
“At what price, honour?”

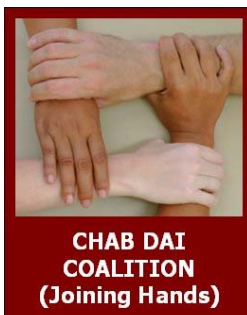
**Research into domestic trafficking of
Vietnamese (girl) children for sexual exploitation,
From urban slums in Phnom Penh, Cambodia**



Research Consultant: J. K. Reimer

**Technical Support: Steve Gourley,
E. (Betty) Langelier**

**Contracting Agency: Chab Dai
Phnom Penh, Cambodia
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Acronyms & Abbreviations

ARI	Acute Respiratory Infection
BCC	Behaviour Change Communication
CDP	Cambodia Defender’s Project (LNGO)
CSES	Children from Sexually Exploitative Situations
CSW	Commercial Sex Worker
CWCC	Cambodia Women’s Crisis Centre (LNGO)
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
IEC	Information, Education, Communication
INGO	International Non-government Organisation
LNGO	Local Non-governmental Organisation
LSCW	Legal Support for Children and Women (LNGO)
MoH	Ministry of Health
NGO	Non-government Organisation
PJJ	Project for Juvenile Justice (LNGO)
PLA	Participatory Learning and Action
PRA	Participatory Research for Action
PSF	Pharmacies Sans Frontiers (INGO)
RGC	Royal Government of Cambodia
STI	Sexually Transmitted Infection
ToR	Terms of Reference
TST	Ten Seeds Technique
UN	United Nations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The overall situation in Cambodia for human trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and children is dire¹: rather than decreasing it appears to be on the increase. Although there is recent attention to addressing various aspects of the issue/s, even for the Khmer majority population there are numerous ‘push factors’ (such as widespread poverty, high unemployment, low levels of literacy, and few income earning opportunities for women) that make sale of children for labour and prostitution serious considerations for many families. There are relatively few resources available for victim support, a weak and not well understood or enforced legal framework for prosecution of perpetrators, and many cultural traits that conspire to sanction trafficking and commercial sex. *The situation for Vietnamese living in urban Cambodia vis-à-vis trafficking and sexual exploitation is even more difficult than for Khmer, as the Vietnamese are a marginalised minority.* Some services area available for victims of trafficking, regardless of age or ethnicity; however these are not always well-equipped to accommodate Vietnamese.

The concept of ‘poverty’ emerges quickly in any discussion about “why families would sell their children” as one variable, and not necessarily even the primary consideration. It is always the result of a combination of factors. This research did not identify one clear, single, or overriding ‘tipping’ point. Findings from this research corroborate previous research publications on vulnerability factors that influence the sale of children into commercial sex. One difference in this research is the weight of particular variables exacerbated by the fact of being Vietnamese in Cambodia, which is itself a vulnerability factor.

The major risk factors (named as such because they surfaced most frequently in conversation with respondents) among the Vietnamese communities surveyed in this research—the presence of which will make the sale of a child more likely—appear to be as follows: crisis/extra-ordinary expenses; debt; the phenomenon of ‘normalisation’; materialism; family honour; cultural perceptions of the value/place of women. All must be considered to occur within the context of general poverty and the psychological burden of uncertainty and insecurity accompanying it; as well as with recognition for the political uncertainty that characterises the lives of the Vietnamese minority in urban Cambodia. The research considers too the extent to which the social context may bear some responsibility for the ‘epidemic’ of sale of children for sexual exploitation.

The research suggests that nearly half of families do sell a girlchild (a ‘best estimate’ is 30-40 percent) for sex; and that more families consider this as an option than actually follow-through with the sale. It appears that under-age girls are more likely to be sold for virginity (then return home), than sold into longer-term prostitution/brothel work. Longer-term decisions seem to be the purview of older girls/women. Community perceptions of prostitution as a viable income source seem to be grounded in a certain pragmatism and resignation, rather than wholehearted acceptance of the work as legitimate, constructive, or desirable.

There is a very high level of awareness among children and adults about the presence of trafficking (sale of girl-children for sex), and prostitution more generally. Many children expressed that they felt themselves in danger of being sold or otherwise forced into involvement in the sex trade: a few said if someone did try to force them they would ‘fight’ but the majority said they would not like it, but would be resigned to going.

¹ Cambodia is a ‘tier-three country’ on the United States list of human rights violators, partially because of this. See Annex 12 for details.

1.0 BACKGROUND & RATIONALE

A major gap in knowledge and information exists in relation to ethnic Vietnamese people in Cambodia. There is no official population figure available, but estimates range from 5-10 percent of the country's total population of about 14 million, making Vietnamese the single largest minority population in the country. Little research of any kind has been conducted about the Vietnamese population exclusively², although Vietnamese are often mentioned in research about sectors or topics in which they have a significant numeric presence. For instance, studies about the fishing industry make such references because Vietnamese comprise a major proportion of fishers in this country. Likewise, in literature about human trafficking³ and the commercial sex industry in Cambodia invariably contain some reference to Vietnamese because a significant proportion of female CSW's in Cambodia are Vietnamese. In most instances, “Vietnamese” are regarded as a single, homogenous population.

Furthermore, reports about the commercial sex industry in Cambodia tend to be either about the Khmer experience or relate specifically to cross-border issues (Vietnamese women being trafficked into Cambodia from Vietnam, as well as repatriation issues for those who are returned to Vietnam). Regarding the Khmer experience, in addition to obvious cultural differences, the practical trend seems to be a movement of girls and women from rural into urban areas. While informative in a general sense, then, these areas of focus are not particularly instructive about the phenomenon of urban domestic trafficking of Vietnamese (girl)children.

While commercial sex is in many respects a very visible industry in Cambodia, it is largely regarded as an illegal enterprise⁴ and therefore remains shrouded in secrecy and speculation⁵; difficult to define quantitatively⁶. Estimates of the total number of women and children in the sex trade vary between 30,000 - 100,000 throughout the country⁷. During this research, estimates of

² The author is aware of one internal research report about involvement of Vietnamese women and children in the Cambodian commercial sex industry, completed in 1999 by a faith-based NGO. Interestingly, the results of that research and the current research are not dissimilar, suggesting that despite the flurry of interest in ‘human trafficking’ little is changing positively for Vietnamese in regard to trafficking.

³ The United Nations (UN) Protocol on Trafficking in Persons defines trafficking in persons as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person for the purpose of exploitation.” (UNODC, Vienna: 2001: ‘The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children’).

⁴ Prostitution per se is not illegal for people who are ‘of age’, 18 years and older; brothels, however, are illegal. And many aspects of prostitution in Cambodia are actually illegal, such as forced confinement (Cambodian law on kidnapping).

⁵ The Ministry of Women's Affairs statement on Prevention on All Forms of Trafficking of Women and Children (2006) begins: “The full extent of trafficking and sexual exploitation in Cambodia remains unknown and often subject to speculation. Existing empirical studies provide only a partial and inaccurate picture of the extent and magnitude of the problem and are often limited to the numbers involved in sex work who have been internally trafficked to meet the demand of the country's growing sex industry. Little is documented about the socio-economic, cultural, financial, historical, geographical and political dimensions that collectively shape the trafficking situation within its context. However, there appears to be a consensus that the problem is increasing at a rapid rate and Cambodia is a source, destination and transit country for trafficking and internal trafficking also occurs.”

⁶ One additional reason for the difficulty in quantification is the matter of definition. The Ministry of Health (MoH) utilizes the concept of ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ sex work and neither are defined very clearly. Generally speaking, women who are hired just for sex in brothels are considered ‘direct workers’ and those working in karaoke bars, beer gardens, dance halls, massage parlors, etc. are considered ‘indirect sex workers’ as their work may or may not actually include providing sexual services.

⁷ At one end of the spectrum is Steinfatt et al (2002). At the other is Beesey (29) quoting Chantavanaci (2000). Periodic crack-downs by the RGC have led to even ‘underground’ establishments and an increase in women ‘free-

the number of Vietnamese who work as direct sex providers ranged from 6-30 percent of the total⁸ with 30 percent as the most often cited figure. For example, PSF estimated that in Phnom Penh 30 percent of the sex workers they have regular contact with in their outreach programming who are older than 18 (‘of age’) are ethnic Vietnamese.

Although there is strenuous debate over the actual numbers of commercial sex workers, few dispute the fact that Vietnamese comprise a significant proportion of the female CSW’s in Cambodia who are engaged direct sex work, a number disproportionately high to the total number of Vietnamese residing in Cambodia. Unfortunately, prevention activities as well as the response to trafficking victims⁹ (social services and legal assistance) do not reflect this and thus render the Vietnamese even more vulnerable to further sexual exploitation. Very few NGO’s employ Vietnamese-speakers, fewer still have ethnic Vietnamese on staff, IEC materials are seldom available in Vietnamese language, and as yet little attempt appears to have been made to creatively address cultural differences¹⁰.

Organisations working to end sexual exploitation and trafficking require a clearer and deeper understanding of ‘the facts’ about ‘the Vietnamese experience’ in order to design appropriate intervention strategies. And faith-based organisations appear to be uniquely positioned to engage in development support to this marginalised population¹¹.

“Trafficking is a serious issue of Vietnamese people within the context of them being seen as a relatively isolated minority community. Any support aimed at this community should initially be processed through church or NGO groups who understand and empathise with their circumstances.” (Beesey, 2003:95)

At the grassroots level, there is a potential within existing structures such as the Church, to build capacity and understanding of the issue/s to enable effective interventions¹². Such institutions are invaluable in the long term sustainability of any project focus within these communities. Of course, specific types of intervention must be carefully considered and acknowledgement made that there will be constraints on possible interventions due both to the nature of the implementing agency/ies as well as to the focus of the intervention. This is not unique to faith-based organisations. PSF, for instance, indicated that their organisation was eventually forced to choose between providing care to CSW’s and working in prevention/advocacy: the former required an intentional disregard for the identity of people involved whilst the latter requires nearly the opposite.

lancing’ as the brothels they formerly worked in close. This makes it even more difficult to obtain accurate and valid quantitative information. Furthermore, it is very difficult to obtain information about under-age girls (less than 18 years) because they are intentionally hidden from view, so they are likely not counted in the figures above. It is now commonly understood that having under-age children in a brothel is likely to result in closure and legal action; brothel owners simply hide the children until a client wants to have sex with her.

⁸ Estimates came from interviews with NGO directors and staff who indicate that these figures most likely err on the low side of reality. There are no available ‘definitive figures’. And such figures would most likely include only reference to longer-term workers, and not one-time sale (for virginity, after which the girl is returned to her family).

⁹ As noted in the UN definition of ‘trafficking’, anyone less than 18 years of age who is found to be in a sexually exploitative situation is automatically considered ‘trafficked’.

