PLATES IN A BASKET WILL RATTLE:
Domestic Violence In Cambodia
A Summary

Written by: Cathy Zimmerman
Research by: Sar Samen,
Men Savorn and Cathy Zimmerman
Edited by: Brad Adams
Written by Cathy Zimmerman
Research by Sar Samen,
Men Savorn and Cathy Zimmerman
1994 version edited by Brad Adams
1995 version edited by Robin McDowell

This report, a summary of "Plates in A Basket Will Rattle: Domestic Violence in Cambodia," was funded by a grant from Unicef and United Nations Development Program in Cambodia for distribution at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.

The original report "Plates in A Basket Will Rattle: Domestic Violence in Cambodia," a 260-page report, was published in December 1994 and was funded by The Asia Foundation, Cambodia with support from the United States Agency for International Development.

The full report is available through
Project Against Domestic Violence, Cambodia;
c/o Box 536, Phnom Penh, Cambodia;
Email: tafcb@pactok.peg.apc.org.
All proceeds go to PADV.

© August 1995 Project Against Domestic Violence
“Plates in a basket will rattle”

A common Cambodian proverb used to explain family problems.

“If people live in the same house there will inevitably be some collisions.
It’s normal -- it can’t be helped.”

But, from time to time, plates break. So do women.
PREFACE

This document is a summary of a report completed in 1994 which resulted from an exploratory study examining the nature of domestic violence in Cambodia. Research for the original study was conducted over a period of six months, during which fifty victims were interviewed in-depth. Other information for the report was gathered through interviews with village, commune and district chiefs (in both the city and the countryside), judges and court personnel, police officers, NGO workers, staff of the Secretariat of the State for Women's Affairs and the former Women's Association, medical workers and midwives.

The intention of this report was to draw attention to an issue that, until the 1994 December Conference on Intra-Familial Violence held in Phnom Penh, had received far too little attention in Cambodia. While this report is a limited study of one country, it is sadly clear that much of the information will reflect actions and attitudes elsewhere. We hope that the report contributes to the library of data from around the globe which will lead to increased public education and awareness, public health, legal reform, legal assistance, and special services for victims and batterers, in an attempt to stop the violence—forever.

REPORT SUMMARY

1. The Violence

• The intensity of violence perpetrated against many women is breathtaking. Most respondents were victims of extremely violent abuse. They suffered severe and unrelenting beatings, including punches, kicks, hair-pulling, whippings with ropes, bamboo canes, metal rods and cords, immolation, rapes, stabblings and gunshot wounds.

• The Khmer Rouge experience, decades of war, pervasive violence, the availability of weapons and inadequate dispute resolution mechanisms appear to greatly increase the severity of the violence.

• Victims often understate the frequency, tenor and scope of the violence. Victims are ashamed of being in abusive relationships. In many instances women related a low level of abuse or deny it completely, but others—neighbors, relatives, local officials—contradicted them, firmly stating that the beatings were regular and cruel.

1Hosted by the Secretariat of State for Women’s Affairs and sponsored by Unicef.
2. Causes and Effects of Domestic Violence

- Wife-battering is considered an internal family matter by the courts, police and local authorities. Women are counseled to be patient while abusers go unpunished.

- Alcohol, poverty, gambling, family squabbles, lack of education and political and social unrest contribute to domestic violence, but it is clear that sexism, culture, social mores and traditional public attitudes cause and perpetuate domestic violence.

- Traditional, sexist notions of the role of women allow for and encourage domestic violence. Gender equality is not yet an integral part of Cambodian culture. Both men and women perpetuate sexist ideals. Women are told by men, parents, officials and other women to cook good food, clean the home, speak sweetly and obey their husbands to avoid being beaten.

- Without significant penalties or official disapproval, batters feel free to batter and cannot learn other ways to express their aggression. Ignoring the problem perpetuates the problem.

3. Costs: Personal and Social

- Domestic violence is expensive for women, families, communities and the nation. Domestic violence creates significant public costs in medicine, hospital care, police, the time of local officials and the legal system. These costs will increase as more health, police, legal and other services are made available to the public.

- Women make up a significant portion of the labor force in Cambodia. A huge amount of productive labor is lost while women recover from their physical and psychological injuries. Family incomes suffer dramatically as the result of violence.

- Women who are injured or threatened are not able to participate in development programs, fail to repay loans in credit programs and cannot further their education of their children. In addition with such a high percentage of women in the overall population the development of the nation is severely damaged by domestic violence.

4. Health, Pregnancy, Children and Family Planning

- Violent spousal attacks significantly decrease the health of women and their families. Excessive amounts of the family budget are spent on health care as a result of violence. Nutrition and other health needs suffer secondary effects.
• A large percentage of women in this study were beaten while pregnant. Violence caused a disproportional number of miscarriages, premature births and low birth weight babies.

• A significant proportion of the children of victims were battered, leading to impaired physical and mental health. Many abused children began to show signs of aggressive behavior and delinquency. Children from abusive homes tend to perpetuate the violence, passing on a legacy of violence to future generations.

• Rape and a general loss of control over women's bodies negatively impacts family planning efforts and protection against AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

5. The Psychology of Battered Women

• Victims feel ashamed, helpless and scared.

• Shame is the dominant emotion among victims. Violence in the family reflects on a woman's reputation and her ability to fulfill her role as a good Cambodian woman. Women believe that their reputations in their community are of the utmost importance. Public degradation causes them to irredeemably lose their respectable image.

