



Stop Child Trafficking in Cambodia



# Riverkids

## Reporting Abuse within Phnom Penh Communities



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## Introduction

This document reports findings from a study aiming to identify existing beliefs and concerns about reporting abuse occurring outside the immediate family by families living in Phnom Penh's poorer urban communities. The ultimate purpose of the research is to increase and improve abuse reporting within the community.

### **1. Methods**

Qualitative research techniques are used when the area to be researched is new, or exploratory in nature. Little past research has been conducted with families within poor urban communities in Phnom Penh about their perceptions of abuse. Furthermore, little is known about how families deal with abuse reporting and the difficulties they face in the process. In-depth, qualitative research was therefore decided upon as the most appropriate method by which to explore the area in detail, and would allow for areas of further exploration to emerge.

Families selected by social workers were invited to participate in the research. The families did not have to be working with Riverkids Project, but were within the charity outreach area. Families were also required to be classified as 'emotionally functional', with a low risk of abuse. Gender was not specified but 1-2 household members per family were invited; children were excluded from the research.

Group interviews were selected as the most appropriate method by which to solicit participant responses. Questions used in the topic guide (see appendix) were designed to facilitate discussion, generating information that may not have been provided from an individual interviewee. This method was also designed to ensure respondents did not feel intimidated during the research. Case studies were also used so that participants could discuss theoretical cases (so the participant can give his/her comment on a fictitious scenario) without revealing personal information, if preferred.

### **2. Sampling**

Eight interviews were conducted with families from four different communities. Using families from different communities was designed to explore whether emergent themes were community specific, or applied to the larger community as a whole. Families received canned goods valued at \$2.50 as compensation for their participation in the research, in line with Riverkids' policy. Fruit and water were provided throughout the interviews.

Interviews were conducted by the researcher and were facilitated using a list of questions (see appendix). All questions were covered during the interview but



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they were designed so that they could be asked in any order to facilitate discussion.

Qualified translators were present throughout the interviews. The interview facilitator took notes during the interviews; these were then written up.

Interview notes were then read by the researcher and themes apparent within the data were noted. The researcher then read the interview notes, identifying and classifying participant responses into these themes, using a form of thematic analysis. If a new theme emerged, these were then added to the list and interview notes re-read. Once all themes had been generated, notes were read through comparing against the original research notes to ensure that all data had been accurately captured and categorised into themes.

Whilst the research was designed to be qualitative and not statistically representative, some statistical summaries have been provided in this report to illustrate findings, and for completeness.

This report focuses on defining perceptions of abuse in the community as well as attitudes towards the identification of serious abuse and the subsequent action taken. The problems and barriers to reporting abuse are examined and an analysis of community hopes and expectations surrounding future solutions is provided.

### **3. Summary of Findings**

Results indicate that almost all communities experience substantial difficulties in the identification of abuse. Furthermore, there are serious cultural and social barriers which prevent communities from reporting abuse. The first reason for not reporting abuse centres on the unwilling-ness of a family to intervene in another family's affairs. This happens for a number of reasons, including fear of serious reprisals to their own family. The relationships between families are also perceived to be at risk through the action of intervention; most participants are therefore inclined to take the 'softer' option of intervening themselves, rather than speaking with a Local Authority body. The second barrier to obtaining help or seeking abuse prevention relates to a lack of knowledge about where, and to whom, to report abuse, with an endemic lack of trust in governing structures and organizations.

Nevertheless, in spite of these perceived difficulties, this study has identified a strong will amongst community members to decrease abuse within communities; respondents identified a number of possible solutions. The results suggest that working with communities, particularly educating communities about abuse and how to seek help, would be advantageous.



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Strengths of the research centre on the rich and detailed data that was produced during the interviews. Participants were willing to talk about potentially emotionally difficult situations that also occasionally involved personal experience. This highlights the importance of the research being taken and its sensitivity as a topic.

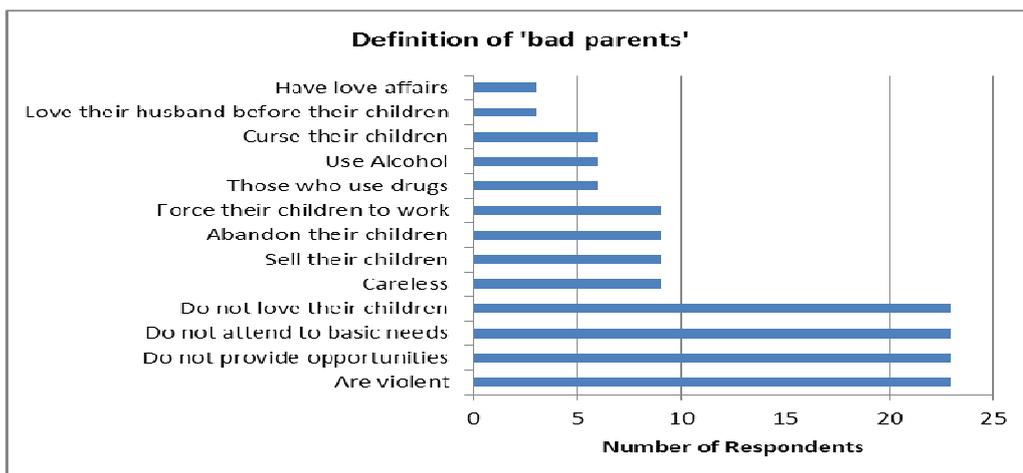


## Defining Abuse

Participants largely agreed about what constitutes a bad or abusive parent, but perceived levels of abuse varied between communities and neighbourhoods. The perception of what constituted 'serious' abuse varied considerably and should be considered in light of its potential as a barrier to identifying what abuse is considered worthy of being reported.

