

Segment Spotlight: Physically Disabled

Who are they?

Thirty years of conflict and its aftermath have left Cambodia with one of the highest rates of disability in the world. Disability affects Cambodians of all religions, ethnicities and socio-economic levels, with the highest concentration among the poor.

Cambodia is one of the most heavily land-mined nations in the world. Even today, two people are injured or killed by landmines or unexploded ordnance daily, adding to the figure of 36,000 Cambodian amputees.

Among the poor, many become permanently disabled by untreated illnesses in infancy and childhood. The destruction of the nation's infrastructure and health services during the war means that today there are large numbers of people living with impairments from vaccine-preventable illnesses such as polio and measles. 70% of women are assisted by unskilled attendants during labor and birth injuries are also a significant cause of disability for both mothers and babies.

Stunted growth due to malnutrition is common. Also, iodine deficiency causes intellectual impairment in many rural communities.

What beliefs affect their lives?

One popular interpretation of karma teaches that disability is caused by bad actions in previous lives. This belief can lead to discrimination against people with disabilities, making it difficult for them to become fully involved in family and community life.

The physical and attitudinal barriers which exclude children with disabilities from going to school and keep adults with disabilities from vocational training have long term consequences. Without education it is difficult for disabled adults to support themselves. They remain poor and dependent upon others, a cycle of poverty which often has a devastating effect.

While a physical or psychological impairment may be a source of frustration for the person with a disability, it is the barriers put up by society which cause the more devastating 'handicap'.

'Difficulty in the heart' (Khmer: *pibaak che*) is often used by people with disabilities to describe the emotional distress caused by experiencing ongoing social marginalization.

What are their needs?

Pray that as the nation's medical, health and social services are gradually rebuilt, poverty-related disabilities will become less common and the needs of people with existing disabilities will be adequately addressed.

Activities to raise awareness are having some impact in breaking down prejudices and misunderstanding about disability, but more needs to be done. Pray for Cambodian communities and churches to become increasingly inclusive of people with disabilities.



Fast Facts

Number of amputees:

36,000

Percent of children stunted by malnutrition:

45%

Number of women who will die in childbirth:

One in fifty

