

Article

# Mothering Practices in Cambodia: Making Sense of Physical Disciplining

by

Tale Steen-Johnsen  
Associate Professor, PhD  
Department of Sociology and Social Work, University of Agder  
Norway  
E-mail: tale.steen-johnsen@uia.no

Nicole Dulieu  
Research and Evidence Advisor  
Save the Children International  
United Kingdom  
E-mail: nicole.dulieu@gmail.com

Ann Christin Eklund Nilsen  
Professor, PhD  
Department of Sociology and Social Work, University of Agder  
Norway  
E-mail: ann.c.nilsen@uia.no

---

## **Keywords:**

Cambodia, parenting practices, mothering, physical discipline, cultural scripts for parenting

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31265/jcsw.v16.i1.368>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

**Abstract**

The physical disciplining of children is widespread globally. To work towards ending physical disciplining, we need to understand this practice's local and contextual justifications. In this article, we explore Cambodian mothers' rationale for the physical disciplining of their children, as we seek to address two questions: 1) How do Cambodian mothers perceive physical discipline?, and 2) How do they negotiate and justify physical disciplining practices? Based on 10 group interviews with mothers of small children, and in different communities in Cambodia, we found that the physical disciplining is a common practice used to correct behaviours considered unhelpful, impolite or disrespectful. However, there are ambivalent attitudes toward this. This suggests that physical discipline is not a static practice, but rather one that is constantly negotiated. We argue that Barbara Rogoff's concept of *cultural scripts* for parenting is well suited for making sense of how physical discipline is justified among Cambodian mothers.

*Keywords:* Cambodia, parenting practices, mothering, physical discipline, cultural scripts for parenting

### **Mothering Practices in Cambodia: Making Sense of Physical Disciplining**

Domestic violence, including violence against children, is a global concern. The United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) unite all signatory nations in an aim to end all forms of violence against women and girls (Target 5.2), as well as abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against children (Target 16.2). Despite this international commitment, close to 300 million children aged 2–4 years (an estimated two in four) experience violent disciplining, and approximately 250 million (an estimated 6 in 10 children) are physically punished (UNICEF, 2017: 19). An estimated 1.1 billion caregivers say that physical punishment is needed to properly educate and raise children (ibid.).

Cambodia is no exception. A survey about violence against children, which was conducted in 2013, revealed that many of Cambodia's children experienced physical violence at home (Ministry of Women's Affairs, Cambodia et al., 2014). Moreover, this survey revealed that mothers were the most common perpetrators of the first incident of a child's physical and emotional violence; this is a finding that resonates with a UN multi-country study on the pathways between childhood trauma and harsh parenting (Fulu et al., 2017).

In this article, we explore Cambodian mothers' rationale for physically disciplining children. How do Cambodian mothers perceive physical discipline? How do they negotiate and justify physical discipline practices? Based on 10 group interviews with Cambodian mothers in different communities, we present how they justify and practice the physical disciplining of their children. Mothers remain the primary caretakers in Cambodia, which is why we have chosen to focus on mothering, rather than parenting (Surtees, 2003:31; Brickell 2011b: 1362). We suggest that Barbara Rogoff's (2003) concept of *cultural scripts* for parenting is well suited for making sense of how physical discipline practices are justified. Rogoff's theory underscores that parenting practices are socially constructed, and "make sense" in a local context. In the upcoming analysis of physical disciplining practices in Cambodia, we start by characterizing the values that Cambodian mothers claim to be important when bringing up their children. We then describe how the mothers sanction behaviours that deviate from these values, and how they justify physical disciplining as part of

their parenting script. The analysis reveals an ambivalence among the mothers when it comes to the physical disciplining of their children.

### **Understanding Physical Disciplining**

The terms “violence”, “child maltreatment”, “corporal punishment”, “harsh parenting” and “physical discipline” are often used interchangeably. The World Health Organization (WHO) broadly defines child maltreatment as “all kinds of abuse and neglect”:

Child maltreatment is the abuse and neglect that occurs to children under 18 years of age. It includes all types of physical and/or emotional ill treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust, or power. (WHO, 2016)

The Committee on the Rights of the Child (2006) defines “corporal” or “physical” punishment as...

...any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light. Most involve hitting ("smacking", "slapping", "spanking") children, with the hand or with an implement—a whip, stick, belt, shoe, wooden spoon, etc. (General Comment No. 8)

Meanwhile, “discipline” can be defined as “behaviour by parents in response to and intended to correct misbehaviour by the child” (Douglas & Straus, 2007: 304).

Physical discipline can therefore be understood as physically coercive actions aimed at correcting the behaviour of children.

