

THE CAMBODIAN WOMEN'S CRISIS CENTER: SAFETY, SHELTER, TRAINING . . . AND THEN?

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"Cambodian women and girls are facing all forms of discrimination and absolute poverty; wherein they have not had proper access to education, health care, nutrition, employment options, protection, and a voice in decision-making" (Cambodian Women's Crisis Center, 2006).

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

The Cambodian Women's Crisis Center (CWCC) is a nongovernmental organization established by three Cambodian women in 1997 in Phnom Penh with the goal to eliminate violence against women. From small beginnings as a basic shelter to provide safety for twenty-five victims of rape, domestic violence, and trafficking, it has grown to a major presence nationally and internationally. With three offices and multiple sites, the CWCC now employs more than 100 people and utilizes hundreds of volunteers to provide a variety of intervention, education, and advocacy services for victims.

Defiance College (DC) established a relationship in 2004 with the CWCC and has been an active partner by conducting training sessions for staff in the areas of program evaluation and monitoring techniques. DC faculty also have assisted with report writing and the development of training materials produced by the organization. All of our efforts have been targeted at building CWCC's capacity to deliver more and better services. In 2006, we began a series of interviews with women who had been the recipients of CWCC services and returned back to their communities. The purpose of the project was to gain a better understanding of the relevance and effectiveness of the services in enabling survivors to become economically viable and self-sufficient.

DESCRIPTION OF SERVICES

The Safe Crisis Shelters provide secure housing and supportive services to victims of rape, domestic violence and trafficking, as well as to their children. These services include literacy and employment skills training. Many clients who use the services of CWCC are illiterate and without jobs or marketable skills. Women who are in need of these training sessions are identified and placed in appropriate courses, such as Life Skills, which also includes literacy training. Employment options include sewing, weaving, reed weaving, cooking, screen-printing, and hairdressing (Cambodian Women's Crisis

Center, 2006). Trainees are taught to sew items such as bags, purses, skirts, and other clothing. They weave towels and scarves and print business cards and other souvenirs (Cambodian Women's Crisis Center, 2005). Ultimately, the purpose of the skills training is to develop the capacity of the women to support themselves and their children after leaving the shelter.

Program staff also attempt to keep abreast of changes in various segments of the Cambodian economy. Areas such as the service industry, skilled crafts, and the agricultural sector are monitored for new avenues of employment opportunity for women. Most recently, pottery was added as a new training option and a skilled artisan was brought in from Hong Kong to teach the craft.

The reintegration and job placement program connects the shelter with the community. The aims of this program include assisting victims to return to their village or relocate to a new community. CWCC works with victims, their families, and local officials to ease the transition particularly in cases where the client has been part of the human trafficking business. The program staff also aid women in finding legitimate employment in garment factories or privately owned sewing businesses (40% of the clients have received skill training in the last three years). Other frequent choices are selling fruit or other food stuffs, weaving, and cooking.



One of the more innovative employment approaches is a revolving fund administered through the CWCC that grants women “seed” money to start a business, either alone or with other clients. A small partnership could begin with as much as \$500. These loans are expected to be repaid so others may also benefit.

The jobs from the training program generate small incomes, but most women end up in better economic positions than they were prior to the trainings at CWCC (Cambodian Women’s Crisis Center, 2006). As indicated earlier, incomes in Cambodia are low, with the average income estimated at \$36 a month. In the 2006 annual report, CWCC reported that monthly earnings for 26% of individuals were \$16 to \$25; 55% were earning between \$26 and \$50; and 17% were earning \$51 to \$75 (Cambodian Women’s Crisis Center, 2006). Weaving as an occupation and hairdressing had the lowest ranges in income (up to \$50), while private tailors, knitting, and printing income was predictable at the \$26 to \$50 range. Private sewing shops offered the entire range, from \$16 to \$75 (Cambodian Women’s Crisis Center, 2005; Cambodian Women’s Crisis Center, 2006).

INTERVIEWS WITH SIX SURVIVORS

While in Cambodia in January 2007, I conducted six interviews of women who had gone through the shelter and reintegration program. The purpose of the interviews was to begin a process of evaluation that would allow a level of information that CWCC could then use for planning purposes. The interviews would also help to gain insight into the lives of these women who were now on their own, trying to survive as sole providers for themselves and their children. We specifically wanted to know about the types of economic activity they were engaged in, the incomes, the types of trainings they received through CWCC, what would improve their lives, and, finally, what their aspirations were. Members of my team included McMaster Scholars Devon Palk and Beth Grafiing and our translator Ms. MOUNG MEARETHEY of the CWCC. Also accompanying us was Dr. Jeanne Gerard from Bowling Green State University’s Department of Family Studies.

