Storytelling Domestic Violence: Feminist Politics of Participatory Video in Cambodia

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Abstract

Domestic violence is often referred to in development circles as the most pervasive, yet least recognised, human rights abuse in the world. Based on four participatory video (PV) workshops in Cambodia, the paper analyses spontaneous and orchestrated forms of storytelling on this normatively "private" issue. Bringing into conversation emerging geographical scholarship on storytelling with more established PV literature, it provides an exploration of the feminist politics that arise when participants' narratives belie established academic knowledge on the causes of, and solutions to, domestic violence. In tandem with questioning whose narrative authority "counts", the paper works to problematise commonly held assumptions about the efficacy of PV to overcome hegemonic norms and discourses.

Introduction

This paper analyses collective storytelling about domestic violence – often referred to in development circles as the most pervasive, yet least recognised, human rights abuse in the world. Based upon four participatory video (PV) workshops co-organised with a gender-oriented non-governmental organisation (NGO), we examine multi-model narratives that emerged on the perceived causes of, and responses to, this foremost issue. Drawing attention to spontaneous and orchestrated forms of storytelling that occurred in the video-making workshops, our analysis reveals group narratives on domestic violence within a select number of Cambodian communities.[2] The workshops formed part of a larger research project (2012-2014) on the 2005 ratified "Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and the Protection of the Victims" ("the 2005 Law"). It sought to produce a clearer picture of the hiatus that many countries, including Cambodia, face between promises enshrined in legal reform and progress realised on the ground in terms of domestic violence reduction (see Hume 2009; Usdin et al 2000; Vetten 2005 as examples from El Salvador and South Africa). Given the framing of domestic violence in feminist moral and political discourse as a community responsibility (Haaken 2010), the workshops provided the opportunity for commune-level dialogue, and scholarly insight, on what remains cast as a "private" issue in Cambodia.

The paper demonstrates how participants' storytelling often reproduced normative ideas discounted in the field of domestic violence studies about why violence happens. As researchers gaining narrative authority and interpretative agency writing this paper, a dilemma opened up that has broader significance for the politics of feminist geographical work on storytelling and PV. Namely, how as researchers should we handle narratives produced that confute feminist "factual" claims? To quote Robert Chambers (1997: 101 emphasis in original) "Whose *reality* counts? – 'Ours' of 'Theirs'"? To develop these lines of enquiry further, we begin by bringing into conversation scholarship on storytelling with PV theory and practice. We follow this by looking at the role of storytelling and PV in upholding and/or overturning social norms. The methodology driving the research is then attended to, before two empirical sections are provided, the first on the narrated causes of domestic violence, and the second, on responses to it. Finally, the conclusion gestures towards future research directions on storytelling, PV and feminist geographical praxis. In sum, our exploration of storytelling domestic violence highlights some of the many, yet under-acknowledged, feminist politics that arise in, but also beyond, the "field" when the normalised knowledges and practices that structure daily life are laid bare through the PV process.

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[2] See Guijt and Shah (1998) for a critique of "community" in participatory approaches to development which frame the social entity as cohesive and harmonious.

Storytelling, PV and Feminist Geography

The development of geographical scholarship in the past five years displays a growing interest in storytelling (see Cameron 2012; Christensen 2012; Houston 2013; Lorimer 2003; Nagar 2013; Price 2010; Sandberg and Tollefsen 2010; Starkweather 2012). Through interviews, photographs, and memory objects, to name but a few methods of elicitation, human geographers have looked to understand social life through narration. The ascendance of storytelling in the discipline relates to the now widely acknowledged point that "existence is inherently storied", and that "life is pregnant with stories" (Kearney 2002: 130). Storytelling thereby affords insight into a key preoccupation of social and cultural geography - the construction of "meaningful selves, identities and realities" (Chase 2005: 422).

In the context of Participatory Action Research (PAR) in which a specific problem is explored by, with, and for those its affects (Kindon et al 2008), emergent interest in storytelling can also be linked to the idea of academic researchers giving voice to sidelined stories, which in turn may enact social change (Razack 1993). As Cameron (2012: 580) comments in her review paper on geography's engagement with storytelling, the theme of "storying (for) change" has been popularised, particularly by feminist scholars, as one means to challenge larger discourses and "build an oppositional politics" through the alternative narratives of marginalised groups. In feminist-oriented work, it is co-authorship that has formed the majority focus. Nagar (2013: 1) writes for instance, that "Co-authoring stories is a chief tool by which feminists working in alliances across borders mobilise experience to write against relations of power that produce social violence, and to imagine and enact their own visions and ethics of social change".