¹⁰ ‘Cultural differences’ are widely noted in the literature, but usually recorded in terms of negative ‘stereotypes’ about Vietnamese from a Khmer perspective.

¹¹ The research team did not find any non faith-based organizations intentionally targeting Vietnamese with development assistance.

¹² All Church pastors/leaders contacted during the research indicated active interest in suggestions for how to address the issue/s of child trafficking and prostitution.

Author’s note: In any research that deals with abuse of human beings it is not uncommon for the researchers, and subsequently the readers, to lose sight of the personal pain experienced by those who are the focus of the research. To ensure that such detail is not lost, and to reinforce the gravity of the situation and give more insight into the heinous nature of the abuse that is directed toward so many girls and women, testimonies of victims of trafficking are included in Annex 13.

2.0 OBJECTIVES OF RESEARCH

2.1 Overview

This research aims to begin closing the information gap specifically in relation to domestic trafficking of Vietnamese children, focusing on girls (defined as females less than 18 years of age), for sexual exploitation. This deliberate focus on this age-group precludes exploration of a plethora of considerations that may be more particularly relevant to older women; the notion of ‘personal agency’ for instance¹³.

There is an increasing amount of anecdotal evidence that suggests the sale of young Vietnamese girls specifically for sexual exploitation is increasing. This research seeks to move beyond general ‘perceptions’ and into the realm of the ‘particular’, discussing related aspects of the issue with families and communities, former and current sex workers, and ‘bystanders’.

In addition to providing recommendations for grassroots-level intervention, there is also a need to analyse the viability and need for intervention at higher levels as well; and to consider changes at a meso- and macro-level which have the potential to impact the viability of specific interventions, and on the effectiveness of various interventions.

The research recognises that the overall situation in Cambodia for human trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and children is dire. Although there is increasing attention to various aspects of the issue, even for the Khmer majority population there are many ‘push factors’ (such as widespread poverty, high unemployment, low levels of literacy, and few income earning opportunities for women) that make sale of children and prostitution serious considerations for many families, relatively few resources are available for victim support, a weak and not well understood or enforced legal framework for prosecution of perpetrators, and many cultural traits (generally a low regard for women) that conspire to sanction trafficking and commercial sex. The situation for Vietnamese living in urban Cambodia vis-à-vis trafficking and sexual exploitation is even more difficult than for Khmer, as they are a marginalised minority.

2.2 Research Questions

1. Explore and document the characteristics of the ethnic Vietnamese families living in [target] communities; including an overview of the current livelihood and education situation, and options.
2. Identify the extent of sale of children into the sex industry [ie. proportion of families in a given community].
3. Identify ‘risk variables’ that may positively incline family/ies to consider sale of children. Also, if possible, identify characteristics of ‘positive deviance’ (families in similar circumstances who deviate from the ‘norm’ in question; in this case the norm being consideration or actual sale of girl-children into commercial sex).
4. Recommend possible areas of intervention at grass roots as well as macro-level.

¹³ See Annex 8 for additional comments from the literature review.

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

3.1 *Research Philosophy*

Qualitative research is, by design, focused on achieving depth of information – it aims to provide rich detail, to facilitate understanding of the individual and individual choices, to allow people to respond in their own terms; and is, by nature, a creative and flexible process. Qualitative research is more concerned with letting people speak for themselves, and allowing a detailed picture of the reality of a person or family emerge, than with consolidating information into large, general statements. Still, by employing different methods some work can be done to identify overall patterns and trends in human behaviour.

The majority of the research and reports reviewed in the process of conducting this study used questionnaires, and semi-structured or in-depth interviews almost exclusively¹⁴. This research deliberately opted to utilise a variety of PLA tools: such tools were considered particularly useful in addressing the more sensitive issues, as they allow natural movement from general to more detailed, sensitive information and facilitate transparency and genuine participation as there is usually a focus on external objects rather than on the participants themselves (ie. the map in the middle of the floor, the picture each participant has drawn, etc.).

Strictly speaking, this research cannot be considered PLA because there is little immediate, locally driven ‘action’ resulting. However, the intention from the commencement of the research was for the skills imparted to the NGO staff and exposure of community to various tools to inform future action against trafficking.

The core research team made the deliberate choice to utilise as research assistants, ethnic Vietnamese staff of NGO’s working in the target community/ies for the purpose of leaving skills, such as group facilitation and information analysis, as well as practical skills in use of PLA tools, in the community. At least one of the assistants indicated that she would utilise the tool/s in her work as a counsellor in an after-care shelter. Another Project Coordinator expressed surprised at the willingness of children to express their opinions about such a ‘difficult subject’, and their knowledge of the subject, and stated a desire to do more such activities in the near future.

3.2 *Description of Research Team*

3.2.1 *Team Composition*

The research occurred over a period of four months: during this time, a total of 14 people participated on the research team, not all together nor simultaneously. This team included four expatriates, two female translators (both ethnic Vietnamese), and eight ethnic Vietnamese (two Kampuchea Krom) employed by NGO’s currently operating programmes in the target communities. All of the researchers were from faith-based NGO’s or held a personal faith-based orientation: this was regarded as entirely appropriate as the research was commissioned by a faith-based coalition organisation that

¹⁴ A notable exception is Busza’s “Participatory research and action: sharing challenges in Cambodia” in which the author attempted to employ PRA for empowerment and mobilization of debt-bonded, young migrant sex workers in Phnom Penh.

specifically wanted to know how their constituency could be better positioned to address issues of child sex trafficking.

3.2.2 Training

The Vietnamese research assistants participated in two full days of training, two weeks apart, and each training day conducted by a different expatriate advisor. During the first day's training, the language of instruction was Khmer (and the participants translated for each other into Vietnamese as necessary). The second day's training occurred in a mix of English and Khmer, with translation into Vietnamese.

The first day's training included an overview of PRA and facilitation, and was more specifically geared toward enabling the researchers to use simple tools in working with children (mapping, timeline, day-clock, pictures).

The second day's training included a brief overview of PRA as a philosophy, introduction of three specific tools (FGD, community mapping, ten seeds technique), and included time for practice with the tools. The day and exercises were designed so that information obtained through the 'practice' session could be included as 'primary data' for the research.

Reference documents were developed in English and then translated into Vietnamese (see Annex 15 for complete set of PRA-related documents utilised by the research team).

3.2.3 Implementation

The first step in implementing the research was to conduct a 'stakeholder analysis' in order to determine the parameters of research activities (see Annex 1). Subsequently, the Team Leader organised the research team, conducted the literature review, conducted some training, ran Focus Group Discussions with teachers from one NGO, and completed the majority of semi-structured interviews. Chab Dai provided access and support for interviews with after-care shelters.

One [male] technical advisor focused on the work regarding data collection from children and ran the Focus Group Discussion with church pastors. The second technical advisor focused on community-level data collection as well as supervising the PRA activities with girls in the shelter and the group interview with women formerly involved in the commercial sex trade. One technical assistant conducted the shelter interviews.

In most instances the community exercises were supervised by the technical advisor/s. Debriefing and write-up occurred within two days of each event so as to prevent loss of the rich detail that emerges from such exercises.

3.3 Research Methods

3.3.1 Literature review: A literature review was conducted prior to launching actual field work, for the purpose of gaining familiarity with the content context, and to identify gaps in knowledge or areas of inquiry in order to shape research methodology and refine research questions. Little research has been done specifically addressing domestic trafficking; even less has been done exclusively on any aspect of life of Vietnamese in

Cambodia. See Annex 2 for a list of references reviewed – the wishes by author/s for exclusion of references to their work is respected, so the list of citations is not actually complete. For instances where such work is referred to in the narrative report, it is noted as an “unpublished”.

3.3.2 Semi-structured interviews: Semi-structured interviews were the method of choice for interaction with NGO staff. A total of 24 such interviews were conducted over the course of this research, ranging in duration from one to three hours.

3.3.3 Focus-group Discussions: These were conducted with various special-interest groups including pastors, teachers, mothers, fathers, children, former sex workers, ‘rescued’ sex workers housed in an NGO shelter. In most cases, facilitators of the FGD also employed some of the PRA tools to help generate discussion and participation. The research conducted six (6) Group Discussions with children (81 children in total) and nine (9) with adults (34 in total). Most of the adults participating in FGD had some sort of connection with the Christian church, including friendship with church members. Not all were adherents to Christianity and not all are currently attending Church but the vast majority would be familiar with basic Christian tenants.

3.3.4 In-depth interviews: Five in-depth interviews, following a general checklist to ensure consistency of information, were conducted to verify the research team’s observation of more general trends as well as to further illuminate difficult concepts or issues.

3.3.5 PRA activities: PRA activities employed for this research included drawing, timeline, ten-seeds technique, community mapping, Venn diagram, community (transect) walks, various issue identification and ranking exercises.

3.4 Selection of sites & participants

This research aimed to focus on community-level information and interviews rather than on obtaining information from CSW’s as most research does, not least because of the desire to identify risk factors from the community’s perspective.

This meant that the research population was ‘prescribed’ by the location and existing interventions of various organisations: for instance, the research chose to focus on Chba Ampeu¹⁵ because it surfaced frequently in conversation with NGO’s and key informants as both a source and ‘end’ location for commercial sex workers, and because one of the key NGO’s working with Vietnamese is present there with staff and programming. This enabled the researchers to capitalize on the ‘trust relationship’ that already exists between these groups.

A list of locations with high concentrations of ethnic Vietnamese was compiled from interviews with agencies and staff operational in Vietnamese communities, as well as from NGO’s who don’t necessarily have work among Vietnamese per se but who are well positioned to comment in this regard. From this list, a total of four locations were determined to be appropriate for the community-level research and thus from these areas came most of the primary data: Svay Pak (Km. 11), Chba Ampeu, Mekong (near Klang Roum Seav Market), and Chek Engre Leu. Some

¹⁵ The Chba Ampeu area is home to perhaps the largest concentrations of Vietnamese in the country: at least four of the studies cited in this research did some primary data collection in this locale.

detailed information was also gathered from Phum Samaki (community located on the highway enroute to Km. 11). In addition to having a large number of Vietnamese, the major criteria for inclusion were:

- (frequency of) reported prostitution in the community,
- (frequency of) reported sale of (girl)children from the community,
- existence of information about prostitution in the location, and
- the presence of an NGO that would facilitate the research team’s access to the area.

For practical reasons the last criterion was weighted most heavily. Other considerations were site specific, including the fact that the Bodeng community is slated for destruction in May 2006 and its inhabitants are to be relocated to new area/s and not all to the same place. Presumably then, patterns and practices of prostitution and commercial sex will adapt to the new location/s. And, while Svay Pak was originally identified as an area of focus, it was later determined that given its history, it cannot be regarded as a ‘normal community’ and therefore information obtained from there would difficult to reconcile or consolidate with information from other more ‘normally functioning’ communities.

In summary, respondents can be detailed as follows¹⁶. Refer to Annex 3 for further details regarding the number of various types of interviews and description of sources.

