

**UNSPOKEN TRAUMA:  
BREAKING THE SILENCE TO HEAL CAMBODIA'S YOUTH**

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## ABSTRACT

In discussions of post-genocide Cambodia, scholars use the term “trauma” almost exclusively to describe survivors’ severe psychological trauma, which is quantified in the country’s notably high prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder. Focusing exclusively on this aspect, however, may do injustice to Cambodia’s youth, whose own suffering manifests itself in unknowingly acquired behaviors and circumstances for which they have little coping capacity. In particular, the absence of Cambodia’s “lost generation,” coupled with the direct damage done to the country’s human and socio-economic development and an enduring “legacy of silence,” have combined to produce a highly complex web of traumas that continues to impact all Cambodians in countless ways, but whose effects on the country’s youth have proven particularly pronounced and under-acknowledged.

In the following analysis, I propose that in order to achieve legitimate reconstruction and reconciliation, the Cambodian state must begin by actively working to address the role of recent history in contributing to the country’s contemporary challenges – and in doing so, to actively treat root causes rather than manifest symptoms. Meanwhile, peacebuilding practitioners must strive to respect and incorporate local approaches to healing in order to focus their efforts in the most effective, sustainable, and culturally sensitive manner possible.

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*“Traumatic events and times have the potential to awaken the human spirit and, indeed, the global family. But this requires acknowledging our own history and that of the enemy, honestly searching for root causes, and shifting our emphasis from national security to human security.”*

- Carolyn Yoder

Upon hearing the term “trauma” used in reference Cambodia, the natural tendency is to think of the physical and emotional scars belonging to the country’s several million genocide survivors, who from 1975 to 1979 endured the brutal rule of the Khmer Rouge regime and, in the end, witnessed the systematic execution and man-made starvation of more than 20% of their fellow citizens.<sup>1</sup> Yet while there is no doubt good reason to concern ourselves with the direct suffering experienced by those who survived the period, and in particular Cambodia’s notably high prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder in the older generation, focusing exclusively on this aspect may do injustice to Cambodia’s youth – an age group whose own trauma manifests itself in unknowingly acquired behaviors and circumstances for which they have little coping capacity.

In particular, the absence of Cambodia's "lost generation," coupled with the direct damage done to the country's physical capital, economy, governance, and human development, has resulted in grave emotional, social, and economic consequences that continue to permeate all aspects of Cambodian life. Together, these factors combine to produce an extremely intricate web of traumas that continues to impact all Cambodians in countless ways, but whose effects on the country's youth have proven particularly complex, pronounced, and perhaps most importantly, under-acknowledged by both the Cambodian state and international community. Though their suffering may not fit the popular understanding of trauma, the causes and manifestations of the challenges facing Cambodia's youth and future generations must also be addressed before Cambodian society is ever able to achieve full reconstruction and reconciliation.

### **CAMBODIA'S LOST GENERATION**

Visiting Cambodia today, it is nearly impossible to miss the shocking demographic imbalance that has resulted from Pol Pot's brief but disastrous 3½-year rule. Walking down the streets of Phnom Penh or traveling throughout the countryside, one cannot help but notice the population's overwhelming proportion of young people – in fact, estimates indicate that as much as 70% of the current Cambodian population is under the age of 30<sup>2</sup>, and the median age is 22.1 years (compared to a world and US median age of 28.4 and 36.7, respectively).<sup>3</sup> The ultimate reason behind this anomaly is not difficult to ascertain: over the course of the Khmer Rouge's brutal rule, it is estimated that Cambodia's total population declined from approximately 8 million to just over 6 million.<sup>4</sup> While not all of the population loss resulted directly from execution, many perished due to starvation and disease, and the few who could fled the country and became refugees. Meanwhile, many of those who did survive beyond 1979 likely suffered the lasting physical and mental consequences of several years' malnutrition, overwork, and physical and emotional victimization, and were therefore particularly prone to potentially life-threatening ailments later in life.

Today, however, the population of Cambodia has ballooned to nearly 14.5 million.<sup>5</sup> Much of the population increase has come as a direct result of a "baby boom" that began as a result of the Khmer Rouge rule and lasted for approximately 15 years, over which period fertility averaged nearly six infants per woman (figure 1). Prior to the Khmer Rouge's rise to power, fertility in Cambodia had been steadily on the decline since 1965, when contraceptives first became widely available in the country. When the regime came to power in 1975, however, fertility began to climb rapidly, and in 1980 fertility reached a record high at 6.6 infants per woman. It would take 15 years for fertility to slowly return to its pre-Khmer Rouge level of

approximately 4.7 infants per woman in 1994, and another 15 years to reach its present level of just under three infants per woman.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, improved access to health care from 1980 to the present has also resulted in decreased child mortality and, consequently, a larger surviving youth population. In contrast, although fertility rose substantially under the Khmer Rouge, infant and child mortality also increased dramatically, as the vast majority of skilled medical professionals had been targeted for execution. Whereas a child born between 1980 and 1984 was estimated to have an 88% chance of surviving beyond his fifth birthday, one born between 1975 and 1979 was estimated to have only a 78% chance of survival.<sup>7</sup> As a result of these combined factors, Cambodia's population pyramid (figure 2) shows a notable population contraction in the 30-34 age group (those who were born under the Khmer Rouge regime) that contrasts sharply with the subsequent population boom.<sup>8</sup>

