



THE 2001 RAMON MAGSAYSAY AWARD FOR EMERGENT LEADERSHIP

BIOGRAPHY OF OUNG CHANTHOL

Oung Chanthol was born on April 12, 1967, in the city of Kap in Cambodia's Kampot Province. Kap is located along the Gulf of Siam, near the Cambodian-Vietnamese border, more than a hundred kilometers southwest of the capital, Phnom Penh. Her father, Oung Dorn, was an army officer who, in the early 1970s, served in the Lon Nol regime. Her mother, Tuon Nan, had worked as a teacher but chose to be a homemaker after the first of her five children was born. She could speak both Khmer and French and was one of only two women in her village to complete the first cycle of secondary school. However, she was not allowed to continue her studies because, like previous generations of Cambodian women, she was not considered worthy of higher education.

Chanthol was the third child in her family and the only girl. Unlike the peasant majority of Cambodians, she belonged to two families of comfortable means. Her father and her paternal grandfather were both army officers; her maternal grandfather was a district chief. Both families owned large tracts of land and hundreds of livestock and employed hundreds of people.

Owing to her country's troubled history, however, Chanthol could not bask in her family's wealth. In the last five decades, Cambodia has seen and experienced more than its fair share of domestic turmoil and foreign intervention. Its people, primarily Khmers, have seen their proud land attain independence (from the French), only to be victimized by a genocide on a scale unheard of since the Jewish Holocaust.

Like Laos and Vietnam, Cambodia would be dragged into the affairs and power plays of nations more powerful than itself. Although Prince Norodom Sihanouk tried to maintain a stance of neutrality against American pressure during the Vietnam War, he was unseated by a coup d'état in 1970 and replaced by Lon Nol.

Lon Nol decided to strike against the communist Khmer Rouge and their Vietnamese allies, spelling the end of the sovereign Cambodian state. The Khmer Rouge rapidly gained strength. With Vietnamese backing, they expanded their sway deep into Cambodia. Lon Nol's poorly equipped and inexperienced soldiers were no match for them.

As civil war engulfed the country in 1972, Oung and her family were forced to move to Phnom Penh, to escape the fighting in Kap. But even being in the Cambodian capital was no guarantee of safety. The Khmer Rouge mined the riverine approaches to Phnom Penh, preventing the arrival of shipments of rice and ammunition. American airlifts to the beleaguered city could not bring in enough supplies. Meanwhile, the country sank into chaos.

On April 17, 1975, two weeks before the fall of Saigon in South Vietnam, Oung and her family watched the Khmer Rouge march into Phnom Penh, its triumph deliberately timed to coincide with the Cambodian New Year. The Khmer Rouge had decided against seeking Vietnam's approval before entering the city, a slight that would exacerbate conflict already stewing between the two erstwhile allies.

Within a week after Phnom Penh fell, some three million people, almost the entire population of the capital plus civilian refugees, were told to leave for the countryside. Even the sick and the dying were dragged out of hospitals. As the people left, the Khmer

Rouge's illiterate peasant soldiers burned books, records, and paper currency, or threw them into the Mekong River. They impounded cars, motorbikes, and bicycles and carried out numerous summary executions in the streets. The Khmer Rouge leadership was not in evidence anywhere during the evacuation, giving rise to complete anarchy.

For Oung and her family, evacuation meant more than twenty days of torturous walking, stopping only to catch some sleep. They went hungry and without medicine. She remembers seeing people killed openly in the streets. Her father and two of his officers who assisted the family threw away their military uniforms to avoid being killed by the Khmer Rouge.

On April 23, the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) began to empty other cities that had populations ranging from fifteen thousand to two hundred thousand. As in Phnom Penh, they committed atrocities in large numbers and made no attempt to hide the bodies of their victims. Scores of dead bodies could be seen floating down rivers or decomposing on the roads. In all, three and a half million people from the cities and another half a million from so-called bad villages were scattered throughout the Cambodian countryside.

As early as two years before the fall of Phnom Penh, the CPK leadership headed by Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot had already decided that the capital would be evacuated. Given the party's limited resources, it could not hope to administer such a huge population, much less feed it. The party leaders also feared for their safety in the city. Most of all, the CPK wanted to prove the superiority of poor people over the bourgeoisie, and the dominance of the countryside over the city. Pol Pot and his comrades saw the cities as breeding grounds for counterrevolution; besides, the CPK needed as much rural labor as possible to increase national rice production.

Pol Pot's plan called for the exportation of surplus rice in exchange for hard currency to pay for imports and, eventually, to finance industrialization. Boasting that Cambodia needed no external ideas to revolutionize its society, he wanted to show the world a new system of socialism. The CPK would be spearheaded by rural teenagers between the ages of fifteen and twenty rather than by radical students, as had been the case in many other communist states.