• Cursing, accusations and threats are as damaging to self-esteem as physical violence.

• Victims believe they are helpless to alter their circumstances. Victims are defenseless in the face of attacks and live in a constant state of fear. Victims live with the very real fear that their husbands will kill them.

• Victims suffered anxiety, profound depression and severe weight loss. Victims showed signs of mental disorders and memory loss and several attempted or committed suicide.

6. Why Victims Don't Leave

• Most victims see no way out of their situations. Social, cultural, family and official pressures may even be stronger than economic factors and make it difficult, if not impossible, for women to leave.

• The most commonly stated reason that women stay with abusive husbands is "for the sake of the children," even in cases in which the children suffer abuse. Women project that children without a father in the home will feel shame and be "looked down on" and suffer developmentally.
"Having nowhere to go" was the second most common reason women gave for staying in violent situations. Women had no other safe shelter options for themselves and their children. This was particularly true of women who lost parents under the Khmer Rouge.

- Women fear the shame of "widowhood" or acquiring the socially unacceptable title of a divorcee.
- Fear of retribution, relations strictures and hope for change were also common reasons for not leaving.

- The all-consuming attempt to decrease the number of female-headed households places the importance of being married above women’s safety and health. Separation is discouraged as a viable option. Women are frequently encouraged by family, neighbors and officials to return to their abusive husbands. Women are rarely permitted to make this choice for themselves. When women try to find relief through divorce, their attempts are usually thwarted by officials. As result, victims to believe that there is nothing that they can do to change their husbands’ behavior or their situations.

- Women become fatalistic. Most rule out the possibility of leaving and instead develop coping strategies that will cause them the least harm. Omnipotent societal attitudes and pressures cause them to remain at risk.

7. Public and Private Assistance

- Except at the recently founded “Secretariat for Women’s Affairs,” there has been virtually no official acknowledgment of domestic violence as a serious social problem.

- Until very recently no NGO specifically addressed the problem of domestic violence. Current efforts remain seriously inadequate and underfunded.

- There are no shelters (two have opened since the time of this report), no professional counseling services for victims or batters, no legal services and no education or public awareness programs.

- Extended family and neighbors are the most important and accessible sources of assistance to victims. In the short term any scheme to assist victims must utilize family members and friends to be successful.

8. Law

- Police almost never respond to assaults. Reported assaults are not treated as criminal matters. Domestic violence is viewed as an internal family matter.
• Decisions regarding arrest are not based on the act of assault, but to injury. Unlike other assaults, criminal penalties are usually not applied in cases of domestic violence unless the woman is killed or near death. Only serious injuries, defined informally but pervasively as “stabbings, gunshots, unconsciousness or death” fall within the application of the penal code.

• Police, local officials and judges usually respond to domestic violence only in the context of divorce proceedings.

• Divorce is socially and legally discouraged. Current law requires officials to try to persuade complainants to reconcile, even in circumstances in which women are at severe physical and psychological risk. The process rarely takes less than one year and can endure indefinitely.

• Reconciliators are not professionally trained and have little or no knowledge of psychology or conflict resolution. Women who are battered are endangered by the form, substance and length of the process. Reconciliation rarely considers the danger to the victim. Victims generally do not want to be reunited. They want to be safe.

• Women understand very little about their rights under the criminal or divorce laws. Legal representation is nonexistent and in some cases prohibited by law.

• Some judges have only a superficial and abstract knowledge of the law. Many apply it incorrectly. Most local officials do not even have a written copy of the law. The law is less important than social pressures and traditions.
HUMAN LIVERS CHURN IN HUMAN BILE

"I can kill you whenever I want. I could kill you and no one will ever do
anything about it," He continued, "I have eaten human livers...raw."

That's what he said to me after he punched be in e face with such force that
he knocked out my four front teeth and split my gum. While my blood poured
from my lips, he returned, laughing to his friends and his card game. My
children and neighbors watched.

My husband was a Khmer Rouge solíder. He joined in 1973. I think this has
made him broken in some important human way.

Any small thing — and many times nothing at all — incites his wrath. One
day I asked him to gather some firewood. He grabbed the axe and swung
the dull side of the axe into my back. My brother was there, but he couldn't
do anything. My husband told us that if either of us said anything, he would
hit me.

One night, at 1:00 a.m., he came home drunk. I was sleeping with my son in
my arms. I was suddenly awakened with a heavy blow to my left breast. I
looked up and my husband was holding the axe. I'll never understand how
the thickness of my shirt kept the axe from slicing into my breast.

"Why did you do that?" I asked. I begged him, "Don't play around like this,
it's not good." He told me, "You are very bad; you have bad ideas, bad
thoughts, a bad mind." While he was saying this, he kept waving the axe
and making chopping motions over our son. He was so drunk. I was terrified
that he would kill my son, so I raised my hand over my son to protect him.
He sliced downward. The laceration on my hand was deep and blood was
everywhere. He saw the blood and put down the ax and he went to sleep.

I think that the 1975-1979 murderous government of the Khmer Rouge has
changed Cambodian people.; Many are now without conscience — they do
whatever they want. They think nothing of their wives. During the Khmer
Rouge, men saw no happiness and had no freedoms, so now they are free
and they will do whatever makes them happy: drink, gamble, not do any
work, see prostitutes, beat their wives.

