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# Responding to The Rape of Cambodian Children 

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Every day of every year, in the villages and communities of Cambodia, children as young as three are sexually assaulted. Many are tricked or sold into prostitution; others end up working in brothels as a result of desperate poverty or similar overwhelming problems. What is not as widely known, however, is that countless more children from all walks of life are being raped in their own homes, villages, and communities, to the extent that rape has perhaps become the most common threat to the well-being of Cambodian children today. Consider these statistics compiled by LICADHO, a non-political, nonreligious human rights organization working in fourteen provinces across Cambodia:' more than half ( $60 \%$ ) of all the cases investigated by LICADHO's child rights department in 1999 and 2000 were rape and indecent assault. The average age of victims was only twelve, while nearly one-fourth (23\%) were committed against children under

[^0]ten; the youngest had only reached her third birthday. In 2001 the situation did not improve, with rape and indecent assault continuing to be the highest reported child rights violation ( 126 cases), followed by physical abuse/torture (48 cases), trafficking (buying and selling children- 16 cases) and murder ( 15 cases).

These statistics refer to the number of cases investigated by LICADHO, and do not prove that the rape of children is on the rise in Cambodia. However, they do indicate that 1) sexual assault of children is not limited to commercial sexual exploitation, and 2) the rape of children in their own homes and communities is a serious issue affecting children all over the country. It may also be true that, since many cases doubtless go unreported, the statistics indicate a growing threat to Cambodia's children. Any such growth could be fueled in part by the increasing availability of pornography (both printed and video), as many perpetrators involved in cases investigated by LICADHO claimed they had watched or were acting out pornographic images they had viewed.

What is clearer is that rape affects children of all ages and from every ethnic, social, and economic background. Those who are most at risk include street children, stepchildren, "adopted" children, physically and mentally handicapped children, and those in prison. However, LICADHO's experience indicates that any child-not only the poor or vulnerable-can become a victim of rape.

If then this is a serious threat to our children, what should we do? Will we allow the rape of our daughters, sisters, and nieces (and in some cases sons and nephews) to continue? What should be our response as Christians, and as parents, family, and community members? This is a difficult question, but we can all begin by being informed of the issue, sensitive to survivors, and proactive in protecting and supporting children.

## Be Informed

"Get wisdom, get understanding; do not forget my works or swerve from them. Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her and she will watch over you. " As Christians, we are called to seek out knowledge and understanding in order to know the Lord's will and to know how to live safely and wisely in this world. Therefore, the first step in responding to the rape of children is to become wellinformed about the issue.

## What is Rape?

Because rape is a crime involving sexual acts, it is rarely discussed openly and in detail. As a result the definition of rape is often not understood, even among police and other authorities. Article 33 of the Cambodian Penal Code, adopted in 1992 during the UNTAC period, states:
"Rape is any sexual act involving penetration against a nonconsenting person".

Although not specifically defined, the word "penetration" here refers to the insertion of a person's penis, finger, other body part, or other object, into another person's vagina or anus. The degree of penetration (whether deep or shallow) is unimportant; if any penetration has occurred without consent, then a rape has taken place. If a person intends to commit penetration and is unsuccessful for any reason, he is guilty of attempted rape, which is equally punishable by Article $33 .{ }^{3}$

[^1]
## Types of Rape Violations

Rape can occur with a variety of attendant circumstances:

1) Sexual Assault with Violence, Threat, or Weapons: This is rape accompanied by violence such as beating, torture, etc., or the use of verbal threats or weapons to intimidate the victim. These cause further trauma to the victim, and thus can result in harsher penalties for perpetrators.
2) Rape and Murder: In some cases rape victims are killed either as a result of the physical abuse caused by the act, or in order to protect the perpetrator from arrest. In one case investigated by LICADHO, a four-year-old girl was raped and murdered.
3) Gang Rape: A gang rape is one involving three or more perpetrators, again inflicting severe trauma on the victim. Human rights workers believe such cases are on the increase, again possibly because of the wider availability of pornography and/or the growing number of gangs in Cambodia.
4) Rape Involving Accomplices: There appears to be a growing number of women who actively help their husbands, boyfriends, and others trick young girls so that they can be easily raped, possibly in order to prevent these men from going to prostitutes and later infecting their wives or girlfriends.

