

Irma Parhad Research
Sao Sary Foundation
Kampong Speu, Cambodia
Community Development Initiatives
to Prevent the
Trafficking of Young Girls
In Rural Cambodia
Prepared by:
Jenlen Leonard

Introduction

This report is to fulfil the Irma Parhad Research Internship and outlines my work with in the rural Cambodian non-government organization Sao Sary Foundation (SSF), whose mandate is to prevent the sex trafficking of young girls.

Cambodia remains one of the poorest countries in the world and struggles with the legacies of genocide, civil war and colonization as they rebuild their country and rehabilitate their people, culture, and economy. Cambodia's newest and gravest social injustice – sex trafficking of young girls – led the country to ratify the United Nations *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children* (known as the Trafficking Protocol) in 2007. However, the country remains under the UN's *Tier 2 watch list* because it isn't meeting the minimum standards for eliminating trafficking (UNIAP).

The Sao Sary Foundation – a protection centre for at-risk children – seeks to prevent the recruitment of young girls by sex traffickers through a broad range of direct programming, as well as community development initiatives, including training programs and community outreach. SSF's mandate remains focused on child protection, as well as children's rights as outlined by international conventions, such as the UN's Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNICEF) and the *Trafficking Protocol*. In order to prevent trafficking, it is imperative that longer term advocacy strategies using community development models are developed to include community outreach to the country's poorest communities and its members.

This report presents a preliminary analysis of the issue of sex trafficking in the Cambodian context, as well as integrating two social work development tools – Kabeer's Social Relations (SR) Approach to gender and development and the International Federation of Red

Cross Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (VCA) tool. As well, risk assessments of both children and communities are presented along with recommendations for further research.

First, a brief background of the circumstances and the issues in Cambodia are presented, which clearly indicate the necessity of professional social work assistance. While it is beyond the scope of this report to present a comprehensive analysis, herein I provide an overview of the Social Relations Approach and the VCA tool and an explanation as to why they are integral to the preparation for, and exercise of, further work that SSF will embark upon as one of its key functions. Included are two appendixes outlining in greater detail the SR Approach and possible social work interventions. The SR Approach and VCA tool, when applied together, can provide a robust analysis from which to assess current practices in Cambodia.

Further work will include the development of other tools that are appropriate for use in this context – i.e. do no harm assessments, logical model planning, results based management and community needs assessments to determine the best strategies to be utilized when working with vulnerable populations and communities.

Background: Cambodia in Context

Cambodia is a country in transition, still struggling in the aftermath of almost two decades of civil war that culminated with the Cambodian genocide perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979, during which an estimated two million Cambodians were slaughtered. While the country is on the road to healing and reconciliation, Cambodia is facing a number of severe challenges, including dire poverty and other social ills, such as sex trafficking. It is necessary to locate the phenomenon of sex trafficking not only historically but within current political, social, economic and cultural contexts.

Cambodia ranks 131 of 178 countries in the United Nations' Human Development Index, for a number of reasons, including: extreme poverty; gender inequality; sexual violence; illiteracy; lack of access to education; high rates of child mortality; shortened lifespan (~63 years of age); internally displaced persons; indebtedness; large family sizes; poor infrastructure; lack of access to clean, safe water and sanitation; threats to physical safety (landmines, HIV/AIDS and domestic violence); precarious livelihoods; crop failure; land disputes; food insecurity; and chronic, high unemployment among a very young population (UNDP).

These issues are endemic throughout Cambodia, however the severity is particularly acute in the rural area of Kampong Speu province, where SSF is located. Factors such as large family sizes, indebtedness and single-parenting, place girls (and their families) at particular risk because they are actively targeted by sex trade traffickers.

As an international social worker in a foreign country, it is imperative that I draw upon, and work with, local knowledge and practices. My research on Cambodia shows that among the many challenges it faces has been a slow recovery in terms of education since the genocide, when Cambodia's most educated citizenry were targeted and largely exterminated by the Khmer Rouge government. During this time, the Royal University of Phnom Penh (as it is now called) was closed and the whole educational system and infrastructure were destroyed, which has had a severe, long-lasting impact on Cambodia society (Fujimoto, 2009).