### **1. Perceptions of Failing Parents**

Thematic analysis indicated that the majority of participants agreed on what constitutes a bad parent. Of the 23 interviewees, all responded that the following were indicators of bad parents: being violent, not attending to basic needs, not loving their children and not providing the child with opportunities such as education. Further qualities cited by around 2/5 respondents included abandonment or selling, carelessness and forcing children into labor. Around 1/4 respondents also agreed that alcohol and drug abuse and cursing their own children came under the title of 'bad parenting' whilst other acts included parents having affairs and a wife placing the love of her husband above that of her husband. There are therefore a wide range of views about what constitutes 'bad parenting' but the four qualities stated by all participants are important areas to focus on in further research as they fall broadly into two main areas: lack of care and violence.



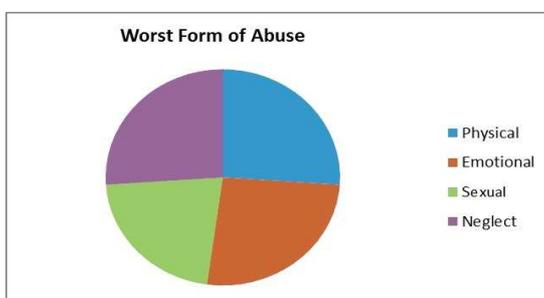


## **2. Perceived Number of Abusive Parents**

Participants from every group interviewed stated that there were bad parents within their neighbourhoods. However, the number of ‘bad families’ varied widely between communities; most participants were unable to specify how many bad parents there were within their neighborhood. Up to 15 bad families within one neighbourhood was suggested by one group. One group suggested that they were not aware of any bad parents within their neighbourhood. This might suggest a promising community finding but this group also stated that they were employed elsewhere and were consequently less involved in community affairs. The results suggest that there may be potentially high numbers of abusive families within certain communities. It may also be the case that abuse within other communities goes un-noticed due to absenteeism; further research should consider whether this is the case.

## **3. Perceptions of Serious Abuse**

Perceptions of ‘serious abuse’ fell into four main groups: physical, emotional, sexual and neglect. Participants were fairly evenly split over what they considered to be the worst form of abuse.



Amongst those who considered physical abuse to be the worst were several participants who had themselves been affected by physical abuse. Physical abuse was considered by this group to be the worst form of abuse largely due to the emotional difficulties caused and that participants found it difficult to move on. One participant illustrated this by describing her own physical abuse, being bound and beaten by her husband and bearing witness to the same abuse to her child. Despite assistance from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), the abuse has emotionally affected her and the physical abuse leads to an emotional recall.

Participants who considered emotional abuse to be the worst form of abuse described situations of bullying, discrimination of abandonment. These situations were used to highlight situations that affect one’s ability to report



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abuse rather than describing familial abuse such as discrimination of HIV sufferers leading to social isolation.

Reasons given for feeling that sexual abuse was the worst form of abuse included the fact that sexual abuse can induce feelings of depression and shame, affecting the victim's future. This further extended into future difficulties such as finding a partner, especially when experiencing mental health difficulties and having been exposed to the possibility of sexually transmitted disease.

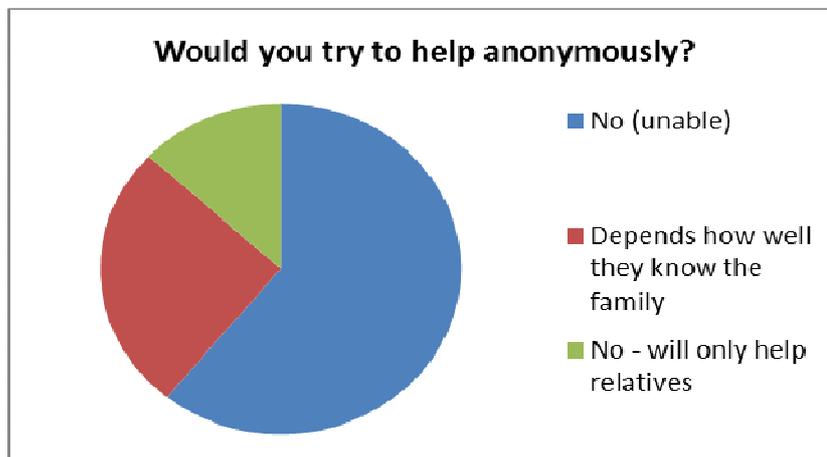
Neglect was seen as serious because of the loss of opportunities children face when they are denied education and basic needs. Interviewees explained that when children are not educated they have no hope of finding a good job and will have difficulty distinguishing between right and wrong. This combined with a feeling that their parents do not love them, may lead them to make serious mistakes such as committing criminal offences or entering dangerous employment within the sex or drug trades. Unlike the other categories, neglect was the only one ever attributed a justification by a small number of interviewees. These women, while generally condemning neglect, explained that it could occur due to intense poverty experienced by the parents. They suggested children were particularly at risk if their mothers were prostitutes who did not have sufficient money to feed all their children; the fact that many workers are often refused pay by their clients was cited.

