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# Do Justice, Love Mercy 

Combating tourism-based sexual exploitation<br>of children

Laurence GRAY

## Introduction

Lee is a fifteen-year-old girl lured by her aunt into prostitution. She was sold to a fifty-year-old American man for $\$ 400$ for four days. After that she was forced to go with a twenty-five-year-old Japanese man for $\$ 50$. Then the pimp brought her to sleep with a Chinese man far $\$ 30$. Finally she slept with a forty-year-old Frenchman. The Frenchman slept with her for a month at his rented house. After that she came to stay in an entertainment establishment again. Two days later she was freed through a police raid and sent to an organization.

Physically she was free, but her mind and spirit were still bound by her experience. In all probability true freedom will take much time and support. Linking children with opportunities to regain dignity is a ministry in itself. Challenging the principalities and powers that allow this type of exploitation to exist is the focus of this paper.

The Bible contains many examples of setting captives free. We need today to work toward this aim, while all the time realizing our limitation as broken people who are often captives ourselves. Galatians 5:1 states that Christ has set us free, and instructs us not to allow ourselves to become slaves again. To be a captive to anything
results in reduced potential. Some limitations, such as addiction, can be mitigated by a personal change of will or lifestyle. Others, such as poverty, are externally imposed and less easily remedied by the captive. God challenges us to fulfill our potential.

While it is possible to reflect dignity in adversity, captivity is not God's purpose for humanity. Nevertheless we see children in debt bondage and physical captivity through forced prostitution. Traffickers prey on children in villages, at markets, and on the street. Justice is often slow to act, as systems representing the poor never seem to catch up to the need. God tells us that there is a deceiver, a force working to diminish and destroy life. He appears as a snake in Genesis to tempt and distort. As we work to combat poverty and exploitation, and bring God's presence more fully into the brokenness of the world, we encounter this force of evil. As we work with others in this enterprise we must use the armor God gives to us, since our strength and will alone are not enough.

History provides examples of God's people bringing about change through striving for a different vision. Prophets have challenged the actions of ruling authorities. Leaders are called to account for their faithfulness and their care for the poor. Political success was not recognized if the most vulnerable had no voice in their favor. When the poor were not cared for, and laws absent or misused, God clearly called through the prophets for justice to be restored. The story of Jonah is but one example where a reluctant prophet was given an unpalatable message to tell the city of Nineveh that it needed to change its ways or be destroyed. Certainly Cambodia needs advocates who in the prophetic tradition speak for the defense of others-in this case for children who are exploited for pleasure and profit as tourism grows.

Speaking out can be effective, but if not planned wisely can cause further problems. We may be tempted to focus not so much on our message but on ourselves as messengers to gain credibility, respect, and praise. Jesus was tempted by the devil to perform miracles in the wilderness. He answered that people must not tempt the Lord their God. In order to balance opportunity and risk we need good council and prayer.

We are obligated to pray against exploitation. Joint prayer is an exercise in calling into being by faith an improved set of circumstances-"praying in the kingdom." Change does not always occur immediately before our eyes. The ending of slavery took hundreds of years, but it happened. More recently many people prayed for the ending of apartheid and for justice to come to South Africa. Many can petition governments or international bodies. This is needed especially when working on behalf of the poorest of the poor who have no voice of their own. Christians should be part of this process. Those who hold the Christian worldview are impelled to oppose oppression and injustice on both the spiritual and the political and social levels.

Christians believe that God has made all people in his image. Thus all have inherent dignity and the opportunity to know God. Sin is a barrier to this relationship, which was bridged by the death of Jesus who willingly gave himself for our sake. While Jesus' gift of reconciliation has given a new opportunity to relate with God, we are vulnerable to the influence opposing powers that seek to destroy and debase God's creation. Although we are often weak, we can be strengthened through God's love, and so exercise moral choice and oppose injustice practiced against others. Through our relationship with God our eyes will see and ears hear these things more keenly.

