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និងការពារសិទ្ធិមនុស្ស

លីកាដូ



LICADHO

CAMBODIAN LEAGUE FOR THE
PROMOTION AND DEFENSE OF
HUMAN RIGHTS



“GOOD WIVES”
WOMEN LAND CAMPAIGNERS AND THE IMPACT
OF HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISM

A report issued in
November 2014



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Women Land Campaigners and the Impact of Human Rights Activism

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AND DEFENSE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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COVER: A woman joins an International Women's Rights Day protest, Phnom Penh, March 2014.



Women activists pray during a street protest, Phnom Penh, March 2014.

Background



WOMEN AND LAND ACTIVISM

During the last decade tens of thousands of Cambodians have been forcibly removed from their homes or their farmland and many more threatened with displacement. In the majority of cases, the Cambodian authorities are involved in the disputes, through the granting of land concessions or the use of state forces to intimidate people, remove them from their land and destroy homes.¹

In response, many affected communities have organized themselves to resist eviction or to seek proper redress for what they have lost. Cambodian women have been at the forefront of these campaigns with many becoming effective community leaders and human rights advocates.

LICADHO works closely with communities involved in land conflicts. It supports them to carry out their own advocacy by providing them with material help and resources, and provides professional services such as legal representation, social work and medical care to ensure they are able to continue with their activism when problems arise.

As a result of this work LICADHO has had regular, close

contact with women land activists and is therefore aware of the many challenges they face. Not only are they subject to threats and intimidation from the government and the frequent use of force and the law against them, they carry the constant burden of an uncertain future for themselves and their families.

STUDY METHODS

Conversations with women land activists during the course of LICADHO's work have revealed the high price women pay for their activism, suffering not only serious economic and emotional impacts but also often domestic violence and family breakdown. In order to gain a better understanding of the impact of land rights activism on women, and in particular the relationship between activism and domestic violence and family breakdown, LICADHO interviewed 24 women² involved in campaigning against eviction and land grabbing. Half of the women were from rural communities and half from Phnom Penh. They had all been involved in campaigning for several years and eight of them were extremely active and now work almost full-time as campaigners. Some of the women had been arrested and spent time in prison because of their activism.

¹ In April 2014, LICADHO published data showing that in the parts of the country covered by LICADHO monitors, the number of people affected by land conflicts in which the state was involved reached half a million: <http://www.licadho-cambodia.org/pressrelease.php?perm=342>

² In Phnom Penh, the researchers interviewed five women from Borei Keila community, six from Boeung Kak and one from Thmor Kol. In Banteay Srey district, Siem Reap province, researchers interviewed twelve women. All of the women were interviewed individually and the interviews took place in June and July 2014.

Interviewees were mainly selected because of their experience of domestic violence or family breakdown, although this was not always the case. The interviewees were therefore not a representative cross-section of their communities.

All of the interviews began with an open question about how the land dispute had affected the interviewee's life. In most cases, this led to a broad discussion of a variety of impacts which included effects on the family and sometimes domestic violence. It also covered the impact of eviction and loss of land as well as the more specific impacts of long-term activism. The various impacts were not separated by the interviewees into distinct categories and were often described by the interviewees as inter-related. In order to communicate the complexity and the severity of the impact of land conflicts, this report includes a discussion of all of the impacts raised by the interviewees, not just domestic violence and family breakdown and not only the impact of activism.

A NOTE ON THE FINDINGS

There were similarities between the experiences of all of the interviewees but it is important to note that the effect of land conflicts varied depending on the circumstances of the different communities. The experience of urban communities differed from the experience of those in rural areas; and those who had actually been evicted faced more severe difficulties than those still in their homes or in possession of their farmland. The particular circumstances of the interviewees before their land disputes began also varied and this had an impact on how the disputes affected them. Those in urban communities had generally been better off, more educated and less isolated than those in rural communities. Most of the interviewees in rural areas were already living in extremely difficult circumstances before their land disputes began, not only poor but often affected by disability, alcoholism and pre-existing domestic violence. The findings below attempt to reflect some of these differences whilst also drawing conclusions about the similarities between the interviewees' experiences.



