Event(ful) spaces of organised legal encounter: Reflections from a client consultation competition on domestic violence law in Cambodia

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Over the past five years, geographers’ engagement in legal observation and/or intervention has begun to gain momentum, with a particular emphasis on the courtroom. Courtrooms are positioned as epicentres of law(yering) in-action, yet their pre-eminence should not deflect from efforts to build a more inclusionary geography of law attendant to other, less high-profile and official, spaces of law. In this paper, I elaborate on this argument by interrogating a client consultation competition (CCC) that I co-organised on domestic violence law with staff and students from a higher education institution in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The paper hones in specifically on the political interface that the CCC event fashioned between myself, the student competitors, and the state. Drawing on participant observation and audio-recordings of the event, in addition to post-competition focus groups I held with students, the paper demonstrates the value of cross-pollinating social geographic work on events and encounter with legal-oriented scholarship in the discipline on spaces and actors of law. Chased within the political, their fusing together permits researchers to widen their horizons beyond the court event and to think creatively about other legal infrastructures in which law and legal practice comes to be known and operationalised. The paper therefore asks that geographers committed to fostering justice not only step inside the courtroom, but also venture into spaces where its future prospects are born.

KEYWORDS
Cambodia, domestic violence, encounter, event, law

INTRODUCTION

Over the past five years, geographers’ engagement in legal observation and/or intervention has begun to gain momentum, with a particular emphasis on the courtroom. It is here where a growing number of geographers have variously witnessed, and sometimes even taken part in, war crimes trials (Jeffrey, 2019), asylum claims (Faria et al., 2020; Gill & Hynes, 2020, this issue), and other cases (Cuomo, 2020, this issue; Walenta, 2020). Yet according to Caroline Faria et al., this emerging cohort of scholars is counterpoised against the majority of legal researchers, and indeed legal geographers, who rarely step into a courtroom, despite the fact the courtroom is a highly significant legal space, one densely concentrated with legal
meaning and through which legal subjects, spaces, and instruments are performed, created, disciplined, and managed (2019, p. 2).

Courtrooms here are positioned as epicentres of law(yering) in-action, yet their pre-eminence should not deflect from efforts to build a more inclusionary geography of law (Chouinard, 1994) attendant to other, less high-profile and official, spaces of law.

In this paper, I elaborate on this argument by interrogating a client consultation competition (herein CCC) on domestic violence law in Cambodia. CCCs encourage the promotion and development of the skills involved with client interviewing and counselling and involve students working in teams of two. In professional terms, client consultation is a daily form of private practice undertaken in advance of formal legal action so that lawyers can engage with, and understand, their client's priorities. In the competition, the students interview and advise a client (a role-playing actor), and are assessed according to criteria relating to interpersonal skills and the legal problem presented. I contend that if the courtroom is given to be the foremost event space of law and its practice, then the classroom cum simulated law office can also be envisaged as a modest, yet eventful, space worthy of study. The courtroom is not a bounded space of legal adjudication “severed from the wider social field,” nor is it “a closed system of knowledge of practice” (Jeffrey, 2019, p. 2). Moving from a separatist to more integrative approach to understanding courtrooms and their relationship with society means bringing into orbit formative and preparatory spaces of law-making, including those in higher education and professional training. In other words, the practice of law and its extra-courtroom origins should have greater standing in the geographies of law project.

The paper that follows is preoccupied specifically with the political interface that the CCC event fashioned between myself, the student competitors, and the Cambodian state. So often the state has an “absent presence” in our research and direct contact is limited, either by lack of access and/or because academics exclude state actors from their analyses. As Alison Mountz explains, the latter is problematic: while “state practices are often concealed in praxis” and “decision-making processes are obscured,” academics have a tendency “to reify this disembodiment when they marginalize [these] people from their analyses” (2004, p. 324). The CCC (like the courtroom) is a more-than-legal space in this sense, and its organisation offered the opportunity both for the researcher, and for students as witnesses and participants, to experience face-to-face encounters with government representatives bound up in spatialities and power geometries of law beyond it. Part of the value of the CCC event is its enabling of this very encounter, in which legal knowledges and expertise, and divergent subjectivities, readings, and pragmatics of law, can be better understood.