- No. individual interviews with agencies / staff: 19
- No. shelters interviewed: 5
- No. child FGD: 7
- No. child participants (male/female): 81 (38 boys, 43 girls)
- No. Adult FGD: 9
- No. Adult FGD participants: 34 (11 male/23 female):
- No. in-depth interviews: 5 with 6 females.

3.5 Data Analysis

All of the qualitative data was synthesized in consultation between various combinations of the research assistants, technical advisors, and the Team Leader. Important issues and quotes were put into categories based on key topics and this informed the report outline as well as data analysis. As often as possible, actual quotes are utilised throughout the report as a way of giving voice to people too often unable to speak out for themselves.

3.6 Research Constraints

3.6.1 Language – it is optimal if research can be conducted directly in the heart language of the population in question. In this case, neither the Team Leader nor the technical advisors speak Vietnamese. For the research, three languages were utilised: Vietnamese, English, and Khmer. As much as possible, translation was done directly between Vietnamese and English or Vietnamese and Khmer. All note taking from PLA activities and FGD was done in Vietnamese and then translated into English for analysis and inclusion in the report.

¹⁶ In some cases, names of organizations were purposefully omitted at their request.

3.6.2 Considerations regarding sample size - The research is qualitative in nature, and therefore the sample size of respondents was relatively small. The findings here cannot be generalised or extrapolated to the entire Vietnamese urban community in general. They can, however, be regarded as indicative of the social reality of this population at this point in time and inference can be drawn from that.

3.6.3 Constraints for accessing respondents - One difficulty of working with urban poor population is, quite literally, finding time to meet with people. They work every day of the week, and usually all day. In some instances, a minimal ‘wage replacement’ was provided to participants to enable them to participate in focus group discussions.

Despite making effort to do so, it was not possible within the confines of this research to access families who had actually sold children, nor was it possible to meet any minors who had been sold. This was due to reluctance on the part of the research assistants/cooperating NGO’s to arrange such meetings because of concern that it might jeopardise their own work.

The term ‘community’ is used quite loosely in this document to refer to people who live in close physical proximity to one another. The slum community population is reportedly transient with a large degree of movement in/out, a feature that works against development of trust and cooperation among residents. As well, there did not appear to be very well developed social network mechanisms evident that are often considered to characterise ‘community’¹⁷ (ie. examples of caring for a neighbour or ‘doing favours’ for each other, or a community mobilising to work together on an issue of common concern). A strong sense of individualism prevails in the target areas¹⁸. This made it difficult to organise for focus group discussion; it also has obvious implications for interventions.

3.6.4 Legal status of Vietnamese - The fact that poor Vietnamese in Cambodia are in a tenuous position because most are unable to obtain official status documents, makes them sometimes reluctant to engage in conversation/s, or to convey the ‘real facts’, especially about sensitive issues that are legally and/or morally questionable.

3.6.5 Security concerns: Families may find themselves under threat if they disclose (or are perceived to disclose) information regarding the identity of the ‘brokers’ who arrange and make the sales of children.

3.6.6 Historic animosity - Perhaps the primary reason for the dearth of information about ‘the Vietnamese experience’ is the obvious and well-documented historical animosity between the Khmer and Vietnamese¹⁹ that seems to intensify rather than

¹⁷ The Church may be an exception to this, as it focuses on developing a sense of communal responsibility among its members, and encouraging members to literally care for their neighbours. However, the Church remains very small in number and limited in its geographic focus.

¹⁸ Schousboe-Laursen corroborates this; as do interviews with women formerly working as prostitutes strongly show the same attitude – when asked if they would tell others not to get involved in prostitution or would help women to get out of prostitution it was clearly stated that they did want to initiate involvement in the affairs of other people. “I would help them if they came to me for help.” Arensen et al noted that community members do not express public disapproval and make few active efforts to prevent trafficking of children because of self-interest and the notion that people have no right to criticize another family. (2004: 62).

¹⁹ In particular, see Farrington: “Living in the Shadows” and Schousboe-Laursen: “Cambodian Nationalism and the Threat from Within: History, Rights, and Practice in Relation to the Ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia.” Full citations are included in the annex.

diminish with time and interaction between the two nations and peoples. NGO's appear reluctant to become engaged with Vietnamese per se in a development programming context for, among other reasons, uncertainty or fear that it may compromise their ability to continue operating in the country and/or because of (negative) pressure from Cambodian staff. This 'working environment' makes it difficult to pursue 'the Vietnamese question' with Khmer staff and NGO's.

3.6.7 Discriminatory attitudes: There were discernible currents of discriminatory attitudes and beliefs expressed by NGO staff about the Vietnamese²⁰. 'Informant objectivity' is difficult to assess in this context.

3.6.8 Logistical considerations: Reliance on other organisations to arrange for meetings made the process much slower than it would otherwise have been; however, the benefit is that communities where interviews and group discussions were conducted trusted the interviewers and, presumably, the information obtained is of better quality.



Chba Ampeu (Sugarcane Market) area. Photo credit, Dr. Janet Cornwall, 2005.

²⁰ This issue also noted by Farrington (2002) in her research among Vietnamese living in Poipet. "...organisations and their staff often believed that whilst Khmer families trafficked their children out of desperation and because they were truly poor, ethnic Vietnamese families trafficked their children because they were only concerned about money and didn't love their children". The researcher's hard copy of the Farrington report did not include page numbers.

4.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Overview

Vietnamese in Cambodia tend to live in segregated communities, although there is some inter-marriage between Vietnamese and Khmer, particularly for the Kampuchea Krom. Although the majority have resided in Cambodia longer than ten years, less than one quarter of the people interviewed had ‘legal Cambodian papers’ (such as ID card, passport, family book) and those who did reported ‘personal connections’ and ‘paying large sums’ as necessary conditions for obtaining the documents. There is a general perception that ‘opportunities’ (for better employment, for improved living conditions, for ...) increase if one is more Khmer – many Vietnamese reported give their children Khmer names, assuming Khmer names themselves, marrying Khmer, and learning to speak Khmer language all in an attempt to ‘be Cambodian’.

The Vietnamese communities are characterised by crowded living conditions, poverty, lack of sanitation and other services (healthcare, credit, education, etc.), subsistence living (defined as day-to-day employment), precarious income, mobility and transience²¹. The most commonly cited occupations include day labour (especially construction and fishing related), selling small items such as snacks or plastic toys, recycling, market vending, and fishing.

The majority of Vietnamese respondents were literate in Vietnamese (children and adults); most households had at least one adult caregiver capable in verbal Khmer, very few households had both caregivers fluent in Khmer, and almost no adults are literate in Khmer. Vietnamese families put a priority on Vietnamese education for their children, especially literacy. Few had aspirations of achievement in the Cambodian formal education system. If a child was in school, it was more likely to be a Vietnamese school than a Khmer school: there were reported to be a fair number of classes (not formal schools) available for children, teaching primarily Vietnamese literacy and numeracy. These are usually private initiatives – the exception is the Hoi Viet Kieu school and the NGO schools.

Clearly, the sale of children into the commercial sex industry is a very visible, well known, and widespread phenomenon in Vietnamese communities: almost every child and adult had a first-hand story of a family they know personally, who has sold a girlchild. Children reported being afraid that it could happen to them, and powerless to know how to ‘fight against it’ although the majority said they would try.

Given the research limitations and the sensitivity of the topic, it was not possible to ascertain with any degree of certainty the proportion of families in a given community who sell at least one child. The number who seriously consider selling a child was reported to be more than half the families: the number who follow-through less than half the families. It was generally agreed across communities that less than half of the families (most often cited: 20-30 percent) had at least one member working as a prostitute: however, this was seen as quite a different type of work than selling of virginity (ie. the latter was not usually considered ‘prostitution’ because it only happens for a short time and then the girl/s return to the community so are not perceived as actually working in prostitution). In discussion it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between the phenomenon of selling girlchildren for prostitution and prostitution because they are regarded as such different things by the focus population.

²¹ Personal observation; and Arensen et al. 2004:60-63.

Major ‘risk variables’ that may positively incline toward consideration sale of children included: crisis/extra-ordinary expenses; debt; the phenomenon of ‘normalisation’; materialism; family honour; and cultural perceptions of the value/place of women (gender issues). All must be considered within the context of general poverty and the psychological burden of uncertainty and insecurity accompanying it; as well as with recognition for the particular factor of political uncertainty that characterises the lives of the Vietnamese minority in urban Cambodia.

4.2 Legal Status

Vietnamese in Cambodia occupy a liminal space: it is virtually impossible to be recognised as citizens by the Cambodian government²² no matter how long they have resided in Cambodia; and the Vietnamese themselves indicate that they do not feel particularly welcomed by the Vietnamese government although many voiced aspirations to return to Vietnam one day and many visit relatives living in Vietnam at least annually.

“To the individual Vietnamese, whether immigrant or long-term resident, the question is not what their legal rights are, but how they are perceived and classified within the community when they meet or are confronted by officials and other Khmer individuals.” (Schuesboe-Laursen, 2004:78)

As the President of the Hoi Viet Kieu expressed, the situation for Vietnamese in Cambodia is very difficult.

- *“They have lived here a long time; like me I am third generation and think of myself as Cambodian. But it is not easy for [Vietnamese]. Political change is happening a lot, especially at election time and this causes us trouble. And in times of war or conflict or crisis [the Khmer] chase away the Vietnamese.”*
- *So why, if life is so difficult, do they want to be here? “ For many, this is their home! They have been here too long [to think of Vietnam as home].”*

Few of the Vietnamese interviewed had genuine ‘legal’ papers. There are variations on the story, but basically Vietnamese must purchase the family book and ID card. Some but certainly the minority, of families have a ‘legal’ Cambodian family book. None of the women interviewed had the ID card, but a few of the men interviewed did possess the cards. Just one of the people interviewed had a Cambodian passport; she obtained this during the UNTAC period when, she said, they were much easier to get. Even so, participants indicated that they can own property in their own [Khmer] name when authorised by the *sangkat* authorities (two examples of where this was the case were in Stung Meanchy with a Kampuchea Krom couple and the second in Mekong area where the woman was given a passport under UNTAC).

Most of the adults interviewed indicated that they did have an ID card issued by the Hoi Viet Kieu. The price and process for obtaining this card, as well as the duration of validity, seemed to vary but some people in all locations indicated the presence of such an identification scheme.

²² The laws pertaining to this issue are the 1994 Immigration Law (which defines aliens and their rights and duties as foreigners within Cambodia) and the 1996 Nationality Law (which defines who is considered to be a member of the nation). Under the current system of laws, ‘immigrant is the only legal classification available to Vietnamese: “All are to be regarded as immigrants and foreigners regardless of the fact that they may have been born in Cambodia or lived the majority of there lives there.” (Schousboe Larsen, 2004:81).