I never chose to leave my husband before because I didn't want my children
to be without a father. But recently my daughter died. After I lost my
daughter, I was more worried about staying than leaving. I was afraid that I
would die and leave my child with an evil father, so I took my son and we
ran away. We are now living as beggars in Phnom Penh at a cyclo driver's
house.
GENDER, CULTURE AND SOCIETY

In order to better understand the situation of battered women in Cambodia, it is helpful to look at society's attitudes regarding husbands and wives.

Traditional roles

The education—formal or informal—of a young woman is so important and so profoundly enmeshed in the culture that there is a widely recognized verse called the "Chab Srey," or the "Rules of the Lady." The following are excerpts paraphrased from the Chab Srey:

Always speak sweetly and accomplish your tasks with dexterity, weave and work with the iron and needle and finish each task forthwith...you must grow old without a moment of distraction...never turn your back to your husband when he sleeps and never touch his head without first bowing in his honor...you must take care of your parents and never contradict them...never tattle to your parents anything negative about your husband or this will cause the village to erupt...never go strolling to visit others...respect and fear the wishes of your husband and take his advice to hear...if your husband vies an order, don't hesitate a moment in responding...avoid posing yourself as an equal to your husband — and never above he how is your master; if he insults you, go to your room and reflect, never insult or talk back to him...have patience, prove your patience, never responding to his excessive anger...but using gentle language in response.

While all of the words of the verse itself may not be known throughout the villages, its meaning and instruction have been passed on from generation to generation, from grandmother to grand-daughter, even from father to daughter. Women protect their daughters by instructing them to meet the widely held ideal of "srey krup leak," or perfect lady." At present, the verse is taught in Cambodian grade schools. Over half of the women interviewed told us that common excuses used by their husbands for battering relate to their conceptions of the role of women in the home, such as complaints about meals, household tasks, refusal of intercourse, and inadequate attention or service.
Ironically, during the period of Khmer Rouge rule (1975-1979)—years of unparalleled slaughter and dehumanizing brutality—domestic violence was virtually non-existent. Like so many things, it simply wasn’t allowed. This was not because of any great enlightenment about women’s rights or the importance of the family — the family was systematically destroyed by the Khmer Rouge—but because domestic violence represented a deviation from the rules. The only violence permitted was that which was approved of and inflicted by Angka, or the Khmer Rouge leadership.

Random acts of domestic violence subverted the control of the Khmer Rouge. The perpetrator was acting without permission. This was not tolerable and so was proscribed. A husband who hit his wife would be penalized severely; as a result, domestic violence, like many other things, was almost eradicated.

But the long-term effects of the Khmer Rouge period on domestic violence have hardly been benign. One victim explains her theory:

"After 1979 men changed. Nine out of ten men are broken, ("khoch"), nasty. During the Khmer Rouge period they had no happiness at all. So now that they are free, men do whatever they want."

During the Khmer Rouge period and since, a large number of Cambodian males have had to face the possibility that they would have to attack, fight, fire at or kill another human being. Add to this the fear of being a target for attack or murder and one has created an individual who must be alert to enemies at all times and prepared to retaliate, even in the most trivial of circumstances.

One legacy of the Khmer Rouge period is that Cambodia has one of the largest armies on a per capita basis in the world. Like other countries in or emerging from situations of civil strife, weapons are available and readily used. In a country that has lived by the gun for so long the potential for weapons must always be a consideration when intervening in cases of domestic violence.

Violence was a learned and a common response to a wrong or perceived wrong. Children were instructed that social order is based on punishment and violence. Children were not only permitted to use violence, they were often trained and encouraged to hit or even shoot others who broke the rules. All errors or failures to obey the rules were to be noted and condemned severely. This aggression is not dissimilar to what occurs in the abusive relationship.
Self-preservation is the most basic of human instincts. In situations of trauma, human beings naturally respond in a way that places their own lives above all else. Patterns of behavior that are considered "normal" may be replaced with ones that will help the person survive.

The devastating nature of domestic violence that exists in Cambodia today may be partially attributed to the acquired responses that were adopted in order to survive under the Khmer Rouge. It is not easy to unlearn these behaviors. For some individuals, these behaviors may have become acceptable and normal.

After the Khmer Rouge defeat, some men felt rage. People were angry for what had been done to them, for the pain, suffering and humiliation that they had endured. Their newly gained liberty offered the threat of poverty, persisting combat and a government that seemed to many more like an occupying force.

The Khmer Rouge taught individuals that family bonds were meaningless. The Angka was the parent and one's sole devotion was to be to the Angka. Parents were encouraged to annul feelings for their children and spouses were instructed to place their commitment to the Angka before that of the spouse. Children were told that their parents were useless; a parent was not to be loved and not to be trusted. In some areas, children were recruited to spy on their parents. Children were rewarded for turning in a parent who had misbehaved or gone against the rules.

Mass weddings were conducted between forcibly matched strangers in order to foster emotional distance among spouses, as well as to destroy bourgeois Cambodian culture by eliminating customs of marriage. Refusal to marry a stranger usually meant death.

Upon being granted relative freedom after the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge, some men began to immerse themselves in pleasure. Drinking, taking of second wives, use of prostitutes and lack of parenting characterized the behavior of a number of men within the family. At the same time the vast majority of male survivors had little or no education, few skills and no employment possibilities. They needed income, but had no way of earning; even if they wanted to support their families they had no opportunities to do so. Many men were rendered impotent in the re-emerging society.

