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# A Vulnerable Nation: The Intersection of Rural Poverty, Cultural Norms and Gender-Based Violence in Cambodia

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**Abstract**

Since the 1990s, women and children in Cambodia have experienced increasing trends in trafficking for both sex and labour, largely due to ongoing poverty factors. This vulnerability of women and children in Cambodia can also been seen in the normalization of gender-based violence in some communities, which often begins for young women and girls at an early age. This study collected the oral narratives of 26 Cambodian young people, all of whom survived early childhood trauma and despite this, appeared to be doing remarkably well. Participants were recruited through non-governmental organisations and their stories capture their lived experiences of physical and sexual violence, trafficking, incarceration and modern-day slavery. This paper aims to provide insights into the survivor journey, from the trauma they experienced, to community perspectives, stigma and the challenges survivors faced in reintegration. Also capturing stories of hope, social connection and recovery from trauma.

**Keywords:** human trafficking, gender-based violence, stigma, survivor reintegration, Cambodia

## 1. Introduction

Cambodia continues to be a source, transit and destination country for human trafficking (UN, 2012). This vulnerability can be attributed to a number of factors, which stem from the country's turbulent 20th century, including high unemployment and poverty rates, especially among adolescents and youth (Langler et al., 2007). Higher rates of poverty exist among rural populations than their urban counterparts, highlighting unsafe migration options (Langler et al., 2007). Complex supply and demand factors exacerbate human trafficking, including child trafficking (Bearup, 2015). Children from impoverished families are particularly vulnerable, with some being sold to beg on the streets of Thailand, whilst many are "subjected to forced work in agriculture, construction, factories and domestic servitude" (United States Department of State, 2016, p. 2). Some children are sent to work on fishing boats, whilst others are drugged and forced into prostitution (West, 2008). UNICEF (2017) found that 35 percent of Cambodia's 55,000 sex workers are children under the age of 16.

Another factor frequently cited in research as impacting the country's vulnerability to trafficking, particularly for women and girls, is their devaluation in families and society (Gajic-Veljanoski & Stewart, 2007; Raymond et al., 2002; Steinfatt, 2011). Low cultural regard for females also intersects with the demand for cheap/free labour, which is largely unchecked by policies and enforcement in Cambodia (United States Department of State, 2016). Additionally, virgins are sold to brothels as a high commodity because of the belief that sex with a virgin has rejuvenating powers, which makes very young girls more vulnerable to sex trafficking (Keo et al., 2014).

Furthermore, this devaluation of women and girls in Cambodian communities can be seen in the commonplace of gender-based violence across the country. One study found that up to one in four Cambodian women were survivors of some kind of violence and/or sexual abuse, although it has been proposed that the actual figure is likely to be much higher (Eisenbruch, 2018). This is further supported by a recent report by the US State Department (2020), that rape in Cambodia is heavily underreported. This underreporting is attributed to survivors being fearful of reprisal, social stigma and a general distrust of law enforcement (US State Department, 2020). Charges for rape in Cambodia are rare and the country's penal code does not specifically mention spousal rape (US State Department, 2020).

Additionally, in Cambodia there are higher incidents of gang rape than elsewhere in Asia, with the average for other Asian countries being 2.5 percent, whereas in Cambodia it is 5.2 percent (Brickell, 2017). Informing the

normalisation of gender-based violence in Cambodia are the country's cultural standards and views on gender roles and equality, which underpin a societal acceptance of violence, particularly domestic violence (Jewkes & Morrell, 2010; Santana et al., 2006). Moreover, Cambodian traditions perpetuate the sociocultural norm of the women being the one to blame in instances of domestic violence (Eisenbruch, 2018). A national survey conducted by the World Bank (2019) revealed that over a quarter of women in Cambodia had experienced domestic violence. In Cambodian tradition, there is a cultural precedent of women being subservient and inferior to men (Brickell, 2008; Jewkes & Morrell, 2010; Santana et al., 2006). This tradition is then combined with the Cambodian domestic ideal of *samroh samroul* meaning "to smooth over and seek harmony" (Brickell, 2017, p. 297), which complicates the issue of domestic violence. These customs around maintaining domestic harmony through individual silence have been shown to detract from improvements in domestic violence alleviation in Cambodia, as most Cambodian women who experience domestic violence do not seek help or report the issue (Eisenbruch, 2018).