Basically the cards were perceived to register their presence or act as a sort of census: beyond that, they did not know what its purpose might be and none had ever used it for anything. They did think it might be useful if they moved to another location in the city.

As noted by Schousboe-Laursen, one of the implications of not having clearly defined official status is a deeply ingrained sense of insecurity which inhibits long-term planning or visioning.

“Larger confrontations between Vietnamese and Khmers were very rare; instead the continuous threats of forced evictions, denial of access to healthcare and schooling, extraordinary bribes, and obstructive behaviour from local officials had become a permanent condition of life for the Vietnamese....living in a constant state of emergency had resulted in a general apathy among the inhabitants towards changing their social situation.” (2004:57)

This may be especially so when combined with the insecurity of poverty and subsistence living, and a lack of community or social coherence such as that experienced by the Vietnamese who are the subject of this research.

4.3 Socio-economic Profile

4.3.1 Duration of time in Cambodia & legal documentation: the period of time ethnic Vietnamese respondents have been in Cambodia ranged from one year to 22 years (24 reported for a male spouse): more than 70 percent have been in Cambodia 10 or more years.

Many of the children were born in Cambodia: 33/81 participating in the PLA activities. However, none of the children are ‘legally registered’ here because their parents do not have proper papers. In some cases, the parents registered the birth in Vietnam (if they possess Vietnam family book) by taking unofficial ‘registration’ document provided by clinics in Cambodia and submitting those for an official birth certificate from Vietnam.

A small number of the adults interviewed indicated that they had ‘official’ ID cards (no women reported this, only men) purchased from legal sources through questionable channels; and one Kampuchea Krom family (who have Cambodian relatives) indicated that they had a Cambodian family book.

Analysis: The majority of Vietnamese living in urban Cambodia, Phnom Penh, are permanently settled and do not have genuine intention to return to Vietnam. Therefore, long-term solution/s to various social problems must be considered. That includes addressing the issue of ‘legal status’.

4.3.2 Family size and home setting: The majority of children reported having both a father and mother²³ living in their homes. In cases where there was a single caregiver, it was usually a mother (3/5); in one case it was an aunt; and one case of a father-headed

²³ No distinction was made by the research questions between birth- and step-parents or to determine the extent of ‘blended families’. Also, this question was not pursued in depth to find out whether or not one parent was largely absent, as anecdotal information suggests, particularly for men/fathers.

household was recorded. Based on anecdotal evidence and the literature review, this research assumed that many more children would come from single-headed households or be cared for primarily by extended family members such as aunts or grandmothers rather than birth-parents.

Adult focus group participants reported an average of 2.75 children per family, with the least number of children recorded as zero and the most as six in a single family. All 81 participating children reported having at least one sibling; 34 had four (4) siblings (the single largest category); 13 had two (2) siblings; 10 had six (6) siblings. Twelve of the 81 children had five or more siblings. The largest number of siblings reported was nine (just one instance). Most children reported 1-4 siblings for a [maximum] average nuclear family size of six (6). Many children also have grandparents and other relatives living in their homes. These figures are comparable with the rural Khmer population: average family size for Khmer is five children for a median household of seven.

Intra-family violence was also noted by both children and adults as being common in their communities. It is often associated with alcohol consumption. All reports of physical violence were of men as perpetrators and women and children as victims.

The majority of families rent their homes, as they cannot afford to purchase them; and some families indicated another factor in the ability to purchase is also the legal one²⁴. The exception to this was Chba Ampeu where 9/16 total children indicated that their families owned their homes²⁵. Slightly more children live in concrete homes than wooden structures; the majority of children at Svay Pak indicated they live on houseboats. In poor communities, wooden houses are less expensive to rent/purchase than concrete houses.

For families living along the riverbank, the river is often a primary source of potable and bathing/cleaning water as the city system is simply too expensive to install or to access. Many families reported having to purchase water, especially for drinking/cooking. Most homes appear to have access to electricity, even if not their own supply.

Food security was reported as being adequate (“usually enough”) by the children²⁶. In Mekong, an average of 12/15 reported eating three meals per day of two dishes (not including rice). In Svay Pak frequency was slightly lower (8-10 reported eating three meals per day) but the average number of dishes was higher, reported by 9 girls and 7 boys as ‘3 or more’. In Chba Ampeu all children reported eating twice a day, most of them with three different dishes.

More than half the children indicated that their families could not afford ‘formal’ health care (ie. go to a hospital, see a doctor if someone was sick). The majority of children

²⁴ As with other aspects of life having a formal legal aspect, there did not appear to be a single, consistent system for land/house purchase. One woman indicated that she had recently purchased and built a house ‘using the normal methods’. One family said it is because they are Kampuchea Krom that they can buy land. Others indicated that it was not possible for them to own land ‘because we are Vietnamese’.

²⁵ One possible explanation is that in the past five years, two major fires have swept through Chba Ampeu, demolishing a large number of shacks and poorer shelters. Many of the residents of the poorer-quality housing were among the poorest community members and were subsequently re-located. This may have resulted in a greater degree of homogeneity in housing types and poverty-level than was previously (naturally) the case.

²⁶ It should also be noted that one reason the children reported having ‘usually enough’ food may be that they all attend an NGO-supported school that daily provides soya-milk and a snack.

indicated that they simply obtain medicine from a pharmacy in their community because they couldn't afford doctor's fees, (i.e. they could only afford medicines rather than a doctor's consultation/treatment)²⁷.

Slightly more than half the children attended either a church²⁸ or a Vietnamese pagoda – frequency or consistency was not ascertained by the researchers. About half the children who attend church also go to the pagoda: church as that is their own choice, and pagoda when their parents require.

Analysis: This picture of the socio-economic status of Vietnamese in slum areas shows that poverty is a factor in the decision to sell children, but just one factor among many. It may not be the primary factor. Families are not particularly large; many families have two primary caregivers residing at home and both are working; food security is reported to be adequate (meaning that sale is not usually made due to desperation or inability to provide for basic needs). Clearly, extra-ordinary expenses, such as that for healthcare, are one factor that may incline families to sell a child so that they can access a sizeable sum of money quickly.

That families are actively religious means that this could be positively exploited as a point of communication or organising within a community.

4.3.3 Language & Literacy: About 80 percent of the children participating in the PLA activities reported that at least one of their parents was able to speak Khmer. Differences between mothers and fathers in regard to ability with oral Khmer language was slight according to the children²⁹ but there were fewer mothers than fathers reported as 'speaking Khmer'. Adults were more reticent to report themselves as having ability in Khmer – less than half indicated that they themselves 'speak Khmer well': however, most reported that at least one adult in their household was conversant in Khmer. From the adult FGD it was learned that men are more likely than women to have some capacity for writing Khmer. Just one father, and no mothers, were reported by children as able to 'read and write Khmer'³⁰: that adults indicated that about 30 percent had some ability to read and write some Khmer.

²⁷ Adults were not asked this question about healthcare. The author suggests that other reasons for not accessing the formal system could be related to proximity to formal (RGC) health providers or to the perception of discrimination if they go for treatment. At least one NGO working with Vietnamese indicated that they had difficulty whenever they wanted to get one of their parishioners admitted to hospital because of language issues, the need to pay money up-front, and generally inconsiderate treatment of the sick person. With the exception of the language issue, this may also characterise the experience of poor Khmer!

²⁸ Did not ask details on what church or what kind of pagoda – 'pagoda' is the term used to refer to Vietnamese or Chinese place of religious worship, usually Buddhist or Chinese religion, but could be Cao Dai.

²⁹ This differs from adult self-reporting on oral ability in Khmer. Few of the adults interviewed indicated that they could speak Khmer well, although most could speak sufficient Khmer for daily marketing and mobility. Vietnamese is the language spoken at home and the language most highly regarded by all families and individuals interviewed.

³⁰ It should be noted that this question of Khmer literacy was not posed for the Chba Ampeu children's groups through oversight on the part of the facilitators.

Levels of Vietnamese language literacy among parents, as reported by their children, were respectable (about 85 percent of fathers and 60 percent of mothers); and even higher as self-reported by adults. About 10 percent of adults interviewed indicated that they are not literate in Vietnamese. Literacy levels in the general population may be slightly lower; traditionally people associated with the Christian church tend to be literate.

Analysis: Low Khmer orality and literacy rates hamper the Vietnamese and constrain opportunities (for employment, for education, for social services, etc.). It cannot be assumed by NGOs who have programmes in areas with Vietnamese population/s, as it seems to be, that ‘they can all speak Khmer’ and therefore no attention needs to be given to language issues.

Better use could be made of the fact that Vietnamese language literacy skills are high among the Vietnamese population, for both women and men. That is, more effort could be made to translate appropriate documents or use print-based media as a way of reaching the population with various messages and ideas.

4.3.4 Employment & Livelihood options: In more than 80 percent of the families represented by the children, both parents were recorded as ‘having employment’³¹. The most common work reported by children for fathers was ‘construction’ and for mothers was ‘selling’. Other frequently mentioned occupations included: selling bananas, owning a coffee shop, motorcycle driving, mobile snack/food stall, prostitution, market stall, peeling garlic, factory worker, electrician, cutting hair, carpentry, and taking in laundry.

According to the adult focus group discussions, and anecdotal evidence gathered during ‘walk-about’ in focus communities, it is more common than not that people, especially women, have multiple income sources. For instance, one woman processes and sells fresh soya milk, takes in laundry, and watches children for a neighbour.

In the Mekong area, one-third of boys and girls (5/15 for both) reported assisting with work for income (helping to sell, scavenge, look after siblings so parents can work) and in Km. 11 this was higher, where about two-thirds or 66 percent (9/15 girls, 11/15 boys) reported that they help with earning income (the type of work differed and specific examples included fishing, selling coffee, boat repair). Due to an oversight by the facilitators, this question of child participation in earning family income was not posed consistently in the Chba Ampeu PLA groups so their response is not included.

All children reported having some chores at home – taking care of siblings, cleaning, washing, cooking, and so forth. There did not appear to be a readily discernible consistent role distinction between what boys said they do and what girls said their chores

³¹ Author’s note: It may be that mothers’ work is under-represented by this as they sometimes bring work into the home, such as laundry or child-care, and are therefore not regarded by their children as ‘being employed’. It is also likely that in many cases, the absence of a parent from home indicates ‘employment’ to a child when in fact the parent may only be seeking employment and not actually earning an income.

“At what price, honour?”

A qualitative study into domestic trafficking of Vietnamese (girl) children for sexual exploitation

are (ie. some boys said they are charged with watching younger siblings, and some girls said the same).



Children in Chba Ampeu. Photo credit, Aaron Cash, 2005.

Adult FGD estimated that 70-80 percent of children in ‘poorer families’ (see 4.3.5 below) make some economic contribution to the family, starting around age six or when they are ‘old enough to help’. Often they begin by helping parents (ie. preparing snacks) and then may eventually shift to independent work. Children from poorer families were more likely to have independent work than children from ‘middle’ families who tend “to stay

with their parents in the shop”. In all reference communities, more girls than boys reportedly work for income; for this, the most common rationale was that “*girls can earn more [than boys]*”.