The victims of Khmer Rouge brutality during the three-year period (1975–1977) that became infamous for its “Killing Fields” have been estimated to number one and a half million, with a hundred thousand more killed for having been “enemies of the revolution.” The Khmer Rouge victimized not only ordinary people but also those in their own ranks and former allies. Widespread purges and executions were common occurrences.

Oung Dorn must have sensed that he was on the CPK's extermination list because he had worked for the Lon Nol regime. He warned his family that if anything happened to him and they were able to escape, they should seek out a relative in another province. True enough, in 1976, the communists arrested him, along with two other former army officers and a college professor. He was never seen again. That same year, his youngest son died of starvation. The boy was no more than three years old.

Oung has memories of being brought to a forest and told to clear it for planting potatoes. She was also made to move seedlings from the seedbeds to the paddy fields. Her parents were ordered to level the land, taking soil from one field to another to create rice paddies. Making fertilizer was another form of manual labor.

Many families worked alongside hers, Oung says. People were categorized into two groups: the New People and the Old People. The Old People were those who lived in rural areas, while the New People were the enemies of Pol Pot's regime. “We were forced to work

very hard without food, without water, without anything, just live in the forest,” Oung recalls.

After her father’s arrest, she and the rest of her family were taken to a new village. Her mother Tuon Nan was assigned to join the workforce at a dam, while Tuon’s two older sons were made to join youth teams. Oung was to plant peanuts and sugarcane. An old woman was assigned to look after the smaller children in a shelter. When Oung’s six-year-old brother Sony disturbed the woman’s sleep one day, she threw him from the shelter and hurt him badly.

While millions of New People toiled for the CPK, international developments conspired to bring down the Pol Pot regime. What had been a serviceable working relationship between the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese communists slowly deteriorated. Neither party trusted the other, given centuries of Khmer-Vietnamese hostility.

With the ideological rupture between Moscow and Beijing in the 1960s, Cambodia, which the CPK had renamed Democratic Kampuchea (DK), was now allied with China, while the Vietnamese took the side of the Soviet Union. As neither the Chinese nor the Soviets were interested in direct military confrontation, it fell on the Cambodians and the Vietnamese to serve as puppets in a proxy war.

Pol Pot massacred Vietnamese on their common border and executed Cambodians accused of having “Vietnamese bodies.” As tension between the two neighboring countries worsened, skirmishes between their regular military units became more frequent. On Christmas Day, 1978, the Khmer Rouge abandoned Phnom Penh, putting an ignominious end to a brutal regime. More than a hundred thousand Vietnamese launched a major offensive on several fronts.

When the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia, Oung found herself back on the road and reunited with her family, but only temporarily. The Khmer Rouge herded them and other New People toward the mountains, away from the fighting. All they had with them were the clothes on their backs, and all they had to eat were root crops they could dig up. Many people perished along the way; they were either shot by the Khmer Rouge or collapsed and died from sheer exhaustion or starvation.

Oung remembers well the ordeal of her family’s flight. “We ran together. The Khmer Rouge forced us to run through valleys, mountains. I saw many people, old people, women with children, killed with the shelling and also bombing. One of my brothers was injured. We walked, I think, many months, through mountains and forests with the shelling, and without enough food. We found root crops along the mountain.”

Eventually, the family was able to escape both the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese. They reached a refugee camp at the Thai border, but at great personal cost. Oung’s brother, Sony, had had to be carried throughout the entire journey because of his injury. One of Oung’s older brothers was separated from them during the harsh trek to the mountains; they would not see him again until 1992. During that thirteen-year span, he received no education and ended up impoverished in a rural area.

For many Cambodians, the end of the “Killing Fields” did not mean an escape from the strife in their country. Two hundred thousand Vietnamese soldiers and cadres occupied Cambodia until 1989, but despite their control of the urban areas, they could not claim to control all of the countryside. The Khmer Rouge regrouped as a guerrilla force in both the northeast and the southeast.

With 80 percent of the country’s arable land destroyed, many Cambodians were forced to flee to the Thai border. Four groups were fighting for control over what remained of

devastated Cambodia. These were the Khmer National Liberation Front, which ran the refugee camp that Oung had reached; the Khmer Rouge; the Vietnamese; and the Royalist Resistance, which was loyal to Prince Sihanouk.

The refugee camps had been constructed primarily by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and were supposed to feed and house all Cambodian refugees, including the displaced Khmer Rouge. Thailand had initially wanted to close its borders, but relented upon the request of then U.N. Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim. The continued fighting did not spare even the refugee camps. They were considered centers of resistance that provided manpower for the competing factions in the field and were therefore targets of opportunity for the contenders.

Oung and her family were thus forced to move to Chumrom Thmey (New Camp), a refugee camp run by freedom fighters that was later occupied by the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF). The camp was called Rithysen Camp (also Nong Sameth). Oung eventually ended up in Site Two of this camp. Altogether, she would spend thirteen years of her life in refugee camps.