Additionally, cultural gender traditions were taught to women in Cambodian schools until 2007 through the 19th century poem *Chbab Srei* (Rules for Women), which emphasises the woman's role as obeying and respecting her male superiors including her spouse (Anderson & Grace, 2018; Ling & Austin, 2010; Mustakova-Possardt, 2014) by "keeping the fire in the house" (Brickell, 2017, p. 298). According to Brickell (2017), "this Cambodian Buddhist expression embodies the idea that in order to maintain a harmonious household, women are responsible for supressing three fires of potential conflict within the home- parents, husbands and 'others'" (p. 298). Furthermore, Mustakova-Possardt (2014) highlights a common Cambodian expression which encompasses gender inequality in cultural norms which states that, "men are gold and women are cloth." The implication of this expression is that once dirtied, gold can be polished back to its original state, while cloth cannot be cleaned once it is "soiled."

This cultural norm results in Cambodian girls who have been abused finding it more difficult to marry, as they are considered damaged goods (UNICEF, 2019). Additionally, women who defy the gender codes by becoming sex and/or entertainment workers are stereotyped as "bad" or "broken" women and are often regarded as subhuman (Hoefinger et al., 2017). While these women can sometimes rehabilitate their "tarnished" images through financially supporting their families, sex and entertainment workers are generally discriminated against by all facets of Cambodian society (Hoefinger et al., 2017). This in turn makes these women more vulnerable to sexual abuse and violence, which only further marginalises them (Mustakova-Possardt, 2014).

Furthermore, the Cambodian state continues to promote a strict gendered social order which upholds conservative, patriarchal Cambodian cultural traditions and social values in terms of gender roles is at odds with mainstream globalised popular culture. These two opposing cultural currents have resulted in the Cambodian state and Cambodian (male) elders' "moral panic around the 'loss of tradition' and 'Western influence,' both of which are seen to lead to immorality" (Hoefinger et al., 2017, p. 315) and "enormous emphasis [is still] placed on traditional marriage and children" (Hoefinger, et al., 2017, p. 317).

Within this cultural context, Cambodian women and children remain an extremely vulnerable to sexual abuse and violence. These survivors (particularly children who have experienced repeated, ongoing violence or complex trauma in early childhood) often develop defective coping skills, such as hyper-arousal and/or disassociation. There are gender differences in dysregulated behavioural responses of traumatised children. Outbursts, fighting and bullying are often associated with male trauma survivors, whilst silence, crying and not wanting anyone near them are often witnessed in young female survivors (Perry, 2007). One of the key elements in the trauma-informed literature around teaching children to self-regulate is the creation of a safe and predictable environment that mitigates a child reaching the "tipping point" for an emotional outburst (Brunzell et al., 2015; Wyatt et al., 2017). Perry and Szalavitz (2006) argue that whilst fear is the most common reason for the brain to shut down and disassociate, poverty, societal marginalisation, hunger, thirst and exhaustion can have a similar effect, resulting in individuals with above-average baseline levels of distress. Moreover, these individuals may maintain a continuous sense of disconnection from others and their environment long after the trauma event has taken place, even in the absence of a specific event in the present (van der Kolk, 2014).

This disconnection experienced by trauma survivors may be further exacerbated by sociocultural stigma by communities, which has been found to be an important contextual factor in Cambodian resilience studies (Link & Phelan, 2001; Mollica et al., 2014; Stamm et al., 2003; Zimmerman, 2014). Stigma disproportionately affects women in Cambodia due to its patriarchal society and traditional conceptions of gender (Henry et al., 2013; Khun, 2008; Miles et al., 2020). This cultural norm is evident in a commonly used expression in Cambodia which encourages married women to "be strong" in their marriages, even in the face of abuse and infidelity (Miles et al., 2014). Furthermore, a woman's choice to leave a violent and/or abusive marriage is further stigmatised; this is also based in traditional gender roles in Cambodia, which view the failing of the marriage as the fault of the wife (Miles

et al., 2014). According to a study published by van der Keur (2014), 75 percent of Cambodians believe wives should be patient and endure domestic violence in order to keep a family together. Importantly, cultural influences and stigmas can adversely impact recovery of trauma survivors in Cambodia.

