



# Slave trade



**From bonded labour to sex slavery and abuses of children, Cambodia's problem with human trafficking is deeply rooted. But thanks to a former Australian police officer and his not-for-profit agency, something is being done to stop it.** words Nathan Scolaro

In 2008, Steve Moorish, founder of the anti-human trafficking agency SISHA, was called on to investigate one of the most challenging cases of his life. He had started the charity, which strives to ensure justice and human rights protection for victims of exploitation across South East Asia, just a year earlier, and already demand for his services was skyrocketing. “We received information that there were 16-20 girls being held in a brothel on the Cambodia-Thai border,” he says via Skype from his Cambodia base. “When we found the brothel, it was a dirty old wooden shack with metal-bar windows and all these girls locked inside.

“When a customer would come to choose a girl for sex – for which they would pay \$2.50 – the pimps would unlock the door, take that girl out, relock the door and escort the customer and the girl into another room with filthy mattresses. Then they’d lock that door and wouldn’t open it unless the customer was satisfied with the sex. If it wasn’t good enough, the girl would be bashed and tortured with metal poles.

“But what made this sexual slavery case even more shocking was that the brothel was run by military police who were mandated to work in the anti-human trafficking and women’s division of the force. They were supposed to be looking after women and children, and they were running

a brothel. We also found out that one of the girls got pregnant inside and had her baby there. Because it was crying all the time, the police officer thought it was scaring the customers so they macheted the baby across the back of the head. We found the baby buried in the ground.”

Steve and his team busted the operation, freed the girls and put them through post-trauma care, a process which exemplifies SISHA’s core function – to investigate, rescue and provide aftercare for victims of exploitation. As the organisation has grown over the years, it has also come to incorporate arms for legal support, community awareness and police training.

Steve, who is a former senior detective with the Victorian police force, understands there is no easy way to talk about issues such as sexual slavery, bonded labour and child rape. But he is adamant it must be done. Only when we start to discuss the reality of what’s happening in these countries, he says, can necessary and lasting change take place. “Our work is extremely unique and important here – no one else is doing it in the world, let alone South East Asia,” he says. “But what we do scares the shit out of people – corporations don’t like to be aligned with the cause, that’s a huge tragedy.”

Ladsy and straight shooting, Steve is about as candid as they come. After just a few minutes in

his company, you realise why he is the man for the job, and why the job has been so successful. To date, SISHA has rescued more than 600 victims of trafficking and exploitation crimes, and apprehended more than 120 offenders. “I have an open outlook about it all,” he says. “I have to. I’m not here to end world slavery, maybe it’s something that’s always going to be part of humanity, but I’m passionate about doing my bit and locking up as many of the shitbags who commit these offences as I can. If we get too emotional and throw our hands about, who’s going to get the job done?”

SISHA (which stands for South East Asia Investigations into Social and Humanitarian Activities) is an Australian-registered charity that has garnered the support of several esteemed Perth businesspeople, such as Gina Rinehart and James McMahon (managing director of Chauvel Group), both of whom currently sit on the company board.

It was a holiday to Cambodia in 2004 that opened Steve’s eyes to the poverty and exploitation occurring across the country, and ultimately saw him move to Cambodia to establish the organisation three years later.

“I was experiencing a ten-year glitch as a policeman,” he says. “I was getting a bit disillusioned, I guess, with the way the force was in Australia – the bureaucracy and all. When I saw the exploitation in Cambodia, and a judicial and policing system not equipped to provide the necessary services to the community, I decided I would use my skills as a detective to help. I was told while I was there that I could assist organisations investigating child exploitation, so I went back to Melbourne to ask for a year off without pay, but they wouldn’t allow it.”

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So, despite his high-ranking position and not having any experience with NGOs, Steve resigned from the force, moved to Cambodia and worked for a year and a half as a consultant before laying down the foundations of SISHA. In a country where 20.9 million people are enslaved, half of whom are children and the vast majority of whom are female, the organisation has become a critical force, with child rape among the most serious and widely occurring cases on the current agenda. “We’ve had 60 child rape cases since the first of March 2012, five of which were rape murders,” Steve says.