At Chumron Thmey, she lived with her mother and two brothers, as well as an aunt. Tuon Nan chose not to remarry for fear that her second husband would not treat her children well. Instead, she adopted three boys to replace the two sons she had lost during the war. She had managed to keep some gold and jewelry hidden from the Khmer Rouge, and now used these to start a business selling groceries and clothes. Oung helped her mother by crossing the border from Cambodia to Thailand and back again to buy goods to sell. It was a risky activity since Thai soldiers could easily mark her as a "smuggler" and shoot her. Tuon Nan augmented her income by operating a lending library.

By 1983, Oung's elder brother was sent to the nearby UNHCR-run Khao-I-Dang camp to receive a technical education. Tuon Nan placed great importance on education and encouraged him to go, even though he would have to elude Thai border guards on his way to Khao-I-Dang. Twelve years would pass before he and Oung saw each other again, this time in the United States. By then, he was living in Long Beach, California, and she was in the United States on a scholarship.

A dutiful daughter, Oung helped her mother with her business enterprises. On weekends, she took over the selling, while Tuon Nan attended to her other children. Oung hardly had time for herself. When she turned thirteen, she went back to school. As a child, she had dreamed of becoming a journalist. Curious by nature, she would rush to the scene of each new shelling at the camps, just to see what was happening. But she was a refugee, who lacked the luxury of nurturing long-term ambitions, let alone dreaming of a normal childhood. Her only concerns were to find food for her family's next meal and to survive the war.

She says, "In my whole life, there was no childhood. I had to be an adult, I had to work a lot. When I was not sleeping, all I could think of was no shelling anymore, no fighting anymore, and to have food. That's all we thought of. We never wished to have a big house or education or anything."

In 1983, amid the relative peace at Chumron Thmey, Oung began to learn English at a private school. Her teachers were professors who had managed to hide their educational status from the anti-intellectual, anti-Western Khmer Rouge. She took her subjects seriously and enjoyed her teachers' trust, and soon emerged as a student leader. Tuon Nan hired a private tutor to teach her Thai, French, and English.

The school buildings were makeshift structures made of bamboo and palm leaves, with tables fashioned out of bamboo. Books had to be brought in from Thailand. White earth was used to write on the blackboard, until chalk from Thailand became available.

Oung and the other children were expected to do community work, even when they were in school. They were required to help the soldiers build bunkers. (Working on construction could be dangerous, and she remembers that one of her classmates was injured while doing so.) They carried wounded soldiers to the hospital when there was fighting and assisted in the construction of a dam in peacetime. She says they felt “very proud and happy” to be of help to the resistance and to their country.

As a student, Oung had no concept of human or women’s rights. Since Cambodian men traditionally shun housework, it was she who did the house chores when her mother was out at work. Although this was “customary,” she complained about doing more work than her brothers. “Everyone has one mouth to feed,” she remembers saying. “So we should work equally.”

After finishing secondary school, Oung thought of taking up a business course so that she could help her mother. But there was already a School of Law and Public Administration at the camp, and so, not wanting to wait another two years for the business school to be completed, she enrolled in law. From 1989 until 1992, she studied law as well as a little public administration. Approximately three hundred students started the program, among whom only eight were women. Only fifty or so of the original number eventually passed the course.

While still in high school, Oung met Thou Thon, the camp president. Before the war, he had traveled extensively abroad and been active in the Lon Nol regime as general director of the Youth Department of the Ministry of Information and other senior posts. In the camp, he often presided over awards ceremonies for the brightest students. Oung was invariably among the award winners. She caught his eye and he proposed marriage, even though he was twenty-seven years older than she was.

In Cambodia, Western-style courtship is not the norm, and neither is communication through letters between a man and a woman. Cambodian women ordinarily do not choose their husbands. When Thou Thon made his proposal, Tuon Nan was not enthusiastic about the match and, in the beginning, Oung herself was not interested either. He was a politician, whereas she thought of herself as just an ordinary girl. But Thou Thon was patient. He understood that she desperately wanted to finish her education. In time, Oung’s family concluded he was a good person. They were married in January 1989, and the union brought two daughters: the older, Thou Chanmeali, was born in 1990 while Oung was in law school, and the second, Thou Chanmealea, in 1992.

After finishing her law course, Oung worked as director of a camp program that provided vocational classes, such as hairdressing, cooking, and cloth-flower making as well as lessons in hygiene and family planning, to some one thousand poor rural widows with large families. Coupled with her wartime experience seeing women being raped, tortured, and abused, this work led her to begin to think seriously about the problems of Cambodian women.