Link and Phelan (2001) argue that stigma has long-lasting adverse mental health consequences, whilst Zimmerman (2014) notes that stigma for survivors can lead to feelings of guilt and shame. Additionally, the results of the 10-year longitudinal study called the Butterfly Project by Chab Dai, conducted in Cambodia with reintegrated trafficking survivors, found that keeping a secret (out of fear of community perception) can be a significant strain on a survivor's mental and physical health (Miles et al., 2020). Research from the Butterfly Project provides contextual understanding of community and culture, especially in regard to recovery of trauma survivors and the challenges they face due to sociocultural stigma.

This body of research aids in understanding trauma symptoms and how trauma and resilience may present in Cambodian young people, particularly women and children with extensive histories of trauma. This research project sought to fill a gap in the literature, by further capturing the lived experiences of young people in Cambodia who had early life experiences of trafficking, incarceration and modern-day slavery. The findings presented in this article, are part of a wider body of work that explored trauma and resilience in a Cambodian context (Wyatt, 2021). The researcher is a member of the Australian Association of Social Workers and this Doctoral research sought and gained approval by Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee and the Cambodian Ministry of Health prior to undertaking field research in 2019.

## 2. Methodology

This qualitative study interviewed 40 participants in total using a Grounded Theory (GT) approach and incorporated multiple data gathering instruments. The findings in the following section are presented through the lens of 26 trauma survivors aged between 18-30 who had been supported by NGOs. The remaining 14 interviews were conducted with key insiders from the child protection space and their narrative is captured in a wider body of work (Wyatt, 2021; Wyatt, 2022; Wyatt & Welton, 2022). For the purpose of this article, the focus will be on the 26 Cambodian young people, who had all experienced significant early childhood trauma.

Qualitative interviews of the trauma survivors were enhanced using a resilience scale and narrative timeline, outlined in the section below. The data set of participant narratives were coded according to GT principles, with the focus on the analysis of the biographical data collected through the interviews and participant timelines. Some of the lived experiences of gender-based violence and trafficking are captured in the voices of the young people interviewed for this study. This includes the hardships, significant relationships and opportunities of significance they have experienced, alongside strategies and resources they utilised to aid them in their recovery from trauma.

The sample was made up of the 26 young people, all with trauma histories that were recruited through three NGOs. Hagar International (Hagar), Flame Cambodia (Flame) and This Life Cambodia (TLC). These three NGOs were purposefully selected, given their work in the human rights space supporting young people with significant trauma in Cambodia, but in different contexts and capacities. Hagar supports women and children who have been trafficked and abused by providing a range of social and economic supports. Flame has an educational focus, working with children in impoverished areas and the slums of Phnom Penh. Whilst participants from TLC, were recruited from a program that supports children who have served time in an adult prison, often having extensive trauma histories prior to their incarceration.

Throughout the interview process, the researcher critically engaged with the production of knowledge providing a safe space for participants to share their experiences. One way to encourage a safe space with the trauma survivors specifically, was with the use of narrative timelines. This shifted the focus away from their trauma history or 'what happened' and towards 'what happened next?'. Therefore, the focus of the interviews was post-trauma and on their lives, meaningful relationships, access to work and opportunities provided by the NGOs, that perhaps was helpful for them. The use of timelines can enhance contextualisation of narratives, particularly when researching sensitive topics with marginalised groups (Ryan-Nicholls & Will, 2009). Kolar et al. (2015) argue that by asking open-ended questions through the use of a timeline, the emphasis is placed on participant narratives and reflexivity becomes a central practice in the construction and analysis of the interviews.

In addition to the timeline, the Cambodian translation of the 10-point Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (Kh-CD-RISC-10) was used as an additional data collection method. A study that reviewed the reliability and validity of Kh-CD-RISC-10 found that although it did have good psychometric properties for Cambodian adolescents, the researchers questioned its generalisability in the wider Cambodian community (Duong & Hurst, 2016). However, utilizing a range of data collection methods was helpful to ensure the validity and reliability of results of this study. Following each interview, data merging occurred wherein quantitative data was reordered

alongside participant demographics to enable the researcher to use this information in conjunction with participant narratives.

