

The Middle Way

Bridging the Gap
Between
Cambodian
Culture and
Children's Rights

Steve Gourley

NGO COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD
(NGOCRC)



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The Middle Way

Bridging the Gap Between Cambodian Culture and Children's Rights

"The Middle Path avoids attachment to the two extremes... in order to solve a problem, we should position ourselves on neutral, upright and unbiased ground. We investigate the problem from various angles, analyze the findings, understand the truth thoroughly, and find a reasonable conclusion."

- *Teachings in Chinese Buddhism, Buddha Dharma
Education Association*

***Dedicated to all those working to protect our young and
honour our elders, in Cambodia and beyond.***



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Photo: Peter Harris

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A “middle way” is needed in which the value of parents’ traditions and the rights of children are acknowledged and respected.

Photo: Peter Harris

Executive Summary

Background and Objective: Bridging the Gap

This research addresses the lack of comprehensive information available in Cambodia relating to knowledge, attitudes, and practice of ‘children’s rights’ as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). For more than a dozen years, awareness-raising about children’s rights (CR) has been a prominent feature of the development work landscape in Cambodia. Numerous organizations apply significant resources annually to implement a wide range of related activities: community-based awareness-raising; media campaigns; training workshops on the UNCRC and topical issues such as human trafficking; and various types of advocacy including legal reform. However, efforts to assess the impact or results of these efforts have not been as common. Experience of CR practitioners suggests that while there is a relatively high degree of awareness and understanding of rights that have been the subject of significant attention (such as the right to protection from physical and sexual abuse), actual practice lags far behind. As a result, in 2008 the NGO Committee on the Rights of the Child (NGOCRC) conducted an assessment of the understanding of children’s rights in Cambodia, including identifying cultural factors that support or hinder the implementation of UNCRC at the family level.

Research Topics

The research aimed to assess the level of awareness, understanding, and application of children’s rights at the household level, specifically among parents and children of various socio-economic levels in both urban and rural areas. Unique to assessment of child rights work in Cambodia, this research included in-depth cultural analysis of the influence of traditional cultural beliefs and practices on children’s rights. After planning consultations with children, parents and CR practitioners in Phnom Penh and Kampong Cham, the Research Team identified two topics for each of the ‘four baskets’ of children’s rights to Survival, Development, Protection and Participation. This resulted in a total of eight issues warranting study for their relevance to the concerns of Cambodian families and their impact on children’s rights:

- *Nutrition & Healthcare* (Right to Survival)
- *Girls' Education & Sex Education* (Right to Development)
- *Discipline & Sexual Abuse* (Right to Protection)
- *Arranged Marriage & Community Participation* (Right to Participation)

Process and Methodology

Planning and data collection were conducted during several phases from January – August 2008, with analysis, validation, and write-up taking place over the remainder of the year. Qualitative research was conducted with 540 respondents (360 parents aged 25-65 & 180 children aged 12-17) in Focus Group Discussions using a variety of Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) activities. Based on the results, a quantitative household KAP (Knowledge, Attitude and Practice) survey was then conducted with 1,800 adult and child respondents (1,200 and 600 respectively, with the same age range as FGD). Respondents in both phases were 50% female, and approximately half were from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Data was collected in urban (Phnom Penh), rural (Kampong Cham), and remote (Oddar Meanchey) locations.

Summary of Findings

The findings indicate that basic awareness of child rights terms and concepts were high amongst the vast majority of respondents in all locations, regardless of age, sex or socio-economic status. Parents and children showed a higher level of *understanding* (as opposed to awareness) in relation to Survival, Development and Protection rights, perhaps as a result of a pre-existing positive cultural emphasis on child health, community safety and education. However, far less understood or appreciated were behaviours relating to the right of Participation, with the exception of urban parents and children from higher socio-economic backgrounds.

In terms of attitudes, the majority of respondents were favorable towards children's rights as they see it has improved the situation of children, although approximately 30% were ambivalent about the appropriateness of CR for Cambodia, and a minority of parents felt that it is a threat to Khmer culture and undermines parental authority. Children, on the other hand, were more likely to express their belief in their rights and the need to change traditional beliefs and practices that violated them.

In terms of practice, implementation of CR at the family level was found to lag significantly behind respondents' awareness and attitudes towards all baskets of rights. Survival and Development rights appeared to be the most respected as these were largely in line with the priorities of parents and NGOs working in the target areas, while Protection and Participation rights were less practiced when these conflicted with traditional values. This highlights the key role that culture plays in the implementation of children's rights in Cambodia.

Location and socio-economic background also featured significantly in the findings. Phnom Penh respondents from higher socio-economic backgrounds (both adults and children) were much more likely to express views and report behaviour aligned with CR than were their rural counterparts. This may indicate the positive effect that higher income and educational levels can have on the implementation of children's rights, perhaps by enabling families to overcome the limitations of poverty and explore alternatives to traditional beliefs and practices that are more in line with the UNCRC.

The Research Team suggests that the disjuncture between knowledge and behaviour is best explained as resulting from tensions between traditional cultural beliefs and 'modern values'. A comparison between traditional Cambodian values and those embedded in the UNCRC revealed that the two perspectives differ in many respects, resulting in disagreements between parents favoring a 'traditional' worldview and children influenced by a distinctly different set of 'modern' concepts and values. Research on specific traditional beliefs and practices revealed that the strong cultural emphasis on family and parental reputation or 'honour' - as well as the pervasive influence of hierarchy and patriarchy in parent-child relationships - hinder the realization of children's rights in many areas of family life. On the other hand, widespread concern and effort was found among both mothers and fathers regarding their children's health, education and safety in the community. Parents also appeared willing to respect children's rights in other areas when children acknowledged their *responsibilities* to their parents and families – a value shared by Cambodian culture and the UNCRC, but rarely emphasized in CR projects. The findings suggest that allowing the strong cultural emphasis on responsibility to take a central place in CR promotion may be one of the most effective ways of achieving widespread acceptance of children's rights in Cambodia, and helping children learn how to act in ways that encourage their rights to be increasingly respected in the home and community.

Although it is clear that both traditional and modern values have important roles to play in Cambodian society, the research concludes that the optimal way forward is not through valorizing either "tradition" or "rights" resulting in competition and division. Instead, a "middle way" is needed in which the value of both parents' traditions and children's rights are acknowledged and respected. Indeed, as Cambodia cannot go backwards in time, it must find a way to integrate and embrace the contemporary concepts of social justice and individual rights sweeping the globe – re-interpreting those aspects of its culture that do not meet the needs of the current generation, while proudly preserving those that do.

The research findings and practical suggestions for application included in the research report will make a significant contribution to more effective programming in the future. While the findings show that much progress has been made in promoting awareness of the UNCRC in Cambodia, it is clear that governmental and private agencies must adopt more culturally-appropriate methods of education and promotion if children's rights are to be fully realized at the family level. In particular, activities that strengthen parents' ability to understand, communicate with and guide their children are needed to help them respond to the rapid socio-economic and cultural changes occurring across the country.

To support this, specific programming recommendations are given to assist agencies in improving the relevance and effectiveness of their work in promoting children's rights. 'Middle Way Solutions' suggested by the respondents themselves are also provided for each of the traditional beliefs and practices studied, giving parents and children an excellent practical starting point for promoting dialogue and action on the issues presented.

I. Background and Methodology

1.0 Objectives of Research

This report is an assessment of the level of awareness, understanding, and application of children's rights in Cambodia, among parents and children in urban and rural areas and across a spectrum of socio-economic levels, as measured against the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC or UN-CRC). The CRC was ratified by Cambodia on 15 October 1992 with no reservations and was subsequently incorporated into the Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia in 1993. After the ratification not only did the Cambodian government do its best to raise awareness of child rights, in addition other civil society organisations also attempted in different ways to increase public awareness of the CRC. Though some progress has been made, there is little substantive evidence available to demonstrate the current levels or degree of understanding of child rights and practices among Cambodians. To address this gap, and provide comprehensive baseline values, the NGO Committee on the Rights of the Child (NGOCRC) commissioned an assessment of the understanding and practices of the CRC in Cambodia.

NGOCRC also recognized the need for deeper understanding of the impact of traditional cultural beliefs and practices on children's rights, and therefore asked the research team to undertake a cultural analysis and identify supportive and hindering factors to implementation of UNCRC. Most importantly, the purpose of the research was to assess the level of understanding of the CRC and practice within the Cambodian cultural context, focusing on the family level. The research thus included the following specific objectives:

1. *Assess the level of understanding of child rights among parents and children;*
2. *Identify traditional customs and practices that support children's rights at the family level;*
3. *Identify traditional customs and practices that hinder children's rights at the family level; and*
4. *Develop recommendations based on findings.*

2.0 Research Topics and Timeline:

In order to narrow the focus of the objectives related to traditional practices, as well as to ensure the relevance and usefulness of the findings to communities and practitioners, the research team conducted a series of consultation meetings during the planning phase. These included participatory focus group discussions with children, parents and NGO staff in Kampong Cham and Phnom Penh. Based on their concerns and priorities, the research team selected two topics for each of the 'four baskets'¹ of children's rights to Survival, Development, Protection and Participation. These eight specific topics then became the focus of the subsequent research:

¹ The 'Four Baskets of Children's Rights' are commonly used in Cambodia for describing and promoting the main categories of rights contained in the UNCRC.

- *Nutrition & Healthcare* (Right to Survival)
- *Girls' Education & Sex Education* (Right to Development)
- *Discipline & Sexual Abuse* (Right to Protection)
- *Arranged Marriage & Community Participation* (Right to Participation)

Planning and data collection were conducted during several phases from January – August 2008, with analysis, validation, and write-up taking place over the remainder of the year.

3.0 Contracting and Implementing Organizations:

This research was commissioned by Save the Children Norway, Plan International-Cambodia, and UNICEF-Cambodia, and implemented by the NGO Committee on the Rights of the Child (NGOCRC). NGOCRC is a national coalition of forty-six (46) non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the Kingdom of Cambodia whose major commonality is their commitment toward the Rights of the Child. Established in September 1994 by nine (9) elected NGO Members, NGOCRC endeavours to raise awareness of the Convention on the Rights of the Child among children, their parents, and all relevant institutions. It dedicates its efforts and resources to the efficient and effective implementation of the CRC by advocating for child rights. Specifically, it concentrates on the formulation and amendment of laws pertaining to children. It also monitors the implementation of CRC in Cambodia and submits supplementary reports on the implementation of CRC in Cambodia to the United Nations CRC Committee. The NGOCRC also aims to strengthen the capacity of its Secretariat's staff and NGO members.

4.0 Research Consultant and Team:

The Primary Research Consultant was Steve Gourley, a sociologist with more than a dozen years of experience in children's rights in Cambodia, specializing in participatory research, rights-based project planning, monitoring and evaluation and staff development. Training and supervision were conducted by the consultant entirely in the Khmer language, thereby increasing accuracy and reliability of the overall research project. The consultant was supported by two Research Coordinators, Mr. Tem Soksan and Ms. Phou Mean, both experienced social researchers specializing in quantitative and qualitative data collection, computer-based analysis, training and supervision of research teams, as well as management of small-to large-scale research projects. In addition, the Research Team included approximately 35 third-year students and recent graduates of the Royal University of Phnom Penh's faculties of Sociology and Psychology, all of whom had previous experience with social research via class projects and/or research internships with NGOs. Various team members served as team leaders, focus group facilitators, and/or enumerators as the situation warranted.

Training was conducted both formally and informally at various times throughout the study, to increase the teams' understanding of research design and methodology, development of research tools, and systematic data collection and analysis. Various participatory training methodologies were used including role plays, field trials, and instant feedback from team members. Equal emphasis was placed on team-building and open communication to support effective working relationships and the successful completion of research objectives.

5.0 Research Process and Methodology

5.1 Qualitative and Quantitative Methodologies:

This research employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods: *Qualitative* data collection was conducted via Focus Group Discussions² using Participatory Learning & Action (PLA) activities, and Semi-Structured Interviews with key informants, including village elders, local authorities, teachers and NGO workers. *Quantitative* data collection was conducted using a Household Survey designed to assess the knowledge, attitudes, and practice (KAP) of respondents. The survey employed a questionnaire comprised of approximately 80% closed-questions and 20% open-ended questions.

Questionnaire & FGD tool development was done via pre-testing and revision, over a period of 4-days for each phase (qualitative and quantitative). Qualitative work was done first, enabling construction of the KAP questionnaire based on the results of the qualitative component.

In addition to the above, a literature review informed the development of the methodology and specific tools/questions, and contributed to analysis of the research findings.

5.2 Child Participation

Children contributed to this research in a variety of ways and at different points in the process. Child representatives from NGO/CRCs Children's Advocacy Network (CAN), the operational areas of Plan-Cambodia, and other NGOs were involved in a) planning consultations, b) data validation, and c) formulating recommendations. In addition, a very high proportion of child respondents (50% of all focus group participants and survey respondents) was intentionally selected to ensure that children's interests were clearly and directly represented in the findings. A gender balance was achieved at all times, with boys and girls separated when gender-sensitive topics were discussed in focus groups.

All children were between the ages of 12-17 due to their knowledge of (and ability to articulate) the cultural issues affecting Cambodian children and young people. Children participated by their voluntary involvement and the permission of sponsoring NGOs and/or parents. The RT followed standard child protection protocols at all times.

6.0 Data Collection

6.1 Research Locations:

These following provinces were chosen for the research because of the presence of families typifying urban and rural lifestyles, and because they were accessible via development NGOs that were willing to facilitate logistical coordination.

² 32 focus groups were held in each research location for a total of 96 FGDs. Each group met twice for 3-4 hours per session over 2 days, allowing for in-depth discussion of traditional beliefs and practices. Separate focus groups were held for participants of differing age and socio-economic levels, allowing data to be dis-aggregated. Males and females were separated into small groups for discussion of gender-sensitive topics.

- Urban: *Phnom Penh*
- Rural: *Kampong Cham*
- Remote: *Oddar Meanchey*

Within each province the RT consulted with parents, children, and key informants in the following locations:

- 2 Districts/Sangkats in each province
- 50% of villages randomly sampled within each District/Sangkat

6.2 Sampling Considerations:

To ensure that the findings would be relevant to groups working with children and youth from a variety of family backgrounds, the research design attempted to account for the wide range of cultural lifestyles that exist in Cambodia today. As a result the sampling design aimed for a balance between parents and children from remote, rural and urban areas; from conservative 'traditional' families to more liberal 'modern' families; and from higher and lower socio-economic backgrounds³. Sampling targeted parents and children⁴ primarily of Khmer ethnicity to ensure that the research reflected the worldview of Cambodians, and an equal gender balance was sought to ensure that women's and girls' voices were heard. Key informants were selected who could verify qualitative findings based on their intimate knowledge of Cambodian culture and family practices.

6.3 Sampling Procedure and Sample Size:

The calculation of the overall sample size as well as village-level sampling of target groups were performed by an experienced statistician employed by Data Solutions, a respected local research firm. Data Solutions also conducted the quantitative data entry and analysis using SPSS software. *Stratified sampling* was used to select relatively homogeneous subgroups from the population; followed by the selection of individual respondents using *systematic sampling* (a method similar to random sampling but requiring less time and funds). The sample size was as follows:

- *Qualitative Phase*: 540 (360 parents / 180 children) focus group participants
- *Quantitative Phase*: 1800 (1,200 parents / 600 children) survey respondents
- **Total Sample Size = 2,340 adults and children**

In summary, the total number of research respondents was 2,340 individuals, of which 50% were children and approximately 50% were female. Ages of parents ranged from 25-65 and children were aged 12-17.

7.0 Data Processing & Analysis

7.1 Data Validation:

After the data was collected, it was then codified, tabulated, and analyzed using a combination of Discourse Analysis and SPSS software (Statistical Package for Social Science). The validity of the data was ensured by triangulation, i.e. cross-checking

³ Socio-economic status was identified by assessing living standards rather than household income levels, which are difficult to calculate and verify. The assessment checklist included housing type and quality, home and/or land ownership, vehicles, food security, # of children in school, etc.

Parents and children participating in the research were not related.

information given by a single source with two other sources. This was accomplished by asking standard questions of parents; then similar questions of children from the same household and/or village; and finally, from key informants close to the families and who could thus confirm or contest the information (e.g. village elders, teachers, etc.). Information collected by the various research methods (focus groups, interviews, and surveys) was also compared to verify the consistency of the data.

The final results and major findings of this assessment were also presented to child representatives of NGO CRCs Child Advocacy Network and groups of experienced NGO practitioners. This allowed them the opportunity to not only confirm, contest or clarify the findings, but also to give their recommendations as to which should be highlighted for specific kinds of action.

7.2 Data Analysis:

Qualitative data from each target group and research location was collated according to standard rules created during the development and testing of research tools, allowing identification and analysis of trends and major themes.

Quantitative data was entered into a database programmed to generate demographical and statistical reports on specific research questions. An expert statistician hired for the assessment developed and entered the formulae used in the database to ensure the accuracy of the findings.

8.0 Research Limitations

Due to the difficulties involved in researching a complex topic such as human culture, several limitations exist which should be remembered when reviewing the findings in this report:

Generalizing Findings: While the sample size for both qualitative and quantitative data collection were large, the findings are not intended to be generalisable or applied to other populations in Cambodia. This is especially true of the KAP survey, which may yield different results with respondents of different demographics, and those living in areas with different socio-economic, ethno-cultural and religious influences. However, the results may be indicative of what might be found in populations resembling those studied in similar urban, rural and remote settings.

Defining 'Traditional' Culture: For this report, the researchers focused on 'traditional' beliefs and practices. However, the researchers are aware of Khmer history with respect to the impact of the Khmer Rouge genocide and how it dramatically altered the family unit, and thus acknowledge the problem of working with the notion of "tradition". Since the Khmer Rouge reign ended in January 1980, the country has gone through a period of frequent and dramatic political changes with the Vietnamese occupation, the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, UNTAC, free elections, and movement toward a neo-liberal open-market economy. Another important factor to consider is the relatively recent but pervasive influence of globalisation and modernisation on traditional cultural values, especially for the younger generation whose worldviews and lifestyles are significantly different from those of older generations.



Both traditional and modern values have important roles to play in Cambodian society.

Photo: Nigel Goddard

The researchers acknowledge that these practical considerations may have influenced the response of participants, including how traditions are remembered and practiced as compared to previous eras.

Control of Variables: When discussing traditional beliefs and practices with parents, the RT could not control for all of the variables that might influence decision-making in these areas. These include factors internal to the family such as the presence and influence of grandparents, religious beliefs and practices, etc. as well as external factors such as power dynamics in the community, the stability and effectiveness of local governance and justice systems, access to public and private services, and other circumstances that may vary from family to family. Instead, these discussions focused on how traditional beliefs and practices had changed in the participants' lifetime, whether they thought they should still be followed or not, and why.

Disaggregation of Data: Disaggregated statistics on the responses of the various target groups (including parents and children, males and females in different locations) are not presented for most quantitative questions. This is because, with the exception of location, significant differences were generally not found in the KAP survey. This was surprising, as children's answers were very different to those of parents during the qualitative research/focus group discussions. This may have occurred because large-scale quantitative surveys are not the ideal method for capturing people's true feelings about sensitive issues. As the child-friendly PLA activities used during the qualitative research contribute to an environment of safety, trust and peer support, significant differences could be more likely to be found using this methodology. Therefore, the RT considers the qualitative findings to be more accurate when these are in conflict with the survey results.

In terms of disaggregating the responses of mothers and fathers participating in focus group discussions, logistical constraints limited the number of variables that could be controlled and accounted for during data collection and analysis. As a result, mothers and fathers from different families participated equally in each adult focus group, and findings referred to as "parents" represent a consensus that facilitators sought between them.

State vs. Parental Responsibilities: As the research objectives focused on the understanding and implementation of children's rights at the *family* level, the research team focused on parents and/or guardians as the primary duty-bearers. Thus, the findings and report did not specifically examine the responsibilities and performance of the Cambodian government in implementing the UNCRC, except in relation to how parents and children understood the role and impact of local authorities, teachers and health care providers on the practice of CR within families. While it is likely that parents working as civil servants would share many of the characteristics of the parents participating in this research, a separate study should be conducted to determine their level of CR awareness and understanding, as well as how traditional cultural values influence their decision-making as duty-bearers at the State level.

II. Cambodian Culture & the UNCRC: A Comparative Analysis

1.0 About the Convention on the Rights of the Child

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child⁵ is presently the most widely ratified international human rights instrument. All UN member states except for the United States and Somalia have ratified the convention. It is the only international human rights treaty to include civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, specifying in detail what every child needs to have a safe, happy and fulfilled childhood.

"The convention is a comprehensive instrument which sets out rights that define universal principles and norms for the status of children. It not only sets out these fundamental rights and freedoms, but also takes into account the need for children to have special assistance and protection due to their vulnerability. It is also the first legal instrument to focus solely on the child, regardless of where the child was born and to whom, and regardless of sex, religion and social origin."

2.0 Culture, Values and Behaviour

A key objective of this study was to identify the cultural⁶ factors that affect the implementation of children's rights at the family level. This required understanding the values central to 'traditional'⁷ Cambodian culture and those embedded in the UNCRC. The Convention on the Rights of the Child argues that all persons below the age of 18 should be assured of certain rights, which in fact represent a set of values that are based on international development norms⁸. Traditional Cambodian culture, on the other hand, has its own set of norms and values which have long functioned as a way to govern society and guide social interactions.

Understanding cultural values is crucial for CR and other development practitioners, as they undergird and therefore directly influence social behaviour:

"Values are the beliefs about what is important, beautiful, good and right, and what is not. Values strongly influence what people do or refuse to do, when, how, with whom and to what effect" (Gower, 1992, p. 74).

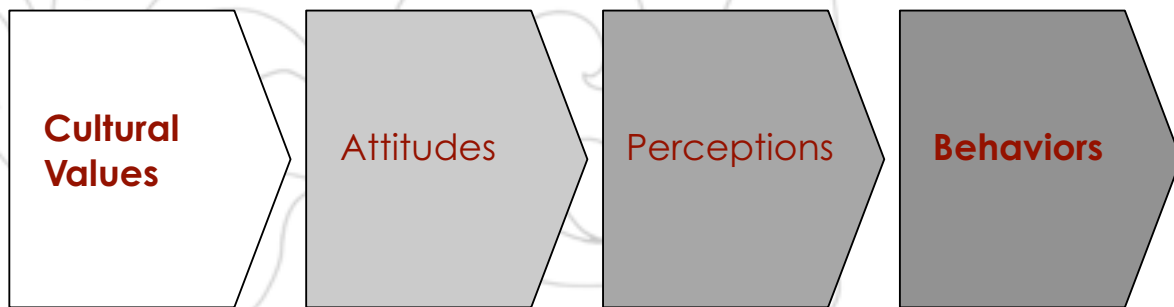
⁵ The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child came into force in September 1990. This comprehensive document was drafted over the course of ten years (1979-1989).

⁶ "Culture" in this paper refers to all of the learned, socially transmitted behavior of a society. It includes the ideas, values and customs that are shared by groups of people. (Gower, 1992, p. 62)

⁷ "Traditional" in this paper refers to cultural beliefs and practices that have been consistently practiced for generations of Cambodians. See 'Research Limitations' in *Section I. Background and Methodology* for the difficulties inherent in defining and operationalising this concept.

⁸ "Norms" in this paper refers to the established standards of behavior for a society. They indicate what people should or should not do in a given situation, e.g. how people are expected to act. (Gower, 1992, p. 71)

In other words, values influence social attitudes towards something or someone, which in turn influences how people perceive and interpret objects or events, and finally motivates their behaviour⁹, as shown in the following diagram:¹⁰



This has obvious implications in working with children, especially when it is considered that the young are in less of a position to control or respond to cultural values which have a negative impact on their lives. Part of the responsibility of adult 'duty-bearers'¹¹ is therefore to become aware of (and if necessary, to challenge) the prevailing values and attitudes which influence the way a society views and behaves towards children.

A comparison of the value systems found in Cambodian culture and the UNCRC revealed that many key values were distinctly different, if not diametrically opposed to one another. This is not surprising considering that the ostensibly "universal" principles and articles of the UNCRC tend to represent Western development concepts and values, and therefore would not necessarily be inclusive of those held by Cambodians (and perhaps most Asians). Although not a popular notion in the child rights community, many children's advocates are critical of this, as noted by researcher Ruth Payne (2004):

"...the modern conception of childhood remains inherently Western (Archard, 1993), being exported through globalisation and international legislation such as the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Ennew, 2003). In particular, the UNCRC has created a 'global childhood' as a standard against which all childhoods should be measured (Bissell, 1999; Stephens, 1995)..." (pp. 15-16)

Regardless of one's position on this, is important to be aware of the differences between the two value systems, as shown in the chart below:¹²

⁹ This does not mean that behavior is always a direct reflection of an individual's values; nevertheless, they often do influence behavior, and they may also serve to justify behavior.

¹⁰ Adapted from O'Leary, M. & Nee, M. (2001) in *Learning for Transformation*.

¹¹ This term is part of the language of the rights-based approach (RBA) to development, which, generally speaking, conceptualizes achievement of 'rights' in terms of two parties: "rights-holders" (the people whose rights are in question) and "duty-bearers" (members of society responsible morally and/or legally for ensuring those rights).

¹² Adapted from O'Leary, M. & Nee, M. (2001) in *Learning for Transformation*. Many consider this to be the seminal study of cultural factors influencing development practice in Cambodia.

UNCRC Values	Cambodian Values
Equality/Participation	Hierarchy
Transparency	Honour/Reputation
Gender Equity	Patriarchy
Empowerment	Patronage
Justice	Harmony
Individualism	Collectivism

In view of the dramatic differences that exist, it is important to understand how each contributes to the overall functioning of society – and thus how and why specific values influence behaviour in a particular way. Each of the values above meets specific needs and therefore offers different benefits depending on the context in which they occur. Understanding the positive contribution of each can help decrease the tendency to judge a particular value or value system as “better” than another, illuminate how decision-making and behaviours can differ in various socio-cultural contexts, and help explain the conflicts that often occur between traditional parents and modern children. To aid in this, the research team compared and contrasted several of the traditional and modern values which frequently surfaced during the research. For reasons of analysis each value is examined separately, but it should be noted that they are actually interlinked and often appear seamless in the way they reinforce and interact with one another in daily life.

2.1 Equality vs. Hierarchy:

The value of *equality* (and the closely related value of *participation*) seeks to “flatten” differences in social status, and regards the contributions of all members of society as equally important. While different roles and responsibilities may exist within families, much flexibility and opportunity is given for various members to interact within and outside of these by sharing the load and working together for the equal benefit of all. Fairness is highly valued in this regard, particularly in decision-making.

In contrast, the value and practice of *hierarchy* gives order to social life through identification of each person's position and authority in society, and provides a guide to social interaction between individuals and groups at different levels. In Cambodia a person's position within the social order is determined chiefly by their age, but is also affected by many other factors including gender, wealth, knowledge, family reputation, personal character, political position, occupation and religious piety. In *Learning for Transformation*, the seminal study of cultural factors influencing development practice in Cambodia, researchers Moriah O'Leary and Meas Nee (2001) note that:

"In Cambodian society social stratification and differences in status are extremely important. Everyone knows, and needs to know, their place relative to that of others... as a result of the current level of acceptance and legitimacy accorded to this hierarchical order, there are set expectations of appropriate behavior when people at different levels interact... it was frequently said that if the expected behavior was not followed the person would be perceived as 'misbehaving'." (p. 53)

The common Cambodian proverb, **"Waterfalls always flow from top to bottom, never bottom to top,"** illustrates the belief that hierarchy is seen to be the natural order of things, and that power will always flow down the social strata. Those at the bottom of the social order are encouraged not to challenge those above them, as the proverb says, **"Don't take an egg to strike a stone."** This is particularly strong within the (extended) Cambodian family, as grandparents and in-laws, husbands, wives, and older and younger children/siblings have clearly prescribed roles and expectations of how each should interact with (and even address) one another. Miles (2008) found in his research on children and violence that this emphasis on hierarchy can affect how Cambodians understand the concept of 'rights':

"...children and adults often talked about different family members having more 'rights' than others. It appeared that they were seeing the concept of 'rights' through a hierarchy framework rather than an equity framework, thus making the concept of rights null and void or at least very different than what was thought to be communicated. This has implications when we consider teaching children their rights. We may think they understand them but their understanding may be very different than ours."¹³

Although children and those with the lowest status are limited in their actions and influence, hierarchy serves to clarify relationships and decision-making within a family, and if accepted, can greatly simplify the way households and families are managed.

