



Changing the Narrative about Child Sex Trafficking in Cambodia

Message Resource for Global Staff

ANSWERS TO FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Are you saying that child sex trafficking is totally eradicated?

No. The research shows a 2.2% prevalence rate of minors among all sex workers in three major cities. As with any nation, cases of sex trafficking will be reported, but now the Cambodian public justice system is equipped to respond, bringing rescue to victims and accountability to perpetrators. Substantial improvements have been made by implementing a strategic model designed to stimulate, repair and equip the broken justice system to respond to sex trafficking. We are very aware that Cambodia's justice system still needs to strengthen their professionalism, increase resources, weed out all corruption and patronage, and extend the effective response seen in the anti-trafficking police to other police units such as military, border and local commune police. Cambodia also faces other serious issues of violence such as rape, domestic violence, land grabbing, and labor trafficking. However, the Cambodian government and public justice system have a solid foundation—gained through the fight against sex trafficking—upon which to build in combating other issues of violence, while continuing to address any reported cases of sex trafficking.

Why are you carrying out an aggressive campaign to show Cambodia's progress?

Cambodia is a story of hope for the global movement to end slavery, and we want people to recognize and be encouraged by the progress being made in this fight. The men and women on the ground in Cambodia who are responsible for this change deserve to be recognized, not continually stigmatized. The image most people have of child sex trafficking in Cambodia is based on a story that—while once true—is no longer the reality on the ground. Highlighting the true picture will not only encourage those who have been fighting trafficking in Cambodia for a decade and provide lessons learned for future initiatives, but will also ensure practitioners, donors and government leaders are accurately designing and supporting programs to meet real needs and gaps.

Also, the global counter-trafficking community needs to see proven models of success, research-based methodology, and demonstrations of hope, so that they can apply the lessons learned to other contexts. We want to ensure the world knows about Cambodia's progress, understands how the public justice system improved dramatically in just a decade, and sees how the lessons learned in a nation once thought to be ground zero for child sex trafficking can now be replicated to advance the fight to end slavery in other places.

What about labor trafficking in Cambodia?

IJM's project and research in Cambodia has been solely focused on the commercial sexual exploitation of children. We are very aware of the other significant issues of violence that

Cambodia needs to address in a more focused and significant way, including labor trafficking. The good news is that key Cambodian government leaders, the public justice system, and the NGO community now have increased capacity, legal foundations, and experience gained from the fight against sex trafficking that can be applied to combat other issues of violence. IJM Cambodia is also exploring the possibility of starting a project focused on labor trafficking.

Your study just looked at commercial businesses, but isn't child sex trafficking all underground now?

No, the significant number of child sex trafficking victims being openly sold in the early 2000's are not all being sold underground today. Research analyzed by the U.S. Department of Justice shows that geographic displacement of a crime generally does not occur as a consequence of directed law enforcement.¹ As law enforcement in Cambodia has improved in targeting child sex trafficking, persistent criminals have had to change their methodology to better hide their crimes. As these criminals operate more covertly, they become harder to access by customers looking to purchase sex with children, making it more difficult to facilitate the sale of minors for commercial sexual exploitation. Our research shows a 2.2% prevalence rate of minors 17 and under among all sex workers in three former trafficking hotspots; these cases are more likely to occur in the "underground" market, as they would in any nation with an effective law enforcement response to crime. Our study utilized undercover methodology to assess prevalence of commercial sexual exploitation of children in a wide variety of entertainment establishments in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap and Sihanoukville. IJM has also gathered information about the current state of sex trafficking through our regular work on the ground, including daily investigations in multiple provinces, conducting check-in surveys with 30+ other counter-trafficking agencies and hotlines throughout the nation, tracking media stories, and checking in with our partner law enforcement agencies throughout Cambodia. This has given us a strong picture of the current state of sex trafficking in Cambodia.

Why do some organizations disagree with your research findings that prevalence has decreased and that the public justice system has improved?

Our study assessed CSEC prevalence in a variety of commercial sex establishments in three former trafficking hotspots—and currently the three largest commercial sex markets—Phnom Penh, Siem Reap and Sihanoukville. We found that the prevalence of minors aged 17-years-old and younger is 2.2% with young minors aged 15-years-old and younger representing just 0.1% of the commercial sex industry. Some organizations embedded in high-risk communities—such as Vietnamese, border casino, or poor Cambodian communities where rampant crime occurs— will see cases and experience slightly higher prevalence of child sex trafficking within a specific area. In addition, some NGOs have different definitions for trafficking. IJM uses the legal definition under Cambodian law. For child sex trafficking, minors are defined as individuals under the age of 18. Some organizations extend the definition of 'minor' to include adults ages 18 to 22. Some NGO's may be aware of child victims of gender-based violence, which is distressingly common in Cambodia. It is a crime that the Cambodian justice system must address, but it is not the same as the organized sale of children for commercial sexual exploitation. We hope a better understanding of the current reality of trafficking in Cambodia will lead to investments in gaps

¹ See page 31 of the 2012 prevalence study for more details on these reports.

that most need attention, such as continued improvements in the public justice system, and programs to combat labor trafficking and gender-based violence.