## 3. Findings

All of the young people lived through some type of trauma during childhood. The majority spent their early life in the provinces where violence and poverty were commonplace. Almost all participants had encountered child labour and hunger, as well as the death of a close family member. Most had experienced multiple forms of abuse and trauma—physical, sexual, emotional or psychological—by the time they were teenagers. A common theme among the trauma stories, although not shared by all, was the prevalence of human trafficking. However, there were differences in the types of trafficking (i.e., for labour or sexual exploitation), as well as the age at which individuals were trafficked. Some were trafficked as young as 4 years old, whereas others were trafficked in early adulthood.

> *"I was 4 when my mum gave me to those people [for trafficking] who left me to the Chinese family. I cried for a few days because I miss her; I don't know why she left me ... They started to ask me to do housework such as clean the floor and do the other work. Because I was young, I could not do everything well, so they hit me, did not offer me the food. It was hard for me when I was young."*

Both physical and sexual violence were commonplace in the early lives of the young people, even for those who had been trafficked often had experienced sexual abuse at the hands of a male family member as a child beforehand. Unfortunately, in many of these instances, other family members knew of the sexual abuse but because they were also experiencing abuse, they would not intervene. One participant, who was later sexually abused by her stepfather at age 9 before being trafficked for child labour in Cambodia by her mother later in life, detailed this failure of family intervention in her story. She described her living situation at age 8 and how she had shared her fear of her stepfather's bad intentions with her mother, who failed to intervene:

> *"My stepfather had many friends, they always drank alcohol together, talking loudly in a big group. He did not want me to work, either. I suspected that my stepfather had a bad intention with me. He wanted to have sex with me, because when he was drunk, he tried to be close to my bed while I was sleeping. I told my mother this: 'Papa is not really good to me. He has tried to be close to my sleeping bed at night.' She replied, 'Your papa is just worried about the mosquitoes biting you.'"*

In the majority of cases where participants spoke of violence and/or sexual abuse, the abusers were known to them:

> *"I was born in Kandal Province in Cambodia. I lived with only my mother. I haven't seen my father since my birth. My mother always drank alcohol and would hit me when she felt upset, or bad, or got angry with me. I was so lonely because I did not have many friends. I also used to be hit by a young monk when I visited a pagoda at lunchtime. When I was small, I was often violated by others, which made me feel so afraid."*

The young people who had been trafficked for child labour spoke of extensive physical violence at the hands of their perpetrators. Another participant who was sold to the owners of a restaurant at age 9 and slept on the floor under the sink in the kitchen when not working an 18-hour day, so she could hide from the sexual advances of another restaurant employee. Others were sold as "domestic helpers" to outside families, where severe physical abuse by their "employers" was common. As another participant described her experiences as a 7-year-old:

> *"The second family I lived with gave me all the work in their house, to do everything for them as a house cleaner. Sometimes they hit me when I did not clean the floor. They hit every part of my body."*

In other instances, many of the young females lived in constant fear of violence. The threat of violence was part of their everyday life at home and in the community. Many of the female participants spoke of their overwhelming fear of men after multiple incidents of being sexually harassed, abused and in some instances raped by men in their lives starting at a young age.

> *"While I think [my foster dad] as my dad, like ... but until now, I feel scared of men. We're girls, like, can be easily attacked."*

Furthermore, many of the female participants reported that they felt threatened by men when in public places if unescorted by a male. One participant commented that because of her history of sexual abuse and being sex trafficked before the age of 12, she continues to distrust men, even in the context of her new foster family after NGO intervention. Another participant was repeatedly raped by her stepfather before the age of 10 and experienced extreme community stigmatisation and described her distrust of all men in adulthood. The narratives of the women illustrate how childhood abuse and trauma at the hands of men can have long-lasting effects in terms

of feelings of trust and sense of security in their heterosexual relationships, whether familial, platonic or romantic, later in life:

> *"Adults become naughty. Men in my village use drugs, they steal chickens, they steal villagers' stuff, so it's very unsafe. So, I feel unsafe in my heart too."*

Many women reported feeling unsupported by their family and community due to their gender. This experience was more pronounced if the individual lacked a female caregiver in their family structure and became more profound if they had experienced sexual assault. One participant described feeling abandoned by her father in the years after the death of her mother when she was 8, and the subsequent rape by a man in the village when she was 10 years old:

> *"When I moved to Phnom Penh [after NGO intervention], my father never helped me, or encouraged me at all, because I was a girl. Sometimes, when I met him once a month, he tried to escape from me."*