Although corporal punishment is widespread, according to Douglas and Straus, it is the most controversial aspect of discipline. These authors concede that the difference between corporal punishment and physical abuse, in practice, hinges on whether the child is injured seriously enough for the case to be classified as abuse by child protective services, regardless of the parent’s intent (Douglas & Straus, 2007: 305). Thus, the perception of what may be defined as discipline and abuse is relative to contextual (i.e. legal and cultural) variations.

We subscribe to an understanding that perceptions of physical discipline are socially constructed, and that the societal acceptance and normalization of such practices are established and maintained within the family. This notion builds on research that depicts how parental practices are transmitted between generations, despite their

potentially harmful effects (e.g. Fulu et al., 2017). Douglas and Straus refer to studies that discuss whether the harm of corporal punishment is lesser in societies where it is approved and deemed necessary; this is because children in these societies do not mistake it for rejection, but rather perceive it as a form of good parenting (Douglas & Straus, 2007).

Physical discipline arguably implies that the rationales of adults in terms of physical disciplining might become “colonizing” and “restrictive” upon children (Pérez et al., 2016). We acknowledge that even though physical discipline might be culturally acceptable in local contexts, it violates children’s rights. Moreover, regardless of societal acceptance, children might experience physical discipline as being painful or humiliating. In this article, we focus on Cambodian mothers’ justification and practice of physical discipline, and not on how physical discipline might occur in arenas outside of the home, such as in schools.

### **Cultural Scripts for Parenting**

An important dimension of socialization is *culturalization*, or the adoption of culturally specific norms and values (Frønes, 2016). Implicit in this understanding is the acknowledgement that parents in diverse societies might have different ideals and goals for their children, and what is considered appropriate in one context might be inappropriate in another. This might be the case even if there is a universal international agreement about an overall aim, for instance, that children should be protected from violence, as stated in the UN SDGs and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Setting aside potential conflicts of interest, the key question relates to the interpretation of how a phenomenon, such as child violence, might be understood by both researchers and social service practitioners, and not on how physical discipline might occur in arenas outside of the home, such as in schools.<sup>1</sup>

Barbara Rogoff’s theories on the cultural nature of human development are relevant to help shed light on how Cambodian mothers understand and justify the physical disciplining of their children. What her theory brings to the table is a perspective of

---

<sup>1</sup> It should also be noted that we do not suggest that there is a link between physical discipline and sexual abuse. The focus of the article is solely on the physical disciplining of children in the domestic arena.

how cultural practices need to be studied as embedded in- and shaped by the social and cultural environment in which they take place. Rogoff claims that there are *cultural scripts* for upbringing in various contexts, and that these might be very different from international ideals. The Western, middle-class ideas of upbringing, which have become somewhat normative, are linear and treat childhood as a preparation phase for adulthood. Viewing mothering practices in light of this ideal, only focusing on how they differ from the Western golden standard, will render us blind to how parenting practices make sense in the context in which they are situated. Rogoff underscores the need to go beyond ethnocentrism when attempting to understand how and why parents in different cultural contexts raise their children. She claims that children develop as participants in local communities, and their development can only be understood in light of the cultural practices of their communities, which is constantly changing (Rogoff, 2003, p. 3).

Rogoff understands cultural development as interactive, and emphasizes how we are all culturally situated. Accordingly, she warns against seeing one cultural practice as superior to another, claiming instead that scholars need to understand cultural aspects and variations in human development in order to find practical reasons and understand human development worldwide (Rogoff, 2003, p. 7). In each community, human development is guided by local goals, prioritizing learning to function within the technological context of that specific community (Rogoff, 2003, p. 23). We use Rogoff's perspective to open the perspectives of what Cambodian mothers do when they physically discipline their children, and more importantly, *why* they do it. By looking for the mother's own justifications of how and when to use physical disciplining we acknowledge that such practices, in line with Rogoff's thinking, emerge from, and make sense in the context in which they are applied. We have similarly, in line with her advice, attempted to study physical disciplining as a culturally situated practice, thereby challenging an ethnocentric stance which would immediately have led to discussions of how physical disciplining should be avoided.

Similarly, the concept of *parental ethnotheories*, associated with Harkness and colleagues (2007), refers to the cultural models that parents hold about children and families, including their role as parents (Harkness et al., 2007: 67). Parental ethnotheories are the key to understanding the strategies that parents apply when

raising their children (Harkness et al., 2007: 66). Harkness et al. have studied parents from different communities, and found that various communities hold very specific understandings of children's intelligence and personalities. It is through the theoretical perspectives of Rogoff and Harkness et al. that we explore Cambodian mothers' perceptions of physical discipline and their practices in the bringing up of their children.

