



BROKEN PROMISES SHATTERED DREAMS

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**CHILD TRAFFICKING
AND THE LAO PDR
SELECTED CASE STUDIES**

**MINISTRY OF LABOUR AND SOCIAL WELFARE
LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC**

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These case studies are based on the testimony of victims, their families, affected villagers and officials. The names of all the people featured in the case studies have been changed to protect identity, however, place names remain the same.

The research was made possible through the dedication and commitment of the research team, led by the Chief Researcher Mr. James Chamberlain, Mr. Panh Phomsombath, Ms. Viengmala Vangmua, Ms. Phimheng Oudone, Mr. Thavone Vixaysak and Mr. Khonesavanh Chittanavanh.

All photographs: Jim Holmes/UNICEF

This publication has been supported by



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INTRODUCTION

The issue of child trafficking in the Lao PDR is complex. Situated in a region where one-third of global trafficking occurs from or within, Lao PDR is made vulnerable through its geographic location, a weak economy, changing demographics, growing rural/urban disparities, low literacy rates and educational levels and a lack of awareness about child's rights.

The country context is unique in that all 18 provinces except one share an international border with one of the neighbouring countries: Cambodia, China, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. The Lao PDR has a population of approximately 5.5 million and the population is young. Forty-five percent of the population is under the age of 15 and 55 percent is younger than 19 years of age. It is an ethnically diverse country with 49 recognised ethnic groups. Economic and educational indicators are low and almost 80 percent of the working population are dependent on subsistence farming.

TRAFFICKING ROUTES

The Mekong River is more of a highway than a boundary. There is intermarriage and flourishing informal trade relationships between Laos and Thailand. Since the border between the two countries is approximately 1,100 km long, it is very difficult to police. Furthermore, a large number of border crossing situations that eventually end up as trafficking are done legally with legitimate border passes or even passports. However, in many places informal crossings are so common as not to attract the attention of authorities.

It is interesting to note that locations to which victims are transported along the way are well known. The businesses at these locations are often masquerading as quasi-legitimate employment agencies, which, as long as their victims do not return, are reasonably safe from prosecution. In any event, the people involved can simply deny any coercion, and place the blame on other employers further down the chain.

LAO PDR - MAJOR CROSS BORDER TRAFFICKING ROUTES



Recruitment of either internal or cross-border trafficking is carried out largely by those familiar to their victims. Traffickers use their familiarity with the victims to build trust, making ultimately empty promises of work and money to lure victims into agreeing to leave their village

A PROFILE OF CHILD TRAFFICKING

The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, with support from UNICEF, conducted a national situation analysis into child trafficking to better understand the phenomenon. This study profiles those most at-risk of trafficking, the traffickers, provides information about trafficking routes and methods, exploitative labour situations and rescue and return of victims.

The overwhelming majority of trafficking victims surveyed are girls aged between 12-18 years of age (60%) and most victims (35%) end up in forced prostitution. Other forms of employment were domestic labour (32%), factory work (17%), and fishing boats (4%). The majority of cross-border trafficking occurred into Thailand although some cases were reported of trafficking into Myanmar and China. Crossing the border is relatively easy; many victims actually crossed with legal papers, and informal crossings are not uncommon.

Most victims come from rural areas, however, almost none of the victims came from truly remote areas or from situations of extreme poverty. Internal trafficking was found to be common and based on the sample exclusively involving females trafficked into either factories or prostitution. The provinces of Houaphane and Xieng Khouang were found to be the most affected by internal trafficking.

The majority of victims are lured or deceived into leaving their home on the promise of good employment. Recruitment for either internal or cross-border trafficking is carried out largely by those familiar to the victims. Traffickers use their familiarity with the victims to build trust, making ultimately empty promises to lure victims into agreeing to leave their village for work opportunities.

Trafficking networks were found to be well structured, with connections to organized crime networks in neighbouring countries. Victims may be bought and sold several times over with the price the trafficker receives often portrayed as an employment agent's fee.

The following profiles provide an overview of trafficking situations as told by the victims of trafficking themselves.