Women factory workers on International Women's Rights Day, Phnom Penh, March 2014.



Boeung Kak activists gather during a media conference, Phnom Penh, August, 2014.

An Urban Land Rights Campaigner's Story

Being an activist and community leader has been hard for me because my husband didn't want me to do it and this led to disagreements. Before I started as an activist, our life was happy and we had time after work to talk and have fun and relax and go out at the weekend. All that has changed.

Before the conflict, I was a good housewife. I did the cooking and took care of my daughter and did everything properly. But when I started campaigning I stopped doing most of that work so he left the family and stopped supporting me and my daughter financially and we had a really hard time.

There was violence too and he destroyed property in the house. The violence happened around four times and it was serious. He hurt me physically. It was because my husband worked and came home tired and I didn't have time to prepare food and do the work of a good housewife. Also, because he's in the military he didn't want me to get involved in campaigning. Normally when he called me I was out campaigning. This was because I didn't just go campaigning for my community but I supported other communities too and he got angry about that. He imposed conditions and said that I should be a good housewife and stay at home and manage the house. I could not accept this so he left. He said that if I didn't change my mind and I continued with my activism one day he might murder me so it'd be better for him to leave me. That was nearly three years ago.

“[After the violence] I didn't go to the authorities for help. I don't have any confidence in the local authority because they try to monitor and follow me so I don't trust them. I know they won't help me. They would be happy if I had problems.”

My economic circumstances after my husband left were very hard. I wasn't working and he didn't support us because he was trying to put pressure on me to stop my campaigning. I didn't go to the authorities for help. I don't have any confidence in the local authority because they try to monitor and follow me so I don't trust them. I know they won't help me. They would be happy if I had problems. But I did go to [NGO name] to see a lawyer after the serious violence because we have joint ownership of the house and my husband said that if I divorced him I would lose it. I asked the lawyer about that and he said it wasn't true.

I didn't file a divorce complaint because I know it's mainly my fault and that I'm not a good housewife and I didn't listen to my husband. Our tradition says we should listen to our husbands. I decided to choose the community and continue with my activism and he was hurt by that.

I am now reconciled with my husband. He came back around a month ago. His friend who works in social work tried to convince him that it's good to have a strong, activist wife and he tried to reconcile us. So now my husband says it's okay to do campaigning just as long as it's not political. Now I get along with my husband but I'm not sure about the future because I'm still campaigning. I joined a protest yesterday and my husband was worried about that but it's very hard not to get involved.

Before I started campaigning I was in a dark place. I knew nothing about society and its problems. But now I'm in a light place because I know about so much and I got training on the law and advocacy from lots of organisations. So I have more knowledge and that makes me really happy because I know a lot more about society's problems. I have no regrets about my activism. Instead, I am happy because I helped society and other communities to make them strong and share knowledge so we can stand up together and I feel that I have contributed to society. The government will be afraid because all the people are united and we all help each other.

Findings



CHANGING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

Almost all of the women interviewed said that the land conflicts and their involvement in campaigning had brought about a change in their relationships with their husbands and in some cases their wider families. Their activism has meant attending frequent meetings and protests over many years which has reduced the amount of time they have to spend at home or providing for their families. The women who have experienced the most change are the community leaders for whom campaigning has become an almost full-time activity. Many of the women summarized the impact of their campaigning on their lives by saying that before they started, they were “good wives” but that now they have little time to cook and clean and look after the family in the traditional way and so they can no longer describe themselves as such.

The inability of the women to fulfill the traditional wife’s role was a source of tension in the families of almost

all of the women interviewed and they all described having to deal with very similar complaints from their husbands.

Firstly, their husbands were critical of the excessive time they spent away from home and the fact that they had less time to look after the family as a result. A very common specific criticism was the failure to prepare food; this was a particular source of tension and arguments as men often came home from work to find that their wives were still out of the house and there was nothing for them to eat.