We also have promises from God on which we need to act. "Where two or three are gathered I am there." "Ask and it shall be given, seek and you will find." We need to own these promises, raise our voices to God in prayer, and act locally to the extent we can. As we do so God may call us to further action. A challenge to all is to listen for God's voice in a given situation. We may be called to be led rather than to lead, to change rather than control. This was the call to Peter-to allow himself to be led even to places to which he did not want to go. Prayer with others in humility and seeking God's grace in situations that cry out for intervention is something Christians can do through a personal relationship with their creator. A child being used as a tourism commodity traded for profit and pleasure is one such situation.

## Tourism

Cambodia attracted 270,000 visitors in 1999, a number predicted to triple in four years. Cambodia has much to offer with its proud heritage and famous Angkor temples. Recent history also attracts visitors to see this land that has emerged from the shadow of Year Zero. It is a new frontier with more excitement and mystery than those neighboring countries that have been on the tourist trail for decades.

Tourism also provides easy access to vulnerable children through the power and economic disparities fundamental to the "cheap third-world holiday-sun, surf and sex." This other side of Cambodia is promoted through word of mouth, Internet chat rooms, and sometimes publications. Thailand and the Philippines, wishing to mute their reputations as popular destinations for sex tourists, have taken legal moves to protect children. As these countries become more restricted, attention will turn elsewhere. Sex tourists are attracted by impoverished conditions that promote low cost of prostitution, wide availability, and perceived impunity from prosecution. Recent prosecutions and the jailing of an English schoolteacher have served notice that impunity is not assured. However in recent years Cambodia has been increasingly linked to child prostitution, and risks this reputation overshadowing the publicly promoted cultural heritage of the country as its principle association.

## The Effects of Sexual Violence on Children

Sexual violence can devastate young lives, as shown by this story of a sixteen-year-old girl. World Vision worked with her from 1999-2000.

At age thirteen Sokha allowed herself to be sold for $\$ 600$ to a foreigner to help her family pay for medical treatment. After that she practiced prostitution for two years until she became sick. When that happened, clients would not take her and she was thrown out on the street. We worked with her for over a year while she battled HIV. Sokha died at age sixteen, weighing less than 20 kilograms, with no family present. She touched others with her dignity in the
face of death. and through her a church became involved in visiting women at the Russian Hospital to bring support and the Good News.

The story shows the powerlessness of the victim, abuse of power by the offenders, humiliation, physical assault, and isolation in suffering. World Vision partnered with Physicians for Human Rights in 1996 to write a report on the psychosocial effects of sexual exploitation. This study identified the following effects on children:

Trauma. Sexual trauma is the violation of the most intimate and personal aspects of the self. One's own body becomes the setting in which the atrocities are perpetrated. For the young women living in the brothel the sexual violations take place inside the tiny cubical that is their only private living space. There is no safe haven for them.

Shame. A powerful psychological reaction linked to the sexual nature of the trauma. Personal value falls sometimes to the point of seeing no other option because they are worthless.

Betrayal of Trust. Approximately half the young women are sold to brothels by people that they know. This betrayal has long-lasting effects, and relationships develop slowly with children in recovery. Information is precious and sharing in it is earned.

Layers of Truth. The inaccuracy of personal stories suggests coping mechanisms that the girls may have used. Some girls constantly need to reinvent themselves, as they are given a new name and history every week by brothel owners who want to control them and prevent the detection of a missing girl.

Self-blame. Many girls blame their fate on themselves, assuming an exaggerated sense of their part in the events that led to their present circumstances.

Disruption in Normal Development. Young women are forced into a role that separates them from the community. They are not able to participate in many informal socialization activities that would prepare them for future roles as income earner, wife, and mother.

Separation from Family. Important relationships suffer. Many young women grieve loss of contact, particularly with siblings.

Grief and Depression. A sense of hopelessness develops at the loss of freedoms, relationships, and innocence.

