



## The struggle of Cambodia's single mothers

*Throughout Cambodian history, Khmer women have been likened to their celestial goddesses known collectively as Apsara. The gentle smile and subtle beauty of the Apsara images on the walls of the great temple of Angkor Wat symbolize the warmth and dignity to which all Cambodian woman aspire. The ancient Khmer story of Srey Kroup Leakhnak tells of a perfect Cambodian woman. She is portrayed as virtuous, contributing greatly to her family and to the national identity.*



One of the less obvious consequences of the decades of war and the Khmer Rouge genocide was the fracturing of Cambodia's social fabric. Cambodian women lost their traditional role and status. All of Cambodian society suffered from this loss but Cambodian women were the biggest losers.

Today, many Khmer women, especially single mothers, remain compromised and marginalized in absolute poverty with little hope of ever improving their lot. The challenge of caring for children when there is nothing to provide them creates a dilemma which a mother cannot resolve. Children go hungry, are uneducated and miserable. A mother in such a situation has nowhere to turn. She is unable to protect and provide for even the most basic needs of her children and she suffers greatly as a result. Miserable and lacking self-confidence she can no longer view herself as an image of Apsara.

## Helping empower women

CFS works to empower women by breaking the cycle of poverty for rural women. We encourage their initiative and hard work thereby building up their confidence independence and hope for the future.

Dr Samnang and his team identify single mothers through direct contact or information provided by commune or village authorities, they make an initial approach with a view to establishing a relationship with compromised women. The steps of intervention typically are:

- Provide counseling for those with mental health problems or, if appropriate, make referrals to relevant health services.
- Identify pressing problems and needs in relation to the woman and her children.
- Approach community members or neighbors for other support such as social or psychological support and resources or integrate the single mother into a community Self-help Group.
- View the family's economic power and develop a plan to start them with a small income generation activity.
- Follow up visit to provide technical support and to enrich family sustainable with economic income.

### Case study 1

A single mother with 5 children lives in a small village in Rattanak Modul District, Battambang province. She was identified as suffering from a depressive illness after her husband's accidental death. His chest was crushed by a falling tree while clearing his small farm. She was left unable to provide for her children. In her despair she turned to alcohol.

Villagers notified CSF that the children were not attending school and were hungry. The villagers had earlier approached the pagoda and asked the monks to help. The monks were able to provide limited assistance but it was clear that the family needed more help.



CFS staff made a home visit. The woman told them that she did not know what to do, that her situation was hopeless and that she could not see how she could provide for her five children

CFS arranged for two of her children who appeared unwell to be seen at the health center. They gave the family a food basket and basic cooking implements (Pictured left)



Through ongoing discussions Dr Samnang and his team convinced the mother that she could improve her situation but only if she would cooperate and work with CFS staff. The children were provided with school uniforms and a basic school kit. Mother's spirits improved when she knew that her children were attending school.

The next step was to help her establish a steady income through a variety of initiatives tried and proven to work in such situations. She decided that with CFS help she would establish a small fish farm and home garden. The produce would feed her family and surplus would be sold in the local market.

CFS gave her the supplies and tools to start her venture. She worked hard to establish her fish pond (pictured right) and garden (pictured below) and was soon able to feed her family. Within a few months under CFS guidance she was able to gradually acquire a small amount of capital, increase her production and slowly, slowly save a modest amount with which to buy a piglet. In time the piglet became a pig and was sold. She then invested the profit in major repairs to her house. (photos this page and next page)







### EPILOG

This mother is now a proud member of the village community. She has a successful small business and a new house (pictured below). Her depression is behind her. She and her children look forward to the future with hope.




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## Case study 2

Choung Sokthoeun, is a single mother, aged 49. She lives in Kamrieng district with her six children. Her husband deserted her three years ago after a long period of domestic violence directed against Sokthoeun and the children.