Some of the women reported that their husbands also expressed their anger in terms of sexual jealousy. The fact that the women were often away from home until late and returned tired meant that they were no longer as sexually available to their husbands as

they had been in the past. This caused tension in the relationships of many of the women interviewed and several of the women said that rather than just expressing dissatisfaction at this, their husbands accused them of having affairs and said that were lying about being out campaigning.

“Before the conflict I was a good housewife. I did the cooking and took care of my daughter and did everything properly. But when I started campaigning I stopped doing most of that work so he left the family and stopped supporting me and my daughter.”

Urban land rights campaigner



Villagers from Kratie province visit Phnom Penh to petition the Prime Minister, Phnom Penh, August 2014.

The majority of the women said that their role in decision-making within the family had also changed after they became involved in community activism and that this was something that their husbands found difficult. They explained that in the past they had obeyed every decision their husband made even if they didn't agree. Now, they express their opinions, are not afraid to disagree with their husbands and make many more decisions by themselves.

In one community, many of the leaders have succeeded in gaining land titles but have decided to continue campaigning until everyone in the community has received a title. Because of this, their husbands and other family members have accused them of enjoying the attention and fame that has come as a result of their activism and of choosing to neglect their families so that they can continue to experience this.



Villagers from Chi Kor Leu community protest against the Koh Kong Sugar Company, Koh Kong province, October 2014.

TENSION AND VIOLENCE

Almost all of the women interviewed said that their new roles and the resulting changes in their relationships with their husbands had led to arguments. Five of them said that these arguments had led to violence which they saw as a direct result of their role as campaigners. None of them had suffered violence before they began their activism. Four of the five were community leaders who said that their husbands had told them that they must choose between the family and the community. The violence began when they refused to stop their activism. All of the four community leaders had separated from their husbands although one had recently started living with her husband again after a friend had helped to reconcile them. The fifth woman, who was not a community leader but was a regular participant in protests, had never separated from her husband. She commented that the violence had subsided recently as she now participates less in campaigning activities because the community has been successful in getting some of its land back.

In six other cases, women said they had experienced serious violence at the hands of their partners but it was difficult to identify a causal relationship between the violence and their activism because the violence predated the land conflict. Three of the women commented that the violence had started during their first pregnancy or shortly after their first child was born. However, all of the six women commented that the violence had

Case Study

I often joined the campaigning. I started in 2002, at the beginning. I've even been to Phnom Penh to campaign. My husband joined me the first time but after that it's just been me. He didn't really give his support, especially when I went to Phnom Penh. He accused me of going for a holiday but I still went. He said that I just went to enjoy myself and that I don't care about the family. He was happy when I got the land but he doesn't admire me for what I did.

He has been physically violent to me many times and for many years, since my first child. Normally he hits my head and face. Last year he beat me badly twice, once with a piece of bamboo on the back of the head and the other time with a wooden stick making me unconscious. He also beats the children. I have four children, the oldest is 16 and the youngest is 9. The violence happened before the conflict began too but after it began, he threw me out of the house and said that the house and the land and the children all belonged to him.

Now we are living in the same house again but I spoke to the village chief about a divorce. The village chief said that it's not good to get divorced but that if we do, the property should be divided.

If I got divorced I don't know where I'd go and I don't know if the children would go with me.

Now I'm not afraid of joining with other villagers and campaigning against the authorities. I know my husband is wrong but I'm still afraid of him and can't oppose him.

Rural land rights campaigner

"He didn't really give his support, especially when I went to Phnom Penh. He accused me of going for a holiday but I still went. He said that I just went to enjoy myself and that I don't care about the family. He was happy when I got the land but he doesn't admire me for what I did."

Rural land rights campaigner

worsened since the land conflict began. Four of the women said that their husbands had also been violent towards their children. The women had been involved in land conflicts for several years and said that the tension and violence in the family had grown more serious the longer the conflict had lasted. Their husbands had become increasingly resentful of time spent away from home as they lost hope of achieving a successful outcome in the land dispute. They therefore accused their wives of no longer caring about the family. Their choice to continue campaigning was cited by all the women as a trigger for violence by their husbands.