The young people spoke at length about their communities' perception that harassment, abuse and sexual trauma were the fault of the survivor, regardless of the girl's age at the time of the event. Many of the participants with sexual abuse histories talked about the importance of secrecy because of social stigma and harsh judgment by others and how hard it was to "keep a secret" in their close-knit Cambodian communities. Others had chosen to maintain their silence to keep the peace inside their family, especially if the abuse was at the hands of a family member, such as an uncle or a brother-in-law. Gossip about what had happened to them, victim-blaming and fear of future repercussions by the perpetrator were common themes among the female survivors:

> *"At that time, in their mind, they thought like I was not a good lady after they knew my bad story with that guy. They looked down on me, discriminated me. They sometimes spoke behind my back from mouth to mouth about my story. Some villagers said I was the lady who intended to cause that trouble to happen, not that guy. Some of them didn't even hate the guy."*

Some participants spoke of the cultural expectation of maintaing honour, especially family honour. This sometimes resulted in girls who had experienced sexual abuse at a young age having difficulties getting married when they were older because of how their communities perceived them. Because of this cultural influence of maintaing family honour, a few particiants with sex abuse trauma spoke of their families trying to marry them off (often to their abusers) to avoid gossip and family shame:

> *"At that time, I just thought that because I felt like no one loved me anymore because my own parents wanted that marriage, because they were thinking about Khmer culture in which a girl and a boy who involved (had sex) should get married. Because they didn't want to hear gossip from others."*

Some of the male participants were aware of the difficulties that females encountered in their steeply patriarchal society due to the rigid Cambodian traditional standards surrounding gender. The following reflection is from a male participant, who was orphaned in early childhood and spent many years living on the streets in Phnom Penh before being taken in by an NGO. Previously, his sister died when they were both young and he reflected upon how since she was female, once he was orphaned, he felt that she was better off dead instead of being alone and unprotected:

> *"To be a girl, they don't feel safe; they need someone to take care of them. They have to find something to make them be in a safe place, but for me, no problem. That's why I'm sad. Sometimes, I miss my sister. I feel like if she were still alive, I'm sure I would take care of her well. But when I think again, I feel like she's really lucky that she died, because there would be no one to take care of her. She might become a prostitute. She might sleep with a guy who had money. I mean, I miss her, but I'm also happy because it wouldn't be good for her to grow up alone as a girl in a developing country. So, she died was for the best."*

The young people faced several challenges in addition to their primary trauma due to compounding stigma associated with their histories: sexual abuse; incarceration; being an "NGO kid" in the community; or for some, fitting several of these categories simultaneously. Not all participants felt rejected by their communities; some even found strength and support there, but many did not. Participants spoke of the challenge of gossip in their local Cambodian communities, where most members have known each other their whole lives.

There is a Cambodian expression *raksaa pleeng* which translates to "keep the fire," meaning to keep domestic problems (particularly those related to females) within the family, so the neighbours and the community do not know what is happening "inside the house." However, because of the close-knit aspect of rural communities, it can be difficult for young people to keep their trauma histories secret from others. For instance, all of the young people who had been incarcerated commented on stigma and community attitudes towards them after their release and

return to their community. Of the younger group that had been incarcerated (ages 19–22 at the time of interview), reintegrating into their community became problematic especially when searching for employment, as everyone knew their histories. As this participant explains:

> *"Like when I walk around, they wouldn't let their children come close to me or wouldn't let their children hang with me. Some friends I grew up with since little, but after I came out of jail, their parents wouldn't let them hang out with me."*

This practice of *raksaa pleeng* can also serve to mitigate stigma for some survivors by keeping their trauma a secret. This code of silence among immediate family members can often shield the family from further gossip. However, it is not always successful given the families' close proximity to others in the community, especially if the perpetrator is a member of the same community. One participant had been sexually abused for years by her uncle, who was 30 years her senior. She talked about when she told her father what had been happening to her:

> *"My father was very angry, but because they did not want to put shame on us, he decided to ask my grandmother to arrange a marriage for that guy and me. At that time, I was just 14 years old. He said what happened to me; he'd still help and still love me. But it was a difficult situation for me because I hate [my uncle] and scared of him, so how can I get married to him? So, I think if they agreed to let me get married to him, I would commit suicide."*