Powerlessness, poverty and hopelessness, combined with the absence of law-enforcement, often breeds violence and crime. The safest place to demonstrate authority and release this frustration is inside the family.
A MOTHER'S TALE

Kim Y married when she was twenty-five and died when she was thirty-one. This story was told by her mother:

I can tell what I know, I only know a little bit from what her sister and her neighbors told me. The last time I saw her she was very sick. She couldn't talk. When they were first married my daughter told me that she had problems with her husband. I never asked more. I tried not to separate my daughter from her husband. I told her "If you can endure, you should continue to bear with it."

They separated. Later, he tried to return home. He went to the chief of the village who mediated, but I don't know what they said. All I know is that my daughter agreed to live with him again. Later, my daughter told me that she was beaten, but she only told a little bit. I didn't pay much attention because I thought it was only a small problem.

One year after the second baby was born, they had many arguments. That year his parents gave them a very small rice field. He began going over there to farm and he spent many days there. One day, she followed him there and asked him to come to the other field and they argued.

My youngest daughter, Lieng, told me how he kicked her on her left side—in her abdomen and her ribs. He pummeled her in the head and the face. Lieng came running because Kim Y was screaming, "Lieng, please help me, I am going to die." She grabbed him, but he was so much stronger. He went back and continued beating Kim Y.

Thirteen days after he hit her she was in so much pain she finally went to the hospital. They gave her some medicine. But her condition worsened. The neighbors brought her to my house. She vomited the whole day. I brought her to the hospital and when I removed her clothes I saw bruises on her arm, neck and side. The medical staff told her that her nerves were damaged and that her liver had suffered trauma and was no longer functioning. They could not cure her and they informed her that she would likely die very soon.

After two days in the hospital we brought her home. That evening she died.

Her husband only once went to the hospital. His parents suggested that he stay and take care of his wife. We didn't want him to; he was to blame and we were angry. He never came to see here again. He came only to the funeral ceremony. At the funeral he did not say a word.
We do not yet have statistically significant data on the number of women subject to domestic violence in Cambodia. A statistical study on the prevalence and attitudes regarding domestic abuse is currently underway and will be completed in early 1996. What we do know from this qualitative study is that in every village we visited—even in villages in which we did not conduct interviews with the victims—there were cases and reports of domestic violence.

We asked the women how often they were physically attacked. The incidence of physical violence among the victims ranged in individual cases from a total of three incidents to several beatings daily. It usually started with punching. Once the woman collapsed on the ground, the husband commonly began kicking her. He kicked arms, legs and into the stomach and back. One woman explained how she vomited blood during one episode while her husband was kicking her in the back. Other women described being kicked in the head or in the face.

Women told how their husbands tried to strangle them until they could barely breath. Fortunately, for the victims we interviewed, someone always intervened or the husband quit before choking them to death.

A number of the batterers took hold of the woman's hair, dragged her by the hair and pounded her head against a cement floor, a wooden bed-frame, a column of the house or the dirt ground outside the home.

Two women described how they had been intentionally poisoned. One had been poisoned with toxic herbs and the other with rat poison in the drinking water. Both became violently ill.

The most common weapons used by husbands were rods, poles, sticks and branches. Thirty-four of the fifty women were struck with weapons such as bamboo rods, sugar-cane, palm stems, rattan sticks, metal piping and metal bars used in housing construction.

Women were whipped with ropes, plastic cords, electrical wires, fencing wire, chains, bicycle-lock chains, motor fan belts, bamboo floor lattice, tree branches, rattan lashes and cow-whips.

Knives were mainly used to threaten the wife. Only a few women we interviewed were actually assaulted by a knife. A number of victims reported being threatened with axes. Two of the women reported being sliced by the blade. One had the axe thrown at her and the other was struck in the head. When the axe was used to hit, most often assailants struck with the blunt
side at the woman's legs and her back. Men battered with the handle of the axe as well.

Pistols, rifles and machine guns were used to threaten women. About one-quarter of the victims' husbands owned guns. A few women told of having guns fired at them. One described how her husband fired shots around her feet. He then chased her around the house firing at the floor near her until the neighbor came and took the gun from him. Another described the times that her husband aimed just to the side of her head and fired.

Several of the women described how their husbands burned them using smoldering firewood and burning torches. Two women were bound at the time of these attacks.

Rape

Twenty of the fifty women stated that their husbands did not force them to have intercourse. Several women in this category explained that they were ashamed to quarrel about this problem. They always consented.

Some of the woman were scared of the consequences of refusing to have intercourse or had intercourse under the threat of physical violence or other types of coercion. Comments from women in this category included: "If I try to stop him, he will accuse me of having a lover."

Many women used the word rape ("rumlop") or described how they were physically forced to have sex: "He does what he wants, even when I tell him I don't want to."

We asked women: "Should a man be able to have intercourse with his wife whenever he wants?" Thirty-two of the thirty-seven women who responded said "yes." Women generally feel too ashamed to mention "rape" in public, so in dealings with the police or the court the subject often does not come up.

One highly placed judge responded to the question of spousal rape as follows:

"If the wife complains that her husband raped her, the court will not consider this seriously. Now there is no law regarding husbands raping wives; there is only the law regarding others. A husband cannot be found guilty of this. If another person rapes her, we will see some form of injury when we do an investigation. If a person other than the husband rapes her, this is a crime and the punishment will be five to ten years."
Abuse during pregnancy

The period of pregnancy provided no sanctuary for battered women. Attacks during pregnancy actually escalated. A shockingly large number of the women we interviewed were abused during pregnancy: thirty-one of the forty-six women who replied stated that their husbands beat them while they were pregnant.