In other cases, the tension between a husband and wife caused by the change in the wife's role did not lead to violence or a breakdown in the relationship. Some women said that there was tension when they first started their activism because their husbands were not happy with their new roles and felt they were not looking after the family as they should. However, over time, their husbands had adjusted to the change and now supported their work and understood that they were doing it for the benefit of the family. In one case, after some initial tension at the start of the land conflict, the husband and wife had completely swapped roles with the husband doing most of the childcare and work to look after the house while his wife carried out her work as a community leader and campaigner. The woman did acknowledge that tensions remained and that she did not know what the future held. She felt that the longer the land dispute went on, the more chance there was that the relationship between her and her husband would deteriorate.

In one of the rural communities, it was more common for both men and women to be involved in campaigning and for husbands and wives either to join protests together or to take it in turns to go while the other stayed at home to look after the children. In the families which organized themselves in this way, whilst there was still tension arising out of the threat of loss of land, there was less tension as a result of the involvement of women in campaigning.

Many women acknowledged that their husbands had some justification for opposing their campaigning activities. Whilst they found the criticism from their husbands stressful and often unfair, there were some occasions when they said that they felt it was reasonable. They explained that their husbands had often said that they did not mind their involvement in the campaign as long as they were not leaders and did not stand at the front of protests. This arose out of fear that their wives might be injured or get arrested. Given the history of land conflicts in Cambodia this is a far from unreasonable fear. The women also said that their husbands' concerns about their reduced contribution to childcare and the family finances were not wholly unreasonable. They saw that it put a much greater burden on their husbands than previously and was a genuine source of stress for them. Two of the women commented that their husbands had jobs in the military and were therefore worried that they might be discriminated against in their work as a result of their wives' activism. The two women recognized this as a genuine concern but were not sufficiently persuaded by it to stop their activism.

ECONOMIC IMPACT

In the cases of all of the women interviewed, conflict over land and their involvement in campaigning had an economic impact which was severe in some cases. In urban communities the women suffered a reduction in income as a result of two main factors. Firstly, before the land conflict, many of the women had made use of their homes to generate income by using one or two of the rooms for small cafes or shops or by renting out rooms to tenants.

Those who lost their homes therefore simultaneously lost an important source of income. Others remained in their homes but found that as a result of the eviction of households around them and the destruction of their communities, their businesses became unviable. The second main cause of loss of income was

Case Study

Before the conflict, life was happy. We had decent living conditions. My husband worked and I had time to take care of my family but later I needed to spend a lot of time campaigning so I had to reduce my time at home.

The conflict has affected lots of families. Some are still together but there are a lot of arguments and tension even if the relationship is not broken because women don't have time for cooking and taking care of the children.

Because of campaigning I didn't spend time with my family and my husband was angry and told me to stop but it was hard to stop because some community members still didn't have their land title and so I couldn't stop. And he got so angry that it led to physical violence. Before the campaign he didn't even use insults. But when I went campaigning, he swore at me and told me to stop and used violence. He doesn't understand me. [Community leader] tried to reconcile us but it didn't work because my husband just gave me two options, stop campaigning or not. I chose the community.

As soon as we got the land registration certificate my husband wanted a divorce so we got divorced and divided the house in two. I made my side into rental rooms and I use the money to support my children's education.

I campaigned for the land for my children because I saw other communities at the relocation site, I saw their living conditions. They were very bad. The children weren't wearing proper clothes and it was like dying. I thought it was better to die here than to move over there so I kept fighting.

But the campaigning really affects the children too. I am worried because now the children are still young and so their education is not so expensive but as they get older it will get more expensive.

Urban land rights campaigner

the women's involvement in campaigning. Before the land conflict, many of the women had jobs as market sellers or cleaners; as a result of their campaigning, which involved regular meetings, street protests, and for some, time spent in prison, it was no longer possible to hold down regular work.



A resident of Borei Keila eviction site, Phnom Penh, February 2014.