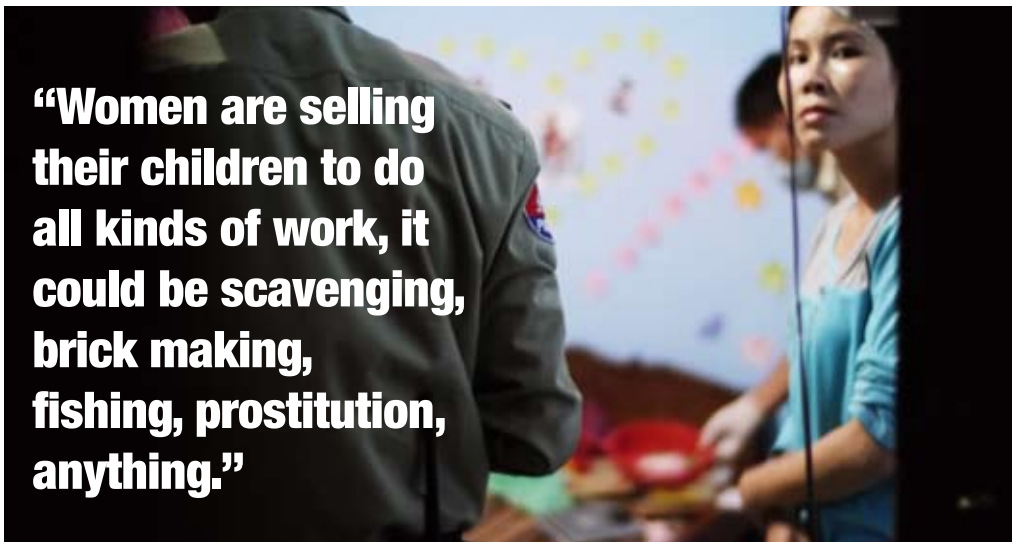
Last year, Andjelka Matic and Natasha Di Ciano, the Perth duo behind the popular charity dining event Dine for Life, flew to Cambodia to get an insight into SISHA’s work. They were looking for a cause for their upcoming annual fundraiser, and were invited by Steve to get a closer look at the operation. “Each year we look for a charity that isn’t widely known to the public,” Natasha says. “A charity and a cause that needed a voice, and for us that was human trafficking. What we witnessed in Cambodia and what Steve explained to us was beyond belief. We couldn’t hold back the tears. We decided there and then that to be able to save one child from these horrors would make it all worthwhile.”

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Steve with graduating police officers; police collecting evidence; brothel raid.



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Steve says the problems in Cambodia are almost certainly a result of the Pol Pot regime in the 1970s, which sought to eradicate the country’s educated, cultured and urban population in favour of an extreme form of peasant Communism. The Khmer Rouge movement, led by the then Cambodian prime minister, Pol Pot, resulted in more than three million deaths, half by execution and half by starvation and disease. “We’re dealing with a country that’s effectively only 30 or 40 years old,” Steve says. “There was the Vietnam War and then the genocide under Pol Pot and then a civil war – that’s a huge blow. It’s why poverty is a massive problem here now. 25 per cent of the population lives on less than \$1 a day, and 60 per cent live on less than \$3 a day.

“When you’ve got extreme poverty, no matter how aware you are of the exploitation and issues such as trafficking going on, it drives you to make poor decisions. It’s even worse when you’re uneducated, which a lot of people here are because of the Khmer Rouge. When families are confronted

with brokers saying ‘we’ll give your daughter a job in Malaysia’, even though they suspect it’s unsafe, getting a meal on the table will make them yield. Women are selling their children to do all kinds of work, it could be scavenging, brick making, fishing, prostitution, anything.”

There are two ways SISHA comes to work on a case. The first is proactive – the troops actually go out to spots where human trade might be taking place, sniff around, talk to informers, and ultimately uncover incidents first-hand. The other is reactive – they might receive a tip-off, from anyone really, which they’ll investigate and collect evidence for. The next step is to rescue the victims, which might involve a troop of police officers and a mapped-out plan, before putting the individual through short-term aftercare. “The trauma these people go through can be horrific,” Steve says. “Not just physical abuse, but psychological as well – a lot of them are drugged into submission and brainwashed. Just imagine

what’s going through your head too when your families – people you trust – sell you. That post-trauma support is paramount.”

Sometimes, though, particularly for girls who have been in the sex industry for a long time, adjusting to normal life can prove too difficult, and they end up returning to the system after their rescue. “My team will say ‘Right, you’re safe now, we can give you vocational training and counseling, we can give you a great chance at life,’” Steve says. “But a lot of the girls figure, ‘Well, we’ve been in the sex industry for five years now, we’re putting money on the family table, there are no chances of getting a husband, I’ve been ostracised from the village, why go back?’”

Legal support is an important component of the SISHA operation. Families are encouraged to go to court and stand up against their offenders, largely because it sets a precedent for the community. “In a country like Cambodia, where there’s still a long way to come, sending people to jail because they’ve committed an act like rape makes an important statement. It tells them rape is wrong, which seems obvious to us, but after everything the country’s been through, there’s still a lot to learn.”

SISHA currently employs 36 staff, and has trained over 600 police officers. Setting up the operation and creating partnerships with police and government hasn’t been an issue. The hardest thing, Steve says, has been getting funding and support. “Lots of Australians make claims to being worldly and understanding what’s going on close to our shores,” he says. “But when it comes to human trafficking and slavery, it’s almost as if they turn a blind eye. People need to start thinking globally and accepting that this is a cause that needs attention.”

*To learn more about SISHA or donate funds, visit [sisha.org](http://sisha.org).*

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