Although Cambodians aged 35 and older are slightly more numerous than those aged 30-34, their populations still pale in comparison to that of those born after 1980. This comes as a direct result of the aforementioned executions, man-made famine, and other abuses that plagued the country under the Khmer Rouge. Older men are particularly absent from modern Cambodian society. Between 1975 and 1979, a young man aged 20-24 was estimated to have nearly a one in four chance of dying; in contrast, a woman of the same age was estimated to have only a 7% chance of dying. Other age groups show similar albeit somewhat less pronounced trends in male/female mortality, and on average, men were approximately twice as like to die under the Khmer Rouge.<sup>9</sup>

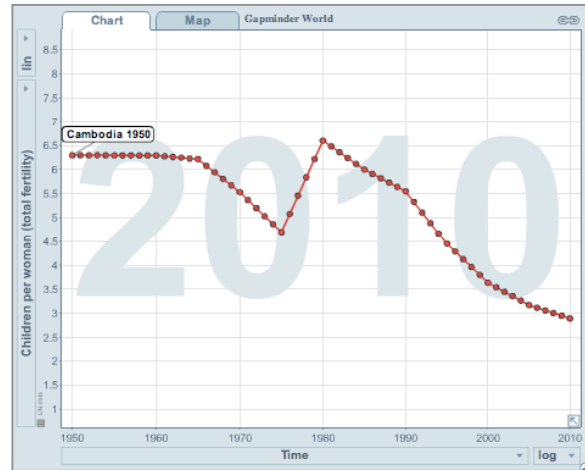


Figure 1 – Fertility in Cambodia, 1950-2010.

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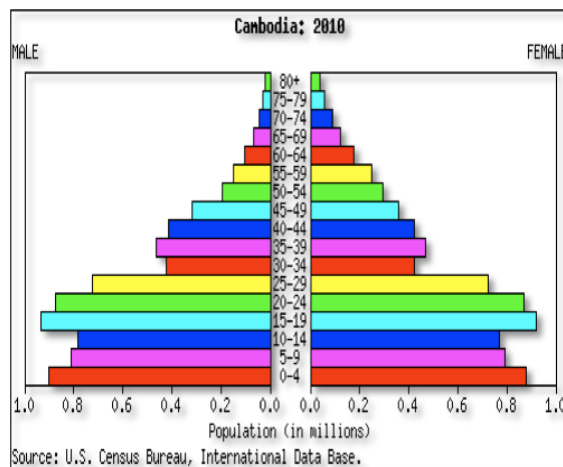


Figure 2 – Projected Population Distribution (2010).

What such a diagram fails to show, however, is the resultant makeup of Cambodia's population beyond gender measures. In particular, the older generation has been left virtually devoid of many of the individuals who would otherwise have been charged with the task of leading Cambodia's reconstruction. In fact, one of the primary reasons for men's high rate of mortality under Pol Pot was not their gender – in principal, the Khmer Rouge actually strove to eliminate or ignore gender differences – but rather the threat that many of these men posed to the Angkar on account of their elevated levels of education, occupations, status. Very highly educated men and women were most at risk for execution, though religious leaders, bilingual persons, wealthy urban residents, and even individuals who wore glasses (which allegedly symbolized education) faced a much higher chance of death under the Khmer Rouge.<sup>10</sup> Researchers estimate that of Cambodia's 22,000 teachers who were alive in 1970, only 7,000 survived the Khmer Rouge years, while only 10% of Cambodia's 450 doctors survived.<sup>11</sup> Together, then, these groups constitute the vast majority of what has come to be known as Cambodia's "lost generation" – an entire generation of would-be academics, business professionals, religious and political leaders, and wise elders, among others.

#### **CONVENTIONAL TRAUMA: PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL VIOLENCE**

Today, most survivors vividly recall witnessing the systematic disappearance of this "lost generation," and many also recall their own brushes with death at the hands of the Khmer Rouge. According to one study, more than 50% of survivors report having personally been "close to death," and just over 30% report incidences of physical or mental torture.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, many former cadres also suffer from participation-induced trauma, which research has suggested can be as severe and in some cases more severe than that experienced by victims and survivors.<sup>13</sup> Not surprisingly, then, Cambodia bears the unfortunate burden of having one of the highest rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the world. Current estimates indicate that 14.2% of Cambodian adults aged 35 and older suffer from some form of PTSD – a figure nearly six times higher than that of the United States (2.3%). Researchers have also linked Cambodia's PTSD prevalence to high rates of mental and physical disability, which affect 40.2% and 39.6% of the population, respectively.<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly, however, Cambodians aged 35 and under – most of whom are presumably too young to have remembered the Khmer Rouge – also suffer from abnormally high rates of PTSD (7.9%).<sup>15</sup> And though it is not difficult to deduce the cause of most older Cambodians' suffering, ascertaining the precise source of the youth's trauma proves somewhat more difficult. In some cases, young Cambodians at the upper end of their age group may indeed have some

memory of atrocities witnessed during their early childhood. Others may be particularly susceptible to feelings of collective or historical trauma that emerge not necessarily as a result of personal experiences, but rather from witnessing the effects of trauma on others, or even through the unconscious trans-generational transmission of traumas that research suggests “can occur even when the next generation is not told the trauma story, or knows it only in broad outline.”<sup>16</sup>