In rural communities, the effect of campaigning was less marked as many of the interviewees were not employed but rather worked on the land. They said that their income had gone down as a result of taking days off to attend protests but as they had not lost their jobs the reduction in income was not as extreme as in the urban communities. It must be said, however, that the rural communities were on the whole significantly poorer than their urban counterparts before their land conflicts began, with many families living a hand to mouth existence.

Loss of income had a number of effects on the women interviewed and on their families. Before the conflicts began, none of the women were wealthy but most were able to cover their living costs and provide for their children. Some were living just above the poverty level. The drop in income they experienced therefore had a serious impact.

Some of the women interviewed mentioned that they now made small amounts of money in less satisfactory ways, for example by collecting rubbish, an activity in which their children were also involved. Many said that in order to survive they had had to borrow money from informal money lenders and now had large debts that they had no way of paying off. A couple of the women interviewed said that they knew of others who had taken up prostitution in order to make money, although none of the women interviewed said that they had done so themselves.

All of the women talked about the effect of the loss of income on their children, in particular the fact that they were no longer able to afford the school fees for their children and in some cases were unable to pay for essential medicine. This effect was a source of considerable internal conflict for all the women given that their main reason for taking up a campaigning role was to provide a good life for their children by ensuring they had a home now and in the future. They all recognized that as a result of this choice, they had had to sacrifice to a certain extent their children's care and education. They therefore felt that despite their best intentions, their actions had damaged their children's future prospects.

Case Study

Campaigning has caused problems in my family because it takes many days and we have to spend money and we have five children. My husband gets angry if I go campaigning because it costs money to travel and we are in debt and have a lot of children. He swears at me and has hit me many times. He has hit the children too. The violence happened before the land conflict. It started during my first pregnancy but after the land conflict the violence increased.

When he's violent, normally I escape to the neighbours' house. Only when I am seriously beaten do I go to my family's house. I've never asked for help from police, local authorities or NGO, normally just the neighbours. I reported it to the village chief. She said it was a family problem so did not interfere. She told me: "It's an internal problem, you'll get along tomorrow."

At the moment I'm staying with my mother with all the children and am afraid to go back in case he's still angry. I need to ask my family to talk to him so I can go home safely.

When I went campaigning and saw the brave people I felt confident but still with my husband I'm not confident.

Rural land rights campaigner

"My husband gets angry if I go campaigning because it costs money to travel and we are in debt and have a lot of children. He swears at me and has hit me many times. He has hit the children too."

Rural land rights campaigner

The loss of income was a significant cause of tension between husbands and wives and often led to arguments. Where women lived with extended families, the reduction in their contribution to the overall family budget was also problematic. In both cases, women were criticized for their continued campaigning and pressurized to give up their activism so that they could find a regular source of income. In the cases where violence took place, financial problems, and especially the existence of debt, were cited by the women as a significant factor contributing to the occurrence of arguments.

Loss of income also led to family breakdown in families in which violence did not take place. Several women said that their husbands and grown up children had left them to find work in other provinces or in Thailand. In some cases, those who had migrated for work sent money home but in others the women had heard nothing for several years and said that they did not expect to see their family members again.

EMOTIONAL IMPACT

All of the women said that the many years of campaigning, the insecurity of not knowing what would happen to them, and the family tensions had taken a heavy toll on them emotionally. Several of them described symptoms of stress or depression such as sleeplessness or, at the other extreme, wanting to stay at home and sleep all day. Some of them said that they often felt intense and rapidly-changing emotions such as profound sadness followed by elation. Almost all of them said they were now a lot more short-tempered than they had been previously which meant that small disputes often resulted in unnecessary arguments. Three of the women said they had thought about suicide on several occasions over the years. Some of the women said that they believed that the difficult emotions they felt would all go away if the land conflict was resolved while others said that they felt that the changes they had undergone were more severe and were likely to affect them forever.



Villagers from Kampong Speu province protest in front of ANZ bank, Phnom Penh, August 2014.

