

Survival often requires being inconspicuous. The Cambodian Women's Crisis Center (CWCC) has had to balance this need for privacy with an equal need for public visibility. Yet their PUBLIC office is a lesson in quiet but intense existence.

I'm sitting in a small room of their center with Executive Director Chanthol Oung while she tells me about the inner workings of their fledgling organization. The going hasn't always been smooth and they've sometimes had to learn lessons the hard way. At the same time they have had exceptional success by anyone's standards. The CWCC has already served almost 150 women since opening their doors in March 1997.

Chanthol has a license of law and public administration — AND she finds good lawyers. Recently, one of the CWCC clients won a landmark domestic violence case in civil court with the help of the Cambodian Defender Project. (See main story.) I was so absorbed in the stories of the women and how the center is able to provide services that I completely forgot to ask her what brought her into this line of work. Whatever her motivation, she exudes passionate interest and perhaps that passion sparks hope in the women who enter the CWCC's doors.

I say doors — plural — because the CWCC has two places: the public office and the women's shelter. The shelter, as women know, must be absolutely confidential in order to protect women from abusive husbands, pimps, brothel owners, and even law enforcement personnel and high level government officials who are involved in the prostitution and

trafficking of women and children. In order to maintain this confidentiality, the public office serves as the intake center and has a capacity to house 10 women. During the first week, CWCC does intake assessment, counseling, and screening of the women before moving them to the shelter.

The shelter has been "home" to an average of 50 women a month since it opened even though the ideal capacity is about thirty. The women always make room for more. The women can stay in the shelter for up to six months. The CWCC provides food, medical assistance, clothing, literacy training, counseling — both psychological as well as legal — and make referrals for various kinds of vocational training with other NGOs. In the first nine



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Chanthol Oung, Executive Director of the Cambodian Women's Crisis Center

months alone, 10 women have availed of vocational training and five were already placed in factory jobs which CWCC located. Some women do want to reintegrate into their communities and CWCC helps them return. Thirty-one women so far have taken that difficult step.

Community education is a critical concern and aspect of CWCC's efforts. Four months ago, the CWCC launched a TV video and radio spots on sex trafficking which are still being aired. One of the immediate results was the

Hope Amidst Despair:

the Cambodian Women's Crisis Center

By Nancy Pearson Arcellana

awakening of the vice-mayor of Phnom Penh. Last 5 November, he brought district police chiefs from all city districts for an orientation where the CWCC showed their video, presented the issues, and asked for support in stopping the trafficking of women. The results in the last weeks have been dramatic with a significant rise in rescues of women from brothels and arrests of people involved in trafficking. How are they able to trust the police? Chanthol calmly replied, "We only trust those who have been referred by our husbands, friends and former classmates." So far, that policy seems to have been a good one.

In addition to the terrible emotional and physical scars inflicted upon women and girls — many forced into prostitution are between the ages of 12 and 17 — the incidence of those testing positive for HIV/AIDS is astounding. It confirms the UNDP assessment that Cambodia has the highest HIV transmission rate in the world. It is highly unlikely that the new and expensive treatments now available in the West for prolonging life will be available to these poor women and girls. This fact, among others, makes places like the CWCC even more remarkable in their ability to spread hope in the midst of despair. ☺