BEATEN AND BROKEN

Many trafficking victims are sold to brokers who place them in private homes as domestic servants, often in urban areas, where they are usually locked up in the house they are working in. This type of scenario is particularly dangerous as the victim is isolated and disorientated. Escape is difficult and dangerous, and victims forced to work as domestic servants experience some of the most extreme cases of violence and abuse.

Manivone was 16 years old when she was trafficked to Thailand. She was working in a garment factory in Savannakhet province, an area that is notorious for trafficking. The factory was run by a Thai businessman called Mr. Xang, who has business interests in textiles, road construction and importing heavy machinery. He successfully convinced her, along with another girl from her village, Net, to go to Thailand with him.

The girls left Savannakhet in 1996, crossing the Mekong River in a small boat accompanied by Mr. Xang. They stayed overnight in Mukdahan, a well known border town where trafficking victims are often transferred. The following day Mr. Xang handed the girls over to another man who put them to work in his house where there were many other girls working. They worked for 18 days but were not paid. Then the girls were delivered to Paichit, a wealthy businessman in Bangkok.

Upon arriving at Paichit's house, the girls were told to hand over their clothes from home; in addition to their clothes, all their money and telephone numbers from home were taken away. The girls' suspicions turned to fear that they had been sold.

Paichit's house had very high walls and 24-hour security. Manivone ended up being confined in this house for seven years and throughout her incarceration, she was treated brutally by her employers and never received any money. She

worked with four other Lao girls; one from Khammouane province; one from Savannakhet; and another from Champassak; doing housework and other chores from 5am to 1am, without a break. They were fed only once a day, but if their employer was not happy with their work, they were not fed at all and punished severely. The girls were never given any medical treatment for their injuries nor were any basic necessities provided. For the short time they were allowed to rest, the girls slept on the bare floor with just a pillow and blanket.

The punishment and beatings continued throughout the seven years that Manivone was detained and various methods of torture were employed. Manivone was tortured regularly in many different ways with pliers, ranging from pinching her skin in tender spots to cutting her ears and tearing the soft flesh. Pliers were used to cut her teeth and break them, leaving exposed broken stumps.

The girls were punished for the smallest infractions; if the flowers looked faded in the garden or fallen branches not swept up immediately, they would be forced to lie face down on the ground while they were whipped with a strip of rattan or their fingers hit with a rock. The girls often discussed plans to escape but felt their chances were hopeless and even if they did manage to escape, no one had any money to get back to Laos.

Fortunately for Manivone, her uncle Nam, started looking for her after her family realized that the Thai businessman must have sold her. Manivone managed to escape with the assistance of her uncle and made her way back to Laos after seven years of forced labour.

This case was publicized in the Thai media and the police came to Paichit's house and freed the other girls. Due to the publicity generated by the case, Mr. Paichit was charged under Thai law. Mr. Paichit traveled to Laos and offered Manivone's family money to stop the legal proceedings. Manivone was reluctant, but her uncle convinced her to take the cash settlement and sign the papers. The case has subsequently been dropped.

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SOLD INTO PROSTITUTION

Sexual exploitation is a significant feature in the trafficking of women and children. The physical appearance and age of the girls is an important indicator of their value as a commodity in the sex trade. The younger, more beautiful girls will fetch higher prices in the brothels. Girls who are not considered attractive enough to lure clients are rejected and sent back to the trafficker who may either accept the situation as a lost investment or sell her into another form of labour, usually domestic or factory work.

Nang is from Luang Namtha province in the north of Laos and was trafficked by someone she knew from her village. In 2001, Nang left home for the first time when she was 16 years old after being deceived by a woman in her village named Ms. Thien, who persuaded Nang and two other girls, Ping and Oi, to go with her to Thailand telling them that she would help them find good jobs as sales assistants.

Nang willingly went to Thailand with her mother's permission. Before leaving, however, Nang told Thien that she had no intention of going to Thailand to work in the sex industry. Thien swore that she would not make her do such a thing, as a mother herself, there was no way she would do that to her and told Nang that she loved her like a daughter.

Thien told the girls that they would go to Thailand for only four to five days and make a couple of stops along the way. When they were in Xieng Sene in northern Laos, a prospective employer came from Chiang Rai to see the girls. Their clothes were removed and their bodies were examined from head to toe.