Women were beaten throughout their pregnancies—at three months, six months and at full term. A number of men directed their assaults at the women’s abdomens, including kicks to the abdomen. Four women reported miscarriages as an immediate and direct result of the beatings.

In our discussions with obstetrics staff and midwives we were told that women who miscarry due to injury rarely explain how the injury was sustained. One woman had three spontaneous abortions caused by her husband's assaults. She reported to the hospital staff that she fell down the stairs. She told us that she was too ashamed to tell them the truth.

Thirteen of the fifty women specifically mentioned that they were hit "just after delivery."

Physical Injuries

Virtually all of the women described swelling that lasted for days and some showed permanent bumps to the scalp, torso and limbs. Two women lost teeth. One of them lost all four of her front teeth and has a split gum. Three of the victims have hearing impairments as a direct result of blows to the head or ear. One woman is completely deaf in one ear. Another is hard of hearing in both ears and shouted when she spoke. The third suffers from permanent ringing in the ears.

One woman showed her deformed and dysfunctional finger and wrist, both of which her husband slowly twisted until they broke. Two women sustained burns. One was stuck with a burning piece of firewood. The other had her face shoved into burning charcoal.

Several women spoke of chronic trembling and chills. Two described problems they thought were related to their heart: palpitations or shortness of breath. These symptoms emerged following beatings in which they were repeatedly kicked in the ribs.

Four women mentioned regular headaches. One woman suspected nerve damage after an incident where she was struck unconscious. Two
women stated that they are unable to carry anything on their heads anymore as a result of blows to the head.
After a serious crack to the leg with a piece of wood, one woman has had difficulty walking for almost ten years.

One victim has suffered blurred vision ever since her husband tried to poison her. Another woman has a permanent black spot on her iris. One told us about persistent numbness in her hands.

**Death and Suicide**

While we did not attempt to document the number of homicides as a result of domestic-violence, during our research we came across a great deal of circumstantial evidence of spousal murder. We learned of at least ten women who died as a direct result of beatings. For example, in the outskirts of Phnom Penh a man burned his house down with his wife and children inside. A bloodied knife was found outside the house. Another man was reported to have tried to chop his wife's head off with an axe and then left her for dead in the ricefield.

Men who kill often abuse alcohol or drugs, suffer from personality disorders or have witnessed abuse during their childhood.

Suicide is a manifestation of profound psychological anguish. Five women told us that they considered suicide, at least three attempted it and one woman we interviewed hanged herself one month after the interview.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL AND OTHER "NON-VIOLENT" FORMS OF ABUSE**

**Threats and Insults**

Thirty four of the forty-six women reported that their husbands had threatened to kill them. Wives reported husbands having put knives to their throats, placing guns into their necks, clutching and cutting off the air from their windpipes, knocking them unconscious and, in at least one case, trying to burn the house down—while his wife lay unconscious inside.

We heard the term "nging" referred to in almost every interview. "Nging" is an insulting or profane Khmer term for "you" (female).

Most disturbing to the women were the insults regarding destroyed or deformed female genitalia. While the exact meanings may not translate very
well, the following illustrates the violent and violating nature of these insults: "Sayviech": crooked/deformed clitoris; "Saylien": bulging or protruding clitoris; and "Nging ban tai bok": I should ram a rod up your cunt (implied—in the phrase)

These terms not only imply that the woman is deformed as a female and is therefore devalued, but within these very physical references there is an inherent threat of violence and mutilation.

Husbands also use this abusive language in reference to women's families—usually towards mothers or females in the family.

Slang such as "your mother's vagina/cunt" ("kondui minha") or "fuck your mother" ("choimarai") are commonly reported hurtful phrases. This type of insult is so broadly recognized as unacceptable in Cambodian society that it is one of the legal grounds for divorce.

Isolation

Cambodian women are generally discouraged from leaving the home alone or idly chatting with neighbors. We asked the women about their freedom and mobility. Twenty-one of the fifty were required to ask permission before they were permitted to leave the house. Fourteen were allowed to leave freely. Thirteen of the women explained that they can leave, but they must tell their husbands where they will go first. Some of the women recounted that if their husbands returned home and they were not there, they would be punished.

Two of the women were forbidden to leave the house when the husband was at home. One woman was instructed not to see her sister, her only living relative, because the husband stated that he was jealous of the brother-in-law.

Three of the women told us that their husbands followed them when they went to the market. One of the husbands takes his wife to and from work everyday to make certain that she encounters no one else:

Psychological Effects of Domestic Violence

The overwhelming impression that we had about the women's emotional and psychological states was that they felt trapped, with little or no hope of escape. The psychological effects described ranged from anxiety to severe mental disorders.
One woman spoke of intermittent periods of disorientation and at least four women talked about memory loss and inability to think clearly or concentrate (women sometimes connected this to blows to the head):

Cambodia has almost no psychiatric services. Medical providers have no training in therapy or psychiatric care. This is exacerbated by the conventional view, even within the medical community, that domestic violence is a normal family problem:

Sixteen of the women stated that they were presently ill or had gone through periods of severe illness. Most of these women were extremely underweight when we met them. Two of the women explained that they would consciously allow themselves to become more and more ill to convince their husbands that their illness was real and serious (perhaps also to avoid further abuse).

One of the most startling interviews was with Vannary, who described how, prior to the Khmer Rouge period, she had become depressed and emaciated because of spousal abuse. Ironically, while she and her husband were living under the brutal Khmer Rouge regime, Vannary’s husband could only covertly abuse her, choking and pinching her.