This is important given that women's ability to claim their legal rights is heavily mediated by government actors and the powerful messages they send out. Likewise, client consultations are encounters which have moral, emotional, and intellectual dimensions of experience to them. As such, they can facilitate a relatively candid space to explore and better comprehend the viewpoints of government actors. In this context, the paper pushes for dialogue and exchange between literatures on events and encounter in social geography and those in legal geography that emphasise the political nature of law-making and legal knowledge (Jeffrey, 2011).

On the former front, an event is generally understood as something that happens and is significant in some regard (it is eventful). Geographers are now writing extensively on “events” and their various modalities (Coleman & Stuessi, 2016; Duru, 2019; Simonsen et al., 2019) and there is just cause to think more about “the event” as means to secure life (Anderson & Gordon, 2017). Scholars in geography regularly draw on Elizabeth Povinelli’s (2011) writing to show how the powerful are invested in thresholds of eventfulness not being met by social justice movements in order that hegemonic power relations and their interests be protected. Women's attempts to claim their legal rights in Cambodia, for example, are often dissuaded by local officials who seek to maintain domestic violence as uneventful to those in power (Brickell, 2020).

Rather than legal reform remaining a “quasi-event,” one that “never quite achieve[s] the status of having occurred or taken place” (Povinelli, 2011, p. 13), I position the CCC as a space that rendered domestic violence eventful to students who had not studied the 2005 law in their curriculum before. In a country where the law curriculum focuses on traditional commercial private practice or international law firm needs (Rosenbaum, 2015), re-orienting the focus to domestic violence law and a national law pertaining to welfare and social justice was a key stimulus behind the decision to co-organise the CCC. The CCC emerged from the “ethical practice of resourcing” (Driscoll Derickson & Routledge, 2015, p. 1, emphasis in original) the production of knowledge via the organised legal encounter. Its impetus picks up from, and contributes to, scholarship on academic responsibilities in research (for example, Jazeel & McFarlane, 2010; Noxolo et al., 2012) in its carving out of an event space for a law ordinarily absent in the curriculum.

The non-eventful status of domestic violence in popular and political consciousness is also challenged by the CCC and the resources dedicated to bring it into existence. As a slow violence occurring gradually, “out of sight,” and “dispersed across time and space” (Nixon, 2011, p. 2), the CCC offered a visible and concentrated focus on an issue ordinarily obscured from view. Such understanding of violence as ongoing, banal, and often unrecognised is, of course, a long-
standing endeavour of feminist work (Christian & Dowler, 2019). As Christian and Dowler continue, the “invisibility of slow violence is deeply linked to the invisibility of feminized experience and space more broadly” (2019, p. 1072). Connected to this, the commonplace occurrence of domestic violence is elided as a political concern by the preoccupation with “hot” violences such as war (Christian et al., 2016).

In one respect, the CCC can be thought of only as a “punctual” moment which “attracts and holds the attention of a public and/or governing authority” for a fixed time (Anderson et al., 2019, p. 5). Yet despite this, and the inability to challenge domestic violence as a quasi-event “swallowed up by ongoing life” (Povinelli, 2011, p. 84), it represented an “interval for action” (Anderson et al., 2019, p. 5) bringing together students, scholars, and government representatives into convened encounter. “By transforming the invisible, dispersed, and uneventful into the visible, compact, and eventful,” the CCC brought the “dailiness, ordinariness, livedness” (Povinelli, 2011, p. 154) of slow violence into the orbit of discussion. As a researcher therefore, the CCC was a concrete way to apprehend, evaluate, and re-reflect on the quasi-events of domestic violence and domestic violence law that would not be possible otherwise. The event and the encounters it hosts and forges are thus arbiters of revelatory power and occasions of hope-making (Anderson, 2020; Wee et al., 2019). As the feedback from students indicates later in the paper, the CCC did, in fact, lead some students to ask searching questions of government representatives in the event, to consider why they had not previously studied domestic violence law, and to appreciate the grounded realities that victims faced. As a result, the CCC reached beyond its duration, much like slow violence which stretches beyond the location and duration of any original violence.