An alternative explanation, however, is that many young PTSD sufferers have indeed endured their own fair share of suffering – suffering that, though not inflicted by the Khmer Rouge directly, nonetheless takes root in the regime’s brutal rule. In particular, Cambodia continues to suffer from exceptionally high rates of violent crime, child abuse, and domestic and sexual violence. Violent crime peaked in the late 1990’s, when the homicide rate reached 11.6 murders per 100,000 persons – higher than any other country in the region except the Phillipines.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, in 2000, the Cambodian Ministries of Health and Planning reported that 25% of Cambodian women had been the victims of “emotional, physical and sexual abuse at the hands of their husbands” – a statistic that is in fact presumed to be somewhat low due to underreporting.<sup>18</sup> In more recent years, Cambodia has also gained notoriety for its growing child abuse rates: in one study, 67.5% of Cambodians reported that hitting children is a warranted form of disciplinary action, and that women were more likely to do the hitting.<sup>19</sup>

Researchers attribute most of Cambodia’s violence to years of civil war and particularly to the long-term effects of life under the Khmer Rouge. The correlation is attributed to the widely accepted “legitimation of violence” theory, whereby homicides increase substantially following “the pervasive war-time presence of officially sanctioned killing” and according to which greater combat losses also result in higher murder rates.<sup>20</sup> This increased propensity to violence has been further complicated by the expanded availability of weapons in the post-conflict era, and Cambodians report being particularly fearful of armed soldiers, former soldiers, and even police officers. In Cambodia’s case, though few government records concerning the country’s pre-war crime rates exist today (as most were destroyed by the Khmer Rouge), most estimates indicate that crime levels prior to 1970 were in fact much lower than they are today.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, high patterns of substance abuse, a problem that is itself largely rooted in Cambodia’s PTSD epidemic, has also been linked to the country’s high rates of spousal and child abuse.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, it would be a stretch to say that *all* of Cambodia’s violence stems from Pol Pot’s brutal rule, particularly in the case of domestic violence. For although many scholars do hypothesize that both spousal and child abuse have been heavily exacerbated by the brutality to which people were exposed in Democratic Kampuchea<sup>23</sup>, others maintain that centuries of deep-seated cultural norms and practices are to blame. Namely, Cambodian women have long striven

to follow *Chbab Srey*, or the traditional code of conduct dictating that women always obey and respect their husbands and to remain silent about abuse, thus reinforcing the idea that a woman who causes her husband to behave violently must be failing in her duties as a wife and mother.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, here again few reliable statistics exist concerning pre-conflict domestic violence and child abuse rates, and so it is difficult to determine the extent to which either act represents a new, post-conflict phenomenon. A more likely explanation, however, is that the two explanations complement and reinforce one another, and both factors undoubtedly play a role in the country's current rates of spousal and child abuse.

Yet regardless of the extent to which the Khmer Rouge can be held directly responsible for Cambodia's current violence, it is clear that patterns of abuse are at least partly passed down. In one study, researchers found that children who were exposed to domestic violence during their upbringing were more likely to consider violence a normal part of a relationship, and therefore to become involved in abusive relationships themselves.<sup>25</sup> Another compilation of 60 independent studies found that, without any intervention, one third of abused children grew up to become abusive parents themselves, while another one third were deemed at risk of becoming abusive.<sup>26</sup> Thus there exists a danger of passing on of abusive and violent behavior to youth and future generations, and of perpetually compounding the suffering of an already deeply traumatized society.

Unfortunately, however, despite international attention, the Cambodian state has done little to counteract these problems, as years of civil war and continued unrest have led Cambodian authorities to view many violence issues as insignificant.<sup>27</sup> Not surprisingly, the government has taken a somewhat more serious approach to violent crime and property crime than to issues of spousal, child, and substance abuse. This is in large part due to the aforementioned cultural norms that discourage marital confrontation and encourage keeping private matters private. Meanwhile, criminal activity is more common (or at least more commonly reported) in urban areas, where the law tends to hold much more sway, than in rural, hard to reach areas. Furthermore, the state's interest in pursuing rapid economic development and tourism growth have given way to efforts to downplay any factors that might discourage such activities – and though outsiders may not witness “private” violence firsthand during their visit, they may easily be frightened off by outward shows of violence and crime.<sup>28</sup>

As a result of these combined factors, Cambodia has (at least on paper) long possessed a relatively strong legal code as it pertains to property crime, murder, non-marital rape, and other such universally condemned offenses.<sup>29</sup> Up until very recently, however, the country had no laws that pertained specifically to domestic violence, claiming instead that any such charges were

covered under existing assault laws. In 2005, legislators did pass Cambodia's first formal law criminalizing spousal abuse, entitled the "Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Protection of Victims," which defined domestic violence as "acts that threaten life and physical well-being, such as torture, cruelty, or sexual abuse" and encouraged officials to seize weapons used by the perpetrator.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, however, the new law fails to recognize rape in marriage and requires officials to encourage reconciliation, even when the victim is at risk. Meanwhile, when it comes to child abuse, Cambodia's legal code remains vague. Though some formal protections are provided through the Marriage and Family Law (1989)<sup>31</sup> and the Constitution (1993)<sup>32</sup>, this most recent legislation on domestic violence explicitly states that "the traditional discipline of a child should not be considered as violence or domestic violence."<sup>33</sup> Yet what constitutes "traditional discipline" is a highly fluid concept open to interpretation, and certainly not at the top of law enforcement officials' priority list.