### **Physical Discipline in the Context of Cambodia**

Cambodia is demographically one of the youngest countries in Southeast Asia, with more than one-third of the population (estimated to be nearly 15.5 million) below the age of 14. The living conditions for most Cambodian children are harsh, often with a high risk of mortality and stunting. The vast majority of Cambodians live in rural areas, with only about 20% residing in urban areas. The literacy rate of the total population is less than 80%.<sup>2</sup>

Corporal punishment is not yet fully prohibited in Cambodia, whether at home, in day-care or alternative care centres (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children and Save the Children, 2017). Although little research on parental ideals and practices in Cambodia exists, there is reason to assume that the physical disciplining of children is widespread. A 2013 survey on violence against children, conducted by the Cambodian Ministry of Women's Affairs and UNICEF, revealed that many of Cambodia's children experience physical and emotional violence, as well as sexual abuse (Ministry of Women's Affairs, Cambodia et al., 2014). Physical violence appeared to be particularly common. More than half of both females and males aged 18 to 24 reported at least one experience of physical violence before the age of 18. For the 13- to 17-year-old age group, approximately 60% had experienced physical violence; nearly 30% of these teenagers, of both genders, experienced emotional violence from a parent or caregiver. This survey further revealed that mothers were the most common perpetrators of physical and emotional violence (Ministry of Women's Affairs, Cambodia et al., 2014). This finding corresponds to the aforementioned UN multi-country study on violence in Asia and the Pacific, which reveals that, compared with fathers, mothers more commonly smack their children as

---

<sup>2</sup> Demographic data were retrieved from <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/kh>.

a form of discipline (Fulu et al., 2017). The authors suggest that this might reflect the fact that mothers take the primary responsibility for child-rearing.

This concurs with studies on the key features of contemporary Cambodian culture and their implications for child protection. For example, the Christian charity organization, Tearfund, surveyed 1,314 Cambodian school children in 2007, and found that child ill-treatment was widespread (Miles & Thomas, 2007: 394). Among the children surveyed, 43% reported having experienced, at some point in their lives, physical punishment by their parents, 29% experienced physical punishment by their teachers and 37% experienced bullying by their peers. Moreover, 16% of the children in the survey said that they had been touched on the genitals since their ninth birthday, and a remarkably high number, 22%, reported having witnessed the rape of a child by an adult (Miles & Thomas, 2007: 394).

A statistical analysis drawn from the 2014 Cambodian Demographic and Health Survey of 1,809 women indicates that the mothers' agency is a significant mediating factor in decreasing their justifications of child abuse (Grace, 2019: 1). This suggests that mothers have an important role to play in healthy child development, and in ensuring that children are protected from harm.

It is commonly assumed that the so-called "communitarian" beliefs frequently associated with Asian family values, such as obedience, hard work and helping others, are strong among Cambodians; this is also true when residing abroad (e.g. Baudinet, 2018; Brickell, 2010; Tajima & Harachi, 2010). Several studies indicate that there has been a historically strong reliance among Cambodians on hierarchical family structures that involves a high tolerance for physical discipline. This is particularly manifest in studies on Cambodians in exile, wherein the norms pertaining to family life are challenged. For instance, a study of cultural considerations in Cambodian child-rearing, conducted among Cambodian refugees in the US<sup>3</sup> in the mid-1990s, revealed that the family was the most important structure in the life and identity of a Cambodian, and that life was ordered within a hierarchical structure (Kelley, 1996). One consequence was that Cambodian mothers were more reluctant

---

<sup>3</sup> A large number of Cambodians settled in California after the Khmer Rouge regime came into power.



than Western mothers to cuddle and nurse their new-born baby. Furthermore, Cambodian mothers paid little attention to the different stages of child development, and seldom distinguished between different developmental phases (e.g. infancy, toddlerhood, pre-school age, etc.).

Similarly, a more recent study on the child-rearing beliefs and physical discipline practices of first-generation Vietnamese and Cambodian immigrants to the US found that, among the Cambodian respondents, obedience was considered the most important value to teach children (Tajima & Harachi, 2010). This same study revealed that more than half the respondents used physical punishment with their child (e.g. spanking, slapping or hitting with an object), and found evidence of the intergenerational transmission of physical discipline. This finding corresponds with the UN multi-country study (Fulu et al., 2017).

