



## Prevention of Human Trafficking in Cambodia

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Young People Against Prostitution and Human Trafficking:

The Greatest Violence Against Human Beings

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Cambodia located in Southeast Asia, with a population of over 15.1 million. (World Bank, 2013). Cambodia is bordered by Thailand to the northwest, Lao to the northeast, Vietnam to the east, and the Gulf of Thailand to the southwest. Siem Reap, the home of Women's Resource Center, is one of the poorest provinces in the country, is located in the north west of Cambodia. Siem Reap is located just 150km from the Thailand border, making migrating to Thailand for work very accessible.

Due to the Khmer Rouge killing an estimated 2 million Cambodians during their four-year regime in the late 70s, Cambodia remains a poverty stricken country. Those who survived the brutal genocide at the hands of the Khmer Rouge; today's older generations live in fear of a repeat regime, suffer Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and have not been afforded the benefit of safety, nutrition or an education. Almost 20% of Cambodians live below the poverty line, of \$1.25 per day. This equates to around 3 million people. (UNICEF, 2012).

A staggering 49% of the population of Cambodia is under 30 years of age (Cambodia Demographic Health Survey, 2010). Many Cambodians are growing up without completing formal schooling. These young people are the future of Cambodia and deserve the right to learn and flourish as adults. Many are illiterate and have a lack of opportunity to access education, which is a major cause of poverty and as a result why people so desperately seek to migrate outside of Cambodia. UNICEF, 2012, indicates that 92% of children complete primary school. While this appears promising, there are only 39% boys and 36% of girls enrolled in secondary school. (UNICEF, 2012). It is not surprising to learn that 26% of Cambodian women are illiterate (Cambodia Demographic Health Survey, 2010).

A consequence of a lack of education is minimal employment opportunities. "An estimated 250,000 to 300,000 new young workers are entering the labor force each year, for which decent employment opportunities need to be found. It is projected that Cambodia's labor force will grow by 22% between 2007 and 2015." (International Labour Organization, Cross-border labour migration in Cambodia: Considerations for the national employment policy, 2013). These 'decent' employment opportunities are inconsistent and often inexistent, resulting in people opting to seek work outside of Cambodia, where wages are perceived to be higher. The main country of destination for Cambodian migrant workers is neighboring Thailand. Significant numbers of workers cross the Thai border for seasonal work or on a short-term basis. ILO stated, "This type of migration is predominantly irregular, and the Cambodian Government has indicated that this is an area in which it would like to strengthen cooperation with the Thai Government under the MOU". (International Labour Organization, Cross-border labour migration in Cambodia: Considerations for the national employment policy, 2013). Total number of Cambodian migrants who completed nationality verification in Thailand as of March 2012 is 249,055. (IOM Migration Information Note, Issue No. 13, IOM Thailand, 2011. Website of the Office of Foreign Workers' Administration, Ministry of Labor, Thailand.)

In Malaysia, the other major destination for Cambodian migrant workers, the demand for domestic workers has increased dramatically (ILO, 2013). In Cambodia, domestic work is primarily seen as 'women's work', meaning uneducated and unskilled women are targeted for these types of jobs in Malaysia. In recent years, there has been concerning human rights violations to migrant workers in Malaysia following a series of reports of physical abuse and sexual exploitation.

Workers going to the Republic of Korea have a different profile from those going to Thailand and Malaysia. The estimated income to each worker is far higher than working in Thailand or Malaysia, with reportedly better conditions. However, the strict requirements of learning Korean, as well as very high financial costs, including a passport, air ticket, medical examination, pre-departure training, and administrative expenses reaching US \$1,000+, make it inaccessible for many. (ILO, 2013). Additionally, Korea offers more male-dominated sectors

of work – for example agriculture, fishing, and construction. As a result, there are far fewer Cambodian women migrating to the Republic of Korea.

It is evident that women are significantly more vulnerable to human trafficking and exploitation as well as coercion and intimidation because of their lack of education and gender oppression. Many women lack the opportunity to obtain safe and profitable work in Cambodia or abroad and are left to resort to informal, domestic work in countries with few restrictions or rights protection in place. Additionally, Cambodian women face the pressure of social expectations to return from working abroad with significant earnings. This results in some women accepting jobs without understanding the contract conditions, or worse, misinformed and deceived and sadly many women feel ashamed of their situation and do not reach out to family at home for support to escape their horror.