In keeping with Cambodian tradition Sokthoeun believed that violence and conflict within the family is a private and internal affair. In keeping with the Khmer proverb, "Bringing family problems outside the family is like bringing a fire inside to burn the family," she bowed to tradition, did not complain and did not seek help with her violent husband.

Sokthoeun is a gentle and caring mother who has tried to have her children attend school. Sokthoeun's youngest son is severely mentally retarded. The family's dire financial situation necessitated that the children help her support the household by taking temporary work in small farms surrounding their village. Her eldest daughter managed to find manual work across the border in Thailand and occasionally sent small amounts of money back for the family. Such employment places young girls at high risk for exploitation and trafficking into the sex trade.



Again CFS was made aware of the family's plight by villagers. A home visit was conducted and a detailed evaluation made.

CFS encouraged all of her school aged children to enroll in school. CFS contacted local school teachers to gain authorization for the children to attend school again and provided them with uniforms and basic school kits.

CFS made contact with the eldest daughter in Thailand and convinced her to come back to her village to help her mother with the income generating initiatives. Together they made a plan to improve the family's situation.

Following discussions regarding possible sources of income, CFS provided a modest capital to Sokthoeun to start a mushroom farm (pictured right).

This initial initiative provided Sokthoeun with a small income and gave her the confidence to expand her enterprise to also try her hand at growing vegetables. Unfortunately she does not own land but Dr Samnang discussed her plight with the village elders who agreed she could use a small plot to cultivate vegetables. Again she has succeeded, with an initial crop of kangkong (morning glory) and cabbages (pictured below).



After a few months, encouraged by her success and savings, she decided to sell her produce directly to the villagers rather than to businessmen in the markets. This initiative also proved successful, allowing her to further expand her enterprises (pictures following page).

She is now a happy and contented mother., She is able to provide for her family and looks forward to the future with optimism.





## EPILOG

On a recent CFS visit to the family Sokthoeun proudly told Dr Samnang that following this year's harvest she plans to buy a plot of land and thus provide security for herself and her family for the future.

## **CAMBODIA FAMILY SUPPORT (CFS) SPONSORS**

### **CAMBODIA FAMILY SUPPORT AUSTRALIA (CFSA)**

Cambodia Family Support Australia (CFSA) exists solely to raise funds and provide some technical support for the Cambodia Family Support Program in Cambodia. 100% of funds raised are given to the program. CFSA personnel donate their time and own funds to run CFSA.

### **INDIVIDUAL DONORS**

Almost all money raised through CFSA has come from individual donors. The program is grateful for the generosity of each of our donors especially during the recent lean times. We continue to need your support. Tax-free donations can be made through Rotary World Community Service (see below).

### **ROTARY**

CFSA and CFS are grateful to be supported by Rotary Clubs of Perth and Phnom Penh. The CFS project has been adopted by Rotary Australia Worldwide Community Service (RAWCS), Western Region with the result that donations made through RAWCS are tax deductible (Australia). More details are available from RAWCS website ([www.rawcs.org.au/projectsLocations.cfm?pageRef=ref142](http://www.rawcs.org.au/projectsLocations.cfm?pageRef=ref142)) or by contacting CFSA.

### **ROTARY CLUB OF PERTH**

A second project proposal has been submitted to the Rotary Club of Perth for another three-month 'Water and Sanitation Project'. CFS has 2 such projects proposed, one in Kamrieng District and the other in Ratanank Mondul District. We need funding of approximately A\$5000 for each project. Any Rotary Club interested in a worthwhile, short-term project should contact CFSA.

### **TERRES DES HOMMES (GERMANY)**

CFS has received funding from Terres des Hommes (Germany) (TdH) for a 2-year project "Psychosocial Support and Anti-Trafficking of Children and Women in Rattanak Mondul and Kamrieng Districts, Battambang". TdH has agreed to give CFS a total of Euros 44,851 for the project. This project ends in March 2011.

### **TERRES DES HOMMES (NEDERLANDS)**

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