As Cambodia continues on the road to recovery and development, the need for professional social work remains particularly acute. While an English-language accredited Master's of Social Work program at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) was established in 2009, with a social work curriculum focusing on ethics; community development;

clinical; research, and policy with subject matter relevant to the Cambodian context, professional development is still fledgling.

Gender, Development and the Social Relations Approach

The *Social Relations* (SR) Approach, rooted in structural feminism, is a suitable tool for evaluating how gender relations abet the phenomenon of sex trafficking of girls in Cambodia. Cambodia is a collectivist, patriarchal and highly structured society; women's roles, rights and responsibilities are typically defined in their relation to men. The SR analysis seeks to move beyond a micro-level analysis to incorporate a mezzo and macro-level analysis, using an institutional framework – family, community, market and state. For example, by looking at the *state* in terms of laws enacted, but not acted upon, we see that gender inequalities are obscured by official ideology; in practice, the state, which is rife with corruption, is doing very little to protect girls from being trafficked and offers victims of trafficking little recourse through law. An institutional analysis clearly shows the challenge Cambodian women are facing in striving for empowerment and autonomy (not to mention survival or security). It is evident that women in Cambodia don't have the "ability to participate fully in those decisions that shape one's choices and one's life changes, at both the collective and personal level" (March, Smyth, & Mukhopadhyay, 1991, p. 103). While both sexes live in extreme poverty, it is girls who suffer disproportionately by all measures of well-being and remain at high-risk for recruitment to sex-trafficking.

Cambodian institutions encourage and actively endorse male patriarchy and gender inequality as seen through the common aspects of social relations within every institution: 1) a set of rules; 2) activities; 3) resource allocation; 4) people (i.e., who is excluded resources?); and, 5) power (who decides and whose interests are served?) (March et al., 1991). For example, there is a double standard regarding virginity: if a woman loses her virginity, she brings dishonour to herself and her family, whereas men are able to have more than one partner before and after

marriage. Girls who lose their virginity are shunned, alienated and unable to marry, putting them at greater risk for sex trafficking. The incidence of forced marriages and child marriage is been shown to have a high co-relate to sex trafficking (an area that warrants further community studies).

The SR Approach places the issue of sex trafficking within a broader institutional framework, from which interventions and policy can be developed. It moves beyond focusing blame on individual or households for lack of child protection to incorporate a structural analysis of gendered social relations across all institutions.

The issue of sex trafficking is mired in a complex process of gendered inequality, reproduced within these institutions. However, a social work perspective views gender as socially constructed and therefore subject to change (Leach, 2003). Further community development initiatives would propose to study the extent to which these co-relates exist in the local context.

Vulnerability and Capability Assessment (VCA)

The VCA is a useful social-work tool because it links individual or community vulnerabilities to their capacities, which is very much in line with my strength-based social work practice model.

In adapting the VCA tool to the context of sex trafficking in Cambodia, data would be collected to identify potential *threats, social vulnerabilities, capacities and strengths* (Davis, 2004).

- *Threats* – (based in nature, violence or deterioration) In Cambodia this may include, for example, violence against girls and women

- *Vulnerabilities* – women and girls are more vulnerable to violence, poverty, stigma and marginalization

- *Strengths* – including physical, social, organizational, skills and attitudes

The VCA tool works well with Sao Sary Foundation's mandate to prevent sex trafficking because it seeks to remove the root causes by working with vulnerable families and the community through various social development initiatives. The VCA allows the community to define *their* issues (rather than those imposed by or perceived by outsiders) in terms of the threats and vulnerabilities, as well as identifying their strengths and capacities. This is vital because it recognizes their ability to change within a participatory process by building on strengths and capacities to address the larger context in which child abuse and sex trafficking occurs.

The SR Approach and VCA provide a comprehensive analysis when used together. The SR Approach primarily focuses on the structural – how institutions create and enforce gender inequalities – whereas the VCA incorporates localized and specific identification of vulnerabilities (which may include others missed by the SR Approach), as well as capacities and strengths.