The CCC was also a legal space of organised encounter where the everydayness of domestic violence and the operation of law was brought forward as an ethical response to long-standing failures to address this infringement of women's rights. A previous study I had undertaken had established a profound hiatus between legal reform and transformative change for women in Cambodia (Brickell & Prak, 2014). This was based on the inadequacy of financial and human resources to support legal training on implementation and enforcement of domestic violence law, confusion over women's rights, and a political environment in which women were being actively discouraged from seeking justice (Brickell, 2015, 2020). The CCC functioned, therefore, as an eventful setting where laws and persistent issues pertaining to domestic violence in Cambodia could be amplified.

In so doing, the paper builds on geographical research on spaces of encounter and their eventful potentialities in furthering the legal geography project. The majority of scholarship on encounters has been focused on the unplanned, yet organised encounters are nonetheless crucial, especially to those oriented to social justice (Wilson, 2017a, 2017b). The meaningful contact facilitated by and in the CCC between the different interlocutors is formative of the learning it enables, a “process of worlding,” which emerges from “the distanciated ecology of interactions between texts, people, sites and objects” in this punctual space (Jazeel & McFarlane, 2010, p. 115). The learning capacity afforded by the CCC event is precisely these moments of worlding, including failures and transgressions, which arose from the performance and re-mediation of domestic violence law. By “emphasising contact zones as method as well as theory,” Kye Askins and Rachel Pain (2011, p. 804) emphasise, too, the significance of organised events for fostering interaction. While the CCC was brought into being as a legitimised space aligned inside, rather than outside, of the political mainstream, the exposure of students to the raw politics surrounding the journey and purpose of domestic violence law offered more dissonant perspectives than they initially conceived. There is, therefore, unexhausted merit in thinkers on encounter and events engaging more with organised spaces of law, from classrooms to courtrooms, which offer new insights into power relations, and the undermining as well as fostering of possibilities for change.

The next section of the paper provides more contextual information on the organisation of the CCC and the actors involved. The empirical heart of the paper is then provided in a section that examines the CCC as an event(ful) space of organised legal encounter through the mixed-method qualitative research. The concluding comments include final reflections on the CCC and the overarching contributions of the paper for cross-pollination of social and legal geographic thought.

2 | THE CLIENT CONSULTATION COMPETITION

I co-organised the CCC (Figure 1) with staff and students from the Law and Public Affairs Faculty at Paññasatra University of Cambodia (PUC) in 2014. The CCC focus on domestic violence law arose from an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)–(then) Department for International Development (DFID)-funded research project (2012–2015) on the (in) efficacy of the country’s 2005 domestic violence law (for full information, see Brickell et al., 2014). The CCC concentrated accordingly on Cambodia’s legal processes and provisions for victims seeking legal protection and/or redress. The CCC idea also emerged through my prior knowledge of PUC’s Legal Clinic Program, which provides hands-on training and
experiential learning for students. Two of their students had worked with me as research assistants on past projects and I had remained in touch throughout their education at PUC. The CCC was therefore the outcome of research projects and relationships built over several years.

I co-applied with PUC and was awarded funding from the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) to hold the event. That the event was FCDO-funded is a reminder of what Pat Noxolo et al. identify as “the politics within which the ethical call to responsibility is being played out” (2012, p. 427). Our application was, for example, tailored to highlight the students’ role in future “good governance” in the country and the role of the event in raising the profile of the 2005 law in the public domain. The “locational imperatives” (2012, p. 427) of the CCC were therefore multiple, rooted in the language and rationalities of its funder, and my own position as principal investigator of an ESRC-DFID grant in which there was expectation of “impact.” To me, however, the overarching logic of the event was to ensure that the testimonies collected from domestic violence victims in the study, and critically, the victim-led learning they had generated, would have a tangible outlet and outcome. I had also been nervous and had found it difficult to engage with the government about the findings of the research, given how critical they were of the law itself and its implementation and enforcement. However, the CCC, funded by the FCDO, provided a legitimate forum through which to invite productive collaboration with these very stakeholders.

