

COMBATING HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN CAMBODIA



For more than a decade, The Asia Foundation has been a leader in the fight against human trafficking in Asia.

BOPHA'S STORY

Everyday after school, Bopha* sold bread by the side of the road to supplement her family's limited income. When business was slow, the 15-year-old chatted with Sokha, a 35-year-old woman who lived in the same village in Banteay Meanchey province and often stopped by to visit. The two developed a friendship, and in December 2004 Sokha made Bopha an offer. She promised a high-paying job in Phnom Penh that would allow Bopha to send home money, helping pull her family out of poverty. Bopha agreed and, at Sokha's urging, did not tell her parents she was leaving.

On the day of the trip, Sokha gave Bopha a drink that made her dizzy, then unconscious. When she awoke, the two of them were in a taxi arriving at an unfamiliar Phnom Penh restaurant. Sokha told Bopha to go in and clean up, after which the taxi driver drove her and three other girls to a guesthouse. One after another, he called them inside; Bopha was the last. Inside the guesthouse, the taxi driver raped her.

Stunned and broken, but feeling powerless to stop the events, Bopha was brought back to the restaurant, where she was forced to waitress for a month until Sokha returned. When she did, she claimed to be Bopha's mother and collected the girl's wages, then relocated her to a

restaurant in Battambang. There, Bopha again was forced to wait tables, but soon the servitude extended to sex with customers in a backroom. Weeks later, the cycle repeated: Sokha arrived, claimed Bopha's earnings, and transported her, this time to a Banteay Meanchey karaoke parlor. Suspicious of Sokha and Bopha's relationship, the owner of the establishment alerted local authorities, but they took no action. At the karaoke shop, Bopha was forced to work, but was not sexually exploited.

Bopha's salvation finally came when, one night, her uncle happened to visit the parlor. Recognizing Bopha, he informed her parents, who sought assistance from the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC) in Banteay Meanchey. Staff from ADHOC freed Bopha and filed criminal action against her perpetrators in the provincial court. In December 2005, Sokha was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment and a one million *riel* (approximately \$US 250) fine, which Bopha received as compensation. The taxi driver was not convicted. Despite Bopha's testimony, the investigating judge dropped the charges against the driver based on contradictory statements from Sokha and Bopha and Bopha's inability to locate the Phnom Penh guesthouse where she was raped. The judge made no attempt to summon witnesses from the guesthouse or restaurant.

* All names have been changed to protect identities of individuals.

Unfortunately, Bopha's experience is not an isolated one. Trafficking in persons is one of the most serious human rights issues facing Cambodia today. In a country where the average per capita income is among the lowest in the world and state support systems are negligible, unsuspecting victims are lured with false promises of jobs or marriage, then forced into sex work or exploitative labor situations. Controlled with

threats, lies, drugs and physical force, victims of trafficking are often held in slave-like conditions, unable to escape.

In efforts to combat this growing problem, The Asia Foundation's counter-human trafficking programs in Cambodia focus on five main areas: prevention, protection, improvement of the legal environment, improved coordination among

PROGRAM FOCUS

PREVENTION

- Awareness raising
- Safe migration
- Education & training
- Scholarships
- Income generation
- Community & child protection networks

PROTECTION

- Counseling services
- Shelter
- Vocational training & job placement
- Reintegration
- Research activities

IMPROVED LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

- Legal counseling & representation of survivors
- Legal & investigative training for NGOs & law enforcement officials
- Participation in the drafting & revision of counter-trafficking law

IMPROVED COORDINATION

- Regular issue-based coordination meetings
- Link partners with similar goals; link partners in specific geographic areas
- Monthly newsletter on Foundation programs & community news

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

- Counter-trafficking web portal, TIPinAsia.org
- Electronic database for human trafficking information

authorities and service providers, and increased access to information. The Foundation's unique approach attempts to link together these five areas, creating a seamless, comprehensive "chain" of services for survivors. This commitment to collaboration is a trademark characteristic of The Asia Foundation, which strives to build coordination among partners, projects, and initiatives and emphasizes shared information and joint response within the community. The overall goal of the Foundation's counter-trafficking efforts is to ensure that victims and at-risk groups have opportunities to minimize their vulnerability and create better lives for themselves.

The first link in the chain of counter-trafficking efforts focuses on prevention, a broad category that encompasses activities such as awareness raising. In order to educate youth like Bopha, the Foundation supports non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that raise awareness of trafficking issues in schools and communities. The Child Rights Foundation (CRF) works in primary and secondary schools to provide educational sessions on topics such as child rights, drug abuse, and the prevention of trafficking and sexual exploitation. CRF also trains teachers and organizes and monitors youth clubs, whose members become peer leaders and educators. In 2005, CRF held International Children's Day events that drew more than

8,000 students, teachers, parents, authorities, and community members to participate in a variety of activities to build trafficking awareness.

