shame and embarrassment surrounding such experiences. It is

Table 1. Children’s experiences of violence (Tearfund, 2005)

Experiences of violence (lifetime prevalence)	Response		By gender			χ^2	<i>p</i> <
	Number (total)	%	Boy %	Girl %			
Direct experience of peer bullying	475 (1271)	37.4	40.6	34.5	4.95	0.03	
Direct experience of physical punishment by parent	552 (1277)	43.2	50.5	36.4	25.83	0.001	
Direct experience of physical punishment by teacher	369 (1294)	29.2	34.7	24.1	17.175	0.001	
Direct experience of genital touching by an adult (after age nine)	177 (1099)	16.1	18.9	13.5	5.81	0.02	
Direct experience of child rape by an adult	15 (1289)	1.2	1.8	0.6	3.69	0.06	
Witnessed rape of another child by an adult	290 (1297)	22.4	23.5	21.4	—	NS	
Direct experience of child sale	39 (1297)	3.0	3.7	2.4	—	NS	
Knowledge of child sale in community	607 (1291)	47.0	45.1	49.1	—	NS	

NS = not significant.

Table 2. Children's attitudes to violence

Type of violence	'Always right'	'Sometimes right'	'Always wrong'
Bullying by peers	3.8%	15.2%	81.1%
Beaten by parents	5.1%	44.6%	50.3%
Beaten by teachers	4.4%	51.8%	43.8%
Sold	2.9%	2.3%	94.9%
Raped	2.0%	2.6%	95.5%

possible, for instance, that some of those who said they had witnessed rape of a child had actually experienced it themselves but felt unable to say so even in an anonymous questionnaire.

Children were asked to say whether they thought each type of violence was always right, always wrong, or sometimes right and sometimes wrong. Responses varied for each type (Table 2). Nearly all the children considered being sold or raped to be always wrong, and a large majority took the same view of bullying by peers; however, around half thought that being beaten by teachers or parents was sometimes right and sometimes wrong. This suggests that, however much traditional values are being eroded by new ideas, traditional ideas of deference towards parents and teachers are still influential for children. It may indicate a cultural environment in which forms of violence by adults against children are allowed, or even encouraged. Indeed, some of the comments made by children and adults in the focus groups suggest that, although ideas of human rights have achieved some acceptance, they have also been subsumed under traditional hierarchies of deference, so that parents are seen to have more rights than children, and men more than women, rather than rights being understood in terms of equality.

At the same time, it is clear that children feel confident in saying that certain forms of abuse are never acceptable. For example, one child in a focus group said of the selling of children, 'even the wild animals don't eat their children'. Another 'Even if they are poor and full of debt a parent does not have the right to sell their children'. Children also had clear ideas that perpetrators of rape and trafficking should be prosecuted. Despite the views reported above that a culture of violence may be endemic in contemporary Cambodia, it is clear that the present generation of children, judged by those whose views are reported here, strongly wish to live lives free from violence and abuse.

Research with Children and Influence on Policy

The ultimate aim of this research was to influence national policy, and specifically to bring children's own views into the policy

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‘Children are rarely asked their opinions and are unused to dialogue with adults’

debate. This has been done in a number of different ways, using opportunities presented by discussions that were already taking place. In February 2005, a National Consultative Meeting was held on ‘rights-based education’ at the Senate of the Kingdom of Cambodia, organised by the Ministry of Education with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights (UNHCHR). This meeting gave an opportunity to present the findings of the research in relation to corporal punishment by teachers and to recommend that this practice should be made illegal. This has now been incorporated into a draft Education Act currently awaiting approval of the Council of Ministers. A national conference in June 2005 (organised by the lead author in collaboration with UNICEF) gave an opportunity to point out concerns about a draft domestic violence law which would have continued to allow physical punishment of children in the home. In the final version of the law this appears to have been amended.

Findings from the research were also used to develop public information for children and adults, including posters, a TV slot and two ‘Safe Children’ karaoke video training packs. (This work was facilitated by Tearfund, produced by Resource Development International and funded mainly by the British Embassy Global Fund.) Two children’s comics have also been produced by Tearfund, addressing sexual abuse and violence in the home. In these ways the contributions made by children to the research, including their ideas on what can be done to prevent violence and ill-treatment, are being used to promote wider awareness of the issues.

In a society like Cambodia where the power imbalance between adults and children is great, children are rarely asked their opinions and are unused to dialogue with adults, and may be reluctant to divulge information for fear of consequences. Their parents may have survived troubled times by keeping quiet and not speaking out, and this may have been communicated to their children. A Khmer proverb says ‘do not take fire from the inside to the outside’; appearing as a victim may mean loss of ‘face’. On the other hand, in a society where adults have been afraid to communicate for fear of consequences, children’s comments may on occasion reveal material that is hidden in adult responses.

Boyden and Gibbs (1997, p. 205) suggest that

‘a carefully planned process of consultation with Cambodian children, rather than investigations of Cambodian children, could provide the most appropriate basis for future planning.’

