

EIGHT STORIES

Riverkids and child trafficking
in Cambodia

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CAMBODIA: LIFE IN THE SLUMS

You won't find them in the guidebooks, or even see them from the street but over a third of Phnom Penh's 1.5 million people live in slums.

Some are recent migrants from the countryside, searching for work, others were born and raised in the slums and have never left the city.

All of them are crowded into tiny shacks with bad drainage, illegal electricity and water, and exorbitant rents.

Life in the slums has its own peculiar economy. Many families go without legal paperwork because they can't afford the "fees" to get them, and without savings or stable jobs, they end up paying \$15 to \$40 a month for a 100 square feet shack. Across the road, in a safe middle class neighbourhood, a decent house can be legally rented for a fraction of the cost per square foot.

Transport to work can cost half a day's wage, so the slums squeeze into any spare land in the city that's walking distance to the construction sites, nightclubs and bars, markets and factories.

With nowhere to safely store food, families have to walk to the markets every day and end up paying

more for lower quality food. Meals are stretched with a plastic bag of three cracked eggs, somehow managing to feed a family of five.

Brightly coloured foil packets of shampoo flutter from the stalls inside the slums because it's much safer to pay a premium for one day's worth of shampoo than to risk paying more for a cheap bottle of shampoo that could be stolen from your shack.

Bags of rice, shoes, even school uniforms are stolen, and there's nowhere safe to keep your savings because the banks won't accept an account without paperwork. So families buy gold jewellery when they can, something they can quickly pawn in an emergency and guard on their own bodies.

Every day could be the end. A traffic accident, a lost job, a sick child or a fire can destroy everything they have, with no social safety net to catch them.

Many give up and retreat to the haze of alcohol and drugs, or chase an escape in gambling.

When most of your neighbours are in crime or sex work, there's little judgement for families that sell their children.

Eight months pregnant, in a flooded one-room, she had to quit her job at a shoe factory when the chemical fumes made her faint.

And the slums are full of children, barefoot and dressed in rags.

They race through the tiny alleyways, jumping over the mounds of plastic bags, broken syringes and faeces, climbing the poles that hold up shacks and diving into the river to swim past where the drains let out.

If they're very lucky, their parents scrimp and save to send them for a few hours of school each day, but when they come home there are no books or colouring pencils.

The slum children learn early to help out minding their younger siblings, cooking and washing, picking up trash to sell or begging from tourists.

For the children in the slums, this is their world and their future.





STORY: CHAU AND KIM

Once, there was a young woman — barely out of her teens — who lived in Vietnam. She wanted to help her family so she went looking for work in Cambodia, but like so many young migrants, she ended up betrayed and sold to a brothel.

Chau was trapped in the brothel because of a fake debt. Until quite recently, brothels in Cambodia kept trafficked women captive with fake debt.

The brothel owners would charge outrageously high interest on the money paid to the trafficker or the family that the sex worker had to pay off.

Then the brothel owner would charge rent, meals or any cost they could dream up, until the sex worker was trapped in spiralling debt, most of it fictitious but terrifying. The brothel owners used violence and threats to force the sex workers into paying far more.

One day, a young man came to the brothel and started talking to her. Kim was a blacksmith, and like her had come to Cambodia from Vietnam, searching for work. She confided her story in him and over time, they fell in love.

Kim worked and saved until he could pay off her debt to the brothel and free her.

Chau and Kim married and moved into a tiny rented room in a slum.

Both of them worked hard and they were able to send their children to school, making plans that their children would have a better future than they had had.

Then Kim lost his job at the blacksmith, and had to search for another job. His new job paid less and they had to take their children out of school. Soon, it was a struggle just to feed their children — and Chau was pregnant with their fifth child.



(Left) Nyla gets her little sister ready for kindergarten.

(Above) A social worker from Riverkids brings food to their house and comforts Chau who was then too weak to stand up.



With a heavy heart, she decided to secretly return to her old job as a sex worker. She lied to her husband that she was working at a restaurant to protect him and hide her own despair.

The money she brought in for a while helped, and when Kim's work improved she was able to quit. Their life seemed back on track and they welcomed a tiny baby boy into their family.

But Chau began to feel weak. She got sicker and sicker. They went to the local clinics and learnt that she was HIV positive, and devastatingly so was her little baby boy.

Chau began to fade. When the Riverkids social worker met Chau, she couldn't get up from where she lay, emaciated and close to death.

Their savings were gone on medical care. The older children and Kim were devastated, watching Kim suffer. Their little boy seemed healthy, but they knew that his future was bleak.

