



TRAVELLING SEX OFFENDERS

Grooming abroad: the Cambodian context

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Paedophiles, as established through research “prime their victims over time through a process known as grooming. This has a dual purpose of securing the cooperation of the victim and reducing the risk of discovery or disclosure.”¹ Unfortunately, in different regions this process is moulded to fit the environment, culture and sensitivities of the community at large.

In recent years, Cambodia has become one of the principal destinations for foreign sex offenders visiting South East Asia. This is primarily as a result of an established sex industry, a low age of consent, inadequate legislation, poorly resourced and uneducated law enforcement, and most importantly, poverty. Furthermore, a destination shift has occurred as a result of neighbouring and other Asian countries ensuring that the prosecution of child sex offenders becomes a priority.

In light of the last abovementioned point, it is therefore important to note that foreign offenders abusing children within the Asian region are often able to transpose their grooming techniques in various Asian countries without much alteration as a result of similar customs and practices.

The most obvious activities employed in the grooming process in Cambodia, are not vastly different from those employed in the West. All children welcome gifts, trips and outings. For example, a Fun Fair offering rides and roller skating, situated on the banks of the Mekong in the heart of Phnom Penh is frequently used as grooming grounds. However, it is equally important to realise that the smallest of gifts has a comparatively huge effect on children in Cambodia. Thus, Cambodian children can be groomed by foreign offenders readily, without much effort or monetary input. For example, a child sex offender who offers a mobile telephone to a child as a method of grooming has two effects. Firstly, the child is from an extremely poor background and therefore sees this as a wonderful gift as no one in

her community has a mobile telephone. Secondly, this also allows the offender to contact the child directly to arrange meeting appointments with the child and his/her friends either whilst in Cambodia or abroad without the risk of being seen in public places with the child/children. Furthermore, child sex offenders often have video games in their private residences or role play entertainers or clowns which ensure children will spend copious amounts of time with the offender.

Poverty is the first factor in which foreign sex offenders are able to manipulate and create the foundation for the grooming process. A relationship of support is easily established in Cambodia where 36% of the population are living below the poverty line.² This relationship of support can be classified crudely, whereby children ardently seek out sexual relations with foreigners as a result of an increased awareness of the growing 'market', in essence, a facet of child prostitution. The push into child prostitution varies from, orphaned children to children having to support their family members, members who are often alcoholics or have gambling addictions. For example, a child shining shoes might earn 1000 riel per day (US\$0.25), however, could potentially earn US\$20.00 if he/she has sex with a foreigner.

Over 1.5 million children between the age of 5 and 14 years are estimated to be working in Cambodia,³ many of which are hawking to take full advantage of the increasing tourist population. It is therefore not surprising that foreign sex offenders effortlessly have access to children.

Furthermore, as a result of a sizeable vulnerable community of children, a large majority of which are street-living or street-working children, foreign offenders not only have access to one or two children but large groups. Street-children often belong to gangs, and as a result of having to support drug habits, the leader or various members of the group who are approached by foreigners or having had a sexual relationship with a foreigner will offer or encourage other members of the group to do the same.

Action Pour Les Enfants, Cambodia (APLE) has categorised the foreign sex offenders' active participation in the grooming process where a relationship of support exists, as 'god-fathering'. It is common for foreign child sex offenders to assume the fatherly duties of (monetary) support, discipline, education (often in the form of English lessons), and food and shelter. Consequently, such 'god-fathers' are inevitably grooming the child and the child's relatives and other persons close to the family by providing housing, and luxuries such

¹ <http://www.ncis.co.uk/ukta/2002/threat09.asp>

² The latest national poverty line is approximately US\$0.45 per day, according to the World Bank

³ The Cambodia Child Labour Survey IPEC-SIMPOC 2001

as televisions, video games and radios or even the basic necessities that more often than not, the ordinary Cambodian family is unable to afford.

This relationship of support therefore creates a dependency on the foreign child sex offender and trust as he appears to be giving and kind, ensuring the child's silence and more importantly, the family's inaction or disbelief should the child divulge information pertaining to abuse.

A further two factors ensure a code of silence, firstly, open reference to sexual conduct and public affection are taboos within Cambodian society, and secondly, a societal and age hierarchy is deeply entrenched in Khmer culture. Unfortunately, children are therefore unwilling and/or afraid to openly speak about inappropriate conduct or sexual abuse with their parents and persons in positions of authority over them. A foreign child sex offender can therefore openly groom a child without fear of disclosure.

Unfortunately, many cases which APLE has worked on, the parents or family have known of the abuse and as a result of the monetary support are reluctant to sever the relationship between the foreigner and their child. Moreover, a lack of education as to acceptable practices in the West might contribute to the continuing relationship.

There is a huge push to learn English in Cambodia, and thus sex offenders have been known to pose as English teachers giving them an excuse to invite children into their private residence or guesthouse. Such sex offenders might charge a reduced rate for lessons which ensures the parents' support and trust. Consequently after developing a relationship with the child through a number of classes, a platform for abuse has been established.

Grooming often takes the form of an engagement in Cambodia owing to a legislative lacuna depicting the terms and the age at which persons can enter an engagement. APLE has monitored a number of cases where the foreign child sex offender has entered an agreement with the family to marry their daughter, often aged between 12 and 13 years, when she reaches the age of 18.⁴ This engagement therefore builds a relationship of trust with the parents, whereby the offender has access to the girl and any romantic involvement will not be viewed negatively by the family or the community the family is living in.

In instances where a foreign sex offender wishes to have immediate and unlimited access to a child he might propose to marry the young girl. Births are rarely registered in Cambodia and in those cases where the child has a 'birth book'; unfortunately, the nature of this document makes it easily alterable.

⁴ In terms of Article 5 of the Marriage and Family law, a woman can only get married on attaining the age of 18.

Furthermore, some foreign sex offenders have married Khmer widows who have children. The marriage provides the widow and her children with support, food, education and health care and creates the perfect environment for abuse of family members, and inaction should the abuse be discovered.

The use of the internet in Cambodia has exploded in the last 2 years, wherein Cambodians have realised the economic viability of IT related businesses for example, internet cafés; so much so, that one could find as many as 5 internet cafés on one block in the capital, Phnom Penh. As a result of competition and ensuring a profit margin, many internet cafés have not installed necessary anti-profanity systems and safe-guards. Foreign child sex offenders therefore have unlimited access to the internet in most urban parts of Cambodia which they undoubtedly employ as a grooming tool to desensitise children to acts of abuse and create a method of communication when the sex offender is abroad. Furthermore, Cambodian children are new to the concept of online child abusive images and the extent of the transmission of these images and thus might not view posing naked when asked to do so, as an act of child sexual exploitation.

Lastly, one must not overlook establishment-based child sex abuse for it makes up the majority of child sex abuse committed in Cambodia. Foreign offenders are undeniably able to gain access to children through brothels as a result of the market for virgins, where younger and younger girls and sometimes, boys are being lured or sold into the prostitution industry. Additionally, an intermediary might approach foreign offenders, offering the sexual services of children of various ages. However, for obvious reasons, in such cases offenders do not need to employ grooming methods.