A study on public knowledge, attitudes and practices pertaining to children's rights in Cambodia revealed the prevalence of traditional beliefs and practices, which emphasizes family and parental reputation or "honour" (Gourley, 2009). Power differentials between elder–younger family members are hierarchical and pronounced in traditional Cambodian culture. As Ovesen, Trankell and Öjendal argue, in Cambodian culture, "All relations are hierarchically ordered" (1996: 36). This is manifested in daily life and epitomized in rituals and greetings, in which younger people are expected to bow to their elders (*bong*) who have authority and status. Moreover, gender differences are pervasive, and the moral norms of conduct differ markedly between men and women.<sup>4</sup> Miles and Thomas (2005: 395) found that human rights ideals, despite gaining some acceptance in Cambodian culture, "have also been subsumed under traditional hierarchies of deference, so that parents are seen to have more rights than children". It has been argued that Cambodian parents do not encourage conflict resolution through apologizing, because this would involve a loss of "face" for both the child and parents. A Khmer proverb says, "Do not take

---

<sup>4</sup> The traditional moral codes of conduct, known as *chbap srey* (for women) and *chbap proh* (for men) were taught in Cambodian schools until 2007. These codes feature proverbs valuing a girl's purity and virginity. For instance: "Boys are like gold; girls are like cloth: gold can be washed clean but once cloth is stained, it is ruined." Although these codes are no longer recited in schools, their normative influence on how girls and boys are raised cannot be rejected (Brickell, 2010a, 2011b).

fire from the inside to the outside;” thus, appearing as a victim may mean a loss of “face” (Miles & Thomas, 2007: 396).

Although these values are at odds with modern ones and may serve as obstacles to the realization of children’s rights in many areas of family life, it seems reasonable to argue along with Gourley, who stated that, rather than imposing modern values into a society that is presumably not prepared for it, a “middle way” is needed, in which the value of the parents’ traditions (on the one hand) and children’s rights (on the other hand), are acknowledged and respected (Gourley, 2009). Our study takes a similar stance. Although we firmly believe that physical discipline is detrimental to a child’s well-being and development, we acknowledge that such practices are widespread, and even considered necessary in certain cultural contexts (Douglas & Straus, 2007). Our intention in this article is therefore to explore Cambodian mothers’ justification of physical discipline in order to understand the rationale behind it.

## **Methodology**

The data presented in this article consist of 10 semi-structured group interviews with Cambodian mothers in three different locations in Cambodia: a remote area primarily consisting of self-sufficient households, a semi-rural area with some degree of industrialization and in Phnom Penh, the urban capital. These group interviews included between six and 10 participants. The mothers were all from low- and middle-income families. The interviews conducted in the remote and rural areas transpired in local community houses, while in Phnom Penh they took place at the office of the independent research institute, Indochina Research Limited (IRL). Our motivation for selecting a mixed sample was to reveal a variation of experiences. Due to the relatively low number of participants, the sample is not fit for a comparative analysis. The participants were also offered monetary compensation<sup>5</sup> for their participation in the study.

---

<sup>5</sup> The compensation was 15 USD each. We acknowledge that monetary compensation for research participation is controversial. Generally speaking, we think payment should be avoided as an incentive for participation, but can be offered to compensate for time use. To avoid self-selection to be based on the prospects of payment, we did not inform the interviewees about this prior to the interviews.

The group interviews were conducted in the Khmer language by experienced facilitators from the IRL. The interview guide was developed by this article's authors. Before the interview process, the facilitators received a two-day training that focused on how to conduct group interviews and the related ethics. The translation and conceptualization of specific words and phrases were discussed with the facilitators, back-translated and then underwent revisions.

The interview questions emerged from our initial curiosity about how early childhood development ideals, as promoted by international development agents and non-governmental organizations, correspond with local notions of childhood and parenthood.<sup>6</sup> We did not initially set out to conduct a study on physical discipline as a mothering practice, but rather on mothering from a broader perspective. However, reading through the interview transcripts, we discovered that physical discipline was a contested topic among the interviewees, and that it could provide an interesting angle for addressing mothering ideals and values. Apart from a pragmatic need to delimit this research's scope, the choice to focus exclusively on mothering, instead of parenting more broadly, derives from the fact that women remain the main caretakers in most Cambodian households.

Group interviews are appropriate for conducting explorations and revealing peoples' values and attitudes. Group interviews might elicit "thicker information since group members will respond to what the other say" (Repstad, 2007: 99). In our opinion, such interviews are also suitable for acquiring insights into how participants negotiate their ideas and opinions about ordinary practices and uncontested topics, such as parenting. We are particularly interested in norms related to parenting, and group interviews are well suited to eliciting such norms. Nevertheless, it should be noted that some participants might feel more inhibited from speaking freely when participating in a group, which could pose a possible limitation to the findings we present here.

---

<sup>6</sup> The project upon which this article is based is part of a larger research interest on Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) initiatives in the Global South. See Nilsen (2017) and Nilsen & Steen-Johnsen (2019).

