

Combating Domestic Violence in Cambodia

Public Education through Street Theater

It is estimated that one in four women in Cambodia is a victim of domestic violence. To address this serious problem, The Asia Foundation's Global Women in Politics (GWIP) program supported street theater productions to raise awareness about violence against women and women's legal rights in Cambodia.

To be meaningful, legal rights education needs to go beyond disseminating educational materials. For people to internalize their rights and understand how the law can be useful, legal information must relate to people's everyday lives. Portraying realistic dramas on domestic violence, the street theater performances raised community awareness on this problem traditionally considered a private matter and suggested non-violent ways of settling arguments within the household.

With GWIP support, the Project Against Domestic Violence (PADV), the Women's Media Center (WMC), and the traditional *ayai* Prom Mahn theater troupe – headed by one of Cambodia's most popular and charismatic stage personalities – collaborated in this first-ever link between a non-governmental organization and the tremendously popular *ayai* street theater for public education purposes. The play, performed nightly in 36 remote communities in five provinces, attracted 340,900 people in all with audiences of as many as 30,000 in some districts.

The drama compared the experience and fortunes of two neighboring families. One family enjoys a high quality of life attributable to the loving relationship between the husband and wife, while the other is devastated by repeated incidents of domestic violence. Through this story, the performance:



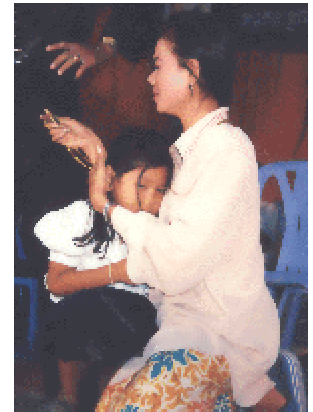
- raised awareness that domestic violence is a human rights violation and against the law;
- showed that domestic violence is a public problem, not simply a family problem by highlighting the harmful effect of domestic violence on women, children, families, and society;
- encouraged community intervention in cases of domestic violence; and
- informed the public of the law and the local services available to those who need help.

An audience in the provinces watching the show.

Achievements

This project was very successful in:

- *Raising Awareness about Domestic Violence* – After the performances, local organizations reported an increase in the number of domestic violence survivors seeking assistance.
- *Building Coalitions* – Through collaborative links with a wide variety of political actors, the street theater project stimulated the formation of broad coalitions including human rights and women’s service organizations to convey women’s rights messages to local communities and government officials.
- *Linking with Policymakers* – By gaining the support of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs and the Ministry of Interior, PADV and WMC ensured the security of the performing troupe and secured the cooperation of local authorities so critical to the success of the initiative.
- *Increasing Media Coverage of Domestic Violence* - Through press releases, PADV ensured local and international media coverage of the performances and the issue of domestic violence.



The actors playing the wife and child.

An Innovative Strategy

Some elements of the PADV/WMC strategy made it particularly effective. These include:

The Medium – Street theater is a direct and powerful method of communication independent of access to TV or radio, enabling public or legal education messages to reach rural areas with little access to other media. Because whole communities watch together, it encourages public discussion of an issue previously thought of as a private family problem.

Advance Preparation – A public awareness team from PADV and Women’s Affairs contacted NGOs and officials for support during each performance. Before each show, a team member spoke about domestic violence and where families could find local help.

Local Relevance – Since theater is a flexible medium, it can evolve and be tailored to local needs and available services. Each play informed the public of the law and the local services available to victims, including interventions from the police and commune officials, legal aid, and domestic violence shelters. The action the heroine takes to end the abuse in each performance reflects the services available in the area.

Accessibility – Street theater is a more accessible legal rights or public education strategy for groups that do not necessarily have the funding or the ability to produce full-length professional plays or documentaries.