The Cambodian Government has a responsibility to protect migrant workers to work in other countries. However, attempts to uphold this with international MOUs has failed many migrant workers, especially those who experience exploitation. It is apparent there is a lack of regulations and enforced policies and laws in place to best inform and support migrant workers and their families before, during and after they depart Cambodia to work abroad.

### **Introducing, Women's Resource Center:**

Women's Resource Center (WRC) is located in Siem Reap, Cambodia is first and foremost a drop-in center welcoming women to ask questions regarding all aspects of life and offer basic counseling support. WRC assist all women by providing information, education and counseling support with a well-developed and researched referral system ensuring the appropriate support women need is specific to their situation.

In addition we have a program of educational workshops that are not readily available in Siem Reap, which are assessed as a vital need within the community. WRC's workshops include Legal Aid, Women's Health, Parents Talk and Financial Literacy. WRC are also working on establishing an additional workshop on 'Safe Migration', to commence in 2015. 'Safe Migration' will be conducted in villages we identify as in need, through surveying, to raise awareness and inform people to have more information about both national and international migration. Our findings thus far indicate a definitive need for a safe migration workshop to protect vulnerable women and girls from human trafficking.

Human trafficking is a worldwide issue that too affects Cambodia. A number of factors contribute to the increase in human trafficking in Cambodia, such as poverty, socio-economic inequality between rural and urban areas, deprivation of land, landlessness as a result of climate change or so called 'development' programs, lack of jobs, lack of education, and lack of information available on challenges and dangers of migration.

We have found that illiteracy rates among migrant workers are very high. This affects their ability to understand contracts, the nature of pre-departure training, and methods of educating migrants and potential migrants about safe migration and their rights at work.

Our experience also tells us that domestic violence can play a major role in why women seek work abroad – often it is a desperate attempt to escape a violent husband or family member. The prevalence of gender-based family violence is high in Cambodia, reportedly 1 in 4 women (Cambodia Demographic Health Survey, 2010).

Sadly, women continue to be targeted for such gender based abuse, with the majority of our clients who seek counseling support and sharing their experiences of trafficking describing sexual abuse as the primary abuse they endured. Forced into prostitution or held captive and abused in their 'workplace', women's labor rights are exploited and it is clear the abuse becomes their purpose of their 'work' contract. Abuse and exploitation can occur during both legal and illegal migration, but largely occurs when women migrate illegally. Illegal migration into Thailand takes place almost every night in Poipet the border town at the Cambodian-Thailand boarder. Many Cambodians are sent back to Cambodia by Thai police and dumped at the boarder of Poipet; known as a haven for trafficking, prostitution and other illegal activities. This results in many female migrant workers being coerced into human trafficking rings for sexual exploitation and forced labor. Subjected to sexual abuse, physical violence and the high risk of sexually transmitted diseases with no access to health care, women can be compelled to drug use and living on the street without food or money and no emotional support from families or friends. Understandably these experiences result in mental health problems and severe psychological trauma.

A 2011 case study of a WRC client describes the reality for many Cambodian migrant workers:

Bopha, 33 years (not real name): Bopha was born in Siem Reap. Her friend introduced her to work in Malaysia. Bopha went to Malaysia through a domestic worker agency but unfortunately the recruitment agency did not have an operative license. Bopha had a contract with a family in Malaysia for 2 years, during this time she was raped by her male employer, who she called her 'owner', every single day. Bopha couldn't move or run away because the recruitment agency had kept all of her important documents such as identity card and passport.

Bopha was depressed not only from the ongoing rape, but also being stuck in her 2-year contract – she did not have the right to break her contract, which she signed without the understanding of the conditions of her job. If Bopha had attempted to leave, the police would have arrested her because she had no passport and not a single dollar in her pocket. Bopha felt too ashamed to call her family in Cambodia, eventually she worked up the courage to call her family and tell them everything and her family reported her situation to a legal NGO in Cambodia to ask for support – luckily they could.

Bopha was very depressed after her experience of working abroad. WRC supported Bopha with ongoing counseling and referrals to further support. Bopha is one of the lucky ones, her family was very supportive; many other women do not experience family support as many families feel shame on their family and disown their daughters. Over a lengthy period of working face to face with Bopha, she eventually felt strong enough to start another job in Cambodia and close to her family home.