Dramatic forms of storytelling have commonly been used to capture research knowledge and these marginalised perspectives (Sinding 2006). Recently however, new technologies have allowed those stories to be told in other ways as digital video recording equipment has become increasingly mobile and accessible. PV has thus arisen as a PAR methodology, a way of using technology to open space for storytelling (see Kindon 2003). In PV dramas, participants select and describe events turning these into story elements in a "narrative act" (Maines and Bridger 1992). Through audio-visual media, participants thereby *create* their own stories around a more or less determined problem" providing the opportunity to "*show*", "*tell*" and even "*perform*" (Ramella and Olmos 2006: 3&4 emphasis in original). As de Lange (2008) notes in connection to Southern African-based work on AIDS using "community-based video", *participants*' own exploration and analysis of problems affecting their lives takes center stage in these workshops. Seminal work by Waite and Conn (2011: 117) has foregrounded, for example, how the PV drama platform opens "up a space for young women to articulate their voices and to performatively explore theirs and others' experiences" on sexual health. While sexual health, like domestic violence, is a sensitive topic to address, they reveal how the fiction-reality

boundary permitted women to more comfortably voice their opinions and experiences (ibid.).[3]   Hypothetically then, participants as storytellers are positioned in relative control as they socially construct meaning (Bauman 1986). This ideal correlates with feminist approaches that valorise the listening to women's voices, local knowledge, and the questioning of relations between expert and non-expert (Mohan 2001, Waite and Conn 2011).

Foundational geography scholarship by Kindon (2003) contends that PV may enable researchers to adopt a "feminist practice of looking" by refuting hierarchical power relations between researcher/research subjects and observer/observed. Although feminist methodologies have paid attention to positionality, reflexivity, and the emotive aspects and power relations of research (Rose 1997), in PV scholarship, the place of the researcher in the post-fieldwork phase remains more vague. Like Waite and Conn (2011), we had limited opportunity at the time for any co-produced analysis beyond discussions in community screenings held. This paper signals our regaining of "narrative authority" by passing comment on the videos produced in the workshops.

Through our regaining of "storytelling rights" (Shuman 1986) we became anxious about the privileging of our own claims to knowledge. In the participatory development arena, Mohan (2001: 162) sums up what emerged as an ethical quandary we wrestle(d) with: "The corollary is that by valorising the local and being self-critical of our colonising knowledge 'we' behave as we do not have anything to offer". Yet moving beyond the binary of insider/outsider to more closely focus on the outcomes of this interaction, Mohan (2001: 165) productively ventures that a "constructive dialogue" *can* be offered. As Nagar (2013: 4) comments accordingly:

"Collaborative storytelling allows co-authors from varied locations to draw upon and scrutinise their multiple – sometimes conflicting – experiences and truths while exploring, enhancing, and elaborating upon how these interconnect with 'expert' knowledges."

Looking to sociology validates the expectation that stories will demand interpretation, that "following a story means more than just listening: it means filling in blanks, both between unfolding events and the larger point they add up to" (Polletta 2006: viii). Our analysis and write-up in the space of this paper reflects, therefore, how there is 'always an author, the planner as policy analyst [or in our case academic as researcher], who is choosing which facts are relevant, what to describe, what to count, and in the assembling of these facts a story is shaped, an interpretation, either consciously or unconsciously, emerges" (Sandercock 2003: 21). While this paper presents an overarching story from the workshops that we have identified as

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[3] See Cahill (2010: 161) for a critique of the assumption "that fiction provides a boundary which separates out **"real"** life and that the players are protected when working within this boundary".

meaningful to the scholarly community, we also claim that we are supporting what Senehi (2002: 45) has coined "constructive storytelling" which creates the potential for openness, dialogue, and insight in the workshops originally held. Carrying discussion on in this vein, we now turn to the representational politics of participants' storytelling.

Between Hegemonic and Subversive Storytelling

Waite and Conn (2011: 115) declare that for young Ugandan girls who engaged in PV drama, their narrative agency allowed "the performative exploration of embedded powerful relations" which were "therefore informative and has the potential to be transformatory and empowering". We too see this potential, but caution that while these workshops can serve as spaces for emancipatory discourses, they can also act as a conduit for hegemonic norms to be re-inscribed and further engrained. It is this tension that forms the backbone of the paper. By analysing the video dramas and other storytelling interactions, we note both hegemonic stories that reproduced existing relations of power and inequity alongside a couple of more subversive examples that challenged the status quo. This possible concurrence has been highlighted in storytelling literature:

Storytelling has always had and still has two basic functions: first and foremost, to communicate the relevant values, norms, and customary practices of a group of people – to conserve them and pass them on to future generations so that they will be better able to survive. The second function is to question, change, and overthrow – the dominant value system – to transform what has been preserved so that the values, norms and customs enable a group of people not only to survive but to improve their lives and make the distribution of power and wealth more just (Zipes 2006: xvi).

Applying these theoretical offerings, Little and Froggett (2010: 471) contend through their experiences of participatory art projects that storytelling both shores up social conformism at the same time as inspiring critical consciousness. Stories, as Sandercock (2003: 22) furthers, are illuminating because of their "underlying plots, which are all exercises in valuing human activities, in a moral ordering of life and social organization…the more alert we can be…the better we are able to evaluate them. We need to understand the mechanisms of story…to be more critical of the stories we have to listen to". Yet in relative terms, literature on PV "does not seem to address the extent to which participants must rely on the conventions of dominant narrative structures" in their storytelling (Low et al 2012: 57) thus questioning the assumption that empowerment is tied to participation. The latent expectation persists that the participatory process will produce "counter-stories" that challenge the status quo and the dominant logic of what is understood as "natural" (Etherton and Prentki 2006; Harris et al 2001). Fine (2005: 147-148), for example, argues that social research should play a "counter-hegemonic role, by revealing the fault lines of injustice" and lead to a process of "collective rearticulation". Given this emphasis, our paper very much chimes with the poignant question posed by Cameron (2012: 588):

What is at stake when one places one's hopes in the capacity for studies to construct alternative discursive terrains, and by extension, to transform the conditions under which social, political, and economic life unfolds? Does such an approach wilfully over look the failure of so many stories to transform dominant discourses?