## Who Are The Perpetrators?

Just as children of all ages and backgrounds can be victims of rape, perpetrators also come from all ages, occupations, and roles in communities. As in child trafficking (buying and selling children for labor, sexual, or other purposes), perpetrators often know the child beforehand, coming from within the family (fathers, uncles, or even brothers), or from within the child's community, such as neighbors or others working nearby. Even the church-both its members and its leaders-is not exempt from harboring potential or actual rapists, and must take steps to safeguard its members. A majority of cases
investigated by LICADHO ${ }^{4}$ have been farmers or fishermen, (30\%), followed by government employees (police, soldiers, or MPs, 17\%), "other" occupations (landlords, moto-drivers, doctors, goldsmiths, etc., $14 \%$ ). Disturbingly, a significant number of rapists are students (14\%), with some as young as thirteen. Combined with the fact that the average age of perpetrators was twenty-five, this indicates that parents, schools, and churches need to give serious and immediate attention to instructing boys and young men about respecting girls and women.

## Laws and Penalties Against Rape

In Cambodia, rape is a criminal offense punishable by law. As such, victims and their families have the right to file criminal charges against perpetrators, both in order to provide justice to the victim as well as to protect other women and children from being raped in the future. Persons found guilty of rape are punishable by imprisonment. According to Article 33 of the Penal Code, punishments for rapists include the following:

> Minimum Punishment: 5-10 years imprisonment
> Rape Accompanied by Fraud, Violence, or Threat: 10-15 years imprisonment
> Rape Committed by a Person in a Position of Authority over the Victim (such as police, employer, etc.): 10-15 years imprisonment
> Rape against a Minor (person under 16 years old): Double the above prison term(s).

## Be Sensitive

Because it is such a little discussed and understood topic, there are many misunderstandings about the causes of rape and its impact on its victims. Thus many people (even parents) often accuse victims of doing something to cause or allow the rape to occur. As a result they are also insensitive to the feelings and needs of survivors, and

[^2]deny them the support they need to recover. As Christian parents, relatives, or church and community members, we of all people should be understanding and compassionate to victims, and know how to appropriately support them. This begins with understanding some of the incorrect beliefs people have about rape and its impact on women and children.

## Four Myths regarding Rape

Myth \#1: Women provoke rape by suggestive dress, provocative behavior, being alone at night, etc.
Truth: No type of dress or behavior gives a man the right to sexually assault a women or child.
This myth wrongly shifts the blame from the perpetrator to the victim, and ignores the fact that young children who are raped do not yet possess the maturity to intentionally dress or behave provocatively.
Myth \#2: Men are unable to control their sexual desires, making rape a spontaneous assault.
Truth: Studies in the United States and England show that most rapes are entirely or partly planned, with only $15 \%$ being spontaneous.
While many believe that rapists are sexually starved, these studies also show that many perpetrators are either married or involved in consenting relationships with girlfriends, prostitutes, etc.

Myth \#3: Most rapists are strangers to their victims.
Truth: The majority of rapes are committed by people known to the victim.
Of the cases investigated by LICADHO, $68 \%$ were committed by someone who knew the victim well (relatives or others living in the household, boyfriends, neighbors, and friends), while only $25 \%$ were committed by casual acquaintances or strangers.
Myth \#4: Many women falsely accuse men of rape.
Truth: Rape is one of the most under-reported of all serious crimes.
A study in the US indicated that only $2 \%$ of reported rapes were false claims. In Cambodia, it is also unlikely that a women or
child would make a false accusation of rape for three reasons: 1) the shame and embarrassment associated with rape and sexual activity in Khmer culture make it embarrassing to admit to family and friends, and put her reputation and chances of marriage at risk; 2) the insensitive treatment of rape cases by authorities make it a difficult experience to file charges; and 3) fear and mistrust of the legal system cause many women to believe they will not receive justice. In light of these difficulties, it is unlikely that a Cambodian woman or girl would lie about a rape. ${ }^{5}$

Because of the above myths, accusations of rape are often not taken seriously within the family, the village or community. However, the fact is that rape is an inexcusable crime and grievous sin against God.

## The Impact of Rape on Victims

This is the true story of "Thany" (all names of persons appearing in case studies have been changed):

In 1999, seven-year-old Thany was invited to play at her neighbor's house by another young girl named "Dara." She was reluctant to go, and said later that Dara's thirteen-year-old brother had raped Thany on at least three prior occasions. Urged by her mother. Thany went with Dara to play. After playing for a while, Dara suggested they go to the pond to wash, and when they finished washing. Thany rushed to go home, but Dara called to her brother that Thany was getting away.