2.2 Transparency vs. 'Honour':

Transparency emphasizes the importance of honesty and openness in all areas of life, including admitting mistakes and/or personal weaknesses as a means of learning, overcoming obstacles, and developing personal character. The rationale is that only through self-awareness of both strengths and weaknesses can an individual develop; that mistakes are necessary to find solutions and increase effectiveness; and that admitting rather than hiding character flaws is as admirable for its honesty as it is essential to overcoming them. For example, parents in families which value transparency often incorporate it into the way they discipline their children, helping them to feel secure in admitting mistakes in order to encourage discussion and learn from the experience.

In Cambodia honour and 'saving face' are considered very important, as the degree to which an individual is accorded honour and respect can have a direct and significant impact on their position in the social hierarchy, and therefore their influence and autonomy. It is important to note however, that possessing a high social position carries with it an ascribed status which itself increases a person's prestige and honour. Respect can also be earned though having "good character," which is best accomplished by behaving in ways that conform to cultural norms and religious precepts.

¹³ Personal communication by Glenn Miles, PhD regarding dissertation findings on children's rights and violence in Cambodia.

Respect and prestige have traditionally functioned to enable access to patron networks, and therefore to social and economic capital which help ensure the long-term survival and overall well-being of individuals and families. According to O'Leary and Nee (2001):

"To survive through... difficult circumstances, with no justice system, people have to look for powerful protectors or other alternative systems that can guarantee their personal security. In this case, people perceive the patronage system as essential. They for instance, choose their patron from among villagers whom they trust and who have strong links with the authorities, both civilian and military."
(pg. 53)

Gaining and maintaining access to patrons is greatly facilitated by possessing honour and prestige (as well as giving them to patrons who expect to receive respect from those they assist). This contributes to the tendency of Cambodians to avoid making mistakes and "losing face" in order to protect their reputation and relationship with patrons, and safeguard the security they receive. The importance of saving face in the context of family reputation is illustrated by the proverb "**Don't take inside fire outside, nor bring outside fire in.**"

2.3 Gender Equity vs. Patriarchy:

Gender stratification, e.g. the relative status of men and women, varies widely from culture to culture. Those cultures which value gender equity promote justice and partnership between men and women in all spheres of life. Gender equity holds that females and males are equally valuable and deserve the same rights, including equal opportunities, access to resources and representation. World bodies have linked the rights of women and girl children as essential to socio-economic development; for example, UNICEF promotes gender equality as "*levelling the playing field for girls and women by ensuring that all children have equal opportunity to develop their talents*"¹⁴, while the United Nations Millennium Project states that "*...societies where women are not afforded equal rights as men can never achieve development in a sustainable manner.*"¹⁵

In contrast traditional Khmer gender norms, with their strong emphasis on *patriarchy*, allocate power and authority to men, with the expectation that they will take primary responsibility for the welfare of their families and communities. As a result, clearly differentiated gender roles exist for Khmer men and women. Female identities and roles are traditionally embedded in the family unit, e.g. wife, mother, daughter. A common Cambodian proverb says "**Women don't dive deep or travel far**", meaning that regardless of her efforts a woman cannot stray far from her household duties and the protection of her husband, Male heads of household are expected to provide safety and economic security for the female members of the family, while women manage domestic affairs and, if needed, contribute to household income.

Strong expectations are also placed on women's responsibility to maintain a good reputation by modesty and chastity. Gorman (1999) noted that "*virginity and marital fidelity are crucially linked to perceptions of a virtuous woman, which in part determine a woman's social status.*" Immodest or promiscuous behavior may also reflect on her parents' and/or husbands' inability to 'control' or 'manage' her.

¹⁴ UNICEF (2008). *Gender Equality*. Retrieved February 10, 2009 from www.unicef.org/gender

¹⁵ United Nations Millennium Campaign (2008). *Goal #3 Gender Equity*. Retrieved February 10, 2009 from www.endpoverty2015.org/goals/gender-equity



Maintaining family honour is important in gaining access to patrons, and therefore assistance in times of need.

Photo: Peter Harris

In terms of education, formal schooling (originally in pagodas) has traditionally been reserved for male members of the family in view of their expected future roles as family and community leaders. In contrast, girls are educated informally at home by their mothers and older female relatives, with an emphasis on learning homemaking, familial responsibility and subservience to elders (Arensen, Bunn, & Knight, 2004; see also Gorman, 1999).

2.4 Empowerment vs. Patronage:

Empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social or economic strength of individuals and groups. Cultures that value empowerment seek to reduce the unjust social structures that exclude disadvantaged populations from decision-making processes. These types of cultures often focus on giving disadvantaged populations the skills and means to affect their own development. Those at the bottom of the economic hierarchy are encouraged to participate in creating change within their communities. This approach tends to upset the power balance, by advocating putting power in the hands of the poor.

In contrast, the patronage system in Cambodia emphasizes a hierarchical set of relationships in which the patron, who enjoys a high position within society, provides support or charity to those of lower status. This is echoed in the proverb, **“The rich take care of the poor like a skirt wraps around a body.”** Some see this relationship as beneficial to both parties, providing merit to the rich while giving the poor access to help in times of crisis. In this relationship the power to affect change remains with the patron, who ideally acts in the best interests of those he or she assists.

2.5 Justice vs. Harmony:

Justice strives to promote equality by providing universal and consistent standards of punishment for all. Cultures which value justice promote the rights of the individual and seek to resolve disputes by identifying who is wrong and who is right according to a set of written legal rules, and exacting a standard punishment from the perpetrator. Nisbett (2003) notes that:

“Conflict between individuals in Western countries is handled to a substantial degree by legal confrontations... Westerners call on universal principles of justice to push their goals and judges and juries feel obliged to make decisions they believe would hold for everyone in approximately similar circumstances.”

Maintaining harmony is the traditional Cambodian approach to conflict resolution. It stresses the importance of peace and balance within a family or community when resolving a problem. As Nisbett states, *“In the East, flexibility and broad attention to particular circumstances of the case are the earmarks of wise conflict resolution.”* Many societal aspects are taken into consideration when attempting to forge a solution that maintains harmony; societal, cultural and legal, however no one aspect dominates. *“The goal in Eastern conflict resolution,”* he argues, *“is more likely to be hostility reduction and compromise is assumed to be the likely result.”* This makes it a very flexible and variable system; however, the resulting compromise may be extreme.

2.6 Individualism vs. Collectivism:

Anthropologists divide cultures broadly into those that are collectivist and those that are individualistic. Those that are individualist tend to view accomplishing things independently of others as a virtue. The identity and actions of individuals is therefore of great importance, and “responsibility to self” is often stressed as much as or even more than responsibility to groups, including families. As a result, youth often seek to express their individual style and personality through fashion, music, and entertainment that is radically (and often purposely) different from their parents, and even adults pursue “alternative” lifestyles that are against social norms in order to find personal fulfilment and distinguish themselves as unique and creative individuals. Although the individuality can and does lead to conflict when the interests of individuals and families collide, it nonetheless serves to foster the individual and social change that drives human growth and development.

In contrast, collectivist cultures are family- and group-oriented. As a result there is a very strong emphasis on the economic, social and moral responsibility that family members have one to another. This has such overriding importance in Cambodian culture that it may be argued that children traditionally do not have rights, but only *responsibilities*. While this may sound harsh and one-sided to some, it contributes to the respect and loyalty that Cambodian children show their parents and elders - qualities that are often admired if not envied by parents in the Western world. It also has obvious benefits in contributing to a strong sense of solidarity that can help ensure a family's long-term stability and survival. Identification with the family unit is so strong, however, that the actions of an individual member can easily build up or damage the reputation of the family as a whole. A Cambodian proverb illustrates how this is demonstrated in practical terms, noting: **“In a basket of fish, if one stinks, they all stink.”** In Cambodia this is particularly true of how the actions of children can affect the reputation of parents.

3.0 Cultural Change and Social Tension

It is apparent that the traditional and modern values described above can and do have a beneficial role and purpose in their respective cultures. Sociologists who subscribe to the structural functionalist school of theory hold that a social behaviour or institution will persist if it fulfils specific needs of a society, particularly in contributing to its overall stability. From this point of view¹⁶, the traditional values (and their related behaviours) described above each had a specific role or function in providing stability, order and other benefits to Khmer society from ancient times up to the recent past. As the forces of globalization continue to impact Cambodia, however, the appropriateness and usefulness of customs such as arranged marriage are being questioned and challenged even in remote areas. As a result, a gap inevitably develops when traditional and modern cultures co-exist in a “transitional” society experiencing rapid social change. This was clearly seen in the research as traditional parents and modern children described conflicts that arose because of differences between the worldviews held by each. Parents often espoused values influenced by centuries-old Asian customs and traditions, religious principles, and rural lifestyles based on an agricultural economy. Many parents hold fast to these old ways, quoting a proverb that says, **“You should not hurry to throw out the old and replace it with the new.”** Children, on the other hand, tended to describe a distinctly different set of values and attitudes influenced by relatively recent global trends, education, scientific and

¹⁶ Other sociological theories start with different assumptions and therefore yield different explanations of social behaviour. For example, conflict theorists hold that social institutions and practices serve to maintain the privilege or status of some groups while keeping others in a subservient position. This may provide an explanation for the role of gender discrimination in the topics covered by this study, such as girls' education, arranged marriage, community participation, etc.

legal principles, and lifestyles shaped by an urban economy, media and technology. This was noted by Perry (2002) in *Torn Between Tradition and Desire: Young People in Cambodia Today*:

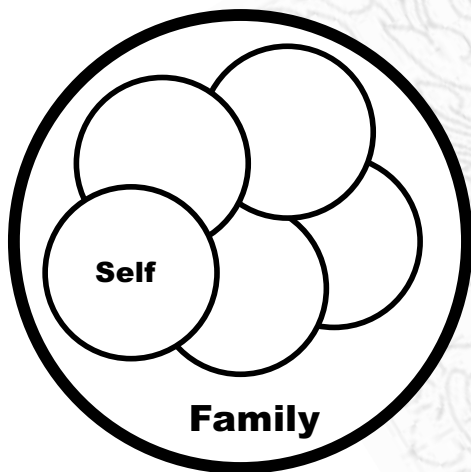
“Children and young people here, as in other countries, are living radically different lives due to the different realities they experience. This is reflected in the quote by young men in Prey Veng: ‘We want to be different. We long to have long hair or shave our heads, we want to listen to our kinds of music and watch sexy videos. We want people to know that we are different from children and adults!’” (pg. 23)

As a result, the vast majority of parents in focus groups expressed having difficulty understanding and accepting the differences between their children’s lives and their own traditions.¹⁷ One elderly woman explained that her daughter always says to her, *“Mother, you’re not keeping up with the modern world.”* Conflicts were said to increase as children got older, and especially after puberty when parents seemed to expect them (particularly girls) to become more responsible in conforming to traditional ideals.

The tension between the two value systems is clearly illustrated by situations in which “the best interest of the child” (UNCRC value) is in conflict with “the best interests of the family” (traditional Cambodian value). A common example of this is the dilemma faced by many families in Cambodia and other countries, in which children may engage in ‘hazardous’ child labour in order to help the family as a whole survive. While child rights advocates may see this as an unacceptable violation of an individual child’s rights, traditional Cambodians may see the children’s economic contribution to the family as not only necessary, but also as a positive expression of the child’s *responsibility* to support their parents and siblings – a value often shared by the children themselves. The competing values and expectations of the two sides make it difficult to reach a common understanding of the situation and therefore act as an obstacle to sustainable attitudinal and behavioural change. This lack of agreement may be in part because Westerners and others with modern values may see their children as ‘one among many’ family members, whereas traditional Asians view them as ‘part of a whole’ family unit, as illustrated below¹⁸:

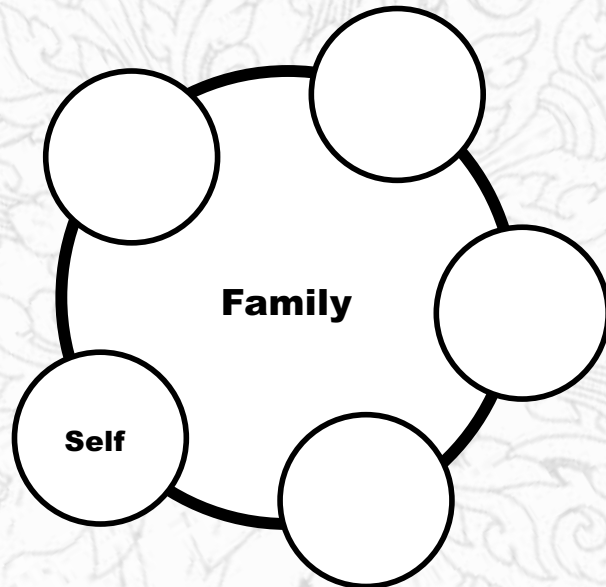
¹⁷ The sociologist William F. Ogburn coined the term “culture lag” to describe a period in which a society’s “non-material culture” of ideas and values have not yet adapted to a new “material culture” of innovations in the way people live, work, play, and so forth. Culture lag was found to be a major cause of tension within families, as parents’ ideas of a “proper” Cambodian lifestyle conflicted with their children’s desire to participate in the newest social and economic developments occurring around them.

¹⁸ Adapted from Nisbett (2003) in *The Geography of Thought*, which contrasts historical, sociological, psychological and other influences on ‘Asian’ and ‘Western’ culture and their corresponding worldviews. It is the view of the research team that his description of the traditional Asian mindset is fairly representative of the traditional Cambodian worldview.



“Part of a Whole”
(Traditional View of Family)

*Self and Rights overlap
within the family unit*



“One Among Many”
(Modern View of Family)

*Self and Rights are separate,
existing independent of the family*

These two distinct worldviews give expression to the values of collectivism and individualism, among others. Whereas traditional Cambodians often appear to have a sense of self that overlaps with (e.g. cannot be separated from) their family, Westerners and those with modern values frequently take pride in viewing themselves as individuals with an identity separate from their family¹⁹. According to Nisbett (2003) this greatly influences the way human rights are conceptualized in different cultures:

“Westerners seem inclined to believe there is only one kind of relation between the individual and the state that is appropriate... But most peoples, including East Asians... there is little or any conception of rights that inhere in the individual. For the Chinese, any conception of rights is based on a part-whole as opposed to a one-many conception of society. To the extent that the individual has rights, they constitute the individual's 'share' of the total rights.” (pg. 198)

When considered in terms of the family, then, any ‘rights’ that exist would be viewed as being shared among and/or overlapping amongst the various members in a traditional family. Conversely, in a modern worldview, ‘rights’ are considered to be possessed separately by the individuals.

Clearly, all of these factors can have a direct and significant impact on decision-making within the family. As Nisbett concludes, Westerners tend to think *linearly* - decisions are made in a straight line largely independent of context, e.g. event ‘A’ must lead directly to response ‘B’ - while Asians tend to think *holistically* - decisions are

¹⁹ These are of course broad generalisations and do not account for the variations that may be found in Asian and Western societies.

made within a circle, e.g. depending on the context of each situation.²⁰ This seemed to be evident in the findings of the current study regarding cultural responses to child sexual abuse. Respondents whose worldview reflected modern values based on rule of law and civil society (in particular parents and children from higher socio-economic backgrounds) indeed tended to think linearly, stating that if their child was raped legal redress was the only proper course of action - regardless of the circumstances²¹. In contrast, respondents with more traditional values appeared to make decisions holistically, saying their response depended on the circumstances of the family as well as the survivor. For them, legal redress was only one possible response to sexual abuse; other viable alternatives included keeping the incident secret, accepting compensation out of court, arranging marriage to the perpetrator, etc. In addition, a wide range of factors could affect the final decision, including the wishes of the survivor and her parents; the nature of the relationship between the survivor, perpetrator and their families; whether pregnancy was involved or not; the perceived severity of the abuse and its social and emotional impacts on the survivor and other family members; and last but not least, the socio-economic status of the various parties.

In sum, respondents with traditional values tended to consider how a particular response to child sexual abuse would affect the family as a whole, e.g. how it would affect the *shared rights* of all members. This does not mean that traditional Cambodian parents are not concerned about the well-being of their individual children; it may rather mean that their concern for any one individual in the family is tempered by their culturally-derived sense of responsibility for the entire family. It should be noted that in Cambodia, 'family' often includes several generations of extended relatives living under the same roof – a significant responsibility indeed.

4.0 Determining The Best Interests of Children

The concept of the 'best interests' of children has long been the subject of global debate, in part because the Convention does not offer a precise definition. The problem of determining what is exactly in a child's best interest can be compounded when competing worldviews are present, for example when opinions differ on how the family and its members should relate. While conflicts between culture and rights are unavoidable, they must be resolved in a way that ensures that children's most basic needs for survival, protection and development are provided for. As a signatory to the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child, Cambodia is legally bound to ensure that children's best interests are identified and considered, as stated in Article 3.1-2:

1. In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.

2. States Parties undertake to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being, taking into account the rights and duties of his

²⁰ In addition to Nisbett, there are, of course, numerous other authors who have identified and described 'cultural tensions', though in different terms and through 'different lenses'. One of the most well-known is Hofstede's (1986) "4-D model of cultural differences" (developed for business/industry). From an educational perspective, Popkewitz (1988) also describes the clash between 'modernism' and 'culture' (read: tradition). Specifically in regard to Cambodia, O'Leary (2006) discusses the angst of 'modern development workers' when they confront 'traditional ideas' held by so many of the people in their 'target group'. Also in the Cambodia context, Pearson & Chhay (2006) describe the 'clash of cultures' which occurs between western and Cambodia development workers/organizational values, suggesting that the tensions are not purely temporal (ie. generational) but also 'cultural' (East/West).

²¹ Extended discussions with these respondents revealed that their strong stance on this issue was not just due to the power and privilege that comes with status and affluence; but also stemmed from their understanding and belief in standards of justice and the proper rule of law, which they felt was necessary for Cambodia to develop into a safe and prosperous nation.

The Middle Way

or her parents, legal guardians, or other individuals legally responsible for him or her, and, to this end, shall take all appropriate legislative and administrative measures.

This does not offer a precise definition of “best interests”, but rather presents it as a fundamental concept to guide duty-bearers in all their actions towards children, alongside three other “general principles” which are basic to the implementation of all of the rights contained in the UNCRC. Regarding this, the UNHCR document *Guidelines on the Formal Determination of the Best Interests of the Child* states:

“While the term ‘best interests’ broadly describes the well-being of a child, it is not possible to give a conclusive definition of what is in the best interests of the child, as this depends on a variety of individual circumstances, such as the age and the level of maturity of the child, the presence or absence of parents, the child’s environment, etc. The term “best interests” should, however, be interpreted and applied in conjunction with the CRC and other international legal norms. It is important to be aware that for certain specific actions, including adoption and separation from parents against their will, the CRC requires that the best interests be the determining factor, whereas for other actions it has to be a primary consideration, which does not exclude other considerations to be taken into account.” (UNHCR, 2006, p. 6)

As noted above, the responsibility to implement the principle of best interests belongs primarily to the State, stemming from its international legal obligations. The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has enacted legislation relevant to many of the traditional practices covered by this study, such as laws against early and forced marriage. In regards to parents however, Article 3.2 also recognizes the rights and duties of parents to raise and develop their children as they see fit, so long as they base their decisions on what will be in their children’s best interests (see sidebar). Cambodian parents may differ in this, but regardless of the identity or perspective of the duty-bearer, the situation must be assessed within the context of all the child’s rights as afforded by the UNCRC. The *Implementation Handbook for the Convention on the Rights of the Child* asserts that:

“Any interpretations of best interests must be consistent with the spirit of the entire Convention – and in particular with its emphasis on the child as an individual with views and feelings of his or her own and the child as the subject of civil and political rights as well as special protections... (decision-makers) cannot interpret best interests in an overly culturally relativist way and cannot use their interpretation of ‘best interests’ to deny rights now guaranteed to children by the Convention, for example to protection against traditional practices and violent punishments.” (Hodgkin & Newell, 2002, pg. 41)



Agreeing on what exactly is in a child’s best interest can be difficult when competing worldviews are present.

Photo: Peter Harris

Q & A: The UNCRC and Parent's Rights

Is the role of the family protected?

Yes. The UNCRC acknowledges the primary role of parents and the family in the care and protection of children, and the obligation of the State to help them in carrying out these duties. It is stated in Article 5, for example, that:

State Parties shall respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents or, where applicable, the members of the extended family or community as provided for by local custom, legal guardians or other persons legally responsible for the child, to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of the rights recognised in the present Convention.

What about the rights of parents?

The UNCRC does not infringe on the rights of parents to decide what is best for their children. Instead, it specifically states that governments make every effort to keep families intact, and provide support and assistance to parents in fulfilling their responsibilities with regard to the upbringing and development of their children.

The promotion of children's rights is not a matter of placing children in conflict with the adult authorities in their lives, but of encouraging all citizens to work together for a safe, healthy and productive future for children.

Article 18 of the UNCRC states that:

State Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child. Parents or, as the case may be, legal guardians, have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child... State Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children.

Article 12 says that children have the right to express their views in all matters affecting them. Does this mean that children can now tell their parents what to do?

The intention of Article 12 is to encourage adults to listen to the opinions of children and involve them in decision-making. It does not give children authority over adults and does not interfere with parents' rights and responsibilities in relation to matters affecting their children. The UNCRC recognises that a child's participation in decision-making must occur in a manner that is appropriate to the child's age and maturity.

The UNCRC encourages parents, judges, social workers, childcare workers and other adults responsible for children to consider the child's view and to use that information to make decisions that will be in the child's best interests.

Source: *Children's Rights Alliance Information Sheet*, www.childrensrights.org

The latter reference to cultural practices is particularly relevant to this study. The UNCRC recognizes the important role of indigenous culture in the lives of children, stating in its preamble that the Convention itself was developed while “...taking due account of the importance of the traditions and cultural values of each people for the protection and harmonious development of the child...”. Nonetheless, Article 24(3) specifies that cultural practices must be limited to those that are not harmful: “State Parties shall take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children.”

Although this article refers specifically to healthcare, as noted above the best interests principle requires that this be applied with regard to the full range of rights afforded in the Convention. Therefore, it can be said that when traditional Cambodian values and practices help meet children’s basic needs for survival, protection, development and participation, they should be preserved. Conversely, those that hinder their fulfilment must be challenged and adapted, particularly when the physical and emotional health of children are at risk. An example of this is when the rights of a girl to protection and rehabilitation from sexual abuse are sacrificed for the preservation of family and personal honour. One 54 year-old man in Kampong Cham explained the rationale of many parents who choose not to report the rape of their daughters as safeguarding her long-term economic security: “You must understand: [female] virginity is very important in Cambodia, and if people know that my daughter has been raped, (we will all) lose respect; and if this happens, no one will want to marry her; and if no one marries her, who will take care of her when my wife and I die?”

This man and many others interviewed (including some children) believed that it was in his daughter’s best interests to hide the abuse. He added that he knew that rape was wrong and a punishable crime, and that he would like justice to be served, but that “honour is more important”²². In fact, personal and family honour is so central to Cambodian culture that it influenced parent’s decisions in nearly every topic researched by this study. Similarly, patriarchy remains embedded in the Cambodian psyche, despite government and NGO efforts to achieve greater gender equity at family, community and national levels. A very high level of gender bias was found in every topic studied²³ with the exception of healthcare. From community participation to arranged marriage, discipline to sexual abuse, academic and sex education and even breast-feeding, overt discrimination against girls was found - and in many cases internalized and practiced by females participating in the research. Although honour and patriarchy may have served important and perhaps even necessary functions in the traditional society of Cambodia’s past, in modern times they have become dysfunctional and, some would say, even harmful to the country’s children and youth. As Cambodia cannot go backwards in time, it must find a way to integrate and embrace the modern concepts of justice and rights sweeping the globe – changing aspects of its culture that are found not to be in the best interests of the current generation, while proudly preserving those which do.

5.0 Towards Contextualisation

It is evident that if new legal and social concepts such as children’s rights are introduced in a country without regard for the existing values upon which the society functions, their impact will be limited. Failure to contextualize may also help explain why people’s speech and behaviour can appear to be contradictory, as Cambodians often voice their support for children’s rights but continue to act according to deeply

²² This view was supported by many KAP survey respondents questioned on the issue of justice vs. honour; see findings on sexual abuse in Section V, *Traditional Beliefs and Practices*.

²³ For detailed examples see Section V, *Traditional Beliefs and Practices*.

held beliefs and cultural realities which have not been accounted for by children's advocates. As one middle-aged man put it, "*Knowledge of the mind can be changed easily, but culture is in our hearts - and people's hearts do not change quickly*". Key informants echoed this, acknowledging that even though parents may know the law regarding early marriage, for example, "*their hearts betray their heads*"; in other words, people continue following cultural norms even when they know their behaviour is not conducive to the realization of children's rights. However, continuing to promote children's rights and the values embodied in the UNCRC as the only "correct" way for parents to view and treat their children is not an effective or sustainable solution. Such an ethnocentric approach fails to acknowledge worldviews and lifestyles that in some cases have existed for thousands of years, and will not change based solely on the concepts and principles of an international treaty. This does not mean that cultural beliefs and practices that are found to be harmful to children should not be questioned or challenged; however, child rights programs which are not respectful of indigenous cultures may also fail to learn from local wisdom and customs that meet children's needs in unique and effective ways.

To be sure, traditional values emphasizing charity, harmony and collectivism can be used to facilitate the implementation of children's rights, depending on how they are defined and presented. In fact, one of the main findings of this study is that allowing the strong cultural emphasis on *responsibility*²⁴ to take a central place in CR promotion may be one of the most effective ways of gaining widespread acceptance of children's rights in Cambodia, and helping children learn to act in ways that encourage their rights to be increasingly respected in the home and community. The Convention itself gives many starting points for this, especially Article 29 which specifies that children's education must include "the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society", including developing children's respect for their parents, their nation's culture and values, the rights of others, and even the environment.

In addition in failing to learn from and build upon local knowledge and experience, development practitioners are becoming increasingly aware that imposing 'foreign' values may result in unexpected and unintended harm. Apart from potentially undermining the social fabric upon which societies are built, the quick and systematic introduction of foreign values into a society can actually create unhelpful conflict between various groups - for example, NGOs and governments; local authorities and communities; employees and employers; and even parents and children. Parents in many focus groups expressed such conflict when they said that "*children now have more rights than the parents,*" explaining how some children threatened their parents with reporting a child rights violation if they were treated unfairly, and how this undermined parental authority and ability to raise children according to their traditions.

While some conflict is expected and even necessary for change, conflict resulting from an incorrect understanding and/or application of children's rights can have the affect of dividing rather than uniting groups that need to work together for the betterment of children. Regarding parental response to sexual abuse, for example, the "child rights purist" may focus on legal redress while failing to acknowledge the significant social repercussions that loss of honour has for parents and children. Meanwhile, "cultural guardians" who seek to preserve traditional values may neglect the need of child victims to receive assistance from outside the family, which may be vital to their

²⁴ This was clearly illustrated in the findings on *Traditional Beliefs and Practices*, as parents repeatedly emphasized the importance of children's responsibility in 6 out of the 8 topics studied, including discipline (obedience to parents), sex education and sexual abuse (respecting gender roles and sexual norms), girls' education (domestic and family responsibilities of daughters), arranged marriage (respecting parents and/or responsible dating) and community participation (responsible behavior).

protection and recovery. As both sides fail to see the importance of each others' perspectives and their implications for those involved, the chances for reaching a creative solution responding to both realities is slim.

Real and sustainable change in the situation of Cambodian children can only happen if child rights advocates and the general population both 1) reflect on the underlying values that motivate decisions and behaviours towards children, 2) identify those that are in conflict and those that are shared, and 3) find ways to reduce differences and build on commonalities. The *Do No Harm* approach to foreign aid and development assistance provides one possible model.²⁵ It provides a framework for monitoring the intended and unintended impacts of humanitarian work in order to eliminate negative impacts, and increase positive contributions of international interventions. It is based on the assumption that in every situation, two factors come into play: dividers and connectors. *Dividers* are factors that cause tension and can cause conflicts and fighting. *Connectors* tend to reduce tension and/or bring people together. As both exist in any given situation, the *Do No Harm* approach provides a method for identifying and capitalizing on the positive effects of connectors, while reducing the negative impacts of dividers. Some connectors and dividers identified were identified during the research (see sidebar); it is hoped that more will be sought out and utilized by those wishing to contextualize child rights work in Cambodia.