Several young people described variations of *raksaa pleeng*. Females spoke of the "fire" in terms of sexual and physical abuse at the hands of a family member and how seeking external support would result in them bringing shame and dishonour to their families. Males also spoke of the "fire" in terms of domestic problems entrusted to the family system to solve without outside help. All of these young people self-reported that they felt it was their responsibility to "contain the fire" and not tell anybody what was happening to keep the family's honour intact and social standing in the community. As this participant explains:

> *"It is not so easy to trust. Especially in Cambodia, we have a lot of trauma from Khmer Rouge and we have proverb I try to translate to English, like we 'did not bring our house story to the outside.' In Khmer it means like if I translate it: don't bring the fire inside to outside, everyone tries to keep it inside them."*

While *raksaa pleeng* is a societal rule in Cambodia, there are some exceptions, as described by one participant about how her community supported her after she was attacked and raped on her way to school. After that event, the community banded together and walked alongside her so she could get to school safely, and they supported her in her education and dreams of going to university:

> *"Some of my villagers knew my family story well. They encouraged me and also helped care about my security after my problem when I went to my school, as I am a little girl."*

Opportunities provided by the NGOs were critical to developing life skills and a way of generating an income for the young peoples' recovery. For the young people who were previously incarcerated, the family unit was paramount for their survival. Educational opportunities and independence are both themes that emerged strongly in the data. As one participant explained, he was given an opportunity to learn a skill when he was in jail, which he hoped he could use to earn an income and assist his family in surviving financially:

> *"I was angry because of the time wasted [in jail], which would otherwise be for making an income to support my family and younger siblings. But after making friends, getting to learn from different organisations, my anger subsided. I took the chance as an opportunity to learn new skills. Once I'm out, I could help my family better."*

Many of the young people from the NGOs had secured scholarships to go on to university, yet appeared to be quite humble about their academic successes. Many believed that doing well in their studies was dependent on the educational opportunities they were provided, rather than contributing their successes to being gifted or special in any way. These participants saw education as a way out of extreme poverty, which was a shared experience of most of the young people interviewed:

> *"Before, I noted that most girls in my village have low education due to their poverty and family issues. They just finished Grade 7 or 8. At that time, I also knew that no one in my family got a good education as the villagers, either. I wanted to help myself so that I could help others. I wanted to finish high school and enter a university someday."*

These findings capture the early lives of the young people within the context of Cambodian society and culture. Lived traumatic experiences and cultural factors both shaped the lives of the participants and informed their recovery. The behaviours, motivations and attitudes of the young people, which arose from their specific trauma

histories and experiences, became clearer through their lens. The lived experiences of the young people captured through their narratives provide crucial background information for understanding what happened to them and the challenges of overcoming their circumstances.

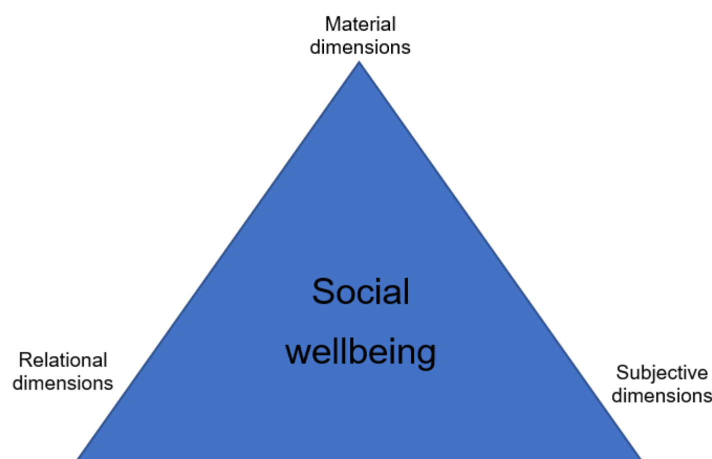
**4. Discussion**

The findings presented in this article highlight the great tenacity of these young people to not only demonstrate resilience, but to in fact thrive when presented with opportunities, despite their early childhood trauma. Based on these findings, it could be argued that the ability to develop resilience is not just about rugged individualism, but also the connections and opportunities provided through the NGOs to access education and training, thus providing an avenue towards a better life. There are many interpretations of resilience in the aftermath of trauma, and much overlap of the various theoretical frameworks that conceptualise resilience. Yet one thing remains definitive: much can be gained from the insight and lived experiences of young people who have managed to do remarkably well, despite complex trauma situations. Within this network of relationships post-trauma the young people described, there appears to be real potential for the families, community and NGOs to positively influence their capacity to adapt and thrive in the face of adversity.