We got them to a good local hospital and connected them to an NGO that helps HIV positive people, Medecins Du Monde. Chau and her son were put on antiretroviral medication for free.

Riverkids helped them navigate the medical system and supported the family with food.

(Left) Nyla finds a quiet place to study at the Riverkids centre.

(Right) Nyla plays with the little children in the Riverkids Baby Room.

Within three weeks, Chau began to take her first shaky steps again.

Riverkids enrolled the three oldest children in our school programs. For Kim and Chau, their children's future began to show hope again.

Their oldest daughter Nyla excelled at school and Riverkids chose her as one of our Smartypants Scholarship students.

Nyla was chosen not just for her academic smarts,

but for the quiet and steady hard work she put into school. In class, she's quick to answer questions, but patient and gentle with other students who ask her for help.

Her parents made sure she had time to study and encouraged her to dream of a future where she could become a teacher, a doctor or more.

Nyla's four little siblings aren't quite as well behaved, especially her baby brother who much prefers





to race around and play, but they are just as bright and loved as Nyla.

At the end of 2010, Chau was healthy enough to start planning to open a secondhand clothes shop at the local market. Kim had a steady job driving a tuktuk.

He was driving home two days after Christmas when a car slammed into his tuktuk. The driver raced off, leaving Kim bleeding on the road with severe head injuries.

At the hospital, surgery was delayed until family paid the \$800 demanded by the medical staff. Thanks to volunteers and Riverkids staff, we were able to pay the money within a day. Without our assistance, the family would likely have wound up in massive debt, forcing Chau back to sex work, or worse, to sell Nyla.

But the late surgery failed. Kim died.

Grieving, Chau decided to return to Vietnam to her mother's house. She decided to leave Nyla in Weekly Boarding at Riverkids so she could stay in school.

In Vietnam, Chau got a job at a bakery shop earning \$80 a month. Her mother looked after the four smaller children.

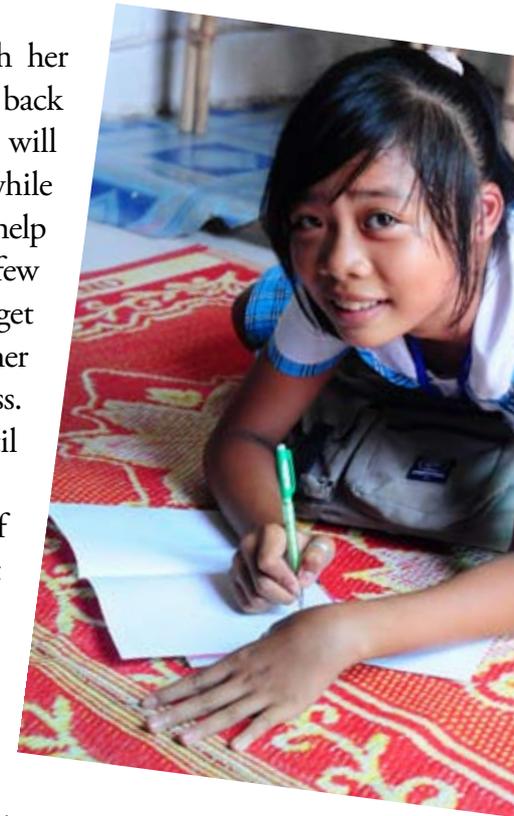
But being apart from her eldest daughter is incredibly hard for both Chau and Nyla, so after much discussion with Riverkids, Chau is coming back.

She's now preparing with her mother to move the family back to Phnom Penh. Her mother will help look after the children while Chau works. Riverkids will help her with rent for the first few months, and a small loan will get her started at the market with her secondhand clothes business. Nyla is counting the days until they are all reunited again.

Kim wasn't a man of means or education. He wasn't known outside of the slum he lived in with his family. But to his wife and his children, he meant the world.

Losing Kim has changed their family. He left them nothing but memories. Memories that have shaped a widow who kept her family together, who sacrificed for her daughter's future and who is raising five bright healthy and loved children.

That's an inheritance.



(Left) Kim, a tuktuk driver, was killed in a hit-and-run accident driving home last December.

(Right) Nyla won an academic scholarship, much to her parents' delight.



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We welcome visitors to our Cambodia offices in Phnom Penh. Please email or call us to schedule a visit. Because our programs are for high-risk children and families, all visitors and short-term volunteers must be accompanied by staff.

Weekly boarders mug for the camera under the shade nets that are set up for a meeting later that day in the only playground space in the community.