

Overcoming Victimhood of Violence

Women facing violence in Phnom Penh
speak out and look to changing the
status quo



An initiative of 4 Women, 4 Communities, 4 Stories



This publication is an initiative of Women Peace Makers.

Authors

Suyheang Kry and Raymond Hyma

Research

Panhachakneat Hean Sotha, Serey Sorphorn Ly, and Kagna Mourng

Design by Malia Imayama

Photography by Molynin Khleang

Women Peace Makers

#43E, Street 456

Tuol Tumpong II, Chamkamom

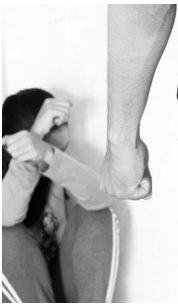
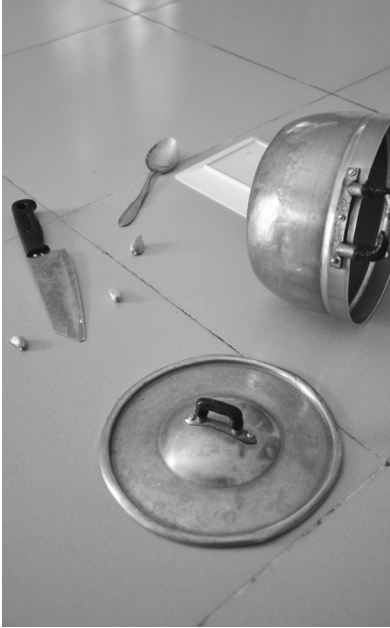
Phnom Penh, Cambodia

www.wpmcambodia.org / wpm@women-peacemakers.org

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Violence as a layer of identity

How does it define us?

Suyheang Kry

4 Women, 4 Communities, 4 Stories is an ambitious undertaking to explore intersectionality among women facing more than one aspect of marginalisation in their lives. We often consider double marginalisation involving those who face dual systemic barriers. Through this initiative we have also worked with and surveyed Indigenous women, women with disabilities, and rural-to-urban migrant women. Indigenous women face ethnic discrimination and gender inequality. Women with disabilities navigate being a woman and living with a disability in a society built for a mainstream non-disabled majority. Rural-to-urban migrant women confront life as women with a rural identity, often putting them at a disadvantage in an urban setting that marginalises their lack of access to education, services, and even culture available in the city. This piece of the intersectionality puzzle we have put together is different. We decided to recognise women facing violence as a doubly marginalised group. These women may not fit the traditional

categorisation of an intersectional analysis, but we believe they do face systemic barriers both as being women and as being survivors of violence. They also represent a larger aspect of the other groups: violence was recognised and discussed as a common theme for every other group included in the study.

One in five Cambodian women report experiencing physical and sexual violence by their intimate partners while one in three experience an emotional form of violence. I grew up seeing violence against women all around me, especially in a domestic context. Like many Cambodian women, the violence between a man and woman became somewhat normalised to me and affected my identity and my journey. I decided to direct my career towards conflict, specifically on how to transform conflict between two or more parties. As I dug deeper into the conflict of others, I also looked more profoundly into myself. The aspect of gender could not be separated from what I was witnessing. As



Suyheang Kry

Executive Director of Women Peace Makers

much as we women strive for leadership in a male-dominated society, we continue to be trapped in different forms of violence, particularly in the private sphere.

Every woman's story is her own and each one inspires others. From the women featured in this study, I heard four key reasons that women in Phnom Penh may be trapped in violence. The first is around the social norms we experience regarding gender that put women in subordinated roles. So often, women subconsciously feel obligated to live under that norm in order to "fit in." We are scared of the stigma of divorce and we go through our lives believing that we must accept and endure, even when facing violence. The second is our lack of a support system. We often feel unable to approach our friends, family, and relatives on issues we see as private or internal to the household. Even when we are ready to report violence, we do not know where to go and our experiences in the legal sphere often prove to be far from survivor-centred. The third is economic dependency. So many women cannot imagine any way to financially

sustain themselves in the eventuality of separating from their abusive partners. The fear of being unable to earn an income keeps many in violence. The last is our own perceptions of what family is and how we must care for our children and maintain our family unit. So many of us are raised with the value that we must keep our families together at all costs - even if it means putting that above our own safety.