Fear. Beatings and punishment from brothel owners are common. Young women are also fearful of contracting AIDS; however, they cannot refuse clients.

Captivity. Young women have endured captivity for weeks, months, and sometimes years. Initially they may fight the brothel owner's demands that they service clients. This results in their being locked in a room for a week, or being beaten until they yield. They lose any sense of control over their own fate.

Being a Good Daughter. In the Cambodian context this is a crucial factor. Many young women see themselves as being able to help their family survive through their prostitution. This gives context and meaning for their personal sacrifice.

These effects serve as a background for those who aid the recovery of survivors.

## Contributing Factors

World Vision undertook a joint study with the International Office of Migration in 1996 to understand the pattern of trafficking from Cambodia to Thailand. We found the following factors increase the risk to girls of being sold or trafficked:

> Poverty
> Lack of education
> Involvement of relatives
> Ease of deception by traffickers (in situations where people do not know about traffickers, or are too trusting)
> Lack of border control
> Lack of vocational options
> Community resignation to the existence of prostitution

These factors are not exceptional in many countries. World Vision works in different ways with a variety of actors in the best interests of children.

## What Can Be Done Against This Background?

Freedom from exploitation is upheld through such international instruments as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Countries where the rule of law is strong have mechanisms to address crimes of exploitation. These include not only the legal system but also medical and human services. Public debate enables the public to express its views; helps hold the police, judiciary, and government accountable; and encourages debate on the need for change.

World Vision Cambodia as a child-focused Christ-centered agency places advocacy as a core activity in working with the poor, seeking justice and promoting transformation. It both uses its own voice to speak up on issues adversely affecting children, and helps the poor and marginalized to speak for themselves.

## Child Sexual Exploitation and Tourism Research Project

Sexual exploitation clearly violates the rights of children. World Vision undertakes projects that work with child victims. World Vision is therefore witness to the resulting damage done to the children-physical (sexually transmitted diseases), psychological, and social (stigmatism by family and society). These in turn lead to unemployment, isolation, sickness, and even death.

As a result, World Vision initiated an investigation of the link between the tourist industry and sexual exploitation of children in Cambodia. The research was conducted jointly by universities, NGOs, and government ministries (including the Ministry of Tourism). The investigation was structured along the following lines: Aim: To reduce the incidence of child sexual exploitation in

Cambodia, and to promote mechanisms to protect children from sexual exploitation through tourism.

## Objectives:

- To raise awareness among Cambodian government ministries of the nature of the problem and how it can be tackled
- To raise awareness among children and their families of the nature and occurrence of the practice
- To reveal the need for cooperation between all sectors of the Cambodian government and civil society to work toward ending this practice.


## Activities:

- Research project organized by World Vision Cambodia, in partnership with the government of Cambodia, the Cambodian National Council for Children, and the Ministry of Social Affairs, Labor, and Vocational Training.
- Publication of the report "Child's Work, Adult's Play: Report of Research on Child Sex Tourism in Cambodia." This report was distributed among various government ministries in Cambodia, as well as embassies, industry, and NGOS.


## Participants:

Interviewees in Phnom Penh, Seam Riep, and Sihanoukville:
68 children (average age 15)
26 motorbike taxi drivers
32 government staff of Ministry of Tourism
14 government staff of Ministry of Social Affairs, Women`s Affairs, provincial police departments
5 NGO staff
32 tourist facility, e.g., hotel guest house staff
20 general public

## Who is Involved in Child Sexual Exploitation?

The Ministry of Tourism says that $65 \%$ of tourists to Cambodia in the year 2000 were men. Research conducted with the Ministry of Tourism and The Cambodian National Children's Council in three main tourist locations revealed the following information from children themselves.
$88 \%$ of children had been involved in providing sexual services for tourists. Information also came from twenty members of the general public who live close to entertainment establishments. They estimated that $42 \%$ of the girls were taken away from the facility by clients, $47 \%$ were left alone, and $9 \%$ were taken by pimps. It was estimated that $60 \%$ of the children who had contact with tourists were 14 to I8 years old, and $40 \%$ were 18 to 22 years old.

