

IF ONLY SOMEONE HAD BROKEN THE SILENCE!

SEXUAL VIOLENCE
ON CHILDREN

Help



KAMLA BHASIN

Pictures

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PREFACE

First published in 2003, “If only someone had broken the silence” was originally written by Kamla Bhasin and illustrated by Bindia Thapar. As the book matter revolves around child sexual violence, an issue affecting thousands of children in Cambodia, Gender and Development for Cambodia (GADC) in partnership with UN Women decides to create the translated and redrawn edition.

GADC would like to acknowledge the efforts of Mrs. Kamla Bhasin and Bindia Thapar for creating such a wonderful book and their generosity to allow us to translate the book content into Khmer for Cambodian audience. GADC would also like to thank UN Women for its financial support in this publication.

Gender and Development for Cambodia

Phnom Penh, March 2011



Gender and Development for Cambodia (GADC)

GADC is a local non-governmental organization (NGO) that promotes gender equality as a fundamental human rights, necessary for Cambodia's social, economic and political development. For over a decade GADC and its partners have worked to bring greater gender equality throughout Cambodia by promoting the following :

Vision

GADC has a vision to see that all Cambodian people are equally empowered to use their potential to participate in national development with full dignity and justice, thereby creating a fair, just and stable living environment in the society.

Mission

GADC's mission is to promote gender equality by:

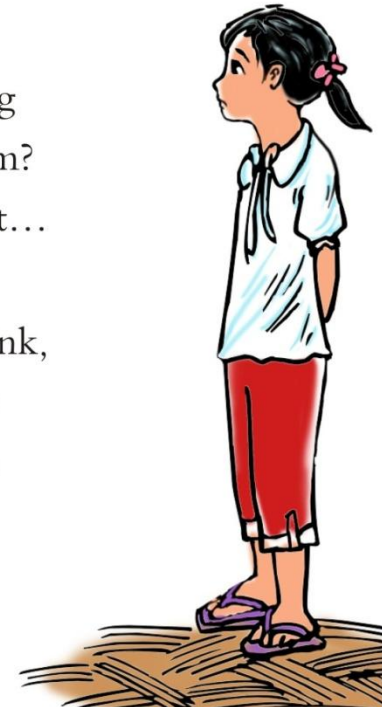
- Promoting mutual respect between men and women
- Enabling policy makers and institutions to develop and carry out plans and programs that address gender inequalities.
- Strengthening support structures at the national and local levels, in order to eliminate gender inequalities



Like most children, you would also know and meet many adults, in addition to your parents and grandparents, for example your uncles, aunts, friends of your father, mother, older brother or sister, your teachers, neighbours etc.

Now tell me honestly, do you like all of them? Do you feel good and happy meeting and being with ALL of them? Just think about it...

While you think, I would like to share with you my childhood thoughts about and experiences with adults.





To tell you the truth, when I was small I did not like all the adults around me. There were only a few I really liked. I used to like only those adults who treated me with respect. By respect I mean they did not think children are stupid. They listened to me attentively when I talked. They made me feel I was intelligent and had something to say. They did not look down upon me or talk down at me just because I was a child.

They also touched me gently and with respect. They did not pinch my cheeks or smother me with aggressive hugs. When they touched me I felt it was mutual. I liked their touch. I felt good and safe in their company. Although I was much younger than them, they made me feel like a person.



I still think of them often and do so with fondness and love.

But there were some adults, whom I just did not like. I could neither understand nor appreciate their behaviour. For example, they showed their love by pulling my cheeks violently. My cheeks would get red and hurt. There were some who would pull my hair or pull my entire body towards them to express their love. I must confess that I neither liked this kind of love nor the people who showed their love in this manner. I used to wonder why these people could not understand a simple thing—that their acts of love were both aggressive and painful.

You know, there were times when I wanted to pull their cheeks “in love” to make them realise how we children feel when they do this to us.

These adults also talked to me as if being a child meant being stupid. They babied me and that I did not like at all. It is



thanks to them, that I knew quite early in life what kind of adult I did not want to be.

I remember some adult men whom initially I liked very much, but later on, I became quite afraid of them because of the way they behaved with me.

