

A Formal Homecoming and a Family Reunion



ALLAN BEESEY is a social scientist and consultant working in Thailand on issues of labour migration, human trafficking and sexual health. On the Vietnam-Cambodia border, recently, Allan witnessed an unusual ceremony.

It was just after midday, two cars from HCMC had arrived and we awaited the arrival of the van from Phnom Penh. On arrival, alighting from the van was the first secretary from the Vietnamese embassy, representatives from MOSALVY, two reps from the NGO CWCC and the Ministry of the Interior, and of course 25 year old Mai, who was being repatriated after 8 months in Cambodia. The contingent from Vietnam was just as large but not the same high level of officialdom - three of us from IOM, an immigration person, and two women from DOLISA – one from the district (also representing the WU), and the other from the commune level. And Mai's parents were there to take her home; they were taken to HCMC first and then to the border.

The HCMC contingent was seated, the Cambodian contingent entered

and took up most of the remaining seats, almost 20 in total, at the round table in the middle of the room. Mai sat at one end of the table while her parents were at the other. There seemed to be little recognition between them. During informal greetings and the small talk Oanh from IOM beckoned Mai to move next to her mother, in the seat her father had vacated. He had left the room and did not return, apparently embarrassed by not being able to hold back his tears. The seeming lack of recognition was not due to a lack of family love.

There was an electricity black out, so the fans could not be used in the middle of the hot sunny afternoon. No drinks were served for the hour and a half-long process, a mark of the informality of the ceremony. The room was airy with large doors widely

open and windows open onto the green fields. The Ho Chi Minh portrait was one of the few adornments in the large and dusty room with faded paint work; apparently it was seldom used. It was in a building just off the road from where those crossing the border were being processed. A new building further off the road was being constructed, seemingly, to replace this one.

Mai flashed a smile of recognition at me; I had interviewed her a month earlier in the shelter in Cambodia. She was not so happy then, with no reason to smile, but now, wearing lipstick, and casual light blue jeans with the same colour shirt, she could smile easily. The ordeal of her time in Cambodia, and the painstaking month in a shelter near the Thai border, followed by a month in a shelter in Phnom Penh, patiently waiting to

return home, was behind her. During the interview in Cambodia, my asking about her family triggered tears. Now there were no tears, just a sense of relief, almost a sense of joy. She had been working in Cambodia for over seven months.

The small talk continued after the greetings, leading into the formality of introductions around the table. A couple of people handed out cards, and there were polite nods and smiles. The chatter continued, slowly giving way to more serious conversations regarding two repatriations six months earlier. From here, with no formal opening, the mood was slightly more formal with thanks from the Vietnam team for the support from Cambodia, and then Cambodia expressing their appreciation for the support across the border. The IOM HCMC representative was the spokesperson for Vietnam, and a woman from CWCC spoke for the Cambodian side. During this exchange hand-over papers were signed, and a form was passed around so that the names of all those who were present could be recorded.

As the talking went on one was left to wonder whether the best interests of the people for whom this meeting was occurring were actually being forgotten. Did they want to sit through all of this, with hardly a word from them? Were they listening intently, or impatiently waiting for it to end? While CWCC elaborated on their shelter work and their reintegration program in Cambodia, Mai was taken away for a 10 to 15 minute interview with the immigration person. Her mother continued sitting there, silently, and finally Oanh from IOM said that the Cambodian contingent was probably keen to get back to catch the ferry before the border closed, and so the meeting broke up.

One handing-over activity remained, the transferring of Mai's belongings from the Cambodian van to the four-wheel drive. Mai struggled with fixing

the broken handle on her bag, intent to make it work for her. Meanwhile, a plastic bag of oil and tins of food were placed with her belongings, and then a big bag of rice, compliments of CWCC. Friendly chit-chat and good-byes all round as the Cambodian contingent packed into their van for the return journey, and some of the Vietnamese contingent disappeared across the border to buy some Cambodian goods. Her parents were in the background, and our IOM contingent decided to go for a drink with Mai.

We didn't want to ply her with more questions but we did, in fact; well, we tried but she wanted to chat, she wanted to let off steam, maybe letting go of some of the pain, the sense of relief and lightness clearly showing through. She asked after her father and was comforted when told he was waiting just around the corner. Mai's mother appeared and said the others had returned from shopping, they were ready to go. Her father in the front of the van with the driver was all smiles, he waived goodbye as Mai got in the back with her mother, the DOLISA women behind them. Smiles and good wishes all round as they moved off on their journey to An Giang a few hours away.

We met up with Mai a couple of days later, more by accident than planning, when we were visiting the An Giang WU. I asked if she had slept well the past couple of nights, knowing that sleeping was difficult for her in the shelter, surprisingly she said no! Apparently her friends had been calling on her and keeping her up late and then she was too excited to sleep. Further evidence, perhaps, of this being a special case - Mai is a little older than many others, she was not away for too long and still an accepted community member. Also she was clearly deceived by strangers, falling under the control of a pimp with no means to contact anyone.