6.0 The Middle Way

Ultimately, many connectors based on willingness to understand and cooperate are needed to close the gap between parent's traditions and children's rights. In Buddhism, Cambodia's national religion, the concept of "the middle way" may also help in striking a balance between the two:

*"The Middle Path avoids attachment to the two extremes... "Middle" means neutral, upright, and centered. It means to investigate and penetrate the core of life and all things with an upright, unbiased attitude. In order to solve a problem, we should position ourselves on neutral, upright and unbiased ground. We investigate the problem from various angles, analyze the findings, understand the truth thoroughly, and find a reasonable conclusion."*²⁶

At the end of every focus group discussion, children and parents were asked for "middle way solutions" to the problems of arranged marriage, girls' education, discipline and other issues covered by the research, so that family conflicts in these areas could be resolved in a way that shows respect for parents' traditions while protecting children's rights. The results give much hope for easing the problems resulting from rapid social change in Cambodia, and should be practical and effective in families where parents and children show a willingness to try them. The participants' solutions are included in *Section VI, Conclusion and Recommendations*.

²⁵ This approach has been forcefully applied to development by Mary Anderson: *Do No Harm: How Aid can Support Peace – or War*, Mary B. Anderson, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, February 1999.

²⁶ Buddha Dharma Education Association (2008), *Teachings in Chinese Buddhism*. Retrieved November 21, 2008 from www.buddhanet.net



Connectors and Dividers Between Cambodian Culture and Children's Rights

Cultural connectors to children's rights include (but are not limited to):

Responsibility: Both the UNCRC and traditional Khmer culture stress the responsibility of children, particularly within the family.

Respect (for parents): Parental rights and authority are affirmed by the UNCRC as they are by Khmer culture, which also emphasizes respect for elders in general.

Safety: Cambodian parents typically show great concern for the safety of their children in the community (in particular girls), which is reflected in the UNCRC's emphasis on child protection.

Healthcare: The attention given by Cambodian parents for their children's health is in line with the UNCRC's articles related to children's right to survival.

Education: Khmer culture places a very high value on education, as does the UNCRC. Traditionally however, girls' education has taken the form of socialization into traditional female roles within the home.

Cultural dividers include:

Honour: The traditional emphasis on preserving family honour and prestige in Cambodian society can lead some parents to prioritise these over children's rights to protection and rehabilitation, for example, as in the case of hiding sexual abuse.

Hierarchy: The strong emphasis on hierarchy in Cambodian society does not facilitate the recognition of children's capacities, discourages their participation in decision-making and perpetuates "top-down" approaches to education and discipline.

Patriarchy: The patriarchal structure of Cambodian society is directly at odds with the UNCRC's emphasis on non-discrimination of girl children, severely limiting their basic rights to participation, development, protection and even survival.

Respect (for autonomy of children): Traditionally, Cambodian children have been viewed as completely subject to the authority and even "ownership" of their parents, rather than respected as possessing their own rights as individuals.

III. Attitudes of Cambodians Towards Children’s Rights

As part of the assessment’s cultural analysis, the quantitative survey of 1,800 adults and children included several questions that aimed to measure respondent’s *attitudes*²⁷ towards children’s rights, in order to determine how the concept would fit with their worldview as Cambodians.

In addition to asking whether or not they agreed with a specific statement about children’s rights, each respondent was given the opportunity to explain their answer in an open-ended question, allowing the researchers to better understand the reasoning and point of view of the respondents.

The questions in this section were asked only of the 68% of survey respondents that stated that they were familiar with children’s rights. While it is not known what the attitudes may be of the other 32%, this population shows great potential for supporting children’s rights if concepts and practices are presented in a culturally relevant manner.

In general, the findings show that despite the differing values between Cambodian culture and the UNCRC, most of the respondents are positive about the general concept of child rights²⁸, primarily because they feel it has improved the overall situation of Cambodian children. The respondents who are negative, however, feel that child rights are a direct threat to Khmer culture. Interestingly, this seems true for children as well as adults, as significant differences were not found between the attitudes of the two groups. This may be because some children share the traditional attitudes of their parents, or because the survey method did not give children the security to express opinions that are against traditional culture.

Do you think that children’s rights are useful?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location			
	Phnom Penh	Kampong Cham	Oddar Meanchey	Total	Phnom Penh	Kampong Cham	Oddar Meanchey	Total
Yes	34%	2%	30%	85 %	89%	81%	85%	
No	1%	1%	1%	3 %	2%	5%	1%	
NS/DK	3%	4%	5%	12 %	9%	16%	14%	
Total				100 %	100%	100%	100%	

85% of all 1,800 respondents agreed that children’s rights are useful, because:

1. Children's rights promote education
2. It allows children to express their views
3. It reduces child abuse

The reasons given indicate recognition of the need for improved education, freedom

²⁷ "An 'attitude' is a hypothetical construct that represents an individual's degree of like or dislike for an item. Attitudes are generally positive or negative views of a person, place, thing, or event-- this is often referred to as the attitude object. People can also be conflicted or ambivalent toward an object, meaning that they simultaneously possess both positive and negative attitudes toward the item in question." (www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attitude, February 29, 2009)

²⁸ While the general concept was supported, areas in which cultural values clashed with specific rights of children found significantly less support among respondents, as covered in *Section V. Traditional Beliefs and Practices*.

of expression, and protection for children in Cambodia. While support for improved education and protection was expected, support for children's right to express themselves was surprising. This may indicate that respondents recognize the limitations traditional culture places on children (denying certain freedoms such as participation in community life and decision-making). However recognition of a need to change is not the same as readiness to change, as to do so would mean to go against deeply held values.

The overall three percent of respondents that felt that children's rights were not useful answered with the following reasons:

1. It affects Khmer traditions
2. If children have too much freedom they will have bad behaviour

While three percent is a very small proportion of the total survey population, the number increased when respondents were asked "Do you think that children's rights are appropriate for Cambodian culture?". Nearly 10% of respondents said 'no' because:

1. If children have too much freedom it will [adversely] affect their future
2. Some rights are against Khmer culture

It is important to note that for both of the questions combined, a total of 32% of all respondents said that they "did not know" or "were not sure" of how they felt about the usefulness and/or appropriateness of children's rights for Cambodian society. This indicates that a significant proportion of the sampled population has mixed feelings about the concept and practice of children's rights.

Do you think parents should give up some of their traditions in favour of children's rights?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	Phnom Penh	Kampong Cham	Oddar Meanchey	Total	Phnom Penh	Kampong Cham	Oddar Meanchey
Yes	29%	19%	25%	73%	77%	71%	71%
No	5%	4%	4%	13%	14%	13%	12%
NS/DK	4%	4%	6%	14%	9%	16%	17%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

73 percent of all respondents surveyed agreed that parents should give up some of their traditions if those were not conducive with child rights, for the following reasons:

1. To provide children with a good future. i.e. to allow children to learn to think for themselves and to gain more life experience through participation in the community, thus enabling them to make good decisions about their lives as they grow older.
2. To protect children from abuse, i.e. to allow children to learn how to protect themselves rather than parents sheltering them as tradition dictates.
3. To keep harmony in the family when there is conflict between parents' traditions and children's wishes.

It is interesting that the top two reasons acknowledge the importance of empowering children (which is not a Cambodian value), while the third recognizes that parents

should be willing to compromise some traditional expectations when these are in conflict with modern children's desires and needs (such as choosing their own marriage partners, girls' education, etc.). These indicate a good understanding of children's rights among these respondents, or at least a flexibility that will be required to accommodate the changes expected of them in the modern era.

In contrast with these, however, 13% of respondents said that parents should keep their traditions, saying that:

1. Khmer culture is good for children
2. If we give up Khmer traditions then children will not respect their parents

These echoed the concerns of those who felt that child rights were not useful or appropriate for Khmer culture. The perception that child rights undermine respect for parents was also found in some focus group discussions with parents, who said that *"these days, children have more rights than parents."* This is especially significant in the context of a society which affirms the proverb, **"The moral obligations to parents are vaster than Mount Meru"** (the mythical centre of the universe,) and in which school children are repeatedly taught to "respect your parents and listen to your teachers."²⁹ Although a minority of parents voiced these concerns, it was very real for them and perhaps also for the 14% of respondents that "didn't know" or "weren't sure" whether child rights should take precedence over parent's traditional roles and authority.

Do you think that NGOs should focus on children's rights, responsibilities, or both?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	Phnom Penh	Kampong Cham	Oddar Meanchey	Total	Phnom Penh	Kampong Cham	Oddar Meanchey
Rights	7%	5%	11%	23%	18%	21%	17%
Respon.	2%	2%	5%	9%	6%	9%	13%
Both	28%	19 %	17%	64%	75%	68%	65%
NS/DK	1%	1%	2%	4%	1%	2%	5%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Nearly a quarter of respondents felt that NGOs should focus solely on rights in order to:

1. Reduce child rights violations
2. To increase the awareness of children's rights in the population

Approximately a tenth (9%) felt that responsibilities were the most important because:

1. Children have enough rights already
2. It is important for children to be responsible

While these answers indicate attitudes that both support the need for increased protection of rights and promotion of responsibilities, the majority of respondents (64%) felt that *both* concepts should be taught by NGOs. This is significant because it reveals that Cambodians may see rights and responsibilities as inter-connected, i.e. that one cannot exist without the other and are both necessary for children's well-being. This is

²⁹For a more detailed discussion of cultural values and community participation see Jordanwood, M. (2004), *Respect and Rights*. Save the Children-Noway: Phnom Penh, Cambodia

not surprising in view of the fact that Cambodian culture has always recognized that the responsibility of children is to be obedient, respectful, helpful, and studious for example. The implication for child rights practitioners is that in order to gain widespread acceptance and implementation of the UNCRC in Cambodia, an equal emphasis on children's responsibilities within families and communities should be integrated with training and campaigning on rights.

IV. Awareness and Understanding of Child Rights

This section describes the findings related to **Objective 1: Assess the level of understanding of child rights among parents and children**. To determine this, the quantitative survey of 1,800 adults and children included questions regarding 1) respondents' awareness of children's general and specific rights, and 2) their understanding of how these rights are implemented in specific situations.

1.0 Awareness of Children's Rights

In regard to survey questions on basic awareness, respondents were asked whether or not they "knew" (i.e. recognized or were familiar with) terms which are commonly used by NGOs in training, campaigning and awareness-raising. The results can therefore serve as one indicator of the effectiveness of child rights promotion in the target locations.

Respondents were first asked if they knew the term "children's rights", and to give an example of what they understood it to mean. Those that were familiar with children's rights were then asked if they had heard of the "4 baskets" of rights commonly promoted by GO/NGOs in Cambodia. The 4 baskets consist of the rights to **Survival, Development, Protection and Participation**. While the individual articles of the UNCRC often fit into more than one of these baskets, they are generally understood as follows:

Rights to Survival include those that ensure the fulfilment of children's most basic needs, including food, shelter, health care and clean water, as well as a birth certificate ensuring access to legal and social services.

Rights to Development include those that ensure children's ability to reach their full potential, including education, play and freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

Rights to Protection include those that ensure that children are protected from all forms of violence, abuse and neglect, have access to rehabilitative services, and are given fair treatment within the justice system.

Rights to Participation include those that enable children to express their views and meet with others allowing them to take an active part in their families; communities and nations; to form their own ideas and religious beliefs; and to access information that is helpful to them.

The results of the survey are presented below. Differences between the locations and target groups are noted only when pertinent. In general, significant differences between the awareness of parents and children were not found, perhaps because they both were exposed to the same CR promotional activities.

Have you ever heard about children's rights?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location			
	Phnom Penh	Kompong Cham	Oddar Meanchey	Total	Phnom Penh	Kompong Cham	Oddar Meanchey	Total
Yes	25%	18%	25%	68%	75%	55%	73%	
No	8%	15%	9%	32%	25%	45%	27%	
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

When asked this question, 68% of the total number of respondents said they had heard of the term 'children's rights'. While this is a respectable result, a target of at least 80% of the general population would arguably be a more desirable indicator of successful awareness-raising.

Within each location however, approximately 75% of Phnom Penh and Oddar Meanchey's population had heard of children's rights, while only 55% of Kampong Cham's population was familiar with the term. This suggests that while Phnom Penh and Oddar Meanchey have achieved respectable results in promoting children's rights (perhaps due to a greater number and duration of awareness-raising projects in those locations), more work is needed in the survey locations in Kampong Cham.

Have you ever heard about children's right to: a) Protection b) Survival c) Development or d) Participation?

	% of all 1,800 respondents answering "Yes"			
	Phnom Penh	Kampong Cham	Oddar Meanchey	Total
Protection	23%	15%	19%	57%
Survival	22%	14%	19%	55%
Development	19%	12%	14%	45%
Participation	14%	12%	10%	36%

As the table shows, the most recognized basket across all locations among all respondents was children's right to protection, with 57% of the total number of respondents stating they were familiar with it. This is not surprising given the amount of work that has been done in Cambodia to address issues such as child trafficking, sexual and physical abuse, child labour, etc. Recognition of protection rights was followed by survival (55%), development (45%) and lastly participation (36%).

It should be noted that the recognition rate for specific rights never exceeded 60% of the total respondents across all locations, which seems rather low considering that awareness-raising on the UNCRC has been conducted in Cambodia since 1994. However a more positive impact is found when the awareness rate is viewed in terms of the population *within* each location, as seen in the next table:

Recognition of the Four Baskets among 600 respondents per location

	Phnom Penh	Kampong Cham	Oddar Meanchey
Protection	70%	46%	56%
Survival	66%	42%	56%
Development	43%	29%	37%
Participation	57%	35%	41%

The table above shows that a higher percentage of Phnom Penh's population knew of all 4 baskets, ranging from 70% awareness of protection to a minimum of 43% awareness of development rights. Oddar Meanchey was next with a range of 56% to 37% awareness across the various 4 baskets, while Kampong Cham showed less than 50% awareness of all baskets. The findings therefore indicate that the most awareness-raising is needed particularly on the right to participation and development in Kampong Cham and Oddar Meanchey.

2.0 Understanding of Children's Rights

In order to determine the level of understanding of child rights (as opposed to basic awareness), scenarios based on real-life situations were read to respondents, who were then asked if what happened to the child was morally right or wrong. This approach was used because the research team assumed that if respondents were asked a straight-forward question about whether the scenarios violated children's rights or not, respondents might have tended to answer according to their technical knowledge of legal rights, or give what they thought might be the correct 'textbook' answer, rather than honestly state what they regarded as a violation of child rights. The research team therefore reasoned that the recognition of certain actions toward children as morally wrong or unethical would be a good indicators of respondents' actual understanding of child rights, and not mere familiarity with the concept.

The scenarios describe situations and practices which are commonly found in Cambodia, yet which may be considered violations of children's rights as found in each of the 4 baskets. As such, respondent's answers give insight as to how Cambodians feel about justice, violence, corruption, gender and other issues as they apply to and affect children. They may also reflect how respondents might respond if they encountered these situations, and therefore may serve as possible indicators of how children's rights are actually being practiced³⁰. Each respondent was also given the opportunity to explain their answer in an open-ended question, which gave further insight into their reasoning and verified whether they connected the scenario with children's rights or not.

As above, differences between locations and target groups are only noted where applicable. In general, greater levels of understanding were found between urban and rural areas than between adults and children, again perhaps because they had been exposed to the same types and levels of CR promotion.

2.1 Right to Protection Scenarios

³⁰ Self-reporting of behavior against scenarios is one way to assess changes in practice in KAP studies.

A public primary school teacher hit a student because he didn't do his homework. Is this right or wrong?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Right	16%	23%	22%	61%	48%	69%	65%
Wrong	15%	8%	11%	34%	47%	26%	33%
NS/DK	2%	2%	1%	5 %	5%	5%	2%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

A total of 61% of all respondents surveyed agreed that it is acceptable for a teacher to hit a child who does not do his/her homework – an act which violates both national law and the child's rights. When viewed by location, Phnom Penh respondents were again least likely to agree, indicating a greater level of awareness about children's right to protection from corporal punishment than in the two provincial locations.

The majority of respondents who agreed said it was the fault of the student for being lazy in not completing homework. This indicates that the prevailing cultural emphasis is on the responsibility of children to obey teachers rather than on teachers to address problems without using violence.

The next most common reason given was that the teacher was simply doing their job in wanting the child to be a good student, indicating that the tradition of allowing teachers to do whatever is necessary to teach students is still very strong in Cambodia and not perceived as a violation of children's rights. In fact, key informants stated that in the past, when boys were taught by monks in local pagodas, parents would tell the monks, "We need only their skin and bones", a well-known saying indicating the approval of violence as a means to educate their children - an attitude which continues today.

Among respondents who disagreed, they reasoned that:

1. The teacher should have simply advised the child and not hit the child.
2. It was a violation of the child's rights.
3. It might adversely affect the child's emotional health.

While these respondents demonstrated a solid understanding of the unacceptability of corporal punishment in schools and the negative impact of violence against children, the fact that 60% found it acceptable shows that further attention must be given to changing beliefs and attitudes in this area.



Traditional Cambodian values place a strong emphasis on the responsibility of children to respect and obey their teachers.

Photo: Nigel Goddard

A 12 year-old street child steals a chicken and is tied up and beaten by the chicken's owner. Is this right or wrong?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Right	3%	7 %	6%	16%	8%	21%	19%
Wrong	30%	25%	27%	82%	90%	75%	80%
NS/DK	1%	1%	0%	2 %	2%	4%	1%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

An overwhelming majority (82%) of all 1,800 respondents felt that punishing a child by tying him up and beating him was wrong. When disaggregated by location, twice as many respondents agreed with violent punishment in the provincial locations than in Phnom Penh, demonstrating less understanding of children's rights in the provinces.

The most common reasons given that the boy was treated wrongly were because:

1. The owner should have corrected the child in a non-violent manner.
2. The boy was too young for such punishment.
3. It was a violation of the child's rights.

These answers all indicate recognition of the child's right to protection from violent punishment, however it is significant that no respondent mentioned the street child's rights to survival (e.g. shelter, food, etc).

Those who said this type of punishment was acceptable felt that the boy was at fault in committing a crime, and that it was necessary to deter him from stealing again. These answers again demonstrate the prevalence of a strong cultural emphasis on responsibility of children, and the justification of adults to use violence in order to correct child behaviour.

A 16-year-old girl is trafficked as a sex worker. Later, the police arrest her because she is a sex worker. Is this right or wrong?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Right	1%	3%	4%	8%	7%	13%	11%
Wrong	30%	25%	28%	83%	89%	77%	84%
NS/DK	2%	5%	2%	9%	4%	10%	5%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

83% of all respondents surveyed correctly stated that the arrest of a teenage girl who had been trafficked is wrong. Geographically speaking, Kampong Cham had the lowest awareness of this, and also had the largest percentage of respondents who were "not sure" or "don't know" (10%).

The majority of these recognized that she was a victim of the crime of trafficking and should therefore not be arrested. Others stated the police should have investigated why she was a sex worker (to find out whether she was working voluntarily or not), and that she was under 18 and should not be held responsible.

In contrast, the minority of those that felt that she should be arrested said that:

1. She was working as a sex worker.
2. The police were trying to help her (perhaps by rescuing or “re-educating” her).
3. She was a disobedient child and did not follow her parents.

These answers reveal the alarming belief that the girl's arrest could be justified because she should be held accountable for her involvement in sex work - which is so counter to traditional values for Khmer women - regardless of her age or reason for being involved. This perception, combined with another 9% who either did not know or were unsure whether the girl was a victim or offender, reveal that the belief that women are solely responsible for maintaining their sexual ‘purity’ is still strong and should be challenged.

2.2 Right to Survival Scenarios

A father asks the local authorities to issue a birth certificate for his newborn son, but they ask for money to do it quickly. Is this right or wrong?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Right	7%	12%	13%	32%	23%	36%	38%
Wrong	23%	16%	19%	58%	70%	47%	58%
NS/DK	3%	6%	1%	10%	7%	7%	4%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

58% of all respondents correctly stated that it was wrong for the local authorities to ask for money to provide a birth certificate, which by law are free to all children. In terms of breakdown by location, provincial respondents were far more likely to agree that paying for a birth certificate was acceptable, indicating that there is a lower awareness of the rights to a free certificate in those areas, and/or that the practice of corruption was more accepted.

The main reasons that respondents felt this was wrong were:

1. Provision of birth certificates should be free.
2. Bribery is against the law.
3. It is the local authorities' job to issue birth certificates.

Those who believed it was acceptable for authorities to ask for money said so because:

1. “They are working for us” and thus should be paid for their services.
2. Their salaries are low.
3. The father needed the birth certificate quickly so he should pay a fee.

These findings provide evidence that awareness-raising on the right to receive free birth certificates (a necessity for children in order to prove their nationality and right to protection and other services afforded to citizens) have been largely effective. However the fact that a third of the respondents appeared to consider that paying fees for this service is an acceptable practice, indicates that corruption is wide spread and needs to be addressed in order for children to fully realize their rights in Cambodia.

A poor girl goes to live with her aunt. Each day her aunt gives her niece less food than her own child because the aunt is also poor. Is this right or wrong?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Right	7%	5%	7%	19%	20%	18%	22%
Wrong	26%	27%	27%	79%	77%	81%	78%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

In response to this question, 79% of all respondents said that it was wrong for the aunt to give her niece less food than her own child, with similar responses among the three locations. Those who disagreed said so because:

1. It is a violation of her niece's rights.
2. It is discrimination (all children have equal rights to food).
3. She will get ill if she does not receive enough food.

A rather large 19% of all respondents thought it was acceptable because:

1. The aunt is poor.
2. It is her responsibility to care for her own daughter first.
3. The birth daughter has more rights.

While the overall answers indicates a majority of respondents surveyed were aware of the right of all children to nutrition without discrimination, given Cambodia's history of war it is possible that in situations of extreme scarcity some may feel that it is acceptable for a mother to prioritize her own children's survival above others.

A woman takes her daughter to the public health centre for a vaccination, but must return home when the doctor asks for money and she cannot afford it. Is this right or wrong?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Right	4%	6%	7%	17%	2%	3%	4%
Wrong	27%	23%	25%	75%	97%	96%	95%
NS/DK	3%	4%	1%	8%	1%	1%	1%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

75% of the respondents correctly answered that it was wrong for the doctor to charge money to vaccinate the woman's child, with little variation found between locations. Those who felt it was wrong said that:

1. Vaccinations are free.
2. The doctor is responsible for providing free vaccinations.
3. The doctor's actions put the child at risk of illness.
4. The doctors are paid to vaccinate children.

In contrast, those who felt that that it was acceptable for the doctor to charge for vaccinations said so because:

1. The doctor is spending time and materials in providing the service.
2. The doctor's salary is too low.

The findings are positive in that the majority of respondents understood the child's right to receive vaccinations which protect the public from serious and/or life threatening illnesses. However, as in other questions the problem of corruption and its related problem of low salaries for civil servants clearly undermines the provision of public services which support children's right to survival.

2.3 Right to Participation Scenarios

A father doesn't allow his 12 year-old son to meet with his friends after school, because he thinks it's "a useless waste of time". Is this right or wrong?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Right	16%	16%	21%	53%	49%	49%	64%
Wrong	13%	14%	11%	38%	40%	41%	34%
NS/DK	4%	4%	1%	9%	11%	10%	2%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

38% of all respondents correctly answered that the father was wrong in thinking that it was a waste of time for his son to meet with his friends. Among the three locations, Oddar Meanchey was the least likely to recognize this as wrong.

The top reasons given by those who disagreed were:

1. His son has a right to meet with his friends.
2. Meeting friends provided him with opportunities to learn and gain experience.

Over half (53%) all respondents stated that it was right of the father to do this because:

1. He was afraid that his son would meet bad friends.
2. It would interfere with the son's homework and household chores.

These findings indicate that there is some awareness of children's right to meet with friends and the importance of this in their lives. However, the traditional values of protecting children from bad influences by keeping them at home and the responsibilities of children to study and to help their parents at home, are considered to be more important. This is corroborated by the results of focus group discussions which found that parents often lack understanding of the key role that friendships and play have in children's development.

A father doesn't allow his 16-year-old son to go a Christian church because he says it's not Khmer religion. Is this right or wrong?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Right	15%	14%	14%	43%	46%	42%	43%
Wrong	15%	13%	16%	44%	46%	48%	47%
NS/DK	3%	7%	3%	13%	8%	10%	10%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

44% of all respondents correctly said that it was wrong for the father to prohibit his son from attending a church, a sentiment that was fairly consistent between the three research locations. Those who disagreed felt that the father should allow his son to attend a Christian church because:

1. Children have the right to participate in the religion of their choice.
2. All religions are good.

Almost exactly the same overall number of respondents (43%) stated that the father's decision was acceptable because:

1. Christianity is not Khmer religion.
2. Children should follow their parents' wishes.

It should be noted that a significant proportion of respondents (13%) were unsure or did not know how to answer this question, indicating either a lack of awareness of children's right to their own beliefs or a lack of religious conviction leading them to prefer one religion over another.

While it is positive that nearly half of the respondents supported children's right to their own religious beliefs (according to their age and maturity), the fact that the other half of respondents felt that children should conform to their parent's wishes and follow traditional religious beliefs could limit children's freedom in developing a meaningful faith of their own. While Article 14 of the UNCRC does grant parents the authority to guide the development of children's beliefs, as the child grows and matures he or she should be allowed to make personal choices in this matter.

A 16 year-old girl asks her mother to explain about sexual health, but she refuses, saying it's impolite for Khmer women to talk about such things. Is this right or wrong?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Right	9%	11%	10%	30%	28%	34%	29%
Wrong	22%	17%	21%	60%	67%	61%	64%
NS/DK	2%	5%	3 %	10%	5%	5%	7%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

60% of all respondents correctly agreed that it was wrong of the mother not to answer her daughter's questions about sexual health – a response that was found to be similar among the three locations. Most disagreed with the mother's decision because:

1. It is important to protect her health.
2. It is her mother's responsibility to tell her.

However, a third (30%) of all respondents felt that it was acceptable for the mother to refuse to talk to her daughter about sex because:

1. The mother is afraid that the daughter will experiment sexually.
2. She is not old enough to know and will find out when she gets married.

In general, respondents' answers reflect both modern and traditional views on sexual education. While many Cambodians are recognizing that parents should provide children with appropriate information on sexual issues, others are still afraid that children will want to experiment with sex if they hear about it. These answers also reveal the traditional belief that girls in particular must be kept ignorant of sexual matters in order to ensure their sexual "purity".

2.4 Right to Development Scenarios

A public primary school teacher asks for money from students before allowing them to enter her class each day. Is this right or wrong?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Right	9%	8%	7%	24%	26%	25%	25%
Wrong	24%	23%	24%	71%	70%	69%	73%
NS/DK	1%	3%	1%	5%	4%	6%	2%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

71% of all respondents surveyed correctly answered that it was wrong for a primary school teacher to ask for money from students. Little geographical difference was found, with those who disagreed saying that:

1. It is a child rights violation (public school should be free)
2. The teacher already receives a salary.
3. The teacher is a bad role model that will make kids corrupt when they grow older.

24% of all respondents felt that it was fine for the teacher to ask for money from students because:

1. This is the normal practice in Cambodian.
2. The teacher's salary is low.

It is positive to note that the majority of parents and children surveyed recognized that children have the right to free primary education. However the acceptance of

corruption in public services that benefit children is still high, as was found in the questions on birth certificates and vaccinations. Given that this behaviour is commonplace in Cambodia, it is encouraging that so many respondents still recognize that this is wrong, that it is a violation of children's rights, and that children should not learn from teachers that corrupt behaviour is normal and/or acceptable.

A father and mother don't allow their daughter enough time to study like their son because they make her do housework. Is this right or wrong?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Right	9%	8%	7%	24%	26%	25%	25%
Wrong	24%	23%	24%	71%	70%	69%	73%
NS/DK	1%	3%	1%	5%	4%	6%	2%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

71% of respondents surveyed correctly believed it is wrong for parents not to allow their daughters the same amount of time to study as their sons. When broken down by location, respondents from Phnom Penh were slightly more likely to disagree than those from the provinces. The most common reasons given were:

1. All children have equal rights to study.
2. Girls should not be discriminated against.

The 24% of all respondents who agreed said that the daughter should not have the same time to study as her brother because:

1. It is the girl's job to do the housework.
2. The son needs to study more.
3. The son has more freedom.

The results show that the majority of respondents recognized that girls should have equal time to study, which is encouraging especially in light of Cambodia's traditionally restrictive gender roles that limit girls' activities to home and family. The traditional roles were clearly stated by the one-quarter of respondents who saw no problem with favouring the education of sons over daughters.

V. Traditional Beliefs and Practices

This section describes traditional beliefs and practices within specific areas of Cambodian family life related to children's rights to survival, development, participation and protection. Each section, divided by topic, begins with an overview of the main findings, including the various factors which support and hinder children's rights in this area. After specific quantitative and qualitative findings are presented, "middle way" solutions to resolving conflicts between cultural practices and children's rights are given as identified by children and parents themselves.

As in the sections on awareness and understanding above, quantitative data is presented in tables which summarize the responses of all 1,800 survey respondents, as well as the 600 respondents within each location. Several tables presented in succession indicate data that is to be compared between them.