Twenty-two travel agents and tour operators in the three locations estimated that the main groupings of tourists were: those visiting for cultural tourism $32 \%$; for business $25 \%$; for official visits $20 \%$, for sex tourism $22 \%$.

According to the interviewees, the foreigners that contacted children for sexual intercourse were 45\% Chinese, 22\% French, 18\% American, 4\% Australian, and 36\% unknown Westerners.

Among the twenty-eight Ministry of Tourism officers interviewed, $78 \%$ said that they saw children going with male foreigners. The interviewees identified the major groups of foreigners that the children went with as follows: $18 \%$ American, $18 \%$ Japanese, $14 \%$ Chinese, $9 \%$ French, and $32 \%$ European white-skinned men.

The impact to date of the study has been:

- Increased Government response in training, regulation, and monitoring of tour guides.
- Formulation of Government regulations for tour guides and commitment to regulate tourist services.
- Increased publicity of the issue locally, regionally, and internationally; i.e., media coverage in Khmer language press and CNN.
- A workshop planned with government, NGOs, and business on the tourism industry's role in combating sexual exploitation of children.
- Commitment from some tour operators to be partners with the Government and NGOs in promoting child-safe tourism.
- The Ministry of Tourism presents the study at the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific regional inter-governmental conference on prevention of sexual exploitation of children linked to tourism.
- Continued cooperation with the Royal Government of Cambodia in the implementation action of their five-year plan to combat the sexual exploitation of children.
- The research has been used by the Asia Development Bank in forming its poverty alleviation strategy.
- The British embassy has funded World Vision to work with the Ministry of Tourism for two years to strengthen its training of tour guides and monitor this issue.
Responses from the Government as a result of the July 2000 study and the subsequent workshop have included:
- Convening of a further planning workshop with government, NGOs, and business on the tourism industry's role in combating sexual exploitation of children
- Commitment from several tour operators to partner with the government and NGOs in promoting child-safe tourism
- Increased links with industry and NGOs
- A Ministry of Tourism presentation of the July 2000 study at a regional inter-governmental conference on prevention of sexual exploitation of children linked to tourism
- Inclusion of study findings and key recommendations in the Royal Government of Cambodia Report to the Second World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Yokohama, December 2001.
- Continued cooperation by the Ministry of Tourism and NGOs with the Royal Government of Cambodia in the implementation of the five-year plan to combat the sexual exploitation of children
- Discussions with tour associations and businesses on selfregulation measures to enhance child protection.
-. At the request of the Ministry of Tourism, the Asian Development Bank has included building government and tourism industry capacity to respond to commercially sexually exploited children as part of its assistance to the Cambodian government's Socio-economic Development Plan.


## Conclusion

Sexual violence directed at children is unacceptable. It requires action at many levels. Tourism is growing; it involves all countries; visitors include both domestic and foreign visitors. Industry standards are clearly needed. Prosecution is required, regardless of
the nationality of the offender. The world's governments, with the support of United Nations agencies and international organizations, have the responsibility to ensure that children are protected from such crimes. Developing countries need support through bilateral and multilateral initiatives to respond to these issues as part of their efforts to build civil societies. Further, the tourist sector has the obligation to move away from practices that allow the exploitation of children and promote child safety. Initiatives must also involve child participation in communities to promote a safer world for children. Community leaders need to be rallied so that it is no longer acceptable for a girl to be traded, or that a rapist pay only financially for his actions.

Failure to act will mean that we fail children like Sokha. We leave them only few options and a short, painful life. Christians know that this is not right, and through God's grace believe things can improve. We need to be challenged by these circumstances and not indifferent to them. To take action will build opportunity for children. Those with influence, economic power, and the privilege of choice can greatly influence the lives of children in poor areas near borders and tourist destinations. Our actions must reflect the seriousness of this task.







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