Meanwhile, despite the state's at least partial efforts to criminalize and expand the definition of violence, rampant corruption in law enforcement continues to hinder the prosecution of both violent crime and domestic acts of violence. Unfortunately, thanks to years of civil unrest, a system of patronage has become entrenched in the Cambodian way of life, and both petty and grand forms of corruption have become the norm. In fact, in Transparency International's "2008 Corruption Perceptions Index," Cambodia scored a 1.8 on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 10 (highly clean), ranking 166 out of the 180 countries studied.<sup>34</sup> Among the most common forms appears to be police corruption; in one survey, 70% of respondents reported expecting to pay a bribe when encountering police forces.<sup>35</sup> As a result, women in particular remain highly apprehensive of filing charges, and police continue to ignore reports of abuse, as the law fails to specify any penalties for perpetrators.

Yet perhaps the factor that makes these forms of violence truly integral to the Cambodian experience of trauma, and specifically to the youth's experience of trauma, is how little the state has done to recognize the role of history as a significant contributor to Cambodia's growing patterns of violence. For although the country houses over 10,300 prisoners (nearly double the number of prisoners in 2000)<sup>36</sup>, non-custodial sentencing is extremely limited, with no provisions for community work orders, supervised probation, or parole systems.<sup>37</sup> Many potentially productive members of society are therefore relegated either directly to prison or, in less serious cases, to the payment of fines and bribes – both of which do little to address the source(s) of criminal behavior and, some might argue, even exacerbate the cycle. Furthermore, although one third of prisoners are imprisoned for "non-serious" crimes and will therefore presumably eventually be released, very few functioning state-run rehabilitation programs exist.<sup>38</sup> In the few



cases where reintegration is sought, Cambodia often passes on the responsibility to international NGOs whose approaches to rehabilitation vary widely, and whose programs may or may not seek to address the psychological health of their patrons. Meanwhile, because most domestic and child abuse cases are almost never prosecuted, there is little opportunity for the state to rehabilitate offenders, let alone to work with victims. Here again, the work is often left to a wide assortment of NGOs whose locations, services, and methods are unevenly distributed throughout the country. As a result, Cambodia's violence and its societal and psychological roots fall largely by the wayside, thus propagating the cycle of trauma and its manifestations in both survivors and youth alike.

### **SOCIO-ECONOMIC TRAUMA: EDUCATION, CULTURE, AND THE ECONOMY**

It is not enough, however, to measure trauma strictly in terms of mental health, for Cambodia has also surely seen its fair share of social and economic woes in the post-genocide era as well. Perhaps most evidently, the disappearance of nearly all of Cambodia's would-be intellectuals, political and religious leaders, business professionals and other skilled laborers, along with the systematic destruction of books, buildings, and places of worship, have undoubtedly resulted in an unparalleled loss of human and physical capital. Meanwhile, Pol Pot's regressive policies resulted in an unparalleled disruption of the country's social, economic and even spiritual trajectory. Though it is difficult to judge precisely where Cambodia might be today if it had not been for the Year Zero experiment, one can only begin to imagine the extent to which the country's development has been impaired on several fronts.

First and foremost, the quality of all levels of education in Cambodia continues to suffer immensely. For not only were countless academics murdered and learning materials destroyed<sup>39</sup>, but the Khmer Rouge also barred even very young children from attending school, when their mental development was at its most precarious. (Interestingly, the regime did not oppose basic education in theory; however, their aim was to "wipe the slate clean" before "writing on the slate" – the latter stage having never fully come to fruition.<sup>40</sup>) Furthermore, many of the temples and wats that had historically also served as centers of education were destroyed or repurposed, and one large high school in Phnom Penh even served as the Khmer Rouge's largest and most famous torture center, Tuol Sleng. It would take years for Cambodians to return to their homes and restore some semblance of primary and secondary schooling at the local and regional level, let alone to establish a functioning national education system – a task which, many would argue, has still not been fully realized. And although significant gains were realized throughout the 1980's given the sheer enormity of the destruction in the preceding decade, it was not until the conflict

had fully subsided in the early 1990s that the new government would be able to pursue more serious education reform. Today, literacy has increased significantly since the time of Pol Pot, peaking at 73.6% in 2009.<sup>41</sup> Yet nearly one in eight Cambodian children does not attend primary school, and significantly fewer girls attend school than do boys.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, Cambodia's already fragile tertiary education system was all but destroyed under the Khmer Rouge, as almost all of the country's existing scholars became a part of the lost generation, while foreign scholars were forced to flee the country.