In October 1991, in the aftermath of the Cold War, representatives of eighteen countries met in Paris together with the four warring Cambodian parties to consider the political future of the country. Under the terms of the agreements reached in Paris, a temporary government was established in Phnom Penh, made up of representatives from the incumbent regime and delegates from the factions that had opposed it since 1981. These factions joined together to form a Supreme National Council (SNC) presided over by the returning Prince Sihanouk. The newly formed United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) would monitor all SNC decisions on the spot. The agreements withdrew the patronage of powerful nations for individual factions and put the weight of the international community behind the SNC and UNTAC.

In the wake of these developments, Oung was finally able to go home to Cambodia in 1992, together with over three hundred fifty thousand other refugees. She landed two short-term jobs as interpreter (from English to Khmer): first, for the UNTAC electoral officer, whose work basically entailed teaching people how to vote; and second, for activities related with the U.N. Decade for Human Rights education.

Later, she found a job with the Human Rights Task Force on Cambodia, a coalition of international and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that promoted local human rights initiatives. Oung started as an assistant to the director before becoming the coordinator of institutional development programs and, afterward, coordinator of the women's program. Her office provided advice, training, and technical assistance for local NGOs.

Her job was to coordinate sixteen women's NGOs to conduct research, organize seminars and national conferences, and advocate for women's rights. Many Cambodians wanted rights and freedoms but were not too sure what these meant. Oung, thus, had to brief NGO trainers on the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights and they, in turn, would train other trainers. As she traveled around the country and went about training women's groups, she observed even more closely the problems of Cambodian women.

"I met so many problems, terrible problems," she says. She realized that she lacked the experience to provide direct services to the women who needed help.

Oung also became involved in the government's efforts to rebuild her war-torn nation. As it prepared to draft a new Cambodian constitution, she was tasked to translate the constitutions of other countries and make comparative studies of them. These were given to newly elected members of Parliament who had no previous experience in legislative work. Oung's office undertook research, conducted seminars, helped draft laws, and disseminated information.

In 1995, Oung heard about a program at Columbia University in the United States that could help her realize her dream of improving the lives of Cambodian women. She applied and, once accepted, traveled to America to begin four months of study toward a Certificate in Human Rights Advocacy. The twenty participants in the program came from everywhere in the world, including Zimbabwe, Brazil, the Ivory Coast, Congo, South Korea, Brazil, Peru, and Bangladesh. She was one of five women in the program, which involved both course work and exposure trips. Oung studied international human rights laws and conventions and, once a week, visited organizations that provided services to victims of domestic violence and trafficking in women. Among them were Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and End Child Prostitution and Trafficking (ECPAT).

During her stay in the United States, Oung was dismayed to realize how far behind Cambodia was compared to America. "American children are very lucky," she noted. It saddened her that American students had access to all kinds of education, a privilege denied Cambodian children, and it upset her that Americans thought nothing about throwing away food when her own people were going hungry.

She remembers some of her impressions of American culture during that brief tour: "Family structure," she says, "is almost nonexistent in the States. In Cambodia, we are more family-structured. We work very hard but in the evening we eat together, we talk, we share. In America, children live separately from their parents. I saw old parents driving cars by themselves. In Cambodia we have to be very, very good to our elderly."

When Oung returned to Cambodia, she was hired by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR) as a human rights assistant in the legal assistance unit. She was assigned to work with issues such as land grabbing, migration, trade-union suppression, and press censorship.

Her career took a crucial turn when she met an American woman named Michelle Brandt. The two women shared a deep concern for the plight of Cambodian women, including girls working in brothels and wives who were abused (if not killed) by their husbands. Together, Oung and Brandt drew up a proposal for a women's shelter that would provide counseling and other services.

Neither of them had enough money with which to launch the project. Oung estimated that she needed thirty thousand U.S. dollars to rent a room and feed the women. Help came in the person of Walter Skrobanek, who worked for Terre des Hommes in Germany. He came to Cambodia and visited the UNHCR. When Oung learned that he was interested in women's issues, she told him about the plan she shared with Brandt. Give me a proposal, he told Oung, and I shall give you the money. Two weeks later, she had the money she needed to start the Cambodian Women's Crisis Center (CWCC). It was March 1997.

Oung found a room for rent in Phnom Penh. She and Brandt started with a two-person staff, but within a few months they hired three more. (By 2001, the staff had expanded to fifty-two full-time employees and two hundred volunteers.) Oung and Brandt wanted to set up a monitoring program on violence. As they did so, they strove to learn everything they could about rescuing, sheltering, and counseling women at risk. They invited experts from the United Nations to provide training in the law and in conducting investigations. Through Brandt's efforts, the New York-based Sanctuary for Families also sent a counselor to train the staff.

The CWCC lost no time informing the police and other NGOs of their services. The police showed no enthusiasm at first. In Cambodian society, prostitutes are not given much value as persons. Oung remembers one policeman saying, "Why do you want to work with them? Those women wanted to be prostitutes." But one day the center's first client arrived. She was a girl whom the police had rescued from a brothel they had raided. Within weeks, CWCC's twenty-five-bed shelter was full of other girls who were victims of sexual abuse.