Effects on Children

We asked the women whether their husbands hurt their children. Twenty-four of the forty-six women who answered stated that their husbands also abused their children. Some children were the regular targets of attacks. Some of the violence was stunning:

When he isn’t hitting Chendavy, he is battering the children. Sometimes he lashes them with the handle of the cow whip, or swats them with a piece of firewood. They often have welts covering their small bodies. There are days when he is uncontrollable and he kicks the children until their bowels can no longer hold their feces.

All but four of the women stated that their children witnessed the violence against them.

Children of victims also risk abandonment. A few mothers explained that if they were forced by the husbands’ attacks to leave their homes, they would have to depart without their children, because they had no safe haven that could accommodate the children.
WHY WOMEN STAY IN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

One question that we expected to hear often was never asked by a single Cambodian we spoke with: "Why doesn't she just leave?" Because of the emotional trauma caused by battering, often, perhaps even most of the time, women are not able to articulate all of the reasons why they stay. Twenty-one of the women separated from their husbands at least once and returned. Only one woman stayed away permanently the first time she left.

"For the children"

The most common reason given for staying was for the "sake of the children." Children without fathers are "looked down on" or "pitied." Women felt that they were sacrificing their well-being in order to protect their children from the perceived shame of being a child without a father. This reason was given even in cases in which the husband battered the children to the point of serious injury or unconsciousness. Most children witnessed their fathers battering their mothers. It was unclear whether the women understood the long term psychological impact that scenes of violence could have on their children.

"Nowhere to go"

The second most common reason for not leaving a violent home was that women had no other viable housing options. This was especially true among women who had no parents. Women with many children were in particularly difficult positions. Even if they had surviving siblings or other family members, many felt they could only lodge with these relatives for a short time without becoming an untenable burden on their hosts.

"I can't afford to leave"

One common theory to explain why women don't leave violent husbands is financial dependency. In the cases we studied, this appears to be a fallacy. Forty of the fifty women we interviewed were the primary or sole supporters of the family. Twenty-four were the sole supporters of the family. In twenty-two cases husbands took money from the wives for their personal expenditures. Women who stated that they would have more money without their husbands were generally married to men who extorted money from them for drinking, gambling, prostitutes or "second wives." These husbands also pressured their wives into borrowing money from neighbors and relatives and thereby put their families into debt.
Held Captive

On the day that we were supposed to interview Sopheap we were told that she would not be available because she was "locked in her house." We assumed that this meant that she "was busy, had housework to do," or that "her husband was home this day." But in fact, she was locked in her house by her husband with a chain and padlock on the door.

We decided to go to her house. We had been warned that the husband is "very nervous" and "jealous" and informed of one other critical detail: her husband is a soldier. Offering assistance to victims is difficult under normal circumstances. When the assailant is a soldier, it is almost impossible.

There are no windows in Sopheap's dark ground level apartment. When the door is closed the only conduit to the outside world's lights and sounds is the crudely cut hole in the door through which the chain is threaded. As we reached the door a small terrified woman rushed to the hole, sobbing and pleading, "Please help me, please help me to get out." Through the door, she told us her story.

In 1979, Sopheap's marriage to a fellow soldier was arranged by the local military officer. After she married she left the army and thought she had left the battlefield.

Sopheap cannot talk with any man (even her nephew) without raising the suspicions of her husband. Sometimes when he spots a stranger walking in front of the apartment house he accuses her of having slept with him.

When her husband begins a session of torture and abuse, Sopheap is not allowed to speak. It only enrages him more. He closes the door to the apartment so that no one can hear her screams. The children are held witness, but cannot help. They are terrified of their father.

Sopheap is beaten with electrical cords, fan belts. Whatever object he first lays his hands on is a weapon. There is also a gun in the house. Because she was frightened that her husband would one day choose to grab the gun instead of an electrical cord, she finally gathered the courage to file a complaint with the Secretariat of State for Women's Affairs. They suggested reconciliation. He promised. They left.

There were no official avenues to help her. Everyone feared retribution by army colleagues. So she remained in her windowless dungeon.
THE LEGAL SYSTEM

Police and other law enforcement personnel

We asked police officers and other law enforcement officials: "Is hitting a wife considered a crime?" The standard response was: "Yes, if the injury is serious."

We then asked police officers, law enforcement officials and other government officials to define the term "serious." Virtually all of the officials, including section, commune and district personnel, as well as two judges, agreed on a standard definition: "A serious injury is one in which the victim was stabbed, shot, unconscious or dead," or one in which we can see blood.

We then asked: "Under what circumstances will a spouse be arrested and jailed for domestic violence?" Again, the responses were almost unanimous: "If the injury is serious. A serious injury is one in which the victim was stabbed, shot, unconscious or dead."

One female prison guard answered: "Spouses are only arrested in cases of murder."

This answer probably most accurately reflects the reality. From our observations, the only instances in which there were criminal pursuits of a perpetrator were in cases of murder.

Women explained why they did not contact the police. By far the most common reason victims did not contact police was because they believed that the police would not assist. By and large, they were right: police rarely assist in cases of domestic violence.

Most police officials (as well as other community officials) considered domestic violence an "internal family problem" that should not be interfered in by public authorities—or by any person outside the family. Fighting in the family is "normal," a problem that "is here one day and gone the next" and so not worthy of police intervention. "Plates in the basket will rattle."

We asked one victim whether she had ever had contact with the police and she replied: "Sure, they often come over to my house to drink with my husband."