Only a select amount of research has highlighted the emergence of hegemonic norms. As Cahill (2010) systematically documents in her work on drama in HIV prevention projects in Vietnam, dramatic portrayals can bolster rather than dislodge binaries of male-female, strong-weak, sick and well. She surmises "a certain rule-play may confine the role-play, with actors replicating social norms and dominant storylines in order to create a level of believability or verisimilitude" (ibid.155). Cahill therefore complicates the assumption that agency is developed through rehearsal of one's resistance to oppression by outlining how:

The role-plays are only a fiction, but they are a fiction in which the players construct what they believe is a replication of the status quo. If the participants are to lever a change, then a crack must be made in the dominant story, so that a new one can be cobbled into being. However, rather than create this rupture, our role-plays seem to have varnished the story of how-things-go with the sheen of certainty (ibid. 157).

It is this "crack" that we did not manage to fully open in the workshops. By stepping back and not wanting to "interfere" with participants' storytelling, as researchers we now wonder if we were complicit in shoring up social norms, a dilemma we reflect on in the paper's conclusion. Mattingly (2001) also warns against focusing alone on narrative authority in thinking through the value of community drama for challenging and changing the relations of representation. Reflecting on her two year involvement with the community theatre project *Around the World in a Single Day*, she argues (2001: 456) that the "context in which voices are heard matters enormously", their actions "are given meaning within larger structural and institutional processes, which can define and limit the transformative potential of such projects". Far from being attributable to false consciousness or people's inability to perceive alternatives then, such constraints may relate to social norms entrenched in wider power relations. As Kothari (2001: 142) comments in the wider participatory development setting, "self-surveillance" and "consensus-building" associated with PAR has the capacity to sanitise knowledge. After the methodological section that follows, we tease out these contestations further as we analyse the empirical storytelling that emerged from the PV workshops.

Researching Domestic Violence in Cambodia

Since the turn of the millennium, the lack of success in converting advances in legal reform into domestic violence prevention has been especially acute in Cambodia where almost of a quarter of women suffer from abuse (Ministry of Women's Affairs, MoWA, 2008). The weaknesses of implementation and enforcement of the 2005 Law mean that Cambodian women continue to be deprived of the power to defend

themselves or their interests both before and after psychological or physical violence by an intimate partner or family member(s) (Amnesty International 2010). Moreover, it is evident that the general public as well as large proportions of local authorities, judicial, and legal officials, do not understand the 2005 Law and its attempts to protect women's rights (LICADHO 2007). In sum, as argued by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 2013), Cambodia has seen "limited progress in the prevention and elimination of violence against women".

In this context, the study sought greater knowledge of the gap between legal reform and change for women in Cambodia. The mixed method research comprised PV, interviews, and a large-scale household survey in eight communes divided equally between urban and rural environs of Pursat and Siem Reap Province (see Brickell et al 2014 for full report).[4] While the word "domestic" misleadingly evokes a homebound issue, the PV workshops were incorporated specifically to explore and establish the human rights abuse as a collectively significant social and political problem. This was pertinent in a country where its moral code dictates that women should accept the authority of the husband and even in circumstances of domestic violence should ensure that such "fire" (conflict) is not communicated beyond the family (Brickell 2008). Ordinarily in Cambodian tradition, women should not bring "fire" from outside into the house, not take fire inside the house outside, and should take care not to spread or overheat fires (Derks 2008). The power of performance in the remaking of public space where "private" issues can become visible and contestable is aptly demonstrated by Nagar's research with a grassroots feminist theatre in Chitrakoot, India. As Nagar (2000: 359 emphasis in original) reflects, the theatre performances represented spatialised acts in which women, many of whom had suffered violence against them, "literally *moved* the discourse on these subjects— first, from the privacy of women's homes to the spaces of the organisation, and later, from the organisation to the male-dominated public spaces of the community". Likewise, the PV workshops opened up storytelling space for community perspectives and experiences that are not usually voiced and/or heard.

Four workshops were held across a six-week period in Siem Reap and Pursat, in one "urban" and one "rural" location each. Liaising with our collaborating NGO partner, each commune's gender representative asked an equal number of male and female community members of different ages (over 18) if they would like to take part in the three-day workshop. We asked that local officials were not invited to participate so that people could speak more freely and lay perspectives be privileged (See Garrett and Brickell 2015 for a detailed exploration of the power geometries that accompanied the make-up and proceedings of the workshops). In terms of ethical considerations, while we did not directly ask participants if they had been subject to domestic violence, in the first workshop, a middle-aged woman talked about her

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[4] The NGO received training in PV facilitation and have been the grant beneficiaries of the equipment which will remain with them beyond the project to encourage further usage with the communities.

experiences as the group worked through the community mapping. Following World Health Organisation (2001) research ethics guidelines on domestic violence we were prepared to provide information on available services. In this instance however, the participant was already divorced and declined our assistance.

