



Cambodia: A Nation in Ruins

The Kingdom of Cambodia has suffered one of the 20th century's most devastating assaults on humanity. The years following Cambodia's independence from French Indochina witnessed an acceleration in both internal and external political turmoil. In the 1960s, Cambodia's eastern provinces became embroiled in the Vietnam War which led to border clashes with South Vietnam and aerial bombings from the United States. In 1975, the Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, launched a victorious insurgent assault on the Khmer Republic. The victory of the Khmer Rouge begins the story of one of the most tragic events of the 20th century.

The Khmer Rouge attempted to create a communist state based on a collectivist agrarian society. Currency and the banking system were abolished and the entire urban population of Cambodia was forced into the countryside to till the land. This massive evacuation—which led to thousands of deaths due to starvation and disease—marked the beginning of one of the most horrific genocides in recent history. The Khmer Rouge began to conduct deadly purges to eliminate all remnants of “old society.” This included everyone from Buddhist monks to doctors and lawyers to the children of former government officials. Executions were frequently arbitrary—people with eyeglasses or larger stomachs were targeted for their perceived connections to the intellectual class or the former government. By the Khmer Rouge's fall in 1979, it is estimated that as many as 3 million people—over 1/3 of the entire population—died from starvation, disease, overwork or summary execution.

The Khmer Rouge left a legacy from which Cambodia is only beginning to recover. Measured by both income and broader human development indicators, Cambodia is among the poorest countries in the world. With a per capita income of only \$571, Cambodia ranks 131 of 177 countries in the Human Development Report. The Khmer Rouge's efforts to target the intellectual class are still reverberating today—as evidenced by the fact that only 4% of the labor force has upper or post secondary education.

The effects of Cambodia's civil conflict are directly linked to the ongoing poverty in the region. Civil war and economic upheaval greatly altered societal roles and status. The genocide eroded the material, cultural and emotional foundations of both families and communities, devastating Cambodia's traditional support system along with its human resources.

Today, 34% of the Cambodian population lives on less than \$1 per day—placing over 1/3 of the population below the international poverty line.

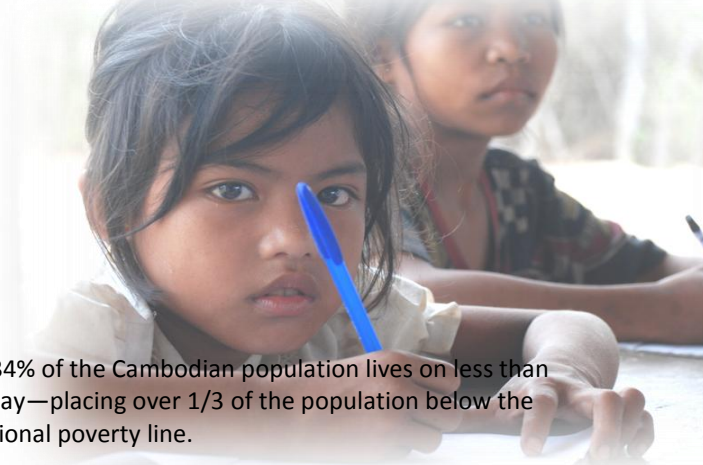
Violence Against Women in Cambodia

The presence of UNTAC peacekeeping forces in Cambodia from 1991-1993 greatly increased the demand for sex workers and also contributed to a more widespread acceptance of prostitution. The desperate poverty of the populace today has made Cambodia a well known destination for sex tourism.

Girls who lack basic education find themselves with very limited economic opportunities. Such desperation leads many girls to turn to the sex trade. Lacking education and living in abject poverty, rural girls are easily lured by the promise of lucrative work in city centers or foreign countries. Intending to support their families through the restaurant or domestic jobs promised, girls are instead tricked and sold into sexual servitude or slave labor. In many cases, the trafficker is a trusted friend, relative, or neighbor. Measuring the number of girls trafficked into the commercial sex industry is an inexact science. Estimates of the scope of the problem vary widely; what is known is that of the 50,000 to 100,000 sex workers in Cambodia, roughly one third of them are children and adolescents.

Gender-based violence is likewise rampant in Cambodia, where women are expected to remain chaste until marriage and are generally held in lower regard than men. Widespread sex trafficking and rape present Cambodian women with a painful irony: in addition to the trauma of sexual assault and abuse, victims are often blamed for what has happened to them. Ostracized and shouldering a burden of guilt for having shamed their families, many girls have no one to turn to. Unsurprisingly, in this environment most sex crimes go unreported.