During the adult group discussion in Chba Ampeu, the group estimated that 30 percent of boys in their community ‘*are thieves, drug addicts, lazy, do not work, are violent...they cause trouble.*’ The group indicated that it felt the comparable category for girls was that of prostitution. This may be an indication of the paradoxical feelings surrounding the occupation of prostitution. It is ‘accepted’ because it brings income; but it also negatively regarded, and girls/women involved are regarded as ‘bad’, in a social sense (although not as individuals).

Discussion Point:

The Vietnamese experience of poverty and unemployment must be considered in light of the overall situation in Cambodia. Un- and under-employment are serious challenges in Cambodia as a whole. More than 250,000 adults enter the labour market each year (UNDP, “Unleashing Cambodian Enterprises”, a draft proposal, 2006). The country has very little manufacturing capacity, few factories, or large-scale enterprises that could absorb a large number of workers. The Micro, Small, and Medium business (MSMB) sector is under-developed due to constraints such as limited access to finance, lack of support services, corruption, and an inadequate legal and regulatory framework.

In this overall context, the livelihood options are generally even more limited for Vietnamese who:

- Occupy a precarious political space and seldom have ‘legal’ permission to reside in Cambodia.
- Tend to have minimal formal education.
- Often possess weak, if any, national-language literacy skills.
- Are largely excluded from the garment sector¹ by virtue of their ethnicity¹.
- Have very few viable options for accessing credit for business start-up.
- Have difficulty owning land due to their legal status.
- Are seldom able to work in government/civil service.
- Are largely excluded from NGO-sector.

4.3.5 Levels of poverty and income: Vietnamese respondents quickly identified five levels of wealth/poverty: the levels proved similar to ranking used by Khmer with the addition of a distinction between levels of wealth, as they indicated that there are no ‘very rich’ Vietnamese living in Cambodia (although there are in Vietnam) but that there are ‘rich’ Vietnamese in Cambodia.

Consistently, Focus Groups reported that 70-80 percent³² of their community is ‘poor or very poor’; about 20 percent are ‘middle’; and 10 percent are ‘rich’. Usually the proportion of ‘very poor’ was estimated to be greater than ‘poor’ (about 10 percent variance). Svay Pak was reported to have a higher proportion of well-to-do people than other communities; Chba Ampeu reported having the largest proportion of ‘very poor’ (40 percent).

No.	English term	Vietnamese Term	Khmer term	Description (from participants)
1.	Very Rich	<i>Dai gia</i>		Distinguishable from ‘rich’ by amount of money and degree of ‘luxury’.
2.	Rich	<i>Giau (Kha)</i>	<i>Neaq mien</i>	Big house, big car, much money.
3.	Medium rich; middle class	<i>Nguoi Trung or Trung Luu</i>	<i>Neaq machum</i>	Have a house; might own house; have motorcycle; car but not so good quality; steady employment (\$40-60/month).
4.	Poor	<i>Ngheo</i>	<i>Neaq kraw</i>	Poor with rented house, with some food everyday, with bicycle, some employment but not consistent – day labourer.
5.	Very poor	<i>Ban Cung</i>	<i>Neaq kraw bumpot or neaq kraw ptoall</i>	Very poor; maybe living on street, often no food, no work; eat 2x/day and simple food.

The research obtained rich detail about ‘average daily wage’ during discussions in Chba Ampeu – not as much detail was obtained from other communities. Below is the table developed by that women’s FGD. The description of each wealth category suggests that value is placed on ‘consistency’ of income and not only the amount of money earned. For instance, market sellers are estimated to earn about half of what gold sellers do, but they are located in the same category³³.

Term to describe wealth	Details	%	Avg. Daily wage
1. <i>Dai Gia</i> (very rich)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In Cambodia, these people are usually Khmer. ▪ When VN, it is because they have been here a long time and they are very very good with speaking Khmer. 	N/A	
2. <i>Giau (Kha)</i> (rich)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Loans money out to others. ▪ Has land. ▪ Is a ‘big seller’; often has store (machinery, motorcycles, etc.). 	10%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ \$500-600 /month (do not know but think this might be the case)

³² For these ranking exercises, the research team utilized the 10 seeds technique which readily lends itself to interpretation into percentages.

³³ Author’s note: furthermore, there was a sense in which some occupations are simply ‘known’ by everyone to be ‘respectable’ and therefore land that job in a particular ‘wealth category’ though it is very difficult for an outsider such as a researcher to ascertain just what criterion are being applied.

Term to describe wealth	Details	%	Avg. Daily wage
3. <i>Trung Luu</i> (medium)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Not lacking money; can pay rent and bills. ▪ Ex.: jeweller, gold seller, market stall, hair dresser. ▪ Kids go to school. ▪ No prostitution at this level. 	20%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Gold seller: \$10/day. ▪ Construction: \$7/day. ▪ Carpenter: \$6/day. ▪ Market: \$5-6/day.
4. <i>Nheo</i> (poor)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ May have some debt; can pay interest on debt but hard to pay off debt. ▪ Can pay rent. ▪ Need just small capital for business. ▪ Examples: day labour, manicure, small seller, laundry. ▪ Change occupations often; whatever work they can get. ▪ Some children go to school but might drop out to help parents earn money. ▪ Some prostitution. 	30%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Small seller: 15-20,000 riel/day. ▪ Construction: \$3-5/day. ▪ Manicure: 10,000 riel/all day work. ▪ Kids sold into prostitution: \$10/day (???) – john gets half the money.
5. <i>Nghio (Ban cung)</i> (very poor)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lots of debt; ▪ Temporary or daily labour; ▪ Whole family does recycling. ▪ Sell children; ▪ Husband may put wife into prostitution in this level. Gradual slide into prostitution: might try, find if there is money or not, and then continue. 	40%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 4,000 riel/day for temp. labour. ▪ Prostitutes maybe \$5/day. ▪ “You get more money if you sell your wife!”

Interestingly, the Vietnamese respondents, and Khmer NGO staff, said that the very poorest in a given community tend to be Khmer and not Vietnamese.

- “No matter how poor, the VN will still work.”
- “The [Vietnamese] will buy the recycled materials from [Khmer] who collect it.”
- “They [Vietnamese] will not just sleep on the street or in a pagoda; they will look for somewhere to live.”

Analysis: It is important to focus intervention efforts at reducing trafficking, on the poorest within a community (supply) but not at the exclusion of the wealthier (demand) residents.

As much as income level, stability of income seems to be a factor in how secure a family feels. This will be an important consideration in designing poverty-reduction activities or vocational skills training efforts.

There are wealth/ier people in every community: it may be possible to capitalise on their presence and appeal to the traditional notions of ‘patronage’ to involve them in activities to reduce human trafficking and, more generally, to improve their community.

4.3.6 Credit Options: In discussion about poverty and employment, the issue of ‘credit’ was also addressed. Participants indicated that it is very difficult to access credit on favourable terms. Poor Vietnamese cannot get credit from formal institutions because they have no legal papers and because they do not have sufficient collateral. Therefore, their only option is local, informal credit. This comes at a high price: interest was consistently stated at 20 percent per month with the requirement of daily repayment of at least the full amount of interest due.

The people collecting repayment are reported to easily resort to intimidation and violence. It was unclear whether or not this credit system is well-organised (ie. with very few people loaning money in a strictly controlled environment: mafia-style) or whether it is comprised of larger numbers of unrelated relatively well-off individuals loaning money. The general perception was that it was simply ‘rich people’ doing it individually, but the attendant level of violence suggests otherwise.

One of the male FGD reported that trafficking recruiters will take advantage of a family’s desperation by lending them money then asking for their daughters to pay off the debt. This sort of ‘environmentally adapted mutation’ of ‘informal credit’ gives some indication of what kind of challenges the poor face as they struggle to make ends meet in a hostile environment.

The other option for accessing a very small amount of capital/credit is what the Vietnamese call *hui*. The Khmer equivalent is ‘*ton tin*’. Essentially a group of people gather together and agree to contribute a set sum of money to ‘the pot’. Members bid on an amount of interest in order to be able to be the first one to take the ‘pot’: in other words, if there is a total pot of \$20 (\$2/member), the first taker may agree to pay 20 percent interest, or take just \$1.60 from each member but agree to pay back \$2). Interest subsequently drops as the group rotates through this cycle. In addition, one member receives a small stipend from the ‘pot’ to take responsibility for tracking and holding the money. While this does allow an individual to receive some capital, the amounts are relatively small. Also it was reported that this is declining in popularity because of increasing numbers of people who take the money and then literally run away with it, never repaying those who have contributed. And it is not without a price for those who participate, although the cost is less than if they borrow from recognised money-lenders.

Analysis: Clearly, access to credit on reasonable terms should be a serious consideration for anyone wanting to intervene in Vietnamese communities to reduce trafficking.

Given that the families most likely to engage in sale of a child are within the bottom two poverty levels, it will be important to carefully design any credit interventions.

Credit should be accompanied by a savings component (to help provide a buffer against ‘shocks’ that may drive a family to sell a child); by lifeskills training; most likely, training in business management and accounts will need to be provided; education and training in relevant health issues could also be included during solidarity group meetings; and it could also be utilised as a way of helping to promote group solidarity and a sense of communal ownership and pride.

4.4 Physical, Social, Cultural Environment

4.4.1 Physical Description: Communities tend to be crowded, with houses packed tightly together. Increasingly the houses are made of concrete, but there are also numerous tiny shacks and more traditional stilt-style houses. Lots are often tiny, and completely taken up with the house: few yards are evident. Few of the alleys or paths are paved. Garbage litters the streets and alleyways. Often there is raw sewage flowing through open gutters, or pooled under stilted houses. There is little ‘play space’ or ‘green space’ in any of the slum communities. Most of the signs denoting businesses or services, are written in Khmer language only, particularly along the main roads – a little more Vietnamese writing is evident off main thoroughfares.

Almost no community facilities exist, with the exception of religious institutions that may make such space available for community use. Occasionally there is an open patch of denuded land that forms an impromptu volleyball court or soccer pitch. It is not uncommon to see very young children wandering around unaccompanied; it is a common sight to see clusters of people (usually sex disaggregated) gathered in shady areas playing ‘lotto’ or cards, or some other gambling games.

Analysis: There may be an extent to which the rather dirty, crowded, ‘unglamorous’ physical surroundings of the target communities, contribute to the general sense of poverty, and the idea that prostitution and child sexual exploitation is a viable and preferred alternative. See section 5.4 below for a more detailed discussion on this point.

4.4.2 Community, social support, accountability structures: There seems to be little sense of trust, little notion of communal responsibility and ownership among the focus communities. This point is echoed by other research reports that address Vietnamese in urban slums in Phnom Penh (Farrington, Schousboe Laursen, Derks, Arensen et al.)