The brother came and caught Thany, covered her mouth and dragged her to some nearby palm trees. He then told Dara to go get a mat and three kramas (scarves). Then the boy called over two of his friends, aged twelve and thirteen. Once Dara laid out a mat, the three boys forced Thany to lie down on it and tied a scarfaround her mouth,

[^3]then tied her hands to the end of a piece of wood which they laid across her chest. They tied her legs apart, then each boy proceeded to rape her, two times each. While this was going on, Dara was sitting a short distance away watching and keeping look out.

The boys then took Thany to the pond and again tied her and raped her two times each. Thany was traumatized by the ordeal and has experienced emotional problems since then. She also suffered injuries to her genital area which required medical treatment. LICADHO investigators intervened to get the police to arrest the boys, who until then were still living freely in the village near to the victim. During the investigation it was discovered that the three boys had been watching pornography at a local video bar, and it appears they copied actions they had seen on video.

Think for a moment about how you would feel if you were Thany: 1) during the rape, 2) after the rape, and 3) while telling family members, police, and the court about the experience. How would you think about yourself, the perpetrators, the friend who had betrayed you, and your future?

Perhaps because of the myths described above and the disturbing nature of the crime, many people do not reflect deeply on how a rape victim may feel. As a result there is a serious lack of understanding about the traumatic effects of sexual assault on the life of a victim, All parts of society must be educated as to the physical and psychological impacts of rape on women and children such as Thany. These can include the following:

## 1. Physical Effects

- Physical injury inflicted by the assailant
- Possible infection of HIV/AIDS
- Other sexually transmitted diseases (gonorrhea, syphilis, herpes simplex, urinary tract infections and polyps)
- Unwanted pregnancy, or pregnancy in very young girls
- Nausea, fatigue, tension headaches, abdominal pain, and vaginal pain.


## 2. Psychological Effects

- Severe anxiety, fear, depression, guilt, self-blame, loneliness, anger, aggressiveness
- Humiliation, shame, embarrassment, lack of self-confidence, helplessness
- Decrease in appetite; chronic bed-wetting,
- Self-mutilation
- Suicide

In 2002, Chenda, an eight-year-old girl was raped twice by a neighbor who told her not to tell anyone or else he would kill her. One day when her mother was bathing her, she noticed something was wrong and questioned her daughter. When Chenda refused to tell her, both her mother and father beat her with an electric cord. She then admitted she had been raped, and was terrified the man would find out and hurt her. Her family says that she is now very scared of other people as. well. and would like her to receive counseling to overcome this.

In 2001, Sophal, a seven-year-old girl, was severaly raped, beaten, and locked in a secret location for several days. When she was found, she was unconscious because she had lost so much blood, and needed emergency hospitalization. Currently she has nightmares and wets her bed at night, is afraid of people (especially men), is scared to go anywhere without her mother, and therefore has not been attending school. When playing with her brothers and sisters, she can suddenly become angry and aggressive. Counsellors who have been meeting with Sophal note that ifshe is not given the opportunity to talk about and express her feelings about being raped, she will express them in other ways, for example in her play.

In 2000. Sophea. a fifteen-year-old girl, was gang raped by fourteen young gang members in her village. She was severely beaten during the rape, resulting in bruises and internal injuries to her genitals. After the experience, Sopheà suffered recurring nightmares, intense fear of being alone; and bouts of crying.

Long-term effects of rape may include personality changes, lack of trust, pessimism about the future, loss of confidence, and distrust
of adults. Community relationships also are affected, as girls who lose their virginity in Khmer culture suffer greatly damaged reputations, putting them at risk of discrimination by friends and neighbors, and greatly reducing their chances of marriage. Studies have also found that rape victims are at a much higher risk of being raped again or to be sold or coerced into prostitution than other girls in the community.

These are clearly life-altering effects upon the victim, and also impact the victim's family. However, even if the above effects are not immediately apparent, it does not necessarily mean they are not there or that she is recovering well. She may be repressing (trying to forget) the experience, or hiding her feelings for fear of being misunderstood. In any case, it is important that we as family, community, and church members are aware of what survivors such as Thany may be experiencing, and show unconditional Christian love, acceptance, and support.

