

The Fabric of Women's Lives in Cambodia

by NILE SPRAGUE

Right, a woman ties knots in silk thread before its dyed. Below, Phalla Doung, 23, weaving silk in the Prey Cheu Teal Village in Cambodia. Weavers in the village received loans from a United Methodist Women Mission Giving-supported project. Photos by Nile Sprague.



M United Methodist Women's Mission Giving supports small loans to silk weavers in Cambodia and other empowering projects that strengthen the lives of women and their families.

icrofinance lending changes the lives of women and families living in poverty. Low-interest loans from United Methodist Women's Mission Giving-sponsored Methodist Mission in Cambodia (MMC) are strengthening women's lives throughout the country.

"I am a silk weaver, my mother is a silk weaver, and her mother was before her," Keo Doung, 25, said as she nursed her only child, 6-week-old Rattana. "Our family has done this work for generations, passing it from mother to daughter.

"Before the loan from Methodist Mission in Cambodia, I did not have enough capital to buy my own materials for silk weaving," she said. "I was stuck in a cycle of debt."

Because she was unable to buy her own material, Ms. Doung had to take thread, dye and other materials in advance from a middleman, and then sell the product back at a very low price. It was impossible for her to escape this situation because the cost of materials was so high. The materials needed to produce a four-meter, or approximately 13-foot piece of silk cost \$60, and the profit was only \$5. However, with a low-interest loan from MMC she was

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able to buy her own materials, and now she can command a fair market price.

"In the past I received only \$5 profit for four meters of silk cloth, which would take me 12 days to make," Ms. Doung said. "Now I make \$20 for the same work."

Ms. Doung lives in Prey Cheu Teal village in the Takeo Province of Cambodia and is married to a rice farmer. She stopped school in third grade because she could no longer walk to school after a motorcycle accident. She lives close to her mother, father and siblings, but has saved up enough money to build her own house — a sturdy, single-room cement structure with a zinc roof. Before having her baby, she worked eight hours a day weaving silk, earning \$30 a month.

Ms. Doung is one of nine women who received loans of \$350 each from MMC to buy silk thread, dye and other materials. The loan is paid back over 12 months, with 10 percent interest — five percent to the church to support educational and spiritual activities and five percent to the community women's group to help finance women's gatherings and seminars.

When women buy the silk thread it is plain white. By tying knots around the thread, the weavers are able to isolate sections for dyeing. The thread

is dyed repeatedly, the knots undone and retied with each dyeing, producing a pattern. Colors are produced with a mix of chemical and organic dyes. Chemical dye is cheaper, but does not have the same quality of color as the organic dye, so both are used.

"In the past I was not able to buy enough food for my family," Ms. Doung said. "Now my income has increased by about 50 percent. We are no longer hungry, we are more healthy, and have more strength and energy."

Called to serve

MMC gives loans to women throughout the country to help start small income-generating projects. "We ask them, 'What skills do you have that you can use to make money?' and let them choose for themselves," Marilyn Chan, MMC Women's Desk Coordinator, said.

The strategy is to use the women's existing skills to start their own small businesses. By giving small loans MMC is able to free weavers from the cycle of debt. Women have expanded their family gardens into money earners, and in other provinces of Cambodia women have been able to increase their family income by raising cows and pigs to sell.

In 1997 Ms. Chan, her husband, the Rev. Joseph Chan, and other



Receiving a loan from a Mission Giving-supported project, silk weaver Keo Doung, 25, continues the weaving tradition in her family. Ms. Doung is shown here with her son, Rattana. Opposite page, left to right, Daneth Him, Marilyn Chan and the Rev. Joseph Chan, work at Methodist Mission in Cambodia.

United Methodist missionaries founded MMC. The Chans had returned to their native Cambodia 15 years after fleeing the country. In 1982 they fled as refugees to the Bronx in New York City, after suffering first under the Khmer Rouge regime and then the Vietnamese regime in Cambodia. They survived numerous escapes, near fatal incidents with land mines, snakes and other hazards, and many years living in refugee camps on the Thai border.

The couple moved around the United States, eventually settling in California, where they both received bachelor degrees in theology. Ms. Chan worked as an elementary school bilingual aide and Mr. Chan worked as a part-time pastor. When they moved to Stockton, Calif., they started learning about the United Methodist faith.