Another link in the chain of services is legal aid and training. As highlighted in Bopha's story, the assistance of human rights and legal NGOs, such as ADHOC, are often necessary to rescue trafficking survivors and persecute perpetrators. Many victims are unaware of their legal rights or reluctant to pursue legal action. In other cases, perpetrators bribe victims to drop charges. Even if a case does progress to court, police officers, lawyers, and judges are often ill-trained and uninformed of the correct legal process. In efforts to strengthen Cambodia's legal environment, empower survivors, and bring perpetrators to justice, The Asia Foundation supports NGOs that provide legal representation to survivors and legal training to NGO staff and law enforcement officials. In 2005, the Cambodia Defenders' Project (CDP) enacted a three-part training series on investigative skills for police and NGOs working in counter-trafficking activities. The project's goal was to improve participants' capacity to identify, investigate, and help prosecute trafficking cases. As illustrated in Bopha's story, traffickers often evade conviction because of gaps in the legal process, such as this Banteay Meanchey judge's inability or unwillingness to call essential witnesses. ■

VIBOL'S STORY

Vibol* was 16 when a woman promised him a well-paying job in Thailand. With his father out of the picture and his sick mother and younger brother in need of financial support, Vibol decided to drop out of school and follow the woman across the border from his village near Poipet. Once in Thailand, however, the woman commanded Vibol to beg and hawk flowers and cakes on the street. Anything he earned, she seized. Alone and destitute in a foreign country, Vibol had no choice but to comply. This servitude ended when Thai authorities arrested Vibol for illegal migration and deported him to Cambodia.

At the border in Banteay Meanchey, an NGO learned of Vibol's experience and referred him to the Don Bosco reintegration support program for trafficking survivors. Staff members admitted him to the shelter and, with assistance from the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO), began providing counseling. At first, Vibol displayed high levels of anxiety and felt he could not return to school

because he had fallen too far behind. After a few months, however, he showed enough improvement that the TPO counseling team recommended he be repatriated home.

On a follow-up visit the next month, the TPO team determined that Vibol was no longer experiencing the same anxiety. He was working to help his mother renovate part of their home and seemed to be doing well, although he still was not attending school. Vibol wanted to resume his education, but needed to earn money for his family and feared he would be far older than other students in his grade. After the TPO team discussed the importance of education with Vibol, Vibol finally agreed to attend the Don Bosco shelter school, taking off Thursdays and Sundays to help his mother with her door-to-door laundry service. The Don Bosco Children's Fund supplied his learning materials. At school, Vibol was pleased to find many students his age and soon was thriving in his studies.

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Disparities in economic development in Cambodia and across Southeast Asia drive migration within and across borders. In this environment, it is vital that people seeking better employment opportunities, such as Vibol, have information on how to migrate safely and protect themselves from traffickers. With Foundation support in 2005, ADHOC conducted training courses for prospective migrants in areas where trafficking is a serious problem, including Battambang, Kompong Cham, and Phnom Penh. These training courses intended to improve participants' chances of safe migration, whether from their villages to urban centers or across borders. The Foundation also works with Mith Samlanh/Friends to provide outreach and immediate services to rural Cambodians entering Phnom Penh in search of employment or an escape from abusive situations in the provinces.

In addition to these safe migration awareness activities, The Asia Foundation works to prevent trafficking by supporting programs that provide educational opportunities for at-risk children. Children like Vibol who fail to attend school—whether due to poverty or the school's physical distance from home—have fewer means to generate income and, in desperate situations, are more likely to fall prey to the deception of traffickers. Education empowers children to create positive opportunities for themselves and their families. In this area,

the Foundation supports the Rural Development Association (RDA) in implementing a trafficking prevention program that includes educational scholarships for children. For approximately 100 recipients a year, RDA provides schooling materials, bicycles, or housing for those who live in remote areas, and regular monitoring and continual training on trafficking, safe migration, and the exploitation of women and children in all areas. As illustrated in Vibol's story, a child's willingness or ability to attend school is linked firmly to his family's financial situation. Recognizing this connection, RDA provides interest-free loans to families of recipients in need. These dual efforts ensure greater long-term stability for both student and family.

Prevention is only one link in the chain of counter-trafficking services. To aid those who have been victims, the Foundation supports various protection activities, including counseling services. Vibol's story demonstrates the severe trauma victims experience; many require professional counseling to overcome their experiences and move forward. To better provide this service to survivors, The Asia Foundation supports TPO, an NGO that conducts counseling through home visits, open-door sessions, and visits to shelters. TPO also works to increase the capacity of shelter-based counselors, addressing the lack of appropriate training among those providing counseling services to trafficking victims in Cambodia. ■

MAI-KHANH'S STORY

Mai-khanh* missed her son's fifth and sixth birthdays. By the time she returned to her village in Vietnam's Bac Lieu province at the end of December 2004, Bao was a head taller and barely recognized his mother. Mai-khanh had left Bao in the care of her parents two years earlier, when she headed for Poipet. A woman in Bac Lieu had told Mai-khanh that this Cambodian border town was filled with lucrative jobs. But when Mai-khanh arrived in Cambodia, the 22-year-old was taken to a hotel in Banteay Meanchey where she was forced to provide sex for money.