Disaggregated data on the responses of the various target groups (including parents and children, men and women) are not presented due to space constraints, and because significant differences generally did not occur. As noted in the section on research limitations, the similarity in responses may have occurred because large-scale quantitative surveys are not the ideal method for capturing people's true feelings about sensitive issues, and children in particular. These are described in the narratives following each table, along with any significant statistical differences found among target groups in the quantitative survey.

1.0 Right to Survival: Nutrition & Healthcare

1.1 Nutrition

In relation to nutrition and breast-feeding, Article 24.1(c,d) of the UNCRC requires that States must take appropriate measures:

(c) To combat disease and malnutrition, including within the framework of primary health care, through, inter alia, the application of readily available technology and through the provision of adequate nutritious foods and clean drinking-water, taking into consideration the dangers and risks of environmental pollution;

(e) To ensure that all segments of society, in particular parents and children, are informed, have access to education and are supported in the use of basic knowledge of child health and nutrition, the advantages of breast-feeding, hygiene and environmental sanitation and the prevention of accidents;

Article 24.3 also specifies that:

States Parties shall take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children.

In this regard, the **UN Committee on the Rights of the Child**³¹ has repeatedly emphasized the principle of non-discrimination found in Article 2, reminding States that nutrition and breast-feeding must not be discriminatory on the basis of the child's sex or any other factor. This includes *"the deliberate act of preferential feeding and/or care of male children; lack of care for disabled children or children born on certain days; food taboos; etc."* (Hodgkin & Newell, 2002, pg. 367).

Summary of Main Findings

This topic covered breast-feeding for newborns and infants as well as general nutrition for children up to pre-teen years (12 years of age). Child health practitioners consulted prior to the research noted that updated information is needed on local breast-feeding beliefs and practices, as there has been widespread misunderstanding in the past of the necessity of colostrum, the benefits of breast milk vs. powdered or canned milk, and of proper weaning ages and practices. Perceptions of parents and children regarding the types and amounts of food that children need at different ages, the connections they make between nutrition and recovery from illness (in particular malnutrition), and differences in feeding boys and girls were also identified during the planning phase and included in the various methods of data collection.

Encouragingly, the vast majority of women joining FGDs in both urban and rural locations recognized the importance of breast-feeding as necessary for the healthy development of babies. There was very high awareness that breast milk was much more important and beneficial than powdered milk, canned milk or sweetened water, and indicated that the latter are only used when a woman is unable to produce milk, or occasionally when she is too busy to breast-feed. When this occurred most indicated a preference for using powdered milk or baby formula, but noted that this was only available to those that could afford it. When alternatives to breast milk were used the majority of focused groups were aware of the importance of paying attention to hygiene during preparation. The importance of colostrum was also known to most of the parents in the FGD as well as in the survey, where 98% of respondents agreed that it should not be thrown away – a clear reversal of traditional custom. These findings may indicate the success of awareness-raising and behavioural change on the importance of colostrum and breast-feeding in general.

However, both male and female parents in focus groups demonstrated a clear gender bias in favour of boys in relation to breast-feeding and particularly in the provincial locations. The majority of participants explained that they typically breastfed boys for an average of 3 years as opposed to only 1.5 years for girls. This discriminatory practice was investigated and confirmed in the quantitative survey, as described in the specific findings below.

In regards to nutrition, a majority of parents and children participating in focus group discussions had a good awareness of balanced diets for children at different ages, from weaning infants through to the teenage years. They often cited nutrition guidelines that have been promoted in Cambodia, including the Four Colours of Food and the Food Pyramid, and were able to explain these. On the other hand, a significant number of parents believed that the amount of food children eat is more important than they kinds of food, a belief that was confirmed by the quantitative survey (see below). As a result, they did not always appear to ensure that a proper variety of foods was eaten,

³¹ The *UN Committee on the Rights of the Child* is a United Nations treaty monitoring body which assesses how well states are implementing the Convention, reports on progress, and also makes recommendations. All States which are party to the Convention are required to submit a comprehensive report to the Committee every five years.

and simply encouraged or allowed the child to eat those foods which he or she liked the most, with the rationale that it was sufficient for them to eat until they were full.

In contrast to the findings on breast-feeding, there was no difference found in the amount of food given to boys and girls after weaning, although participants noted that boys tended to eat much more than girls because of their perceived higher energy expenditure. Interestingly, they often explained their answer in terms of rights, e.g. all children have the same right to nutrition, whereas they did not make this connection when explaining differences in breast-feeding boys and girls.

When asked about the types of foods that should be given to children when they are ill, both parents and children were easily able to list foods that should be avoided for specific illnesses. These foods were generally selected according to the Eastern belief that the body's internal temperature must be regulated to recover from certain illnesses. Foods are selected on whether they cool down or warm up the body. For example, mango and jackfruit are considered "warming" fruit that should not be eaten by a person who has a fever. However, while participants were very clear in stating what should not be eaten according to this distinctly Eastern health system (debatable in its effectiveness), there was very little awareness of the need for balanced nutrition and/or specific foods that *should* be given to children in order to promote a quick and complete recovery. Child health and nutrition specialists stated that for common childhood illnesses such as diarrhea, respiratory infections or other fevers, the recommendation is to continue feeding as normal. As this contrasts with the beliefs and practices of the participants, education and awareness-raising is indicated in this area.

Finally, nearly all focus groups with parents were able to name the major signs of malnutrition, including yellow and papery skin, bloated stomach, severe weakness. Moreover, they did not confuse these symptoms as resulting from other illnesses, or say that such a child was simply underweight or "of slight frame". This response was very encouraging and a sign of the effectiveness of community education efforts by the health sector. On the other hand, most participants were often not able to describe the correct treatment for malnutrition, other than taking the child to a doctor. When asked how much and how often children should be given food, most replied that they should eat 3x per day, "as normal"; this is in contrast to the dominant health message that small meals 6-8x per day is optimal. This lack of understanding about nutrition was confirmed by the quantitative survey.



The majority of participants said boys are breastfed longer than girls because they were expected to work harder as future breadwinners.

Photo: Nigel Goddard

Supportive and Hindering Factors

Knowledge, attitudes and practices that support children's right to nutrition include:

- High awareness of necessity of colostrum for newborns
- Widespread understanding and practice of breast-feeding vs. powdered or canned milk or sweetened water
- Awareness of good hygiene practice when preparing alternatives to breast milk
- High awareness of right to equal nutrition for boys and girls after weaning
- Understanding of balanced diet / nutritional needs of children, including the 'four colours of food' and the Food Pyramid
- Widespread understanding of specific foods to be avoided when children have different illnesses (according to Eastern system)

Factors that hinder children's right to nutrition include:

- Girls consistently breastfed less than boys due to beliefs that "boys need to be stronger to do hard work" & "girls will be stubborn if breastfed too long"
- Very low awareness of equal right of girls to be breastfed as long as boys
- Low understanding and practice of ensuring that children eat a variety of foods vs. the amount of food at each meal
- Very low understanding of connection between nutrition and healthcare, e.g. need for balanced nutrition to recover from illness

Specific Findings

Detailed findings from survey interviews and focus group discussions include:

Boys should be breastfed longer than girls so they are stronger for work.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	19%	26%	26%	71%	56%	77%	77%
Disagree	13%	6%	7%	26%	39%	19%	20%
NS/DK	1%	1%	1%	3%	5%	4%	3%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

If girls are breastfed for too long they will be stubborn.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	12%	16%	18%	46%	35%	49%	53%
Disagree	19%	14%	14%	47%	56%	41%	41%
NS/DK	2%	3%	2%	7%	9%	10%	6%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

As shown in the tables above, 71% of all respondents surveyed agreed that boys need to be breast-fed longer than girls so that they will be stronger for work, while 46% of respondents agreed that if girls are breastfed too long they will be stubborn. When disaggregated by location, these beliefs were significantly higher in the provinces than in Phnom Penh.

These high numbers reflect a clear discrimination against girls, with the reasons given revealing the strict gender roles found in Khmer society. This includes the belief that adult males do heavier work than women (not recognizing the labour-intensive work of women in homes), and the belief that girls should be gentle, mild and self-effacing compared to boys who are expected to be willful and aggressive. Disturbingly, there was no clear connection among the participants of the detrimental affect that under-breast-feeding could have on a girl's physical, emotional and intellectual development. The latter is especially important to address in order for girls to have an equal footing with boys in the education system as well as the workforce.

In terms of breakdown by age and sex, parents and children of both sexes responded similarly in all locations, perhaps indicating that gender discrimination has been internalized by society as a whole. This is not surprising given the patriarchal organization of Khmer society - although this appears to be slowly changing in the nation's capital, where more accurate information regarding breast-feeding is also available.

Children who are malnourished should eat 3 times per day as usual in order to recover.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	18%	18%	22%	58%	54%	54%	67%
Disagree	14%	13%	10%	37%	42%	40%	30%
NS/DK	1%	3%	1%	5%	4%	6%	3%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

While parents in focus groups were usually able to give correct descriptions for the signs and symptoms of malnutrition, they often did not know how to treat malnutrition other than that the child should be taken to the doctor. This was reflected in the survey, with 58% of all respondents agreeing that malnourished children should consume food three times per day as usual. When broken down by location, Oddar Meanchey respondents were 10% more likely to agree than Kampong Cham and Phnom Penh.

These findings indicate a need for increased awareness of the amount and frequency of food that is needed for recovery, as malnourished children should be fed small amounts at least six times per day. Encouragingly, parents in villages with health workers tended to show more understanding of the problem and treatment.

The amount of food children eat at each meal is more important than the kinds of food they eat.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	10%	11%	15%	36%	30%	33%	45%
Disagree	22%	20%	17%	59%	67%	59%	52%
NS/DK	1%	3%	1%	5%	3%	8%	3%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Over half of all respondents surveyed correctly indicated that eating the proper types of food is more important than the quantity. However, 36% of all respondents thought that the amount of food was more important. When viewed by location, Oddar Meanchey was 10% more likely to agree with this. Health workers stated that this is a common problem in some families who follow the preferences of the child and allow them to eat their fill of foods they like (or agree to eat), to the neglect of other foods required for a balanced diet.

Results of focus group discussions on the topic of quantity vs. quality were similar, with many parents demonstrating awareness of the need for a balanced diet, and others believing that it is sufficient to ensure that children eat a lot of what they like.

1.2 Healthcare

In relation to healthcare, Article 24.1 of the UNCRC reads:

“States Parties recognize the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health. States Parties shall strive to ensure that no child is deprived of his or her right of access to such health care services.”

Furthermore, Article 24.2 (e) clarifies that States must: *“...ensure that all segments of society, in particular parents and children, are informed, have access to education and are supported in the use of basic knowledge of child health...”*

Summary of Main Findings

This topic investigated beliefs and practices related to children's right to adequate healthcare. As the research is directed at the family level, the focus was on parents as the primary duty-bearers.

In terms of healthcare in general, parents appeared to have a good understanding of common childhood illnesses and treatments, and knew when it was necessary to seek a doctor's assistance. Moreover, provincial participants had a very high level of knowledge about how to use traditional herbs and remedies for specific illnesses, which they asserted were more effective and less expensive than modern medicine. On the other hand, rural parents also knew which traditional treatments were not suitable – such as 'coining' a very young child with a metal object - and when a modern doctor's assistance and advice should be sought.

Several common Cambodian healthcare myths were also covered by the research. Focus group participants suggest a reduction in the belief that I.V. drips of saline solution is an effective first-line treatment for weakness, dizziness, etc., saying that it should only be done when ordered by a doctor. The KAP survey results showed that another incorrect long-standing belief continues however, namely that taking multiple medicines (pills, tablets, or capsules) is more generally effective than taking one or two. This was balanced by qualitative findings, in which many focus group participants were aware that only a doctor should prescribe the types and number of medications to be taken for a given illness.

Supportive and Hindering Factors

Knowledge, attitudes and practices that support children's right to healthcare include:

- Knowledge of symptoms of common childhood illnesses and awareness of when to utilize modern doctors and medication.
- Good utilization of traditional medicines/healers for simple illnesses
- Reported reduction in practice of using I.V. saline drips without doctors' orders.

Factors that hinder children's right to healthcare include:

- Long-standing perception that taking many kinds of medicines simultaneously is generally more effective than taking 1-2 pills.
- Belief that spirits are the cause of some illnesses may hinder access to appropriate medical treatment.

Specific Findings

Additional detailed findings on healthcare are as follows:

Giving children many kinds of medicine when they are sick is more effective than one or two kinds.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	9%	15%	18%	42%	28%	46%	54%
Disagree	18%	12%	12%	42%	52%	37%	37%
NS/DK	7%	6%	3%	16%	20%	17%	9%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Overall, respondents were equally divided (with 42% agreeing and disagreeing) as to whether giving children many or few kinds of medicine is most effective. When disaggregated by location however, respondents in the provinces were much more likely to agree with the common belief that multiple kinds of medicines is desirable. As in most other questions, differences between adults and children of both sexes were insignificant.

These findings demonstrate that much confusion still exists regarding an issue that has concerned health practitioners for years. Although in a minority of cases multiple medications may be required, routinely providing children with many kinds of medicine is considered to be ineffective as well as possibly detrimental. This is particularly true when medicines have negative interactions with each other, or when antibiotics are administered for short terms as part of a group of medicines. Participants in focus group discussions had a better understanding of this issue than reflected in the survey, with many parents stating that medicines should be prescribed by a doctor according to the type of illnesses. FGD participants also said that in cases where multiple medicines were prescribed, it was often when people relied on the advice of pharmacists, who are less knowledgeable than doctors or more interested in gaining profit than providing proper treatment.

Coining with a metal object can be dangerous for children under 3 years old.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	27%	24%	26%	77%	81%	73%	78%
Disagree	2%	6%	5%	13%	7%	17%	15%
NS/DK	4%	3%	3%	10%	12%	10%	7%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

77% of all respondents surveyed believed that coining a young child with a metal object is dangerous, in agreement with health practitioners who stated that this traditional practice can be dangerous for infants in particular. The fact that only 13% of respondents felt it was not dangerous demonstrates a high level of awareness about the hazards of this practice. Phnom Penh respondents showed the highest awareness.

When this issue was discussed in focus groups with parents, the majority felt that coining with a metal object was unsuitable for very young children because their skin and veins were tender and could be injured. However, participants still said the practice could be performed on young children if a leaf was used instead of a coin, a practice that health workers generally agreed is safe.

Sometimes children get sick because of a spirit and cannot be treated with modern medicine.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	12%	20%	23%	55%	37%	61%	69%
Disagree	18%	9%	8%	35%	53%	28%	25%
NS/DK	3%	4%	3%	10%	11%	11%	6%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

More than half (55%) of all respondents agreed that some children's illnesses are caused by a spirit and could not be cured by modern medical treatments. As expected, fewer respondents agreed in Phnom Penh than in provincial locations.

This confirmed qualitative findings, as focus group participants regularly identified 4-5 symptoms they felt were often caused by an evil spirit or angry ancestor, ranging from fever to twitching to mental illness. While some said that these could in fact be any illness that a parent believed was due to spiritual reasons (including a curse from an enemy), the most commonly mentioned was "Skorn Mday Deam", in which an infant won't stop crying because its mother from a previous life wants it back. In these cases children are taken to a *Khru Khmae* or traditional healer that specializes in the treatment of a particular problem, who then performs a ritual or ceremony on behalf of the child. In some cases this is done in combination with treatment from a medical doctor, again according to the particular beliefs held by parents.

While it is beyond the scope of this research to determine whether these practices are helpful or harmful, parents should be encouraged to have their child examined by a medical doctor along with a traditional healer, to ensure that they receive the highest attainable standard of health care.

2.0 Right to Protection: Discipline & Sexual Abuse

While conducting focus groups and survey interviews, the Khmer terms used in discussing specific types of violence were intentionally selected to infer the serious nature of these acts, so that respondents would understand their relation to child rights. For example, the word selected for 'rape' is translated literally as "to catch and sexually violate", while the word for beating means "to strike hard".

It is interesting that in both focus group discussions and survey questions, questions that asked opinions regarding general issues of child protection tended to elicit responses that reflected intellectual or "head" knowledge of children's rights. Respondents' answers to these types of questions were generally consistent with each other, and in line with children's rights as disseminated by GO/NGOs – giving a positive indicator of the effectiveness of awareness-raising activities in the target locations. However, questions that described more specific, real-life scenarios tended to elicit answers that reflected respondents' actual attitudes and behaviour based on cultural values. As these were less in line with children's rights, they indicate that awareness-raising has not yet resulted in significant change at the level of parental practice. The study therefore served as something of a KAP survey of knowledge, attitudes and practice (behaviour) on these issues.

2.1 Discipline

Article 19.1 of the UNCRC requires that:

States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.

This article prohibits forms of discipline that are violent and/or harmful to children, including verbal and emotional abuse. In this regard, the **UN Committee on the Rights of the Child** has recommended that the utmost care must be taken in discipline so as to not create undue emotional or mental stress onto the child (Hodgkin & Newell, 2002, pg. 39).

It is important to note that the Convention also requires States to provide support for both children and parents as an essential part of preventing and eliminating harmful disciplinary practices:

Such protective measures should, as appropriate, include effective procedures for the establishment of social programmes to provide necessary support for the child and for those who have the care of the child, as well as for other forms of prevention and for identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment and follow-up of instances of child maltreatment described heretofore, and, as appropriate, for judicial involvement. (Article 19.2)

After reviewing Cambodia's progress in this area, the Committee made the following recommendation in its June 2000 *Concluding Observations of the Committee on Rights of the Child*:

In light of articles 19 and 39 of the Convention, among others, the Committee recommends that the State party take effective measures, including setting up multidisciplinary programmes and care and rehabilitation measures, to prevent and combat child abuse and ill-treatment of children within the family, at school and other institutions, and in society at large... Furthermore, educational programmes should be established to combat traditional attitudes within society regarding this issue. (CRC, 2000, Pg. 7-8)

Summary of Main Findings

While several studies have been conducted on domestic violence against children in Cambodia, few have approached the issue from the standpoint of discipline rather than intentional abuse. In other words, how do Cambodian parents typically discipline their children, and could any cultural practices in this area – though well-intentioned – be considered abusive and a violation of children’s rights to protection?

As a starting point, parents and children participating in focus group discussions were asked to produce their definition of a ‘good’ Khmer boy and girl, and what parents did to raise them this way. Both parents and children gave similar descriptions of ideal children, which were based on traditional Cambodian values that have been held for centuries.³² Being polite and respectful to elders, obeying parents and teachers, being helpful at home and a good student at school, etc. were typically listed along with ‘don’ts’ including lying, stealing, going out a lot and having too many friends. Strict gendered expectations were also listed for girls, for example dressing and acting modestly, helping cook, clean and raise siblings, while boys were expected to help with outside chores and the family business.

When the discussion turned to the behavioural issues that parents currently have with children, it quickly became apparent that the rapid social changes influencing the lifestyles of even rural children and youth in areas of technology, education, entertainment and recreation, etc. have outstripped traditional Cambodian ideals. Failure to live up to parental and cultural expectations were the most frequent reasons given for parents to take disciplinary measures with their children, in addition to trying to correct the more common behavioural problems that occur in every child’s life. However, parents seemed to have little understanding of the fact that much of the ‘disobedience’ occurring during adolescence can be attributed to normal phases of child development. A basic understanding of the stages of child development could help parents be more realistic about the levels of maturity and responsibility that can be expected from children at different ages.

To understand how discipline is commonly practiced in Cambodia, focus group participants were asked to give an example of “minor” and “major” mistakes that children often make, and how parents in their community typically deal with these. Minor mistakes usually involved breaking objects, fighting with siblings or not doing chores, while major mistakes involved lying and stealing, skipping school, or doing things against Khmer culture that would embarrass the parents and affect the family honour. These included frequently going out with friends (especially at night and without permission), using drugs and, for girls, having a boyfriend and/or being sexually active.

In most focus groups, both parents and children described a model of discipline that involved three steps, enacted depending on the seriousness of the problem:

³² See Chapter II for a description of the ‘traditional’ Cambodian value system.

The Middle Way

1. *When a mistake first occurs, parents typically instruct the child by using polite, persuasive language to guide them in correct behaviour;*
2. *If the child doesn't listen and/or makes the same mistake again, parents will then scold, threaten or swear at the child using harsh language in order to stop the incorrect behaviour;*
3. *If the child continues to be disobedient and ignore the parent's instruction, corporal punishment in the form of hitting, beating and striking with various objects such as branches, etc. is used, depending on the seriousness of the problem and the anger of the parent.*

These three steps were repeatedly described in focus groups with both parents and children, with little variation. When asked at what point discipline becomes abuse, all participants demonstrated a high level of awareness about the types and impacts of punishment that resemble domestic violence, including the use of strong force and objects causing visible injury to sensitive areas of the body. Both parents and children claimed this type of discipline was unacceptable and should change, as in the words of one boy from Kampong Cham who said, "When I make a mistake, I want my parents to give me advice, not hit me because it hurts". However, some parents and even children admitted that hitting or beating was justified in certain circumstances, for example, when children do not respond to their parents' repeated correction and warnings, or when children had done something counter-cultural, causing the family or its members to lose respect in the eyes of the community.

Not surprisingly, some parents described a much greater need for strict accountability and discipline of daughters, as they felt this was necessary in order to protect their reputation and therefore eligibility for marriage. These attitudes and practices were confirmed by the survey as detailed below, along with findings related to verbal abuse, which children felt strongly about yet which parents did not consider abusive or seriously detrimental.

While it is positive that participants were very aware that discipline can be abusive – and as many put it, "a violation of children's rights" - it is clear that corporal punishment and harsh verbal discipline is commonly practiced and accepted in most Cambodian families. Most parents appeared to do this with the well-meaning intention of raising children to match the cultural expectations they themselves were brought up with, in keeping with the proverb, you must "**Strike iron while it is still hot; train a child while he is still young.**" However, corporal punishment is also viewed as a practical means of controlling a child's behaviour and protecting the family honour. Indeed, few parents were able to give any positive and effective alternatives to 'the Khmer 1-2-3' method of discipline described above. The exceptions to this were parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds in Phnom Penh and some children who had received training on children's rights from NGOs. Many participants in these groups were able to describe non-violent methods of discipline, which emphasized behavioural change through positive reinforcement and the development of children's critical-thinking and decision-making skills.

In order for families to adopt the value of non-violence in Cambodia, parents must not only understand children's rights, but also cognitive and social development milestones, as well as possess effective alternatives to abusive corporal and verbal punishment.

Equally as important is addressing the role of traditional values in perpetuating abusive discipline. In the Cambodian worldview, corporal punishment is allowable to maintain hierarchy, order and respect in Cambodian families; use of violence, then, can be easily justified by those high within the hierarchy to maintain or accrue respect. Such strong cultural values and practices cannot be changed without offering a valid alternative. Discussions with parents in all locations revealed that there is a dearth of real-life role models of parents who use positive and developmental methods of child-rearing. Inspiring role models can be found for Cambodian women, business people, professionals, humanitarians, etc. - but not for parents who deal with issues such as discipline, sexuality and family honour in a manner that respects both Khmer tradition and child rights. Positive role models also need to be identified for children – such a role model would exemplify a “new ideal” of how a modern, yet culturally-sensitive Cambodian young person may look and act.

Supportive and Hindering Factors

Socio-cultural factors that support children's right to protection from abusive discipline include:

- *Good parental and child understanding of the types and impacts of abusive physical discipline and the need to change*
- *High general awareness of children's right to protection from physical abuse*
- *Good understanding among children of types and impacts of abusive verbal discipline*
- *High awareness of alternatives to corporal punishment among children and upper-class parents*

Hindrances to children's rights to protection in this area include:

- *High parental expectations of children's behaviour based on traditional values and customs*
- *Low parental understanding of behavioural problems that accompany normal child development*
- *High acceptance and justification of abusive physical discipline when children are stubbornly disobedient or bring dishonour to the family*
- *High parental acceptance of abusive verbal discipline and low awareness of impacts on children*
- *Stricter accountability and discipline of daughters in order to protect honour*
- *Low awareness of 'middle way' solutions, e.g. parents see few alternatives to verbal and corporal punishment*

Specific Findings

Detailed findings from survey interviews and focus group discussions include the following:

Should parents discipline their children by beating?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	3%	8%	5%	16%	10%	23%	16%
Disagree	30%	25%	28%	83%	89%	76%	84%
NS/DK	0,5%	0,5%	0%	1%	1%	1%	0%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Should parents discipline their children by beating if they don't listen?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	18%	23%	23%	64%	55%	69%	70%
Disagree	15%	10%	10%	35%	45%	31%	30%
NS/DK	0,5%	0,5%	0 %	1%	0%	0%	0%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Should parents discipline their children by beating if they make the same mistake?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	20%	23%	21%	64%	60%	69%	64%
Disagree	13%	10%	12%	35%	40%	31%	35%
NS/DK	0%	0%	1%	1%	0%	0%	1%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Should parents discipline their children by beating if they do something against Khmer culture?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	16%	20%	18%	54%	49%	60%	54%
Disagree	16%	12%	15%	43%	49%	36%	45%
NS/DK	1%	1%	1%	3%	2%	4%	1%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

As seen in the first table above, only 16% of the total number of respondents agreed that beating should be used as a means of discipline, indicating that they considered this inappropriate and/or abusive. However, when a practical reason for beating was given (as in tables 2-4 above), the percentage immediately rose to as high as 64% indicating the belief that beating is justified in certain situations. Approval was highest when children were disobedient, i.e. when they refused their parent's wishes, whereas they were less likely to approve of beating when children did something against social norms.

This dramatic 40%-50% increase in approval of beating may be attributed to the fact that the first questions, being general, indicated people's knowledge of children's right to protection, while the latter questions on specific circumstances reveal people's actual behaviour. Key informants noted that this demonstrates how people's knowledge of what is 'right' and 'wrong' in terms of children's rights does not always match their behaviour, which is more likely to be influenced by cultural values. One woman stated that while many know that it is wrong to beat children, "*the heart betrays the head*", e.g. ingrained cultural behaviours are stronger than head knowledge.

Approval for beating as a means of discipline was always higher in provincial locations, where traditional values and customs may be stronger and the population less sensitized to children's rights. Surprisingly, children participating in the survey tended to approve of beatings slightly more than parents, in contrast to children participating in focus group discussions who were generally strongly opposed to beating. This may be due to the fact that the survey questions focused on beating as a means of discipline, signifying an internalized approval of corporal punishment when children are clearly in the wrong, while focus groups provided a safe environment for children to reflect on the issue and express their views and experiences. Specifically, the majority of children in focus groups were against the use of hitting or beating, stating the serious impacts it had on their physical and emotional health, while parents were more likely to support hitting or beating in certain situations, in order to correct the child.

When asked if they would beat their own children in the future, approximately 50% of children participating in focus groups said that they would not beat their children in any circumstance, and offered clear alternatives, such as clear discussion of the reasons and consequences of their behaviour, withdrawal of privileges, giving extra chores, etc. Those that said they would use corporal punishment said that they would have clear boundaries to ensure that it was not abusive, e.g. hitting lightly rather than beating, not using objects, not hitting on the head, not causing physical injury, and not causing inordinate fear that would cause them to avoid parents or home. They also stated that if they did use corporal punishment, it would be as a last resort.

Positively, children and parents in all focus groups recognized that corporal punishment could be harmful and abusive and is unacceptable. This recognition indicates a clear shift in social attitudes as compared to the past, when parents and even teachers were expected to use any means necessary to discipline children. When asked what types of discipline they regarded as abusive, parents and children commonly listed the use of objects such as sticks and electrical wire, heavy beating causing head injury, flesh wounds causing bruises or bleeding, and broken bones. They also considered tying a child up with ropes or chains and confinement as abusive forms of discipline.

Parents stated that while these forms of abusive discipline continue in Khmer society, people are generally disparaging of those who practice it. Despite this apparent non-acceptance, parents said that beating was usually not reported to or acted on by authorities unless it reached the stage of serious injury, at which point it is recognized as abuse and against the law. Until that point is reached, less severe day-to-day beatings are considered normal practice, even occurring in the authorities' families. Even when serious injury occurs, however, many cases go unreported because people think that this is a private matter and are conscious of the need to maintain harmony in the community – another example of how traditional social values override the modern concept of individual rights.

Cursing or threatening children doesn't affect their emotional health.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	2%	11%	9%	22%	6%	33%	27%
Disagree	31%	20%	24%	75%	93%	61%	72%
NS/DK	0.5%	2 %	0.5%	3%	1%	6%	1%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Encouragingly, 75% of the total number of respondents recognized the negative impact of cursing and threatening on children's emotional health, although it is concerning that 22% of all respondents disagreed with the statement. When disaggregated, respondents in PP were much less likely to agree that harsh language had no effect on children – again perhaps due to a higher degree of awareness of children's rights and/or overall education in the nation's capitol.