All of the former clients interviewed lived in Phnom Penh, two of the women had been trafficked into Malaysia and sold to brothels and the four other women were victims of abuse. All the women consented to be interviewed and share their stories. The names have been altered to respect their privacy.

SREY POI, SURVIVOR OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The tuk-tuk came to a halt after weaving through a maze of narrow alleyways in a destitute area of the city. We got out and walked down a

bleak barren corridor with doorways on either side opening into one-room windowless living spaces, which were approximately twelve feet wide by fifteen feet deep. This is where Srey Poi lives with her three daughters. Her husband inflicted severe beatings for several years until the final time when she sought help from the CWCC. She told us, "If not for CWCC, I would have thrown myself in the river" (Weaner, January 3, 2007).

Srey Poi did not speak English and has a second grade education. Her literacy skills are weak but in her words, "I only deal with other Cambodians" (Weaner, January 3, 2007). Her aspirations are to be more successful by expanding her business and by improving her literacy.

While in the shelter program, she learned to cook and earns her living as a food vendor. She cooks and sells eggs to other Cambodians. Egg vendors are easy to spot at the market or while riding their bicycles in the streets because as many as a dozen cooked eggs are skewered on sticks for easy transport. She sells cooked beef as well. Food vending has a benefit even if the money is minimal because she can feed herself and her daughters as a part of the overhead cost.

She started her business with a \$25 startup loan from the CWCC. Her own estimates of her income are vague, but the living conditions indicate an average of less than a dollar a day. Her daughters supplement the family coffers by doing laundry for the neighbors when not in school and earn as much as 75 cents per wash.

Srey reports that she makes enough income to support herself and her daughters. Her principle expense is the room we are sitting in while talking. There is a bed, a hammock, a bicycle, a charcoal brazier for cooking and little else. It is no more than an urban hut. Although she appears worn down by the life she has lived, she seems happy--no more violence.

SREY WAN, SURVIVOR OF TRAFFICKING

After leaving the first interview, we traveled to one of the bigger roads in Phnom Penh where small food stands and businesses operate just a few feet off of the pavements. We entered a corrugated building that was fifteen feet square. This was the beauty shop and living quarters of Wan, a woman in her mid-twenties. She has been in business for about thirteen months. CWCC provided her with training as a hairdresser during her stay at the shelter.

Srey Wan's journey began while living with her parents. While at her parent's home, she earned money by selling sugar cane drink. It is a common sight in Cambodia; vendors have a cart, lengths of cane, and a press. The



cane is squeezed and captured in a plastic bag and sold with a straw. She was lured by a trafficker with the promise of better work. Unfortunately, she was taken to Malaysia and forced to work in a brothel. She was arrested by the Malaysian police for illegal immigration and spent six months in prison before being repatriated to Cambodia due to the efforts of the CWCC.

While in the shelter program, she received counseling, classes on how to avoid traffickers, hygiene, and sewing classes. She would like to take language classes and expand her business by offering more hair care products and nail polish for sale. Wan reports making \$2.50 per day and up to ten dollars on weekends. She estimates her monthly income to be about eighty dollars a month before expenses. Rent and utilities for the living and work space is fifty dollars a month.

She has no children and is not married at this time. She also reports that she has not been approached by traffickers since leaving the shelter.

SREY PEAP, SURVIVOR OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Near Srey Wan's shop is the restaurant of Srey Peap. It is a busy place located close to a garment factory and is popular with the workers. She has four children who work in the restaurant. She has about a dozen tables. Soup is fifteen cents a bowl.

Srey Peap was the wife of a farmer and lived not far from Sihanoukville, southwest of Phnom Penh. She went with her two children to a shelter to escape physical abuse and threat of death from her husband. She was provided with legal assistance and was able to divorce her husband. She appears to be in her early thirties.

The shelter programs were valuable to her because she acquired the skills that allowed her to live independently of her husband. She took classes in literacy, life skills, and small business management. Srey Peap reports starting with sewing classes, but because of failing eyesight changed to cooking. The training and her small business skills provided her with the tools to start her restaurant and manage her money and expenses.

The restaurant earns almost \$200 a month but \$150 goes for expenses and rent. The building is large enough to accommodate the business in the front and a wall separating it from their living quarters. Behind the five of us are two double beds with mosquito netting, some resin chairs from the front of the restaurant and a door on the back wall leading to an outdoor toilet.

She is a strong woman accustomed to work. We watched her move between her customers and give orders to her staff, which underscored her confidence in her abilities and independence.

SREY SOP, SURVIVOR OF TRAFFICKING

Again in the tuk-tuk for a short ride to a roadside stand selling fruit, eggs, and other foods. The stand's business hours are from one o'clock until dark: the morning is for gathering the food for sale, the afternoon is for selling to people shopping for supper. Sop is the youngest of the six victims we interviewed, a young woman no more than nineteen. We leave the stand to talk and sit some feet away, out of the earshot of those curious about our group. She is shy and the most challenging to draw out in conversation.