After more than a year of this exploitation, Mai-khanh was freed when Banteay Meanchey police raided the hotel, based on a complaint Agir pour les Femmes en Situation Precaire (AFESIP) had filed with the Department of Anti-Human Trafficking and Juvenile Protection. In July 2004, Mai-khanh entered the AFESIP shelter, where she spent six months receiving regular counseling, life skills training, and basic health care. At the end of this period, AFESIP facilitated her repatriation to Vietnam with the help of the Vietnamese Embassy and the Ministries of Interior and Social Affairs. On the last day of 2004, Mai-khanh was reunited with Bao and the rest of her family. Bao had his mother once again.

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For freed trafficking victims, a return to normal life does not come easily. Rehabilitation services, including shelter, counseling, and job training are essential in enabling survivors to overcome the crippling social stigma, become finan-

cially stable, and avoid the threat of re-trafficking. The Asia Foundation supports a number of NGOs that provide these protection services, including AFESIP, featured in Mai-Khanh's story. Recognizing the importance of matching voca-

tional training to the demands of local job markets, the Foundation also supports the Coalition to Address Sexual Exploitation of Children in Cambodia (COSECAM) in its efforts to assess and document the employment market.

The COSECAM job-placement team collects and analyzes bi-monthly data on local employment markets, regularly sharing this information with the Vocational Training Fund, and forms contacts with potential employers to post better relationships and create faster job-placement for graduated clients.

To further strengthen rehabilitation services in Cambodia, the Foundation implements research to inform and build the capacity of the counter-trafficking community. Recent research projects have included a review of reintegration assistance for trafficked women and children in Cambodia, an examination of the nature and scope of substance abuse among survivors, and assessments of employment markets like the silk industry. Such research broadens the knowledge of service providers, enabling them to develop programs more responsive to survivors' needs.

For trafficking survivors who are non-Khmer, like Mai-khanh, the reintegration process can be more complex. These men, women, and children often require language support and repatriation assistance, which involves improved coordination among authorities and service providers. To better support these underrepresented groups, in 2005 The Asia Foundation launched the Children Support Foundation (CSF), a Foundation-managed project to support organizations caring for minority trafficking survivors, including those from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodian ethnic groups. In Rattanakiri, the Children Support Foundation (CSF) has successfully established the province's first protection network, comprised of representatives from local government, law

enforcement, NGOs, and schools. Facilitated by CSF, this network meets every 1-2 months to share experiences, formulate plans of action, and identify trafficked and at-risk people for referrals. This type of coordination among service providers is what the Foundation strives to bring to all organizations it supports.

The Asia Foundation conducts its own activities to strengthen collaboration among counter-trafficking organizations, under the overarching aim to increase coordination and access to research. This work begins with Foundation partners, who previously operated independently within their own service sectors, but now interact and communicate closely with Foundation partners and the counter-trafficking community. The Foundation also holds regular meetings that bring together partner and non-partner organizations working in the areas of prevention, protection, prosecution, and service provision.

In its efforts to improve access to research, The Asia Foundation maintains an Asia-wide, multi-lingual counter-trafficking web portal, www.TIPinAsia.info. This web portal serves counter-trafficking NGOs, survivors, and other organizations across the region by helping them find and share critical information on human trafficking. To further boost information access, in 2006 the Foundation completed a systematic review of literature on human trafficking in Cambodia. This review aimed to assess what is already known of the issue, identify information gaps, and discuss ways to address these gaps. The final stage of the project will be an electronic database that renders this body of literature accessible through key words/access criteria. All of these coordination and information sharing efforts add to the chain of counter-trafficking activities, which The Asia Foundation continually strives to build upon and strengthen. ■

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HEADQUARTERS

465 California Street,
9th Floor
San Francisco, CA 94104 USA
Tel: (415) 982-4640
Fax: (415) 392-8863
info@asiafound.org

WASHINGTON, DC

1779 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Suite 815
Washington, D.C. 20036 USA
Tel: (202) 588-9420
Fax: (202) 588-9409
info@asiafound-dc.org

CAMBODIA

Post Box 536 PTC
Phnom Penh, Cambodia
Tel: (855) 23-210431
Fax: (855) 23-217553
tafcb@cb.asiafound.org

www.asiafoundation.org