After enduring the humiliating physical examination, the girls were taken to Thachilek port, a local checkpoint between Bokeo province and Thailand, a common transfer point used by traffickers. The girls were then separated and

Nang was sent to a house where there were about 30 other Lao girls working. Two days later, a man came to the house and took her to a hotel where he raped her every day for a week until she was forced to start working as a prostitute.

Once she began working, she was locked up in a hotel and forced to provide sexual services to clients eight to ten times a day. She never received any money, only three meals a day. About a week after her ordeal as a sex worker began, Thien came to see Nang, accompanied by Ping and Oi. Nang told Thien outright that she did not want to stay in Thailand and was angry at Thien's betrayal. She could not understand how someone from her own village could lie to her about the job as a sales assistant and then sell her into a life of prostitution. Thien confessed she had sold Nang for 30,000 baht. She did not succeed in selling Ping and Oi because the former was not deemed attractive enough and the latter was disabled. They discovered later that Thien had intended to sell the two girls as domestic servants.

Once the three girls got together, they managed to convince Thien to take them back to Laos. Thien took them as far as Xieng Sene and then ran away before the girls could ask for money to make it the rest of the way home. No one had any money for food or bus tickets but one of the girls managed to get in touch with some relatives who lent them the bus fare home. As soon as they got back home in Luang Namtha, they went to the police to report Thien as a trafficker. The provincial police arrested Thien and fined her six million kip and put her in jail for six months. At the time of writing Thien had already been released from prison.

Nang suffered physical, sexual and psychological damage from her ordeal, but has now returned to her village with her family in Long district. This area suffers a high rate of trafficking in part because of its geographical location near both the Myanmar and Thai borders and partly because of economic pressures.

Once she began working, Nang was locked in a hotel room and forced to provide sexual services eight to ten times a day.



WORK ON A FISHING BOAT

Many of the male trafficking victims from Lao wind up working in the commercial fishing industry. This generally entails long, hard hours out on the open sea. It is extremely difficult to escape from this type of work situation as the victims are often captive on the boat for long periods of time.

Keomany had friends who had worked in Thailand and came back to Laos with claims that as long as they were patient and hardworking, it would be easy for them to get a good job with a much higher salary than in Laos.

The next day Keomany and his friends met a woman who took them across the border illegally. Two Thai men picked them up on the other side and told them they would be driving to Bangkok. However, they soon realized that instead of going to Bangkok, they were being taken to Pattaya, a famous seaside beach resort area in Thailand.

Keomany and his friends were taken to meet a boat owner and told they would be going out to sea for a few days. Although he saw the boat owner pay the two Thai men some money, he still did not realize he had been trafficked.

On the boat Keomany met some other Lao men who revealed that they had been sold to the boat owner and had to work off the money he paid for them and although they had been working very hard, they still had not received any salary. Finally it dawned on Keomany that he and his friends had been trafficked as well.

They worked in all seasons, even through heavy storms, and were paid very little, enduring exhausting working conditions for nearly seven months until they managed to escape. Once they finally made it back home, they told all their friends and family what happened to them and warned them not to believe empty promises of the good life in Thailand.

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GONE FOREVER

An unfortunate consequence of trafficking is that a great number of children simply vanish and their families never see them again. What makes it even worse is when the traffickers are known to the victim's family and are living free from prosecution. The following example is typical of this sad situation.

Most families are in such desperate financial situation (part of the reason why their child may have left to find work in the first place) that they simply cannot afford to travel around Laos or Thailand to look for their missing children or to pay for an investigation of their disappearance.

Mrs. Som is from the Ta Ouay ethnic group from a poor and remote district of Attapeu province in the south of Laos. Her daughter Sitthaly was just 16 years old when she was trafficked to Thailand. In many cases, the traffickers know their victims well and in this case, one of them was actually a relative of the victim and her mother.

Mrs. Som's cousin, Khem, and another woman named Phet approached her about finding a job in Thailand for her daughter. They said they would find her a well paid job in northeastern Thailand. They assured her that her daughter would be successful and make lots of money, but Mrs. Som refused to grant permission for her daughter to leave.