One emergent theme linking all forms of abuse is the potential for long-term emotional difficulties that may hinder the child's development and interact within society. Consequently, education and family support programs should also consider the long-term physical and emotional effects of abuse.



## Attitudes to Identifying Abuse and Taking Subsequent Action

All participants stated that they identify abuse primarily through observation although 3 participants stated that they would use both observation and here-say. However, whether the observer takes further action is dependent upon the relationship between the individual and the affected family. The majority of respondents stated that they would offer advice to anyone, irrelevant of their relationship to them, stating that it is their duty to help one another as they are Khmer. However, in most cases, assistance ceases at the giving of advice; further intervening action is considered to be a family matter.



### ***1. Identification of Abuse***

Interviewees stated that they would determine if parents were abusive purely via observation, and perhaps also consider rumours. Those who did not know any bad parents expressed that they would need to witness the situation before condemning the parents.

When participants were asked to describe how they identify abusive parents they provided the following examples; witnessing parents verbally abusing their children, taking drugs, neglecting their children's basic needs or abandoning and selling their children.



## **2. Reasons for Giving Advice**

Participants provided two main reasons for their decision to intervene and give advice. First, they stated that children are inclined to 'follow their parents footsteps', and suggested that if a parent was violent towards their children then the child would in turn become abusive towards their own offspring. This suggests that ending not just current abuse, but the continuing cycle of abuse, is an aim of those who intervene.

The second reason for giving advice was that reminding parents that children may not wish to look after their parents in the future when they are elderly and vulnerable. This also points towards the long-term future that participants are considering when giving advice.

## **3. Type of Assistance Offered and the Relationship to the Affected Family**

Most participants stated that they would endeavour to help the family irrelevant of their relationship, referencing their connection as fellow Khmers and duty to help one another. Nevertheless, if the abusing family were not relatives, then participants responded that they would only attempt to advise the family. If the advice stage failed, then they would not intervene further. Nine respondents stated that they would only assist in family affairs.

However, there were some exceptions. One group of respondents stated that they would help anyone, irrespective of whether they were a family member but only if they listened to their advice.

Participants were also dis-inclined to seek help anonymously. However, some participants felt they might seek help anonymously if they did not know the family well and felt that they might be threatened. However, help-seeking in this manner required external assistance, fraught with its own set of difficulties (discussed below).



## **Barriers to Reporting Abuse**

Barriers to reporting abuse exist within two domains: the risk posed to the individual (and their family) attempting to intervene, and the structures that are in place that allow abuse to be reported. For this reason the problems in directly assisting must be discussed beside those faced as a result of reporting abuse to an external body.

The results of this study indicate that the act of advising an abusive parent is seen as being of great risk to the individual, their relationships, their family and their property. As introduced above, the main problem for individuals attempting to offer advice or assistance to troubled families is parental resentment for intervening in their family's affairs. This manifests itself in many ways all of which negatively affect the assisting individual.

### **1. Problems Faced by Individuals Offering Advice to Abusive Parents**

The first and foremost reason for not intervening in another family's affairs is the relationship between the families. Families were concerned that the family receiving an intervention would be resentful towards them. Respect plays a large role in family affairs; families were likely to try to intervene themselves before seeking external help due to fear of punishment for disrespect. This was one major reason that families would generally only consider advice-giving and take further action only if the family was related.

Around half of respondents felt that abuse was a family affair; others should not be involved. Additional problems included being abused themselves, being accidentally injured and the abuser being angry with them, a particular difficulty within a 'respect' society.

The most common answer to a question about problems in giving advice was that the abusive parent would not listen, would be angry with the individual and would verbally abuse them. Social ramifications of assisting an ungrateful abuser were listed as: a break down in the inter-family relationship, the abuser and their family excluding them from the community or spreading negative rumours about them. This was experienced most acutely by individuals who had already suffered a perceived diminished status within the community; those affected by HIV in particular, reported feeling that they could not give advice to other families because their opinion is not considered to be worth listening to.

Many of the cases discussed by our interviewees related to domestic violence and many people described the risk that they could be threatened or injured



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themselves. Several participants shared stories describing cases where they had attempted to intervene or offer advice and been wounded in the process. One participant described attempting to prevent a father whipping his child and was accidentally whipped herself. Another described being hit by an aggressive husband while trying to protect his wife from his abuse. All six of the participants who recounted incidents of accidental injury said they no longer offered assistance as they believed it to be too dangerous.

Additional possible consequences of intervening in another family's affairs include being hated or blamed and abuser becoming aggressive (reported by 65% respondents). Other difficulties involved not being listened to and being threatened and cursed.

Assisting abusive families is also seen as financially dangerous. One interviewee explained how her property was damaged by an abusive parent she attempted to advise and how he is unlikely to pay for the repairs. Many participants explained how in cases where they or others they know have taken victims of abuse to hospital, they have been left to pay for the medical expenses. All respondents are members of communities living in low socio-economic areas so the risk of being left with large bills they cannot pay can become enough of a problem for them to take no action.