The girls told stories about terrible torture. Oung recalls that some of them had bruises and broken hands and ribs, and others vomited blood. "We could not bear it at the beginning. The staff just cried, cried, cried, every case they interviewed," she says.

Although prostitution has existed in Cambodia since the twelfth century, according to Oung, there were fewer than a hundred prostitutes before 1975; they were required to pay taxes and to submit themselves to weekly medical checkups. Under Pol Pot, prostitution was nonexistent. After the fall of the Khmer Rouge, a few prostitutes emerged, but they were sent to the prison on Koh Kor Island for rehabilitation. It was in 1992 when the planned economy was replaced by free enterprise that prostitution became rampant in Cambodia. Everything was privatized and people could no longer receive social services for free. As a result, unemployment rose as factories began to bring in modern technology, which was less labor intensive.

Then, too, following the Paris Agreement of 1991, UNTAC deployed over twenty thousand personnel in Cambodia, including fifteen thousand soldiers, to oversee the cease-fire between the factions as well as to organize and supervise the electoral process. The presence of UNTAC raised the demand for prostitutes, as did the arrival of Asian businessmen who wanted to explore investment prospects in Cambodia. The demand was bolstered by Cambodian men, for whom going to brothels carries no cultural taboo, and by foreign tourists attracted by the availability of inexpensive commercial sex.

Pimps scoured the rural areas for young girls they could sell to brothels. The victims, many of them tricked by promises of employment in the cities, ranged in age from fourteen

to twenty-two, the average being sixteen or seventeen. By 1994, seventeen thousand women and girls had been lured to Phnom Penh alone. Thousands more were being sold in Thailand as prostitutes, domestic helpers, and beggars.

Oung believes that the war destroyed many traditional Cambodian values. Her mother observed, she says, that before the war people were sweeter and gentler and more conscious of their responsibilities to their communities. In the past, too, most Cambodians never left their places of birth and they intermarried with their cousins. Such an arrangement minimized domestic arguments because couples were wont to think of their common elders whenever a possible conflict arose.

The Khmer Rouge's forced-migration policy during the war changed all that. Radical political change brought with it a corresponding radical social transformation. When the Khmer Rouge was in power, Oung explains, "people were evicted and moved to different areas. They married strangers, and didn't have common elderly. So they fought each other, they killed each other, more women became victims of domestic violence and rape, and more children could not get along with their violent families."

The breakdown of family ties played a major role in the spread of prostitution. When pimps showed up at the villages with offers of attractive jobs in the cities, young girls were easily swayed and usually went along, without the blessings of their parents. Poverty and the privatization of state services also contributed to the growth of prostitution. Cambodia has long been one of the poorest countries in the world, ranking 156th out of 174 countries in 1996. According to an Asian Development Bank report in 1995, families headed by widows are the poorest members of rural communities. In Cambodia, Oung says, one out of every four households is headed by a woman.

The Cambodian Women's Development Association placed the number of prostitutes in Cambodia in 2001 at between fifty thousand and fifty-five thousand. The Cambodian Commission on Human Rights and Reception of Complaints of the National Assembly estimated that, in Phnom Penh alone, there were more than fourteen thousand women and children working as prostitutes in brothels, bars, massage parlors, private rooms, and hotels. Of this number, 35 percent were below the age of eighteen and about 40 percent were Vietnamese.

Statistics derived by the CWCC from its clients showed that 64.5 percent of prostitutes were forced into the trade: deceived by offers of high-paying jobs; sold by their parents, relatives, or friends; or abducted. The rest saw prostitution as a way out of poverty. Oung says that about 50 percent of the girls at the CWCC suffered from HIV-AIDS.

Thousands of other Cambodian women and children were being trafficked to Thailand, Malaysia, and Taiwan to work as prostitutes, beggars, domestic helpers, or other forms of forced labor. Convinced by the traffickers that their daughters could earn a great deal in Thailand, parents sold their rice fields and other property to be able to pay the traffickers from one hundred to two hundred dollars for a guide and transport to Bangkok. If caught by the Thai authorities, these women were deported to Cambodia, where they joined the ranks of the homeless.

The CWCC today has three regional offices and three shelters, with fifty-two full-time staff members and about two hundred volunteers, in addition to its main office in Phnom Penh. Among these offices and shelters is one set up in 1999, with financial support from Oxfam Hong Kong and Danchurch Aid, a Danish Christian donor agency. It is located at the center of Banteay Meanchey town, close to the Thai border, to serve women from the different provinces who worked as commercial sex workers in the area. The Banteay

Meanchey shelter can accommodate forty women at a time, but often there are as many as sixty. They may stay for as long as six months before being sent back to their villages.

