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New Study Finds Significant Decrease of Children in Cambodia’s Commercial Sex Industry

JUNE 9 2015, London, ON– A new prevalence study conducted by International Justice Mission (IJM) reveals that Cambodia—once “ground zero” for the unrestrained commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC)—has experienced a significant decrease in the prevalence of minors available in commercial sex establishments in three of the largest markets in the nation. In the early 2000’s, estimates of the prevalence of CSEC in Cambodia ranged from 15%-30%. Today, thanks to international attention and investment, along with a strong commitment by Cambodian government officials, prevalence of minors in the commercial sex trade in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap and Sihanoukville has dropped to **2.2%** with minors 15 years and younger making up just **0.1%** of the sex industry.

“The picture of very young girls being removed from horrific brothels in the Cambodian village of Svay Pak is seared in minds of the global community as an example of the horrors of sex trafficking worldwide, but this picture is no longer reality,” **said Sharon Cohn Wu, Senior Vice President of Justice System Transformation for IJM.** “Cambodia has progressed, and we need to tell the updated story of children rescued and restored, perpetrators apprehended and punished, anti-trafficking police being trained and equipped, and effective deterrence established. This evidence-based model of change is an example that other struggling nations can learn from.”

IJM, an international human rights organization working to protect the poor from everyday violence, began work in Cambodia in 2003. Cambodia was experiencing an out of control epidemic of child sex trafficking, with thousands of children openly prostituted in brothels while international and local pedophiles purchased children without fear of arrest. The ineffective public justice system response, rudimentary laws and weak government leadership meant that the child sex industry operated with complete impunity. Few people thought change was possible.

In 2003, Dateline came alongside IJM to profile the rescue of young girls from sex trafficking in the Cambodian village of Svay Pak, bringing international attention to the reality of CSEC in Cambodia and globally. IJM then partnered with Cambodia’s newly formed anti-human trafficking police unit to train over 500 officers nationwide, institute a collaborative casework model with the public justice system to conduct over 200 child sex trafficking cases resulting in over 500 victims rescued and over 200 perpetrators convicted, and accurately evaluate progress and gaps in the public justice system’s response, which informed strategic system reform projects.

By 2012, when IJM conducted its first prevalence study in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap and Sihanoukville – the three largest commercial sex markets in the nation – the percentage of young minors aged fifteen years and younger was down to 0.75%. Since then, the prevalence of young minors in commercial sex

establishments in these three cities has *decreased to just 0.1%*. **Further, from 2012 to 2015, the overall prevalence of minors — ages 17 and under — decreased by 73% from 8.16% to 2.2%.**

As a result of the strong collaboration and dedicated hard work of many coalitions, organizations, committed individuals, and key international and Cambodian government leaders, the Cambodian public justice system has experienced significant transformation in its response to sex trafficking crimes over the past decade.

Today, the Cambodian National Police's Anti-Human Trafficking & Juvenile Protection Police Department is a growing professional body that is invested in enforcing anti-trafficking law, protecting vulnerable citizens and continually developing their officers' skills and ability to respond to trafficking crimes. Cambodia's National Committee for Counter Trafficking and other committed government officials now lead national efforts to curb sex trafficking. A country that once had virtually no appropriate aftercare services for children rescued from prostitution has now become an incubator for best practices in care and restoration by respected organizations. Further, the development of more robust laws and a decade of consistent law enforcement led to clear deterrence in the criminal community. Police are actively identifying and arresting international pedophiles who are still under the impression that they will be able to purchase sex with children in Cambodia. As a result, citizens and civil society have grown in their demand and expectation for a public justice system response to trafficking crimes.

Cambodia's example of progress shows the world *that justice for the poor is possible.*

"While continued vigilance is required, Cambodia is a story of hope for the global movement to end slavery," says Ed Wilson, IJM Canada Executive Director. "This study confirms that the efforts of the many who have laboured so long to protect children from exploitation have made a difference—and should encourage everyone to continue to work until every child is safe."

Currently, the Cambodian government, IJM and other organizations are working hard to deepen and expand success obtained so far in the counter-sex trafficking movement. Improvement is still needed in many areas—including the expansion of law enforcement training and accountability to more remote provinces, obtaining legal undercover investigative authority for anti-trafficking police, issuing more comprehensive rules of evidence and standardized procedures, ensuring robust victim witness support services at every stage of the public justice system, releasing mandatory deportation protocol for foreign convicted sex offenders, and ensuring sufficient operational budgets for anti-trafficking police and government social services. These and other issues are currently being addressed as the government, IJM, and many other coalitions and organizations continue to build on the progress made so far.

The changing tide in Cambodia is evidence that justice system transformation is possible even in the most broken places. What has been accomplished through careful collaboration, hard work, and increased political will in Cambodia serves as an encouragement for other countries where sex trafficking and other forms of violence run rampant. When investments are made to repair broken justice systems and perpetrators are held accountable for their actions, real change is entirely possible.

To learn more about IJM's model, watch this [TED Talk](#) from founder and CEO Gary Haugen.

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International Justice Mission is a global organization protecting the poor from violence throughout the developing world. IJM partners with local authorities to rescue victims of violence, bring criminals to justice, restore survivors, and strengthen justice systems. International Justice Mission Canada shares in this mission.