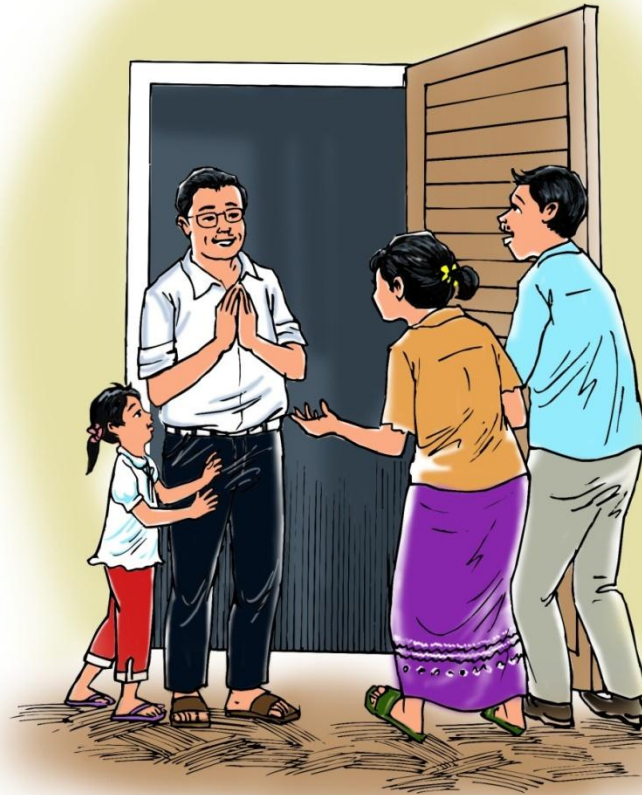
When I got to know them, these men seemed really nice. They knew how to win children over. They talked very nicely to me and showed interest in my likes and dislikes. They won my confidence and came close to me. But soon after that, the way they touched me or kissed me troubled me. It did not seem right. At times I was just confused. I didn't quite understand what to make of them and their actions. I was not sure even of my own reactions. I can't tell you why and how but somehow I knew, that the way they touched me was wrong, it was dirty. I think they also knew what they were doing was wrong



because they never touched me like that when others were present. They tried to catch me when no one else was around.

All these men were much older than me, some were aged 50, 60 and even more. They were relatives, or friends of the family, teachers or brothers and fathers of my friends. Meaning, all of them were “close” to my family and me. My family trusted and respected them. This is why I had no reason to mistrust them. I was of outgoing nature and made friends quite easily.

I remember a friend of my older brother, whom I liked a lot. But, when we were alone he kissed me on my lips. I did not like this kind of kissing. I felt it was strange and not quite right.





A friend of my father's was very friendly.
But, often he hugged me very tightly.
When we were alone he rubbed his
body against mine in a strange way
and kissed me strangely. I felt
repulsed when he did this.
Although in the beginning I
liked him, later I became
afraid and started avoiding him.

A nice old man, about 70 years
old, used to come home to teach
me English. He was either English or Anglo Indian. He often pulled me very
close to his body and tried kissing me on my lips. His face and breathing
became very strange when he did this. I tried telling my father that I did
not like learning from him. But my father always said, "What? He is such
a good teacher. His English is so good. Also he does not charge us any
money." I did not know how to explain to my father. But fortunately for me,
this man fell sick and stopped coming. I felt this time God (or Goddess) had
heard my prayers.

I remember another 'gentle' man, a distant uncle, who often came and stayed with us. He was very fond of me. I also liked him and enjoyed being with him. We were good friends. One day I was sitting on his lap and he was reading out a book to me. Suddenly, he put his big finger in my panty. It hurt and I was shocked. I immediately jumped out of his lap and ran away. He said nothing. I had a strange feeling of fear and unhappiness. He continued to behave with me as if nothing had happened. But I was afraid.

Many questions bothered me. Why did he do that? Is this why he was nice to me? Is he not a good man? How should I behave? Should I go near him or not?

Because I had liked him a lot I did not want to think badly of him or complain about him. Actually these incidents are so old that I am not able to remember exactly what my feelings and reactions were at that time.



I had a friend called Seema. Both of us used to go very often to another friend's place to play. The older brother of this friend often joined us in our games. He bought sweets for us. He often picked up Seema in his lap and talked to her while we played. One day Seema told me that he rubbed and pushed his penis against Seema's back. It hurt Seema a lot. She ran away from him. After that incident both Seema and I were frightened of him. Because of him, we had to stop going to our friend's home.

I remember yet another man and yet another incident. I used to go and play at another friend's house. Both of us played together for hours. On holidays her father would join us. He was so much fun. I thought he was



wonderful, so different from other fathers. But one day even this man touched me in an ugly way. I was very disturbed and upset. Because of her father's mean behaviour

I had to stop going to my friend's house.

After this incident I asked myself – did my friend’s father do this to his own daughter also?

If yes, how would she escape from him? I could stop going there, but she can't do that.

I shuddered with fear. I lived in confusion.

I had all these experiences when I was between five and ten years old. Although I was young I knew these touches were dirty and wrong. I also felt the men who

touched me in this nasty way were also not nice. They

were trying to use me. I often wondered why and how the people so close to me and my family could do this to me.

