



# QUARTERLY IMPACT REPORT

JANUARY TO MARCH 2020

How is the COVID-19 pandemic affecting Cambodia and what are the unprecedented challenges it has created for the girls and families on our program, for our team, and the future of Free To Shine?

Communities across the globe are shaken. Schools have shuttered and businesses have boarded-up. Our hearts go out to our business partners and sponsors at this time. We're seeing governments in Australia and the UK taking unprecedented actions in efforts to keep the economic engines running and to support families who are struggling.

Amidst these uncertain times, we are still showing up every day to do what we can to help keep the girls and families on our program safe. School closures and crucial public health measures have made our work more challenging and we've made adaptations where necessary to comply with recommendations and best practice.



1089

Safety visits



9

Community trainings  
facilitated



6

Water filters  
provided



218

Seeds provided  
(packages)



1

House build

THE NUMBERS THIS QUARTER

# MESSAGE FROM OUR MANAGING DIRECTOR & CO-FOUNDER, NICKY MIH

To say it's been an incredibly challenging time is an understatement. Our team and the families on our program have moved through fear, panic, concern, and incredible cooperation.

Having never lived through a global shut down, we're working with unknowns.

We've had to consider how **school closures** might affect girls' risk of being exploited and trafficked.

We've had to assess how team members can work from home when some of them live in small, shared rooms, and their job requires them to access confidential case files, and to have internet access.

And, to give Free To Shine a fighting chance to survive the financial fallout, we have made the incredibly difficult decision of reducing our team from 24 to 15, making team members we care deeply about redundant in a country that has no Centrelink, Dole, or stimulus package to support them.

If COVID-19 sweeps through these rural communities, where many families on our program live in woven palm leaf homes with little effective way of isolating themselves, without access to ICUs and ventilators, the number of deaths is likely to be high. Many girls on our program live with a grandparent as their main caregiver, whose age places them among the most at-risk of death, potentially plunging a number of girls and their siblings into long-term uncertainty. Upon the death of their grandparents, who will care for them? Where will they be able to live? Our social workers are going to be busier than ever, securing the long-term safety and well being of these girls and their siblings.

## CLOSED SCHOOLS

Schools in Siem Reap have been closed since early March. We know that being in school, under the watchful eye of a teacher helps keep girls safe from exploitation and trafficking so what happens now that the school doors are shut?

An e-learning platform has been set up for students in Grade 9 and Grade 12. Since many girls on our program do not have access to computers or smartphones we're working with local authorities in each village to determine who is able to share or join together to study, and we'll keep students informed of notifications from the Ministry of Education.



Poverty makes the children and families we work with vulnerable, and we know the vulnerable are the most exploited. The COVID-19 pandemic, and its resulting economic crisis is going to plunge the poorest (and typically we work with the 10% poorest in each village) even deeper into poverty. Cambodia is grinding to a halt, people have lost their daily work, and there is no government assistance. For those families with no money to buy food making their way through this pandemic is going to be incredibly difficult, and their risk of trafficking after the pandemic, may be increased massively.

To help contain the spread of the virus we've ceased in-person safety visits and temporarily conduct our work over the phone. When their parents have lost work and don't know how to feed their children, when there is violence in the home, when there is death and grief, we are determined to be there supporting and guiding them through this crisis. We need your continued financial support though to achieve this. We will safety plan with them. We will still engage the support of their local commune council for women and children, and refer them to any support that might become available. The need for our social workers and education officers is greater now than it's ever been, and that need is going to grow exponentially in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic.

In this really uncertain time, I thank you for your commitment to Free To Shine and the girls and families on our program.

Take care of yourselves, and take care of each other.

Warmest regards,



Nicky

## ONLINE CHILD EXPLOITATION

School closures mean more free time, which for those who have access to a smartphone, means more time on the internet. Child rights activists have warned that "cybersex traffickers are likely to exploit the coronavirus pandemic to target more children across Southeast Asia for online sexual abuse"<sup>1</sup>. This quarter, our team attended a one-day training on online Child Sexual Exploitation through APLE Cambodia. Our social workers have facilitated training with the university students about online privacy and safety, and we continue to share information with all the girls and families on our program.

1. N. Wongsamuth and M. Blomberg, "Coronavirus fuels cybersex trafficking fears for children in Southeast Asia", Thomson Reuters Foundation, <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-trafficking/coronavirus-fuels-cybersex-trafficking-fears-for-children-in-southeast-asia-idUSL8N2BIOP9>, (accessed April 3, 2020).

