

HUMANS FOR SALE

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After the end of the reign of the Khmer Rouge, the socio-economic imbalances in Cambodian society only worsened. The disparity in educational quality, employment opportunities, and education between the rural and urban areas increased (UNIFEM, 2002, p.10). The wealth gap between the middle and upper classes and the poor has led to the emergence of the human trafficking industry. The issue of human sex trafficking is a problem around the world. However, as Nicholas Kristof (2004) has highlighted in his columns in *The New York Times*, the sale of girls and women in Cambodia is particularly nightmarish.

The purpose of my project was to create information and training materials about human sex trafficking for the women of the Cambodian Women's Crisis Center (CWCC). The idea was to inform these women so that they could learn how to take special precautions to prevent being preyed upon by sex traffickers.

Takashi Yasunobu defines human trafficking as

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons: by threat or use of kidnapping, force, fraud, deception or coercion, or by giving or receiving of unlawful payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another, and for the purpose of sexual exploitation or forced labor. (Yasunobu, 2004, p.4)

Eighty percent of trafficked victims are women and children. The vast majority of women are forced or coerced into the sexual exploitation. Known as modern day slavery, human trafficking is the largest and fastest growing criminal business in the world. This huge human rights issue victimizes people through forced labor, stealing organs, forced marriages, and especially, sex.

Human trafficking is a global issue, affects all countries, and is emerging at a fast pace. It is the third most profitable criminal activity in the world after drug and arms trafficking. As much as \$4 billion in revenue annually has been attributed to the sex trafficking industry. However, it is a complex industry that is difficult to track. Each year 600,000 to 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders, 80% of whom are women, 50% are

children. Trafficking grew 50 percent from 1995 to 2000. About 1,000,000 children are forced into sexual exploitation every year. The women and children who fall prey to sex traffickers are often migrants, runaways, displaced persons, and those living in poverty. While some women enter the sex industry voluntarily, most are abducted, coerced, or sold by their families (Yasunobu, 2004, p.4).

THE EMERGENCE OF SEX TRAFFICKING

Southeast Asia is known as the center of trafficking activities. Cambodia is a destination country for women and children who are trafficked from Vietnam and China for sexual exploitation. The most common locations within Cambodia to take trafficked victims are Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, and Sihanouk Ville (Yasunobu, 2004, p.4).

For centuries, women in Southeast Asia were regarded merely as commodities to be bought, sold, or traded. Prostitution was introduced to Southeast Asia by Chinese immigrants. As demand increased, Chinese and Japanese women were imported to “service” the Chinese male workers. Southeast Asia went from having issues with poverty, lack of employment and education, to having vast problems with prostitution. As the country industrialized and a segment of the population became wealthier, the demand for sexual services increased, as did the number of brothels and shelter victims of the sex trafficking industry. The emergence of sex tourism also fueled the industry’s growth (Warm Blanket Orphan Care, 2007, para. 4).

Efforts to prevent women and children from falling victim to sex traffickers have begun to occur. Anti-trafficking organizations focus on prevention, protection and assistance with the return and rehabilitation of the victim. Prevention programs tend to focus on women’s empowerment, equality, job training, and safe migration. Local NGO’s advocate the education of women so that they can work and develop more economic control of their lives. Entrepreneurship opportunities provide women with even more control over their lives by providing ownership opportunities. However, Southeast Asian societies also need to focus more on gender equity issues and providing more educational and employment opportunities for women (UNIFEM, 2002, p.12).

In 2007 the Cambodian National Assembly drafted legislation that essentially updated the 1996 legislation known as the Suppression of Kidnapping, Trafficking, Sale and Exploitation of Human Persons (Yasunobu, 2004, p.15). However, the new document has a few issues, which include the lack of effective definitions of trafficking, uncontrollable restrictions on prostitution,

the lack of a protection clause for trafficked victims, and gaps between law and the practice of the laws (Yasunobu, 2004, p.4).

Some Cambodian NGOs are taking a stand against trafficking by campaigning and implementing programs for people and especially victims. They include Cambodian Center for the Protection of Children's Rights (CCPCR), Cambodia's Defender Project (CDP), Cambodian Women's Crisis Centre (CWCC), and Coalition to Address Sexual Exploitation of Children in Cambodia (COSEAM) (Human Trafficking, 2007, para. 1).