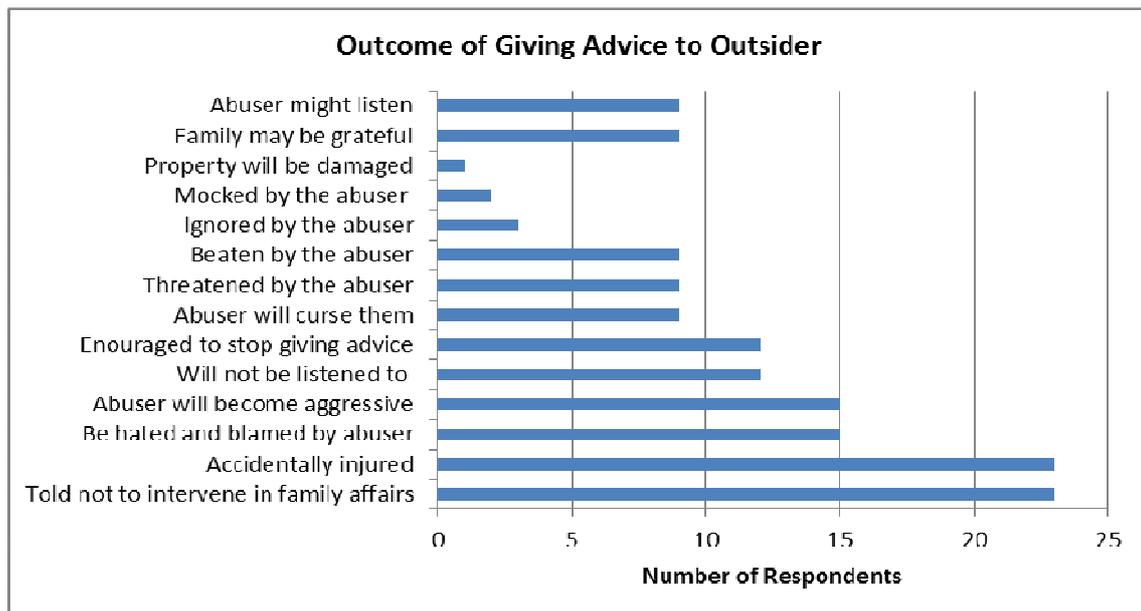
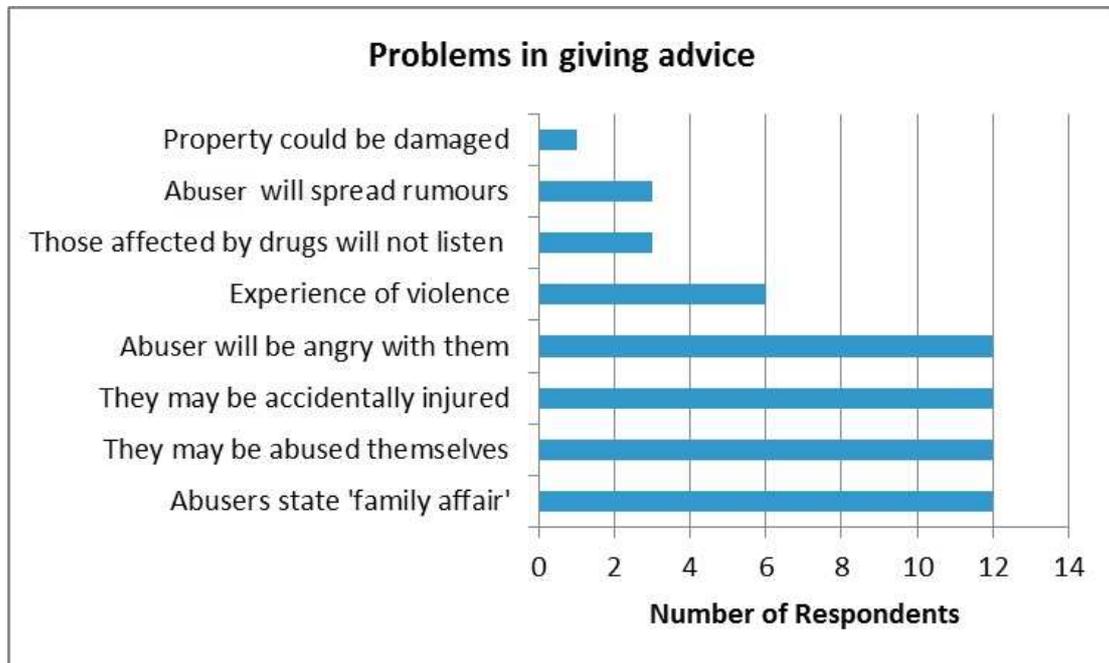
However, around 40% respondents also stated a possible positive outcome – that the abuser might listen to them and the family might be grateful. Given the potential obstacles cited by participants, the fact that over 1/3 respondents stated a positive potential is worthy of note. Exploring and developing these potential positive outcomes might be an avenue to explore in encouraging families to seek help.

Though more research is necessary into community beliefs and the culture of abstaining from interference in other families' business, the primary factor preventing the reporting of abuse is the danger it poses to the assisting individual and their family. This is highlighted by the fact that more individuals are willing to take the 'softer' action of personally intervening, rather than the more serious step of seeking external assistance where perceived repercussions are potentially greater. Although personal action is more immediately dangerous to the individual, seeking help from an official body is perceived as more damaging to the inter-family relationship. However, within this, it must also be borne in mind that there are other reasons why personal action is taken first, including a lack of trust in, and knowledge of, external bodies.