The emotional impact on the women who had been evicted from their homes and were now living in makeshift shelters was particularly severe. As well as the tension that came with being an activist, their desperate living conditions and in particular their total lack of privacy was extremely difficult for them to bear. They all mentioned the constant strain caused by not being able to wash or go to the toilet in private. They described all of the emotions mentioned above but seemed to suffer them more extremely and were often in tears or close to tears when describing their feelings.

Case Study

Since joining the campaign, my time spent with my children has been reduced by about 70%. I hardly see them, only at weekends, so they need to take care of themselves and get their food by themselves. When I was arrested I lost my job and my husband lost his job too because the company went bankrupt. Because of that the children were dependent on my brother and sister. They're not happy with me because I don't have a job and my husband's not happy with me because I don't have time to take care of the children. Even the neighbours criticize me and tell me I just go campaigning because I want to be famous. My brother and sister have told me to take care of my own children and take them to school so now I've had to sell my belongings to get money for school fees.

Now I'm really tired and don't know my family's destiny and I don't know who will take care of my children's future. Honestly I want to stop the campaigning but I feel the community has been mistreated and this really upsets me so I keep going. Also I want to help society and work to strengthen other communities but I don't know if I have the energy. My energy is running out and this worries me. Recently I just feel totally demotivated. I just want to stay inside my room and sleep.

Previously I was just a food vendor so I didn't know what to do if I had a problem. Now I know whether to go to the municipality or which ministry or institution. So now I'm more confident and have more understanding of the roles and responsibilities of police and I can exercise my rights better. But the negative thing is I am more and more sensitive, I get angry really easily.

I have three children. Now they are 20, 16 and 10. The youngest one worries and tells me he doesn't want me to get arrested again because it made him sad to see his father going to bed and crying. And my daughter told me the same. It was very difficult for me because my daughter used to be a good student with good grades but when I went to prison her grades went down. It really affects me that my children are not getting a proper education. We activists are not very educated. Some of us can't even write Khmer very well. I don't want that situation to pass to the next generation because of our activism.

Urban land rights campaigner

Some of the women also described the effect on them of the frequent and often violent contact with police and other authorities. All of the women had experienced at the very least insults from authorities while they were protesting and many had suffered violence on a regular basis. One of the women made a connection between the violence she had experienced at the hands of the authorities and the tension between her and her husband. She said that she often found herself feeling aggressive towards her husband and had once waved a knife at him. She said that she knew it was wrong and didn't want to behave that way but that being on the receiving end of violence from the authorities so often had made her a more aggressive person who was less able to control her anger.

Despite this, all of the women had some positive things to say about how their role as campaigners had contributed to their personal development. They said that they were now much less deferential towards the authorities and, despite having experienced violence at their hands, much less fearful of them. They explained that they now know what their rights are and are not afraid to stand up for them. Many of them said that they were proud of what they had achieved and learned and that, despite all of the difficulties, felt they were stronger people as a result of their campaigning.

THE WOMEN'S RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE

In urban areas all of the women said that seeking help from any kind of authority such as the police was very difficult for them for a number of reasons. Firstly, because they are land activists, the authorities regard them as troublemakers and are therefore unlikely to make any efforts to help them. Those activists with a particularly high profile said that they feared that if the authorities found out about the domestic violence they would not only refuse to help them but would use the information to discredit them. One of them said that her local police often follow her and monitor what she does so she has no faith that they would help her. One other woman, who experienced serious violence in the family, said that she did eventually ask the police for help but they told her it was an internal family matter and took no action to help her. None of the other women interviewed had approached the authorities for help. Two of the women who had suffered violence had come to an informal arrangement with their husbands to separate and to share property and custody of the children. Two had approached NGOs for legal advice about their rights on divorce.



Police stop a march by women protesters on International Women's Rights Day, Phnom Penh, March 2014.

Case Study

My husband and family don't like my campaigning. They are worried about my safety when I go and they also worry about the lack of income because when I campaign I can't earn money.

My husband didn't want me to go. He only allowed me to go maybe one in ten times but I disobeyed him and went anyway. When I came back from campaigning there were always arguments, especially after we got our land title. But I felt pity for the community and so carried on campaigning. My husband made me choose between my family and the community. After many arguments, this led us to split up and in October last year we got a divorce.