Adults and children tended to provide similar answers to the survey, however in focus group discussions children were very clear about what they considered to be verbal abuse, and how this affected them. They commonly listed negative and even traumatic feelings such as worthlessness, shame, fear, resentment, and rejection caused when their parents cursed, threatened and insulted them. The most harmful verbal abuse occurred when they were publicly shamed, when parents insinuated extreme violence, compared them with animals, etc. In a 'reversal' of verbal abuse, some children pointed out that some parents punished their children by refusing to speak to them at all, sometimes ignoring them for weeks at a time, which could have devastating effects on children's sense of self-worth.

Parents in focus groups also said that harsh language was potentially harmful, however, in a ranking exercise they often listed verbal abuse to be the least serious form of abuse. They tended to lack awareness of how harsh words actually affected their children, but more commonly believed it to be an effective and necessary form of discipline. Parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds in Phnom Penh were, however, more likely to understand the effects of verbal abuse and the importance of using proper language to instruct children and develop polite language skills. As one man said, *"In our family we stress using proper language at an early age and in all situations, so that children learn how to speak correctly and resolve problems through polite and respectful speech."*

What Is Negative Discipline?

Negative discipline can take the form of corporal (physical) or emotional punishment in the belief that these are the correct means of disciplining, correcting, controlling or educating a child.

Negative discipline is generally understood to be hitting, shouting and humiliating. However, negative discipline goes beyond just the actual forms of punishment – it also describes a system where children are not allowed to participate in their own discipline. Children have to be able to understand what their mistakes are and how they can make amends.

Corporal and all forms of destructive punishment have far-reaching negative effects on children:

- **Aggression:** Although corporal punishment is seen as a way to subdue children's misbehaviour, it can actually have the opposite effect of creating more aggression. The more children are punished for aggressive behaviours, the more aggressive they tend to become.
- **Mental health issues:** A child who is exposed to corporal punishment and humiliation may resort to withdrawal, depression or other "avoidance behaviors" because he or she is struggling to comprehend the meaning of the physical or emotional attack and his/her defenselessness against it.
- **Physical injuries and abuse:** Corporal punishment can cause injuries but more alarmingly, it can lead to abuse of the child. (Adults) tend to be emotionally charged when carrying out the act of punishment, and may underestimate his/her own strength and lose control.

What Is Positive Discipline?

Positive discipline IS NOT:

- Total freedom for children
- Absence of rules, limits, standards and expectations
- A short-term reaction by adults

Positive discipline IS:

- A long-term approach to developing children
- Shared decision-making
- Shared long-term goals
- Agreed short term limits
- Two-way communication
- Learning & Teaching
- Negotiation skills
- Non-violent conflict resolution
- Managing stress & frustration
- Taking responsibility for the consequences of one's actions

Source: UNICEF (2008), *Fact Sheet on Positive Discipline*

Girls should be disciplined more severely than boys if they do something dishonourable.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	8%	9%	10%	27%	25%	26%	30%
Disagree	23%	24%	22%	69%	70%	71%	67%
NS/DK	2%	1%	1%	4%	5%	3%	3%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Nearly one-third (69%) of the total number of respondents felt that girls should not be punished more severely than boys if they do something to affect the family honour. However, 27% of all respondents did support this statement, reflecting the stricter accountability expected of girls in Cambodian culture and the perceived need for more serious response if this occurs. More than twice as many parents than children agreed with this in Phnom Penh and Kampong Cham, perhaps indicating that parents in urban and semi-urban areas are more sensitive to the impact of their daughters behaviour on their and their families' honour.

Parents in focus groups often pointed to the necessity of being stricter with their daughters in order to protect their reputation and eligibility for marriage, as they considered marriage to be a key factor in their long-term financial security and well-being. While most parents were focused on raising their girls to conform to cultural ideals, some girls could imagine their own successful futures without having to conform to traditional expectations. Some parents could also imagine new roles for women, although they did not always want them for their own girls, in part due to the fears expressed above. In contrast, even girls in provincial locations had a higher expectation that they would be able to get a job and support themselves without a husband as long as they were able to get an education on a par with boys. They also said that family reputation and sexual purity was not as important a factor in their finding a husband as it used to be in the past, due to the fact that youth were now choosing their own partners based on romance and compatibility. With the exception of some parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds in Phnom Penh, most parents did not appear to be aware of how to account for the non-traditional ways of today's youth when disciplining their daughters.

The tradition of disciplining children by beating should be changed.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	32 %	28%	29%	89%	96%	84%	88%
Disagree	1%	4%	4%	9%	3%	12%	11%
NS/DK	0.5%	1%	0.5%	2%	1%	4%	1%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

The vast majority of all respondents (89%) said the tradition of disciplining children by beating should be changed, recognizing that this can be abusive. This was true in each location, with nearly all of respondents in Phnom Penh (96%) agreeing with the need for change in this area.

In focus group discussions parents often said that severe beatings should stop, however many noted this practice will be particularly difficult to change. As one middle-aged woman said, *“Even in poor or rich families, abusive discipline cannot be abolished immediately because it is very hard for parents to change their habits of discipline.”* Moreover, many felt that moderate, non-abusive corporal punishment was an effective and necessary way to discipline children. Many expressed concern that if they were unable to use corporal punishment they would not be able to correct their children unless they cursed and/or threatened them. In fact, many parents felt that the tradition of using harsh, even verbally abusive language to discipline should be preserved, as they consider it an alternative to corporal punishment and it allowed them to “let off steam”, i.e. express anger and frustration.

In contrast, parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds and living in the capital city, and a minority of parents in rural locations, did recognize the need for alternatives to corporal and verbal punishment and had adopted various methods such as discussions in which children decided how to make restitution for their mistakes, giving children extra chores, taking away privileges, etc. Many stressed the importance of good communication skills for parents. One 53 year-old man in Phnom Penh said that: *“Parents should know how to give their children clear reasons for their rules and the consequences of following or breaking them, so that their children can learn to think and improve their behaviour by themselves.”*

The vast majority of children in focus groups agreed with this and wanted both corporal and abusive verbal punishment to end in favour of discipline that gave them opportunities to discuss the reasons for their behaviour with their parents, share their different points of view, and understand larger consequences using real-life examples. They often pointed out that using blame and directive statements did not help them understand better ways of avoiding or dealing with similar problems in the future, such as fighting with siblings.

2.2 Sexual Abuse

Article 32:1 of the UNCRC states that States should protect the child from “all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse” and take all appropriate measures to protect children from:

a) The inducement or coercion of a child to engage in any unlawful sexual activity; b) the exploitative use of children in prostitution or other unlawful sexual practices; and c) the exploitative use of children in pornographic performances and materials.

It is important to note that the Convention also requires that comprehensive recovery services be provided to victims of sexual abuse in Article 39:

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of: any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse; torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; or armed conflicts. Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment, which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child.

In relation to abortion for minors who become pregnant as a result of sexual abuse, the **UN Committee on the Rights of the Child** has expressed its concern regarding the “best

interests of child victims of rape and/or incest in this regard... the Committee recommends that the State Party review its legislation concerning abortion, with a view to guaranteeing the best interests of child victims of rape and incest" (Hodgkin & Newell, 2002, pg. 98). Moreover, the Committee has emphasised that parents are to include their children's views and opinions when making decisions on issues such as abortion, affirming that: "Children have the right to participate in matters that affect them directly." (pg. 36).

Summary of Main Findings

This section describes the results on parental and child attitudes and responses towards sexual abuse of minors³³.

While the topic covered both rape and trafficking for sexual exploitation, a special emphasis was given to child rape, as this issue has not yet been sufficiently researched in regard to cultural values and family responses. As with questions on abusive discipline, terms for sexual abuse, trafficking and rape were carefully chosen to clearly communicate their meanings in Khmer. In addition, focus groups participants were separated by gender when discussing particularly sensitive issues to allow free and frank discussion.

Focus groups began by ranking which of seven types of child abuse they felt were the most harmful. These included rape, physical abuse, verbal abuse, child sex trafficking, labour trafficking, hazardous child labour and child pornography. Nearly all the groups ranked trafficking and rape as the worst, as they felt they were the most serious crimes, often involved physical as well as sexual abuse, and could result in death if the victim contracted HIV-AIDS. However the top and most frequently cited reasons were the loss of virginity that caused shame and other emotional trauma for the survivor; the blame, social rejection and loss of reputation that she and her parents would suffer, and the reduced chances for marriage that would result. Child pornography also was commonly ranked high for these reasons, and also because it was "against Khmer culture" and "brought shame on the nation." Labour trafficking, hazardous child labour and physical abuse were usually ranked next (in various orders) because they involved force, exploitation and serious injury.³⁴

What is significant about these results is that abuse which affects the victims' and families' honour – and in the eyes of some parents, their family's social status and economic security in the future - is considered to be the most serious within the Cambodian cultural context. When asked whether the other forms of abuse also affected personal and family honour, many participants stated that while those who exploited their children's labour or who physically abused them "would be looked down on" by others, these were commonplace in many communities and were often tolerated as private family matters. This indicates the strong link between honour and sexuality in Cambodia, and helps explain the high expectations and responsibility placed on parents and their daughters to protect their sexual integrity.



As Cambodian teenagers embrace new trends and lifestyles, they need support in learning how to avoid the potential hazards that exist.

Photo: Peter Harris

³³ Within Cambodian law, a 'minor' is defined as someone who is under the age of 18.

³⁴ Not surprisingly, verbal abuse was often ranked last or next to last as participants felt that verbal abuse was less harmful to children than physical or sexual abuse – although some children disagreed and ranked it higher because, in the words of one teenaged girl, "Our bodies can always be treated and get well in a few days or weeks, but our hearts can take longer to heal".

It is clear that this standard is only applied to women, however. Many parents and some children quoted the proverb "**Men are like pure gold, women like white cloth,**" meaning that a woman's reputation may be more easily stained than a man's. A young man gave a more explicit explanation saying that "*a girl can disgrace her family by getting pregnant.*" Participants also frequently quoted the Khmer proverb: "**A house with a daughter is like a jar of fish paste**". They explained that this means if a woman breaks sexual norms it brings dishonour on the family, in the same way that breaking a jar of fish paste will stink. It was explained that while the sexual activities of boys was often not only tolerated but expected as they got older, "*parents should pay much attention to teaching their daughter to behave politely, and also they should closely follow her activities... otherwise, she can bring bad reputation to the family and other relatives.*" The virginal standards expected of women contribute to the widespread propensity to blame girls for 'rape' or any kind of sexual impropriety. In the KAP survey, one-third (29%) of all 1,800 respondents agreed that "sometimes rape is the girl's fault" - a belief that is rooted in the cultural emphasis on responsibility and accountability of women to maintain sexual purity and fidelity, while men are not held to this strict standard.

In terms of the impacts of sexual abuse on survivors, focus group participants generally had a high awareness of these and were able to describe issues ranging from emotional, physical, social, and legal impacts. For example, a young girl from Kampong Cham related the story of her seventeen-year-old friend who she said was raped and, as a result, became pregnant. The girl's mother gave her medicine to abort the baby, and five months later arranged a marriage to another man. The new husband found out what had happened on the wedding night, and requested both a divorce and three million riels in compensation. The family is still trying to earn enough money to repay him, and the family reputation is ruined. The girl is lonely and fearful about her future while the perpetrator walks free. Participants were also able to list the impacts on parents – public embarrassment, fears relating to safety and financial issues, worry for the future, and so forth, which revealed the practical survival realities that they and other family members must cope with.

Discussions were then held on how families typically deal with these problems and what participants felt were necessary and appropriate responses. As a "catch-all" solution, many parents felt that sending their daughters to long-term residential NGO centres was appropriate. This is not surprising due to the high number and profile of institutions that serve vulnerable children in Cambodia, including orphans, street children, those affected by HIV/AIDs and victims of sex and labour trafficking. Unfortunately, this "solution" tends to leave parents out of the rehabilitation of their daughters, particularly as most residential shelters do not include extensive involvement of family members in their recovery programs. In 2000, the **UN Committee on Rights of the Child** made the following recommendation in its Concluding Observations to the government of Cambodia:

"The Committee is concerned that children tend to be placed in child welfare centres or children's homes... the Committee recommends that the State party undertake effective measures to promote, through counselling and community-based programmes, the family as the best environment for the child and to empower parents to take care of their children in order to avoid placement in child welfare centres." (CRC, Pg. 7)

Besides the obvious security, medical and counselling services NGO centres provide, however, many parents clearly saw the educational, vocational and residential aspects of centres as a way out of the limited life opportunities their daughters would face in a

poor village.³⁵ It is worrying that few adults mentioned the negative aspects of institutions: for instance how separation from family and community negatively impacts child psychosocial well-being. The minority that would rather keep their daughters at home usually said so because they didn't trust "strangers" to look after them, rather than to avoid the effects of family separation. Those that were the most opposed sending girls to centres were in fact girl children themselves, who said they would not want to leave their parents and siblings; and parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds who had access to healthcare, educational and other services similar to that which NGO centres provide.

Regarding family responses to more specific problems, large differences in values and attitudes appeared in the perceptions and decisions of parents and children. Parents often felt that the physical and mental health of survivors were the immediate priorities – due to the fears of HIV and suicide from depression – followed by the mitigating the social and economic impacts on the child and family. In contrast, children tended to prioritize legal and justice issues, with girls often being adamant about the criminal nature of sexual abuse, the violation to their person and their desire for legal redress. Parents also expressed concern for these issues, however many said they would place a much higher importance on protecting the reputation and therefore long-term welfare of their daughter, as well as the family as a whole. This is reflected in the high number of respondents (34% overall) who agreed with the survey question: *"If a girl is sexually abused it is more important to protect her honour than seek justice"*.

When examining the reasoning of parents and children on this issue, it appears that that children tended to base their decision-making based on the 'modern' values of legal justice and the rights of individuals – which is not surprising as they are one of the first generations raised in an era of human rights in Cambodia. Parents' decisions, on the other hand, naturally reflected traditional values in their responses to sexual abuse, including protecting family honour (acknowledging the 'collective rights' of other family members), preserving social harmony and respecting hierarchy (including not challenging the status of perpetrators who are often older males who may also hold positions of power). This seems to reflect the findings of Nisbett, who states that

"Westerners tend to emphasize the principle of justice and its satisfaction by a judge or jury declaring who is right or wrong, whereas Asians desire reduced hostility by intermediaries, and compromise is the usual result." (2003, p. 194)

This tendency to compromise appeared to be found in the results of focus group discussions and the quantitative survey, as the findings showed an alarmingly widespread support among parents of out-of-court settlement, marriage to the rapist and abortion as acceptable³⁶ responses to sexual abuse (described in the detailed findings below). Although most focus groups included at least some parents who disagreed with legal compromises, the strongest opponents were in Phnom Penh (in particular parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds) as well as the vast majority of children in all locations; both of these groups were strongly against any course of action that would not hold the perpetrator fully accountable and protect other children from abuse.

When 'love' was believed to be a factor, confusion as to the motives of the rapist and even the victim could also result in compromises by parents and even police

³⁵ Recent studies suggest that this attitude is not uncommon. See, for instance, Arensen et al. (2004) and Reimer & Langelier (2006).

³⁶ While pragmatic reasons such as family poverty and/or corruption in the justice system may also contribute to the "acceptability" of these choices, the role and influence of traditional values should not be underestimated.

investigating the incident, who were unsure whether an actual crime had been committed or not. The research team found that many participants and key informants were actually using the term for “rape” to refer to situations involving both coercive and consensual sex. When used in the coercive sense it describes the desperate act of a man who loved a girl so much that he would use rape (i.e. forced intercourse) as a method of pressuring her and parents to let him marry her. As consensual reference it describes voluntary sex between a couple who want to marry, but using the ruse of rape to gain the agreement of parents.

The sad consequence of these beliefs and practices is that the perpetrators of child sexual abuse are not publically challenged nor held fully accountable for their actions; rather they are *negotiated* with, thus reinforcing the values of hierarchy and patriarchy that (among other factors) allow sexual abuse to continue in Khmer society. Meanwhile, the innocent victims of these crimes do not receive the justice they deserve, and often suffer the betrayal of parents and continuing re-victimization when forced to marry their abuser. As Cambodia continues to strengthen its law enforcement and justice systems, serious attention and effort must also be given to changing attitudes and responses at the family level, to ensure that survivors get the support needed to recover.

Supportive and Hindering Factors

Social and cultural factors which support children's right to protection from sexual abuse include:

- *Awareness among all target groups of impacts of sexual abuse*
- *Awareness of laws on trafficking and rape, and increased sentences for abuse of minors*
- *Strong desire of children for rule of law over sexual abuse, e.g. realization of personal and social justice, despite risks and impacts of filing charges*
- *High level of understanding by children regarding perpetrators' responsibility for sexual abuse and non-judgmental acceptance of survivors*
- *High awareness of children's right to report abuse regardless of parents' wishes*

Factors which hinder children's right to protection from sexual abuse include:

- *High parental blame of rape survivors due to cultural emphasis on responsibility of females for sexual purity*
- *Belief in role of “love” in rape leads to social tolerance, confusion in family and police response and agreement to marriage to perpetrator*
- *Low parental understanding of how to effectively support long-term social and emotional recovery of rape survivors outside of relying on shelters*
- *High parental support of sending children to long-term residential NGO centres as an appropriate response to sexual abuse*
- *Cultural values of protecting family honour, social harmony and respecting hierarchy contribute to parental acceptance of out-of-court settlement, marriage to perpetrator and abortion as acceptable solutions to sexual abuse*

Specific Findings

Detailed findings from survey interviews and focus group discussions include the following:

Sometimes rape is the girl's fault.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	2%	12%	15%	29%	6 %	35%	46%
Disagree	29%	19%	16%	64%	88%	57%	48%
NS/DK	2%	3%	2%	7 %	6%	8%	6%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

As shown in the table above, 64% of the 1,800 adults and children surveyed felt that when a girl is raped it is not her fault. In terms of location, nearly nine out of 10 (88%) of respondents responded correctly in Phnom Penh, perhaps due to the fact that urban populations are better informed about the nature of rape and other crimes. However, provincial respondents were up to seven times more likely to agree that rape could be the girl's fault, revealing strong cultural values that result in "blaming the victim."

Traditional Cambodian values tend to place personal responsibility for sexual integrity on females, without due regard to the responsibility of males/perpetrators. Women are held responsible for maintaining their own honour and that of their family, thus the tendency to attribute part of the blame for rape to the victim. This is illustrated by the proverb "**Clap with both hands**", i.e. both parties must be involved in and take responsibility for a sexual encounter. Key informants including child protection investigators confirmed that girls are indeed perceived as contributing to the rape when they do not follow traditional norms, e.g. wearing 'sexy' clothes, going out at night, being too friendly with men, etc. Defence lawyers may use this counter-cultural behaviour argument to place blame on the victim and even judges have been known to reduce sentences for perpetrators if they believe this to be the case.

Other socio-cultural reasons may exist for the tendency to blame victims of sexual abuse. If the perpetrator were to be held responsible, conflict results and social harmony - which is highly valued in Khmer culture - is lost and/or threatened. This, combined with the cultural expectation that hierarchies must be respected by not making those in higher positions lose face (in this case parents and older male perpetrators), may encourage blaming the victim rather than challenging the social order and seeking justice for the victim.

Sadly, when girls are blamed for sexual abuse, family responses often do not respond to the survivor's need for emotional and social recovery. Although focus groups showed parents had a higher-than-expected awareness of various psychosocial impacts of sexual abuse, key informants including child rights investigators and trauma counsellors said parents were less likely to empathize and respond to these when it was believed that their daughter was at fault. Children shared that some parents could become so upset and angry that they beat their daughter when the daughter revealed she had been raped. Clearly, there is a need to change attitudes and beliefs around rape and women's sexuality in general, and to promote appropriate responses and support of victims at the family level.

If a girl is sexually abused, it's more important to protect her honour then seek justice.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	11%	10%	13%	34%	32%	31%	39%
Disagree	20%	20%	19%	59%	61%	59%	57%
NS/DK	2%	3%	2%	7%	7%	10%	4%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

It is positive that a large majority of the total respondents (59%) recognized the criminal nature of sexual abuse and that justice is of primary importance. However a large minority (34% overall) responded in line with traditional cultural values by placing a higher value on protecting a girl's honour. When broken down by location, this sentiment was found to be as strong in Phnom Penh as in the provinces.

In focus group discussions children were adamant about the criminal nature of sexual abuse, the personal violation involved and their desire for legal redress. Parents also acknowledged their concern for these issues, however place a much higher importance on protecting their daughters' and families' honour, as a means of protecting their reputation and status as well as ensuring her eligibility for marriage and security for the future. From this it can be seen that children tended to base their decision-making on values such as rule of law and social justice found in modern societies, whereas parents' decisions were based at least partly on the requirements of traditional values such as family honour, social harmony, etc. and the pragmatic need to uphold them³⁷.

The tension between traditional and modern values can result in complex dynamics in decision-making after a child is sexually abused, which may result in a variety of outcomes and potentially negative impacts on the survivor, as seen in the findings below.

³⁷ It is acknowledged that the 'pragmatism' referred to is due to many factors not dealt with here, including the difficulty of poor families to obtain legal regress in a corrupt justice system; nevertheless, the findings highlight the significant role that traditional values play in how parents view and respond to sexual abuse. It is the view of the research team that economic, legal, as well as cultural factors need to be addressed in order for widespread and sustainable change to occur in this area.

Is marrying the perpetrator an acceptable solution to the problem of rape?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	15%	11%	20%	46%	46%	35%	59%
Disagree	15%	16%	12%	43%	46%	48%	36%
NS/DK	3%	6%	2%	11%	8%	17%	5%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Is marrying the perpetrator an acceptable solution if she [the victim] believes she cannot win in court?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	15%	18%	21%	54%	45%	54%	63%
Disagree	15%	12%	10%	37%	45%	34%	30%
NS/DK	3%	4%	2%	9%	10%	12%	7%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Is marrying the perpetrator an acceptable solution in order to protect the victim's honour?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	21%	22%	22%	65%	63%	66%	66%
Disagree	10%	8%	10%	28%	31%	26%	29%
NS/DK	2%	3%	2%	7%	6%	8%	5%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Is marriage an acceptable solution in order to protect the honour of the victim's parents?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	20%	22%	24%	65%	62%	63%	68%
Disagree	10%	9%	9%	28%	32%	28%	27%
NS/DK	2%	3%	2%	7%	6%	9%	5%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

The 'solution' of having rape survivors marry the perpetrator rather than seek legal redress is not uncommon in Cambodia, and frustrates the work of child rights advocates and those working towards social justice. As seen in the first table above, nearly half of all respondents (46%) believed that, in general, having the survivor marry the perpetrator was an acceptable solution to rape. The subsequent tables show that approval increased to 54% if the victim could not win in court or reach a settlement for compensation, rising to 65% if marriage served to protect the reputation of the survivor or her family. When disaggregated by location this tended to be as true of respondents in Phnom Penh as in the provincial locations.

In focus group discussions on sexual abuse with teenagers aged 12-17, the vast majority were very outspoken about this issue, particularly girls. One 16-year old girl adamantly stated "I would never marry a man who raped me; if he hurts me once, he will hurt me again." They recognized rape as a serious crime of violation and wanted to seek legal redress above all, including the imprisonment of the perpetrator. This was not only to satisfy their own need for justice but to protect other girls from being abused. Very few boys supported marriage to the rapist as an acceptable 'solution' (i.e. resolution for the harm caused) as they recognized rape as a crime punishable by law.

Parents on the other hand often felt that marriage was acceptable due to the fact that it protected the girl's and parent's honour and therefore her future, as they felt it was unlikely that anyone would want to marry the girl after she had lost virginity. Because of this, some felt that the rapist should take responsibility for his actions by marrying and providing for her as his wife. While some villagers did feel strongly that this should not be allowed as the marriage would not likely be successful, few mentioned the traumatic impact that marrying her perpetrator could have on the survivor's emotional life and the potential for further sexual abuse. The main opposition came from more affluent parents in Phnom Penh, who were nearly unanimous in opposing any alternative to legal redress, as they were keenly aware of the violation of their daughters' rights and were anxious to see Cambodia develop into a country where rule of law reduced and prevented sexual abuse.

In response to parents' concerns about damaged reputation and reduced chances for marriage, children in Phnom Penh said that the issue of virginity was not a barrier to getting married because "modern kids understand that rape is not the girl's fault" and therefore not a reflection of a girl's character. They added that compatibility and romance were more important to them than sexual purity. They explained that it is becoming more common for children to become boyfriends and girlfriends and that this relationship may involve sex, and therefore girls are not expected to remain virgins until marriage.

Encouragingly, child rights investigators who validated these findings stated that while this trend continues, it is becoming less acceptable as a 'solution' to rape as compared to 10 years ago. They said this was because parents have seen that the marriage will typically not last and they know that rape is a crime that should be punished by law. However, much more needs to be done to raise parents' awareness of the need to support the psycho-social recovery of their daughters, in order to improve rehabilitation at the family level.

Is it an acceptable solution to marry the rapist if he loves her?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	22%	23%	23%	68%	67%	67%	68%
Disagree	9%	8%	9%	26%	28%	24%	28%
NS/DK	2%	3%	1%	6%	5%	9%	4%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Is it an acceptable solution to marry a rapist if they love each other?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	29%	32%	32%	93%	87%	95%	97%
Disagree	3%	1%	1%	5%	10%	4%	2%
NS/DK	1%	0,5%	0,5%	2%	3%	1%	1%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

As seen in the first table above, an alarmingly large percentage of the total respondents (68%) approved of marriage between the victim and the rapist, if it was believed that he “loved” the victim. This increased to 93% overall if the question stated that they loved each other. The approval of marriage in both scenarios was high in each research location; with those in Oddar Meanchey almost unanimous (97%) in agreeing that this was acceptable if the two had a romantic attachment.

Parents and some children participating in focus groups in provincial locations tended to agree that “love” could be a factor in a rape case and therefore that marriage was an acceptable solution. While children’s and women’s rights advocates may wonder how “love” and “rape” can co-exist, several explanations were given as to how Cambodians may understand this is possible. Some felt that a man could love a girl so much that he could not control his desires, therefore ‘proving’ his feelings for her. In commenting on this, some parents said that that *“If a man loved a woman so much that he would rape her, he will be a good husband and take care of her”*. A more common explanation was that men who are refused marriage by a girl or her parents may use rape as a means of coercion, knowing that it is likely that they will agree after she has lost her virginity to him. As difficult as this is for rights advocates to accept, in all of these scenarios (which were understood to be non-consensual) the participants understood that the rape served as evidence of a man’s love, and therefore served to justify marriage as an acceptable response.

Another scenario that participants explained can involve love is when the “rape” is actually consensual sex within an existing romantic relationship. Both parents and children said that sometimes a couple whose relationship is not sanctioned by the girl’s family may have sex in order to force her parents to let them marry. Although in this case the crime of rape has not actually been committed (as the sex was consensual), others may refer to this as such because premarital sex is not socially condoned in Cambodia. Parents in particular may want to claim that their daughter has been raped, in order to avoid admitting that she has engaged in premarital sex, which would bring dishonour to the family.

The research findings show that in Cambodia the term for “rape” can refer to both coercive and consensual sex, depending on the context in which it is used. This can blur the issues, impacts and responses, to the detriment of the survivor. In cases where coercion is involved, marriage of a victim to a rapist is clearly damaging to a child's emotional and physical well-being. The cultural emphasis on reducing social impacts of rape while ignoring the personal impacts on the survivor must be challenged. Encouragingly, this is occurring in some segments of the population. The majority of children in all locations as well as parents from affluent backgrounds in Phnom Penh were strongly against the belief that a man could rape a woman whom he loved, saying that if he really loved her he would not force her to have sex under any circumstances. They understood that rape always involved coercion and was a personal violation of a girl's body and emotions. They added that if a couple truly loved each other, they should also seek a more honourable method of gaining the permission of family members, without resorting to premarital sex under the guise of rape.

The notion that rape can prove a man's ‘love’ or a couple's love for each other also dilutes the seriousness with which the crime of rape should be viewed and addressed; indeed those working in law enforcement and the justice system officials must first determine which of the two meanings applies in a case, and then act accordingly. Recognizing that a rape report could in fact represent a man or couple's attempt to gain parental permission to marry, a policeman interviewed during the research stated that he checks for signs of the use of violence, drugs, etc. indicating that sex was not consensual and therefore punishable by law. While this is perhaps necessary given the circumstances, in doing so it narrows the definition and identification of rape to only the most obviously violent cases, while ignoring other forms which equally violate children and women's rights and cause significant suffering. Training and awareness-raising is therefore needed to improve the methods and responses of police and others involved in legal protection of girls and women.