The factors that can leave us trapped in violence can ultimately lead to a real lack of empowerment. However, within every story of gender-based violence, sexual harassment, and intimate-partner abuse, are elements of strength. I was able to listen and see strength and resilience in every woman's story compiled in the data that contributes to this publication. I chose to call this *Overcoming Victimhood of Violence* because if we are informed to seek out coping strategies, subtle messages on resilience, and strength directly by the women who engaged in the study, we can see so much more than stories of violence.

Facilitative Listening Design Steps

1



Listener recruitment

2



Customising tools

3



Coaching and Training Lab

4



Trial conversation and reflecting

5



Fieldwork and recording

6



Info-Space Lab

7



Information verification and analysis

8



Writing and planning relevant outputs

Design: Valentina Rivero

The Study

This study provides a snapshot into the multiple barriers that women facing violence in Cambodia confront and the coping strategies they employ in their lives to navigate the city of Phnom Penh. As part of a larger endeavour to capture narratives of intersectionality among women with disabilities, rural-to-urban migrant women, Indigenous women, and women facing violence, this subsection of the study explores the lives, experiences, and perspectives of women facing violence through a qualitative information gathering methodology known as Facilitative Listening Design (FLD). An evolving peace research approach, FLD was chosen for this work largely for its advantage in providing the space for informal sharing on sensitive issues in local community contexts.

The Methodology

Facilitative Listening Design is an innovative adaptation of Listening Methodology. It is an “insider” human-to-human centred approach to better understand prevailing dynamics and explore sensitive topics that make for difficult conversations. It encourages deeper critical thinking and leverages the process to bring together groups at odds with each other and find solutions to protracted negative attitudes, stereotypes, or sentiment. It maintains the rigorous procedural and information-checking steps in conducting listening research, but puts a stronger emphasis on gaining relatively in-depth insight

into a topic as a snapshot at a given moment.

The advantage in this context is that it can be carried out quickly and respond to situations in a timely manner. It is also discrete. Conversations can happen in private or can be informal in nature to provide anonymity to the participants. There is no need to connect any recorded information to the individuals who participated as all documentation happens after and away from where conversations took place. The conversational style of information-gathering can be employed nearly anywhere, even in extremely sensitive environments where conducting more traditional research, using audio recording or questionnaires, may not be feasible. With no need for papers or devices, participants can blend into different environments and engage with people simply as people rather than research participants. It can also be adapted to a range of cultural needs and communication styles depending on the context and the groups involved.

The general procedure of a Facilitative Listening Design (FLD) approach was carried out to better understand thoughts and opinions of four doubly marginalised groups including women with disabilities, rural-to-urban migrant women, Indigenous Women, and women facing violence. Eight general steps guided the process from design to implementation.

¹ For a detailed understanding of FLD methodology, refer to The FLD Handbook: Using Facilitative Design For Your Project (October 2017) provided at <http://wpmcambodia.org/project/the-fld-handbook>.

The Demographics

This study is a limited subsection of a main study involving 41 conversations with doubly marginalised women. This component includes individual conversations with ten women who are referred to as Sharers. The conversations were carried out by two information gatherers referred to as Listeners. The Listeners both actively support women with violence and are involved in advocacy in their communities to create awareness and eliminate all forms of violence against women. The ten Sharers all live in Phnom Penh and vary in age from 21 to 50 years-old. There are students and women from a range of professions, some coming originally from provinces and others who have lived in the city their entire lives. All women are facing, or have faced, some form of violence. In this study, violence against women is seen similarly as the United Nations defines it as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”

Our Listeners in Action

Two university students, Neat and Sophorn, joined the project as Listeners to gather more information on the thoughts and experiences of women facing violence. Both young women are strong supporters for women in violent situations and work hard to not only respond to violence, but also to try and understand it. They both study English at different universities in Phnom Penh.

Neat and Sophorn said that their involvement in FLD helped them to provide the safest space possible for bringing up very sensitive issues,

including physical and sexual violence. Without using recording tools or set questions, the Sharers who spoke with them were able to have a natural conversation and express whatever they wanted, at the time they felt ready to do so. Sophorn said that reflecting on everything she heard during the study, she believes that women facing violence must unite and make their voices heard to find solutions with other women. Neat stressed that women facing violence must have the courage to speak out.