Other women explained that they did not approach the police because they knew they would be reluctant to confront any member of the army:

19
RESTRAINING ORDERS AND INCARCERATION

RESTRAINING ORDERS

For most women, there is no effective form of intervention or restraint to end a current attack or prevent another in the future. The police do not respond and the assistance of neighbors and relatives is usually not enough.

Victims mentioned that they regularly requested that their husbands be "warned" in some official manner.

They hoped that a warning from a higher ranking authority would deter future attacks. There is no such provision in the law for warnings. In practice, they only occur serendipitously if, for example, a woman knows a local official or military officer.

When Ravuth's husband tried to hit her one night, she ran out of the house to the nearest noodle shop. There she found her friend, the local police officer. As she was telling her story, her husband appeared and demanded that Ravuth return with him. The police officer pulled out his gun and warned him to stop hitting his wife. Scornfully, he grabbed Ravuth and retorted, "It's none of your business. I'm only hitting my wife." The police officer did nothing more.

When asked whether they would like a law to make their husbands stay away from them when violent, the majority of the women interviewed said "yes."

In other legal systems the most common method of keeping violent men away from their victims is a "restraining order" (also known in some jurisdictions as a "stay away order" or "protection order"). Restraining orders are legal orders issued by judges which require a batterer to stay a certain distance — such as 50 or 100 meters — from the home and/or body of a complainant.

The success of restraining orders depends on the commitment of the police and judiciary in enforcing them. Police must be trained to enforce restraining orders. This means an immediate response once notified of a violation. Such a response would be a marked departure from the current practice of the police, though it is possible that the passage of a restraining order law would send a message to the police to take domestic violence seriously. Judges would also have to be trained to understand restraining orders and issue them in appropriate cases.
Police officers interviewed claimed that it is a waste of time arresting batterers because the wives would always come to plead for their husbands to be set free. Because batterers are so seldom arrested, it is difficult to know whether this hypothesis is true. In a meeting with a group of victims, we related this theory and solicited their opinions. Most women agreed that women who depend on their husband's labor or income or women who are psychologically dependent may respond in this manner. We then asked the victims whether or not they believed their husbands should go to jail for domestic violence. The large majority said "yes." This answer represented their beliefs about morality and legality, but as a practical matter, a number of the women seemed unwilling to apply this punishment in their own particular cases. One victim mentioned that she feared the inevitable time of her husband's release. Others responded with an understanding nod.
"I'm sorry," but I can't stay long. I have to be home soon or my husband will make problems. He will be waiting at the house with his gun aimed at me if I arrive late.

Many times he has pointed his bayonet at my neck and pretended to throw grenades at me. He has hit me with the axe, a chair, bamboo rods, bottles, metal poles and my bicycle-lock chain. He curses at me, calling me a whore and a cunt. He curses at my mother and he throws rice at her as if she were a ghost.

He threatens to kill me all the time. I am so afraid of him. He has done so many terrible things to me, but I don't have time to tell very much. It is certain that if I'm not there when he arrives home, I will be beaten.

I married my husband when I was 16 years old. I didn't want to marry him, but I had to follow the wishes of my mother. I didn't love him. I never really loved him. I had seen men hit their wives and I thought that this man might hit me.

He's a police officer for the district. He drinks Khmer wine with his police friends a few times a week. He gambles our money and loses. After he gets drunk, he comes home looking for my faults.

I farm in our village. Every three to four days I go to Phnom Penh to sell fried giant black water-beetles at the market. If I return from the city later than usual he is often drunk and waiting for me with his gun.

He gets angry so quickly. I never know what makes him angry. I never know what I did wrong.

Sometimes if I see his attack coming, I try to escape. Once when I saw he was drunk I ran to my mother's house. He wanted to find me so that he could beat me. He picked up our baby and put him on his shoulder and pointed his bayonet into our son's neck and marched around the village yelling to me, "One drop of blood can be thrown away," threatening to stab my baby unless I showed my face.

My son understands and is often very afraid that his father will hit me. Sometimes he tells his father, "Don't hit my mother any more, if you do, when I am big enough, I will hit you back."

Once when I ran to my brother's house he and his two police friends came looking for me. They all had guns. They were hunting everywhere. At the time, my brother wasn't home, but his neighbor helped me to escape.
They kept firing their guns. When my brother got home, he sharpened his knife and yelled, "If you come into my house, I will kill you!"

The last time he told me, "You're not a good wife, you don't take good care of me. You're not as good as other wives." He repeated a Khmer expression: "The food is good because the ingredients are good, the family is good because the wife is good."

I saw him pick up the wood, but there was nowhere to go. He grabbed the piece of wood and hit me on my arms, on my legs and on the head. I tried to protect myself, but I couldn't. I had bruises all over my body. He hit me until he knocked me unconscious. Then, he took the wooden bed and turned it upside down and dropped it on me. He climbed onto the bed that was crushing me and began dancing. He took two sticks and started making music on top of me.

My neighbors came to help me. They are his relatives, but they don't like him. They carried me to my mother's house. He followed them and grabbed my body from them and dragged me back to the house. He closed and locked the door and shut all the windows. I think that I was unconscious for over one hour. I left and I moved to my mother's house.

After I recovered, I went to complain to the Village Chief. I wanted to divorce him. He called my husband. My husband told the Chief that he did not want to divorce. The Chief tried to reconcile twice. Once each week. I went to see him everyday to make them divorce us faster. My husband refused.