Despite Som's protests, Sitthaly and her friends were excited about the prospect of going to Thailand. Ignoring her mother, Sitthaly left the village with two other girls and two other young men. They were promised that once they had worked for six months, they would be paid in a lump sum. They crossed the border into Thailand from Songkhone district in Savannakhet by way of Thapathoum checkpoint, a major border crossing in the south.

The only information Mrs. Som knows is that once the victims and traffickers arrived in Thailand, they were handed over to Mr. Nun, another broker. He took the girls to a wealthy Thai business woman, known as "Che-Noi" which literally translates as "rich business lady", who subsequently sold the girls to a factory. She is the last person to have seen her daughter or who would know her whereabouts.

After six months passed, Mrs. Som had not heard any news about her daughter nor had she received any money. She made several trips to Pakse trying to find out exactly where her daughter was and if she was okay. Finally Che-Noi promised to organise a phone call between Mrs. Som and her daughter but the phone call turned out to be a fraud in which Che-Noi substituted another girl for Mrs. Som's daughter.

Som tried to contact Che-noi several times after that, searching for news of her daughter but all she ever found out was that her daughter might be working in a drinking water factory in Bangkok. Mrs. Som asked for contact numbers but Che-Noi refused to give them to her. She called many times after that and made several more trips to Pakse. To date, Mrs. Som has not had any news whatsoever about her daughter's whereabouts.

LOCKED IN, LONG HOURS, AND LITTLE PAY

Typically working conditions in many factories documented in this study are long, pay is low and verbal and physical abuse is common. The use of amphetamines to keep workers awake and work longer hours was reported by several victims of trafficking.

Mone, a young Khmou girl from Houaphane province was trafficked within Laos to the capital city, Vientiane, to work in a garment factory when she was 18 years old. Traffickers came to her village posing as job recruiters looking for workers to fill jobs in Vientiane. Mone, along with many other young men and women, left the village and headed for the capital. The journey took two days and one night.

The new recruits were assigned to work units where they received five days of training. Mone was assigned to a unit where everyone was doing piece work sewing buttons, for which they would receive about 20 kip per piece. Mone averaged about 130 pieces per day and received approximately 75,000 kip per month, however, this was not even enough to cover her basic expenses; on average, she needed at least 90,000 kip per month, just for food. She worked from 8am to 12pm, and then continued to work from 1pm to 6pm. There was a dinner break, but work resumed afterwards until 10pm, sometimes as late as 11pm or midnight, however, they never received overtime pay.

There was strict 24-hour security at the factory. No one was allowed to leave without written permission from the director. Whenever anyone left the factory, the security guard checked their bags to make sure they had not stolen anything from the factory. All the factory workers lived together in a dormitory.

After a month in the factory, Mone was miserable so she devised a way to escape. Since the security was so strict, she came up with a plan to get out without looking suspicious. She told the security guard some of her relatives were waiting at the gate with a parcel for her. He let her go and she took

advantage of the opportunity to run away. She could not collect her salary because she wanted to avoid arousing the suspicions of the manager, therefore, she had to leave empty handed.

After escaping from the factory, Mone had to find a way to earn some money to pay for the trip home. At first, she moved about staying at different relatives' houses until she eventually went to stay with her uncle and helped him work in the field. Whenever she had spare time, she made rice wine and sold it at the market. It took her almost 10 months to get the cash together, but finally she saved up about 200,000 kip and was able to return home.

When she finally made it back home, she felt ashamed when she saw her neighbours who knew she had escaped from the factory. She could not stay at the factory any longer because she had to work so hard yet barely made enough money to buy food. Moreover, the workers were not treated very well. They had no freedom and were locked up in the factory or dormitory except for meals. They were beaten and they were shouted at all the time.

Even though she was embarrassed about running away from the factory, especially after having such high expectations, Mone is happy to be at home with her parents. She now regrets that she dropped out of school and went to work in Vientiane.