It is clear from these findings that cultural change is needed before communities will see external reporting as the better, safer option. This may be a difficult process due to the perceived ineffectual and negative consequences of taking both courses of action.

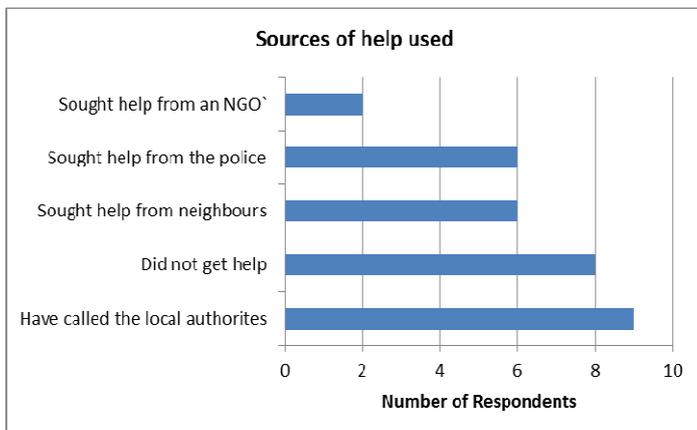


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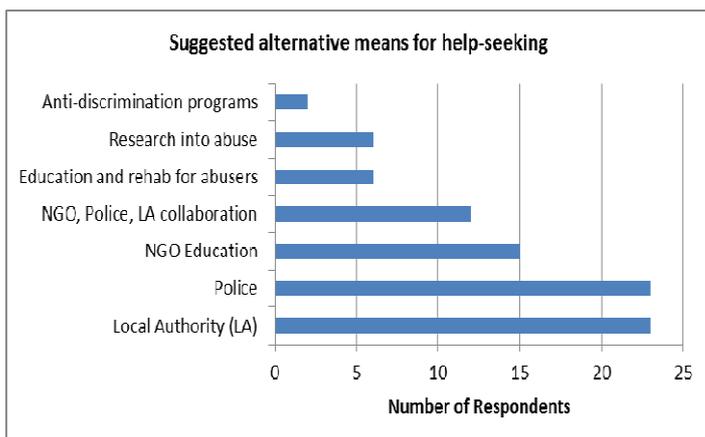


## 2. Barriers to Obtaining Help from Others



Respondents were also asked whom they had contacted about an abusive family. A large number of respondents reported that they had only contacted the affected family. The primary reason given for this was a lack of trust in Governmental and official organizations coupled with a degree of ignorance surrounding the work of NGOs.

The first option most interviewees suggested they would take is to contact the extended family of the abuser; this seems to be another example of the want to keep family affairs private at all costs. Some interviewees had also had experience contacting the local authorities, the police and some NGOs.



The reported experience of seeking help from the local authorities has been predominantly negative. Although several participants described receiving satisfactory assistance in contacting and working with the abusive parent, most were highly critical. Interviewees from communities who had had dealings with them, described the local authorities as too busy to help, not active within the community and unlikely to attend to problems on time. None of the communities reported being satisfied with the work of the chief.



### **3. Reporting to the Police**

Participants identified many problems with obtaining help from the Police. The first and foremost of these was being asked to pay the Police before they had even started to help and often ignoring the problem if they were not paid. Many participants stated that they cannot afford to buy help from the Police. Interviewees reported that Police do not visit crime scenes without being called and if they do arrive, are often late. Respondents described a situation at Km 6 where a brawl broke out in which many people were seriously injured. Neither the Police nor the Local Authorities turned up. In cases where the Police do take action, participants stated that it is not always effective. Abusive husbands and fathers are reportedly imprisoned for a few days, often exacerbating the problem as the perpetrator becomes more violent upon release. However, on occasion, this action was perceived to be effective, especially if the abuser was forced to sign a contract promising not to re-offend.

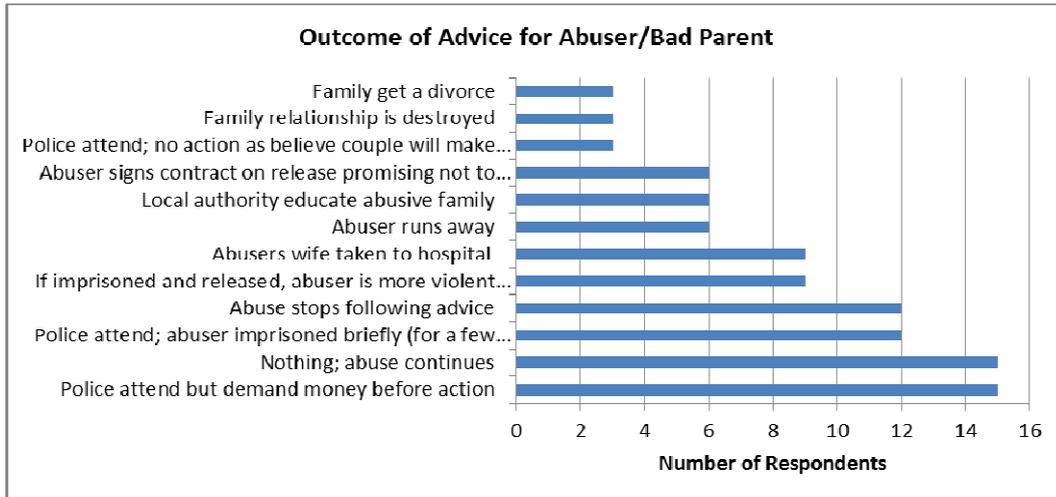
Many participants stated that they would only go to the Police if the case happened to a family member, not an outsider, further highlighting the lack of willingness to intervene in affairs of people that are not related.