The Findings

Initial findings of FLD were analysed by the Listeners themselves based on the data they collected and the themes they heard the most during their fieldwork. Through a process of early analysis, the following findings emerged among the conversations had between Listeners and Sharers.

Women facing violence **Emerging themes**

1. Drugs, alcohol, and debt are risk factors that often play into the violence against us.
2. Being seen as a sex object makes us more vulnerable to sexual harassment, abuse, and discrimination in any industry we work.
3. We experience emotional, economic, physical, and sexual violence.
4. Sometimes we stay in abusive relationships because of feeling powerless, helpless, or not having any idea where to seek help.
5. Local alternative dispute resolution interventions and responses to violence are often ineffective and can lead to re-victimisation and trauma
6. Many communities, and even women themselves, see violence against women as a family issue that should be kept private.
7. Negative gender stereotypes and victim-blaming continue to happen.
8. Many of us who have experienced violence now advocate and wish to see more empowerment, legal rights, and protection for victims of violence.

Drugs and alcohol fuel violence

After getting married to him, I just found out he has a bad side. After a few years, he began to smoke, gamble, drink alcohol and have many partners. He always uses violence against me when I don't give him money. I have become responsible for all his debts. I still love him. That's why I keep supporting him.

- A 30 year-old woman married for eleven years with two children who sells gas and cleans for a living

Drugs and alcohol are deeply connected to violence that women often face. Given that such substances weaken self-control, consumers are more likely to engage in violence when under their effects. Many cases of sexual, physical, and emotional violence involve drugs or alcohol.

The Listeners who gathered information for this study agreed that drugs and alcohol were the most commonly discussed subjects among their group of Sharers. The women Sharers facing violence brought up issues of drugs and alcohol both explicitly and implicitly. Some mentioned their intimate partner's drug or alcohol abuse and associated it to examples of violence. Nearly all

Sharers facing violence in their homes mentioned some kind of alcohol use by the perpetrator. Sexual violence was also frequently connected to alcohol both within the home and outside. Several Sharers working in the beer promotion industry in Phnom Penh discussed issues of harassment and sexual abuse they faced in their workplaces in the presence of clients and customers under the influence of alcohol. Women who were in relationships with drug-addicted partners sometimes discussed how drugs fueled the need for money and often led to violent disagreements when their partners would do anything possible to obtain money from them.



“I want to see more effective and restrictive rules because nowadays violence is so common in Cambodia. I want to see all women have the self-confidence to speak up in order to express their own rights.”

- A 39-year-old teacher's assistant living with her sister who faces violence from her husband

Seen as a sex object

He doesn't care if I don't have any sexual feeling. What he wants is only to take care of his own needs.

- A 50 year-old woman who had a controlling father and eventually married a controlling husband

There is a strong perception, often supported by social norms, that a woman is a sexual object with a subordinate role to please a man. This norm pervades everyday life, fueling industries in Phnom Penh such as karaoke bar hosting, beer promotion in restaurants by young women, and prostitution. Beyond a gendered sex industry, gender stereotypes exist in the homes and lives of everyone. Such social norms are manifested in the role of a wife to her husband, a girl to her boyfriend, and even a lone woman in public in front of strangers.

Several Sharers talked about how they experienced being targets of sexual advances, harassment, and abuse in their lives. Within those reflections, a number of them looked more broadly at a societal norm of men as initiators and women as an object or a target. In particular, some women working in the beer promotion industry noted that their jobs put them at especially high risk for unwanted sexual advances. They mentioned stories of women who were forced to have sex with guests with no protection provided by

their employers. They said that they were undervalued by society, criticised and judged, and often immediately associated with prostitution. One beer promotion employee even shared that in spite of facing emotional and physical violence in a public setting, nobody cared because they had no respect in the eyes of society.