Day one comprised three presentations and Q&A sessions, which took place in a large but crowded classroom in the university (Figure 2). It was attended by 70 students who had signed up voluntarily to watch or actively take part in the CCC. The first was by the Ministry of Women’s Affairs’ (MOWA’s) Legal Protection Department chief on the content and scope of the 2005 law. I then gave the second presentation based on findings from the ESRC-DFID project and explained the challenges that lawyers and clients characteristically faced when trying to defend women’s legal rights using it. The presentation was noted by a number of the students in their feedback:

The new thing for me is the law itself. As a law student, domestic violence law is not a subject. Even though it was short-term training, I have learned a lot. It’s like we took a three-credit course! [chuckling sound] I think the explanation is quite comprehensive, and I get the core of the law. One more thing are the research findings. According to your research, I can find out more about real life practice, not only about the law, but also its implementation. (Post CCC focus group participant)

These first two sessions varied from the regular CCCs the university held; the training on the law would ordinarily have been delivered in-house by university staff rather than a specialist civil servant, and the grounded experiences of the law as told through an academic research project would not have been featured in the programme. The event was designed deliberately therefore to bring the students into unique and simultaneous dialogue with the MOWA representative and me, with both of us positioned quite differently as government decision-maker and scholar, respectively. In the afternoon, the third talk was delivered by a PUC law professor on the “art” of client counselling, a standard and mandatory part of a CCC. The five-stage method taught included: (1) preliminary briefing of the client (including firm policies, interview format, limits of confidentiality, lawyer code of conduct and ethics); (2) the client’s story and problem description; (3) clarification by the lawyers (checking for the accuracy of information and paraphrasing to check their understanding is correct); (4) conclusion and analysis (presenting “sound options” and the advantages and disadvantages of each to maximise rights and
minimise risks to the client); and (5) summarisation of notes from the consultation and sub-division of tasks moving forward after the client has left the office. This template consultation gave form and structure to the organised encounter of the competition and provided the legal scaffolding around which the event unfolded. Indeed, the end of day one culminated in a showcase CCC by advanced year students who had represented Cambodia at international competitions and whose performance was then critiqued by the MOWA representative, NGO gender specialist, and law professor (Figure 2).

In contrast to day one, which had a lively, warm, and casual atmosphere to it, day two was more serious and studious in sensibility. It was held in a more formal classroom in which students sat individually in rows (Figure 1). Day two was dedicated to the preliminary CCC round during which 16 teams competed and received feedback from the judging panel. That the event was competition-based, in which each team strove to be recognised for their superior legal knowledge and client consultation skills, links to the nature of legal practice rooted in the presentation of evidence and argument-making on the relative behalf of, and benefit to, their client. Students worked in self-selected, mostly mixed-gender teams of two, and responded to a client’s problem following the methodology that they had been taught. A MOWA counsellor who had intimate professional knowledge of working with female domestic and sexual violence victims played the client and the legal scenarios given to the students and counsellor were co-written by me and PUC staff based on the composite experiences of domestic violence victims in the ESRC-DFID study. The four most highly ranked teams were then assigned mentors for a month of study and technique practice in readiness for the final competition. Scores were awarded for each stage of the client consultation and included additional points for effective teamwork and communication. The final competition was held in a packed university auditorium with over 100 students (Figure 3) and ended with a closing address by the MOWA Secretary of State and prize-giving by the then Deputy British Ambassador to Cambodia. This final competition was formal in presentation and tone, the students dressing up in office-attire, a student compere standing at a podium orchestrating the swift transition between teams, and the Cambodian government dignitaries wearing traditional sampot – long pieces of fabric wrapped around the waist.
To learn more about their experiences, in the week after the CCC I ran two mix-gender focus groups bringing together students who had taken part. With consent, I audio recorded these focus groups. The full duration of the training days and final competition were also recorded with participants’ consent (all were held in English), and I took notes as part of my participant observation. In the months that followed, the CCC audio was transcribed verbatim, including all the presentations, Q&A sessions, client interviews, judging feedback, closing address, and focus groups. This decision reflected my desire to explore the range of inter-animations that emerged at the CCC and not just those competitive moments of the teams working with the client.

3 | ENCOUNTERING THE STATE

The knowledges and expertise circulated in, and mediated through, the CCC forged a temporary space of opportunity for encounter between me (as the researcher) and the state, as mediated through the training needs and performances of the students. The ESRC-DFID research had comprised over 120 interviews with female domestic violence victims, legal and health professionals, NGO workers, low and high-ranking police officers, religious figures and local government authority leaders. Yet the ESRC-DFID project had also heightened my interest in the attitudes of policy-makers from MOWA, previously illusive actors who I was keen but nervous to engage with, given the critical findings of the research.