### **4. Reporting to the NGOs**

In contrast, participants showed a large degree of faith in the work of NGOs. When discussing theoretical situations, participants broadly agreed that if a family was not able to solve its own problems, then the NGO should be called to assist. Nevertheless, very few participants were actually able to describe how they might contact an NGO, highlighting a lack of information within the communities and potentially lost opportunities of reporting abuse. The only two NGOs that participants were able to name were The Riverkids Foundation and LICADHO. When discussing how they might be contacted, a few participants recalled having a card at home with contact details on. In respect of The Riverkids Foundation, their *Child Abuse Protection Guidelines* state that parents will be informed of the guidelines and encouraged to report abuse directly to the program consultants. Communities' members seemed unaware of this policy; reporting is not common practice; this is an area for development.



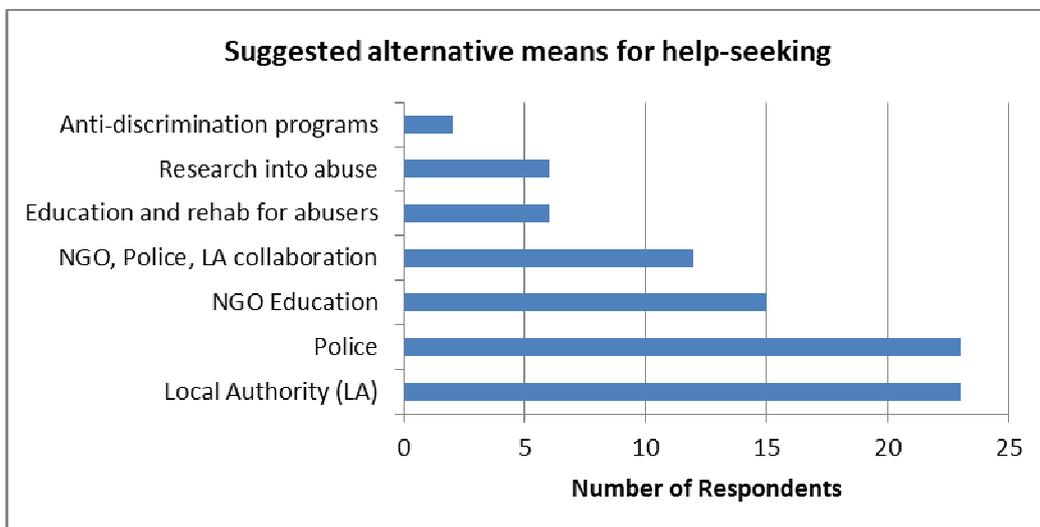
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### 5. Outcomes of Intervention

Almost all participants expressed beliefs that all of the structures mentioned above could be improved, with an aim towards becoming a reliable body to whom abuse could be reported. Disillusionment with the system, coupled with a respect for internal family affairs are serious barriers towards reporting abuse. When the participants were asked “what usually happens to the abusive parent or bad family when an outsider tries to help a bad parent or their family?” over half of respondents replied ‘nothing’.

Nonetheless, respondents did suggest alternative means for help-seeking. All respondents reported that the Local Authorities should be attentive and willing to solve the problems and furthermore, that the Police should attend the scene when called, on time and without asking for money for attendance. These two courses of action were stated by all interviewees as ways that could help reporting and should be considered vital in potential improvements.



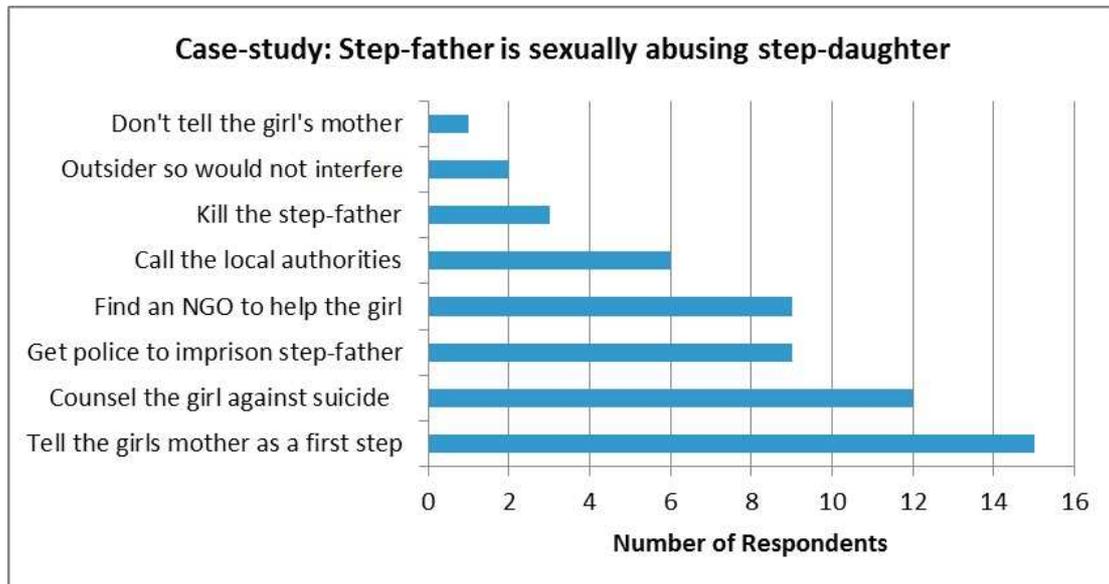


## Case Studies

Case studies were provided as examples within the groups to facilitate and promote discussion; however, they also provide insight into respondent thinking and reasoning. Result counts have been provided below for completeness.