Is settling out of court an acceptable solution to rape?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	12%	14%	22%	48%	37%	41%	67%
Disagree	19%	17%	9%	45%	57%	51%	28%
NS/DK	2%	3%	2%	7%	6%	8%	5%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Is settling out of court an acceptable solution to rape if she (the victim) is poor?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	21%	18%	23%	62%	62%	55%	70%
Disagree	11%	12%	8%	31%	32%	37%	24%
NS/DK	2%	3%	2%	7%	6%	8%	6%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Is settling out of court an acceptable solution to rape if the victim becomes pregnant?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	19%	18%	23%	60%	57%	53%	68%
Disagree	12%	12%	8%	32%	36%	37%	25%
NS/DK	3%	3%	2%	8%	7%	10%	7%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Is settling out of court an acceptable solution to rape if she thinks she cannot win?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	20%	19%	22%	61%	60%	57%	67%
Disagree	12%	11%	9%	32%	35%	33%	26%
NS/DK	2%	3%	2%	7%	5%	10%	7%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Is settling out of court an acceptable solution if the rapist threatens her?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	17%	11%	14%	42%	51%	32%	41%
Disagree	15%	20%	17%	52%	44%	60%	52%
NS/DK	1%	3%	2%	6%	5%	8%	7%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Is settling out of court an acceptable solution if the rapist is rich and powerful?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	18%	14%	17%	49%	54%	42%	52%
Disagree	14%	17%	14%	45%	41%	50%	41%
NS/DK	2%	2%	2%	6%	5%	8%	7%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

While it was expected that the findings would show a high degree of support for financial settlements, the first table shows that an even greater number of respondents approved of this (48% overall) than those who did not (45%). As seen in subsequent tables, approval increased significantly when the question indicated the victim was particularly disadvantaged due to poverty (62%), pregnancy (60%) and lack of confidence in her ability to win a court battle (61%). However, approval decreased when the scenario described she was facing threats from the rapist, or when the perpetrator was rich or powerful. Respondents in Phnom Penh generally approved as much as those in the provincial locations, and often even more than in Kampong Cham.

Focus group discussions with parents in provincial locations revealed that settling out of court was often considered acceptable because of the corruption involved within the police and judicial systems, and sometimes because it was a “quiet” way of settling the case. Compensation, they said, at least provided some acknowledgement of fault and tangible benefit for the survivor and her family. In contrast, the majority of parents from affluent backgrounds in Phnom Penh as well as children in all locations were strongly against settling rape cases out of court. They believed that rape is a serious crime that should be punished in a court of law, in order to gain justice for the victim and to deter perpetrators from continuing their destructive behaviour. Girls in particular recognized the personal violation that occurred in rape and its consequences for their physical, emotional and social well being, and were adamant that rape cases should be taken to court for their own sake as well as to prevent other girls from suffering the same fate.

A girl who is raped should be allowed to complain even if her parents don't agree.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	29%	28%	29%	86%	88%	85%	88%
Disagree	2%	4%	4%	10%	7%	13%	10%
NS/DK	2%	1%	1%	4%	5%	2%	2%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

It is encouraging that the vast majority of respondents (86%) agreed that child survivors of rape should be allowed to file a police complaint even if their parents do not agree. The results of focus groups discussions were largely in line with the survey, with the majority of parents claiming they would respect their child's wishes to file a complaint, saying that it is their child's life and therefore her “right” to do so. It is positive that parents did recognize the right for children to seek legal redress as a right, even though it was not presented to them as being a rights issue. Girls in focus groups also overwhelmingly claimed it was their right to file a complaint, indicating a high awareness of children's right to participate in decisions among all target groups.

Key informants, however, doubted the truth of parents' responses and the ability of children to act on their decisions. While parents and children theoretically recognized the right to participation, the strong cultural emphasis on the hierarchy, authority and respect afforded to parents means that these rights are effectively limited in practice. Child rights investigators from 3 NGOs said that parents are normally the ones that decide whether or not to file rape charges, and that only 30-40% would likely respect their children's wishes if they wanted to go to court. They added that while the child's statements reflected their wishes, it was unlikely that the child would be able to act on their right to file a police complaint in the absence of a sympathetic parent. Thus, while

it appears that awareness has been achieved among the target groups covered, more focus is needed on implementation in order for children to be empowered to respond to sexual abuse.

A girl who is pregnant from being raped should follow her parent's wishes if they want her to get an abortion.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	10%	10%	8%	28%	29%	29%	24%
Disagree	20%	20%	22%	62%	60%	61%	66%
NS/DK	4%	3%	3%	10%	11%	10%	10%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

This question continued investigating the issue of child participation in decision-making after sexual abuse. 62% of all respondents felt that a girl should be able to make her own decision as to whether to keep the child or not. When viewed by location, disagreement was slightly higher in remote Oddar Meanchey, where one would expect to find more traditional views. It is notable, however that at least 10% of the respondents in each location were not sure or didn't know.

While children in focus groups generally agreed that this decision should rest with the child, there were mixed feelings amongst parents. While many parents were supportive of a girl's right to keep a baby resulting from rape, there was much concern about the consequences of this for the family. These included the difficulty of raising the child without a father, of introducing "bad blood" into the family line, the implications of not having a legal father, etc. On the other hand, those that were supportive of the survivor showed much compassion, saying she and her unborn child were still their flesh and blood, and that they would support the victim in raising their child as part of the family.

Key informants and child protection workers painted a different picture, indicating that abortion was a common method of avoiding the shame and hardship placed on a family as a result of rape. Victims' mothers in particular were said to be strongly opposed to keeping the unborn child and often insisted on the victim procuring an abortion, with many mothers personally taking their daughters to abortion clinics.

While abortion is legal in Cambodia, the decision to do so must be made with the full participation of pregnant minors, given their level of maturity to comprehend the full consequences of such a decision. Where parents and other adults are involved in the decision, they must do so with her rights and best interests in mind. Pregnant teens and their parents should therefore be made aware of the available options and be provided with appropriate assistance to pursue them, including maintaining the pregnancy to raise the child herself, to seek adoptive or alternative care, or to have an abortion in a manner that ensures her safety during and after the procedure. The rights of underage girls to keep their unborn children should therefore be promoted, while at the same time ensuring that safe abortions are available to those that voluntarily choose to do so.

3.0 Right to Development: Girls' Education & Sex Education

3.1 Girls' Education

Article 28.1 of the UNCEC addresses the right of all children to education:

States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular:

- (a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all;*
- (b) Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need;*
- (c) Make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means;*
- (d) Make educational and vocational information and guidance available and accessible to all children;*
- (e) Take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates.*

It is notable that this article goes beyond the oft-quoted right to free primary education, to ensuring accessibility of secondary and higher education “for every child” without gender discrimination, and “by every appropriate means” including financial assistance when needed.

After reviewing Cambodia's progress in implementing Article 28, the *Committee on Rights of the Child* made the following recommendations in its June 2000 *Concluding Observations*:

The Committee further recommends that the State party take effective measures to eliminate discrimination against girls, in particular with regard to their access to education... to make primary education free and compulsory for all children; to increase the enrolment rates and decrease drop-out and repetition rates; to increase access to schools, in particular for poor children, girls, children belonging to minority groups and children living in remote areas. (CRC, Pp. 5, 10) Findings

Summary of Main Findings

The inclusion of this topic was intended to investigate whether gender discrimination is visible in girls' education in the three research locations. While the main focus was on primary school, this research also addressed attitudes of parents and children towards secondary and higher education for girls, as referred to in Article 28.1b,c of the UNCRC (see above). Moreover, the question of whether or not girls were encouraged and/or expected to reach the same level of education as boys was deemed important by children and key informants at the planning phase. They felt that while discrimination had been greatly reduced in lower grades, it still existed and limited girls' access to higher grades. Their perception in fact matched the findings of a fact-finding study conducted as part of the *2005 Shadow Report to the UN Committee of the Rights of the Child*, which stated:

The Middle Way

Although the parity between girls and boys accessing primary education has improved substantially, girls still account for a significant number of drop outs and are not enrolling in secondary schooling at the same rate as boys. Whilst primary school enrolment rates have increased considerably, the number of those actually completing the primary school system is still worryingly low. (von Gyer, p. 28)

The current research therefore aimed to provide information on educational beliefs and practices which limit higher education for girls.³⁸

To begin on an encouraging note, participants in focus groups demonstrated a very high degree of understanding of girls' right to education. Parents and children in all locations stated that government and NGO campaigns had succeeded in instilling a very high level of awareness of the law regarding enrolment of girls in primary schools. They often noted that school and village authorities held annual drives to ensure registration of girls, resulting in an enrolment rate equalling that of boys. Local authorities, school officials and key informants in each research location confirmed this.

Of many cultural changes that have taken place in Cambodia over the past several decades, parents appeared to consider the increased education of girls as one of the most positive. In their time, the older ones said, the education of girls took place at home, where their mothers instructed them in the homemaking skills they would need for their future roles as wives and mothers. Learning to read and write was considered unnecessary, as demonstrated by the traditional proverb: "**A woman cannot urinate far from her heels.**" This proverb refers to the pervasive perception that females are limited in what their life options because they are only suited for their 'natural' role as a wife and mother. As one girl in Phnom Penh interpreted it, "She will be the cook in her family. She will nurture her babies and do the household work. She cannot do other tasks as well as manage the household." Moreover, one woman explained traditional knowledge was viewed as dangerous for girls, saying "In the old days parents forbade their daughters to go to school because they become difficult to control once they have a lot of knowledge."

Girls' education was also traditionally limited by an educational system tailored for boys.³⁹ Schools were operated in pagodas which were often located so far away that parents would only allow their sons to travel and/or live there. Moreover, classes were taught by monks whose religious vows prevented them from close association with females. Boys were not only educated toward a future role as family breadwinners, but they were also expected to have a greater involvement and status than women in a public life.



Although there is greater recognition of the right of girls to education, many parents believe that only basic literacy skills are needed so that their daughters can run small businesses to supplement their future husbands' income.

Photo: Peter Harris

³⁸ For more detailed treatment of girls' educational attainment, and persistent failure of Cambodian families to keep girls in school, see the work of E. Velasco (2001, 2004). Fiske's (1995) much earlier study also details discrimination by parents against placing girls in school, and it includes details of Khmer socio-cultural rationale for this choice.

³⁹ See Ayers (2000) for a much more detailed treatment of traditional Cambodian schooling.

In contrast to these traditions, parents in both rural and urban locations felt that education was very important for girls. This is a clear attitudinal change from the past. Many spoke of the value of education in improving their daughters' lives in the present as well as the future. Some felt that lessons on health, hygiene and Khmer society were important and useful, while others hoped that literacy skills might enable girls to one day get a job with a company or NGO.

Despite this, strong cultural expectations of gender roles in Cambodian society still appeared to factor strongly in parents' views and decisions on their children's education. While school is indeed desired and supported for girls at younger ages and lower grades, elder daughters in particular may face social and/or parental pressure to quit school and help their families, effectively becoming a 'second mother' at home while their brothers continue their education. One elderly woman in Phnom Penh explained, *"the oldest daughter is usually the first to stop school because she is traditionally responsible for caring for her younger siblings; she is regarded as the second parent."* Generally speaking, the economic situation of the family, the number of children and extended family members needing support, and the need for practical assistance in running the household were all said to be major factors in the decision of parents and/or their daughters to leave school. Perhaps the most common problem voiced by parents, however, was the palpable fear they had for their daughters' safety when travelling to schools distant from home. Many spoke of the dangers of rape, trafficking, kidnapping, road and other accidents – all significant fears adding to the many issues that discourage parents from allowing their daughters to travel to distant schools. One fourteen year old girl from Kampong Cham explained that she was not allowed to go to school or even into the fields because her mother feared for her safety. Unfortunately, they had very few ideas of how to protect them from these hazards. For example, few mentioned ideas such as having children travel in groups, enlist the help of older students, rotate volunteers of parents to accompany children, etc.

In addition to the above factors is the strong emphasis that Cambodian parents place on marriage for their daughters. Marriage enables a daughter to fulfil her culturally expected role as a housewife, as well as helps ensure a stable future for her and the family as a whole. For these and other reasons researchers were told that it was common, especially in poorer rural communities, for parents to prioritize an opportunity for marriage over school, especially as a daughter became older and they feared she may remain single. The links between marriage, safety and education were also noted by Perry (2002):

"Girls tend to drop out of school in large numbers at puberty. This might reflect parental attempts to control a girl's sexuality, as the virginity of girls is deemed essential for marriage. Security of school-going daughters was a major concern to parents." (pg. 12)

In stark contrast, most parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds in Phnom Penh wanted their daughters to study at the university level, and were willing for their daughters to delay marriage until the girls graduated.

Interestingly, women and girls often appeared to accept the limitations placed upon them, even if they felt disadvantaged. Many girls, however, voiced their disagreement with what they perceived as clear discrimination against them. This included their frustration with their brothers' education being prioritized over theirs, the many responsibilities of household chores, child rearing and other duties that limited their time for school, and the knowledge that, even if they did manage to go to a university, their father and/or brothers would most likely choose their major area of study. Some girls

also explained that they were both upset and ashamed that they could not read or write, and that they were embarrassed to join in conversations with educated people.

Regarding the level of achievement that Cambodian girls can and do expect, education specialists stated that while current enrolment for boys and girls is about equal at primary levels, enrolment drops off faster for girls than boys as grades increase - dependent of course on location. Encouragingly, girls in Phnom Penh generally expected to reach high school, perhaps indicating a higher parental value on education and/or opportunity as compared to children in the provinces. However, provincial parents and children said that 9th grade was the maximum grade level that most girls could expect to achieve, with most of those that drop out do so at much lower grades. While this is likely due to the socio-economic factors described above, what is most concerning is the persisting belief that girls simply do not need to study to as high a grade level as boys do. When asked what the minimal level of education is needed by girls, nearly all provincial parents said grade 9, while for boys they commonly said grade 12, university or "as high as possible".

Supportive and Hindering Factors

Social and cultural factors which support the equal right of girls to education include:

- *Very high awareness of girls' equal right to education*
- *Good recognition of value and benefits of girls' education e.g. increased future work and income, health and hygiene, etc.*
- *Girls and some parents are able to imagine a positive future outside of traditional Khmer gender roles*

Factors that hinder the right of girls to education include:

- *Continued cultural expectation and discrimination against girls to quit school and fulfil economic and household duties at home*
- *High parental and cultural expectation to fulfil role as housewives limits girls' education when they reach age and opportunity of marriage*
- *Strong parental fears for daughters' safety when travelling to/from distant schools*
- *Low awareness of culturally-appropriate benefits of girls' education, e.g. improved marital and parenting skills, etc.*
- *Low awareness of 'middle way' solutions, e.g. parents lack ideas for addressing cultural, safety and other issues*

Specific Findings

Detailed findings from survey interviews and focus group discussions include:

It is more important for boys than girls to study because boys will be head of the family in the future.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	14%	20%	22%	56%	44%	62%	66%
Disagree	18%	12%	11%	41%	55%	37%	33%
NS/DK	1%	1%	1%	3%	1%	1%	1%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Encouragingly, nearly half (41%) of respondents disagreed with the statement that boys should study more than girls. In terms of breakdown by location, Phnom Penh

respondents were

much more likely to opposing discrimination than provincial locations, with up to 22% more disagreeing than their rural counterparts.

This is a reversal of the long-standing belief in Cambodia that education is not important or relevant for girls as they are traditionally expected to be housewives. Despite this, slightly more than half of all respondents (56%) still agreed with the traditional view that boys should study more. They may be because they were reinforcing what they perceived to be the proper status of men in families and society, and/or because they associated education with the earning power that men should have as heads of the family. In any case, the strong support is probably due to a mixture of recognizing contemporary economic realities as well as gender discrimination.

Surprisingly, female respondents showed less opposition than males in all locations, again perhaps because they agreed that boys will need more education as heads of households.

Marriage is more important than education for a girl's future.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	4%	7%	7%	18%	12%	22%	22%
Disagree	28%	24%	25%	77%	83%	72%	75%
NS/DK	2%	2%	1%	5%	5%	6%	3%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

77% of all respondents disagreed that marriage is more important than education for a girl's future, although provincial respondents were twice as likely to prioritise marriage than Phnom Penh. The strong overall support for girls' education seems to contradict the gender bias found in the previous question. This may be because people are beginning to value education for girls in general (as shown in this question), while still affirming the traditional role that boys will fill heads of households (as found in previous question).

Qualitative findings, however, contrasted and gave further insight into these answers. Many parents in focus groups did recognize that educational achievement could one day enable their daughter to get a job with a good salary, particularly as job opportunities were slowly increasing for women. However, the feelings of most were summed up by the words of one man who said *"the most important role for women in Khmer society is still a wife and mother."* Thus, the results appear to indicate that while Cambodian parents are placing an increasingly high value on their daughters' education - especially while they are young - they still expect that the traditional role of housewife will inevitably supersede and therefore limit their studies. Encouragingly, education specialists working on this issue have found that many parents are willing for their daughters to return to school after marriage, indicating a possible 'middle way' solution to respecting parental expectations and children's rights.

A "yes, but..." attitude was also found in discussions on the appropriate level of education for girls. While most rural parents said that they would like their daughters to graduate from high school, others felt that girls only needed to study enough to be able to run small businesses to support their families. The exception to this were parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds in Phnom Penh, who nearly all wanted their daughters to study at university level if they had the desire and capacity to do so. While

their affluent lifestyles surely influenced this response, they clearly valued higher

education for their daughters even if this meant delaying marriage, and moreover were supportive of them pursuing career paths outside of the cultural norms for women. It was encouraging to hear this echoed by most of the girl children participating in focus groups in Phnom Penh, regardless of their socio-economic background. Many expected to graduate from at least high school, desired to study at a university whether they married or not, and were able to envision a future that was distinctly different from the traditional stereotypes of Khmer women. As one 17-year old girl said, *"I can do the same work as men and even support myself without a husband if I can go to university like boys do."*

The belief that boys should study more than girls should be changed for the modern era.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	30%	27%	26%	83%	89%	80%	77%
Disagree	3%	5%	7%	15%	9%	15%	21%
NS/DK	0.5%	1%	0.5%	2%	2%	5%	2%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

An extremely high number of all respondents (83%) agreed that traditional beliefs favouring the education of boys should change. When broken down by location, Oddar Meanchey was found to be the least supportive of change, however 3 out of 4 (77%) respondents still felt that gender discrimination should change in this area.

This is encouraging evidence of the effectiveness of governmental and NGO efforts to change parental attitudes in this area. Along with the significant strides Cambodia has made in increasing access to tertiary education, this may be contributing to broader changes in traditionally male gender attitudes as well. For example, some participants stated Khmer men commonly prefer to marry women who are less educated than them, so that they will not be challenged in their role as head of the family. However, parents and children in Phnom Penh stated that nowadays some young men recognize the benefits of having an educated wife, who they believe will be better equipped to successfully manage the difficulties of marriage and raising children.

Promoting the benefits that educated women can offer their families could be a culturally appropriate way to encourage higher education for girls. Other messages could focus on the fact that Cambodia's economy will have increasing need of more female professionals in the future, and the benefits of having two educated spouses working in order to meet the rising costs of supporting families.

It should be noted however that a change in attitudes does not necessarily indicate a change in practices. Although the research findings show that parents are indeed more supportive of girls' education than perhaps ever before, there are still significant obstacles to overcome before girls are able to realize the same educational opportunities available to boys. Not the least of these is the challenge of poverty that often forces parents to prioritize not only between girls and boys but also older and younger siblings. When this is combined with strict gender roles compelling daughters to help with household chores, child rearing and earning money, in addition to the strong cultural expectations and limitations imposed by marriage, it is clear that the education of Cambodian girls will continue to be limited by these competing factors. Nonetheless, much hope can be found in the positive changes in awareness, attitudes and aspirations found among many forward-thinking parents, and especially children and

youth.

3.2 Sex Education

Article 24.1,3 of the UNCRC addresses children's right to sexual and reproductive health education, including cultural taboos and/or practices which restrict this:

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health. States Parties shall strive to ensure that no child is deprived of his or her right of access to such health care services.

3. States Parties shall take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children.

Article 17a,e is also applicable insofar as children have the right to receive information which is helpful to them (such as age-appropriate sex education) and be protected from information which is harmful (such as pornography):

States Parties recognize the important function performed by the mass media and shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health. To this end, States Parties shall:

(a) Encourage the mass media to disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to benefit to the child and in accordance with the spirit of of article 29;

(e) Encourage the development of appropriate guidelines guidelines for the protection of the child from information information and material injurious to his or her well-being, being, bearing in mind the provisions of articles 13 and 18. and 18.

After reviewing Cambodia's progress in 2000, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child stated:

"The Committee expresses its concern at the high maternal maternal mortality rate, the limited access by teenagers to

teenagers to reproductive and sexual health education education and counselling services, including outside the the school system, and the low level of contraceptive use... use... The Committee recommends that the State party party undertake a comprehensive and multidisciplinary multidisciplinary study to determine the scope of adolescent health problems, including mental health, as a as a basis for promoting adolescent health policies and and strengthening reproductive health education". (CRC, Pg. 9)



As sexuality has traditionally been a taboo topic, many mothers have difficulty explaining the onset of puberty to their daughters.

Photo: Peter Harris

"In light of article 17 of the Convention, the Committee recommends that the party enact special legislation to protect children from harmful information, in particular from television programmes and films containing brutal violence and pornography, and to guarantee their access to appropriate information." (Pg. 6)

Summary of Main Findings

This section describes qualitative and quantitative findings on sex education (inclusive of human sexuality/relationships and sexual and reproductive health) in Cambodia. While this is a sensitive issue in any culture, it is vital that adolescents have access to accurate and helpful information on sex and sexuality in the particularly dangerous sexual environment of Cambodia. The current generation of youth is growing up in an era of widespread, 'normalised' sexual violence that includes systematic trafficking of women and children,⁴⁰ open and underground prostitution,⁴¹ local and foreign paedophiles, rape (often violent) of adult women and children of both sexes⁴², the social acceptance of gang rape of sex workers by groups of young men⁴³ and easy access to pornography⁴⁴ – not to mention the consequences of early pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections such as HIV. Without culturally- and age-appropriate education on managing the many changes and desires that occur during puberty and adolescence, how and why reproductive health is important, and strategies to prevent sexual abuse and exploitation, children are left vulnerable to the very real threats described above. Although it can be said that adults (including parents, authorities and other duty-bearers) are primarily responsible for providing protection in this area, until families, communities and legal systems become an effective safety net, children must be empowered to make wise choices and participate in their own protection.

Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) is necessary for reasons far beyond the need for safety, however. It is also needed to guide adolescents as they experience physical changes during puberty and explore their natural curiosity about relationships and sexuality. This reality was noted in a review of the *Youth Reproductive Health Programme in Cambodia*, which stated:

"Young people do not only have sex in the context of rape or coercion but are sexual human beings who desire to and will have relationships. They are looking for answers to complex emotional and behavioural dilemmas. Interventions should therefore not limit its scope to technical aspects of reproductive health but incorporate a wider social perspective recognizing the circumstances in which sexual and reproductive health decisions are made and related behaviour takes place." (Perry, 2002, pg. 49)

While the importance and need are clear, significant cultural barriers exist to the provision of RSE in Cambodia. Both mothers and fathers in focus groups noted that when they were younger, human sexuality and even physical changes related to puberty were considered taboo topics and not openly discussed, nor were they taught within the school system. When the topic of sex was broached, it was usually not referred to directly. One middle-aged woman in Kampong Cham laughed when she described how her parents told her not to let boys walk across her legs or she would have a baby... *"and I believed it!"* she said. Many other examples of euphemistic warnings were given in focus groups, some of which are still used by parents with their own children today.

⁴⁰ Arensen, L., Bunn, M., Knight, K.. *"Caring for Children from Commercially Sexually Exploitative Situations: Current Practices in Cambodia and Recommendations for a Model of Care."* Hagar Int'l: Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 2004

⁴¹ Greenwood, Z. *"I'm Not Afraid of AIDS, I'm Afraid of No Sex"*, CARE International, Phnom Penh, 2000

Wilkinson, D.J. and G. Fletcher, *"Sweetheart Relationships in Phnom Penh: Love sex and condoms in the Time of HIV,"* PSI, Phnom Penh, (2002).

⁴² O'Connell, D., *Rape and Indecent Assault in the Community*. LICADHO: Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 2001

⁴³ Bearup, L., *Paupers and Princes; Youth Attitudes Towards Gangs, Violence, Rape, Drugs and Theft*, GAD, Cambodia, 2003.

⁴⁴ Fordham, G., *"Wise' Before Their Time: Young people and Gender-Based Violence and Pornography in Kandal Stung District"*, World Vision, Cambodia, 2005.

Besides the issue of premarital sex, even when a couple were engaged in previous eras, the subject of “the wedding night” was typically not addressed directly – and as a result they were not even prepared for sex within marriage. Some participants told of “guards” even being placed at the bedroom doors of a newlywed couple in order to ensure that they would not run away for fear of the unknown. Others said they had heard of a custom in some parts of Cambodia when mothers and other older women brides prepared brides-to-be for the wedding night. However, outside of this there appears to be no precedent for cultural traditions that support the transition of Cambodian young people into a healthy awareness of sexuality and sexual relationships.

In terms of the onset of puberty, some women gave examples of how they had been told by their mothers or older female relatives about menstruation and how to care for themselves, however this was apparently not the norm. For boys even less guidance was given, as men in focus groups said that it was assumed that they would “find out naturally” by becoming aware of their own physical changes and desires.

When children were asked how they learn about puberty nowadays, they described a much wider range of sources, including parents and older relatives, friends, school teachers, village health workers, books and magazines, and NGOs. The most common sources were family members, friends and school teachers. Quantity should not be confused with *quality* of information, however, and this was found to vary widely according to the source, particularly among parents as noted below.

When asked about where they learned about sex and sexual relationships, the sources expanded to include romance books, magazines and movies, pornography via VCD/DVDs, Internet and mobile phones, brothels, and boyfriends and girlfriends. The most common sources were family members and friends, with the addition of various media. Again the quality of information varied, with what is learned from media sources of particular concern. While children in Phnom Penh said that popular magazines are starting to publish helpful articles on building healthy romantic and sexual relationships, they also reported that many students receive and send pornographic film clips through their mobile phones. One boy showed a clip filmed in private room in a Phnom Penh karaoke club, in which a woman performed sexual acts before a small group of young men and women. This is not limited to urban areas, however. Graham Fordham's (2005) study of pornography amongst young people in Kandal Stung estimates that 83.5% have seen some form of pornography, and the Women's Media Centre of Cambodia has been documenting widely distributed comics in which women are routinely raped. These are clearly not healthy sources of information or education for minors. When asked about where they had learned helpful information about romantic feelings and sexual attraction, the vast majority of children said they not been taught about these important aspects of human sexuality in school, as biological and safety issues were more commonly taught. Those that did learn of these had participated in NGO programs or read magazines that addressed the relational aspects of sex.

Parents, while aware that boys and girls were becoming increasingly sexually active, did not seem to recognize that that sexual desire was a normal part of human development, and acted as if it could be easily suppressed or ignored until marriage. Children on the other hand were not only interested, but said that they would like to talk to their parents about these issues, if only they were willing. Encouragingly, the majority of parents – both mothers and fathers – did in fact recognize that sex education could be helpful. A middle aged woman from Oddar Meanchey explained, *“It (sex education) is beneficial because it helps children to understand how sexuality, Cambodian culture and morality are related.”* Most parents also believed that they should be primarily responsible for teaching their children in this area; however, they

cited persistent cultural taboos, lack of knowledge, fear and shyness, and concern that children would experiment if told, as reasons that they did not teach their children openly. These parents seem caught in a dilemma between what they feel they should say to their children, and what they actually do say. This dilemma is likely faced by adults in general, prompting Perry (2002) to observe that:

"Gatekeepers in the form of parents, teachers, employers, and social religious norms are significant factors that create barriers to (sexual and reproductive health) services... for example, it is widely accepted that young single women should not show an interest in (these issues) as this goes against traditional and culture " (pg. 6)

Many mothers and some fathers did in fact say they spoke to their children about proper sexual behaviour and the hazards that exist, however the examples that they gave were frequently euphemistic rather than detailed, and directive rather than reflective. As a result children said they could not understand the many issues and dynamics involved, and the information their parents gave them did not help them to make wise decisions. Some noted the limitations of this approach, with one mother in Phnom Penh saying, *"We should not speak indirectly about these things using metaphors as we used to do, because children will not understand what we are saying, and there are too many problems in modern society."* These parents - usually mothers from higher socio-economic backgrounds – were among the minority that said they specifically set aside time to talk to their children (usually daughters) openly about sexual issues, in order to prepare them for the situations and relationships they would eventually encounter.