Similarly, Cambodia has also suffered from a severe depletion of spiritual and cultural capital. Nominally, of course, the country remains Buddhist and continues to adhere to its pre-genocide traditions, many of which are rooted not just in Theravedic Buddhist philosophy, but also in Hindu and animist beliefs (remnants of Cambodia's pre-Buddhist history). In reality, however, the death of nearly all the country's religious leaders and theologians resulted in a break in Cambodia's previously rich tradition of religious scholarship. In fact, when the Pol Pot regime collapsed in 1979, only 3,000 of the country's 60,000 monks remained alive.<sup>43</sup> One of the few surviving Cambodian monks, Maha Ghosananda, has served as a key figure in restoring Buddhism to post-conflict Cambodia, leading the annual "Dhamma Yatra" (or peace march) through territories that long remained Khmer Rouge strongholds.<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, the leader passed away in early 2007, and though Theravedic monks and nuns from neighboring Thailand, Laos, Burma and Sri Lanka have helped enormously in restoring Buddhism's presence, the country is still striving to retrieve what was once a uniquely Cambodian Buddhist identity.<sup>45</sup> And although the struggle to rebuild a community of intellectuals and religious scholars capable of restoring Cambodia's rich intellectual and spiritual traditions continues today, efforts have been largely thwarted by the same "brain drain" that plagues many developing countries, whereby a large portion of the country's "best and brightest" leaves to pursue more lucrative or stimulating work elsewhere.

At the same time, Cambodian business and trade have suffered enormously as a result of the Year Zero experiment. Here again, trade and foreign direct investment were literally non-existent following Pol Pot's rise to power, as the regime severed all economic ties to the outside world and expelled or executed the vast majority of business executives. Not surprisingly, it would take years for Cambodia to re-establish the country's most basic business functions in the form of markets, shops, restaurants, and factories, let alone to begin to establish a thriving banking sector or to attract foreign investors. Today, the banking sector remains highly unreliable, and it is estimated that 99% of the country's economic activity is conducted using cash.<sup>46</sup> Predictably, each of these factors has played a major role in drastically retarding

Cambodia's economic growth. Although the country's GDP growth rate has admittedly accelerated some in recent years (reaching over 10% in the early 2000s, but slowing again with the global recession<sup>47</sup>), the country's average per capita growth since the Khmer Rouge relinquished power remains low relative to that of her neighbors. For instance, while Thailand's 1979 GDP per capita was only 3.5 times greater than that of Cambodia in the same year, today it is 4.3 times greater.<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, Cambodia's Human Development Index (which also accounts for education/health indicators) is on average 22% lower than that of neighboring countries (Thailand, Laos and Vietnam), and is lower than all other Southeast Asian countries with the exception of East Timor.<sup>49</sup>

Such socio-economic issues have been further complicated by widespread corruption in the government and military that works to exacerbate the country's already inequitable access to resources and means of production. At the local level, many Cambodians report fearing that police officers and soldiers will use their arms to engage in robbery or extortion, while military officials often expropriate land from peasants and to conduct illegal logging for personal profit.<sup>50</sup> In Phnom Penh, high-ranking government officials have been known to seize international development aid to line their own pockets. In fact, after uncovering severe abuses in 43 contracts in 2006, the World Bank suspended USD 64 million in loans and asked the country to pay back USD 7 million in aid; that same year, a study conducted by Freedom House estimated that on average corruption siphons off 10% of Cambodia's gross domestic product each year.<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, Cambodia's problems in education are further complicated by corruption and inequalities that plague all aspects of the education system. In particular, influential politicians, government officials, and businesspeople frequently pay bribes to secure seats for their children at universities<sup>52</sup>, and Cambodia currently spends more than seven times as much per tertiary student than per primary student<sup>53</sup> – all of which work to further exacerbate income inequality.

It is somewhat paradoxical, then, that although the Khmer Rouge had sought to establish a society in which money and material possessions were irrelevant, their presence also produced in many Cambodians an attitude of extreme self-preservation – in fact, those living under the regime were even encouraged to turn in close friends and family members for treason, and many did so to avoid becoming targets for execution themselves.<sup>54</sup> As a result, much like years of conflict resulted in a “legitimation of violence,” so too did the Khmer Rouge's indiscriminate killings work to promote a sense of ruthless self-preservation that further exacerbates Cambodia's already high income inequality. In fact, since 1994 (when available data begins), the share of national income held by the poorest 20% of the population has been steadily declining at a relatively constant rate of just over 0.1% per year, falling from 8% in 1994 to 6.8% in 2004.<sup>55</sup>

And although Cambodia is finally beginning to catch up in raw economic terms – that is, in terms of GDP growth – the gap between rich and poor has become an increasingly problematic obstacle to peacebuilding.

### **A WEB OF TRAUMA: LINKING SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND TRADITIONAL VIOLENCE**

Of course, it would be a mistake to consider the aforementioned emotional and socio-economic traumas independently of one another. Indeed, Cambodia – and particularly Cambodia’s youth – faces a cyclical and highly complex maze of grievances whose various components feed off one another, continually propagating the trauma of the revolutionary period despite thirty years of freedom from the Khmer Rouge and nearly twenty years of (admittedly somewhat fragile) democracy. And though some of these relationships represent widely accepted assumptions in the field of development, other relationships are much more nuanced and contextually specific to the Cambodian experience.