*Case Study Number One:* A ten year old girl living next door tells you that her step-father is having sex with her. She asks you not to tell her mother or anyone.

Most respondents would tell the girl's mother as an initial step, in spite of her request for her mother not to be told. Approximately half of respondents would counsel against suicide and advise the girl that she has a lot to live for.

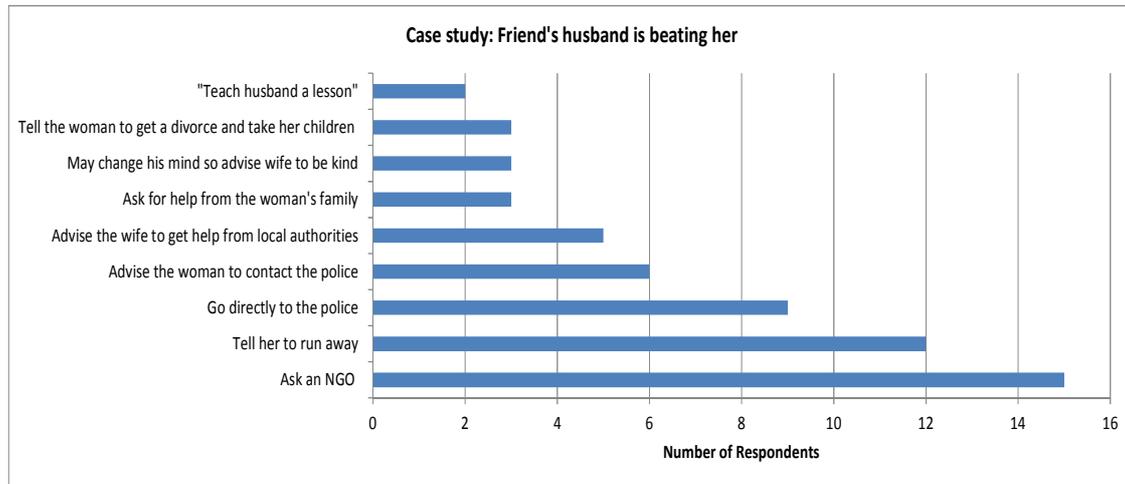


*Case Study Number Two:* You see a friend at the market and her face is covered with bad bruises. She says that her husband has beaten here again and she is afraid he will try to kill her.

Most respondents thought that the best course of action would be to seek advice from an NGO or tell the friend to run away.



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*Case Study Three:* The children in a house nearby keep coming to your house to beg for food. They are skinny and dirty; the neighbours say that their mother has run away and the father is taking drugs.

Most respondents would provide the children with food and clothes with a large number also stating that they would take the children to live with an NGO (assuming the children were in agreement). Most respondents appeared willing to intervene.

*Case Study Four:* A young woman who is the second wife to a man living far away has a baby. You hear that she is planning to sell the baby because the man's first wife says he cannot support her, or the new child.

Respondents were in less agreement on this case study. Nine respondents felt that the child should be given to a good family or NGO whilst an equal number say that the woman should struggle to support the child and not sell it.

*Case Study Five:* A friend of your family says that his son, a teenage boy, has a good job offer in Thailand in the fishing boats. You don't trust the person who is arranging the jobs and your children tell you that the teenager is very scared of going to Thailand because of the stories of abuse there.

All respondents agreed that they would try to persuade the family not to let the son work in Thailand and to find a local job.

Even though these case studies are illustrative, it is clearly shown that many respondents believe in the involvement of NGOs in these difficult domestic situations, or would at least seek counsel from them.

It is also clear that there are levels at which respondents are willing to intervene depending on the type of abuse and severity and judged repercussions for the intervening person or family.



## Conclusion

Abuse is a widely prevalent problem within Phnom Penh communities. Families are aware of these problems but are reluctant to intervene, mainly due to fear of reprisals on their own families and a culture of respect. Reporting abuse to local authority bodies is problematic and most families will only intervene in if the abuser is within their own family.

When participants were asked about the consequences of abuse, many negative responses were noted. Participants expressed fear of reprisals from family members on themselves and their own families for reporting abuse, whether to the family directly, or to a Governing Body. This clearly highlights the difficulties faced by families within these communities in these situations.

Further difficulties with reporting abuse identified by this research are social barriers. The social status of individuals suffering from HIV or those who have experienced sexual abuse or work in the sex industry, is poor, and this can act as a further barrier towards prevention or reporting of abuse. Individuals suffering from these conditions experience discrimination and their opinions and actions on abuse reporting are dis-regarded and individuals are often not listened to. Promoting an understanding of the issues faced by these individuals through education and other forms of community interest is a necessary part of the wider education programme before issues relating to abuse, and many others, can be overcome.

