

A STITCH OF HOPE

Elizabeth Grafing, McMaster Scholar

The fragile Cambodian economy is at a crucial turning point. The economics of the country have been in shambles since the occupation of the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979. Foreign aid is crucial to the survival of the country as Cambodia relies heavily on international monetary aid (U.S. Accounting Office, 2002). One of Cambodia's largest exports is textiles, making it an integral part of the economy. Each year the country exports more garments than the United States and is known for its inexpensive labor cost and substantial quality (International Labour Organization, 2004). However, a recent change in the World Trade Organization has heightened the competition between Cambodia and China (Womyn's Agenda for Change, 2004). Within the next few years, Cambodia may lose a huge portion of its textiles export business to China due to cheaper manufacturing costs. This poses a huge problem for Cambodian women, many of whom are employed in the textile industry.

Behavioral norms for women, known as the *Chba'p*, constrain their opportunities to work outside the household (UNIFEM, 2004). Therefore opportunities for women to work from their own homes would allow women to provide for their families while maintaining cultural norms. While many women have been forced by economic circumstances to seek work in garment manufacturing, simply put, working in a factory is hard on women's bodies. The average career of a factory worker is a mere seven years. This may be a result of factory owners seeking younger workers, the lack of leverage held by the unions, and/or the conditions of the factory, which include an excess amount of dust (Womyn's Agenda for Change, 2004).

From my observations, employment options for women in Cambodia beyond working in factory jobs are limited. Cambodian women appear to be employed in four major areas: teaching, factory work, the sex trade, or independent sewing. Each has its limitations and disadvantages. There are few teaching positions, and these often require costly training and offer inconsistent pay. Though work in a factory provides a decent wage, the conditions are physically challenging. Sex work exposes women to the risks of disease, violence, and emotional damage. The fourth option of independent garment construction looked to me like an appealing alternative.

An independent seamstress works from her home for local tailors. The tailors often employ seamstresses as the markets demand, so the work can be inconsistent. If a woman has her own machine, she can also have her own clientele.

From the evidence, it seemed to me that developing a McMaster Scholar project that would provide women in the textile industry with their own sewing machines was something I was interested in. It also would allow the women I worked with to gain income while working at home. I discovered that each sewing machine would cost about \$100 and if purchased in Cambodia, we could avoid shipping costs. Also, Cambodian sewing machines operate without electricity through the use of a foot treadle that propels the needle and requires specific skill to operate, which is very different from what is commonly available in the United States.

My initial goal was to raise \$1,000 in the United States before traveling to Cambodia. This would provide enough money for sewing machines for at least ten women. The outcome I sought was not to simply give the Cambodian women \$1,000 as an act of charity, but to spend \$100 on a machine that could change her life forever, giving her a measure of flexibility and financial freedom that factory workers do not enjoy.

THE SEWING MACHINE PROJECT WAS BORN

Borrowing from John Dewey's reflective thinking methodology for small groups, I took a moment to understand the task at hand. Dewey advocates a two-step process of defining and then analyzing a problem before even thinking about any possible solutions (Beebe & Masterson, 2006). My reflective exercise led to the identification of four problems:

- 1) Raise money for sewing machines
 - o Do so in cooperation with other college fundraising efforts
 - o Raise \$1,000 in just nine months
- 2) Keep track of donors and their contributions
 - o Allow the donations to be tax-deductible
- 3) Employ methods of ethical persuasion
 - o Represent the college in a positive professional manner
- 4) Find the women who need the sewing machines
 - o Distribute the sewing machines

During the assessment, I came to realize that in contrast to most of my colleagues' projects, mine required significant upfront preparation. Not only did I have to conduct research to represent my school in a respectable

manner, but I also had to be persuasive enough to gather the funds necessary for successful completion. In the original project proposal submitted to the McMaster School Advisory Board, I claimed that I would raise enough money for ten machines totaling \$1,000 US. While my largest challenge, in the end I succeeded in raising \$1,800. When combined with the significant discount we were able to negotiate in Phnom Penh, I was able to purchase 28 sewing machines.

RAISING MONEY FOR SEWING MACHINES

In order to accomplish the first task, I first needed to coordinate my funding requests with the Office for Institutional Advancement and the McMaster School. I supplied them with the list of companies I planned on contacting in addition to the packet of information outlining the project and opportunities for donation. After both offices approved the material and list of potential donors, I sent the packets out and followed up with a call one week later. After receiving only a 30% success rate with the businesses, I decided to employ a more personal strategy for soliciting donations.

Both the McMaster School and the Office for Institutional Advancement were aware of the goals of my project and helped to schedule speaking engagements on my behalf. After developing a new strategy, I began to use it frequently from on the macro to the micro scale. By having personal conversations with neighbors, friends, and family, I was able to share the stories of women overseas. Inspired by my words, many people I spoke with decided to donate to the sewing machine initiative. Now I was ready to apply some accounting knowledge I had gained over the past four years.

KEEPING TRACK OF DONORS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS

The donations slowly began to roll in and I developed a spreadsheet to manage the process. With the institutional help from Defiance College, the process was easy. I learned about tax-deductible donations, nonprofit accounting, and the role of thank you notes in developing and maintaining relationships. Creating a strategic process to follow made it easy for me to track and communicate with everyone I needed to.