The problems mostly happened last year when I spent a lot of time campaigning and I used not to get home until 9 or 10 o'clock at night and my husband thought I had done something wrong and was very suspicious. I told him I just work with women and monks but he didn't believe me. He said I loved the land community more than my family. He got very angry when I was hit by water cannon and had a miscarriage. So angry that it led to him being violent against me. He could not accept it anymore. Before that he hadn't used physical violence, only insults. I didn't get any external help because I thought it was my fault that I could not provide for the family. I felt guilty about not providing for my children. The community helped and would take me to hospital when I passed out following the violence. They also helped me one time when I tried to jump from a bridge. They stopped me.

All of the problems have affected my children a lot. They are old enough to understand what is going on in the family. And they are worried about my health and my safety when I go campaigning so they hate the community. It has affected their education too. They don't go to study regularly so I feel I have not fulfilled my obligation as a mother because of this. I feel disappointed because with my campaigning I got one thing but lost one thing. I feel I should've done better for my family. And with the campaigning we still haven't fully got our objective. But I've walked more than half way. I can't turn back.

Urban land rights campaigner

For those in rural communities, the same anxiety about contacting authorities existed but the women also mentioned a number of additional obstacles to them getting help. The police are often far away from the villages in which the women live and the women do not have the money to pay for transport to visit them let alone to pursue a legal complaint against their husbands. It is also difficult for them to leave their husbands for practical reasons: they have little money, normally several children to care for and nowhere to go. They also face a strong social pressure to stay married. For example, several of the women interviewed had asked their village chiefs for help in dealing with their violent husbands. It was common for the village chiefs to say that the violence was an internal, family matter and they would not interfere or that divorce was a bad thing and the women should just return home when their husbands were calmer; where they had intervened it was always to bring about a reconciliation between the husband and wife. In some cases, this intervention involved the husband signing an agreement saying he would not use violence in the future. All of the women who suffered violence in rural areas therefore felt that they had no choice but to stay with their husbands, even though many of them admitted that their husbands were not only violent towards them but to their children also. There was a sense of resignation to the violence and an acceptance that it was just part of being married.

“Only when I am seriously beaten do I go to my family’s house. I’ve never asked for help from police, local authorities or NGO, normally just the neighbours. I reported it to the village chief. She said it was an internal problem so did not interfere.”

Rural land rights campaigner



Participant in a protest to free 23 imprisoned unionists, strikers and activists, Phnom Penh, May 2014.

Case Study

The conflict started in 2002 but I don't remember exactly when I started campaigning. As a result of the campaigning we got some of our land back but not all. I've joined the campaigning many times.

We made a strong effort to get the land back. We went to many places, Siem Reap, Phnom Penh, we even slept in front of the court. It was only me that joined the campaign and my husband stayed home with the children.

First he supported me but after many times with no result and days and nights away from home, he lost hope and now he doesn't want me to go. There is a lot of tension in the family. The main problem is the economic state of the family. Because I go campaigning we don't have income.

He started being violent towards me after the conflict began. He would get angry after I came back home from campaigning and we would argue and then he would use violence. Now the violence is a bit less because since we got half the land back I go campaigning less and so now I can work more which means we don't argue so much. But sometimes he gets drunk and he brings up the old problems and he gets angry and then is violent again. Normally I run away to avoid getting hit. I stay at a relative's or neighbour's house. He doesn't chase me. Sometimes friends give advice to him to stop and he seems to listen but when he gets drunk he forgets it all.

The children run away too when he gets angry and starts swearing at them.

The first time the violence happened I reported it to the village chief who talked to him but the next time I didn't bother. I just tried to be away from him and be patient with him. If it happens again and is serious I will seek support maybe from an NGO who might be able to advise him or educate him to stop.