For most parents who strive to raise children according to the cultural norm, however, their values and upbringing do not allow for an open recognition or response to the natural sexual development of children and youth. Nonetheless, the rapid changes in Khmer society that expose Cambodian children to sexual issues and hazards must be dealt with by parents in a way that proactively responds to and counters the significant social forces that they encounter outside the home. Guiding children in these matters will therefore require more than simplistic "do this" or "don't do that" messages from parents who focus on the negatives, but rather open an ongoing dialog that encourages deeper understanding and wise decisions. While today's parents are definitely more open than in previous generations, much attention needs to be given to helping parents overcome cultural taboos and equip them with the knowledge and confidence needed to talk to their children.

Supportive and Hindering Factors

Social and cultural factors that support children's right to helpful information include:

- *Parents are very concerned about protecting their children from sexual abuse and ensuring appropriate relationships with the opposite sex*
- *High level of parental awareness of need for their children to have sex education, reproductive health education, and information about sexual hazards.*
- *Most parents feel they are responsible for teaching children about sex and are very open to sex education being taught in school system*
- *Children are genuinely interested in learning about human sexuality and most are open to discussion with parents about sexual issues*
- *Open discussion of sexual hazards and prevention increasing in society due to GO/NGO efforts on HIV/AIDS, etc.*

Factors that hinder the right of children to helpful information about sexuality include:

- Cultural values of honour, hierarchy and patriarchy create taboos for parents, children and especially girls to learn about and discuss puberty, sex and sexuality, severely limiting access of children to helpful information
- Parents do not talk to children about sexual issues openly or in enough detail to be more influential than social environment
- Low awareness of 'middle way' solutions for parents to educate & protect children from sexual hazards;
- Low parental recognition or response to the natural emotions and sexual desires of adolescence

Specific Findings

Detailed findings from survey interviews and focus group discussions include the following:

All children should be taught about reproductive health when they reach puberty.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	30%	27%	28%	85%	91%	80%	84%
Disagree	2%	4%	4%	10%	5%	13%	12%
NS/DK	1%	2%	2%	5 %	4%	7%	4%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

All children should be taught about sexual hazards such as trafficking, sexual pornography, etc.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	30%	27%	26%	83%	89%	80%	78%
Disagree	2%	5%	7%	14%	7%	14%	21%
NS/DK	1%	1%	1%	3%	4%	6%	1%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

As shown in the first and second tables above, a very high percentage of respondents (85% and 83%, respectively) agreed that children should learn about reproduction, reproductive health and sexual hazards. This indicates that both parents and children are aware of the importance of and need for education in these areas. Respondents in Phnom Penh were only slightly more likely to support this than those in the two provinces, where agreement was also high.

However as seen in the last table, the overall approval rate dropped by nearly 20% (from 83% to 64%) when asked if parents should speak openly to their children about "sexual issues". This is possibly because this term infers romantic and sexual relationships, which parents may be more reluctant to speak to their children about than the biological and safety-related topics referred to in the previous question. The increased disapproval may therefore indicate that this is more difficult to discuss openly due to cultural taboos, etc., or simply that they would prefer the school system or other actors to take on this responsibility.

Children will experiment with sex if they are taught about reproductive health and sexual hazards.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	7%	10%	12%	29%	22%	29%	35%
Disagree	20%	16%	17%	53%	61%	49%	50%
NS/DK	6%	7%	5%	18%	17%	22%	15%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

53% or slightly more than half of all respondents disagreed that children will experiment with sex if they are taught about sexual hazards, with the largest percentage in Phnom Penh. In contrast, 29% or nearly a third agreed that children would experiment, pointing to a common fear that many focus group participants expressed about sex education. Interestingly, an unusually large percentage of all respondents (18%) stated that they did not know or were not sure how children would react, perhaps indicating that people are open to sex education but are cautious because it has not traditionally been done in Cambodia.

In focus groups parents were often afraid that sex education would lead to curiosity, arousal, and increased sexual freedom and activity before marriage. Another fear was that girls who spoke openly about sex, even in an educational context, would not be acting as the proper, shy, modest women that they are supposed to be. When asked how these problems could be responded too, the vast majority of parents simply preferred that lessons should be limited to biology using non-graphic pictures.

Other parents felt that hazards should be taught in order to protect their children from STDs, rape, etc. however their suggestions tended towards instilling fear in children, rather than reflection, decision-making, and problem-solving leading to empowerment. Children tended to be more positive and open to learning about sexual hazards saying that it was important and necessary for their protection, yet they also expressed many of the same concerns as their parents.

As in girls' education, it appears that there has been progress in increasing awareness and attitudinal change in this area. However, the various taboos, fears and resulting lack of sex education in Khmer culture must be addressed in order for adolescents to be empowered to protect themselves by taking control of their person and environment.

4.0 Right to Participation: Arranged Marriage & Community Participation

4.1 Arranged Marriage

Article 12 of the UNCRC gives children the right to participate in all decisions affecting them (12.1), including legally binding matters such as marriage (12.2):

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

The UN Committee on the Rights on the Child has on numerous occasions “expressed grave concern about persisting harmful traditional practices” in various countries, including arranged marriages using coercion and early marriages. In regards to the latter, the Committee’s *Concluding Observations* to Cambodia recognized national legislation setting the legal age for marriage at 18 for boys and 20 for boys, while recommending “...that the State party enforce the law on minimum age for marriage.” (CRC, pg. 5)

Summary of Main Findings

This topic was of great concern to both parents and children consulted prior to the research. Cambodian traditions do not allow youth to choose their own spouses nor have a girlfriend or boyfriend before getting married. The authority to choose when and when children will marry rests solely with parents. The proverb “**The cake (child) is not bigger than the pan (parent)**” is often quoted in this context. Arranged marriages are connected with the value system found in many traditional societies which hold that parents know what is best for their children, as their age and experience makes them most qualified to identify a suitable mate. Choosing a spouse is a key responsibility of Cambodian parents, an important task which is referred to in the proverb, “**Check the grass before farming**”. Arranged marriages give expression to the value of interdependence, in which the needs of the family take precedence over the personal preferences of the individual. Stories are common in which Cambodian youth are expected to sacrifice their desires, dreams and ambitions in order to fulfil their family's needs as identified by their parents, often by a strategic marriage to a wealthy person who can benefit the family as a whole.

It may be said that arranged marriage is in many ways very appropriate for a traditional rural society where economic security depended on the strength of family and patronage networks. However, as one older man in Kampong Cham noted, these attitudes are changing, “*These days, children want to know each other well before they get married, but in the past it was more important to trust our parents' judgment and to show them respect.*” Especially since the UNTAC era, new ideals, lifestyles and economics have enabled modern Cambodians to challenge traditional customs such as arranged marriage. Even in remote provinces such as Oddar Meanchey, over half of the youth participating in focus groups group discussions desired to choose who they

would marry. And urban youth are clearly enamoured with the notion of romance and the opportunity to have girlfriends and boyfriends. This can be seen by the increasing popularity of Valentine's Day in Phnom Penh, when each year major boulevards are jammed with couples on motorbikes and sellers hawking roses and other gifts. This dramatic and rapid change has brought new challenges for parents who were raised in with very different customs and values. As one mother put it, *"We don't really know what kids are doing on Valentine's Day; are they simply exchanging gifts or going out and having sex?"*

Encouragingly, there is a widespread recognition of the need for change in this area, perhaps more than in any of the other topics studied. Both parents and children spoke of the severe family conflicts that frequently occur over disagreements on dating and marriage. In worst case scenarios, parents had resorted to violence or threats of disowning their children if they refused to obey them, while heartbroken youth had ran away from home or even committed suicide rather than marry their parent's choice. As illustrated by a story told by a boy in Kampong Cham, *"One girl had many boy friends, and when her parents found out they locked her inside the house. After that she committed suicide with pills."* When conflicts were successfully resolved it often involved negotiation and reaching various levels of compromise, such as the child choosing their partner but giving their parents the final approval. If an agreement could not be reached however, a common solution was for parents to give in and leave their children to the consequences of their choices. Many FGD participants told stories of young couples running away because their parents refused to let them marry. Then, after some time had passed, they would return, at which point the parents would sanction the marriage.

In addition to the frequent conflicts that are occurring, some felt that a change is needed because arranged marriages reinforced gender inequity. Boys were said to have more "choice" in initiating arranged marriages than girls, as they have the option of asking their parents to approach the parents of a girl they are interested in, or even a girl they have been dating – whereas this is not allowed for girls. The passive role of females in arranged marriages was noted in the 2005 Cambodia Health and Demographic Survey (CHDS) found that:

"Only 19 percent of married women chose their husband (chose alone or the respondent and her husband chose each other jointly). In addition, 29 percent of women chose their husband jointly with someone else. The remaining majority of women (52 percent) did not participate at all in the choice of their husband..." (p. 266)

"Eighteen percent of ever-married women in Cambodia met their husband for the first time at the time of marriage. An additional 9 percent knew their husband for less than one month before their marriage. This data suggest that one quarter of all ever-married women were married to relative strangers." (p. 265)

In addition, many parents said that in choosing a suitable daughter-in-law, she should not be so rich or educated that she could dominate the boy or his family. The degree to which this is practiced was reflected in the CHDS findings:

"Men are most likely to be married to women who have fewer years of education than they do. Overall, 55 percent of men have more education than their wife and 20 percent have less education than their wife". (p. 268)



New ideals, lifestyles and economics are enabling modern youth to challenge traditional customs such as arranged marriage.

Photo: Peter Harris

old, but she would be allowed to marry a twenty-five year old man. The parents wouldn't care about his age, because they think only about his ability to create a good family for their daughter."

While parents said they did not want to give up their authority and role in arranging their children's marriage, many appeared willing to change, in part because they saw it as a "violation" of children's rights. This is interesting because this is not an issue that has been specifically addressed by CR education or campaigns – the connection was apparently made by parents themselves, showing how practical, day-to-day problems can bring CR concepts to life. Other parents thought that change was needed because arranged marriages could result in unhappy marriages or divorce - particularly when they were against their children's wishes. However the most commonly mentioned reason was that modern youth were not agreeing to go along with arranged marriages as in the past. This is an interesting example of how Cambodian children have been able to effectively advocate for their right to participation, notably without the initiation or assistance of NGOs. However it appeared that parents are recognizing the fact that they are losing their authority to make decisions in this area, rather than agreeing that their children are capable of making wise choices. One older man lamented this situation explaining, *"These days children can, talk on the phone and go out alone with their sweethearts, hold hands, kiss, and even have sex. In the old days all these things were inappropriate because they went against tradition and made parents feel ashamed in the eyes of the community."*

Despite the recognition and willingness of the need for change, much fear and misunderstanding must be dealt with on both sides if parents and children become aware of constructive approaches to solving the problem. Regarding this, parents said that they would be more willing to go along with children's desire to date and choose

Parents explained the rationale for this, stating that a rich and intelligent wife is traditionally seen as a liability rather than an asset, as she will not submit to her husbands' authority, and as a result affect his honour and reputation as well. Children were also often keenly aware of this and how it affected the status of women in marriage. The practical implications of these beliefs and practices on gender equity in Cambodia was noted by the CHDS study:

"Marriage patterns are greatly influenced by culture and tradition, and their study often yields important insights into women's status and empowerment in society, as society, as well as in their marriage. At the individual level, various aspects of a woman's marriage are likely to likely to affect the amount of autonomy and control she has she has in her married life." (p. 265)

Another reason for change mentioned by both parents and children was the issue of early marriage, which still occurs in arranged marriages in the province. While the majority of focus group participants were aware of the national law setting minimum ages for marriage at 18 for girls and 20 for boys, parents and children noted that children as young as 14 years old still marry in the countryside where it is deemed acceptable by tradition. One girl in Kampong Cham said, *"Even if a girl is under age, the parents can ask the authorities to prepare documents which would allow her to become legally married. Sometimes the girl is only 16 years*

their own spouses if they could have some input into their decisions and if their children showed some respect for their values, particularly by refraining from behaviour which would cause them concern and embarrassment. However, parents did not seem to be prepared with how to advise children in having safe and healthy relationships, outside of simple directives about what not to do. In contrast, children were afraid of their parent's reactions and the conflict that might result if they told them they had a sweetheart, wanted to date or choose their own spouse. This was especially true in the case of girls, who unlike boys face more social consequences for being romantically and/or sexually active.

The issue of arranged marriage and dating holds great potential for positive social change in Cambodia, and could serve as an example of finding a middle way between tradition and rights. This could be accomplished as simply as adopting a consultative approach to arranged marriage and dating (see sidebar on *Decision-Making and the Views of the Child*) as some families have already done. For this to become common practice, however, much attention and support is needed from individuals and agencies working with families, in order to foster the communication that is necessary to resolve conflicts; to provide youth with the wisdom needed to make healthy relationship choices while showing respect for their parents; and to help parents understand the challenges and opportunities involved in guiding their children's decisions.

Supportive and Hindering Factors

Social and cultural factors which support children's right to participate in choosing their spouse include:

- *Strong cultural responsibility and desire of parents to help their children find a good spouse*
- *High awareness of children's right and/or desire to choose their own spouse*
- *Widespread recognition of necessity for social change in this area*
- *Many parents open to compromise, especially if children are sensitive to their values, reputation and advice*
- *Excellent example of children effectively advocating for their right to participation*

Factors that hinder children's right to children's right to participate in choosing their spouse include:

- *Arranged marriage often discriminatory against girls who have less choice than boys*
- *Parent/child conflicts over arranged marriage and/or dating can lead to violence, threats, children leaving home and even suicide*
- *Fear and misunderstanding between parents and children undermines open communication and solutions*
- *Parents are not equipped to advise children in having safe and healthy dating relationships*
- *Early marriage still accepted and permitted in some rural locations*

Specific Findings

Detailed findings from survey interviews and focus group discussions include:

Should parents allow their children to choose their marriage partner?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	27%	24%	23%	74%	80%	73%	68%
Disagree	5%	8%	11%	24%	18%	23%	32%
NS/DK	1%	1%	0%	2%	2%	4%	0%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Should parents allow their children to choose their marriage partner if they are mature and have good character?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	32%	31%	29%	92%	97%	92%	88%
Disagree	1%	2%	4%	7%	3%	7%	11%
NS/DK	0%	0.5%	0.5%	1%	0%	1%	1%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Should parents allow their children to choose their marriage partner if they understand each other well?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	32%	31%	30%	93%	97%	93%	89%
Disagree	1%	2%	3%	6%	3%	7%	10%
NS/DK	0%	0%	1%	1%	0%	0%	1%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Should parents allow their children to choose their marriage partner if they are financially stable?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	33%	31%	30%	94%	98%	95%	91%
Disagree	1%	1%	3%	5%	2%	4%	8%
NS/DK	0%	0.5%	0.5%	1%	0%	1%	1%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Should parents allow their children to choose their marriage partner if their parents have the opportunity to get to know them?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	33%	32 %	29 %	94%	98%	95%	88%
Disagree	1%	1%	3%	5%	2%	3%	11%
NS/DK	0%	0.5%	0.5%	1%	0%	2%	1%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

As the first table shows, a surprising 73% of all respondents (including parents) agreed that children should choose their own marriage partners, showing a distinct trend against traditional arranged marriages. This figure increased approximately 20% when the question included positive qualifiers that showed children had made “good” choices in choosing partners that parents would approve of (see tables 2-4). When disaggregated by location, the two provincial locations showed nearly the same level of support as Phnom Penh.

The majority of parents in FGD were also willing to change this tradition. Both mothers and fathers said that while they still preferred arranged marriages, they were not realistic for modern youth, because they had differing priorities, increased opportunities to meet friends and fall in love, etc. When asked what parents consider a priority in choosing a partner, character and family line were often mentioned as most important because it helps establish whether they can be trusted with their child. However, occupation and assets were also key for parents, as these ensured financial stability as well as status. Children on the other hand spoke of emotional compatibility, romance and appearance, in addition to good character qualities.

Despite these differences, the findings indicate that parents are more likely to approve of their children's choice in a partner if they meet the criteria listed in the survey questions, giving hope for the possibility of finding an acceptable compromise to the problem of arranged marriage.

Should teenagers be allowed to have a boyfriend or girlfriend before they are married?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	12%	7%	13%	32%	37%	20%	38%
Disagree	20%	25%	20%	65%	60%	76%	61%
NS/DK	1%	1%	1%	3%	3%	4%	1%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Should teenagers be allowed to have a boyfriend or girlfriend if they do not go out alone together?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	22%	12%	19%	53%	67%	35%	57%
Disagree	9%	20%	13%	42%	28%	59%	39%
NS/DK	2%	2%	1%	5%	5%	6%	4%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Should teenagers be allowed to have a boyfriend or girlfriend if they are mature and responsible?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	24%	18%	24%	66%	72%	54%	73%
Disagree	9 %	14%	8%	31%	25%	42%	25%
NS/DK	1%	1%	1%	3%	3%	4%	2%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

Should teenagers be allowed to have a boyfriend or girlfriend if their parents can meet and approve of them?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	26%	19%	24%	69%	79%	58%	72%
Disagree	6 %	13%	9%	28%	19%	39%	25%
NS/DK	1%	1%	1%	3%	2%	3%	3%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

While the first table shows that overall approval for dating is rather low at 32% (with Kampong Cham as the least supportive), approval increased dramatically if the children date in a way that shows some respect of traditional values. For instance, approval jumped 21% if couples do not go out alone (table 2). The largest support for dating was when the parents had the opportunity to meet and approve of their child's choice (table 4). What this means is that if the children act responsibly and meet certain conditions, parents are more likely to accept the practice of dating.

Children in focus groups discussions were generally in favour of dating, although some demonstrated a surprisingly conservative view, showing that they still held to many traditional values. Parents also said that they would prefer their children not to date, but that they recognized that it is becoming common for modern children to do so and it is difficult to avoid or forbid. This was a concession rather approval, as they were still concerned about others “looking down on” their daughter and their parenting.

Children claimed that parents do not understand them and what they do, and tend to assume that they are doing “bad” things. This can be understood in light of the fact that parents never had the tradition or experience of dating when they were growing up, and if they did it was likely not socially condoned at all. Children also said that issues of losing honour and reputation from dating were less of a concern to them, although girls were understandably more sensitive than boys. They explained that because dating and even sex were becoming more common, youth did not judge each other by the same standards of behaviour as their parents. In the words of one teenage boy: “Just because a girl goes out and has a boyfriend doesn't mean she is a bad person.”

While the findings above give hope that a compromise can be reached, barriers to communication and negotiation must be overcome by both parties. Homes must become an open forum for teens and their parents to express their desires and their values, to explore various options and their consequences, and to agree on a way forward that is acceptable to the individuals and families involved.

It is against the law for parents to force their children to marry someone they do not like.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	30%	29%	30%	89%	91%	86%	91%
Disagree	2%	4%	3%	9%	7%	13%	8%
NS/DK	1%	0,5%	0,5%	2%	2%	1%	1%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

An overwhelming majority of respondents correctly stated that forcing children to marry is against the law. Respondents in the two provincial locations showed roughly the same awareness as those in Phnom Penh. The actual law is found in the *Marriage and Family Act*, specifically Articles 24 and 23 which are intended to:

“...prohibit early marriage, forced marriage and all obstacles to the freedom of marriage. Neither of the parties to a marriage may impose his or her will upon the other. No one may force any person to marry or prevent a marriage that meets all the legal conditions. Forced marriage shall be null and void.”

The high awareness of this is surprising given the fact that parents are traditionally considered to have the authority to make this decision without the input or agreement of their children. Indeed, as stories of forced arranged marriages were often shared during the qualitative research, it is likely that the survey figures are unrealistically high.

In contrast to the quantitative findings, focus group participants (both parents and children) were divided in their awareness and knowledge of the legality of arranged marriage against a child's will. Some knew there was a law but considered parents to be exempt from this as it is commonly accepted that parents have this authority and role in their children's lives. On the other hand many did not know there was a law, but thought coercion was wrong and against children's rights.

In actual practice children appear to have much difficulty refusing their parent's choice of a spouse, because if they rebel it often causes great conflict - even to the point of children being disowned by parents. While it is doubtful that children would take this issue to authorities for a legal resolution, parents and children should be aware of the legalities involved and the children's rights as stated in both national legislation and international convention. A simple awareness of the law may give children more leverage and caution more parents when dealing with this issue. For example, children do not have to threaten parents with a lawsuit, but could mention that forced marriages are against the law.

Should the tradition of allowing children to marry before they are 18 be kept?

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	2%	15%	8%	25%	7%	45%	25%
Disagree	30%	16%	25%	71%	91%	48%	74%
NS/DK	1%	2%	1%	4%	2%	7%	1%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

71% of all respondents disagreed that children should get married before they are 18, showing a clear reversal of traditional attitudes in this area. However when the data is disaggregated by location, provincial support for early marriage can still be strong, with almost half of respondents in Kampong Cham agreeing.

In FGD, participants in general felt that the appropriate age to get married was at least 18 years of age for girls and ages 20-22 for boys. Participants felt that education and maturity were important priorities over marriage, particularly if the families could afford to keep their children in school. However, rural parents were more often to agree that if the girl was already mature, was approached for engagement, and could benefit economically, that 16 years of age was an acceptable age for marriage.

One of the reasons given by parents to allow their daughters to marry young was the fear that if parents waited too long to marry their daughters off, they might lose the opportunity to do so later. They considered marriage to be very important, if not essential, for their daughter's long-term well-being. In contrast, most parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds said that they wanted their daughters to wait to get married until they finished higher education and had started their careers, unless they were not suited to this or were not clever enough.

Children most often felt that 16 years of age was far too young for marriage, recognizing that they were not ready emotionally for marriage or its responsibilities and that it could disrupt their education, which they felt was more important for their long-term future. Girls also were aware that early pregnancies could be dangerous for them (parents who were against early marriages also were aware of this) and was often one of the first things they brought up. Girls did not seem as concerned with losing opportunities for marriage as the parents were.

Participants in rural locations said that local authorities had no difficulty in approving early marriages using falsified documents, because it is such a long-standing tradition in Cambodia. This indicates that while attitudes towards early marriages are changing, more attention is needed in rural areas in order to ensure that children are protected from early marriages according to national law and the UNCRC. This includes gaining support from authorities to respect and implement the law.

4.2 Community Participation

Articles 15 and 16 of the UNCRC affirms the right of children to participate in the social and cultural life of their communities:

Article 15

1. States Parties shall recognize the rights of the child to freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly.
2. No restrictions may be placed on the exercise of these rights other than those imposed in conformity with the law and which are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety, public order, the protection of public health or morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

Article 31

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

Article 29 is also relevant in specifying that educational opportunities must include those that develop children's social and cultural development:

1. States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:
 - (a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
 - (b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;
 - (c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his/her own;
 - (d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;
 - (e) The development of respect for the natural environment.



Children in focus groups were very aware of the importance of friends and participating in the life of the community.

Photo: Nigel Goddard

After reviewing Cambodia's progress in this area, the *UN Committee on Rights of the Child* made the following recommendation:

"...the Committee recommends that further measures, including legislation reform, be undertaken to promote the participation of children in the family, the school and other institutions, as well as to ensure the effective enjoyment of their fundamental freedoms, including the freedoms of opinion, expression and association. Public awareness of the participatory rights of children needs to be increased in families, communities and schools." (CRC, 2000, Pg. 6)

Summary of Main Findings

The issue of children's participation in social and community life was a major point of concern for parents and frustration for children consulted prior to the research. Cambodian parents traditionally prefer their children to stay at home when they are not at school, rather than go out into the community to meet friends or participate in other activities, although this changes with age. Younger children do in fact enjoy a good deal of socialization while growing up in rural villages where large families are common and where children are free to meet and play together when they are farming, fishing and watching animals. As one mother explained, *"Young children are allowed to do things in the community, but teenagers are rarely allowed out."* The older the children become, the more parents prefer to keep them at home. This is especially true of girls when they reach puberty. One woman explained, *"families have traditionally always been stricter with girls."* She went on to say that when she was growing up *"Whenever a girl wanted to go out she had to ask for permission from her parents or guardians, she had to have at least one male relative to go with her, and even then she could only go out ten percent of the time. And there could not be any romantic relationship at all."* Traditionally this was to prepare them for the responsibilities of adulthood by learning homemaking or vocational skills from their parents, as well to as protect them from bad influences or activities that adults consider to be risky or a waste of time. In contrast, social and leisure activities for older children were and still are considered to be of secondary importance, and are usually regulated to special events and national celebrations such as weddings, Khmer New Year and Pchum Bun festivals, etc. These are also among the few occasions when it is considered appropriate for young people to freely meet with members of the opposite sex who are not their relatives. Outside of the specific purposes of going to school, helping with family work and attending special events, participation of adolescents in community life is generally limited to going out only in groups with an older family member accompanying them.

As in the other topics covered, this tradition is being challenged by recent developments in telecommunication, transportation and entertainment which attract and allow modern young people to meet more friends, have new experiences and travel further from home than their parents ever imagined when they were growing up. Children and adults in focus group discussions often spoke of the continuing stream of new products, activities and forms of entertainment available in urban and some provincial areas that children are attracted to, often causing conflicts when parents see these as expensive, risky or against Cambodian culture. As a result they often try to limit their children's exposure and access to them by keeping them at home. Parents often cited their concerns of safety, the influence of bad friends and damage to family and personal reputation. They also had a clear perception that girls were unable to protect themselves at night or in strange places, unlike boys who, due to their strength and supposed higher knowledge and "street smarts", would be able to protect themselves and each other better than girls.

Teenagers participating in focus groups frequently expressed frustration with the lack of understanding and value their parents showed for this part of their life. They disagreed with parent's views that going out with friends was not important, was a waste of time and placed them at unnecessary risk. Although few described socialization and community participation as a basic right, they were very aware of their importance and role in their lives. Both girls and boys said that going out with friends allowed them to relax and deal with stress, meet and learn from new people, share interesting experiences and memories with each other, learn to manage relationships, and explore new places and developments in their community.

Affluent youth in Phnom Penh and in some provincial families felt that the socio-economic changes in Cambodia were positive in giving them more freedom than before. They said that having motos, cell phones and email give them more access to places, people and information than has traditionally been allowed, although their parents do not always want them to take advantage of these developments. Places and activities that parents approve of tend to reflected their own upbringing, such as going to schools, relatives' houses, markets, and the local pagoda - activities that hold little relevance to the interests or lifestyles of today's youth. Indeed, few parents had more than a general sense of what modern youth are interested and involved in. While they disapproved of places where their children might be exposed to gangs, gambling, video games, clubs and karaoke halls, etc., they were unaware of exactly what places they went to and what they did.

The significant gap between parents' and children's understanding of each other often results in a lack of communication and trust, undermining both children's right to participation and parents' ability to guide and protect their children. Parents often appear to assume that young people who go out are involved in "bad" activities and react accordingly, as in the case of mother who scolded her daughter for attending the evening screening of an educational documentary at a local university. Conversely, some teens are taking advantage of their parents' naiveté to take part in activities they would disapprove of. Many youth told researchers of recent trends in Phnom Penh, including how girls using gas station bathrooms to change into "sexy clothes" after leaving home, and how boys use Internet cafes to download porn videos to cell phones, then share them with friends via Bluetooth (wireless) technology. Others described the popularity of bubble tea cafes among couples who kiss and "make out" in private booths, and how drugs are easily available at discos, where prostitutes solicit teenage boys on the dance floor. Even boys in rural locations told of riding motos to visit brothels in neighbouring villages. While these situations are clearly risky for young people who are unaccustomed to such freedom and experiences, very few parents appeared to realize that they are occurring.

On a positive note, many parents from higher-socio-economic background in Phnom Penh had a clear desire to support their children's involvement with friends and community activities, and saw them as important opportunities for learning and growth. Some had strategies to minimize the risks involved, such as taking their children out on family outings to explore places of interest, and inviting their children's friends to visit them at home where the parents could get to know them. Furthermore, as in the case of Arranged Marriage, some parents are open to compromise in this area, allowing their children to go out more if they met certain criteria such as honesty, responsibility, etc. (see detailed findings below.) A young mother in her twenties gave an example of this, explaining that when she was younger her father had originally refused to allow her out, but once she showed him proper respect he had changed his mind, and allowed her to go.



As Cambodian youth become accustomed to new forms of socialization and entertainment, parents will need to revise strict behavioural expectations based on traditional values.