While girls would be identified as high-risk in Cambodia by the SR Approach and VCA, the SR Approach mitigates individual agency by taking a structural approach, whereas the VCA focuses more on individual and strength-based community-based empowerment opportunities. A SR Approach shows that sex trafficking is not merely a problem between the sexes, nor is it simply a private family matter. Further social work research would include looking at child protection policies in relation to Cambodia's state mechanism, i.e., gender mainstreaming to develop strategies of advocacy and policy to broaden the discussion. The VCA will be a useful

tool because of social work's applicability for participatory action, which encourages dialogue and community capacity-building. It will also allow for the exploration of the issue in how it directly impacts rural families at risk from trafficking recruiters.

The Sao Sary Foundation currently uses both these assessment tools to some degree already in the prevention of sex trafficking by identifying high-risk girls and developing community capacity within a larger institutional framework. SSF seeks fundamental change to the institutions by changing the rules, activities and the power structures in Cambodia. However, it does so against particular cultural diktats that hold females in disregard. Just as importantly, SSF recognizes the strengths and capacities of girls, families and communities as they seek to transform their lives through education and skills training in order to create other markets for themselves besides the sex trade.

As a social worker, the SR Approach and the VCA tool allowed me to integrate some of my understanding of Cambodian society and to explore the issue of sex trafficking within an historical, cultural, social, economic and political context. My social work practice is enriched by using both the SR Approach and the VCA and while they offer a more comprehensive picture when they are used together, they are tools only and, ultimately, as a social worker I need to reflect on the impact these tools may have. As a social worker, I am aware that an intervention or a change in one area has profound and serious implications on all others, especially within a highly structured society such as Cambodia.

These tools aid in the adoption of a holistic and integrative framework – to see not only threats and vulnerabilities, but also to see resiliency, strength and human capacity. It is evident that girls' vulnerability in Cambodia is in many ways an outgrowth of the highly structured patriarchal institutions that allow them to be used and abused. As such, SSF and other like-

minded organizations must strive to change the structures in which they find themselves, but also must see beyond those structures and call upon the strength and resiliency that resides within and among the striving souls of Cambodia.

The following two tables are my primary findings of my research in Cambodia using a social relations approach and a Vulnerabilities and Capacity Assessment (VCA) tool.

**Social Relations Approach
Causes and Effects Analysis
Sex Trafficking and Child Protection
Kampong Speu, Cambodia**

Situation Analysis

The Sao Sary Foundation, Kampong Speu Province

In Kampong Speu province the population is 750,000 people (2008) with 43% under the age of 18 years of age and one in seven families are headed by a single mother (15%). The province has a high rate of work related migration with about 12% of resident leaving to find seasonal or year round work. The proximity to Phnom Penh – PP (less than one hour) sees men leaving the villages to PP for construction work and women for work in garment factories. PP has high demand for sex workers. SSF has identified 50 poorest communities and currently has community outreach to 11 of these communities.

Long-term Effects

Immediate/Intermediate Effects

- Exclusion from their families
- Continued abuse at the hands of males in society/others
- Family rejection
- Community rejection
- Lack of choice to be married or to select partner
- Social outcast
- Social poverty and exclusion
- Economic poverty
- Domestic abuse
- Viscous circle of poverty and sexual exploitation

The core problem

- Sexually-based gender violence by patrons, authorities, dates
- Ill treatment and abuse from authorities

- Lack of information, education and referral
- Lack of choices
- Financial dependence
- Shame, fear
- Lack of physical security – sexual violence, HIV/Aids

Immediate/Intermediate /
Long term causes at
Household level

- Sex trafficking in Kampong Speu Province (and Cambodia)
- Lack of choices for girls/ families
- Actively recruited by sex traffickers
- There is an estimated 80,000 to 100,000 sex slaves and sex workers in Cambodia (one in 150 people)

**Immediate/Intermediate causes at
Community level**

- Lack of sanitation, shelter, medical care, counselling, choices
- Food insecurity, crop failure
- Single mothers
- High level of indebtedness
- Lack of awareness of rights
- Extreme poverty
- Maternal and infant mortality high
- Labor trafficking of husbands
- Lack of options for women
- Men *own* women
- Women not allowed to initiate divorce
- Lack of market options for households – reliant on rice farming