The workshops were jointly led by a Khmer-speaking facilitator and two researchers (the authors of this paper). The goal of each workshop, in the tradition of PV, was to encourage process over product and for the researchers and facilitator to gradually withdraw over the course of each workshop, giving participants maximum opportunity to get *their* message across. In the spirit of PAR which stresses the least amount of control over the participatory process by the researcher (Cooke 2001), our role was limited to collectively agreeing ground rules and teaching peer-to-peer audiovisual technology learning exercises. Although all attendees were encouraged to consider different forms of filmmaking including documentary, animation and drama, all chose to incorporate some form of drama.

In each eight-person workshop, on day one, a range of games to build technical expertise and group rapport were undertaken. On day two, participants learned to storyboard and independently discussed, devised, and shot their drama about domestic violence (Figure 1).[5] With consent, the discussions during storyboarding, alongside other moments in the workshops, were audio recorded. They were later translated and transcribed from Khmer to English (see Kindon 2003 on use of video to record negotiations and decision-making in PV forums). This allowed personal recollections and those plotted in the storyboarding process to be concurrently heard. A computer edit was then completed with participants on the third day before a community screening was held (Figure 2).

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[5] Storyboards are a grid layout of thumbnail images which act as substitutes for video itself.

Figure 1. Storyboarding *Domestic Violence and Law* in urban Pursat. (Source: Bradley Garrett, August 2012)

Figure 2. Community Screening of *I Am Wrong* in rural Siem Reap. (Source: Katherine Brickell, August 2012)

The video recording of the "ephemeral and the untransportable" dramas (Abah et al 2009: 24) allowed for the post-workshop analysis which bolsters this paper. Not wanting to disembody participants' highly charged performances, in the empirical sections that follow, where appropriate, we have embedded the Khmer language video *Know & Change*.[6] In analysing the videos, we sought to identify similarities and differences across them in terms of plots, narrative devices and characterisation. Akin to Haaken's (2010: 2) approach then, we listened "closely to how the story is being told, the positions of various protagonists, and to recurring themes, motifs and subtexts in the narrative resolution of the drama". Acknowledging that narratives are always partial, and that reading them is likewise selective (Pitt 2003), our paper hones in selectively on the decisive factors identified in the escalation of domestic violence, and attempted redress, in each workshop. What we hoped to open out was not a

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[6] A rights-based approach to the participatory video research was adopted. Decisions about distribution platforms, storage formats and security/anonymity protections were all discussed and agreed with workshop participants and actors.

solution to these problems but a space of openness where issues could be discussed, even in fictive form.

Storytelling Causes of Domestic Violence

This first empirical section deals with perceived causes of domestic violence told through storytelling. Its resonance with a key text in the field of domestic violence studies unfurls (Haaken 2010) as we examine narratives produced by participants which counter feminist understanding on why violence happens. Here the "myths" surrounding domestic violence causation are of particular significance to this section. In fact, since the 1970s, myth/fact sheets have been used in America to challenge conventional assumptions about women who are abused on the basis of alcohol and poverty as two canonical examples (Haaken 2010). These sheets are still used today, including in Katherine's own teaching with Master's students in the UK (see, for example the training material of Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights 2003). However, feminist scholars and organisations such as Women's Aid (2006) assert that these common examples are insufficient to explain domestic violence and overshadow the "real" cause of violence – the unequal power relations between men and women which privilege male control (Brickell, 2008; Galvani, 2006; Gough and Edwards 1998; Gutmann 1996). Given broader controversy surrounding the role of these factors (Galvani, 2006), and claims that feminists are terrified by causation (Valverde 1998), Haaken (2010: 4) proposes the term "counter-myth" to suggest a problematic affinity between the two claims – myth and fact.

The primary cause of violence suggested in all four workshops was alcohol abuse. Just as Kothari (2001: 141) has claimed that "the ways in which the knowledge produced through participatory techniques is a normalised one that reflects and articulates wider power relations in society", the habitual use of alcohol and link to domestic violence, was referred to, and constructed as *tomodah* (normal) in our workshops together. While some participatory research projects have been accused of "helicopter research" (Flicker et al 2007) – flying in and flying out - first-hand familiarity of Katherine with the local context and language translated into greater awareness of such normative discourses (see Hermann, 2001 on the role of long-term researchers as "insiders" and "outsiders"). In previous interview-based research for instance (Brickell 2008), men in the Siem Reap Province of Cambodia showed a consistent tendency to blame alcohol as an external factor, a "truth" behind their violent behavior which prohibited scrutiny. The household survey in the 2005 Law research similarly found that 35 percent of men and women answered that domestic violence is excusable if the perpetrator is drunk (Brickell et al 2014).

In the opening scene of each film, a group of men are shown gathered together in a close circle. Sat drinking in the shade, under a tree or stilted home, some have empty beer and liquor bottles strewn around them (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Montage of film screen-shots from opening PV scenes.
(From left to right: *Clear Sky After Rain*; *Domestic Violence and Law*; *I am Wrong*; *Know & Change*)

The videos all show alcohol as the conventional opening narrative - an almost standardised template. While participants were encouraged to explore aspects of domestic violence *they* felt needed telling, by the time we started the fourth workshop as researchers we did worry if we, or our translator, were somehow influencing the decision-making of participants during the community mapping. Also intrigued by the consistency with which alcohol was arising, in the final workshop we agreed with participants that they were at liberty to think beyond our project on domestic violence to other social issues they wanted to story-tell. Despite the flexibility afforded, the same trope emerged (see also Garrett and Brickell 2015 for further discussions on this consistency).