To help facilitate a discussion on parenting, we introduced drawings into the interviews that show different situations in mother-child interactions.<sup>7</sup> According to Gillian Rose, visual methodologies, such as photo-eliciting strategies, are particularly useful for exploring everyday situations, as they visualize ordinary and taken-for-granted situations that can be difficult to portray by using abstract words (Rose, 2012: 305-306). Moreover, visualization gives the participants a more independent and active role in the research process.

The drawings that we used depicted situations of parent-child interactions, which were assumed to be either positive or provocative: reading, playing, doing the dishes, feeding, hugging, scolding and slapping. When a drawing was introduced, the mothers were asked what they thought the drawing depicted. Following up, they were asked what they thought about the depicted activity.

In writing this article, we have focused on the interview sequences following the introduction of two of the drawings (Figures 1 and 2), addressing what we discovered to be a contested issue. Obviously, it poses a methodological shortcoming that we were not present during the group interviews, and in the analysis had to rely on transcripts of translated interviews. Clearly, some nuances were lost in translation.<sup>8</sup> Still, having access to 10 group interviews represents quite an extensive amount of data material which, across the various different interviews, enabled us to see patterns of topics. The facilitators of the group interviews were Khmer women who were well versed in contextual understandings of the topic. However, they were representatives of the urban middle class. Hence, a sense of identification and trust between the facilitators and interviewees could not be taken for granted.

Our analysis is essentially inductive, and was carried out through a thematic categorization of the interview data. We used NVivo 11 software to conduct this categorization. A thematic analysis, in which we looked for repetition, similarities,

---

<sup>7</sup> The drawings were made by N o w h e r e Art Studio in Phnom Penh, in collaboration with the authors of this article and the facilitators (see Figures 1 and 2).

<sup>8</sup> One example is the word “child”, which has two corresponding terms in the Khmer language. In addition, concepts such as “child violence” do not have an exact equivalent in Khmer. The quotes in this article are taken from the translated transcripts, which underwent proofreading by the transcribers.

differences and local explanations, allowed us to find patterns in the material (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

### **Values and Norms of Mothering Practices**

During the group interviews, the Cambodian mothers were asked to reflect on what they thought their children needed to have a good life. This was an open-ended question aimed at capturing the values that they thought were most important for their children to learn. The answers clustered around the following core values: being polite, listening to their parents, helping with household chores, attending school, doing homework and not playing too much. These findings are in line with the so-called “communitarian” beliefs (e.g. Baudinet, 2018; Brickell, 2010; Tajima & Harachi, 2010), and were found across all the groups, with slight variations in emphasis.

A majority of the mothers were preoccupied with the importance of politeness. A mother in an urban area explained this in the following way:

(...) In order to get along well with our society, we need to have good morals, good health and be polite.

In six out of 10 group interviews, the word “polite” occurs as a description of a value. In some interviews, the mothers elaborated on what politeness means, primarily linking it to treating elderly people well.

A mother tied politeness to interactions with older people in the following way:

I teach [my children] to use polite words with older people, even with their own siblings (...).

Another mother had a similar reasoning, as she said:

We need to teach them, since they are kids. Tell them how to respect their parents and older people. Provide them with knowledge, and tell them to choose the right ways to live.

Helping with household chores seems to be closely connected to the value of politeness. When parents tell their children to help, the children are expected to comply. According to the mothers whom we interviewed, doing housework obediently is a core value.

The following reply from a mother underscores that helping with household chores and respecting older people are interlinked values:

My youngest child is always good to me because he always helps me do some housework, and [he] worries about me when I am sick.

In a different group session, a similar connection between these two values is seen in the following expression from a mother. She had this reply when asked whether it is good to discipline your children:

It is good because children will have more responsibility. For example, they will help their mother with some housework, such as cleaning the house, bringing water and watering vegetables and flowers.

The value that Cambodian mothers place on politeness and being helpful exemplifies a cultural code that is indicative of a particular parental script of upbringing (Rogoff, 2003).

In the following section, we look at the sanctions imposed by parents toward the child when these values are breached. We show how the physical disciplining of children is invoked in instances where the children are seen to be disobedient, or transgress values that have been emphasized as important by the mothers.

### **Why and How Cambodian Mothers Use Physical Disciplining**

As mentioned in the Methodology section, stories about physical disciplining often came in response to showing the mothers two particular drawings (Figures 1 and 2). This opened up possibilities for interesting and quite detailed accounts of why and how Cambodian mothers physically discipline their children.