## FAMILY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Travel bans and movement restrictions can be dangerous for those experiencing family and domestic violence. In times of crisis and extreme social stress data shows an increase in violence against women and children. Although data on COVID-19 is scarce, it suggests an increase in domestic violence in the United Kingdom, the United States, and China. One report states the number of domestic violence cases reported in a police station in Jingzhou, China tripled in February 2020, compared to the same time the previous year.<sup>2</sup> In Australia and parts of the United States, however, recent statistics indicated the number of reports of violence has actually gone down.<sup>3</sup> Far from indicating a decrease in violence, experts are concerned this means women do not see a way out in current circumstances and/or that they cannot access the telephone or services to seek help. Our social workers support a number of girls and families living through family and domestic violence and it's imperative that while we are not able to visit these families in-person, we talk with them and safety plan with them over the phone.

2. World Health Organization, 'COVID-19 and violence against women', <https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/emergencies/COVID-19-VAW-full-text.pdf>, (accessed April 3, 2020).

3. S. Fielding, 'In quarantine with an abuser: surge in domestic violence reports linked to coronavirus', The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/03/coronavirus-quarantine-abuse-domestic-violence>, (accessed April 6, 2020).



## LOSS OF INCOME AND FOOD INSECURITY

The pandemic has serious implications for families living in extreme poverty. Many girls on our program had a parent or family member working overseas in Thailand where their daily wage is significantly higher than that which they could earn in Cambodia. These parents, just like many people all across the world, returned home before the borders were closed. Over the span of one weekend an estimated 15,000 Cambodian migrant workers rushed home through Poipet, the border crossing closest to Siem Reap.<sup>4</sup> The mass migration causes concern not only for the spread of COVID-19 through rural Cambodia but also for the loss of income for the thousands of migrants returning home. Many families on our program relied on remittances sent from relatives working in Thailand and this loss of income combined with the loss of jobs within Siem Reap is potentially catastrophic. Families living in extreme poverty have not been able to afford to stock up on food or supplies. One of the most pressing concerns during this pandemic is food insecurity.

4. M. Tum, 'Cambodian Migrant Workers Rush Back As Thai Border Closed', VOA, <https://www.voacambodia.com/a/cambodian-migrant-workers-rush-back-as-thai-border-closed-/5342686.html> (accessed April 3, 2020).

## PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

Our team provide life-changing support services to the girls and families on our program and we must stay operational. The initial cases of COVID-19 reported in Cambodia were linked to people who had been in Siem Reap and we were concerned about the risk of being asymptomatic carriers and passing it on, especially to the elderly in rural villages. Following this and recommendations from the World Health Organisation and the Cambodian Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans, and Youth Rehabilitation to cease in-person safety visits, we are conducting safety checks, providing information about COVID-19 and providing psychosocial support by telephone. While we have very limited scope to offer financial aid or emergency relief packages we are determined to remain on the other end of the phone with them, and support them in every way we can.

**“During this difficult time, we could not conduct the safety visits in person, however, it does not mean we stop working with the girls and families. We have been contacting them through phone calls to make sure they are safe. For girls or families who don't have a phone number, we are getting in touch with them by contacting the chief of their village, commune council for women and children, or their neighbours who live close to them.”** - BONA, SOCIAL WORKER

## SURVIVING THE PANDEMIC

Even amidst a crisis, the causes you care about the most continue to need your support. Free To Shine is funded primarily by small business and individuals, many of whom have already been greatly affected by COVID-19.

To give Free To Shine a fighting chance to survive the financial implications of the global shutdown, we have made the very difficult decision to make 9 positions redundant, reducing our team from 24 to 15. In an incredible display of team solidarity many have directed 20% of their salary to their colleagues for a couple of months to help them through an extremely difficult transition.

Amongst the difficulties, we are seeing kindness.

Our sponsors and donors are telling us “we stand with Free To Shine for the long haul” and where appropriate supporting us in redirecting funding to where it is now needed most, or giving us extensions on written reporting. Those who have no other way right now are pausing their donations for 3 months rather than cancelling them altogether. We feel incredibly blessed for the wider community that makes up Free To Shine.

**Thank you.**

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I do this to protect ourselves and the girls and their family,  
I want to make sure that everyone is safe.

**KUNTHEA, EDUCATION OFFICER.**

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