Nine programs now respond to the various needs of CWCC clientele. In one, CWCC monitors and rescues trafficked women and children. In another, it maintains confidential shelters. In another, it helps former victims reintegrate into their communities and, in some cases, return to their countries of origin. In others, CWCC provides court advocacy and legal assistance; vocational, literacy, and life-skill training; and employment assistance. It also engages in community organizing, awareness raising in the mass media and public seminars, community networking, and staff-capacity building. And it lobbies with government for legal reforms to bring Cambodia within international human rights norms. Each of CWCC's major programs is headed by a coordinator.

The CWCC staff members are constantly trained in aspects of the center's work by experts from U.N. agencies, NGOs, governmental organizations, or countries with which Cambodia shares a common culture. A board of directors handles the business affairs and lays down policies. Oung, as executive director, coordinates the organization's activities full time. Her leadership style is participatory, and she takes pains to ensure that the CWCC staff works as a team. Staff members take turns at chairing meetings to develop their leadership skills and to ensure a democratic process of decision making. Michelle Brandt, who now works in East Timor for the United Nations, continues to help as senior adviser.

To promote public awareness of the plight of prostitutes, the CWCC makes extensive use of the media. It has prepared three- to four-minute television spots that are aired on three channels. These spots highlight the victims' stories but also inform women about the techniques used by pimps to lure them into prostitution. In the rural areas that have no television, copies of the spots are sold to local NGOs and shown in the villages. Since more people have access to radio, the CWCC also has radio programs.

Even before the CWCC was established, Cambodia possessed laws against prostitution. The 1993 Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia states that "the commerce of human beings, their exploitation by prostitution and obscenity which affects the reputation of women shall be prohibited." The UNTAC Criminal Code, which remains in effect until abrogated by new legislation, provides that "any person who procures, entices or leads away for the purposes of prostitution, or sexually exploits a minor, even with the consent of the minor, shall be liable to a term of imprisonment of two to six years." Cambodia is a signatory to international conventions, covenants, and declarations on the suppression or prevention of trafficking in women and children.

The "Law on the Suppression of the Kidnapping and Trafficking and Sales of Human Persons" provides a prison term of from five to twenty years for anyone who kidnaps a person for the purpose of trafficking, sale, or prostitution. Under the same law, people such as pimps and brothel owners and others who benefit from prostitution or open a place for debauchery or obscene acts are likewise subject to imprisonment.

A new law now makes it illegal to force a woman to have sex as payment for money owed. This was the way some women ended up as prostitutes in the past. Since such an arrangement was covered by a formal contract, the police were unwilling to interfere. Consequently, the CWCC has had to educate policemen about this law. The CWCC now maintains a hotline to the police and mentions the hotline telephone number in its television spots. The police force has become a willing partner of the CWCC, although many of its members are not willing to interfere in cases of domestic violence, which they still consider a private rather than a legal issue.

Many prostitution dens are run by syndicates that enjoy the protection of government officials or military officers and retain policemen and officers of the court on their payroll. Armed men have actually gone to the CWCC offices to retrieve rescued girls.

For a long time, Cambodia's courts and the legal system were Oung's biggest disappointment. The CWCC has had more success solving cases of domestic violence than of trafficking. This is because, Oung explains, the traffickers are wealthy, while the parties involved in family issues are relatively poor; they cannot afford to bribe judges. She cites two cases of rape—one involving eight girls victimized by the same man and another of a young girl abused by seventeen men. In both cases, money changed hands and the perpetrators were released.

In cases of trafficking, those found guilty usually serve light prison terms of two or three years. The CWCC receives information about victims of trafficking from various sources: telephone, radio, newspapers, NGO partners, its community-based network, the police, and motor-taxi drivers. Once it hears about a case, it dispatches its monitoring staff to the place indicated by its source. When they report, CWCC acts immediately. If a woman needs to be rescued, the CWCC alerts the police and other competent authorities as well as its NGO partners. If she has been injured, she is sent to a hospital or clinic for treatment.

Lawyers belonging to the CWCC's legal assistance program serve a host of functions. They acquaint women and girls with their rights and legal options, as well as with the costs and benefits of legal action. They help them prepare their complaints and pressure the courts to conduct speedy and fair trials. They accompany the victims to court and, when favorable verdicts follow, work to ensure that the verdicts are enforced. Every year the CWCC takes about two hundred cases to court. At the start, it did not have enough lawyers to represent its clients, but today it can count on the services of two legal aid organizations, which formerly represented only the accused.

To her great frustration, Oung cannot practice law herself, despite her training in law and public administration. This is because the current government of Cambodia does not recognize her refugee-camp-acquired credentials. It says she lacks a formal license or diploma. She has tried to work for a graduate degree or go to a regular law school, but she has had no time to do so.

Oung is happy to report some improvement in the CWCC's work with the judiciary. She says that judges and prosecutors have begun treating women fairly and seriously; CWCC advocates are no longer accused of interfering with and disturbing court work.