One example can be taken from an interview in which a mother explained what happens when her daughter refuses to help her with household chores:

*Mother:* In the morning I ask her to gather [her] younger siblings' clothes and separate them. She needs to wash her own clothes and then wash the dishes. For meals, I prepare [them] by myself, because I'm afraid she will spill our food.

*Moderator:* What happens if she doesn't do these tasks?

*Mother:* I will use a rod to hit her arm or legs, and ask her not to be like this the next time.

This quote is interesting for at least two reasons. A justification for physical discipline is given: The mother can hit the child when she does not do what she is told (i.e. the child breaches the values of politeness and respect for older people). Furthermore, there is an indication in the latter part of the quote as to what is considered appropriate punishment for breaching these values: A rod can be used to hit the

arms and legs. As we shall see later, this specification of how physical discipline can be practiced is shared by many mothers. Using a bigger stick or hitting the face seems to be considered too harsh by many of the mothers whom we interviewed in this study.

Many of the mothers have clear justifications for how physical discipline can be practiced. More specifically, they depict which zones of the child's body are considered appropriate to hit (e.g. legs, arms and the butt), and which ones are not (e.g. head, face and "body"/torso). They also describe what kinds of tools they use for disciplinary measures.

After having been shown a picture of a mother slapping her child (Figure 1), a group of mothers in an urban area had the following exchange:

*Moderator:* How about this picture?

*Mix:* Child violence.

*Moderator:* Have you ever hit your children?

*Mix:* Yes.

*Moderator:* Which part of his body do you hit?

*Mix:* His butt, hands and legs. We never hit his body.

*Moderator:* How about you?

*Mother 1:*<sup>9</sup> Hands and legs.

*Moderator:* Have you ever hit his butt?

*Mother 1:* Yes, I hit everywhere.

*Moderator:* Who has used a rod to hit their children?

*Mother 2:* I used my two hands.

*Mother 3:* When I used my hand to hit him, he [wasn't] afraid of me, so I needed to use a rod or incense stick.

*Mother 4:* I used a small [tree] branch.

The focus on the hands and legs as acceptable body parts upon which a child can be hit was confirmed by several informants. The interesting part of this conversation is how specific these mothers were in outlining how physical discipline can be practiced. This suggests that, in this context, the cultural script for mothering contains provisions about which body parts can be targeted in physically disciplining practices.

---

<sup>9</sup> Mothers 1, 2, 3 and so on are used generically. This means that Mother 1 is not necessarily the same person as Mother 1 in another interview transcript.

### **Ambivalence Toward Physical Disciplining**

Some mothers were confident that the use of physical discipline was a good way of socializing children. As an example, in response to the image in which the parent slaps her child (Figure 1), a mother from an urban area claims that:

I think it is good because it is a kind of teaching/advising, and it does not affect anything.

Based on her attitude, it seems okay to hit a child if it is part of a socialization agenda aimed at instilling knowledge in the child. This seems to be linked to values that we previously identified: (the children) being polite and listening to those who are older than them. However, not all of the mothers were this straightforward in their approach to physical disciplining.



*Figure 1: Mother slaps child.*

In the following section, we unpack how there seems to be a great deal of ambivalence among mothers regarding the use of physical disciplining.

In response to the drawing in which a mother points a finger at a child's face, apparently scolding her for bad behaviour (Figure 2), a mother says:



We cannot use violent action while teaching our children. Pointing a finger at their face is considered violence.

Even so, later in the same interview, the same mother admits that:

I never hit, but I pinch sometimes.



*Figure 2: Mother scolding child*

In phrasing it this way, the mother indicates that she is aware that she exercises some kind of power when disciplining her children; she even suggests that it can be considered a form of violence. Nonetheless, she will, if she deems it necessary, resort to forms of physical disciplining such as pinching.

Some mothers initially displayed disdain at the prospect of physically disciplining their children. They see the harm that this practice can impose upon the mother-child relationship. Yet, just moments later, the same mothers admit that they hit their children. This is revealed in the following exchange that took place when the group was presented with the drawing in which a mother slaps the child with an open hand (Figure 1):

*Moderator:* Now I have some pictures to show you. What message does this picture try to show you?

*Mother 1:* Don't use violence with children.

*Mother 2:* A mother hits her child.

*Mother 3:* A mother slaps her child's face. This is called "child violence."

*Mother 4:* A mother is angry with her child, so she wants to hit her child.

*Mother 5:* This is violence. A mother hits her child.

*Mother 6:* Yes, this is violence.

*Moderator:* Do you think this picture is good or not?

*Mix:* Not good.

*Moderator:* Why?

*Mother 6:* [A] child may feel disappointed when his mother hits him like this.

*Mother 5:* We cannot hit our children.