This is consistent with research from Harvard University Centre on the Developing Child (2015), which has conducted extensive research on resilience, identified common underpinning factors that enhance positive outcomes in children post-trauma. Harvard University refers to these counterbalancing factors as a means to "stack the scale" and optimise resilience across multiple contexts (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015, p. 5). These factors include: "facilitating supportive adult–child relationships; building a sense of self-efficacy and perceived control; providing opportunities to strengthen adaptive skills and self-regulatory capacities; and mobilizing sources of faith, hope and cultural traditions" (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015, p. 10).

Trauma history and personal struggles create a certain level of complexity, particularly when navigating discussing incidences of trauma and abuse, given Cambodian society's traditional preference for silence, which reinforces sociocultural stigma (Miles et al., 2020). Therefore, the relational wellbeing these young people established in the aftermath of trauma, is comprised of social interactions, community-based actions and interpersonal relationships which inform and reinforce social, political and cultural identities. The subjective dimension of wellbeing incorporates cultural values, norms and belief systems (White, 2009). This importantly accounts for notions of self, such as the following: trust; confidence; fears and aspirations; individual and collective hopes; and individual satisfaction or dissatisfaction (White, 2009).

The interaction of these dimensions in the creation of an individual's social wellbeing are illustrated in Figure 1 (White, 2009). All of these factors, interactions and dimensions, which shape a framework for social wellbeing, can inform the development of resilience in trauma survivors and have been utilised to understand the resilience of the Cambodian young people in this study.



Additionally, culture within local communities may help create a sense of identity and belonging for individuals that enable recovery from. trauma (Agger, 2015 & Greene, 2015). The tenacity of these young people who participated in this study, appeared to be fostered by a sense of defiance in the face of how Cambodian society may have labelled them. However, this was not true for all participants and the recovery of many women was further challenged by the weight of community stigma of being trafficked and/or sexually abused. Therefore, culture and community in the relational dimensions are factors underpinning individual resilience; however, their influences may be either positive or negative. Interestingly, many of the young women interviewed in this study described transforming the pain of societal stigma, into motivational drivers fuelling their ambition to positively adapt despite adversity.

Furthermore, a trauma survivor who has access to education may experience a sense of pride and/or satisfaction, or a feeling of fulfilment and accomplishment that further drives them to succeed in other areas of their life. Moreover, work has been found to be a primary source of identity for most adults post-trauma, supporting their wellbeing and sense of purpose, through a material dimension. Other Cambodian-based research has found that for successful recovery to occur, elements of individual economic empowerment for independent living must be also obtainable (Jarl et al., 2015). Furthermore, physical and emotional healing from trauma, needs to be seen in conjunction with employment, education and training opportunities for recovery to occur.

## 5. Limitations and Further Research

The study's aim was to contribute to the growing body of work in the field of resilience and recovery from trauma in Cambodia. It was also hoped that the knowledge generated might be used to further strengthen programs working with trauma survivors in cross-cultural settings. In terms of limitations for this study, the question now arises regarding transferability and the possibility of replicating this research with other Cambodians or other groups of traumatised young people in cross-cultural settings being supported by NGOs around the world. As it appeared that for survivors in this study, that their beliefs, practices and culture helped them recover, but further research is required to see if the findings could be generalised to the broader Cambodian context.

## 6. Conclusion

Cambodia is still challenged by high rates of poverty, marginalised groups, economic challenges and a range of cultural issues such as gender-based violence. Importantly, it appears that the country still struggles to emerge from the shadow of the Khmer Rouge, the effects of which are still felt in the country's youngest generation, particularly woman and children. Additionally, widespread rural poverty coinciding with a deeply patriarchal society that normalizes violence, has resulted in Cambodia's women and children being particularly vulnerable to trafficking and trauma. For these reasons, is it critical that the concepts of resilience and recovery from trauma are understood within the socio-political context of Cambodian culture. NGOs working with individuals and communities to challenge existing socio-cultural norms do have a role to play. However, it will take a widespread coordinated approach of all actors across Cambodia, including the government and law makers if we are to see perpetrators of violence being held accountable and long-term systemic change in community attitudes towards violence against women and children beginning to shift.

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