Because of the campaigning I'm braver now. The community is under long-term suppression so we need to get out of that and so I'm not so afraid any more when I go out with others. I know I have equal rights and so shouldn't have to suffer. And with my husband, I'm not as afraid of him as before. When he's angry, sometimes I respond to him because the more I keep silent, the more he represses me. I am less afraid of him now but not totally unafraid.

Rural land rights campaigner



A woman participates in a protest to free imprisoned land activist Yom Bopha, Phnom Penh, May 2014.

Conclusion



This study aimed to explore the relationship between land disputes, in particular the activism of women involved in those disputes, and domestic violence and family breakdown. The interviews revealed that land conflict has had a wide range of impacts on women activists, financial, emotional and familial, and that in most cases, those impacts have altered the lives of the women concerned profoundly and irreversibly.

The nature of this study means that it is not possible to extrapolate from the findings to all women land activists but it is striking that five out of twenty-four women interviewed experienced domestic violence after becoming campaigners having not experienced it before, and that a further six women, who had experienced domestic violence before their land disputes began, said that the violence had become worse since the conflicts began.

For the women interviewed, the relationship between land disputes and the domestic violence they experienced seems to have arisen from their activism, which took them out of the more traditional stay-at-home, obedient role that is expected of Cambodian women and into the public sphere. A couple of the women interviewed expressed this themselves, saying that as long as they did everything their husbands wanted without argument, their relationships were fine. When they did not and instead, as their husbands saw it, chose the community over the family and took up the role of community activist, their

husbands could not accept their new role and became violent towards them.

It is disturbing that seven of the women who experienced domestic violence took no action to remove themselves from their violent partners and that, with one exception, those who did so did not seek help from the police. However, for many reasons it is neither surprising nor unusual and is in fact no different to the majority of domestic violence victims in Cambodia.³ The women in this study were aware that involving the police was unlikely to improve their situations in any way and would cost them money that they didn't have or couldn't afford. This was compounded by the fact that very few of them had any alternative options for housing and would find it very difficult to survive as a single parent. The women's fear that because of their role as land activists the police would not help them or would use the information against them does set these cases apart from other cases of domestic violence and is a serious cause for concern.

Violence against women⁴ and land grabbing⁵ are two of the most serious and widespread human rights abuses in Cambodia. For many of the women in this study the two issues intersect and their lives are marred by conflict in both the public realm and in the home. The women's accounts reveal their remarkable courage and perseverance and expose the need for a genuine change of will and of policy by the Cambodian government on both issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶▶▶ Ensure police investigate all cases of domestic violence fully and properly regardless of the identity of the victim and that local authorities, police and court staff act independently and in the interests of justice to protect all victims of domestic violence.
- ▶▶▶ Provide extra funding to police, especially in rural areas, for the investigation and prosecution of cases of domestic violence.
- ▶▶▶ Ensure that local authorities, police and court staff recognise that domestic violence is not a private matter or minor offence and that they understand the importance of holding perpetrators of domestic violence to account for their actions.
- ▶▶▶ Increase the number of refuges and social services for victims of domestic violence and develop provision of vocational training programmes.
- ▶▶▶ Put an end to the use of violence against land campaigners and all peaceful protesters.
- ▶▶▶ Put a genuine end to forced evictions and provide fair and adequate compensation to those who have already been forcibly displaced or had their land unlawfully confiscated.
- ▶▶▶ Carry out a transparent and publicly disclosed land demarcation and classification process as soon as possible and ensure that any future land titling program operates under the authority of a relevant state institution.

³ Katherine Brickell, Baureaksmeay Prak & Bunnak Poch, Domestic Violence Law, The gap between legislation and practice in Cambodia and what can be done about it, Preliminary research report 2014, p. 36 <http://www.katherinebrickell.com/katherinebrickell/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/DV-Law-Prelim-Report-2014.pdf>.

⁴ Just under 33% of Cambodian men surveyed reported having perpetrated physical or sexual violence or both: Partners for Prevention, Why Do Some Men Use Violence Against Women and How Can We Prevent It? Quantitative Findings from the UN Multi-country Study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific, September 2013, <http://www.partners4prevention.org/node/515>.

⁵ See note 1 above.