While the workshops were all complicit then in the stereotyping of men and masculinity tied to collective alcohol consumption, it is these very caricatures that community-based participatory drama in principal looks to avoid (Butterwick 2003). Representation of the drunken perpetrator was, however, difficult to move beyond in the workshops. Moreover, despite talking with participants at length to understand whether men's alcohol consumption was considered the *direct* cause of violence or an *indirect* one men used to indulge, permit, or license abusive behaviour, the former was repeatedly underlined. In other words, participants framed domestic violence as an effect of men's intoxication and alcohol dependency rather than by more deep rooted causes. Orchestrated through the video plot, and confirmed in our spontaneous dialogue during the workshops, alcohol was solidified as having a causal relationship with domestic violence.

In only one instance during our time conducting the PV workshops was this association problematised. In *I am Wrong*, the commune's chief was asked by the

group to participate in the video by "acting" out his usual response to cases he deals with as part of his real position. In his unscripted performance, a more critical perspective was intimated as he reprimanded the aggressor. Towards the end of the video, the perpetrator is called into the rural commune office by a letter which was hand delivered to his home. He enters the commune office, and is positioned in front of the commune chief who has two further officials flanking him. Sitting upright with his hands clenched through the filmed interview, the perpetrator is questioned.

> *Commune chief:* Do you know why I summoned you here?
>
> *Perpetrator:* I don't know.
>
> *Commune chief:* No, don't ignore this! We have called you in here to solve your problem. You committed violence against your wife and children at home? Don't you know that?
>
> *Perpetrator:* Oh yes, because I was drunk.
>
> *Commune chief:* Oh, because you were drunk…
>
> *Perpetrator:* Yes. I was drunk.
>
> *Commune chief:* You were wrong and put the blame on alcohol, didn't you? Don't you dare do this again?
>
> *Perpetrator:* Yes sir. I promise I will stop drinking and I will stop beating my wife.

As the commune chief makes light of ("you were wrong and put the blame on alcohol"), a flash of recognition is evident that drunkenness cannot be considered a sufficient cause of violence. These fissures of understanding were undermined nevertheless by the causality that the perpetrator continues to read into his drinking and violent behaviour towards his family. The participant in his response says, "I will stop drinking and I will stop beating my wife" thus keeping the hegemonic association between alcohol and domestic violence intact.

Besides alcohol, a second trope that appeared ascendant across the videos was the transgression of binary gender roles i.e. men/work, women/home. Under the rubric of Cambodian tradition, reciprocity, or the complementary nature of male and female roles are reflected in a popular Khmer proverb, "the seedling supports the soil, the woman supports the man". While men and women's role in this and similar proverbs are cast as interdependent they are not deemed interchangeable; a fixity that played out in the videos. Despite national level data indicating that women are now taking on a wider range of domestic and non-domestic roles than in the past (UNIFEM et al 2004), such prescriptive gender roles are still viewed as necessary for Cambodians to follow (Brickell 2012).

In *Know & Change* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AqO59VYkt8Y) for example, attention is drawn to a wife's domestic duty and to a husband's disregard for his own provider role. The apportioning of blame forms the basis for the introductory

scenes of the video. After opening with a group of men sat drinking on the grass (see figure 3), a woman (Srei Mom) emerges into view talking to herself about her husband's (Piseth) unacceptable behaviour:

> I can't find him anywhere. Where did he go? I suspect he's gone drinking again…he's not working again, how are we going to eat now? [1.53-2.04]

Having walked over, flip-flops in hand, Srei Mom stands over Piseth and pointedly questions why he never thinks about his children or provides the family with food [2.14 onwards]. While Srei Mom presents herself as assertive, she is told to go home and not bother to him further. But she refuses to remain silent and is repeatedly beaten first by Piseth's fists and in a second bout, with a wooden stick [2.52 onwards]. Here, it could be interpreted that by publicly standing up for her rights, Srei Mom risked and bore the consequences of her public criticism when tradition dictates that "fire" is kept in the house and spousal deference should be upheld.

In the other three videos, similar expectations on women to perform as dutiful wife and mother were present. In each, for example, the husband is shown staggering home envisioning a cooked meal awaiting his return. The video *Clear Sky After Rain* most directly brought women into the spotlight for failing to fulfil this task. After the opening scene depicting men's communal drinking (Figure 3), the film cuts to women's own leisure time as they congenially play cards together on a wooden platform under a villager's home. Sat on this platform, we are introduced to the wife (Lida) who turns to the other women and says that she will continue to play cards rather than returning home. Having swayed home to find an empty rice pot – an important symbol of familial cohesion in Cambodia - the husband (Kamol) seeks revenge by powerfully twisting Lida's arm. Called to the commune office, Kamol brings to the fore the abusive attitudes that can prevail when the victim is blamed for violence committed against them:

> From today, I promise to stop beating my wife anymore. I promise to stop drinking. I will correct myself to be good husband. I will help her do the housework. But I would like to say my wife was also wrong…she always go gambling and does not do the housework. She does not take good care of the children or family.

Much like Piseth then, Kamol looks to obscure his own role in the violence he committed by placing the burden of blame on Srei Mom's own supposed misdemeanour.