Martin et al. argue that legal geography research needs to pay more attention to lawyers as actors “co-constituting space and law” (2010, p. 2). In this vein, the CCC also provided a novel and discrete time-space for the meeting of trainee lawyers with government officials who are too often hidden in plain sight. This was not lost on several focus group respondents, one of whom noted:

There are several reasons that caught my interest to join it. Firstly, I was interested in the content. To me, it is the first time I have joined a workshop related domestic violence … For me, it was about the speakers as well. Going through the agenda, there are speakers from various backgrounds and speakers from Ministry of Women’s Affairs. I used to watch TV shows about domestic violence, and I thought it is maybe more interesting because those who are in charge of domestic violence will come and talk, so we will get more accurate information and in-depth understanding about domestic violence by participating.

The CCC’s involvement of government actors was appealing not just for the students, but their bringing into direct proximity also provided the opportunity for me as a researcher to temper generalised views I had developed about state inaction and the willingness of government staff to challenge long-held views on women’s subordinate place in Cambodian society. I had grown disillusioned through the ESRC-DFID research at what I saw. My positioning of the CCC as a punctual, or momentary, space of encounter in this way links to “the etymology of encounter” as “historically coded as a meeting of opposites” and tending to assume a lack of commonality (Wilson, 2017b, p. 452), as I had. Yet the positive face-to-face encounters with several MOWA staff members questioned my unnuanced negativity. This arose, in part, because of intra-government tensions I sensed in the narratives circulating at the CCC. A common utterance made by the students, in different variants at the event, for example, was “divorce shall be the last resort.” The students were both exposed to and themselves enacted dissonant voices on the desirability and necessity of divorce.

For example, while the MOWA Legal Protection chief on day one of the training was consistently clear that women’s needs were of primary concern, even if this resulted in divorce, the overarching onus on family togetherness was instilled in the competition’s closing address by the MOWA Secretary of State:

The Law on The Prevention of Domestic Violence and The Protection of Victims has a stated purpose to ensure the harmony of families. No one wants to break up the family relationship. If families break down, there are many consequences. There is no happiness and the children have difficulties. If families break down, the state has to deal with it too.

As is evident in the closing address, the championing of the family is of central concern, so much so that it “suppresses and normalizes the individual by emphasizing the whole” (Mountz, 2004, p. 329). This is something that was also witnessed in the preceding competition rounds, during which the majority of teams indicated the necessity of victims to reconcile with their husbands on the basis of socially normative ways of doing gender and family in Cambodia. The dialogues that emerged at the CCC reflected a continuum of moralistic and political contestation around marriage, family, and the purpose of domestic violence law. This is perhaps not surprising: encounters in public fora “carry with them a set of
contextual expectations about appropriate ways of behaving which regulate our coexistence” (Valentine, 2008, pp. 328–329). With this there can be a fear of “getting it wrong” (2008, p. 330), which could certainly be identified. The more-than-legal encounters at the CCC are set too then, within a constellation of other embodied social and cultural norms which the students, like the government representatives, were navigating.

For example, Cambodia’s domestic violence law defines its purpose not only as “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” (Article 1), but also in official guidance to “limit the number of divorces” (Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC), 2007, p. 41). Domestic violence law is thus constructed through, and becomes a conduit for, wider political claims to non-violent customs and traditions, which intensify rather than relieve the pressure on Khmer women to uphold the supposed balance and integrity of family life in a rapidly changing society (Brickell, 2015).

With respect to exposure, students were again made aware of the challenging journey of the law into existence as a result of these tensions. In the Q&A session with the chief of MOWA’s Legal Protection Department on the first day, a student put her hand up and asked the pertinent question “Why did the law take so long to ratify?” She was told:

In the first draft we enshrined some articles related to punishment and we submitted this to the National Assembly … I don’t want to blame anyone, but some Excellences, especially His Excellences said ‘If this law is enacted, there will be many widows in Cambodia’. This is why when we submitted the law to the National Assembly in 2001/2002 it was rejected. However, they requested a change to the content so that the punishments were withdrawn.