When they are reported, a typical solution for a family of an ‘unchaste’ daughter is to seek retribution from her assailant. Local custom calls for the perpetrator to pay compensation when charges are brought against him. Yet rather than treating victims with tenderness or care, in some cases the attacker's marriage to the “tainted” daughter is demanded - and delivered.





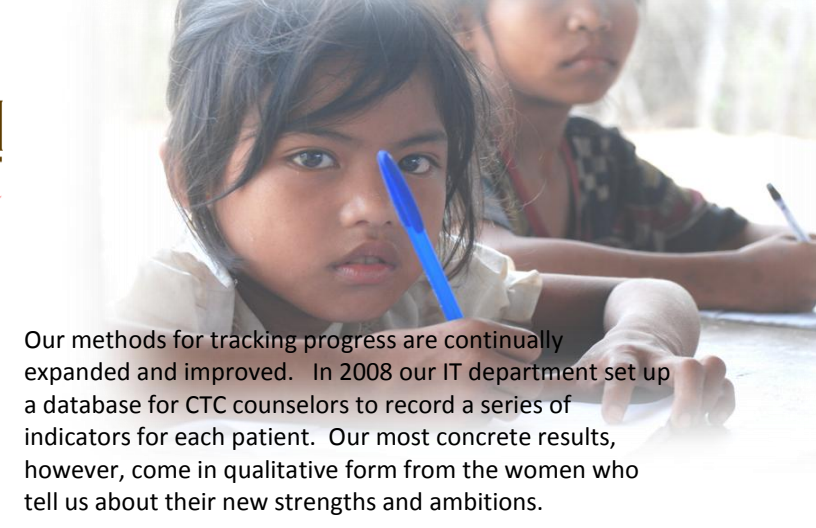
Our Solution

Therapy for the sexually abused is a revolutionary concept in a country where young women can be forced to spend their lives with their rapist. Lotus Outreach aims to curb this discrimination against victims of sex crimes by first empowering the victims. Providing psychological support in a safe, nurturing environment, we offer women and girls a chance to reclaim their dignity. Social justice may still be out of reach, but we don't believe an emotional sanctuary should be.

Since 2007, Lotus Outreach has been operating a pilot program, Consoling Through Counseling (CTC), in collaboration with a local partner, the Cambodian Women's Crisis Center (CWCC). Abused women staying at CWCC's shelter in rural Banteay Meanchey can participate in individual and group counseling for up to one year. Therapy focuses on trauma, stigma, guilt and family relations in order to bolster self-worth and overall mental health. While patients choose what to share, counselors are trained to discuss solutions for the present and future as well as helping victims process what has happened in the past.

Professional counseling is known to reduce related concerns, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), addiction and suicide. The need for this care is immense, and our operation is small in comparison. In 2008, 171 patients, 76 of their relatives and 80 at-risk girls participated in group and individual counseling. Among the patients, 76 were victims of domestic violence, 55 of rape, and 40 of trafficking. Because some of the patients who arrived in 2008 are still at the shelter, our reintegration rate is incomplete. However, the previous year a full 76 percent of our patients reported substantial recovery and confidently rejoined society.

Through CTC and with our partner, CWCC, we are steadily advancing sustainable goals for the future. By reintegrating individuals into the community through therapy and skills training, we encourage women regain control of their lives. We help them to shed their shame and guilt, and to see themselves as survivors rather than victims. Besides promoting gender equality, CTC's success has raised awareness in the surrounding community about violence against women.



Our methods for tracking progress are continually expanded and improved. In 2008 our IT department set up a database for CTC counselors to record a series of indicators for each patient. Our most concrete results, however, come in qualitative form from the women who tell us about their new strengths and ambitions.

Lotus Outreach believes this project is not only sustainable, but is an integral element to the sustainability of numerous projects which address women's rights. By focusing on restoring dignity and providing tools to combat danger and discrimination, CTC helps prevent women from re-entering the realms of abuse and discrimination. Furthermore, the improved self-esteem and quality of life learned by our patients are passed on to many women we cannot reach directly. Those who have benefitted from CTC can now extend that support to others in need while improving the well being of the countless generations that will follow them.



CTC's impressive results are achieved on a lean allowance. We are able to keep our costs at a minimum by coordinating with the grassroots CWCC, which is run entirely by local people and volunteers from the community. However, our greatest expense is the most difficult to reduce: nearly 75 percent of our annual budget is devoted to our counselors' salaries. It is an enduring challenge to lure competent therapists to our remote but critical location where so many trafficking crimes occur. A competitive salary is crucial to procuring and preserving talent, and for \$10,000 we can offer this to two full-time counselors and one caretaker.