The storytelling of blame also emerged more informally within the workshop as participants shared their individual experiences and beliefs with one another. In urban Pursat, for example, in the refreshment break after storyboarding a discussion between three women began about men and women's respective familial roles,

> *Socheatha (female):* In general, if a husband misses lunch or dinner his wife will be unhappy…maybe she won't recognise her husband's face anymore. You know, it's true. At least, we know that all women prefer

their husbands to come back home to eat and chat together. Women need this.

Chanya (female): I know a family in my village…the husband is the breadwinner; he controls everything in the house, including money. One day he went to dentist and had his tooth treated. He came back with a bright gold tooth and showed it to his wife…she said she was unhappy about this, as he had previously refused her money to buy a new shirt. Suddenly, her husband got angry and hit his wife with a rice pot. Then he ran away from home to his mother's side in Battambang. Later he came back home. I don't think she has any freedom at all.

Leakthina (female): Some people say that men are not the only root cause of the domestic violence…that women are as well. I don't want to take any side but it is true that some wives who stay at home don't take good care of their husbands and children. Husbands are the breadwinners of the family and wives in charge of household work can often be found gambling with friends or neighbours. When their husbands come back home there is no food to eat!

The unchoreographed discussion above illustrates some of the latent ideals and gender norms participants brought into the workshop. Just as the notion of policy can appear gender-neutral (Hearn and McKie 2008), it is important not to foreclose presumptions about gender which have the potential to be reproduced in participatory research interactions. In much of the storytelling, demarcations between men/public and women/private are ideologically evoked and sustain rather than transcend traditional gender roles. While Socheatha initially highlights men's absenteeism from the home as a problem which perturbs women, Leakthina's comments go full circle in establishing women's own domestic negligence as a deviance linked to domestic violence (see Brickell 2011 on household neglect and its perceived links with family breakdown). Indeed the 2005 Law research household survey found, with little gender-differentiation, that 78 percent of respondents answered positively that women should stay at home taking care of their husband and children (Brickell et al 2014).

Like the accusations made by the two husbands against their wives in the videos *Know & Change* and *Clear Sky After Rain*, victim-blaming was pronounced across the workshops producing the subtext of a woman undeserving of assistance. Haaken (2010: 47) writes that in domestic violence stories "the female protagonist must meet an extreme standard of feminine virtue in order to be cast as a legitimate victim". Throughout the workshops, the ability of women to take action against a violent spouse appeared undermined at several points. Yet at the same time, Chanya's personal story about her friend emphasises the economic as well as physical violence which can lead to abject hopelessness and pity rather than blame.

According to Eagleton (1991: 187 emphasis in original) "Myths are a particular *register* of ideology which elevates certain meanings to numinous status". In this first empirical section focusing on perceived causes of domestic violence, storytelling has

shown how alcohol consumption and the transgression of normative gender roles are accepted, much like myths, as explanatory factors almost without question. While we do not deny that alcohol abuse or spousal arguments about gender roles and responsibilities are observable realities in respect to domestic violence, the overarching reliance on these factors in the videos worked to neutralise discussions on gendered power imbalances. Given that from a feminist standpoint, "replacing the common myths about the causes of family violence with a stronger knowledge of who benefits from its continual perpetration" (Orr 1991: 120) is imperative, the workshops in some ways failed to create dialogue on the use of these "causes" as mythic foils to justify violence. Instead, the storytelling confirms the ambiguity between "myth" and "fact" that Haaken (2010) more broadly surmised.

Storytelling responses to domestic violence

This second empirical section focuses on the perceived paths to addressing domestic violence. While the first empirical section showcased women's assertiveness in holding, at least verbally, their husbands to account, we move on to explore the staged disempowerment that emerged when accessing justice through official channels. The videos showcase the relative importance of family members, from uncles to mothers, advocating on a victim's behalf.

In *Know & Change* (figure 4) we left Srei Mom being publicly hit with a stick after vocally contesting Piseth's lack of income-earning in front of his male peers. While the threat is made that she will tell her mother (Sopheap) if he continues, in practice, when Sopheap arrives home, she finds Srei Mom trying to shield her facial injuries. Claiming that nothing is wrong, she is delirious and masks her wounds. This is not uncommon. The household survey found that 76 percent of female physical violence victims have never sought help (Brickell et al 2014).

Finally able to comfort her with an embrace, Sopheap vows to deal with the issue after keeping previous occurrences private. Turning to Srei Mom, she asserts, "I knew it, he beats you again…I can't stand idle by any more. He's been beating you too many times now…no this time I am going to report him. I won't be quiet this time because he did that so many times…we cannot allow this to happen again and again like this" [4.47-4.59]. In the next scene we find Sopheap striding with purpose into the village, and stopping the village chief who is riding along on his motorbike [5.09-06.12].

As is clearly evident in this part of the video, Sopheap is met with an un-cooperative and disinterested male village chief. Despite showing him respect and deference, the village chief fails to offer assistance or support. Instead, he stresses the futility of the situation and Sopheap is told rather to contact commune authorities. This part of the film was particularly critical of responses to domestic violence and according to participants was included to highlight the low priority given to women's wellbeing. As indicated in the excerpt, the village chief is very much aware that Piseth is a repeat offender, yet rather than taking action in response, he emphasises the

supposed intractable nature of domestic violence to divest him of responsibility. The video therefore contains a community viewpoint that confronts dominant power hierarchies by questioning the political will to address domestic violence at the village level in Cambodia.