The Chief sent our report to the Commune office. They called us two times to reconcile. They asked us to "make sure" we wanted to divorce. I was sure.

The process took so long. I stayed at my mother's house. He missed me, so he came by very often trying to be kind to me and my family. I didn't care. I still thought he was a mean and terrible man and stayed angry with him. He loves me, but because he has a bad character, he hurts me.

It was maybe about ten times that people tried to persuade me and make us join together again. Even my mother kept trying to tell me to return to him. Many of the neighbors advised me to go back. A few warned me not to because he would always be the same. Everyone talked to me so much.

I tried to think about what I should do. I thought about the past when he hurt me so much. But I know it is not good for a Cambodian woman to have more than one husband. I thought maybe he might hurt me more if I didn't agree to go back; maybe he could change; maybe I still loved him a little.
Women in prison

One woman in prison for assaulting her batterer-husband told us her story:

For many years, Naly's husband raped and beat her regularly. Emotionally and psychologically shattered, feeling trapped and unable to escape, Naly finally exploded. After being raped hours before, Naly explained, "I woke up early. While I was sweeping the ground in front of the house, I couldn't stop the memories of all the horrible things he had done to me for so long. I felt so upset and everything he had done stayed in my mind. I couldn't stop thinking about them. I felt so much pain in my heart. I went straight into the house with the axe to warn him not to do these things to me anymore. He wouldn't wake up. I wanted to warn him. Finally he opened his eyes. closed my eyes. I hit him. I only remember hitting him once, but in court I saw three cuts over his eye."

Naly was arrested, tried and found guilty. However, during sentencing the judge considered the ferocious and incessant abuse Naly suffered as a mitigating factor. Naly was almost five months pregnant when she was brutally battered and in turn attacked her husband. Her trial occurred almost four months later when she was at full term. She was also ill with a sexually transmitted disease passed to her by her husband. Naly was sentenced to "four months in jail and six months probation." The timing of the release was set to coincide with her delivery date.

The judge explained that under usual circumstances the sentence for a similar assault would be five to seven years. Because she had been "tortured so badly" and because she was ill and pregnant he gave her a lighter sentence. In an unconscious and informal way the judge was recognizing the defense of "Battered Woman Syndrome." Battered Woman Syndrome is premised on the theory that in certain circumstances a victim is left with no choice but to respond to violence with violence in order to escape and find safety.

Though it is not clear exactly how many victims of domestic violence are currently in prison in Cambodia, we do know that approximately half of the women in prison were charged with or found guilty of violent acts against others. Many killed or wounded their husbands or male partners. Many are serving lengthy prison terms in very poor prison conditions.
The culture of reconciliation

In Cambodia the first instincts when a dispute arises are avoidance and denial. If possible, problems are not confronted in the hope that over time they will evaporate into the mist. Enormous efforts are made to avoid "airing dirty linen in public." No matter what the outcome, open, public disputes create the possibility of hurt pride, shame and loss of face. Even being involved in a messy public dispute creates emotional anguish for the participant, whether the person is innocent or guilty.

When disputes persist, there is a great premium on at least the appearance of a mutually acceptable outcome. This is true in the formal legal system and the more important informal world. Parties are consulted and, if possible, brought together to settle their differences. If the outside community believes that the parties have settled their problems by agreement, and not through coercion (such as a court judgment), all involved may exit with their pride intact and their heads held high.

This process is most often called reconciliation, though in Khmer the words "reconciliation" (psapsaah), "mediation" (samrohsamruel) and "reunite" (bong-ruebbongruem) are often used interchangeably.

In the context of the marriage relationship, reconciliation is seen as an effort to renew or repair the broken or breaking relationship. The goal of all intermediaries, whether family members or government officials, is to keep the couple together—at all costs. This goal is advocated by Khmer custom and by past and current Cambodian family law. Successful reconciliation means that differing parties have reached an agreement to settle their differences.

In Cambodia the scales are tipped against women. Confusion of the process with the outcome—the agreement to meet as opposed to the agreement to agree—can be disadvantageous, and even dangerous, for victims of domestic violence.

Divorce of a violent husband: A Hobson's choice

We asked women "What is the best way for you to get out of this situation?" Thirty-two of the fifty respondents answered that the best way out was to "divorce" or "separate." Later in the interview, we asked the same women whether it was preferable to be a woman with a violent husband or a
divorced woman. Thirty-nine of the forty-one who answered stated that divorce was better.

Despite the virtual unanimity of this answer, the preference for a divorce sometimes seemed to be more rhetorical than real. The most striking example of this is the woman who hanged herself. Her husband wanted a divorce and beat her until she acquiesced. This man was among the most brutal we heard about. The research team provided her with funds to live with her mother. Yet for reasons we will never know she still chose to return to him. She was among the women who responded that it was preferable to be divorced than live with a violent husband.

RESEARCH STRATEGY

Our primary research goal was to learn about the situation of battered women in Cambodia in order to gain insight into the forms of assistance that would be necessary, feasible and appropriate. We set out to understand the causes and nature of the violence, as well as potential resources and barriers to assistance.

In addition to collecting victims' personal case histories, we planned to incorporate interviews with law-makers, government officials and potential service-providers who might encounter battered women. From lawmakers and government officials we expected to learn about the existing laws and future legislation and determine the legal training and education necessary to protect battered women. Perceptions and opinions of officials and service providers often affect their decisions and treatment of victims and batterers.

Through this "loosely-structured" research format, we intended to engage the subjects and let their information lead us.