- *“They do not have anyone to help them analyse their problems or help them think through long-term implications of decisions. They do not trust anyone. Who can they turn to for help? They have no family here.”* [NGO worker assigned to Bodeng area, speaking on reasons why parents might traffic children].
- *“We don’t look at other people. We are just trying to survive. How can we look at what other people are doing?”* [Women’s FGD, Chba Ampeu]

Respondents indicated that the general lack of trust within their communities is exacerbated by factors such as lack of family in the area (*“we can only trust our family”*), transience (real or imagined), insecure employment which makes people feel uncertain and afraid, *“everyone works hard everyday and they do not have time for anything else”*. The sense of competition with neighbours also surfaced regularly in conversation.

One woman who formerly worked as a CSW (about ten years ago), when asked what she would want to tell others in her community about prostitution, said:

- *“I don’t worry about the community, only my family and myself.”* [This woman had some very bad experiences with gang rape and physical abuse when working as a prostitute].

Two respondents, one expatriate and one Vietnamese who had moved to Cambodia from Vietnam to work among urban Vietnamese indicated that there is clearly a difference in the way that Vietnamese families organise themselves here and how they organise in Vietnam. In Vietnam, it was noted that there are many social structures—including extended family, social obligations, and different Government offices and activity requirements—which help to keep people accountable to one another for their actions. These are largely absent in Cambodia; so it is easier for Vietnamese living here to do things that they might not otherwise considered.

4.4.3 Recreation/entertainment³⁴: Major entertainment and social gathering places for men were identified as coffee shops, porn cafes, gambling sites (such as cock fighting or card playing); and if available, cleared patches of land where they can play volleyball or soccer.

The major meeting and socialising place for women was identified as the hair dresser. Numerous women were observed to gather and visit around gambling games; the market is another location where women gather and socialise although often in the context of working (not purely recreational).

³⁴ See Fordham’s report, *“‘Wise’ Before Their Time”* for a more full discussion of ways to positively promote and signify ‘masculinity’. 2005.

Analysis: There are very few alternatives to currently questionable social practices such as gambling and cock fighting. If constructive alternatives could be put into place, this may well reduce some of the energy and resource put into more negative entertainment. Giving alternative forum for achievement (such as organising soccer teams and tournaments, positive recreation or education opportunities like literacy classes) too may reduce the need for males in particular, to feel they have to ‘prove themselves’ in things like sexual conquest or gambling.

4.4.4 Sexualization: There is a sense in which the nature of interaction between people living in the focus communities appears to be sexualised in an unhealthy way. This occurs through a convergence of multiple factors: pornography is easily accessible even to very young children in porn cafes, several children reported having immediate family members who visit porn cafes and who also bring porn videos home, prostitution is common in all communities researched and there is little attempt to hide it, children (girls and boys) readily identify the location of many brothels, there are very few options for constructive recreation or entertainment, there is high unemployment or under-employment leaving many people frustrated. Children were said to play at copying the actions they see in the porn movies.

4.4.5 Drug Use: Drugs were cited by teachers at four locations as being a rapidly increasingly problem for the past three years; one that has many attendant social ills such as theft (drug users steal in order to support their increasingly expensive habit) and violence (users break into fights or argue with family members who will not give them money). Glue-sniffing and yama were the two drugs teachers could name. Additionally, some children in nearly every FGD were aware of the presence of drugs in their communities; this was true even of the younger children.

4.4.6 Cultural evolution: The question of cultural adaptation and change is very relevant in the context of discussion about trafficking. Vietnamese in Cambodia are regarded as neither Vietnamese nor Khmer. As one ethnic Vietnamese NGO worker described:

- *“VN in Cambodia are completely different than Vietnamese in Vietnam. You cannot expect them to be the same! VN and Khmer who live here [in Cambodia] all catch the same bug!” (ie. the Vietnamese in Cambodia are more like Khmer than like Vietnamese in Vietnam). Views on education are different: in Vietnam people are very keen on education but here they don’t want to send their children to school. In Vietnam, people think about the future and about providing for their children but that is not so much in Cambodia. Also, Vietnamese in Cambodia do not work so hard as those in Vietnam. But, respect for the family seems to be the same.”*

One implication of this is that finding/s from research about trafficking which pertains to cultural issues, needs to be carefully applied to Vietnamese in Cambodia. It cannot be assumed that cultural norms in Vietnam are consistently applicable, nor (more obviously) Khmer cultural norms. Both do have an influence but the result is a ‘hybrid’ culture that needs to be considered on its own merit.

4.5 Community Administration

It was difficult to determine whether or not a clearly defined system of ‘informal governance’ exists among the VN community/ies in Phnom Penh. Khmer NGO staff of local organisations involved in Vietnamese areas have the perception that the Vietnamese community is well-organised and ‘takes care of its own’. They talked about the need to communicate with “community leaders of the Vietnamese”. However, their interaction seems to consist mainly of meetings with the local representatives of the Hoi Viet Kieu (HVK), the only formal administrative body that exists (Vietnamese Association in Kingdom of Cambodia). The HVK is an official extension of the Socialist Government of Vietnam and is sanctioned by the RGC³⁵. It has official representatives designated in major Vietnamese communities around the country, in Phnom Penh as well as in the provinces.

4.5.1 Hoi Viet Kieu: According to the President, the HVK has three departments: social problems, local representatives, and education. The role of the HVK is to:

1. Collect information about Vietnamese people living in Cambodia. Instruct the Vietnamese to obey Cambodian laws and customs.
2. Help in crisis times such as fires, floods, disaster.
3. Help individual families to find housing, help those who are sick, who are in difficulty.
4. “We run a cemetery where Vietnamese families can buy a plot [for \$25-\$50] to bury the dead.”
5. Have representatives in each community who can inform the central HVK office.
6. Provide some education opportunities for kids (teaching Vietnamese and Khmer curriculum up to grade 5; currently have about 1000+ students attending classes).

There is a perception by ‘outsiders’ (Khmer NGO staff) that the HVK is a positive feature, and active advocate for the Vietnamese: ‘[the HVK] helps people find housing and jobs, they help when people are sick.’ The Vietnamese interviewed during this research indicated that they did not regard the HVK activities as being particularly useful or effective.

It was also a commonly held perception by Khmer respondents that the Vietnamese community was more of a homogenous entity than the Vietnamese respondents indicated. And that the Vietnamese had the ‘fall-back’ position of being able to move to Vietnam in the event of trouble or needing assistance. Neither of these perceptions was affirmed by the Vietnamese respondents of this research.

Analysis: The Hoi Viet Kieu must be considered by any organisation who wishes to work amongst the Vietnamese. But agencies should not assume that the HVK is in any way representative of the communities in Phnom Penh. Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that the HVK itself can adequately accomplish all it aims to (ie. providing education, providing assistance in the event of crisis, etc.).

As there are no clear administrative or support structures in place in Vietnamese communities, this may be an excellent place for organisations to apply their resources: to community organising.

³⁵ As such, it makes a concerted effort to keep track of the numbers of Vietnamese in urban areas in particular: however, this information is not readily available for NGO’s.

4.5.2 Interface with Cambodian authorities and Khmer: When asked about points of interface with official Cambodian authorities, the [Khmer] ‘*May Phum*’ (village chief) was cited as a key figure. Points at which they must interact with the *May Phum* include:

- Register for wedding.
- Register for a funeral.
- When they want to open a new church.
- If they want to buy land they need [his] permission.

Further, participants indicated that the Chief tells the community about general information: such as if there is an election coming, if there is chance for people to get ID cards, etc.

There is reported to be ‘chronic’ (consistent but ‘low-level’) harassment of Vietnamese by officials, with the police mentioned most often. Harassment appears to be ‘localised’ (rather than ‘centralised’) and not a uniform system of interaction between police and Vietnamese. It seems to depend upon community/location. It often takes the form of requiring payment before any service is rendered; or payment to prevent a negative repercussion for behaviour such as being jailed.

There was not a consensus on the issue of discrimination by Khmer toward Vietnamese: perspectives on this appears to depend upon extrapolation of personal experience and upon location. It is perhaps best summarised in the following exchange during a Focus Group discussion:

- A Kampuchea Krom male says that authorities don’t care about whether the people involved are Khmer or Vietnamese, what matters is MONEY.
- An ethnic Vietnamese female says there is certainly discrimination against Vietnamese and that one common way this plays out is through asking for higher payment from Vietnamese.

There appears and was reported to be a fair amount of inter-marriage between Vietnamese and Khmer; also, both Khmer and Vietnamese conduct business in common markets and are employed by one another in various shops and work settings. Generally, the Vietnamese reported that they can live side-by-side with the Khmer and that they get along well. It would seem that at the grassroots level, daily interaction is amicable. But it does not take much for difference to surface. And when differences are apparent, they are most likely attributed to ethnicity rather than other causes (such as personality).

As Schousboe Laursen observes: “...it is important not to see the practices of the state, or the state representatives or the general public as separate factors each influencing the lives of the Vietnamese; rather one should recognise the cumulative effect of these factors. Taken individually, each factor is an obstacle, but piled together they become a ‘condition of life’, inseparable and impossible to act upon.” (2004: 88)

4.5.3 Settlement issues: Poor Vietnamese tend to migrate to urban areas in Cambodia where there are other Vietnamese, and through ‘well defined informal systems which have developed over time’ can be successful in terms of finding homes to rent, accessing water and electricity, and so forth. The ease of settlement in Phnom Penh seems very much to be a matter of ‘who you know’. So too with accessing ‘official documentation’.

There appear to be as many ways to access official ID papers as there are people who want them. Differing stories of amounts paid, who people had to know in order to get the papers, etc. But, for everyone it is reportedly difficult to get papers; and easier for men than women - women seldom get such documents.

Speaking Khmer / assuming Khmer name was frequently stated as an important way for the Vietnamese to access local services (such as education, getting a house, etc.). Most families reported giving their children both a Khmer name (“for outside the house”) and a ‘real’ Vietnamese name, as well as assuming Khmer names for themselves.

4.5.4 Conflict resolution: Normally there is no external intervention for inter-family conflict. The exception may be when physical violence occurs, or the conflict spills out into public space. In those cases, rarely were neighbours reported to intervene, and only sometimes the police will intervene; money is required for police intervention.

In situations of conflict between families or neighbours, if injury is sustained, people can go to the village chief/authorities, or commune authorities (paying more according to the level) and sue. This consists of making a complaint and having the authorities write it down. The complainant must sign and pay according to whatever the authorities decide is the outcome. Generally this system was reported to work satisfactorily; it plays more when there are conflicts between neighbours or families rather than within families.

Another specific example given was as follows.

