

CAMBODIA

Culture for Change: Preventing gender-based violence in Cambodia

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BACKGROUND

This proposal is the first applied research in Southeast Asia that harnesses local culture for primary prevention of gender-based violence (GBV) and involves partnerships with official agencies and NGOs. Through engagement with perpetrators, victims and monks, the project will map the role of popular cultural beliefs and practices, both as a cause of and solution to GBV and, in partnership with local agencies, translate the findings into curriculum resources and inform a culturally responsive Theory of Change that will enable mitigation of GBV.

INNOVATION

Current approaches to violence prevention often view local culture and tradition as barriers to change because they are taken as explanations for the gap between legislation of international standards and continuing violence against women and girls. This creates a cycle that may focus the work of primary prevention of GBV at the wrong target. Any change in GBV, in any country, has to deal with local tradition and culture, which is dynamic. The challenge is to change the 'tradition' of harming women, rather than citing it as the barrier to change. To convince people of the value of behavioural change, one needs to develop a common understanding and create rapport. This proposal involves working with local cultural brokers and religious leaders to advance culturally informed strategies to prevent GBV. Recognising that Cambodian 'culture' has moved quickly in response to neoliberalism, and that the tapestry of spirituality is moving with it, the research team proposes that monks and female devotees – among a diversity of religious leaders – can harness these local cultural notions to help break impunity and prevent GBV. This proposal will test how, using local logic on GBV, we can help government agencies understand the barriers to change.

OBJECTIVES

The proposal includes the following objectives:

1. Test how the research team's preliminary evidence on the cultural drivers of GBV are valid in building a cultural model of GBV in Cambodia through action research. We will confirm how women, men, girls and boys use their local cultural references to make sense of the types of GBV they have experienced or witnessed. In this way, the project will expose and analyse the cultural forces that underpin and shape the GBV 'landscape'.
2. Explore and test how interventions by monks and female devotees could modify risk behaviour and contribute to the primary prevention of GBV in collaboration

with the Buddhist network. Theories and interventions used by monks to mitigate the effects of GBV and prevent further episodes will be examined. We will document why perpetrators and survivors sought help from monks and female devotees and how it changed attitudes towards women and girls and the sense of impunity on GBV.

3. Through invited partnerships with official and local agencies, explore ways to underpin policy with a culturally responsive Theory of Change.

METHODS

1. Explore the cultural drivers of GBV in Cambodia through action research. This will involve engaging existing Cambodian NGOs, participants, and their communities and families. GBV experiences and lexicography will be recorded and analysed.
2. Engage existing Buddhist monks and female devotees in Cambodia to explore and test how their interventions could reduce GBV. The ways in which monks use ritual interventions to ameliorate and prevent GBV will be observed. Ritual interventions will be coded on a local spectrum that includes to keep potential victims out of harm's way; enhance immunity against attack; induce the aggressor to love instead of harm the victim; and disarm the aggressor by 'killing violence'.
3. Explore ways to underpin the National Action Plans with a culturally responsive Theory of Change. This will involve incorporating findings and curriculum development for local monks, devotees and NGOs. Socially engaged monks and female devotees will be recruited to adapt Buddhist teachings and peace-promoting activities to work with RACHA and other local NGOs dealing with GBV to engage in reflective learning.

POLICY AND ADVOCACY IMPLICATIONS

This project aims to understand the building blocks for a culturally-responsive Theory of Change for GBV prevention in Cambodia. It will influence Technical Working Groups and could make a real difference to Cambodian government's policy e.g. Country Program, National Guidelines for Managing Violence against Women and Children and the National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women, and to implementation e.g. Technical Working Groups.