At the commune level [6.14 onwards], Sopheap finds officials who are more receptive to Srei Mom's persistent plight and who directly criticise the village leader for his lack of help. Initially in contact with a female office clerk, and then passed on to a female commune chief, a policeman (Sambath) is called to the office.[7] Sat around a table [6.32 onwards], the mother is explicit that the violence is repeated and worsening. With a sense of urgency, Sambeth responds by drafting in further police officials to bring the perpetrator to the office [9.37]. Threatening him with legal action, he instead opts for reconciliation. While the police chief adamantly says "There'll be no more forgiveness on the part of the law", it is promissory justice that is presented as *modus operandi*. Asked to "correct" his drinking and lack of financial provision for his family, law is used as a threat rather than mechanism to enforce Srei Mom's rights to a life free from violence.[8] Again, victim-blame is evident and drunkenness alluded to as a reason behind his violent actions.

In the other videos too, the couples are shown "reconciled" together with the symbolic value of the harmonious family underscored. In *I am Wrong*, for example, in the opening scene in which men drink together, one of the perpetrator's friends highlights the risk that hitting a wife has for destroying family reputation. These insights reflect a growing number of studies on domestic violence that highlight broader political preferences for preservation of family over the protection of women (Boesten 2006). Indeed, Brickell and Platt's (2015: 11) paper on marital separation in Cambodia (and Indonesia) suggests similarly that "village authorities show an attempt to keep marital separation within a framework of silence in which domestic disharmony must remain a private matter open to reconciliation rather than closure".

The video *Clear Sky After Rain* also illustrates comparable concerns. On being called to the commune office, the husband, Kamol, is sat down next to his wife (Lida) whose arm we saw violently twisted in earlier scenes. While Kamol is addressed by the police team, Lida is never once consulted as to her wishes or support needs. Blurring fiction with reality, in this scene participants choose to use the "real" commune chief accompanied by a "real" policeman to enact the scene.

Commune chief: [Looking directly at Kamol] I have received a complaint that you were beating your wife so hard she was wounded. So I have called you to the commune office in order to solve this problem. You have been advised to stop hitting your wife many times before, but you clearly didn't listen. On behalf of the local

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[7] Unlike the video *I am Wrong* which included "real" authority figure in its cast (acting), all the characters in the video *Know & Change* were actors from the workshop group.

[8] In our wider research, we found no correctional education or support provided in any community.

authority, we can't excuse your violence against your wife anymore. Our village focal person and local authority worked hard to educate people on domestic violence law in our commune but you have never listened.

This time we will follow the law. You must promise and sign contract with the local authority and police to stop violence in your family. Also for the victim you should stop gambling [Commune chief gesture towards Lida with his hand and an intent gaze]. You know that our society does not accept this behaviour. Please take responsibility for your family and taking care of your children and housework. The gambling brings you more poverty and will break your family apart.

I request that you sign this letter…both husband and wife. From now on I want you both come back together as normal. But you both must promise to stop the violence and gambling. The village chief and focal person has asked to support reconciliation of you both. We do that because, although we acknowledge the victim was hurt, it was not so serious…like a broken arm for example. If we can't reconcile you both, then the perpetrator must go to court.

> *Kamol:* [Looking down and away from his wife] I recognise that I did something against the law and brought a bad image on my family. I promise you, I will stop hitting my wife any more. In the future if I break my promise the local authority or police can take legal action towards me.

> *Police officer:* [hands crossed on the table] The perpetrator must sign a letter to stop hitting his wife and children. Next time if you do it again, and in case of any serious injuries on the victim, you will be punished under the law. We cannot excuse you anymore.

> *Commune chief:* What do you think?

> *Kamol*: From today, I promise to stop hitting my wife anymore. I promise to stop drinking. I will correct myself to be good husband. I will help her do the housework. But I would like to say my wife was also wrong…she always goes gambling and neglects her housework. She does not take care of the children and family well. I would also like her to stop gambling as well.

> *Commune chief:* Please consider the violence will end up more in losing time, money, and job then make your family more suffer.

> [Police officer leans over to produce a letter and inkpad. Kamol then Lida sign the letter with their thumbprints. The table then disperses and the film ends]

Perhaps keen to demonstrate his knowledge of the 2005 Law, the actual commune chief alludes to Kamol's ignorance of and disregard for, his wife's well-being and authority education efforts. However, much like *Know & Change*, the cyclical nature of domestic violence and its temporary redress is identified by the

chief as he says "*this time* we will follow the law" (our emphasis). In this sense, a dynamic cycle is implicit within the video, one that repeats itself because it is never satisfactorily resolved.

