

THE NEXT GENERATION:

YOUNG PEOPLE FROM CAMBODIA

Q. Do your parents talk about the past?

A. My mother has told me some of her experiences during the genocide. She lost her mother. There were seven in her family but only two survived – she and her sister – because of lack of food or sickness. Everyone only had porridge and they had to work very early in the morning until the evening. It was very hard. My mother got caught for stealing rice. They put her in prison for this. She got away when the Vietnamese troops arrived.

Now we are past the sorrow of it – it becomes a memory of our parents’ generation. But as the next generation, we are living with the effects of it.

Q. Could you explain that?

A. The generation that grew up during the Pol Pot Regime have a lot of trouble having close relationships. Intimate relationships – I don’t believe in that, because I don’t see very many families like that here. I am very romantic. I like to believe in the possibility of a romantic family where everyone loves each other – I wish to work for that possibility but I don’t see that now.

So many men go to brothels or gambling. Some women are also involved, but it is more with the men. This can cause many problems for the family because it uses up all the money. So the child has to be the one that solves the problem by going to work. Children have to solve their parents’ problems.

Q. What was it like in the 1980s and 1990s?

A. During the 1980s there was the internal war – what we called the “cleaning up”. There was an obligation for everyone to participate – the boys and men were collected for this, but the women had to make more food. All guys who had left school or were not working with the government, they had to join the army.

Many people had to join different labour groups – building the roads, cleaning up the land. They had to follow the temporary authorities – the transition. During this time we were in the communist state – we got support from Russia and China.



Q. How was your education organized?

A. We had to sing national songs to encourage all young Cambodians to be brave and to fight and to be engaged in the army – you would hear this all the time. We were encouraged to say bad things about our king. Then when we turned into a democracy we were supposed to say only good things about him. We studied about the communist leaders in Grades 3, 4, 5, and 6.

You were not allowed to learn English or French. You could be put in prison for that – even if you were young. We studied only Vietnamese and Russian. And if you had any contact with people abroad you would be punished.

Cambodia was closed to the world so I thought the world was very small. We were very controlled – we had to obey the rules of the family and the family had to obey the authorities – my grandfather was the head. It was very male oriented – but that is even now. And it affected my life so much.

Q. In what ways?

A. Every family has its own story. But there are some trends. Everybody recognizes that the level of violence in Cambodia is extremely high. And the sexual violence is high – sexual exploitation is high. And the morals are low. The survivor mentality started with Pol Pot and has continued since then.

Q. What do you mean by “survivor mentality”?

A. People only thinking about how to survive and that is all they can think about – that takes everything. And after a while that becomes a mentality, a way of relating to the world. So attitudes get changed, the way people relate to each other changes.

During Pol Pot we collapsed, the whole country collapsed. People felt that they weren't even really part of a human society. Most people have not been able to move beyond that survival stage. They live under such poverty. They are like they are in the mud of it.

But families that are a little better off, they start to think about dignity. That is just how it is; it is the next stage of life. Once you get beyond survival you can begin to think about friends, about dignity and about enjoyment of life. But people still do not think very far - they think only about themselves and their families - not about society or about the world or even in terms of the future.

Q. What are their main concerns?

A. Money. Money has become very important in our society now. We think it is because of the Pol Pot Regime and having to start from zero. So now outward signs of success like a car or other materialism are very important, especially for those who were in the war. It says, "I am doing well, I am as good as everyone else."

We see now that people are just preoccupied with their enjoyment of life. They talk about having a brighter future - life that goes up not down. By this they mean having money. Being rich means security. So people don't think very much about morals. They just think about surviving, of doing what people who have money tell them to do.

Q. How does this affect Cambodia?

A. We are concerned that the morals of our society are going down. This is very hard for teenagers because they have the problems in the family and they don't know where to go.

Now in our society we have a lot of corruption. There is a big gap between the rich people and the poor people. The rich people are determined to keep their good lives - they will do anything to ensure this. And at the other end, the poor people are doing everything just to try to survive. So the gap is becoming bigger and bigger.

Our culture, our morals, our traditions were destroyed; most of it has gone because of the war. And then there were so many influences - culture from the west, everywhere. And we had no reference



points to reject it. We had a tendency to take things from others because we were so weak and also because our culture was not in place.

Q. Why is the impact of outside influences so strong?

A. Because we are so poor. We are not strong because we are poor. And we have had so many changes that it is hard to have a strong connection to anything. We have had many different political regimes.

First we had a collective regime, then the Pol Pot regime, then communism and now democracy. So people have moved from one form to another - from survival and the authority of the Pol Pot regime, to communism where you had to be so careful. Now we have democracy where we are supposed to participate openly with each other. Now we are supposed to participate and to think about the greater good for people.

Q. So the transition was too rapid?

A. Yes. What happened to our parents' generations was so much. They experienced the whole thing. They experienced so many different regimes so many political regimes - and the killing, the genocide, so much. And during all that time you couldn't trust anyone, in order to survive you couldn't trust anyone. It is not easy to suddenly give democracy to people.

A lot of things are out of control and are messy here. For an outsider they can look and see that Cambodia it is a beautiful country, they can't see the situation inside. To the outside world we try to show that we are very strong. The Minister of Culture did this to ensure the pride of the Cambodian men and Cambodian people. It was to strengthen them. But can we be that strong? In real life it is different.