Over the past decade, research by children’s rights organisations in Cambodia has increasingly recognised the importance of children’s opinions (Bearup, 2003; Child Welfare Group, 2003; Dorning, 2002; Gray *et al.*, 1996; Hudd, 2003; Lawrence, 2004).

But whilst this kind of qualitative research may be welcomed by the NGO community, the Government's attitude to such research is another matter. It would be naïve to assume that simply communicating children's 'voices' will necessarily have much impact in a context where those voices are routinely disregarded. Most children who took part in the research reported here would normally have no access to policy makers at any level. However, this research showed that many children have things to say about violence and ill-treatment, and some at least can articulate a clear understanding of its causes and effects, and of ways to prevent it.

The researcher has to put the information in a form that is going to be heard by decision-makers. This is especially difficult because in Cambodia the intelligentsia were deliberately targeted in the genocide, and the present governing class do not have a high level of education. Those who do have the skills to read research reports may not be in the ministries that work with children. There is a strong preference for quantitative data, and the reporting of this research reflected this in emphasising prevalence data from the survey. At the same time the focus group results were used to ensure that children's voices were included more directly.

Article 47 of the Royal Cambodian Constitution says that 'citizens shall be free to express their views', and Article 41 says that citizens have the right to freedom of expression. In Cambodia's report to the UN in June 1998 (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2000a, CRC.C.11.Add.16 English) the Government suggests that there are some opportunities for children to express their views, but that:

'children cannot exercise this right fully because custom does not allow them to challenge decisions taken by adults or to be present at discussions between adults . . . In Cambodian society, parents or guardians are habitually heavy-handed and do not allow children to talk a great deal. Because of such oppression, children lack courage, initiative and determination in exercising their rights.' (Paras 37 and 49.)

This is a clear statement of the problem; what is less clear is how far the Government is committed to challenging it, or how effectively it is working together with the UN or other organisations to do this. The influence of the UN over government departments is at best tolerated and often resented, and the UN has been criticised by members of the NGO community as being dictatorial and not consulting member states. If true, then this is setting a poor example, if the UN wants those at a local level to encourage better listening and inclusion of children. International donors may prefer to focus on high-profile issues such as sex trafficking, rather than issues that affect a majority of Cambodian children such as domestic sexual abuse, corporal punishment in school and discipline in the home. Cambodia lacks a strong democratic culture,

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'Children lack courage, initiative and determination in exercising their rights'

**‘Advocates can act
as a “bridge”’**

**‘There is little
real democratic
engagement’**

**‘A major challenge
for any country’**

and local NGOs lobbying government are often seen as oppositional rather than collaborative, threatening a loss of ‘face’. (Of course, it must not be thought that such resistance is uniquely Cambodian; governments in other countries, including the West, are often very reluctant to accept criticism from outside.)

There are certainly opportunities for researchers and children’s rights advocates to challenge current practices, as this experience demonstrates. However, it has to be done sensitively, in such a way that it is not seen to be yet another imposition from the West. Advocates can act as a ‘bridge’, by listening carefully to what children have to say and putting it into a form that other adults can hear. The Child Rights Foundation surveyed 5000 children’s views on the implementation of the UNCRC in Cambodia, which were then submitted to the regional consultation of the UN Study on Violence Against Children held in Bangkok in 2005.

It is increasingly recognised that children are able to engage in dialogue with politicians (Ennew and Hastadewi, 2004). At the national conference referred to earlier, held in Phnom Penh in June 2005, to prepare for the regional consultation of the UN Study, Cambodian children were enabled to be active in sharing their concerns with key stakeholders, and an opportunity was provided for children to communicate directly with a senior member of the Government. That the official in question failed to take up this opportunity may reflect unfamiliarity with the idea that adults in authority can have dialogue with children. Perhaps we should consider how we can work with politicians on effective communication with children, rather than the other way around. It may also be asked how we can expect politicians to listen to children when they are barely listening to adults. Cambodia may perhaps be seen as an imposed democracy, where certain criteria must be met to satisfy international funding agencies, but where there is little real democratic engagement.

Conclusion

This research suggests that abuse and ill-treatment are everyday features of life for many Cambodian children. This has to be seen in the context of Cambodian history and culture, a complex picture that does not admit of simple explanations. It is clear, for instance, that despite a whole host of factors that might be expected to produce an acceptance of violence, for the children who participated in this research it was not acceptable to be beaten or bullied, much less to be raped or sold. However, many of them had direct or indirect experience of all of these abuses. Changing this would be a major challenge for any country, and especially for one that is still struggling to rebuild social infrastructure.

In the end, it is Cambodians who will have to decide on the direction and pace of change. The Government could do much to tackle some of the violence currently experienced by children, through sanctions on corporal punishment in schools and promoting non-violent methods of discipline, through prosecuting domestic cruelty as well as trafficking of children, and by clamping down on video violence and pornography. Religious leaders can also do more to promote non-violence and to emphasise traditional teachings of dignity, tolerance and compassion. Whilst Cambodia is still remembered for the effects of the genocide, traditional values and modern influences may actually be more influential in creating the context in which violence against children has to be understood and in which their rights are to be promoted.

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