## Be Proactive

To be "proactive". means that you take action to prevent problems before they happen, or if a problem has already occurred, to take personal responsibility for solving it to the best of your ability. With such a sensitive and disturbing issue as child rape, it is easier to deny or ignore it rather than to confront it and become involved in protecting children. But as Christians called to engage with and minister to the world, we are to be proactive and address the holistic needs of children and adults. Blessed with wisdom, spiritual gifts of various kinds and, most of all, love, we have already been equipped by God to respond to the issue of child rape. And all of us, in our roles as parents, relatives, church, or community members, can be proactive in the following ways:

## Parents and Families:

- Discuss with your daughters, in a way appropriate for their age and understanding, about the problem of sexual abuse. ${ }^{3}$ Let them know that it is not right for any adult to touch or molest them sexually, to be wary of going alone to quiet places,
and to run for help if they fear they will be molested in any way.
- Let them know that they are always free to talk to you about their problems, and that if they are ever raped you will be there to love, listen and support them unconditionally.
- Know and watch for any physical or psychological signs that your child has been raped (as listed above), and if you suspect they have been, gently provide them the opportunity to tell you. Do not force them, as this may add to the trauma. Eventually they will tell you or another person they trust if given enough opportunities.
- Consider, after discussing with your child, reporting the incident to the police, the Ministry of Women and Veteran's Affairs, human rights groups such as LICADHO, or other NGOs such as the Cambodian Women's Crisis Centre. ${ }^{6}$ Filing a complaint may lead to the arrest of the perpetrator and prevent other children from suffering the same experience.


## Churches:

- Inform church members of the problem by sharing, in an appropriate way, time and place, the myths, truth, and impacts of rape on both women and children. Reading portions of this article in a small women's group, for instance, and then discussing, is one way to do this.
- Show Christian love and support of various kinds to survivors of rape. Do this without gossiping of their experience or embarrassing them; simply showing the child you love and

[^4]value them is enough in most cases. In this way they will know the church is a place of healing and acceptance, and experience the love of God through their church family.

## Communities:

- Inform your neighbors, community leaders and local authorities of the problem by sharing, again in an appropriate way, the myths, truth, and impacts of rape. After they understand the issue they can join with you in protecting and supporting children.
- Watch out for the children in your community, taking care that they do not place themselves at risk by going alone to distant or quiet places, or by hanging out with suspicious men or youth.
- If you hear that a child has been raped, discuss privately with the child and her parents about reporting the incident to the police, a human rights organization like LICADHO or another NGO working with women or children. Let them know that legal and social assistance is available through them, and encourage them to seek justice and protect other children by filing charges against the perpetrator.
- Again and most importantly, show love and acceptance to survivors in your community by not gossiping about their experience or treating them in any way which would embarrass or demean them. Value them as you would value any child, for God loves all children unconditionally, no matter what they have experienced.

In conclusion, as Christians with wisdom, gifts and faith, we of all people can-and should-be proactive in protecting our children from falling victim to rape, and in loving and supporting victims in their recovery. If we are informed, sensitive and proactive, and involve the Lord in our efforts, we can do this by his power and grace.


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[^0]:    'Portions of this article have been taken directly from the report "Crimes in the Community: Rape and Indecent Assault in Cambodia" by Diane O'Connell, published in 2001 by The Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights--LICADHO.

[^1]:    ${ }^{2}$ Prov 4:5-6.
    ${ }^{3}$ Indecent Assault, on the other hand, is a separate crime, defined by Article 42 of the Penal Code as "touching, caressing or any other sexual act not involving penetration". Here it is understood that the intention was not to penetrate, therefore such an act would not be considered rape or attempted rape. Indecent assault is still a crime, however, punishable by imprisonment of 1-3 years.

[^2]:    ${ }^{4}$ Unless otherwise indicated, all statistics are compiled from cases investigated by LICADHO during 1999 and 2000.

[^3]:    ${ }^{5}$ While thus statistically unlikely that a Cambodian woman would falsely accuse a man of rape, it could happen. Here as elsewhere, any defendant should be presumed innocent until proven guilty, and allowed his or her day in court [ed.].

[^4]:    ${ }^{6}$ National Police Hotline: 023 720555; World Vision Nevea Thmey Centre: 023 880342; Cambodian Women's Crisis Centre: 023982158 or 012 840507; LICADHO: Phnom Penh: 023 360965/217626; Banteay Meanchey: 054 958861; Battambang: 053 952828; Koh Kong: 035936116 ; Kg Cham: 042 941464; Kg Chhnang: 026 988637; Kg Speu: 025 987220; Kg Thom: 062 961292; Kompot: 033 932663; Prey Veng 043 944527; Pursat: 052 951496; Siem Reap: 063 964066; Sihanoukville: 034 933716; Svay Reang: 044 945833; Takeo: 032931360 .

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