At the same time however, the victim is blamed of gambling, forewarned about the heightened potential for marital breakdown, and reminded of her role as homemaker. Despite claiming that the 2005 Law would be followed, reconciliation is used to bring back together the couple "as normal". The perpetrator signs a "contract" that warns him of the legal implications of his violent actions if committed again (Lida also witnesses this). Interview research with stakeholders central to domestic violence reduction suggests that these repeated warning contracts are commonplace (Brickell et al 2014). Premised partly on the apparent non-seriousness of the victim's injuries that did not extend to a broken bone, the chief favours the (elusive) search for family harmony over ending the succession of violence through law. The significance accorded to harmony is officially enshrined in legal rhetoric in Cambodia. Article 1 of the 2005 Law includes a clause, which defines its dual purpose:

This law has the objective to prevent domestic violence, protect the victims and strengthen the culture of non-violence and the harmony within the households in society in the Kingdom of Cambodia. This law is in the purpose to establish a legal mechanism to prevent domestic violence, protect the victims and preserve the harmony within the households in line with the Nation's good custom and tradition…

As the above outlines, "there is a distinct tension here, between what is hallowed as a national culture and tradition of harmonious households, set against a law which has arisen conversely from the disharmonious realities that many women face" (Brickell 2014: 264). Indeed, even in situations of domestic violence it is claimed by the NGO CAMBOW (2007) that across Cambodia at village, commune and provincial level, leaders and law courts perpetually try to "reconcile" the conjugal couple.

More generally then, we contend that ruling modes of conflict resolution in Cambodia shaped the mode of storytelling that participants adopted. While the recurrent nature of the domestic violence complained of in the videos suggests that deliverance is incomplete, the videos still posit reconcilement as the prevailing means of closure. Indeed, according to Donovan (1993: 446) the entire "Cambodian legal system derives from the ancient Asian model of community-based nonadversarial dispute resolution through conciliation". In effect, the degree of closure told simultaneously belies women's experiences of domestic violence that are painfully bereft of such "neat" conclusion. Closure could be considered falsified, with women's experiences of domestic violence rarely having proper beginnings, middles and ends like a story.

Yet the video titles given by participants – *Know & Change* and *Clear Sky After Rain* - suggests a linear "before and after" scenario in which education leads automatically to behavioural change. The videos' plots may also be attributable to the storyboarding process which structures a sequencing of events that is linear and

cumulative (see Cahill 2010 on the need to challenge chronological and/or linear narratives in PV work). As Kothari (2001: 149) comments, researchers are asking participants "to adopt and play a role using certain techniques and tools, thus shaping and, in some instances, confining the way in which performers may have chosen to represent themselves". In her writing on storytelling and protest, for example, Polletta (2006: 9) argues that "final events in the story resolve the problems raised by earlier events in a way that tenders a more general normative point". In this case, the reliance on mediation as ending, may have emerged from multiple influences: the conventions we imposed as researchers; a lack of knowledge about what enforcing the 2005 Law entails; and a deeply rooted cultural logic of conciliation that filters through legal and everyday rhetoric.

Conclusion: Feminist Quandaries Revisited

This paper has considered the collective storytelling of domestic violence, from its perceived causes to remedies. It has shown how PV workshops can function as hegemonic spaces in which gender norms and conventional explanations for domestic violence are expressed through the choreographed process of drama making and more spontaneous flow of storytelling between participants. The videos and informal conversations held between participants show alcohol and gender role transgression as commonplace explanations for why violence happens. Meanwhile, redressing domestic violence appears more driven by a moralistic commitment to domestic harmony than to women's wellbeing. In this respect, a culture of impunity for perpetrators pervaded the PV work with the 2005 Law framed in the videos as a nominal threat rather than actionable mechanism for women to pursue justice.

In limited respects, the workshops offered the opportunity for subversive storytelling to circulate. Going beyond social norms that cloak domestic violence (or "fire") in spatially confined silence; the videos showed men and women as assertive characters publically contesting violence against family members. At the same time, failures were also critically raised (often in the conversations in-between videoing) about the lack of assistance offered to families at the village level in such pursuit of help. Of further note was that in each of the videos, the incidence of domestic violence was represented as repeated rather than a singular. In this sense participants, however unconsciously, alluded to the fallacy of reconciliation attempts that keep female victims trapped in a cycle of domestic violence.

In terms of framing PV as a "feminist practice of looking" (Kindon 2003), our paper tentatively suggests that workshops can be seen as spaces of constructive storytelling where hegemonic and subversive storytelling bring to the fore the entrenched social inequalities that policy-makers need to take further heed of. The workshops showed, for example, the underlying discriminatory gender norms that require positive action by the Cambodian government. Indeed, within a broader geographic remit, the recent Second Report of the UK House of Commons International Development Committee (2013) on "Violence Against Women and

Girls" emphasizes the remaining need to focus on changing social norms which are creating a major barrier to effective violence prevention and response.

Together with our experiences in the field, we contend that future research needs further consideration of how feminist praxis might challenge the reproduction of "myths" which wound, and how scholars might create space for activism and education during PV and PAR more broadly. At the same time however, greater dialogue is needed on the potential for researchers to become complicit in *de*legitimising and undermining participants claims to knowledge through such interventions. Given that an accepted norm with PAR is that 'the outsider must be aware of being a participant rather than an expert and expect to be taught rather than to teach' (Winton 2007: 499), this paper has introduced a fraught politics which requires more open discussion – how as researchers we should handle, and potentially even intentionally shape, stories that matter. Although the compatibility of PV with feminist geographical scholarship has been posited as having the ability to destabilise power relations (Kindon 2003), more questioning is needed of the methodological and ethical quandaries that accompany PAR work when the approach's promise of emancipatory discourses are confounded by prevailing norms that underpin unequal gender relations.

Acknowledgements

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