- *“If neighbours are drunk and fighting physically, people can take the injured one to village authorities and help them to sue the other one who caused damage. Police still do not get involved. Whoever is at fault must pay and sign a document indicating that it ‘won’t happen again’. If so...maybe they will be put in jail.”*



Many Vietnamese live along the riverside in Phnom Penh. Photo credit: Aaron Cash, 2005.

4.6 Presence of NGO's & other services

Overview & Analysis: There are some NGO's operating in predominantly Vietnamese communities, and some Government services available to Vietnamese. There was clearly a great deal of appreciation for services that are available; but equally clear was the fact that services are not adequate for the population size. Further, it is difficult for Vietnamese to access Government services because they lack official ID documents; it is difficult for NGO services that are not directed specifically toward Vietnamese because of lack of language skills, and a tendency toward negative attitudes by Khmer staff toward Vietnamese.

It would be useful for agencies who do focus on Vietnamese work to communicate more regularly and fully with each other, to share experiences, resources, and learnings.

4.6.1 Government Services

Vietnamese communities in Phnom Penh are largely without external social/care services, either those offered by the RGC or by non-governmental organisations. Two basic services of [formal] Education and Health are difficult to access because of language barriers, lack of official papers, and a general feeling among Vietnamese that they will experience discrimination. All communities had at least some access to city water and electricity, but reported having to pay a high price for 'hook up' (again, there was awareness and acknowledgment of the fact that this may be a factor of poverty rather than ethnicity).

As detailed elsewhere, interaction with authorities tend to be negative: at times of conflict and with financial demands and general harassment. It was not easy for respondents to distinguish whether some of the negative interaction was merely a factor of being poor (they recognise that poor Khmer are harassed also), or specifically because they were Vietnamese (see 4.5.2 above).

4.6.2 Community-Based projects reaching Vietnamese

A small number of international organisations run programmes or services that do reach Vietnamese. For instance, Pharmacie Sans Frontiers (PSF) works in six MoH clinics around Phnom Penh and environs, as well as 10 mobile clinic locations and approximately 50 small-scale locations to provide care and information to sex workers about STI's and health. They have four Vietnamese speakers on staff; and have produced and use some IEC materials in the Vietnamese language.

Similarly, TASK operates a weekly clinic in Chek Engre Leu and indicated that a large proportion of its clients used to be Vietnamese³⁶ and therefore they hired an ethnic

³⁶ According to the TASK staff, in the past year or so, many of the Vietnamese women/girls moved on to more lucrative locations such as Bodeng. Now the majority of women working as prostitutes in this area are reportedly Khmer.

Vietnamese woman on a part-time basis to conduct the training/lessons in Vietnamese. Other examples of projects reaching Vietnamese include:

- TASK’s The Little Conquerors (TLC) programme for handicapped children operating in Meanchy District estimates it has a steady 30 percent Vietnamese children on its roster. At least two of the TASK staff can speak functional Vietnamese.
- Working in cooperation with the MoH in Phnom Penh, the Reproductive Health Association of Cambodia (RHAC) has community workers for family planning working via a commune network. These presumably reach some Vietnamese³⁷.
- MSF Belgium has apparently produced an educational book for commercial sex workers in the Vietnamese language³⁸.
- World Relief operates a micro-credit project in the Chba Ampeu area and estimates that about 25 percent (totalling ~475 clients) in that area are Vietnamese, and has at least three Vietnamese speaking staff. The project manager indicated that he is very pleased with the participation by Vietnamese and that they are successful in repayment – the average size of loans for the Vietnamese clientele is about \$400, indicating that they are not the ‘poorest of the poor’.
- World Relief HOPE project works in five locations around Phnom Penh, reaching about 7,000 children of whom about 230 are Vietnamese. HOPE does not have any fluent Vietnamese-speaking staff but reported that most of the children do speak Khmer adequately to allow participation in project activities. HOPE does preventative health education through a child-to-child format about dengue, diarrhoea, basic hygiene and ARI. They also have a moral instruction component (love one another, respect for parents, honesty, sharing, caring for neighbours, etc.) done through songs, drama, and puppetry.
- Maryknoll’s Seedling Project provides food, rent, and educational support for poor families around Kandal Province. Seedlings estimates that about 20 percent of its total beneficiaries are ethnic Vietnamese, and many of these live in communities along the Mekong River. In addition, Maryknoll supports four kindergartens and about eight adult literacy classes (Vietnamese and Khmer) that are based in different churches located in predominantly Vietnamese communities.
- Both ILO and IOM are involved in counter-trafficking and have given some special attention to Vietnamese issues, especially relating to repatriation and reintegration. And, more than any other single organisation, IOM has conducted research efforts specific to the Vietnamese (in relation to commercial sex work). See List of References in Annex 2 for research report titles and details.

The Anlong Kranong and Nengkong Thmai areas are an anomaly as they are resettlement sites to which people from Bodeng and Chba Ampeu were relocated after the fires of late 2001. The population may be as much as 30-35 percent Vietnamese. Several NGO’s are still operating there, having started in an emergency relief capacity and now functioning in a more developmental way. The only efforts aimed exclusively at the Vietnamese appear to be church-related work, with the exception of a small group of Vietnamese

³⁷ RHAC was not contacted directly by the research team, so details are not clearly known; its activities were referred to by other NGO’s.

³⁸ Likewise, MSF Belgium was not contacted directly so details are not known, such as date of production, dissemination, larger programming, etc.; the production of this book was cited by another NGO healthworker.

women who are making crafts as an income-generating activity through a church-based organisation. For other services, both Vietnamese and Khmer [theoretically] benefit equitably but no attempt is made to focus specifically on Vietnamese.

4.6.3 Community-based projects focusing on Vietnamese

There are several initiatives undertaken by Christian agencies³⁹ amongst the Vietnamese in different locations around Phnom Penh and a small number initiated by private ‘*Viet Kieu*’ (Vietnamese term referring to Vietnamese who live outside Vietnam). In most cases, the agencies have ethnic Vietnamese on staff or working as volunteers. In at least one case, the expatriate volunteers do not speak any Vietnamese but have a good command of Khmer and do not see lack of Vietnamese language as a hindrance to their work with children ‘because the children all speak Khmer even if their parents do not’.

The types of interventions are not too widely varied, consisting primarily of the following (listed in descending order of frequency):

- Education both for adults (literacy) and for children. Education for children consists of some combination of Vietnamese language literacy, Khmer language orality and literacy, Vietnamese and/or Khmer primary school curriculum. In most cases the stated aim for the child-focused education is to ‘mainstream’ Vietnamese children into Khmer formal school system which necessarily requires the organisation to engage in advocacy to have children admitted to a school.
- Kinder-care or pre-school. Conducted in the Vietnamese language; basically acts in a childcare function and as preparation for children for school.
- Free medical care: this tends to take the form of regularly scheduled but periodic clinics in Vietnamese communities. Diagnosis and medicines are usually given without charge. Depending upon the type of illness, some NGO’s will also make the effort to get Vietnamese admitted to local health facilities, such as Preh Malea Hospital.
- Children’s clubs. Catering to different ages, but basically including fun and instructional activities, snacks, some type of ‘moral guidance’ component.
- Small loans/low-interest credit: this tends to be done on an ad hoc basis, rather than systematically implemented. There is less concern about ‘repayment’ than there is about the welfare of the family or individual/s involved.

4.6.4 After-care Shelters

All five “after-care shelters” in Phnom Penh interviewed indicate that they accept both Khmer and Vietnamese girls into care but at the time of the research, two did not actually have any Vietnamese in care. Some shelters appear to be making a serious attempt to cater to Vietnamese clients through such means as hiring ethnic Vietnamese, or at least Vietnamese-speaking Khmer, as permanent staff. One shelter reported that it attempts to have a 50-50 ratio between Khmer and Vietnamese on staff at the shelter, although it is difficult to achieve because it is difficult to find appropriately skilled and experienced

³⁹ This report does not detail the church-work conducted by Christian agencies, but only the development-oriented initiatives.

Vietnamese⁴⁰. This same shelter conducts Vietnamese language literacy classes as part of its ‘skills development’ programming.

The vast majority of staff in the shelters are Khmer. Some of their remarks (see below) give an indication of the perceived differences between Khmer and Vietnamese, and the tension that is deeply held⁴¹.

Observations / remarks by Shelter Representative:

- Vietnamese characters are stronger than the Khmer girls character.
- Vietnamese have stronger attitudes. They are more clever and quick to learn. Khmer are easier to take care of but harder to train.
- The shelter representative would say the more Vietnamese in the shelter, the more problems there are. “If 50/50, Khmer/Vietnamese it is too hard to have control at the shelter.”
- Vietnamese are scared of authority however. When the Vietnamese embassy officials come to the shelter, the VN girls are scared.
- The VN girls are disorderly. They use clever means to escape. The Khmer are gentle.
- VN girls do not like the female staff; they only like to talk to the male staff.
- It seems that among the Vietnamese, [prostitution] is viewed as another form of work. “I’ll do this for 20 years, then I’ll have enough and retire.” Among the Khmer, however, it seems to be more of a stigma, even an “accepted rape”.
- Sometimes there is fighting [between Khmer and Vietnamese residents] because of language problems and the food.
- Vietnamese girls are typically difficult. They make problems. They usually do not want to stay. They often are more destructive of the property. They are harder to work with than the Khmer.
- Usually Vietnamese families in Cambodia will sell the children back [into prostitution]. Therefore the aim of the shelter is to repatriate them to family in Vietnam. There is less risk of them returning to prostitution this way.

In addition to shelters set up specifically to respond to female victims of trafficking, there are shelters for women, such as Cambodia Women’s Crisis Centre (CWCC) and Hagar, whose purpose is to address domestic violence but not trafficking *per se*. Reportedly these shelters also accept Vietnamese women. However it is not clear if there are Vietnamese speaking staff at the shelters; and how information about the available services is disseminated. It is not likely that many Vietnamese know such services are available: with the exception of a few teachers, none of the research respondents could name with certainty, one organisation that might be able to assist women.

Furthermore, as suggested from some of the remarks in the table above, staff attitudes may make it difficult for Vietnamese to assimilate. And long-term solutions (such as returning women/girls to their community and family of origin) may be more difficult to negotiate, given the precarious legal situation of most poor Vietnamese families living in Cambodia.

⁴⁰ Author’s note: Perhaps church groups or NGO’s working in VN could refer potential staff. There is ample room for greater cooperation and information-sharing among agencies working with Vietnamese.

⁴¹ This was noted by Arensen et al, “Respondents...seemed less likely to acknowledge that Vietnamese clients had been victimized tend [sic] to more readily express empathy and concern for Khmer women in sex work.” (2004:24)

4.6.5 Phnom Penh Crisis Response System

There is a fledgling crisis referral system in place for Phnom Penh and environs to assist in case of immediate risk of, or victims of, sexual and/or physical abuse and trafficking. This system is designed for the majority Khmer population, but theoretically it is accessible to Vietnamese as well.