Once Mone got back to her village, she discovered there was something else insidious happening in the factory. She did not realise it at the time, but the factory provided drinking water laced with amphetamines. She noticed that everyone felt tired in the morning, especially after working so late, but once they drank the water provided by the factory, they all felt fresh and ready to work all day and all night. She had often wondered if they put something in the water, but did not dare to even mention it. However, when she saw some people in her village taking amphetamines, she realised that they had the same effect as the spiked drinking water in the factory.

THE IMPACT OF HIV/AIDS

Trafficking increases the vulnerability of children and young people to HIV/AIDS infection through forced sexual relations or through a loss of power that inhibits protective behaviour.

According to HIV test data, the epidemic in Laos is concentrated in provinces that are centers for internal migration and cross-border movement including Savannakhet, Vientiane Capital, Khammouane, Champassak and Bokeo.

Although no cases of HIV/AIDS infection of children under 18 years of age were reported during the study, the following case study is illustrative of the dangers and increased vulnerability.

Bay is an ethnic Khmou girl who was trafficked to Thailand when she was 21, along with another 20-year old girl, Ammala. They were both working at a beer shop in Luang Prabang province when they were approached by a recruiter promising they could earn about 5,000 baht a month in Thailand.

The recruiters took Bay and Ammala to Thailand and told them that in three months they would be able to return to Laos. The Thai trafficker sent the girls to work in a massage parlour in Souphanbouly province. The hours at the massage parlour were grueling; they worked from 7pm to 3am. The living conditions were not much better. The rooms were cramped and the girls slept four people to a room on the floor with no mattress. For the first two months they never received any money and were given only 50 baht per day for food.

The massage parlour owner claimed she had already handed over the equivalent of two months' salary, or a total of 57,000 baht, to the trafficker in payment for the girls. She made it clear that she expected them to work for free for the next couple of months to pay off her investment. Once they had

worked for two months, they were supposed to start receiving a salary. After six months of working at the massage parlour, Bay became seriously ill and went to the district hospital for a check up. She was very weak and could not walk. She had rashes and spots all over her skin and she was bloated. She could not sleep or eat, was nauseous and often vomited if she did manage to get some food down. Eventually she found out she had tested positive for HIV.

She continued to work, but two months later, she became extremely sick once more. The brothel owner gave her eight months' salary and told Bay and Ammala to go home. Bay received about 80,000 baht while Ammala got just over 100,000 baht. However, after deducting expenses and other costs, the girls only received 28,000 and 31,000 baht respectively. After settling accounts and ending up with much less than they were promised, the girls took the bus to Chiang Rai. On the way there, the girls were fined by the police because they were not carrying any papers. The Thai police took all the money they had. When they arrived in Chiang Rai, they were fined once again by the police for working illegally and carrying no papers, this time 2,000 baht each.

On returning home, Bay became gravely ill. Bay's family is very poor and could not afford to send her to the hospital. Since the research was carried out, Bay has died.

Bay's mother holds a picture of her daughter who contracted HIV after working in a massage parlour.



BEER SHOP

Victims of trafficking often come from all walks of life, ranging from residents of Vientiane with a high school education to illiterate people from the provinces. Most of them are easily lured by the prospect of earning better money, and, especially for the children of underprivileged families, the chance to make some money to help their parents.

Boua, from Houaphane province in the north of Laos, was trafficked by someone her parents believed they knew well and could trust. Mrs. Soulany came to Boua's village and offered to give her a job in her house, explaining that she would be working in the garden and doing some housework. Boua's trusting parents believed Soulany and allowed their daughter to go with her to her village in Xieng Khouang province. What Soulany did not mention was that her husband owned a beer shop and that Boua would work there as a waitress.

For the first few months, Boua only had to do housework and some cooking, in addition to taking care of the garden, the animals and the fish pond. Then one day, she was ordered to start serving drinks in the beer shop and forced to have sex with the clients.

At that time, there more than ten other Lao girls working in the shop, all ethnic minorities and all from Houaphane province, with the exception of one girl from Oudomxay. Most of the girls were extremely young and under the age of 18. Boua reported that there were three 14-year olds, eight 15-year olds, plus at least three other underage girls.