For instance, one might readily assume (and not entirely incorrectly) that income inequality, violence and crime are intimately related. However, the wider causal relationship between general economic development and violence in Cambodia proves somewhat more difficult to isolate – for although both have definite roots in the Khmer Rouge period, the two issues also complicate and propagate one another in ways not unlike in other developing countries. High crime rates, for example, are known to deter tourism and foreign direct investment, thereby impeding economic development. Meanwhile, though most scholars agree that poverty in and of itself does not *cause* crime, most also concede that the inequitable distribution of resources and the lack of opportunities that often accompany poverty *can* contribute to increased crime. Interestingly, however, although one might most readily assume that extreme poverty would lead to property crimes stemming from pure need, studies have shown that poverty may actually bear a stronger causal link with domestic violence rates than property crime, while those that “escape” from poverty actually become more likely to engage in criminal activity.<sup>56</sup>

Researchers ascribe this seemingly counterintuitive relationship to the process of modernization, which tends to place high value on material acquisition while simultaneously increasing public knowledge of economic inequality via improved communications technology. Poverty is a relative concept, they assert – and so although individuals may be becoming wealthier in absolute terms, exposure to information concerning all that one still does not have (be it electricity, an iPod, or the latest luxury vehicle) leads to a newfound awareness of one’s own poverty with respect to the wealthiest members of society.<sup>57</sup> This phenomenon therefore

results in an unexpectedly positive relationship between economic development (specifically when it is accompanied by heavy modernization) and property crime.<sup>58</sup>

On the other hand, weak education systems contribute significantly to gender discrimination and domestic violence in poorer, less “modernized” populations. In one study conducted in Cambodia, researchers found that as household standard of living increased, domestic violence decreased, and vice versa, and that that spousal abuse was worst in households where the woman had 8-13 fewer years of schooling than her husband.<sup>59</sup> Yet gender discrimination can also obstruct economic development – in the most extreme cases, nearly one half of a society is prohibited from contributing to the economy, or at least from contributing at full capacity. Interestingly, however, in Cambodia’s case, the problem is not that women do *not* work; in fact, due in large part to the country’s overall demographic imbalance, women actually comprise more than 50% of the work force (though that number is slowly declining).<sup>60</sup> In some cases, women even contribute as much, more, or even all of a household’s income because their husbands are either deceased, disabled, or otherwise unable to contribute. Unfortunately, however, most of these women are employed in poorly paid agricultural or unskilled labor, and more than one third of adult working women are illiterate (compared to just under one seventh of adult working men).<sup>61</sup> Thus although women are essential to the functioning of Cambodia’s economy, their ability to contribute at full capacity is largely limited by a permeating societal aversion to educating girls. It is therefore not only universally poor access to education that limits economic growth, which affects both boys and girls, but also enduring cultural expectations, which limit the extent to which women are able to participate in Cambodia’s more formal economic functions.

Our analysis of the interdependence of these many forms of violence, however, would not be complete without acknowledging how they work together to contribute to a more conventional understanding of trauma – that is, the psychological trauma that medical professionals most often categorize as post-traumatic stress disorder. Of course, the most obvious manifestations of PTSD in the youth come as a direct result of the domestic and criminal violence that are themselves rooted in income/gender inequality, poor education, hindered economic development, and widespread substance abuse – which in turn are all at least partially rooted in the Pol Pot’s disastrous Year Zero experiment. Yet sufferers need not experience direct physical violence in order to feel traumatized, and our understanding of suffering is perhaps limited if we choose to define it only according to a selection of physiological symptoms. Indeed, impediments of any kind to an entire society’s social, cultural, spiritual and economic growth are traumas unto themselves, as all result in emotional disturbances across the population, albeit in varying forms

and to varying degrees. All of these elements are therefore significant contributors to Cambodia's experience of post-genocide trauma, and deserve to be recognized as such.

### **A LEGACY OF SILENCE: CAMBODIA'S FORGOTTEN HISTORY**

Yet perhaps the greatest tragedy to befall Cambodia's youth lies not simply in the aforementioned psychological and socio-economic grievances – to which many would argue that Cambodians have proven astonishingly resilient – but rather in the lack of formal recognition given to their multifaceted suffering. For although young Cambodians are excellent students of Khmer culture and ancient Angkor civilization, most know shockingly little about their country's late 20<sup>th</sup> century history or their parents' and grandparents' experiences at the hands of the Khmer Rouge. Without this knowledge of recent history, the youth is left thoroughly unable to understand the sources of their society's emotional, social and economic difficulties, let alone how to cope with them.

There are of course many reasons behind the absence of this crucial collective knowledge. Perhaps most obviously, the disappearance of Cambodia's "lost generation" resulted in a relative lack of elders from whom to learn, while many survivors are understandably quite uncomfortable talking about their experiences. Some report that to this day they still fear that the Khmer Rouge may once again return to power, and so they remain apprehensive of speaking out against them.<sup>62</sup> Even those that do not literally fear a return to power cling to what has become a survival strategy turned habit of silence. Meanwhile, despite the nation's ongoing struggle to retrieve its religious identity, the Khmer remain largely impacted by the principles of Cambodian Buddhism and in particular by the notion of *karma*, according to which the quality and circumstances of one's life now and in the future depends upon one's own deed and misdeeds in past lives. Adherents to the principle therefore often prefer to focus their energies not on past injuries – which, it is thought, were likely merited as a consequence of errant acts committed in past lives, and whose perpetrators will no doubt be punished in the life to come – but rather on bettering the future. Consequently, Cambodians tend to shy away from talking about trauma, instead focusing more on moving forward and even forgetting painful episodes, and often brushing aside the largely Western idea of confronting trauma and its perpetrators. All of these factors combine to produce a phenomenon that scholars refer to as a "conspiracy"<sup>63</sup> or "legacy"<sup>64</sup> of silence, where events that weigh heavily on the minds of all members of a society are rarely openly discussed, and where the tradition of silence is passed down due shared fear, pain, religious beliefs, or even simple habit.