This research has highlighted forms of serious abuse that may take place. Respondents were split about the most severe form of abuse and so it is important to educate communities about all types of abuse, not just physical abuse, and the symptoms people should be looking out for. Furthermore, there is a clear need for education and clear direction about how to report abuse. Many individuals have expressed that they do not know where to seek help but many have stated that help is needed and they might go to an NGO. The results have also shown reporting abuse to authorities such as the police are fraught with difficulties and are part of a wider societal problem. To many, the start of the process of reform commences with a change in attitudes towards how and when it is appropriate to intervene in the affairs of another family. Educational programmes were suggested to inform community members about serious abuse and the importance of education about abuse. These educational reforms took two forms, namely not to commit the abuse and what to do if you do observe abuse. Education and assistance with alternative means and ways to approach families and authorities are needed.

Respondents suggested that education programs should be a result of collaboration between the NGO sector, local authorities and the police. While all participants believe and possibly expect this effort to be led by NGOs, many emphasised the need for it be strongly routed in official local structures. They



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explained that while NGOs come and go, the local authorities are permanent and must be encouraged to do their job correctly. Local authorities must also be educated and encouraged to be involved in community efforts to decrease abuse and to provide stable, long-term solutions.

### **1. Responses to Reported Abuse**

Respondents broadly agreed that actions must be made promptly and should promote sustainable solutions. This includes not only that the responses of the Police and Local Authorities are sincere and effective, but that their continuing support is provided to abusers and victims to ensure problems do not persist.

The initial response of Police should be made in appropriate time, not demand money and should do their job to solve problems. Some participants have suggested NGOs should work with the Police to help solve the problems that cause them to feel they can ask victims and assistants for payment. Similarly, interviewees described the need for local chiefs to attend to issues of abuse promptly and thoroughly. When provided with hypothetical situations, interviewee explained the importance of setting a precedent that there are serious consequences for violent and abusive actions.

In this respect, respondents felt that consequences for committing serious acts of abuse must match the offence. For example, when husbands are briefly incarcerated for abusing their wives, an effective solution described by participants is for the husband to be forced to sign a contract upon release detailing serious consequences for reoffending.

Finally, on-going support and education is necessary for those affected by abuse. Respondents in this study have proposed solutions, including education and rehabilitation programs for abusers, especially those that are driven to abuse as a result of issues such as drug and alcohol dependency. It was also proposed that it should be standard procedure for NGOs, the Police and Local Authorities investigating allegations of abuse to provide or refer victims to immediate support services that will offer both short and long-term help and support for victims of abuse.

### **2. Areas for Further Research**

This research was designed to be exploratory in nature. There is a lack of knowledge about how wide-spread abuse is within communities; further research is needed to document the extent. Furthermore, little is known about the type and severity of abuse within these communities; difficulties in assessing severity of abuse have been clearly shown and need to be further investigated. Moreover, further research is needed into the reluctance of families to report



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abuse. The lack of knowledge about how to report abuse to authorities such as NGOs highlights the urgent need for education and communication about bodies that can assist in these cases and how these bodies can be contacted. The response of Local Authorities needs to be examined, together with ways in which their involvement can be improved. There is also a need for further developing research into the short- and long-term consequences for the victim of abuse and how they can be supported so that the cycle of abuse is not perpetuated.



## Appendix

### Questions

1. What do you think is a bad parent?
2. How many families in your own neighbourhood are bad parents?
3. How did you find out that they are bad parents – by observing them, because their family members told you, or because other people told you?
4. Have you ever tried to give advice or help a bad parent or their family?
5. What are the problems in giving advice or helping such people?
6. Have you ever gone to ask for help from others for a bad parent or their family? (Get them to discuss who they asked for help, including relatives of the family, neighbours, local authorities, the police, or organizations)
7. Do you decide to help depending on how serious the abuse is?
8. What is serious abuse? (Ask them to discuss in these four areas: physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and mental/emotional abuse)
9. Do you decide to help depending on how close your relationship to the family is?
10. Did you try to get help anonymously?
11. What usually happens to the outsider if an outsider tries to give advice or help bad parents or their families?
12. What usually happens to the family or bad parent if an outsider tries to give advice or help bad parents or their families?
13. Can you think of other ways to report bad parents and their families so they can get help?
14. Hypothetical situations to discuss what they would do:
  - a. A 10-year-old girl living next door to you tells you a secret that her stepfather is having sex with her. She asks you not to tell her mother or anyone.
  - b. You see your friend at the market and her face is covered in very bad bruises. She says her husband has beaten her again, and she is afraid he will try to kill her.



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- c. The children in a house nearby keep coming to your house to beg for food. They are skinny and dirty, and your neighbours say the mother has run away and the father is taking drugs.
- d. A young woman who is the second wife to a man living far away has a baby. You hear that she is planning to sell the baby because the man's first wife says he cannot support her or the new child.
- e. A friend of your family says that his son, a teenage boy, has a good job offer in Thailand in the fishing boats. You don't trust the person who is arranging the job and your children tell you that the teenage boy is very scared of going to Thailand because of the stories about abuse there.

### **Acknowledgements:**

Interviewers:

Catherine Nadel

Georgina Wheeler

Report Writers:

Zoe Colberg

Anita Mehay