EMPLOY METHODS OF ETHICAL PERSUASION

In my research I found one article in the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* that was particularly helpful. The authors offered five criteria for evaluating the ethics of a message. They created the acronym TARES to assess “Truthfulness (of the message), Authenticity (of the persuader), Respect (for the persuadee), Equity (of the persuasive appeal) and Social Responsibility (for the common good)” (Baker & Martinson, 2001).

Often before a presentation, sending material, or having a meeting with an organization, I would put my message to the TARES test. Performing research in the prior academic year helped me to prepare the *truthfulness* of my message as I included sources for data in the PowerPoint presentations. Because I discussed issues that I had direct knowledge of, I ensured the *authenticity* of my message. By targeting my speeches to the specific audience, I was able to better communicate a *respectful* message to the persuadee. The donors of the sewing machine initiative were voluntary because I never directly asked any audience for money. This created an *equitable* message, because there was not a hard sell appeal to audiences. Finally, I truly believe that if I hadn't shared the stories of women in Cambodia, I would not be fulfilling my social responsibility. Simply by showing pictures of women in garment factories and explaining the situation, I was able to partially fulfill my responsibilities as a global citizen and demonstrate the *social responsibility* of my message.

The basis for the sewing machine project was to allow a community of women in Cambodia to help themselves and their families escape poverty by providing them with the tools to succeed. With the skill of sewing and the basic structure to start a business or to work independently for others, the recipients of the machines would be given an opportunity to earn a living. Over the course of nine months, the task of raising money for sewing machines proved to be my top priority. At the same time, I actively learned and implemented the framework for philanthropic persuasion and accounting practices.

THE SEWING MACHINE PROJECT

Finally, I was in Cambodia with the funds in hand to purchase sewing machines and supplies. We found a sewing machine shop that would give us a good discount that was located around the corner from a thread distributor. After purchasing the machines and supplies, we found an outlet market to purchase fabric. Very different from the intensely crowded markets scattered throughout Phnom Penh, this market was outdoors and boasted an entire street dedicated to textiles. We chose a variety of colors and fabrics that could be reconstructed to meet an assortment of needs and appropriate to the women's skill level.

I anxiously awaited the day I would meet the women who would be receiving the sewing machines. I dreamed for months about what they would look like, what they would design with the machine, and how the donation would impact their families. Then suddenly the day was upon me. After a 45-minute boat ride, we were in the rural village where the giving ceremony took place. The giving ceremony was also the site for extended



teacher training on the campus of one local school. Because of the long relationship that the McMaster School has with this community, I decided to give fourteen machines to schools in the area in order to facilitate the teaching of a sewing skills course. With wide smiles and a nod in gratitude, the teachers accepted the machines on behalf of their schools. Finally, it was time for me to introduce the next fourteen machines to their new owners-- individual women from the area.

Chaos ensued as I realized that I was also responsible for the accurate distribution of the fabric and thread. With a crowd of people around, many rearranging the carefully organized fabric and thread, I met my toughest challenge. The language barrier became painful as I realized that I could not explain the sizes of the pieces of fabric. Eventually all of the supplies were distributed and I was able to thank the women. My only wish is that I could have spoken Khmer to hear more of their stories and tell them what an inspiration they had been to me for the past nine months. However, one woman did not need a translator. She shook my hand and said, "Merci beaucoup." I could only bow my head to my fingertips in response.

Just when I thought we could all relax and celebrate, the women began to look disillusioned. Finally our guide said, "These women need a way to take their machines home; they are poor and do not have transportation."

Dumbfounded by this statement, I quickly decided that a portion of the cost of my project budget would have to pay for the home delivery of the machines.

As quickly as the machines appeared, the women began packing them away on the most available transportation. One by one, carriages, bicycles, and motorbikes left transporting sewing machines to their new homes, each vehicle kicking up dust against the afternoon sun. The project, my mission for nine months, was complete. I could not help but feel somewhat unfulfilled at the realization that I hadn't had the chance to speak with any of the women I had been working to help.

When we arrived in the next village, much to my surprise one of the women who had received a sewing machine appeared. Through a translator, I learned that she was a single mother of a little boy who she desperately wanted to send to school. She told me that she could not wait to get home and learn how to make cuffs and collars so she could make her son a proper school uniform. The money she would soon earn would help pay for his education. As we ended the conversation I told the translator to "wish her the best of luck for her and her little boy." She called out through the translator, "I wish you all the same."



REFLECTION

Every time I sit down to glance at photographs from the trip, I wonder if anyone will believe my story when I can hardly believe it myself. When I first started the project, I actually was rather unsure about my ability to raise such high amounts of money. After all, fundraising is much different from Girl Scout cookie sales--for which I was the top seller in third grade. As the months drifted by and the donations filtered in, I was overwhelmed by the generosity of the donors, many of whom were complete strangers.

When the day finally arrived and I saw the beautiful sight of brand-new fully assembled sewing machines at a giving ceremony in rural Cambodia, I thought, “Wow, look what one person was able to do.” But immediately that idea felt wrong as I realized the project’s success was not a result of one person’s efforts.

Many people contributed to the success of the sewing machine project, including my McMaster learning community members. And although the departure of the sewing machines was bittersweet and it signified the end of nine months of hard work, the journey was only beginning for the recipients of this incredible gift.

I too had been the recipient of an incredible gift that changed my complete outlook on life. For two consecutive years, the McMaster family allowed me the opportunity to achieve more than I could ever imagine--and for that I am eternally grateful.

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