Tragically, however, many older citizens report that even when they do try to share their stories, young Cambodians often refuse to believe them, believing at first that their parents and grandparents are simply prone to exaggeration. Those who are initially reluctant to accept the stories often report that they “have a hard time believing how a human being could be so cruel to another human beings [*sic*].” And though most eventually come to understand that the brutal period was indeed a reality, unresolved questions linger in their minds as to how and why it all happened.<sup>65</sup>

The youth’s initial reluctance to believe the reports and subsequent lingering astonishment are not surprising: after all, discussions of the period are largely absent from the public discourse, especially from education. Although the Vietnamese-backed government of the 1980’s did make some efforts to keep the atrocities alive in Cambodians’ minds (largely for their own political reasons), in 1993, the newly formed government decided to drop all textbook sections on the Khmer Rouge in hopes of “promoting reconciliation.”<sup>66</sup> It was not until 2000 that a brief history was reintroduced in the ninth and twelfth grade textbooks, and 2002 that a longer version of the history was included in the twelfth grade books. Unfortunately, however, today only 4% of Cambodians manage to complete high school<sup>67</sup>, and so very few are ever exposed to a uniform state-approved curriculum on Khmer Rouge history. And though two thirds of the country’s young people report that they first heard about what happened between 1975 and 1979 from their parents, nearly half report that they did not learn of it until they were 11 or older, and more than half report that they know very little about their families’ experiences.<sup>68</sup>

Meanwhile, a small but important percentage of those who have received education on the topic may have been exposed to heavily biased and potentially dangerous propaganda. In the Cambodian region of Anlong Veng, where many former Khmer Rouge reside today, residents report that throughout the late 1990’s most children who were able to attend primary school used a textbook whose preface stated that “the book’s goal is to make boys and girls aware of the enemy of our nation.” According to one observer, these students learned little of how to read and write; rather, “they would go to school in the morning, and study about who the enemy is, and in the afternoon, they would make bamboo spikes for the front.” Fortunately, individual accounts indicate that most of these curricula have been removed and textbooks are no longer as provocative; however, the problem remains that most Cambodian children are never exposed to any collective and objective version of the history.<sup>69</sup>

Admittedly, several overtures have been made since 1979 to increase objective awareness of the atrocities, and more recently, to encourage forgiveness and promote justice. The People’s Republic of Kampuchea made the first such attempt in 1984, though their efforts were perhaps

somewhat disingenuous and inflammatory, when the Vietnamese-backed government declared an annual “Day of Hate.” On this holiday, Cambodians were encouraged to vent their anger against Pol Pot and other “enemies of the nation,” including the “American imperialists” and the “Chinese expansionists.”<sup>70</sup> Despite its fragile rule, the short-lived government also managed to establish Phnom Penh’s Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in the compound that had once served as the infamous S-21 prison, where 17,000 individuals were tortured under the Khmer Rouge. In 1988 the Vietnamese also built a Buddhist stupa at the Choeung Ek killing fields in memory of those who were executed there, most of whom came directly from Tuol Sleng. Meanwhile, several smaller torture centers and killing fields across Cambodia have been converted into both official and makeshift memorials.

Other significant steps have also been taken in the years following the adoption of Cambodia’s constitutional monarchy. Perhaps most importantly, with the help of the United Nations the Cambodian government recently succeeded in establishing the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), whose primary function will be to try serious crimes committed in Democratic Kampuchea.<sup>71</sup> In fact, although it took some time for the tribunal plans to be finalized (the Cambodian government having originally placed its request with the UN in 1997), in February of 2009 S-21 prison director Kaing Guek Eav (widely known by his alias Duch) became the first of five top Khmer Rouge leaders to be tried.<sup>72</sup> Meanwhile, US President Bill Clinton’s signing of the Cambodian Genocide Act in 1994, which aimed to investigate and document the atrocities of 1975-1979, enabled the establishment of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) in Phnom Penh. In 1997, the Center became an independent Cambodian research institute working to preserve the memory of the brutal regime, and DC-Cam has also been called upon to serve as the primary source of evidentiary materials for the ECCC.<sup>73</sup>

Unfortunately, however, most Cambodians do not live within the vicinity of these sites – in fact, only 15.7% live in urban areas, where most tributes are located. Though 48% of Cambodian youth report having visited at least one memorial, most lived in urban areas, and substantially fewer rural Cambodians had ever done so.<sup>74</sup> Meanwhile, many outside observers are often shocked at what appears to be a widespread ambivalence toward, or even a lack of knowledge of, the ongoing Khmer Rouge tribunals. According to one recent study, nearly one fifth of Cambodia’s youth was entirely unaware of the trials. Of those who had heard of the ECCC, 27% reported that they were either concerned about fairness or wondered if/when the trials would actually occur; another 17% said that they did not know what to think of the tribunals, or that they did not have any opinion.<sup>75</sup> Meanwhile, it is not entirely clear how



beneficial the trials will be to survivors themselves; in one study, researchers worried that they might exacerbate PTSD in older Cambodians, as nearly 90% of Cambodians over the age of 35 reported fearing that the tribunals would bring up painful memories for them.<sup>76</sup> And despite the ECCC's efforts to disseminate accurate information about the tribunals and to clarify that only high-ranking commanding officials will be tried<sup>77</sup>, rumors still circulate in some rural areas that the courts may attempt to try other low-ranking cadres – an unfortunate bit of hearsay that has resulted in an even greater attachment to the survival strategy of silence.