Mai's story

Mai's story has not been fully clarified yet. So far, it appears that she made the decision herself to go to Cambodia, hoping to earn some money for her family. She fell under the control of a pimp in Phnom Penh and was living with him, perhaps for six months. He sold her to a Thai customer and some other men and then she was working in a brothel.

She was outside the brothel one day with another sex worker who ran away. Mai was blamed for letting her get away and 'fined' by increasing her debt astronomically. The pimp took her to Poipet where he tried to sell her to Thailand, but she refused. It is not clear whether they were escaping the debt or endeavouring to pay it off.

Mai was then sold into massage and sex work in one of the casinos on the Thai border. She cried all day and a Vietnamese female cook took pity on her. She notified two men friends, working at the CWCC shelter in Banteay Meanchy, in the same province, who rescued her. She stayed in this shelter one month before going to Phnom Penh. Her father had looked for her twice in Cambodia, one time to tell her that her 18 year old brother, working as an electrician, had died in an accident at work, and to ask her to come home. She only found out about her brother's death when she was in the shelter and was heart-broken. The district WU is now helping her to make a small business plan. She wants to sell sugar-cane juice.

Loan's story

Loan escaped from the Phnom Penh brothel where she was held, after just a few weeks. She was only 15 years old and had been deceived by her grandmother who sold her. She planned the escape and then executed it in the middle of the day while others were sleeping. She knew she would be beaten and sold

to another brothel if she was caught trying to escape. She was receiving just one customer a day but it was not what she wanted to do and was determined to escape. She got a motorcycle driver to take her to the bus station. She had no cash with her, and so offered the motorcycle driver and the bus driver her earrings. While the two men were fighting over the share from her earrings the police came and then brought her to a shelter.

Loan spent almost three months in the shelter in Cambodia before she was repatriated with Ni in the first repatriation of the current IOM project. Her biological parents and

her stepfather wanted Loan to be reunited with them right after the return. However, given her age and the fact that her grandmother faced a police investigation, she was encouraged to go to the LRS. The grandmother has been looking for Loan to get her to drop the case. The CPCC counseled her and Loan agreed to stay at the LRS for a while.

She visited her family in late September 2001 and again at Tet in late February. She attended a three month hairdresser course from September to Dec 2001 and was then apprenticed to a beauty salon, initially without pay. She has enjoyed the working environment and says the LRS has been good, too, but she has also been lonely, is reserved, did not make friends easily and was missing her family.

She spent a month with her family, mainly her mother and step-father, but also with her father, during Tet. She felt like it was time to go home and the LRS agreed. We drove her home the day after Mai was repatriated. We took her to the CPCC office. Soon after we arrived her mother was there to pick her up, with her young sister and her friend. They caught a boat on the small river to get into town in Dong Thap, and that's how the four of them returned home.

CWCC - Cambodian Women's Crisis Center
 CPCC Committee for the Protection and Care of Children
 DOLISA Department of Labour, War Invalids, and Social Affairs
 HCMC - Ho Chi Minh City
 IOM - International Organization for Migration
 LRS - Little Rose Shelter
 MOSALVY - Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour, Vocational Training and Youth Rehabilitation
 WU - (Vietnam) Women's Union



Human trafficking has been well documented in the Mekong region over the past couple of decades, especially that of trafficking for the purposes of prostitution. Internal trafficking of women and children occurs in every country and in the past decade almost every official border area and many minor crossings in the Mekong region are routes for trafficking. Thailand, with a rapidly developing economy during the 1980s, was a major destination country, with surrounding countries, including China and Vietnam, being source areas. Thailand remains the main destination, although it is also a source country for women going overseas into prostitution as well as a transitory route for women from surrounding countries who are trafficked overseas.

The shift from trafficking and assisted passage to relying very much on one's own resources has occurred in northern Thailand, with the pattern extending across the border into the Shan State in Myanmar and to Chinese (Dai) women from Yunnan. There will always be new women and girls who require assistance, but this is more like assisted passage than smuggling or trafficking, although the lines can be blurred.

In both South and South-East Asia, prostitution is the dominant reason behind child trafficking. Although the precise number of children who have been trafficked into prostitution is unknown, a 1996 UN report estimated that one million children work as prostitutes in Asia.

In South-East Asia, the majority of child trafficking victims are forced into prostitution. Other destinations include bonded labour situations, domestic work, forced marriages and adoptions, and more recently begging. While Thailand and Cambodia are the hotbeds of trafficking activity, all countries in the Greater Mekong Sub-region witness in-country trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, usually from rural to urban centers.

In Cambodia, most trafficked children end up in the commercial sex industry. Most of the prostitution-related trafficking occurs within Cambodia, although sizeable numbers of children are trafficked from Viet Nam. There are no reliable estimates of the number of children trafficked into prostitution in Cambodia, or even of the number of children working as prostitutes. We do know, however, that children comprise a significant proportion of the prostitutes working in Cambodia – estimates range from 15.5 to 33 percent.