Other Sharers told stories of sexual advances both at work and at home. One woman talked about her an experience of sexual harassment in a training. An instructor touched her inappropriately during the session to which she publicly confronted him in front of her peers. Trying to normalise what he had done, the instructor responded by making a joke and humiliating her. Another woman talked about her husband in the military who treated her as a sexual object at home and believed it was his right to engage in sex any time he desired. The sexualisation of women was a common theme that not only appeared in individual stories, but also pointed out a social norm and a fact of life for many in the city of Phnom Penh.



“I want to see women have enough confidence to talk about their problems, especially when somebody violates their rights and makes them feel small and uncomfortable.”

- A 30-year-old woman who works in her community on gender issues and has experienced violence throughout her life by multiple perpetrators

All kinds of violence

I was facing physical violence in my first marriage. I was 16 years-old while my husband was 30 years-old. He was a powerful person holding a high position... He had a gun. He always got violent when he drank. He hit my head with his gun where I still have a scar. Then I got a second husband, he didn't use physical violence on me but he was using mental violence. He cheated me and also tried to rape my daughter.

- A 50 year-old housewife originally from Ratanakiri province that divorced her first and second husbands

Although it is common to first associate violence with the physical form, other forms of violence persist. Sexual violence is any sexual act or attempt to engage someone in sex through violence or coercion. Emotional abuse is anything that makes someone feel undermined through words or actions that cause insecurity, lack of confidence, or make someone feel powerless. Economic violence is any form of controlling someone through financial means, including holding money from them, exploiting them, or controlling their ability to acquire, use, or maintain resources.

Conversations among Sharers highlighted numerous forms of violence experienced by women in Phnom Penh. Many Sharers acknowledged and understood the complexity of different

forms of violence and related their stories to one or several. In addition to physical violence, several women discussed the emotional violence they faced. This was mainly associated with fighting and intimidation. Sexual violence was mentioned both at home and in the workplace. Sexual violence was often linked to power and position, involving partners, bosses, or customers who held some form of dominance over the victim. Economic violence was elaborated by several women who talked about it both in the contexts at home and at work. Some who had partners that controlled their economic lives did not have a way to leave the relationship with the financial means to be independent. Others discussed financial exploitation at work or in their industry, feeling especially vulnerable as women.



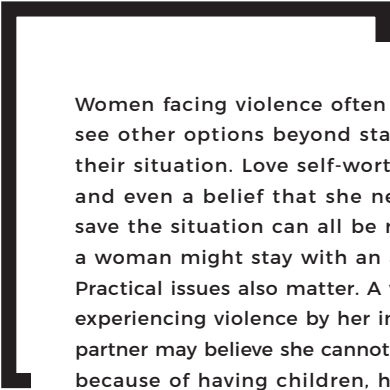
*“Do not give
up and speak
up. Do not
stay under
the control
of men.”*

- A 50 year-old housewife whose abusive husband was reported by her sister and arrested

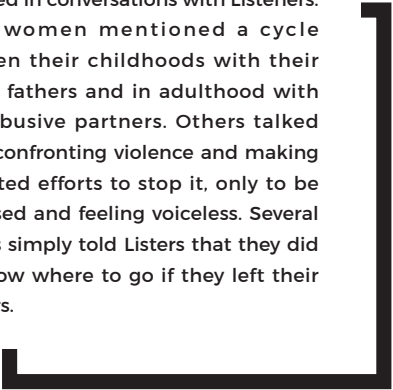
No idea where to go

I still bear to live with him because I keep thinking he can change. And also I don't have any idea where to go myself.

- A 30 year-old woman married to a man who physically abuses her, has a relationship with another woman, and controls her money



Women facing violence often do not see other options beyond staying in their situation. Love self-worth, fear, and even a belief that she needs to save the situation can all be reasons a woman might stay with an abuser. Practical issues also matter. A woman experiencing violence by her intimate partner may believe she cannot escape because of having children, her own family pressure, and financial constraints that leave her feeling she has little choice.



Sharers who were living in violent situations or who had faced violence in the past discussed their thoughts and reasons for remaining in a relationship involving abuse. Feeling powerless was one of the most common points conveyed in conversations with Listeners. Some women mentioned a cycle between their childhoods with their violent fathers and in adulthood with their abusive partners. Others talked about confronting violence and making concerted efforts to stop it, only to be dismissed and feeling voiceless. Several Sharers simply told Listers that they did not know where to go if they left their partners.



