

# Combating Human Trafficking in Cambodia

Unsafe labor migration practices puts Cambodians at risk of exploitation and abuse, most commonly in the form of labor and sex trafficking. For over a decade, Cambodia has been monitored by NGOs and government agencies as a source, transit, and destination country for human trafficking. The problem itself has only grown. While the causes are complex, poverty remains a significant driver for human trafficking. Half of Cambodians live on less than \$2 per day and the widening socio-economic disparity between rural and urban areas places pressure on many to migrate for work. While doing so, the poor quality of education, lack of legal protection, and low levels of awareness of the risks of labor migration leave many Cambodians vulnerable to human trafficking.



The most at risk demographic group is youth. Those under 30 now make up more than 50 percent of the country's population; 80 percent of Cambodians live in rural areas. Rural youth increasingly face pressure at home to search of work in Phnom Penh or across Cambodia's porous borders in Thailand, Malaysia, Japan, Kuwait, Qatar, and South Korea – all migrant labor hotspots where risk factors for exploitation are compounded.

Often considered to affect women only, human trafficking in Cambodia preys on men and children as well. The Asia Foundation's research shows that there is widespread under-reporting of male victims, most often exploited through forced labor in the fishing, agriculture, and construction industries. Still endemic, female victims include those trafficked into the sex industry or into factories or into private households as domestic servants. Children are often trafficked for sexual exploitation, street vending, and forced labor in organized begging rings.

The dramatic rise of labor migration in recent years is cause for deep concern. Between 2004

and 2011, the number of registered Cambodian migrants increased by 272 percent. According to the Ministry of Labor & Vocational Training, 78,740 Cambodians were registered and sent to work abroad by recruitment agencies from 1998 to 2010, with 53,160 registered migrants in 2009-2010 alone. While the lack of reliable quantitative data regarding unregistered labor migration makes it difficult to accurately estimate the total number of labor migrants, according to the International Organization for Migration about 200,000 Cambodian migrants are believed to be in Thailand alone.

Despite the increasing scale of the problem, progress has been made to combat human trafficking in Cambodia. The 2008 passage of the Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation was a watershed for the sector as was the creation of an inter-ministerial body the National Committee to Lead the Suppression of Human Trafficking, Smuggling, Labor and Sexual Exploitation of Women and Children (National Committee). However, despite the efforts of the Royal Government of Cambodia to combat human trafficking and develop effective



## CAMBODIA

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migration policies, the legal framework in Cambodia is struggling to keep up with the rapid evolution of labor migration. Thousands of migrant workers are still inadequately protected.

## APPROACH

The Asia Foundation's approach to combating human trafficking is guided by an integrated strategy of prevention, protection, and prosecution support. The Foundation works in partnership with the Cambodian government and civil society to build policy consensus and cooperative arrangements for better service delivery. In order to achieve better coordination, the Foundation has focused its work on the development of a national action plan on counter-trafficking which has been in use by all stakeholders including the Cambodian government and development partners. Through support to our partners at both the grassroots and national levels, the Foundation has raised awareness of safe migration practices and strengthened closed gaps in social safety nets, including psycho-social support, access to justice, and shelter provision. The Foundation's core approach to our grassroots prevention and protection work rests on peer-to-peer exchange. By providing commune councils, youth groups, and NGOs with the appropriate training, these champions in turn pass on their knowledge to communities. This peer-to-peer approach has been proven to provide a trusted focal point for those seeking to migrate for work to gain advice on how to avoid the potential dangers of migration and on how to access services such as victim support, legal aid, or shelter. Through strengthening the safety net for safe migration, the Foundation has served as a catalyst for more effective and coordinated responses among our partners.

## ACTIVITIES

The Asia Foundation's Counter Trafficking in Persons program in Cambodia includes activities such as:

- Providing technical assistance and capacity building to the government, the National Committee to address trafficking, and civil society partners to create and maintain structural frameworks for the effective coordination of a myriad of anti-trafficking efforts.
- Advising on law and policy reform, including drafting and adopting new laws, such as the landmark Policy and Minimum Standard for the Protection of the Rights of Victims of Human Trafficking.

- Providing livelihood support to populations at risk in order to prevent vulnerable people from taking excessive risks in migrating for work.
- Designing national and local mass-media awareness campaigns across five Cambodian provinces.
- Improving the quality of psycho-social support available to victims.
- Increasing access to, and quality of, shelter services.
- Increasing the capacity of police to investigate and prosecute trafficking cases.
- Improving access to justice for victims, so that perpetrators can be effectively prosecuted.
- Building capacity of youth clubs and empowering them to train local communities on safe labor migration, as the peer-to-peer approach is a proven means to prevent unsafe labor migration practice.
- Producing publications to inform the design of effective programs for Trafficking in Persons: Labor migration policy, practice and protection in Cambodia; analysis of the legal framework on labor migration in Cambodia; and labor trafficking to Malaysia
- Supporting commune councils to protect their communities from human trafficking, by piloting a project to record migration movements and labor recruitment processes happening in their local communities.

## ACHIEVEMENTS

- Policy on National Minimum Standards for the Protection of Human Trafficking Victims established.
- Launched and supported the National Committee to address trafficking under the Ministry of Interior and the Deputy Prime Minister.
- More than 1,800 victims of trafficking supported through shelter, counseling, reintegration to communities, legal aid or vocational training since 2006.

## EXPERIENCE

The Asia Foundation's anti-trafficking programs have made major contributions to establishing a more proactive and responsive system to combat human trafficking since 2002, and Cambodia is now one of the leading countries in the region with regard to combating trafficking.

*The Asia Foundation is a nonprofit international development organization committed to improving lives across a dynamic and developing Asia. Headquartered in San Francisco, The Asia Foundation works through a network of offices in 18 Asian countries and in Washington, DC. Working with public and private partners, the Foundation receives funding from a diverse group of bilateral and multilateral development agencies, foundations, corporations, and individuals.*



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