



MOBILISING COMMUNITIES TO SAFE-GUARD CHILDREN



Without a safe and protective environment at home and in their communities, children are vulnerable to an array of abuses and lack access to appropriate support for when it happens. And as poverty at home and the promises of a better life abroad continue to drive Cambodia's youth from the countryside to urban areas or cross the border to Thailand, the risks of unsafe migration and being trafficked remain unacceptably high. In rural areas, children work alongside parents to supplement livelihood. In some cases, family members willingly sell children to brothels and factory owners just to make ends meet.

Child Wise Cambodia found that 25 percent of all Cambodians have been sexually abused while three fourths of all rape victims in the country are children. At the borders, many young Cambodians are trafficked into neighboring Thailand and Vietnam to work as bonded laborers or sex workers.

An estimated 10,000 to 20,000 children roam the streets of Cambodia's cities. A combination of factor including poverty, domestic violence, rural to urban migration, congested living conditions, forced evictions and the weakness of the education system, is increasing this number by 20 percent every year. Street children often work at construction sites or brick-making factories for little or no pay.

More than half of Cambodia's population is under 21 years old, which makes the task of safeguarding the rights of children all the more urgent. Cambodia's child protection system on the national and local level continues to lack sufficient resources and enforcement. Though policies and laws are in place that define and strictly prohibit any form of child abuse, they are not consistently implemented.

- *Child Wise Cambodia (2012)*
- *ECPAT NGO Joint Statistics Project (2012)*

THE FACTS

- Population between 7 and 14 years old: **1.4 million** (*Global Breakthrough*)
- **52%** of children between 7 and 14 have worked (*The Child Labor Coalition*)
- Number of children affected by child labor: **750,000** (*Ministry of Labor*)
- Percent of children involved in some form of labor: **50%** (*Global Breakthrough*)
- Rate of children sexually abused: **1 in 5** (*Child Wise Cambodia*)
- Rate of men who have been sexually abused: **1 in 6** (*Child Wise Cambodia*)
- $\frac{3}{4}$ of all rape victims in Cambodia are children (*Child Wise Cambodia*)
- **49 to 70 percent** of prostitution customers are Cambodian men (*Straight Times*)



For the protection of children, World Vision works to improve the quality of child protection services, accountability through law, and coordination between community and civil society organizations, government authorities and NGOs.

In 2011, World Vision continued expanding and strengthening child protection mechanisms at the community level in four Area Development Programmes targeting more than 7,000 people including village and commune chiefs, police authorities, and 2,900 children and youth, to prevent all forms of child abuse including domestic violence, sexual exploitation, forced labour and human trafficking. This included working with communities to increase their knowledge and change attitudes towards the rights of the child and understanding the importance of protecting children. Special attention was given to 1,400 child labourers and children vulnerable to becoming child labourers in eight urban and rural areas where World Vision involved children, parents, employers and authorities to reduce and prevent child labour in brick factories.

Through mobilising children and communities to learn more about their basic rights and how to identify unsafe situations and suspicious behaviors, communities were better equipped to prevent and report abuse. Community members established roles and responsibilities to respond to occurrences of abuse in cooperation with law enforcement authorities.

Children and youth clubs provided a safe environment for children to learn how to protect themselves from abuse and what support is available if they are abused or know of someone who was abused.

Through our Trauma Recovery Program, we provide recovery and reintegration interventions for girls who have been trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. Last year, World Vision intervened on behalf of 34 girls and provided support to over 200 boys and girls who have been trafficked and sexually abused.

World Vision runs a Bamboo Street Children Center that provides safe shelter, food and informal education for children living and working on the streets in Phnom Penh. The shelter also organizes night outreach teams that work with over 3,000 children to provide first aid and raise awareness on child rights, HIV and AIDS, drug abuse, hygiene and child trafficking.

During the National Creative Anti-Trafficking Forum in December 2011, World Vision co-facilitated a forum with MTV Exit that trained 46 Cambodian youth activists how to conduct human trafficking awareness campaigns, communicate creatively, and use online tools to expand the impact of their message.



FROM GUILT TO FREEDOM



Unlike other children, Mao missed the chance to obtain an education. In grade two, she dropped out because the combined income of her mother, a market vendor, and her father, an assistant chef, was not enough to cover her family's expenses.

The rent alone for the house they lived in was USD\$200 a year. Mao's mother took out loans from a number of microfinance institutions just to get by. When her family could not pay their debts, Mao says, people came and "threatened to take down the zinc roof of our house."

When she was only thirteen, a friend's mother asked Mao if she wanted to sell her "Pomme" (a Cambodian term for virginity) to make money. Driven by a desire to help her family in any way she could, Mao reluctantly agreed. She thought it would be worth it. "I should not have been so naïve and ignorant to trade myself," Mao says.

The day after, two women traveled with her to a hotel in Battambang city in the northwest of Cambodia where Mao sold her virginity to a man for USD\$200. Mao sent USD\$150 dollars to her mother to cover the debts. She did not tell her where it came from.

Even though Mao regretted her decision, poverty pushed her to sell her body again. A few days after the first incident, Mao accepted another offer despite experiencing pain and bleeding. Fortunately, the second client did not touch her and left her with USD\$30.

Mao's final client was a male foreigner being investigated by the Cambodian department of Anti-human trafficking and Minor Protection. When he was caught, Mao was rescued and sent to World Vision's Trauma Recovery Centre where she received medical care for her physical injuries and psychosocial support.

In the Trauma Recovery Centre, Mao has received counseling, practical training on topics such as health, life skills and language studies. She also realized that she loves to weave. Mao is now able to weave the traditional Cambodian Krama. Some of the money she makes she uses to support her family.

Mao wants other girls not to fall into the same trap of sexual exploitation. Two of her friends, she says, were recently sold to a foreigner. Mao wants to use her story to convince other young girls not to trade their bodies. Her message to parents is simple: "Please do not trade your children."

With her past no longer controlling her, Mao can finally look to the future where she hopes one day to become a teacher so that she can "read and teach other people to read." ■

**Names have been changed to protect identities.*