By now I was so thoroughly confused that I was not able to tell who was good and who was bad.



As I grew older, I learnt that not only girls, but boys also suffer sexual abuse. They are also abused by older boys and men in families, schools, specially boarding schools, work places, camps etc.



Whenever I saw the uncles, teachers and friends of the family who abused me, I felt they were ferocious people

wearing masks of gentleness. Other members of my family were not able to see through their masks. I knew their real faces and I was perplexed, angry and miserable.



Because I was perplexed and confused, I was not able to talk to anyone. I had no idea how to talk. I did not seem to have the right words to explain my experiences. What would I say? How would I describe it? Would people believe me? I was afraid and all I managed to do was to avoid the men who had been bad to me and to be cautious with the others.

I feared and hated these dirty men pretending to be nice by putting on masks. I often plotted revenge and made plans to get them punished. I carried a lot of anger and hate inside me for a long time but was unable to break my silence.





Even after I grew up, several men tried their dirty tricks, but did not succeed. By now I was stronger and careful. Today I think I was lucky

that the sexual abuse I suffered was not serious. Now I know that little girls suffer even rape and the rapist can be an uncle, a brother-in-law, a teacher, a neighbour. Sometimes even a father rapes his own daughter. But the psychological pain I suffered was bad enough. No child deserves such pain.



The sexual abuse I suffered made me fearful and suspicious. This fear, suspicion, anger and hatred for the abusers bothered me for years. Today I know that such painful experiences, fears and doubts can cause a lot of harm to children, specially if they cannot talk about them to anyone.



My acutest pain and disappointment has been the fact that I was not able to talk to anyone, not even to my own parents, brothers or sisters, to any of my friends or teachers.

Even till this day I ask myself, why was I silent?

Why did I not tell anyone anything? Did I keep quiet because I was confused? Or I had no words to explain my experiences?



Was it because I did not want to complain about people I had actually liked? Or was I afraid no one would believe me? Or they will blame me and punish me?

Did I think no one will believe a child against older and more powerful people, who were decent in the eyes of others?

Did I keep quiet because I felt may be it was my fault, may be I was responsible for what they did to me, may be there was something wrong with me?



Was I silent
because I had
been taught
it is dirty
to talk
about such things?



Frankly, I do not know why
I kept quiet. Why was I, a
child, not able to share my
pain, fears and confusion?
Why did I carry this big burden
of silence for so long?

I really don't know why?

Another painful question, which has nagged me for a very long time, is I was small, confused and unsure, but what about my parents, my older brothers and sisters? Why were they silent? Why didn't any of them warn me or tell me to watch out against wrong touches or wrong people?



They were older and wiser. Surely they knew such things happen. What was the cause of their silence and their failure to prepare me and to protect me? Is it possible that all of them were unaware that children are sexually abused?

I think my parents and older brothers and sisters loved me. But then how come none of them were able to sense my discomfort, pain or my silences? Or had I become such a great actress that nothing of what I experienced showed on my face or in my behaviour?

Today, I also ask myself, why my mother, father, older brothers and sister or teachers did not create in me the confidence that I could talk to them about anything and everything which I did not have to hide ? Why did I not have the confidence that they would believe what I told them and remove my confusions and fears?

Why did these distances and gaps exist in my family? Were we not like strangers, although we lived under the same roof? Are all families as silent and distant?

Later on in life a friend shared her experiences with me. She said “When I was young a friend of my father used to visit us. He was our neighbour. He often took us children for walks or games. One day he took us to an abandoned building. He gave all of us sweets. He put me on his lap and rubbed and pushed his penis against my lower back.”



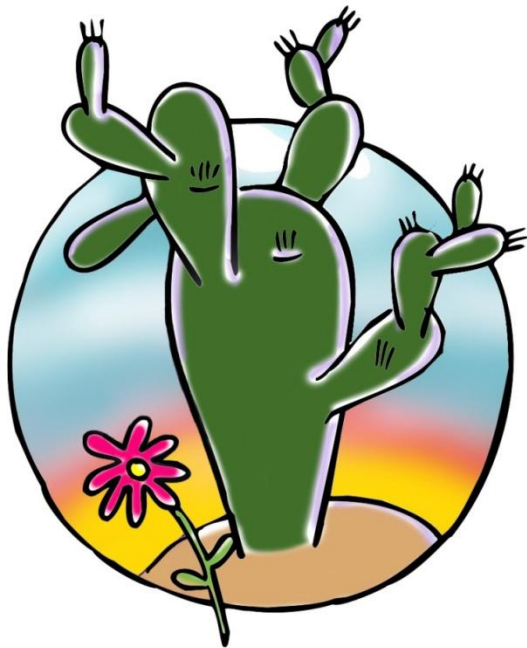
“I felt awful and it also hurt. I tried to move away but he held me tight. I screamed loudly, jumped out of his lap and started crying. All the children gathered around me and all of us ran to my home. I told mother what had happened. She told my father. My father talked to our neighbours and all of them together reported this man to the police. He was punished.”