Sop was kidnapped by traffickers in Battambang and taken to Malaysia to be prostituted. She was ultimately able to escape from the brothel owner but was subsequently arrested and imprisoned by the police. She was then repatriated through efforts by the CWCC.

She spent her time in the shelter learning to cook and sew. She learned the business skills that she uses to operate her stand from both the CWCC and an aunt. Selling food is a business of choice for her. She also would like to learn English as this would open up new opportunities for more income. However, she states that lessons would be \$2.50 dollars a day, which is prohibitively expensive for her.

Traffickers have approached her since leaving the shelter, but she credits the training and prevention skills learned at the CWCC with helping her to avoid being taken again.

SREY KON, SURVIVOR OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The next visit takes place in a more residential neighborhood. Kon lives in the house she previously occupied with her husband. Her parents live across the road from her. Her parents join us for the interview and sit under the house. We are offered water and oranges for refreshment.

Srey Kon's husband was a Cambodian doctor who physically abused her. She was sheltered for a year with the CWCC and has not experienced any violence since leaving. She has three children (two girls and a boy) who attend school. Her former husband pays fifteen dollars a month to help support the children and does visit them.

Kon is a teacher at the neighborhood school and sells various confections in a property front stand. She attended school through the eighth grade and then a teaching school. She spoke a little English. Her salary as a substitute teacher is \$25 per month and she earns an additional \$30 from selling at the confection stand.

While at the shelter, she learned sewing and cooking. She also identified the counseling, specifically the legal, as being the most beneficial of the services offered. Her reflections on the training for sewing and cooking were that they were only of limited usefulness. She now makes some of the clothing she needs and does repairs. The cooking has been more helpful because it allows her to make desserts, which she sells.

She is interested in how to make more money to benefit her children. She was the most educated and skilled of the victims that were interviewed. She also had the highest standard of living prior to her abuse and divorce and the most visible support from others.

SREY JAND, SURVIVOR OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The final interview of the day took us to a residential area with houses instead of roadside shops with living quarters. We went up a five-step ladder and into the house, where we met not only Jand, but two of her daughters as well.

Jand has participated in a reconciliation process with her husband after staying in the shelter for five months. He is currently looking for work outside of Phnom Penh and so she is living with her three daughters, a son, and her mother. The children all attend school.

Of the skills she learned at the shelter, cooking and running a business have been the most helpful to her. She makes porridge in the morning to feed the family and then to sell at the local market. Later in the day, she sells fish and other staples to the local people. She thought that selling food guaranteed that the family would have breakfast and dinner. She stated that she has been making enough money to save some each month. She is not paying rent. Regarding sewing, she is not skilled enough to open a shop and also cannot compete with the market prices where most area people buy their clothes. The daughters in the family are attending a school where English is taught and also attend a nearby church that is operated by an American sect. Like the other women who were interviewed, Srey Jand would like to increase her business to make more money to help her children.

COMMON THEMES

In light of CWCC's own statistics, the fact that none of our interviewees were sewing for income was an oddity. Last year, 60% of the women who reported employment were sewing for a living (Cambodian Women's Crisis Center, 2006).

All six of the women were self-employed and credited CWCC with teaching them business skills and basic money management. All had family incomes that are average or slightly above for Cambodia, a dollar and twenty-five cents a day. All work hard.

Food vending is a logical choice for a business because of the ability to manage the inventory and little need for storage space. All but one of the women thought that some English skills would be beneficial to them, whether it be to expand their own businesses or to gain other employment. All identify the need to expand in order to increase their income: more space leads to more inventory and more profit.

Small businesses in Cambodia are found everywhere. Micro-lending in the form of a small loan to an individual or sometimes a small group of women is successful in providing start-up capital for a business. But the profit margin is very narrow. The two businesses, restaurant and beauty shop, that have real space requirements are paying rent in order to operate. Whether rents remain stable for these spaces in light of the current economic boom going on in Phnom Penh is a legitimate question to pose. Land prices are soaring due to speculation related to off-shore oil possibilities and the development interests of Korea and other nations. The three of the women renting road-front property are vulnerable because while their expenses may rise, the customers they serve are not a part of the current economic upswing.

This early work is an indication of the importance of CWCC's training programs. Each of the women interviewed illustrated the importance of their human capital and that the more assets you bring, the more prosperous you can become. Women with active support systems, such as their family or an involved spouse or former spouse and with more education and skills, have better living situations. Conversely, those who are more isolated and have fewer assets such as education, have more tenuous living situations.

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