Through our learning from our clients, national and international reports it became evident that Siem Reap villagers and potential Cambodian migrants, desperately need access to information to promote labor rights to enhance their protection as well as knowledge of how and why to be safe.

Women's Resource Center's 2015 workshop 'Safe Migration' will inform and educate women about:

What is safe migration? The meaning of 'safe' and why safety is important.

- Informing about labor rights, including contract work and non-contract work, working hours, salary and negotiation, annual leave, benefits, allowances, working conditions etc.
- How to find out key information about the recruitment agency and job placement and accessing support from the right people.
- Having clear plans: what work they'll be undertaking, where they'll be working and living, knowing the name of the destination and employee, how they get there, who they are going with, now the location of destination for job or name of company.
- Knowing how to best protect themselves, before leaving the community – by informing important people including village authorities, legal organizations, family, friends.
- Safety planning – keeping family phone numbers and contacts of agency, police and legal supports in a safe place when abroad and leaving contacts at home with family members.
- Keeping all important identification details at home in Cambodia and also in a safe place to take with them, including some money to take and keep hidden as a reserve in case of emergency.
- How to learn the laws of the destination country – who protects migrants and where. Learning who to report to and how, if something does go wrong while working abroad.

While this reads as very comprehensive, the information will be shared in a very simply format; sharing only the most important and relevant information in a clear and concise format. Our target group will be informal working women, who are often uneducated and who can only manage a basic level of information and training.

### **How to prevent human trafficking in Cambodia?**

To combat human trafficking in Cambodia it must involve everyone, at every level, such as individuals, communities, non-government organizations and government to ensure appropriate information and the necessary intervention is had. Most importantly we must start intervention and raising awareness in local communities, and advocate for the rights of workers who deserve their rights to be upheld and honored. From our four years of working directly with women who experience gender based violence, exploitation and a general lack of education we believe these are the most important means of combatting human trafficking and exploitation of migrant workers in Cambodia:

**1. Improve Education in Cambodia** – Quality education must be accessible and made obtainable to all children, both girls and boys respectively. Knowledge improves job prospects and allows for informed decision making in life. Education also builds confidence to choose the right job and life path and have opinions and values.

**2. Increase employment opportunities in country & improve minimal wages** – Encouraging Cambodians to gain employment in Cambodia and reducing the need to seek work abroad and the choice to choose employment within Cambodia. Increasing minimal wages increases job security and quality of living. Enabling Cambodians to feel safe and confident about their financial health can protect Cambodians from the deceitful coercion of human trafficking.

**3. Enhance Promotion and Protection the safety, labor rights and human rights & Raising awareness about 'Safe Migration'** – Providing ongoing informational campaigns and educational workshops on safety, labor and human rights encourages people to talk openly about migration dangers, issues and challenges.

**4. Reduce Domestic Violence Against Women and Children** – Raising awareness and education about the impacts and consequences of gender based violence and family violence so women are no longer subjected to abuse that is becoming normalized. Providing people with information of what is a healthy and unhealthy relationship, to learn positive practices.

In conclusion, the risk of trafficking and exploitation is high for Cambodian migrants, and significantly higher for women. Lack of education and literacy, poverty, domestic violence prevalence, low socio-economic status, gender inequality, social expectations and a lack of government policies and systems to support and uphold workers rights compound often resulting in exploitation and abuse for migrant workers. Women's Resource Center strongly believe that to combating human trafficking in Cambodia involves four key elements to consider to take action and make change:

1. One is to improve education because knowledge allows for informed decision making.
2. Second, increase employment opportunities and increase the minimal wage in Cambodia. Commonly people, most commonly women, seek work abroad because of the limited options and poor wages in Cambodia.
3. Third, is promoting labor and human rights and raise awareness about safety and migration, hand in hand. Advocating for vulnerable people to have access to information to build their confidence to seek support and feel safe and able to report abuses.
4. Lastly, and most importantly, tackle the prevalence of domestic violence against women and children because it is this violation of the right to safety that can lead to women flee the family home to work abroad, without adequate information to protect themselves elsewhere. This is not a top down approach, in Cambodia little is successfully implemented from the top down. These changes must starts from us; at the community level, project into the society, and supported and implemented at government level. Every big or small action, at every level, can be taken to prevent vulnerable people from this modern form of slavery.