After listening to this story I felt if my family had been frank and had talked to me about my body and about sex I could have been confident and careful. I could have known the difference between a good and bad touch, the difference between a person who loves children and one who abuses them.



Had there been such openness at home or at school I would definitely not have been silent. My parents could also have taken some action against all men who tried to abuse me.

It is quite possible that those people with masks were abusing and causing pain to other children also. May be those children were also silent like me.



Our silence left the guilty free. They were neither punished nor did they have to apologize for their crimes.

Had my family members or teachers been frank and open I would not have had to carry my painful secrets around for so many years. I could have shed my fears and hatred then and there.

Okay, now let us leave my story and me. I have already said too much about myself. Now you tell me – have you ever felt someone looking at you or touching you in a wrong or bad way? If yes, what did you do? Did you keep quiet like me or did you talk? To whom did you talk?

Are you able to tell such things to your family members, friends or teachers? Have your parents or teachers been open with you? Have they given you the confidence to share with them anything that bothers you?

If you have questions about your body or about sex you can talk to anyone? Whom can you talk to? Or have you been told that sex is dirty and one should not talk about it to anyone?



Did anyone in your family or in school take the initiative to talk to you about the changes in your body and about sex? Or did they give you books, which helped you understand your body and sex?

Do you talk about sex with your friends?

Or is there silence around these matters, like there was in my family forty years ago?

Today when I am older I believe we should be like friends in our families. Fear or silences should really have no place.

We adults should be able to make the children feel they can talk about anything; they can share their fears, doubts and confusions.

We adults should be able to give children the confidence that we do our best to understand and respond to their feelings, experiences, fears, and questions. No one will shout at them or ask them to shut up.

We adults should be able to realize that children also have views, they also have a personality, an identity of their own and we have to accept and respect it.

Isn't it well known that children grow better in a free and democratic atmosphere rather than in an atmosphere of fear or over protection?



Today, as a mother of a daughter and a son I also believe that no subject is dirty and no subject should be a taboo. Not even sex. Yes, some people can have dirty thoughts about sex but sex is neither dirty nor bad. I feel, our homes and schools can and should explain sex and sexuality to children. They can and should tell children about the possibility of sexual abuse and about the difference between a good and bad touch.



Some people believe talking about sex with children is bad for them. It has a negative impact.

But, the fact is that if we inform children about their bodies and sex they can understand themselves better. Without correct information children develop wrong ideas. Talking frankly about sex can remove unnecessary and harmful fears as well as dangers (like sexually transmitted infections, HIV infection, unwanted pregnancy). If sex is an essential part of life, how can talking about it or preparing for it be dirty or bad?

Some people believe one should not talk with children about things that may give them fears or worries.

However, I feel proper information and knowledge reduce rather than create fears and worries. Talking frankly with adults and having the power of information and knowledge makes children strong and confident. They become aware and better prepared to deal with situations.

Some people also say that if something bad happens to a girl then we should definitely keep quiet. Talking about it will bring a bad name to the girl and her family.

But, on the contrary, I feel talking about sexual abuse of a girl should bring a bad name to the abuser not to the girl who is abused. She should be appreciated for exposing a culprit and for protecting other children.



What is your opinion on all this? Should one talk frankly or not?

Once again I feel, if anyone of us has a question or a doubt or a fear, we should definitely try to talk to someone we feel close to or trust.

Discussion with people we trust can only clarify things and help us get rid of our fear and doubts.

Just like opening of doors and windows brings light, air and freshness to a dark room, opening ourselves and our thoughts, brings freshness and confidence.

Sharing our thoughts also creates friendships, friendships between people of the same age or between adults and children.

By opening up to people we might encourage and help them to open up too. Maybe they too are looking for someone to talk to and be friends with.

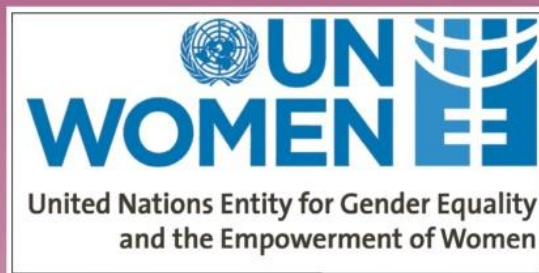
So friends, I am all for talking to all.

What about you ?

LET'S TALK, LET'S BECOME FRIENDS







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