Photo: Peter Harris

The traditional upbringing and values of most parents, however, means that they are not as willing to emphasise socialization and community participation as much as activities that provide more concrete skills and benefits such as school and helping the family. As Cambodia continues to modernize, its youth will need increased participation in the life of their communities in order to develop along with their country, as well as to contribute to that development. Parents are becoming more aware of these issues but need to revise their high expectations of children based on traditional values; this is urgently needed for girls, whose participation is especially restricted by strict cultural ideals of proper social behaviour as well as responsibilities at home. Parents also need to be supported in understanding the interests and desires of modern youth as well as the specific risks that children face in modern society. Perhaps more than anything, parents need to be proactive in communicating with and providing guidance to their children in a way that supports their participation in positive activities, while also mitigating and protecting the potential hazards they may encounter when away from homes.

Supportive and Hindering Factors

Social and cultural factors, which support children's right to community participation include:

- *Younger children enjoy a good deal of freedom to go out into the community and meet with friends, especially in rural areas*
- *Strong parental concern for older children's physical safety and protection from harmful influences*
- *Some parents aware of developmental importance of community involvement and actively developing strategies to protect*
- *Some parents open to compromise, e.g. middle way solutions to increasing community participation while minimizing risk*

Factors that hinder children's rights to community participation include:

- *Strict behavioural expectations of traditional parents emphasize learning and responsibilities at home, at the expense of social skills and community experience required to meet demands of contemporary society*
- *Strong discrimination against teenage girls' involvement in community life*
- *Low parental awareness what modern youth are interested and involved in, including high-risk activities needing parental response*
- *Significant communication gap between parents and children, limiting mutual understanding, cooperation and parental guidance*

Specific Findings

Detailed findings from survey interviews and focus group discussions include the following:

Parents should allow teenagers to go out at night if they go out in a group, and tell their parents where they are going and what time they will return.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	17%	11%	15%	43%	49%	33%	46%
Disagree	16%	21%	17%	54%	49%	64%	52%
NS/DK	1%	1%	1%	3%	2%	3%	2%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

54% of all respondents disagreed that teenagers should be allowed to go out at night, even under specific conditions, reflecting traditional values. However, nearly half (42%) of all respondents agreed that this was acceptable given the conditions which address parent's main concerns of 1) safety, 2) reputation and 3) responsibility. This was roughly true of all three locations, although as in several other questions respondents in Kampong Cham were notably more traditional than Oddar Menachey.

It is more important for boys to learn about community life than girls.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	19 %	24%	25%	68%	57%	73%	74%
Disagree	14 %	8%	8%	30%	41%	24%	25%
NS/DK	0,5%	1%	0,5%	2%	2%	3%	1%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

It is more important to protect a girl's reputation than allow her to go out in to the community.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	11%	15%	20%	46%	33%	45%	61%
Disagree	20%	14%	12%	46%	60%	43%	36%
NS/DK	2%	4%	2%	8%	7%	12%	3%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

The first table above reveals that 68% of the total number of respondents agreed that it is more important for boys to go out into the community. This reflects the common perception that boys have more to learn and benefit from going out than girls do. It is also partly explained by the fact that 46% of all respondents said that it is more important to protect a girl's reputation than to let her go out (table 2), showing the traditional concern for protecting a girl's honour as well as her family's, even if her freedom and development must be limited. When viewed by location, the data again indicates that the provincial respondents hold much more traditional gender views than those in Phnom Penh.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ These are among the few survey questions in which age and gender differences appeared in the disaggregated data. Children were more supportive of the equal participation rights of girls than parents, and girls slightly more than boys. Adult women tended to be more conservative, perhaps indicating that they accepted their traditional roles.

During focus group discussions, parents were very aware of the importance for boys to go out and socialize, as they felt this prepared them for their expected future roles as leaders in the community and family. However they felt that it was much less important for girls, as their responsibilities were more centred in the home.

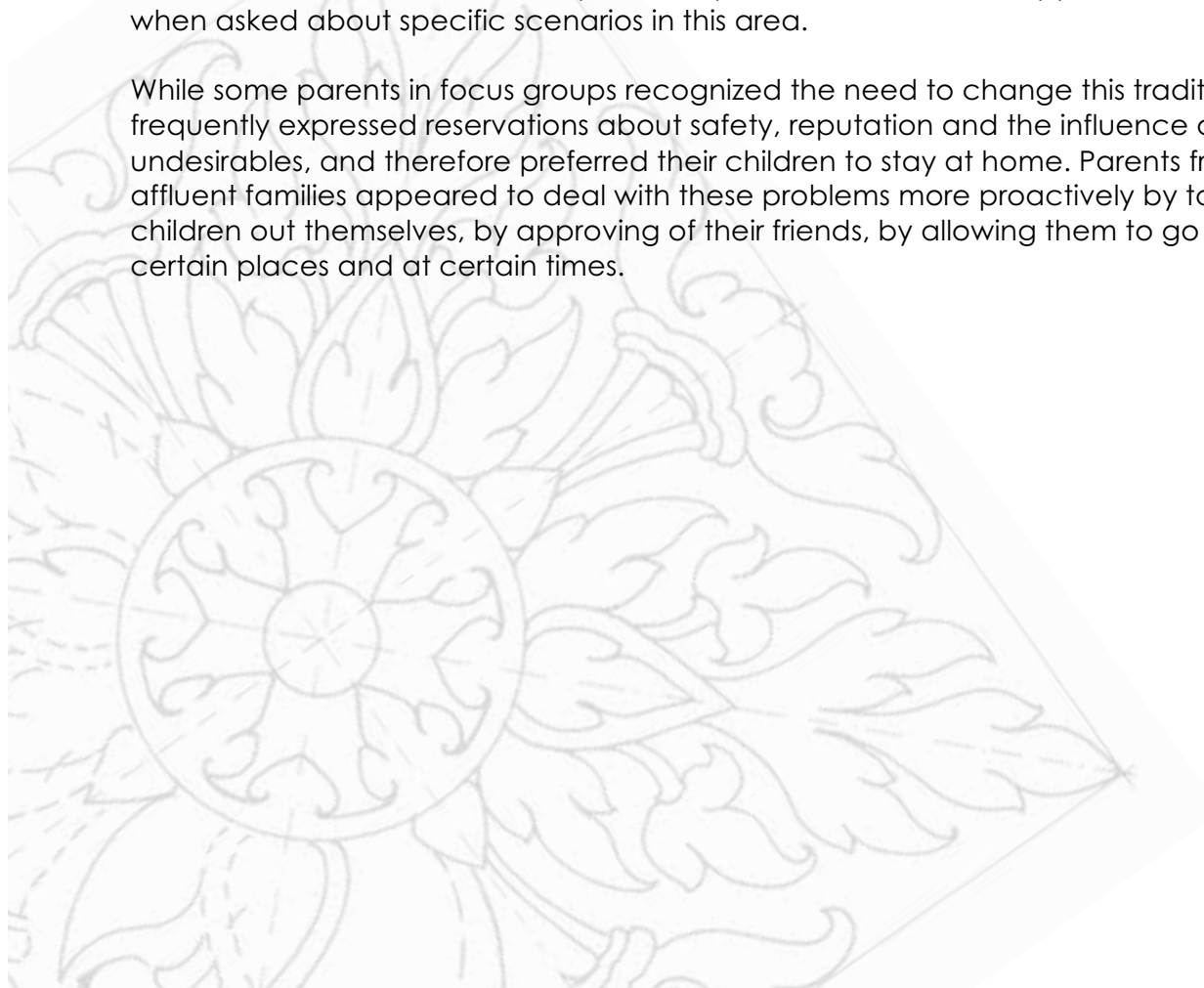
Girls in FGD said that they very much wanted to participate in community life as much as boys did, including meeting with other girls as well as boys, being able to go out and work at night, and explore new places and meet new people. However they were aware of the effect this could have on their reputation and relationship with parents. Boys generally felt that girls should be allowed to go out the same as them, but conceded that it would affect their reputation.

The tradition of not allowing children to go out should be changed for modern times.

	% of all 1,800 respondents				% of 600 respondents per location		
	P. Penh	K. Cham	O.M.	Total	P. Penh	K. Cham	O. M.
Agree	31%	28%	29%	88%	92%	84%	88%
Disagree	2 %	3%	3%	8%	4%	9%	10%
NS/DK	1%	2%	1%	4%	4%	7%	2%
Total				100%	100%	100%	100%

88% of respondents said that the tradition of limiting children's participation should be changed, with roughly the same level of support found among the three research locations. This may indicate that societal attitudes are changing and that at least a general awareness of children's right to participate in community life has been achieved. However as shown in previous questions, the level of support actually drops when asked about specific scenarios in this area.

While some parents in focus groups recognized the need to change this tradition, they frequently expressed reservations about safety, reputation and the influence of undesirables, and therefore preferred their children to stay at home. Parents from affluent families appeared to deal with these problems more proactively by taking their children out themselves, by approving of their friends, by allowing them to go out to certain places and at certain times.



VI. Conclusion & Recommendations

It is very encouraging that the concept of children's rights is more widely known and accepted by many people in Cambodia than ever. Even in remote locations such as Oddar Meanchey, parents and children demonstrated a high level of awareness regarding the 4 baskets of rights, and recognized a wide range of specific rights in common real-life scenarios. This serves as a positive indicator of the effectiveness of awareness-raising in the target locations by the government and NGOs.

In terms of the actual practice of implementing children's rights at the family level, it is clear that a major factor which facilitates this is that the extent to which the values of parents (and therefore their beliefs and behaviour) are aligned in line with the UNCRC. The fact that the "universal" principles of the UNCRC are sometimes in conflict with traditional Cambodian values helps explain why some parents have difficulty understanding and practicing them – for example, children's right to participation in decision-making. It also clarifies why conflicts often occur between parents who expect their children to conform to traditional ideals of behaviour, and children who have embraced modern lifestyles and concepts including their rights as individuals.

In order to close the gap between Cambodian culture and children's rights, parents must gain the understanding and skills needed to respond to the many social, and legal, economic, and cultural changes influencing their children and nation. Children in turn must learn how to manage their new freedoms in a way that is both responsible and respectful to their parents' values and traditions. Polarizing the issue by "taking sides", e.g. pitting traditions against rights or vice-versa, will not accomplish this. A 'middle way' is needed that will honour Cambodia's past while embracing the needs of the present, and provide parents and children with the wisdom needed to respond to the challenges of contemporary life – and the opportunities they provide.

Ideally, finding a balance between Cambodian culture and children's rights would mean a convergence of the two value systems - rather than allow increased competition and divergence. Nisbett (2003) optimistically predicts that this is not only desirable but also likely, as the global village continues to shrink and its citizens increasingly learn from rather than compete with one other:

"The world may be in for a convergence... based not purely on Westernization but also on Easternization and on new cognitive forms based on the blending of social systems and values." (p. 224)

Such a convergence may actually allow parents and children to benefit from "the best of both worlds": whereas traditional values can be seen to contribute to order and stability to families, modern values may promote children's personal and social development. Many parents and children participating in the research were able to combine the two by suggesting 'middle way' solutions to the topics discussed. In many cases they succeeded in preserving the essence of traditional values while updating the related customs or practices to bring them in line with children's rights. Thus, for example, the roles of parents in arranged marriage are still respected, but consultation with children is added to ensure their views are incorporated into the final decision. In other cases, parents were willing to change some of their traditions if their children showed increased *responsibility* – for example, allowing teenagers to go out with their friends at night if they returned on time. It is hoped that their suggestions will encourage other parents and children to find their own balance between the expectations of traditional culture and children's rights, and bridge the gaps between them.

1.0 Middle Way Solutions

At the end of each focus group discussion, parents and children in all research locations were asked to come up with their own solutions for the problems discussed. Below is a summary of their suggestions for each topic. Each section compiles the opinions of different individuals from the FGDs in to a single summary.

Discipline

Many parents suggested that behavioural problems could be addressed through more discussion between themselves and their children. Some suggested that it was necessary to explain the reasons that certain behaviours were inappropriate, while others noted that clarifying their expectations and consequences for breaking them was necessary. One parent suggested that this could be done through written contracts, while others said that changing the way in which parents speak to their children could help, especially avoiding blaming and shaming. Some parents said that it was important to try to understand their children's point of view. Children suggested that they in turn should try to empathize with their parent's feelings.

Children also felt that communication was key, and felt that parents should help them to understand their mistakes. Many were adamant that parents should not swear at them, nor should they ostracize them by refusing to talk to them, both of which they said had the effect of deeply hurting their feelings. They felt that building caring and trusting relationships with children was necessary so that when problems arose they were more easily resolved.

Parents also felt that acting as good role models was important. Some argued that parents should keep the promises they make, be consistent, and be fair with their discipline. Children also noted the importance of role models, asking that the parents show them good people to emulate.

Many parents felt that alternatives should be found to corporal punishment; some noted that paying positive attention to children such as praising and rewarding good behaviour could help reform them. They also suggested that parents should not discipline whilst angry or drunk. Children were also against physical punishment and wanted parents refrain from beatings because of their size and strength advantage, and wanted them to be aware of the strong emotional effects discipline can have on a child. Some noted that a parent should only use corporal punishment if the child was very obstinate, and preferably not with an object. If the parent did use a stick the children felt it should be small and light and used more to get the child's attention rather than inflict pain. Others noted that extra chores were a more appropriate punishment.

Children suggested that external mediators might be called in to resolve disputes, such as village elders or chiefs. They also thought that neighbours should intervene and report abusive discipline to the authorities.

Sexual Abuse

Parents offered many suggestions for how to support a child who has been raped. Some focused on the legal procedures, saying that NGOs should help raise awareness on how to report a rape, and how to collect medical evidence immediately after the violation to help convict the perpetrator. Others focused on emotional aspects, saying that parents should be careful not to show their anger in front of the child, and should focus on the future, perhaps by performing a ritual to erase the bad karma accrued.

Many children also thought that parents should comfort rather than blame a rape victim, and that attitudes needed to change so that rape victims were not considered 'bad'. Some suggested that parents should consult the rape victim as to her own wishes for the future, such as regarding reporting the crime, settling out of court, etc. Finally, girls felt that a daughter should be allowed make her own choice as to whether to keep a child if she became pregnant, and whether to marry.

Girls' Education

Many parents felt that girls' education should be supported to at least completing high school. They said that parents need to understand that educated girls can earn more money and in turn, help support their current and future families. Parents also said that they should delay their daughters' marriage until they have graduated from high school, and if possible, university as well. Another option was to allow girls to get married, but then encourage them to return to school and complete their education.

Children had many suggestions for how to support girls to stay in school longer. They said that parents should hold discussions with their girls to look for solutions to their concerns, and should talk to girls about their life goals. They said girls should lobby parents on their own behalf, expressing their wish to stay on at school. Children said parents could support girls by limiting the amount of housework they needed to do, and by asking boys to pitch in.

Children also asked for external support in persuading parents to let girls stay on at school. They felt that parents should be educated as to the short- and long-term benefits of girls' education. They said this might be achieved through TV/radio campaigns, local authorities initiatives by local authorities to achieve 100% girls' enrolment in each village at each grade, and publicity marches by the children themselves. Some said that local authorities should intervene if parents are preventing their girls from attending school. Finally, children wanted the government to help as well, by offering scholarships to girls, asking teachers to support girls, and by building schools close to the villages so that girls do not have to be at risk as they travelled.

Sex Education

Many parents felt that they needed to learn how to overcome embarrassment and talk about sexual issues with their children. Some suggested that this could be helped by having mothers talk to their daughters and fathers to their sons, and by having discussions in a quiet private place. Others felt that giving children educational books and encouraging discussion could be helpful, while others said that parents should tell children about sex using simple, clear words, but not show them graphic pictures. Some felt that children should be warned about the hazards of sex, stressing the danger of STDs, the difficulties of pregnancy before marriage, and the effects of loss of family honour, but that this should be accompanied with clear guidelines about risky behaviour as well as ideas about self-control.

Children also felt that clear and honest communication was important in this area. They said their parents should tell the truth about sexual issues, including the specifics of abortion and sex crimes. Some believed said that only those over 13 years old should receive sex education. They agreed that mothers and fathers should privately talk to their children of the same sex, but that if they were uncomfortable dealing with these issues they could call on other older members of the extended family to talk to children for them. They wanted help solving problems relating not only to sex, but also love and romance. They also wanted parents to take the time to explain the reasons behind their advice.

Arranged Marriage

Parents offered many forms of compromise on the issue of arranged marriages. They said parents should help children recognize what makes a good life partner. Parents could also suggest potential partners, but the final decision should rest with the child. Some parents also said that their children could have a boyfriend or girlfriend if they were old enough, if parent had met and approved of them first, and if the relationship was intended to culminate in marriage.

Children felt that they should have the right to choose their own life partners, but that parents could talk to them about this issue, explain the consequences of their actions and prepare them to make good decisions. Children felt they should be responsible by choosing partners who would not jeopardize the family's reputations. They also felt that children should be honest with their parents about who they loved, and that parents should focus on support rather than blame. They were against using fortune tellers in deciding marriage as this was an outdated belief.

Children felt that parents should not place excessive restrictions on their right to socialize with friends of the opposite sex, and that parents should give girls more freedom in this area. Children, in return, they said, should act responsibly and refraining from sexual contact on dates.

Community Participation

While some parents hoped that children would consider their and their families' reputation and agree to stay home, many were able to go beyond this position to offer middle way solutions to ensure community participation. Parents imagined striking a balance, so that children were allowed out, if they acted responsibly. Some parents said that children should let them know in advance when and where they were going, and who they would be with. Other parents wanted to meet their children's friends before they went out. Some suggested that they continue the traditional practice of going out in a group with an older family member as a chaperone.

Children also felt that parents and children should try to find a balance. They said that parents should understand that going out was an important part of their development, but that children should be careful to avoid embarrassing their parents. Some said that children should be allowed to go out if they show maturity and responsibility for their actions when they did so. Children also stressed the importance of communication in this area, saying children should listen to their parents' concerns, but should also let them know that excessive restrictions could have a detrimental effect, as being forced to stay home was depressing and stopped them from learning about the world.

2.0 General Recommendations

The following general recommendations address cultural factors that affect the implementation of children's rights at the family level. However, it is recognised that these must be pursued in tandem with improvements on other levels, including community-based poverty alleviation and strengthening national health, education, law enforcement and justice systems.

Adapt Children's Rights for the Cambodian Context

- Develop guidelines on promoting the UNCRC in a culturally-relevant manner, to assist rights-based organisations in conducting training and awareness-raising in ways that *embrace* rather than oppose Cambodian culture. The guidelines could apply the “Do No Harm” framework to promoting CR in ways that ‘connect’ rather than divide adults and children, for example by:
 - Clarifying *the rights of parents* as affirmed by the UNCRC
 - Emphasising children's *responsibilities* in relation to their rights
 - Identifying Khmer proverbs and traditional stories that support children's rights, and/or re-interpreting them to be in line with the UNCRC
- Design child rights training around the life experiences of participants, beginning with family rights issues identified in this report, and then expanding to broader issues and applications. For example, address concrete issues such as arranged marriage and community participation, then use these to illustrate larger rights concepts such as non-discrimination, participation and the best interests of the child.
- Develop comics, radio and/or TV shows depicting positive role models of Cambodians families who successfully balance tradition and rights, e.g. promote new “ideals” of behaviour to bring cultural expectations of parents and children in line with the demands of contemporary life.

Promote Understanding and Practice of Children's Rights at the Family Level

- Develop projects and strategies that focus on practical application of children's rights within families
- Develop specific projects to strengthen parenting skills in positive discipline, child development, sex education, family communication, etc.
- Encourage reflection and dialogue between parents and children about rights and other practical issues that affect their day-to-day lives, via ongoing support groups, workshops and seminars, community forums and other events
- Offer training and information that supports parents and children in devising ‘middle way’ solutions to family conflicts such as those covered in this research
- Broadly disseminate research findings in simplified child- and adult-friendly language and formats, for example short “fact sheets” on discipline, girls’ education, etc.; audio “reports” (CD recordings); video presentations (VCD/DVD), etc.

Mainstream Gender Discrimination in CR Programming

- Target gender equity as a cross-cutting issue in all CR programming to reduce widespread discrimination against girls in day-to-day family & community life
- Expand the status, roles and freedoms of girls in Cambodian society in culturally-sensitive ways, e.g. by promoting positive role models of successful, educated, contemporary Cambodian women who achieve a balance between traditions and rights

Conduct Additional Cultural Research

Additional action-oriented research should be conducted to facilitate adapting the UNCRC to the Cambodian context, including:

- Identify the changing attitudes, trends and influences within contemporary Cambodian teen / youth culture, and how these support or hinder children's rights;
- Assess the level of CR awareness and understanding of civil servants at the local and national levels, including examining how traditional cultural values influence the decisions of duty-bearers within relevant ministries and government institutions.

3.0 Recommendations for Specific Topics

The following recommendations suggest strategies for bringing the traditional beliefs and practices studied into line with the UNCRC. As this list is not exhaustive, other methods should also be identified as needed, ideally through a process of critical reflection on the cultural values (both traditional and 'modern') involved.

Nutrition

- Build on the widespread awareness of the benefits of breast-feeding, to encourage mothers to breast-feed girls for as long as boys and eliminate the belief that breast-feeding will result in girls being more stubborn.
- Offer further nutritional training for parents so that they understand the balance between quantity vs. quality of foods, as well as the link between proper nutrition and recovery from illness.

Healthcare

- Increase awareness that many medicines are not necessarily better than one or two
- Promote the importance of doctor's examinations along with traditional healer's treatments for illnesses believed to be caused by curses, spirits or ancestors.

Discipline

- Offer courses to parents on child development to raise awareness that some behavioural issues are a part of normal development and transition to adulthood
- Strengthen parents' knowledge and use of alternatives to corporal punishment, including improved communication and positive discipline skills
- Raise awareness that verbal abuse can have a devastating impact of children

Sexual Abuse

- Reduce discrimination against victims of sexual abuse by campaigning against cultural attitudes that contribute to “blaming the victim” by parents and society, and promoting a new code of family honour in which role models of “honourable” parents and neighbours support survivors in seeking justice and a positive future and role in society.
- Assist parents in creating ways to support the recovery of sexual abuse victims in homes and communities without recourse to rehabilitation centres.
- Encourage rehabilitation centres to involve parents and/or other family members in the recovery of victims.
- Raise awareness so that families understand that rape is not an outcome of love, and that marrying a daughter to a rapist is harmful as well as a violation of her rights to participation and protection
- Address the issue of forced marriage due to rape by assisting families in devising by prosecuting perpetrator and supporting victim, instead of arranging a marriage, etc.
- Work with village elders, legal authorities and courts to promote prosecution of perpetrators and to stop marriage of girls to rapists.

Girls' Education

- Raise awareness of the equal right of girls to secondary and higher education, and increase access by providing financial assistance and addressing cultural roots of discrimination
- Promote the benefits of education for girls in terms of improved earning, marital and parenting skills.
- Assure safety of girls in going to and from school.
- Redefine the model of an ‘honourable’ girl, as one who attends school, and is thereby able to support herself financially later in life.

Sex Education

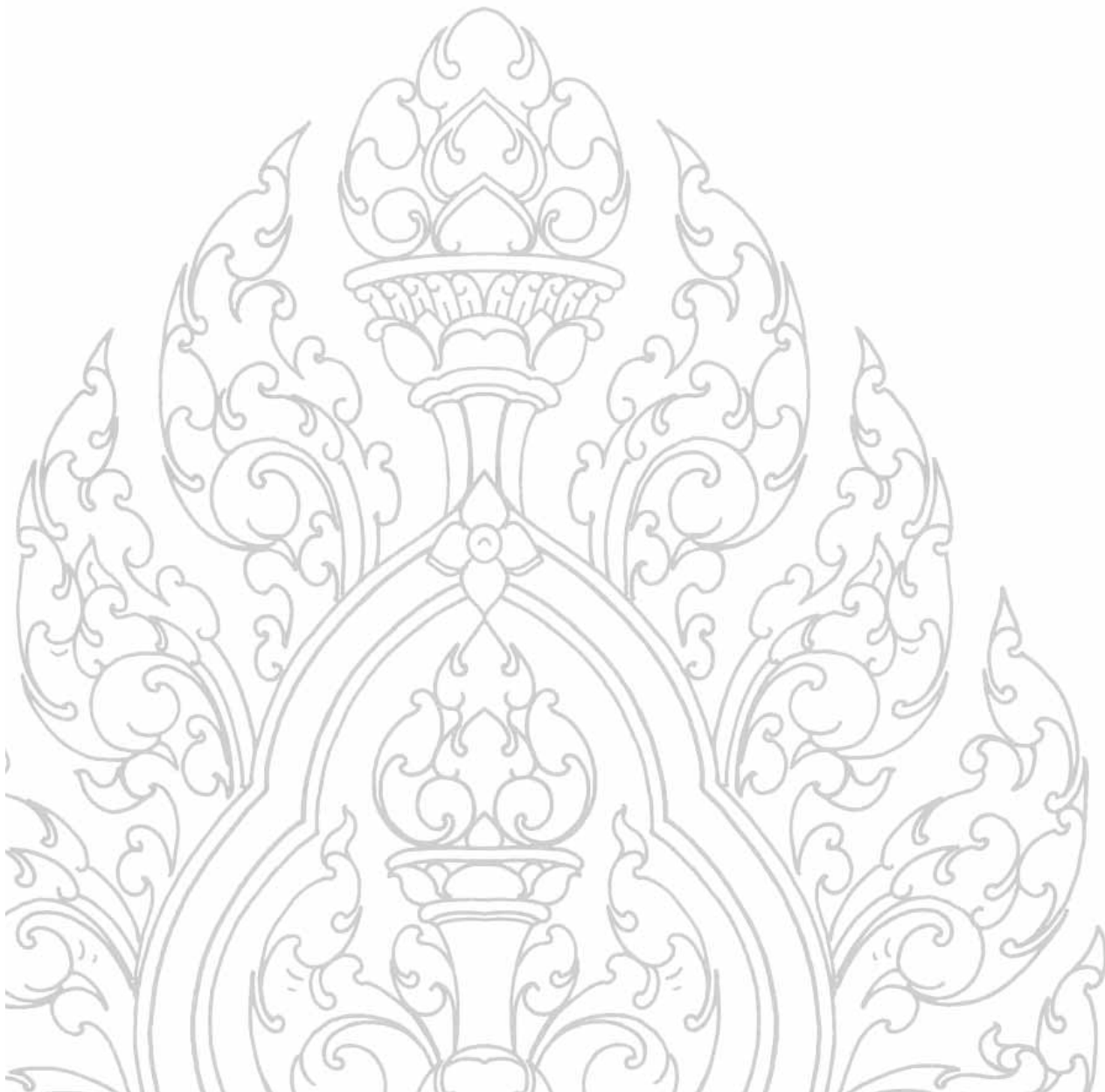
- Reduce cultural taboos against sex education by promoting its safety and health benefits, while assuring parents that providing appropriate information and education in this area does not encourage children to experiment sexually.
- Identify methods of Relationship and Sexuality Education that are culturally and age-appropriate, and therefore understood and supported by parents and children.
- Support increased access to RSE for teenagers, including providing 1) support for school-based education through improved curriculum, teaching resources and training, and 2) community-based education for parents and teens via involvement of village health workers and trained volunteers.

Arranged Marriage

- Raise awareness of children's rights to participate in the choice of who and when to marry, and how this can be done in the context of arranged marriage
- Promote open dialogue between parents and children on the issues of dating and marriage, focused on mutual respect and cooperation
- Provide training and guidance to youth on safe and responsible dating, choosing a spouse and pre-marital counselling, as well as for parents in providing guidance in these areas
- Increase awareness and enforcement of national laws against forced/coerced and early marriage

Community Participation

- Increase awareness of children's right to participate in social and cultural life of the community, and the developmental benefits of this for boys and girls
- Support parents in understanding the interests, desires and problems of modern youth, and how to support guide their children's community involvement in safe and beneficial ways
- Promote increased responsibility of children and adolescents in exercising their right to participate in social activities
- Address gender discrimination by seeking ways for girls to participate in community life in safe and culturally-appropriate ways
- Make communities "child and youth safe" by reducing pornography, sexual and substance abuse, gang violence, etc., and developing positive alternatives to risky places and activities



VII. Appendices

ACRONYMS / ABBREVIATIONS

CAN	Children's Advocacy Network
CR	Child Rights
CRC	United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child
FGD(s)	Focus Group Discussions
FGP	Focus Group Participation
GO/NGO(s)	Governmental Organization/ Non-Governmental Organizations
KAP	Knowledge, Attitude and Practice
NGOCRC	NGO Committee on the Rights of the Child
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
PLA	Participatory Learning and Action
PP	Phnom Penh
RUPP	Royal University of Phnom Penh
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Science (computer software)
STDs	Sexual Transmitted Diseases
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

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