"I came back to Cambodia because I wanted to support my people," Ms. Chan said. "I had visited the country before and I saw the people were poor, both physically and spiritually, and I wanted to help them find salvation." When she and her husband returned to Cambodia, they brought with them their 6-year-old daughter, but left behind their two oldest children, then 16 and 11.

Grassroots work

MMC projects in Cambodia work through a network of more than 150 churches throughout the country, using many different approaches to educate and empower women. The program includes Mission Giving-supported Bible Women's trainings, which cover subjects such as human rights, health and hygiene, microfinance and savings, HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention, and environmental preservation and awareness. The first training was held in March 2004 with a woman representative from each church attending the seminar. Following this, local trainings were held with several women attendees from each church, who re-

turned to their villages and taught the lessons to their neighbors and community members.

Through a variety of grassroots approaches, MMC is changing the lives of women and their families. The approaches are diverse and flexible, adapting to women's situations and needs.

"Since I started my garden and began earning money for my family, my husband listens to me more, and domestic violence has stopped," said Thy Mao, the recipient of a small grant to buy tools and seeds for her garden at her home in Phum Phnov Village, Svay Rieng Province.

Sopheak Him, 25, participated in an MMC auto-mechanics course. This course marks the first time women have been trained as mechanics in Cambodia.

"From studying auto-mechanics, I have learned to depend on myself and be confident," Ms. Him said.



"Now I know I am strong enough to live away from home, and I can do the same work a man can do."

As women rise from poverty and their positions in society are strengthened, their confidence spreads. Women are caregivers and supporters of those around them. Their parents, siblings, children and spouses all benefit from the empowering work of MMC. As their quality of life improves, so improves the lives of those around them; as they are educated, they educate — strengthening the fabric of their lives.

First Women Mechanics in Cambodia



Right to left, Srey Leak Ros, Emmanuel Berte and Sopheak Him repairing an engine as part of United Methodist Women's Mission Giving-supported Faith Engine Ministry in Cambodia.

by NILE SPRAGUE

Faith Engine Ministry (FEM) in Cambodia has trained the country's first women mechanics, building stronger engines and stronger lives.

In addition to auto and motorcycle mechanics, the program teaches women welding, English, driving skills, computer skills, spiritual development and air conditioner repair. FEM is part of Mission Giving-supported Methodist Mission in Cambodia.

Srey Leak Ros joined five other female students for the 3 1/2 month training in auto mechanics and welding, organized by Emmanuel Barte, a missionary of United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries.

Ms. Ros was questioned when she started studying auto mechanics in 2006. People would ask, "Why are you studying mechanics?" she said. "Why don't you stay at home and cook? You will lose your beauty, your long nails, your white skin.

Ladies are weak and cannot learn about mechanics.' When they told me, 'Ladies are weak,' it hurt the most."

To date, six women and 90 men have graduated from the training. The number of women is small, but significant in a society where mechanics, welding and work of this nature are considered strictly man's work. When Mr. Barte started the trainings, he fought resistance on many fronts. Traditionally, women in Cambodia do not learn mechanical trades and it was hard to find women students because of social prejudice.

Ms. Ros speaks with confidence and pride, and has an unabashed sense of humor. These characteristics are in stark contrast to the reserved, soft-spoken, deferential nature typical of young women in Cambodia.

"In the past I didn't dare to stand up to my father or brother if they blamed me for something," Ms. Ros said. "Now I have more confidence and I stand up for myself."



Emmanuel Barte, left, and Srey Leak Ros sanding metal before welding.

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“After the mechanics class my parents gave me more responsibilities and asked me to do work that before they asked my brother to do,” said fellow classmate Sopheak Him. “This made me feel very good because my father trusted me and asked me to do the man’s work.”

These young women’s hard work is revealed in their confidence, strength of character and self-assurance.

“In all of Cambodia I have never seen a woman mechanic — this is the first time in Cambodia,” said Sotheary Pov, another FEM student.

“Before the training I was very shy, but because of this experience I am more confident and it is easier for me to talk with people,” Ms. Pov said. “At first I didn’t believe I could learn about mechanics and I thought ladies could not use heavy tools. Now I know I can do this, I am inspired and want to learn more — I want to learn everything there is to know about being a mechanic.”

