

Christians Aim to Stop Child Sex Trade

Faith-based groups in Cambodia and elsewhere are working to end sexual exploitation

Srei Gauv's smile was as bright as the sun rising over the nearby Mekong River. "I dream about being married and living in a big house," the 18-year-old Cambodian said. "I want to have a family."

Not unusual aspirations for a teenage girl, but hearing them come from Srei Gauv brought tears to missionary Tammy Fong Heilemann. "This is success," Heilemann said. "She is learning to dream."

Srei Gauv did not dream much before she arrived at House of Hope in Kompong Cham, started by Heilemann and her colleagues in 1998 as an outreach of the Christian humanitarian organization InnerCHANGE. Rather, Srei Gauv's family and society had relegated her as an outcast because she was one of an estimated 20,000 underage children who had for years been ensnared in Cambodia's grizzly world of sex trafficking.

"Some girls are sexually exploited as young as 6," World Vision Cambodia Communications Manager Anita Dodds said. "It shocks you to the core."

In Asia alone, as many as 1 million boys and girls under 18 are forced, coerced or sold into prostitution or sexual slavery each year, estimates Rob Morris, director of Justice for Children International (), a New Haven, Christian advocacy group. Worldwide, the figure may be twice as high.

"A lot of people are not aware of the issue," Morris added. "Most are blown away when they learn the facts. Obviously justice is important to God—the Bible talks about defending the weak and the fatherless. I cannot think of anyone in the world who is more vulnerable [than a child forced into sex trafficking]. If the church is aware, we will act."

Thailand and the Philippines have long been hotbeds of child prostitution, but trafficking does not stop there. World Vision International also identifies Cambodia, India and Brazil as tempests, but adds that no nation lies untouched. An estimated 10,000 forced prostitutes are brought into the United States each year, The New York Times reported.

Traffickers often transport women and children to nations where they do not speak the language or know the culture. Nepalese cross the border to India. Colombians can be found in Venezuela. Nigerians work in brothels in Italy.

"The map of sex-trafficking routes spans around the world," Morris said. "It looks like a spider web stretching from Mexico to Russia to Sri Lanka."

UNICEF Canada estimated that sexual exploitation yields \$3 billion a year, the third-largest organized crime in the world, only trailing drug and gun trafficking. This forcible movement of people is 10 times larger than the trans-Atlantic slave trade at its peak. Lack of awareness, sex tourism, weak or no local law enforcement and poverty spur its growth, Thailand-based ECPAT (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes) and other watchdog agencies assert.

Sex trafficking proliferated virtually unchecked for years, but people have started to fight back. In 2003, President George W. Bush signed the Protect Act that allows U.S. agents to prosecute American citizens who commit sex crimes against minors in any nation and establishes mandatory 30-year sentences for each offense. In December, Bush also inked the Trafficking Victim's Protection Reauthorization Act. It earmarks \$200 million to combat trafficking worldwide.

Faith-based missions are also involved. In January, World Vision received a \$500,000 U.S. government grant to launch a child sex tourism prevention project utilizing billboards, in-flight magazines and the Internet. In Cambodia, World Vision () works to prevent sex tourism through police training, partnerships with the Ministry of Tourism and Ministry of Interior, children's clubs and other efforts, Dodds said.

Last year, Washington, International Justice Mission (IJM) spearheaded a widely publicized brothel raid in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, that resulted in the rescue of underage girls. IJM () investigates cases of sex trafficking, works to rescue victims and attempts to bring perpetrators to justice.

"Commercial sexual exploitation is the ugliest, most preventable man-made disaster on the earth today," IJM founder and President Gary Haugen said. "As people of faith, God calls us to do something about this oppression. We cannot simply look away; we must act."

In Cambodia, several other Christian agencies seek to heal victims and reduce poverty. The Hagar Project, for example, runs three businesses that employ Cambodians, some of whom have come out of a shelter the ministry operates for rape victims and former sex workers.

“Christians are still lagging behind in providing a meaningful answer,” Hagar Project Director Pierre Tami observed. “In general, we do not have much appreciation for justice. You cannot go to a girl in a brothel who has been sold by her mother and give her the four spiritual laws. The church needs to be awakened. Girls are literally disappearing, and the gospel has a chance to make a difference.”

InnerCHANGE’s House of Hope conducts health-education seminars in Cambodian provinces where prostitution thrives and offers girls a way out. As many as 20 girls a year can reside at the ministry’s home. After nearly a year at House of Hope, Srei Gouv has learned to read, has gained self-respect, can operate a sewing machine and attends church. “I will not be deceived any more,” she softly, but firmly, said. “If other people can make it, I can make it.”

Some House of Hope graduates go into business manufacturing garments, purses and other items for Hands of Hope, an adjunct business (). One graduate now earns \$100 a month. Typically factory workers earn \$45 to \$70 a month.

A growing number of like-minded ministries reach out in other nations, too. House of Refuge in Chiang Rai, Thailand, originally only housed girls who had been forced into prostitution. Now the group has two homes and also takes in minors who have been victims of sexual abuse. In the Congo, Relief for Oppressed People Everywhere (ROPE), a Britain-based Christian charity, helps orphans, street children and girls in danger of prostitution.

“Sometimes we question the impact we have on what seems like an impossible issue to address,” Heilemann told Charisma.

“Then we look at the faces of the girls and young women like Srei Gouv and we remember that it is worth loving one at a time ... offering hope, modeling compassion, showing the mercy of our God—and giving them a chance to dream.”

Steven Lawson in Cambodia