Immediate/Intermediate causes at
Community level

- Rural area
- No access to water and sanitation – only 12% have no toilets.
- Extreme poverty – 44% of all households have .50 / day; poverty rates lower in provincial capital of Chbar Mon (27-30%)

- Landless – land disputes
- Loan Sharks – unable to repay loans
- Decreasing plot sizes

Long term causes at **Community level**

- Cultural diktats trumps international and domestic law
- Extreme poverty – 45% of population lives on <\$2/day
- Lack of education – infrastructure, resources
- Teachers – low rates of pay, low retention rates

Immediate/Intermediate / long term causes at **market level**

- Lack of economic options and insecurity : 94% list rice farming as primary source of food and income; only one crop per year; low yields; landlessness is increasing and plot sizes decreasing
- No involvement to the formal market
- Ideology of male breadwinner
- Unequal access

Immediate/Intermediate / long term causes at **state level**

See Royal Cambodian Government’s report entitled, Social Protection for Vulnerable and Poor People

(some key elements in report can be utilized/extracted from this report to be used in developing a local community development model in Kampong Speu)

- Failure of security to protect women and girls
- Lack of support for teachers
- Failure to legislate and prosecute
- Government has yet to extend its poverty identification prgm. to the area (ID poor I and ID poor II, therefore lack of id cards - unable to get free medical care)
- Lack of education – ratio of students (aged 6-11) is 34:1; (aged 12-14) is 39:1
- Lack of health – 31 public health clinics (1 for 24,000 people) – many private clinics dispense illegal medications

Social Work Interventions

As a feminist social worker, my practice is a strengths-based approach seeking to facilitate the empowerment of girls and women to move beyond victim status. Gender relations and roles can, and do, change. The following is social work interventions at the micro, mezzo and macro levels.

Individuals/Familial

- Broad protection
- Prevention – child trafficking is a crime
- Law enforcement – labor context, laws and regulations, re-unifications to family, criminal charges against perpetrators
- Victim assistance – many response required – raped children and reduce their vulnerability to being re-trafficked and abused

Community and State Levels

The Sao Sary Foundation seeks to work with commune councillors and district officials and key areas of income generation activities have been identified in many communities. Advocacy efforts should include village, commune and district levels, and state level (soft peddle). Holding state level accountability is problematic at this point, however theoretically, advocacy efforts seeks to ultimately place *pressure* on governments to honor women as citizens with civic, political, social, economic and cultural rights through policy, programs and practices that provide equal access to education, health care, resources and income. Further, educational programs that begin to promote a greater civic role for women, as equal participants, are required. The table that follows begins to capture some of the possible social work interventions outlining long, intermediate and immediate goal.

Conclusion

I made a commitment to the people I worked with in Cambodia – to listen, to understand, to reflect and to learn ... and to act upon my return to Canada. Social workers not only have a responsibility to present the viewpoints of people in developing nations, we also have a very unique role to play in international development efforts, not only in our ability to work collaboratively in an inter-disciplinary environment but to do so based on a principled ethical framework of social justice, human rights and a *do no harm* philosophy,

References

- Davis, I. (2004). Progress in analysis of social vulnerability and capacity. In G. Bankof, G. Frerks, & D. Hilhorst (Eds.), *Mapping vulnerability: Disasters, development, and people* 115-127. London, UK: Earthscan.
- Fujimoto, H. (2009). Aspects of social work with vulnerable groups in Cambodia. *Journal of Social Policy and Social Work, 13*, 6-15.
- International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC). Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (VCA). Retrieved from <http://www.ifrc.org/en/what-we-do/disaster-management/preparing-for-disaster/disaster-preparedness-tools/disaster-preparedness-tools/>
- Leach, F. (2003). *Practicing Gender Analysis in Education*. London, UK: Oxfam.
- March, C., Smyth, I., & Mukhopadhyay, M. (1999). *A Guide to Gender-Analysis Frameworks*. London, UK: Oxfam.
- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Convention on the Rights of the Child. Retrieved from <http://www.unicef.org/crc/>
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Country Assessment of Cambodia. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org.kh/undp/>
- United Nations Inter-agency Project on Human Trafficking (UNIAP). Retrieved from <http://www.no-trafficking.org/>