It is estimated that 15,000 prostitutes are in Phnom Penh. 35 percent of them are trafficked from China and Vietnam. As a general rule, women and girls are recruited through their own families who believe that the traffickers offer legitimate employment opportunities. The families believe that the woman will be able to send money home. The human merchandise is often sold to brothel owners who pay up to \$350 for each female victim. When victims are housed in the brothel, they are considered to have debt. Brothel owners require the debt to be paid off before the women can make their own money. This debt can take up to six months to pay off, after which the woman makes \$2 per customer before paying the brothel owner for housing (Flamm, 2007, para. 4).

According to UNAIDS (2007), there are various physical and psychological issues that women endure as a result of being trafficked. Women are at risk of reproductive and other gynecological problems, of contracting HIV/AIDS, forced abortions, and physical abuse. For example, 2.2 million women in Southeast Asia are infected with the HIV virus. They make up 29% of 7.6 million HIV positive people in the region (UNAIDS, 2007, para.10). "The human security and human development in Asia is seriously threatened as the epidemic is spreading within climate of stigma, discrimination, denial and ignorance" (UNAIDS, 2007, para.11).

A PROJECT TO HELP WOMEN

For my project, I proposed to become an expert on human sex trafficking in Cambodia. With my newly gained expertise, I created manuals and brochures to help promote awareness about the sex trafficking industry to women and children in rural areas of Cambodia. I also planned to present the information and possible actions to take when approached by a potential kidnapper to the women and children of the CWCC. With the help of the CWCC, and the McMaster Cambodia learning community, I developed brochures that were appropriate for the reading level of the women and children.



IN-COUNTRY ACTIVITIES

During the trip in Cambodia I distributed materials on trafficking to the women of the CWCC, as well as in the villages that we visited. The focus of the brochures was how to avoid becoming a victim. Instead of just handing out the materials, I taught the information to clients and staff through skits, which appeared to be a new learning method for them. The skits had characters that portrayed the trafficker, the victim, and the victim's family and conveyed possible scenarios that could lead to abduction, as well as possible preventative actions.

Not only was I able to teach women, but I also had the opportunity to learn things about the trafficking industry that I was unable to find while researching. While working with the CWCC staff to help me make my skits more realistic, I found out that the girls sold into trafficking by their parents have no say in the decision. As a rebuttal to this issue, I strongly suggested that it is sometimes important to stand up to one's parents when safety and health are concerned and when the job is unsafe or illegitimate.

RESULTS AND REFLECTION

Prior to the Cambodia trip, I spent nearly a year researching and preparing for my presentation and training to the women of the CWCC. I admit that I was surprised to learn new information that is not available in a research book. The best experience was to hear and read about the stories that women had and how they handle issues and circumstances of human trafficking.

Because Cambodian culture places such high value on taking the advice and direction of parents, Cambodian women tend to accept the idea of taking jobs presented to them by friends and even people they do not know. A lot of the trafficking occurs through people who know the girl's parents. This issue of acceptance and trust is a big reason why women are kidnapped and forced into prostitution.

As a Human Resources major, I plan to work directly with people to help them fit their skill set and experience. I knew that my ultimate goals would be directly in line with that of my project to help women in Cambodia. The two and a half week trip brought the whole learning community experience together for me. I explored the history directly; I ate very different foods than I am used to; and I trained women about how to be cautious of trafficking by using skits and entertainment. I gained a much better understanding of Cambodian culture than I ever could have from books. Also I learned how to be adaptable to new situations and environments.

It was ironic to me that Cambodia places great importance on serenity and peacefulness. Cambodia is a country that endured a government that exterminated a huge portion of the population during the Khmer Rouge and yet still maintains a picture of tranquility. This picture of tranquility masks the prevalence of the brutal human trafficking industry. I was grateful that I could learn the real life stories directly from the women who either knew trafficked victims or were victims themselves and apply that knowledge to teach women precautions to take in their daily lives. I have a better understanding of why trafficking is such a problem. The prevalence of abject poverty in Cambodia makes the combat against trafficking much harder to deal with. I hope that McMaster future projects help women and children learn how to find employment on their own.

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