### **MOVING FORWARD**

Safety and human security are no doubt essential elements in trauma healing. Indeed, scholars agree that a population cannot begin to address its trauma if the cycle of abuse has not ceased, whether the continued abuses stem from a prolonged conflict or simply from cycles of violent crime, domestic violence, and child abuse.<sup>78</sup> Yet I would extend this concept to say that a population also cannot fully address its trauma if its development is impaired, be it in economic, cultural or even spiritual terms. Cambodians who are striving simply to put food on the table or to send their children to school have little time or energy to mourn and grieve, let alone to meditate on their collective past and its societal consequences or to think about forgiveness and reconciliation. Meanwhile, diminished religious and cultural institutions and resources also deprive Cambodians of full access to their own culture's healing practices based in traditional belief systems – coping strategies that in the case of Cambodia may ring most true to the population.

It is not enough, then, for the Cambodian state to aspire to end Cambodia's trauma by adopting a clinical approach and treating each element separately. Although both corporal and socio-economic security are essential to trauma healing, treating each symptom independently will do little to end the cycle of suffering. It is not enough to build more schools, hospitals, and wats, to increase trade or attract more foreign direct investment, or even to counsel or medicate more PTSD sufferers. Rather, each of the country's problems must be viewed through the lens of Cambodia's collective and historical trauma, and the nature of their interaction must be carefully addressed. Cambodia must work to alleviate not only the symptoms of trauma, whose manifestations are numerous and widespread, but also the original source of trauma.

In the broadest sense, then, the Cambodian state and indeed all Cambodians must strive to acknowledge their collective history and its manifestations in all areas of life. In practical terms, this amounts to providing a place and meaning for the events of 1975-1979 in modern educational, economic, cultural and judicial institutions. First and foremost, the Cambodian state

must work not simply to expand access to education, but to make the study of the country's darkest period a central part of the curriculum. This history must be explicitly imparted to the country's youth in order for them to truly understand their own individual and collective challenges, and to provide them with the necessary tools to aid in Cambodia's reconstruction. Furthermore, Cambodia must work harder not only to find and prosecute perpetrators of violence, but also to understand the source of criminal behavior and to tailor rehabilitation programs accordingly. The country must also strive to recognize the roots of corruption in the extreme self-preservation of the Khmer Rouge period, and in doing so, work to put an end to corrupt practices in government and law enforcement that exacerbate inequality and hinder development.

Of course, striving to understand each of these elements in the context of Cambodia's darkest period in history should not mean forcing Cambodians to live in its shadow for all eternity. For although a thorough understanding of these root causes is essential to reconstruction and reconciliation, peacebuilding practitioners (be they state or non-state actors) must take special care to avoid causing Cambodians to feel limited or defined by their collective past.

Furthermore, to encourage the acknowledgement of trauma should not mean universally replacing existing coping mechanisms – and in particular meaningful religious and cultural practices – with Western instruments of blame allocation and clinical psychology. Indeed, it would be a mistake to discount the lessons of Cambodian Buddhism and karma, both of which emphasize forgiveness, moving forward, and working to better the future. A more contextually appropriate approach may therefore be for practitioners to incorporate and even help to revive Cambodian Buddhism and other traditional practices. Such an approach need not mean accepting the legacy of silence – rather, it might mean reframing memories of life in Democratic Kampuchea and their meaning not in unfamiliar clinical terms, but within the context of familiar beliefs and traditions. And though Western psychology is often quick to denounce traditional coping mechanisms as unhealthy and even counterproductive, in the case of Cambodia, healing practices based in traditional belief systems may ring most true to the country's citizens, thus making them some of the most effective tools in trauma recovery.

## CONCLUSION

*“A society cannot know itself if it does not have an accurate memory of its own history.”*

*– Documentation Center of Cambodia*

Post-genocide Cambodia has suffered enormously in both psychological and socio-economic terms. Not only do countless Cambodians suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder

and physical/mental disability, but the country's education system, religious identity, economic security, and governance have all been severely compromised. It has taken years for the country to restore some semblance of functioning systems and institutions; yet despite thirty years of freedom from the Khmer Rouge, Cambodia's citizens remain the victims of a wide array of injustices that remain largely attributable to Pol Pot's brutal regime. Meanwhile, the country's legacy of silence has resulted in particularly complex experience of suffering for Cambodia's youth, whose unspoken trauma continues to go widely unacknowledged. And though the country's problems cannot and will not be resolved overnight, it seems that the single most important step the Cambodian state can take in working toward full trauma recovery is to acknowledge and address the role of recent history in contributing to contemporary challenges. To that end, state, non-state, and international actors must seek to actively treat root causes rather than the manifest symptoms – symptoms which must themselves be recognized not as a slew of isolated incidents, but rather as part of a highly complex maze of trauma whose components are heavily interrelated. Finally, practitioners must strive to appreciate all aspects of the Cambodian experience, and in particular, to respect and incorporate local approaches to healing in order to focus their peacebuilding efforts in the most effective, sustainable, and culturally sensitive manner possible.

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