Since graduating from the mechanics classes, these three women



Sotheary Pov repairs an engine, part of United Methodist Women’s Mission Giving-supported Faith Engine Ministry.

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have gone on to study in university with scholarships from United Methodist Women in the United States and Korean Methodist Women. They continue their education empowered to become strong women and successful women who determine their own futures.



START YOUR ENGINES

by NILE SPRAGUE

Faith Engine Ministry (FEM) was created by Beverly and Emmanuel Barte, United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries missionaries. The couple moved to Cambodia in 2002, bringing with them their three sons, ages 3, 11 and 13. Prior to this, the Bartes had been partners in local church activities in their home country of the Philippines, she as a deaconess and he as an active church member.

Mr. Barte, the instructor of the FEM trainings, came from a poor family, one of 14 siblings. His father did not have money to support Mr. Barte’s education beyond high school. Through his own initiative he learned about driving, welding, mechanics and air-conditioner repair, working first as an apprentice in a garage and later attending formal mechanics training.

“Along with my mechanics and driving skills, my testimony of God’s love and presence, and my hope in Jesus are what I can offer the youth of Cambodia who aspire for a better future,” Mr. Barte said. “I know and understand the difficulty of surviving in poverty, so I want to offer the Cambodian youth something they can build upon for themselves and their future. Faith Engine Ministry offers both faith and skills to the youth, strengthening their spirituality, character and capacity.”



The Beauty of a Volunteer

by NILE SPRAGUE

Daneth Him started working as a volunteer at Methodist Mission in Cambodia (MMC) when she was 24. She commuted 1 1/2 hours each day by *remorque* — a trailer pulled by motorcycle, seating approximately 20 people — to Phnom Penh for school in the morning and work at the MMC office in the afternoon.

“I wanted to work with a Christian organization to strengthen my spirituality and gain valuable experience,” Ms. Him said. “When I started I didn’t know anything. I needed a translator when I spoke to foreigners. Now I am a translator. I have learned a great deal through my involvement with the women’s program. In the future I will be well prepared to deal with issues facing women.”

Today Ms. Him is 27, and works as MMC Women’s Desk secretary. With her earnings, she pays for the living expenses and accommodation of herself and her sister, Sopheak Him, who lives with Ms. Him in Phnom Penh. Her sister is attending university with a scholarship from United Methodist Women, studying for a diploma in English Literature. Sopheak was also part of the Faith Engine Ministry of MMC.

“Through MMC, I was able to attend a two-month women’s seminar in the Philippines, learning about feminist theory, violence against women and other issues affecting women,” Daneth Him said. “When I work with Cambodian women, I know only about their path, but when I meet foreign women, I learn about their capacities, needs and



Daneth Him, left, with her sister, Sopheak Him in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The sisters’ lives have been impacted by United Methodist Women’s Mission Giving-supported Methodist Mission in Cambodia.

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challenges. It is important for women from different parts of the world to interact together, supporting and educating each other.

“When I first started to go to church, my family didn’t want me to be Christian and told me to stop going,” Ms. Him said. “I sought advice from the priest, and he told me, ‘Just be good and show them the good things Christians do.’ I repeated this to my mother and she said, ‘If you believe in Jesus you are not my daughter anymore.’ I was very sad and cried. I told her, ‘I don’t want to lose you or my God. I already believe in Jesus. I am not playing with my beliefs. I don’t know how to explain this to you, but I will show you with my good actions as a Christian.’”

Despite the threat from her mother to disown her, she continued going to church.

“Every Sunday I had to go to church secretly, but when I came back my parents knew where I had gone and scolded me,” Ms. Him said. “I didn’t argue, I just kept quiet, and kept going to church. Eventually my parents came to respect my religion through my good actions, and increased confidence, independence and strength.”

“Though my parents remain Buddhist, they now appreciate what I do, and recognize the value of Christianity,” she said. “Because of what I am doing with my life, they get more respect from the community.”

Ms. Him’s work as a translator played a key role in the stories from Cambodia that appear in this issue of *Response*. She is an educated, strong example of what can be achieved with perseverance, dedication and selflessness.