The CWCC maintains in its Phnom Penh office a drop-in center where victims of sexual or domestic violence as well as government officials or ordinary citizens can report cases of gender-based abuse. Counseling and legal consultation services are available at the center.

At CWCC's confidential crisis shelters, women and their children are assured not only safe accommodations but also food, clothes, medical assistance, counseling, access to vocational training programs such as sewing and silk weaving, literacy classes, hygiene and HIV-AIDS education, and even cultural and social activities. The CWCC has created networks with restaurants, factories, shops, and other work places that can offer its clients jobs after their training. The CWCC's involvement with its clients does not end there. Its staff members visit them at their workplaces and homes and lend them emotional support until they gain sufficient self-confidence.

Victims of trafficking who wish to return to their communities fall under the CWCC's reintegration and repatriation program. The program not only helps the women and girls to rejoin their families and communities in Cambodia or another country, but also trains their parents and the communities and local authorities in the laws on sex trafficking and related

crimes. The process of reintegration begins when the CWCC, with the victim's permission, contacts her family and arranges for them to visit her. Such visits are designed to help women overcome their fear of rejection or humiliation by their families and communities. Many families, says Oung, make frequent visits, until the women are emotionally ready to return home. Prior to a homecoming, CWCC staff members spend three days in a woman's village to make sure that the woman will be safe there and that the community will welcome her. Women who wish to keep their past a secret are given the privacy they want.

Three months after reintegration, CWCC staff members do follow-up visits to monitor the women's conditions and inquire about any need for further assistance. The women also receive help from the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans, and Youth Rehabilitation and the Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training.

In the case of non-Cambodian women, the CWCC provides translators and makes arrangements for their repatriation with their embassies through the International Organization for Migration.

CWCC's community-organizing program is preventive in nature. It is designed to deter violence against women through popular education and the intervention of community volunteers. Through training sessions, villagers are made aware of their role in combating and preventing the crime of trafficking and in prosecuting its perpetrators. The CWCC invites other NGOs to teach the women vocational skills with which they can secure their own livelihood. Through these various training programs, women learn that they need not depend on their husbands nor worry about being on their own.

The CWCC has already trained and organized people in forty-three villages and they, in turn, will mobilize nearby villages. Training participants are provided Khmer-language booklets and handouts on sex trafficking, domestic violence, and rape. The resulting networks now enable villagers to handle cases by themselves, and so they call on the CWCC only when they need a lawyer for a client.

The CWCC has also trained hundreds of police officers and local officials in crisis intervention and on the laws concerning violence against women. In the past, despite repeated visits from a CWCC staff member and detailed information, the police would take weeks to rescue women and children from brothels. Now, however, with a new partnership between the CWCC and the police and local authorities, abusers and traffickers are arrested within a few days and the victims taken to the CWCC shelters. The Ministry of Interior operates an Office for Combating Child Trafficking, which has its own hotline.

Since 1999, the Ministry of Social Affairs has invited the CWCC staff to train its immediate staff as well as all its provincial staff members and their chiefs. The Ministry of Women's Affairs has likewise invited a CWCC trainer to join a team that trains local authorities. The Cambodian Senate has asked Oung herself to train its staff and provincial officers.

Fully aware of the value of its volunteers' contributions, CWCC staff members regularly visit them and offer technical assistance. At monthly meetings for volunteers in the CWCC office, they share problems they have encountered in their communities as well as techniques they have found useful. Volunteers are trained in various skills, among them communication, monitoring, basic counseling, and facilitation.

In its efforts to raise public awareness and promote advocacy of women's rights, the CWCC has developed close working relationships with the mass media. Newspapers and radio and television stations now seek it out for information, a far cry from previous years when the CWCC had to beg for media space. Cambodians have also become familiar with CWCC's work through its illustrated short stories on trafficking in women and children. The CWCC has also produced a Khmer-language resource directory of NGOs and GOs

(governmental organizations) that provide health care, shelter, credit, legal assistance, vocational training, and informal education.

During national election campaigns, CWCC lobbies for the inclusion of trafficking in the platform of action of Cambodia's political parties. A clear indication of the respect and stature the CWCC enjoys vis-à-vis government is the fact that it is now invited to participate in the drafting of legislation, a rare privilege for an NGO. In the past, the government tended to keep the lawmaking process confidential. Oung consults her peers, particularly women's and human rights NGOs, prior to attending those legislative meetings.

Networking is an important dimension of the CWCC's work. It has built up networks with communities, relevant agencies, and more than 150 local and international agencies. The community network has proven valuable in providing the transportation, health care, legal assistance, and vocational training to CWCC clients. The networking with organizations and agencies has also been useful in setting up a referral system, widening the reach of social services, and developing training for service providers and women's rights monitors and educators.