*Mother 4:* Mothers cannot hit [their] children. We need to advise and console them [instead].

*Mother 3:* I think child violence is not good, because it can affect their health or they can become disabled children.

*Mother 1:* It is not good because [a] child needs us to console them. Anyway, they will imitate this action when they grow up.

*Moderator:* Have you ever hit your children?

*Mix:* Yes.

*Mothers 1&6:* I hit his hands and legs.

*Mother 3:* I hit his butt.

*Mother 4:* I hit his hands

This interview's transcript reveals an interesting group dynamic when the topic of physical discipline is discussed. When the mothers are asked what they think of the drawing, they immediately say it is bad, and some label it "child violence". They reflect on how physical disciplining can harm the relationship between a mother and her child. They display an insight into the harm that physical discipline can cause a child, both physically and psychologically. Yet, just moments after saying this, the same mothers admit that they hit their children.

How can such contradictory views co-exist? One explanation, which we articulate below, could be that these mothers subscribe to an ideal of parenting, passed on by global and national campaigns, that disfavours physical discipline, while simultaneously upholding a socio-cultural practice rooted in their own childhood experiences.

We suggest that this indicates a sense of ambivalence among the mothers when it comes to the use of physical disciplining. The mothers see it as bad and harmful but, at the same time, will use physical discipline as part of their mothering practice. This suggests a script for mothering that is flexible and subject to constant negotiations, in line with Rogoff's presentation of these scripts (Rogoff, 2003: 3). Physical disciplining seemed to be prevalent among the mothers we interviewed, but how the mothers

justify and negotiate their practices indicate dynamism and flexibility. It might also indicate an openness to change.

### **Final Reflections**

The analysis of Cambodian mothers' perspectives on- and experiences with mothering has taken us one step closer to making sense of physical disciplining in this context.

As described earlier in this paper, in Rogoff's theory on human development, she stresses that children develop as participants in local, dynamic communities (Rogoff, 2003: 3). Cambodian mothers' tolerance for physical discipline is rooted in ideals that favour politeness and respect for the elderly. Given that violence and physical discipline are widespread in Cambodia, one can assume that many of the mothers whom we interviewed have some sort of first- or second-hand experience with violent behaviour, thereby entailing a certain normalization of it. This is underscored by the observation that these mothers talked about physical disciplining as a matter-of-fact, though rarely seemed reluctant to admit that they hit, pinch or use some other sort of physically coercive action towards their children. Paradoxically, however, during the interviews, exchanges about the importance of avoiding violence frequently occurred.

As exemplified in the final quote, there are several instances in which the mothers seem to use an established term to characterize the portrayed action in the drawings (e.g. as "child violence"), and talk about it in pseudo-professional ways, for instance, depicting how it is detrimental to the child's health or social relations. This opens for the consideration that these mothers might be aware of current debates and knowledge about the harmful effects of physical discipline. As such, our findings provide insight into emerging changes in the intersection between established ways of life and new knowledge.

Through this study, we have attempted to depict the locally rooted beliefs that rationalize the physical disciplining of Cambodian children. Still, this study should not be read as a snapshot of the static parenting practices that depict the values and sanctions imposed on children when these values are transgressed. To further explore the motivation behind the physical disciplining of children, a reflexive and

dynamic approach is required. This view is in line with Rogoff's understanding of how dynamic cultural practices and scripts are the contexts that set the premises for the development of children.

As stated earlier, Rogoff claims that the understanding of human development has been based on a theory on the social function of middle-class communities in Europe and North America (Rogoff, 2003: 3). These theories may be inadequate for explaining how values and new knowledge come into play in shaping parenting practices in other contexts, such as Cambodia. An important implication of our findings is thus the acknowledgement that practices, which by and large are perceived as detrimental, might survive despite an emerging awareness of their harmfulness.

