

Cambodia:

Women's Situation in Site Two

After the Vietnamese troops attacked the resistance camps along the Khmer-Thai border in 1985, the Khmer civilians were evacuated to one focused camp called Site Two. Now Site Two is a bamboo city with a population of 187,037. 34.6% of this number are boys and girls under the age of 10. 31.2% of the population are women between the ages of eleven and one hundred; for the same age bracket men represent 34.2%.

To understand the women's situation in this camp, it is necessary to first understand a little bit about the Khmer customs, especially of the women. Khmer women have tender, gentle and modest behaviors, and are usually shy. Traditionally, they live with their parents until the time they get married.

One hundred years ago, when a girl reached the marriageable age, the parents put her in a room, and did not allow her to go out during the daytime. At night, she could only come out of the room to take a bath. She was not allowed to be seen by men, not even by her own father. Only females could go near her. People believed that this custom enabled a girl to express her gratitude to her parents. This period lasted for three to six months, depending on how rich or how poor they are. She generally got married after a period of three to six months.

Today, choosing the husband remains the responsibility of the parents, not the daughter. After marriage, the wife is responsible for all the housework, but decisions on any important matter are usually made by the husband. A divorced woman is usually looked down upon by other people. A woman/girl who falls in love with any



man without getting married is always insulted or teased severely, and a girl who stays single until age 20 is considered an old maid.

The most important roles for women are cooking, home economics, taking care of the children and serving their husband. They do not need to study very much -- just to be able to read and write is enough because it is believed that women could not be leaders in government. That is why parents do not pay much attention to the education of their daughters.

For most women, the chronic war has also been an obstacle to education. For instance, before 1975 when those who lived in the countryside reached the studying age, they could not attend school because of the turbulence caused by the Khmer Rouge

fighting with the Lon Nol troops. After that, they lived through the Pol Pot time when there were no schools open, and then through the Heng Samrin regime, where they were so much involved with earning a living. When they got to the camp, uneducated, they felt that they were too old to sit with the teenagers in class.

We do not blame them. We realize that they have so many problems that discourage them from studying. Living in a camp surrounded by a barbed wire fence makes women feel very depressed. Some say they think "I am weak!" or that "Women could not have power the same as men." But, in fact, most of them bear heavy burdens in their families. They not only take care of the children, but also do all the housework: carry water, get firewood, build shelter, earn money. Besides having these burdens, women are suffering from their uneducated husbands who may drink, gamble, and have other wives. These are some of the factors that cause women to lose their dignity and become prostitutes.

The sadness of the women in Site Two is overwhelming. Who shall speak for the women and look after the young girls? Who shall ensure that their belief in the future shall not just wither and blow away like dust?

From an article written by: Ms. Seng Pong Leakyna, Ms. Moul Samneang, Ms. Chin Tepy and Ms. Dav Vandy, women living in the Thai-Cambodia border.