An important endeavor of CWCC is the training of judges. In 2002, it conducted four training seminars for the chiefs of judges in all the provinces. These seminars, supported by Asia Foundation, included prosecutors in Cambodia's twenty-four provinces as well as all the chiefs of police. Among the government agencies that have used CWCC programs as models are the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Department of Women's Affairs in the city of Phnom Penh.

Indeed, the CWCC came a long way in its first several years, but many serious problems remained. For one thing, Oung Chanthol and her group confronted constant threats from perpetrators. For another, the corruption in Cambodia seemed intractable. Law enforcement agencies still denied them their ready cooperation or simply dragged their feet. The forensic reports, so important at trials, for example, were often lacking. The courts and police authorities pleaded insufficient funds to carry out their duties. Many police officers took bribes. A verdict of guilty against traffickers, especially well-connected ones, was difficult to achieve. Moreover, the justice system moved at a snail's pace; cases took years to reach the courts. In the meantime, CWCC's clients weakened in their resolve to seek justice. The creation of a juvenile court and a family court, Oung says, would greatly help CWCC's cause. This has not yet occurred, says Oung, but a domestic violence law has now been passed in Cambodia.

Ultimately, Oung believes it is the men of her country who can end the cycle of violence against women. She is training them to do so. Her dream is to train men who can themselves become trainers of other men. She concedes, however, that it is not easy to make men attend seminars, unless the invitation comes from the village chief, in which case attendance becomes an obligation.

Cambodian women have traditionally been told to be patient and silent, even when men inflict violence on them. A Women's Code, authored by one of Cambodia's kings, decreed that women should confine themselves to their homes and be a comfort to their husbands. Oung recalls, "Even (when) I was in school, I was taught that if your husband beats you, you have to be patient and not tell the others. Do not let the fire inside go outside. Fire refers to problems, something hot at home, not for the outsider to know about." She says that although Cambodian women hold the purse strings, they may not use money for themselves. To avoid being beaten up, many women are forced to borrow from other people when their husbands demand more money to support their vices.

Oung's advocacy of women's rights has caused her not a few brushes with irate husbands, brothel owners, and gangsters. One husband showed up at the CWCC clutching

a grenade. Another man barged into Oung's office and accused her of destroying Cambodian culture; his wife, he said, used to follow all of his orders but had become stubborn since she learned about the CWCC. "Every time I want to beat her," the man complained to Oung, "she threatens to run to your Center."

Outraged husbands aside, the CWCC's shelters have become models for other groups and individuals in Cambodia and abroad that are involved in fighting violence against women. With the CWCC's encouragement, at least three other NGOs have established their own shelters for women. To help them and others along, Oung has written a step-by-step guide to setting up a shelter.

Through the years, the CWCC has counted on the generosity of several donors for its survival. These have included Terre des Hommes in Germany and the Netherlands, Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), Church World Service, Ockenden International, United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Partners-in-Development Program, the World Food Program, and the Canada Fund. The Asia Foundation has provided research assistance.

Oung's efforts to help her fellow women in Cambodia, however, have exacted a heavy personal price. "I am," she says, "a very bad mother. My children complain, 'I almost forgot your face. You leave home very early, you come back very late, you work on weekends.'" By placing herself full time in the service of disadvantaged women and children, she has had little time for her own children and the three she adopted. Tuon Nan, however, remains an abiding presence in her grandchildren's lives.

Despite the price she has paid, Oung Chanthol's story is a heartening one. She is someone who rose above personal tragedy and her nation's turmoil to prove something important: that in a male-dominated society one woman's labors on behalf of other women can make a world of difference.

Lorna Kalaw-Tirol

REFERENCES

- Cambodian Women's Crisis Center. *Annual Report, March 1, 1999–February 29, 2000*. Phnom Penh: CWCC, 2000.
- Cambodian Women's Crisis Center. *Biannual Report, March 1, 1999–August 30, 1999*. Phnom Penh: CWCC, 1999.
- Chandler, David. *A History of Cambodia*. 2nd ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996.
- Ebihara, May M., Carol A. Mortland, and Judy Ledgerwood, eds. *Cambodian Culture since 1975: Homeland and Exile*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1994.
- Gilbert, Martin. *Challenge to Civilization: A History of the Twentieth Century, 1952–1999*. Vol. 3. London: Harper Collins, 1999.
- Johnson, Paul. *Modern Times: A History of the World from the 1920s to the Year 2000*. London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1999.

Krieger, Joel, ed. *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Oung Chanthol. Interview by James R. Rush. Tape recording. Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation, Manila, September 1, 2001.

_____. "Legal Responses to the Trafficking Issue in Cambodia: Situational Analysis on Trafficking in Women and Children, the Political Will to Combat the Issue, and CWCC's Intervention." Paper presented at the Regional Conference on Trafficking in Women, Bangkok, Thailand, November 3–4, 1998.

Tarling, Nicholas. *Southeast Asia: A Modern History*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Various interviews and correspondence with individuals familiar with Oung Chanthol and her work; other primary documents.