If any of the girls disobeyed Soulany, she would shout at them, beat them, and withhold their meals. They could not escape because she had confiscated their travel permits and personal identification. Many of them wanted to leave, but they did not have any family connections or friends nearby to help them.

The clients of the beer shop did not always wear condoms and after some time, Boua became pregnant. When she was already six months pregnant, Soulany took her to a private Chinese clinic in Phonesavanh where the doctor performed an abortion without consulting her.

Boua's situation did not improve; she was arrested after trying to leave Soulany's employment, and subsequently sold to another beer shop owner who paid K600,000 for her. After working off her debt she continued to work in prostitution as she felt there was no other work she could do and her family would not accept her back.

NO RETURN

Lack of awareness about legal issues and the resources needed to negotiate the legal system are all serious impediments to following through with investigations that would bring traffickers and exploiters to justice, even in the most serious of cases.

Mrs. Lek, a mother from Oudomxay province, lost her daughter when she was only 13 years old. Khet left home without her mother's knowledge or permission in late 2002. Khet was recruited by one of her friends, a girl named Da, and her father, Mr. Thoune. He facilitated the process by purchasing the bus ticket for Khet and arranging for Da, his daughter, to pick her up once she arrived in Vientiane.

As soon as she discovered her daughter was missing, Mrs. Lek went searching for her everywhere. She contacted some cousins in Vientiane to see if they could find any information for her, but there was no sign of her anywhere.

Just over a week later, Da called from Vientiane and told her father that Khet had died. As soon as Mrs. Lek received the painful news that her daughter had died, she borrowed money from some relatives and went down to Vientiane to claim the body. She arrived on December 8th but missed the chance to see her daughter's face one last time because Da and the village authorities had already arranged a funeral which took place the day before Mrs. Lek arrived.

The only information Mrs Lek found out was that her daughter had been staying with Da in Sisatthanak district since she arrived in Vientiane. Da claims that Khet fell ill one day so she sent her to Hospital 103. The doctors worked on her from four in the afternoon until midnight, but they could not save her life. One of the doctors said that when Khet checked in, she was unconscious, she had been hit in the back of the head, her body was battered and swollen, and her vagina was bleeding. He also reported that Khet was

severely injured and her wounds revealed obvious signs of sexual abuse. In the face of such sadness, Mrs. Lek resolved to work to find the perpetrators of the crime against her daughter. She borrowed money from people and managed to scrape together a million kip to pursue her daughter's case. Despite all her efforts, she did not have enough money to continue the investigation and came home with debts and a broken heart.

Mrs. Lek still suffers from nightmares since the death of her daughter, unfortunately she does not have the resources necessary to pursue her daughter's case and continue the investigation.

RESCUED AND REPATRIATED

As in other examples, it may often be a friend, not just a friendly stranger, who recruits children to leave the village. It probably seems less intimidating or dangerous when a peer is promoting the idea of going to Thailand. If the recruiter is a friend, it may be an additional incentive because the girl would be accompanied across the border by someone she knows from her village. Some people fall prey to the trusting stranger, but being deceived by someone known to the victim occurs more often.

Sone was only twelve years old when she was trafficked by a 15 year old girl named Phet who conned her with the usual stories of a good job with a great salary in Thailand and promises of 2,000 baht per month. Phet approached Sone and her friends first and then her father, Mr. Sith, took the five girls, including Phet, to some brokers; one was a Lao woman and the other was a Thai man. The girls were taken from Savannakhet province to Khemmarath district on the other side of the Mekong and then eventually down to Bangkok.

From there, they met a man who escorted them to the house of a wealthy Chinese woman. Three of the five girls were selected to stay and Sone was one of the them. Sone heard the Chinese woman complain that the other two girls were too young and told the broker to find them other places.

Sone was then taken to a garment factory where she worked for nearly 14 months until the police raided the place and all the illegal and underage workers were taken away. She was taken to Kredtrakarn Protection and Occupational Development Centre where she stayed for eight months before being repatriated to Laos by the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare. While awaiting repatriation Sone received counseling and undertook vocational training.

Some people fall prey to the trusting stranger but being deceived by someone known to the victim occurs more often.