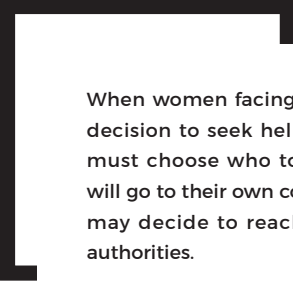
“Sometimes, I tell myself that I simply don’t care about what other people say because I am the one who supports my needs and my family’s needs... and that’s enough.”

- A Sharer who divorced her husband and is often criticised by her neighbours

Help is limited

I used to go and seek help from my local community, but it never worked. There are only two things that ever happen. Either I negotiate with my husband again, or otherwise when I get back home I become the victim once again.

- A 30-year-old woman who now lives with her two children at her mother-in-law's home

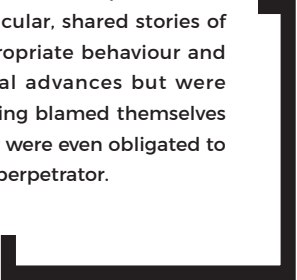


When women facing violence take the decision to seek help or support, they must choose who to approach. Some will go to their own communities, others may decide to reach out to the local authorities.

Sharers who were facing or had faced violence at home discussed their experiences seeking support in their situations. All of them said that their attempts to reach out did not work. Some women sought out mediation services for their family disputes but complained that the primary focus on talking did not necessarily lead to action. Others whose violent partners were arrested shared that they would eventually find themselves in the same situations after being released. Women

who more informally reported the violence to people in their community in search of support also talked about feeling judged or discouraged from bringing up the issues.

Women facing violence or harassment in the workplace also shared their frustration in seeking help in specific situations. Most women who reported issues to their bosses or managers did not receive the support they had hoped for. Women in the beer promotion industry, in particular, shared stories of reporting inappropriate behaviour and unwanted sexual advances but were consequently being blamed themselves for the actions or were even obligated to apologise to the perpetrator.





*“Education
changes a
woman’s life by
helping her to
understand her
own rights and
can reduce or
even eliminate
violence.”*

- A 21-year-old university student who experienced ongoing physical violence in her childhood until she moved into her teacher’s home in grade 7

An internal matter

Personally, I don't want to share my story with others because nobody understands me except myself.

- A 25-year-old woman from Kampong Cham who works in a company in Phnom Penh

For those who grow up with violence or get accustomed to it, it can become something of a family affair. The normalisation of violence within a family leads to it being seen as something private or internal, often contributing to the hesitation to share with others. This can stem from societal, cultural, and personal elements.

Sharers from the study discussed their own perceptions of violence in the family and revealed some reasons for not allowing others to know about it. Some felt that violence was a family issue and should stay within the family unit. Others saw the violence they were facing as a very sensitive issue that should not be shared with others. There was some mention of victims themselves viewing violence as a minor issue or said

that they made fun of if they brought up in social situations outside of the home. One woman even discussed how violence was associated as discipline in her house growing up and that her father believed that physical punishment helped his children learn rules and obey him.

Another major aspect that compelled women to keep violence hidden within the family unit was shame. Some talked about violence itself being an embarrassment and something that was best kept inside. One young woman talked about her own mother who moved to another neighbourhood simply to escape from the stigma she felt with her neighbours after finding out that she was a victim of violence.




*“Women
should be
brave and
voice those
challenges.”*

- A Listener for the project reflects after listening to women
facing violence in Phnom Penh

A woman's burden to bear

Others said to me that maybe I'm the one who's not easy-going enough or too serious. It's putting the blame on me. I'm the victim but why do they think the problem was caused by me?