## References

- Baudinet, M. (2018). *Cambodia in the Twenty-First Century: A Short Social Study*. International Printing House Phnom Penh.
- Brickell, K. (2010). Gender, poverty, and work in Cambodia. In S. Chant (Ed.), *The International Handbook of Gender and Poverty. Concepts, Research Policy* (p. 661-667). Edward Elgar.
- Brickell, K. (2011a). We don't forget the old rice pot when we get the new one: Discourses on Ideals and Practices of Women in Contemporary Cambodia. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 36(2): 437–462.  
<https://doi.org/10.4337/9781849805162.00086> <https://doi.org/10.1086/655915>
- Brickell, K. (2011b). The 'Stubborn Stain' on Development: Gendered Meanings of Housework (Non-)Participation in Cambodia. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 47(9), 1353–1370. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2010.527955>
- Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (2006). *Violence Against Women in Cambodia*. Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights. <https://www.licadho-cambodia.org/reports/files/105LICADHOREportViolenceWoman2006.pdf>.
- Committee on the Rights of the Child (2006). *General comment No.8*.  
<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/10263/pdf/gc8.pdf>.
- Douglas, E. & Straus, M. (2007). Discipline by Parents and Child Psychopathology. In Sass, A. & Sass H (Ed.), *The International Handbook of Psychopathic Disorders and the Law* (p. 303-319). John Wiley and Sons.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470516157.ch18>
- Fordham, G. (2005). *Wise Before Their Time: Young People, Gender-Based Violence and Pornography in Kandal Stung District*. World Vision.  
[https://childhub.org/en/system/tdf/library/attachments/wvi\\_violence\\_pornography\\_070402.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=17735](https://childhub.org/en/system/tdf/library/attachments/wvi_violence_pornography_070402.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=17735).
- Frønes, I. (2016). *The Autonomous Child. Theorizing Socialization*. Springer.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-25100-4>
- Fulu, E., Miedema, S. & Roselli, T. et al. (2017). Pathways between childhood trauma, intimate partner violence, and harsh parenting: findings from the UN Multi-country Study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific. *The Lancet Global Health* 5(5). e512–e522. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X\(17\)30103-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(17)30103-1).

- Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children and Save the Children (2017). *Progress towards prohibiting all corporal punishment of children in ASEAN member states. ASEAN progress briefing.*  
<http://endcorporalpunishment.org/resources/regional-progress-publications/asean-progress-briefing-2017/>.
- Gourley, S. (2009). *The Middle Way. Bridging the gap between Cambodian culture and children's rights.* NGO Committee on the Rights of the Child.
- Grace, K. R. (2019). *Contact with early childhood education programs and child abuse in Cambodia: The role of mothers' agency and involvement in early stimulation activities.* Leigh University.  
<https://preserve.lehigh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6563&context=etd>.
- Harkness, S., Super, C. M. & Moscardino, U. et al. (2007). Parental Ethnotheories of Children's Learning. In J. Bock, & S. Gaskins (Ed.), *The Anthropology of Learning in Childhood* (p.65-85). Alta Mira Press..
- Kelley, B. R. (1996). Cultural considerations in Cambodian childrearing. *Journal of Pediatric Health Care* 10(1). 2–9. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0891-5245\(96\)90067-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0891-5245(96)90067-X).
- Miles, G. & Thomas, N. (2007). Don't grind an egg against a stone: children's rights and violence in Cambodian history and culture. *Child Abuse Review* 16(6), 383-400. <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.1010>
- Ministry of Women's Affairs, Cambodia, UNICEF Cambodia, & the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014). *Findings from Cambodia's Violence Against Children Survey 2013: Summary.*
- Nilsen, A. C. E (2017).: The expansion of early childhood development services and the need to reconceptualize evidence. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 18(3) 269–280. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949117731021>
- Nilsen, A. C. E & Steen-Johnsen T. (2019). The Early Childhood Care and Development Mission and the Institutional Circuit of Evidence. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 18(1), 84-98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X19860558>
- Ovesen, J., Trankell, I. B. & Öjendal, J (1996). *When Every Household Is an Island: Social Organization and Power Structures in Rural Cambodia.* Uppsala University: Department of Cultural Anthropology.
- Pérez, M. S., Medellín, K. & Rideaux, K. S. (2016). Repositioning childhood lived experiences within adult contexts: A black feminist analysis of childhood/s

- regulation in early childhood care and education. *Global Studies of Childhood* 6(1). 67–79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610616631132>.
- Repstad, P. (2007). *Mellom nærhet og distanse: Kvalitative metoder i samfunnsfag*. (4. rev. utg.). Universitetsforlaget.
- Rogoff, B. (2003). *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*. Oxford University Press.
- Rose, G. (2012). *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Ryan, G. W. & Bernard H. R. (2003). Techniques to Identify Themes. *Field Methods* 15(1). 85-109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X02239569>.
- Surtees, R. (2003). Negotiating violence and non-violence in Cambodian marriages. *Gender and Development*, 11(2), 30–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/741954314>
- Tajima, E. A. & Harachi T. W. (2010). Parenting Beliefs and Physical Discipline Practices Among Southeast Asian Immigrants: Parenting in the Context of Cultural Adaptation to the United States. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 41(2). 212–235. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022109354469>.
- UNICEF (2017). *A Familiar Face: Violence in the lives of children and adolescents*. United Nations Children’s Fund. <https://data.unicef.org/resources/a-familiar-face/>.
- WHO (2016) *Child Maltreatment*. World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/child-maltreatment>.