In the discussion group that followed the event, it became clear that the occasion to ask questions of the government representatives had made an impression on many of the students. For example, one focus group participant reflected:

What I learnt from the event is that the Ministry tries to adapt the law, but the National Assembly does not seem willing to help. Normally, they think that domestic violence is a private problem not a national one … 
And one more thing is because they [government decision-makers] are mostly male, domestic law makes women’s rights narrow.

The reply to the student's question, and the observations taken away by a student in the focus group, brings to the forefront male parliamentarians whose bodies remain out of sight yet are integral to the stunted ratification journey (1996–2005) and the diminished potency of domestic violence law. The political and moral effects of their embodied positions is writ large in domestic violence law. As a result, the CCC event brought to the fore, both for me and the students, how legal change is a complex and often slow process in which state and non-state actors negotiate. The CCC exposed not only the fraught legal processes behind legal outcomes, but also the multi-scalar politics of law in which the transnational system of human rights was construed by the Cambodian government as a vertical imposition from above (for further detail, see Brickell, 2020).

As a likely consequence of male parliamentarians’ interventions, for example, from an international human rights perspective, Cambodia’s domestic violence law contravenes UN guidance that new laws should adopt “a comprehensive legislative approach, encompassing not only the criminalization of all forms of violence against women and the effective prosecution and punishment of perpetrators, but also the prevention of violence, and the empowerment, support and protection of survivors” (2010, p. 2). Domestic violence law, however, is penalty free, a point not lost on a couple of the students in the event’s aftermath. For example:

For me, I was interested in two points. First, is domestic violence. Second, it is client consultation. For domestic violence, I did not know about the law. When I went to the workshop, [I learned that] DV law is more of a guide than a penalty law; the penalty law is the Criminal Code. I now know that domestic violence law can guide you to penalty law.

Vera Chouinard notes that there are “rarely unambiguous ‘victories’ in legal change, but rather complex processes of appropriating law for diverse purposes and agendas” (1994, p. 434). The CCC not only enabled me as a researcher to see “behind” the scenes, but also provided a window into the cultural and political significance of a law whose penalty provisions had been severed in its ratification phase.
4 | CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Helen Wilson writes that “‘encounter’ should not be taken as an empty referent for any form of meeting, but is rather laden with value and thus worthy of more conceptual scrutiny than it has received to date” (2017b, p. 465). The more-than-legal encounter that the CCC forged has brought this clarification into focus and has also demonstrated how the organised space of encounter with domestic violence law can be thought of in political terms. The space of experience that the CCC cleaved with the state provided a punctual educational window into the journey and outcomes of domestic violence law for both me as a researcher and the students who participated. While the slow violence of domestic violence and the uneventful status of domestic violence law in the status quo of Cambodian everyday life continue, the CCC as an event space of encounter both ushered and bore witness to the eventfulness of law-making in government rhetoric and practice. Provoked by an ethical drive to challenge the non-eventful status of domestic violence in popular and political consciousness, as well as educational curricula, the CCC, albeit momentarily, elevated it from the hegemony of ordinariness and the mundane. In this sense, the CCC was political in its very happening, an “impact” activity undertaken with the next generation of legal practitioners in the country. It created a space for enlivened engagements with legal rights and new encounters between researchers, students, and government representatives on the slow violence of domestic violence.

As a consequence, the paper has shown the value of cross-hatching social geographic work on events and encounter with legal-oriented scholarship in the discipline on spaces and actors of law. Chased within the political, their fusing together permits researchers to widen their horizons beyond the court event and to think creatively about other legal infrastructures in which law and legal practice come to be known and operationalised. The classroom cum simulated law office is one such event space where the legal comes to be learnt and practised and in which knowledge and skills are tested. The paper therefore asks that geographers committed to fostering justice not only step inside the courtroom but also venture into spaces where its future prospects are born.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank the ESRC and FCOD for funding the research from which the data presented in this paper is taken from. Access requests to underlying research materials should be addressed to rdm@royalholloway.ac.uk. In Cambodia, sincere thanks is extended to Paññasastra University of Cambodia (PUC) and to staff from the Ministry of Women’s Affairs.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Access requests to underlying research materials should be addressed to rdm@royalholloway.ac.uk.

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How to cite this article: Brickell K. Event(ful) spaces of organised legal encounter: Reflections from a client consultation competition on domestic violence law in Cambodia. Area. 2020;00:1–9. https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12660