- A 30-year-old woman talks about the responses she received after opening up about an incident of sexual harassment

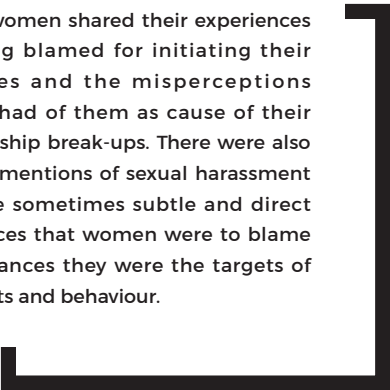


A 30-year-old woman talks about the responses she received after opening up about an incident of sexual harassment

Nearly all Sharers discussed negative gender stereotypes they saw as common in Cambodia and affected them in their everyday lives. Several women said that the societal pressure on them to be “good” wives and mothers often kept them in relationships involving violence. One woman discussed having tried to leave her abusive partner but could not allow herself after those around her said her children should not be far from one of their parents. Another woman who left both her first husband and her second husband mentioned that she had only endured so long because of not wanting to be labelled a bad wife. Eventually after leaving, she faced discrimination by those who

knew. Some women working in the beer promotion industry said that the negative stereotype of their work being associated with prostitution left them especially vulnerable.

Some Sharers talk about victim-blaming and certain norms established around faulting the woman in a relationship, even in situations where she was facing violence from her male intimate partner. A few women shared their experiences of being blamed for initiating their divorces and the misperceptions others had of them as cause of their relationship break-ups. There were also several mentions of sexual harassment and the sometimes subtle and direct inferences that women were to blame for instances they were the targets of such acts and behaviour.





“Women in their workplaces should get more support from those around them because they are facing more negative perceptions from society compared to men.”

- A women who works at a company and says she was humiliated at her job

Supporting women facing violence

*I think that all women face violence.
The thing is that they face it at different
levels. I want to see all couples respect,
commit, and understand each other
before getting married. If all women
stand up and raise their voice to address
this issue, it works!*

- A mother and a woman who faces
violence in her relationship

Although women are often the targets of violence and can find themselves as victims in different contexts, the resilience they develop can lead to a strong capacity for advocacy. Most often, it is those affected by the issue that can contribute to the most impactful and meaningful change.

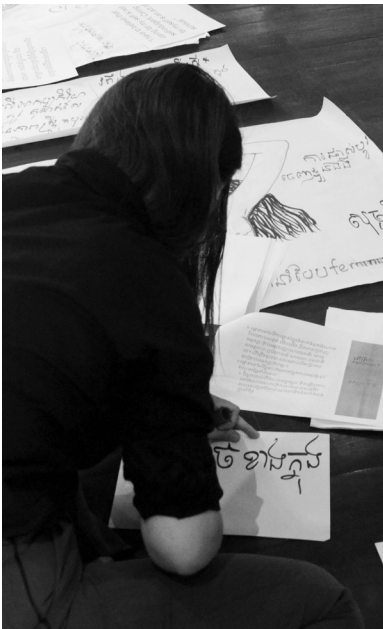
All Sharers expressed some form of advocacy in their conversations with Listeners. Several advocated for women's education with some saying that the confidence stemming from education could significantly curb emotional violence. Sharers also spoke strongly

in support for clear policies and laws that could protect women in all forms of violence. Particularly those facing violence and harassment in their workplaces felt that legal protection was vital, as well as training and awareness for everyone involved. Above all, women facing violence expressed their own leadership on the issues they had experienced personally and saw that confidence and empowerment were key for women to confront violence and gave their support to help others in similar situations.



“I want to tell women that no matter what you do, do not give up and speak out. Do not feel you must live under the control of men.”

- A 50-year-old housewife who confronted her husband's violence



This initiative would not be possible without the generous support of Voice.



Overcoming Victimhood of Violence is a consolidation of the insights and experiences of ten women facing violence in Cambodia's capital city, Phnom Penh. It is one of several studies from a larger initiative known as 4 Women, 4 Communities, 4 Stories that seeks to explore intersectionality among doubly marginalised that include Indigenous women, rural women in the city, women with disabilities, and women who report facing violence in their homes or in public.

This contribution provides a small but powerful reflection on issues that often stay in private. It is unique in the study of intersectionality given that it both represents an element of identity, and a situation of context. It leverages the participatory community research approach, Facilitative Listening Design (FLD), to provide the space for sharing and storytelling while simultaneously using the information for deeper analysis and understanding of the lives of women facing violence in Phnom Penh. It also provides the opportunity for victims of violence to take leadership and advocate for change through their own experiences and wisdom that are reflected throughout the direct voices of those who participated.