To facilitate awareness of this service, and access to it, small colourful cards have been circulated to hundreds of children through various agencies and networks that address trafficking, abuse, and violence. The cards include the MOI (Ministry of Interior) hotline number to report crimes and also a telephone number for Licadho – two of their child rights staff monitor the telephone. Eventually these will be replaced by a national helpline number being proposed by Chab Dai. Currently only the MoI and Licadho monitor and follow-up the calls to these numbers; eventually that network will be expanded to include a national referral system with many more participants. At this time, there is reportedly a Vietnamese speaker on the hotline, but he is on duty only during certain shifts so it is difficult to predict when he would be available at the number.

Some individual organizations also reportedly provide similar services, such as Mith Samlanh/Friends, who works in conjunction with the police to investigate when they receive calls about sexual or physical abuse of children. It is not known whether they have Vietnamese-speaking staff, or what proportion of their calls/cases are with ethnic Vietnamese children.

4.6.7 Legal Support

For a discussion of the existing legal framework under which issues of trafficking and sexual exploitation are regarded, and the legal support that is available in Cambodia, see Annex 5

4.7 Knowledge about prostitution & trafficking

4.7.1 Overview

In all communities where this question was explored there was ready acknowledgement by most respondents (adult and child) of the presence of prostitution and trafficking, and of trafficking as ‘a problem’. The speed and ease with which the topic surfaced was a surprise to the research team. “Prostitution” emerged as readily as “carpentry” or “market fruit seller” in discussions about occupations common in Vietnamese communities: rarely did the research team need to prod respondents. Participants did appear a little more hesitant to talk about (girl)child sale than about prostitution. In conversation about prostitution, there seemed to be a degree of resignation: respondents generally did not think that it was a positive type of work, but they recognise that people, women in particular, have few options for earning such good income and so did not want to ‘blame’ or question the fact that [older] girls/women become involved.

Surprising too was the level of details available about the ‘logistics’ of child (read: girls) sales and entry/participation in the commercial sex trade. However, detailed information about the identity of people actually purchasing the girls in question remains elusive – clearly, in most cases the families of the girls communicate with people known to the

family and living in their community, in some cases a well known ‘child broker’, to arrange for sale. But it was not possible to get information about steps further in the process: who the known ‘recruiter’ sells children to, or where the children go. It was also difficult to gain reliable and precise information about the proportion of families in a given community who have sold, or are considering selling, a (girl)child into prostitution.

- Estimates from focus groups in Chba Ampeu ranged from 10-60 percent of families (women indicated a lower figure, usually 25% and men indicated 60%)
- In Mekong area, respondents estimated about 20 percent.
- Svay Pak: “*most families would sell*”.
- Phum Samaki: “*many of the families in this community sell one child for prostitution*”.
- Street 63: reported the disturbing phenomenon of ‘frequent’ grooming of girls for the trade.

With the exception of Svay Pak which reported significantly more, communities consistently stated that about 25 percent of families have a [female] member currently working as a prostitute and about half were estimated to be over age 18 and half under age 18. Further, about 60 percent of those in prostitution were thought to have entered against their will (‘forced’) and 40 percent ‘chose’ to become prostitutes to earn money. The issues of ‘choice’ and ‘coercion’ are complex; it was not possible given the research constraints to have detailed discussion with the focus groups about nuances of “choice” (ie. they did indicate that some parents ‘sweet talk’ girls into the trade, telling them that they can earn money for the family and that they will get beautiful clothes – but said that even if parents sweet-talk them, the girls themselves decide to become prostitutes).

Analysis: The research suggests that nearly half of families do sell a girchild (a ‘best estimate’ is 30-40 percent) for sex; and that more families consider this as an option than actually follow-through with the sale. Furthermore, a greater proportion of families would sell a child as a one-off event for her virginity, than would sell a child into longer-term prostitution. Longer-term decisions seem to be the domain of older girls/women. Thus, the notion of ‘positive deviance’ (reasons why a minority do not have same behaviour as the majority) is not particularly relevant because the majority are not engaging in the aberrant behaviour examined by this research.

4.7.2 Linguistic clues

The most common euphemism cited by respondents as being used for working as a prostitute is ‘working in a coffee shop’. This is not surprising: in Vietnamese communities, such as St. 63, many coffee shops do serve as ‘fronts’ for back-room brothels. Downstairs there is legitimate business (coffee) while upstairs there is sex for sale.

The research attempted to elicit some of the Vietnamese terminology/slang that is used when people talk about prostitution, as one way of ascertaining deeply held cultural beliefs about the trade. Analysis was inconclusive, although in general, there did not appear to be such negative values imbedded in the terminology as is the case with

Khmer⁴². These observations can only be regarded as very rudimentary: more detailed and technical analysis is merited.

- The most commonly used term is: *lam gai*. (Literally translated this means: ‘being’ – verb used to signify making or doing, the act of working at something + ‘female’ – term used to refer to both girls and women).
- In books and stories when the author wants to be genteel about this subject, she/he will use the phrase “*nguai di mua hoa*” / “*khach mua hoa*” (‘person going to buy flowers’ / ‘visitor or guest buying flowers’). In this case the prostitute is called “*gai ban hoa*” (‘female who sells flowers’).
- Men will say they want to *choi gai* (literally ‘go play with girl/female’).
- A commercial sex worker is sometimes referred to as “*gai di khach*” or ‘girl who welcomes or goes to receive a visitor or guest’.
- *Gai du*: (Literally, ‘girl under umbrella’) This term refers to the fact that Vietnamese women will use an umbrella when they go out in the daytime to visit people because they do not want their skin to darken in the sun; and when go out visiting people they will stop occasionally to talk with different people.
- *Di du*: (Literally, ‘movement’ or ‘to go’ + ‘umbrella’). Same meaning as above.

4.7.3 Awareness levels of children

- “*Out of 10, it happens to 11.*” (ie.: more often than not) [Teenager living on a houseboat in Chba Ampeu, talking about prevalence of child sales in her community]

The results of the child-PLA group discussions show that the all participant children were keenly aware of the presence of the commercial sex industry: they could easily name the locations of brothels and so-called ‘porn cafes’. Most children had first-hand stories to tell about family members, friends, or neighbours who are (or have been) somehow involved in the industry⁴³. The amount of detail that the children contributed leaves little room for doubting the veracity of their statements.

Two issues, pervasiveness (“it’s everywhere!”) and proximity (distance from childrens’ homes and prevalence in their communities), clearly surfaced as issues of concern. Furthermore, it was clear that the majority of children felt insecure and in two communities (Chba Ampeu the exception) the majority of the girls expressed fear that they may be forced into commercial sex⁴⁴.

Analysis: The fact that children are clearly cognizant aware of these issues and aware of how widespread the phenomenon of prostitution and child sales are, means that they are well on the road to being ‘desensitized’ to these activities as negative or unusual or unhealthy.

⁴² In Khmer, the most common term used for ‘prostitute’ is ‘srey koich’, literally ‘broken woman’ which suggests little room for restoration. It also puts the balance of ‘blame’ on the woman/girl, rather than assigning it to the males who purchase sex.

⁴³ Actually working as prostitutes; actually sold for virginity; work as guard, cleaner, errand-runner, bookkeeper for brothel; visiting brothels to buy sex; working as a middle-woman to purchase girls from Vietnam, an aunt who died of AIDS after working as a prostitute, etc.

⁴⁴ These results exclude Chba Ampeu as the question was not posed there.



Many Vietnamese live in very crowded conditions. This is a largely Vietnamese community of carpenters that lives/works in the Boung Traebek area. Photo credit: Aaron Cash, 2005.

4.7.4 Patterns and trends

The so-called ‘conspiracy of silence’ makes it difficult to obtain detailed information about various actors in this sordid drama: everyone knows, but few people talk openly about the details of actual sale for fear of reprisals from those involved, or fear that their lives and precarious situation may be irreparably upset⁴⁵.

One point that was readily divulged was that there are basically two different types of sale. One is for the girl’s virginity: she is sold around the age of 13 (after menarche) and stays away for 2-4 weeks, then returns to her life as it was before (ie. going to school, helping at home, etc.). The other type of sale is for girls who are put into brothels and who are then ‘in the trade’ for a longer period of time.

A new phenomenon (starting about two years ago) reported from the Chba Ampeu community is ‘sponsorship’ of young girls (the youngest was reported to be 2 years of age) by foreign men (usually Asian, sometimes white): families are paid \$150-\$300 per month to care for the girl and when the foreigner is ready he will come and take her for sex. This was not reported to be very common, but as becoming more common.

It was also clear that sex work was perceived by respondents to be largely transitional in nature; that is, Vietnamese girls and women may engage in it as a means to a ‘larger’ or

⁴⁵ Respondents usually expressed some concern during discussions, about what they could reveal for fear of reprisals.

more permanent “end” or goal of starting up a business or purchasing a high-cost item such as a motorcycle. Often it appears that the ‘end’ is not the idea of the younger girls at least. Such findings are supported in other literature as well.

Other trends that were possible to clearly ascertain include the following:

Discernible TRENDS:

- Parents, mothers specified most often, make the decision to sell the girls.
- Age for sale of ‘*kieu*’ (virginity) is 13; few girls are reported as being sold before they reach this age.
- The price for *kieu* was consistently reported at \$300-\$500. There was some indication that the price paid for *kieu* is falling due to an increase in the supply of girls.
- More often than being self-propelled, girls are ‘forced’ by families/circumstances to enter prostitution.
- Kidnapping of children for the purpose of selling them into prostitution was cited as an occasional occurrence.
- Recruiters are intentional about targeting vulnerable families.
- It does not appear to be a result of ‘trickery’; more often ‘deception’/coercion is used to encourage families to sell their children for sex.
- Recruiters can be passive as well: often they are approached by a family wanting to sell a child.
- It is Vietnamese who buy the girls from the parents (specified as Vietnamese, Kampuchea Krom, or Chinese-Vietnamese). The ‘recruiters’ are [almost] always known in the community.
- Community members suggest that at their level, it is probably not a highly organised enterprise, but that it tends to be ‘opportunistic’.
- The majority of clients for the virginity are reported to be Asian expatriates: namely Japanese, Taiwanese, and Chinese. There is a belief that having sex with a virgin is good luck for new business ventures.
- Did not seem to be negative connotations associated with males visiting prostitutes or with the demand for under-age girls. Not one person interviewed talked about the need to address the ‘demand’ side of the equation: that is, the fact that men want to have sex for sale and thus there is a market for it.

4.7.5 Degree of organisation

This community perception that transactions are made through a dis- rather than highly organised network is corroborated in other research as well. An internal survey of one local human rights organisation about Vietnamese prostitution in Svay Pak (early 2003) concluded that:

“There might be many people involved at all levels of society throughout the country and over the Vietnamese border. Probably it is not a specific organised network but more the reflection of how things work in Cambodian society (that is: powerful people who control lucrative businesses, complete impunity, and lack of law enforcement).”