

CREATING A SAFE AND LOVING HOME

At 8 years old, Nita was sexually abused by a group of teenagers. Following feelings of fear and shame, experiencing recurring nightmares, and showing aggressive behavior, Nita's road to recovery began with the social work support from First Step Cambodia.

In 2017, Nita was 8 years old and living with her parents and a younger brother in Preah Vihear province, Cambodia. Nita was sexually abused by a group of boys in the village where she lived. Nita was immediately referred to Angkor Hospital for Children (AHC), where she received medical care and immediate social work services.



In the wake of this tragic event, five suspects were arrested. Two adolescents were convicted to two years in prison, while the three other suspects were released due to being below the age of legal responsibility. Nita's family relocated to Siem Reap Province to ensure Nita's safety and to avoid discrimination and confrontation in their community. However, during this time, Nita did not receive proper counseling and therapeutic services, resulting in ongoing emotional and mental trauma. In January 2019, her case was referred to First Step Cambodia (FSC).

During FSC's first meeting with Nita's parents, several concerns were raised by her mother about her behavior. Nita had difficulty engaging with other children, especially boys and men - including her father. She was not attending school regularly and felt deeply shamed as her story had spread in the community and school. She was experiencing recurring nightmares and feelings of extreme fear. At home, she was showing aggressive behavior towards her younger brother and was engaging in self-injurious behavior.

Based on FSC's assessment, our social worker found that some of Nita's behaviors were a result of the impact of the sexual abuse, while others could be linked to a lack of knowledge and skills of the parents in supporting children affected by sexual abuse or trauma. Our social worker initiated regular counseling sessions, providing psychological and emotional support and teaching her techniques to cope with her anger and stop the self-harm such as relaxation, drawing and do sports. Nita learned how to protect herself and about grooming techniques and safe

“Now I am very excited and thankful for the help of First Step Cambodia. I learned a lot about protecting myself from abuse and I will share this experience with my friends to prevent themselves from sexual abuse in the future”

Nita (10 years old)

places. At the same time, our social worker engaged with the parents. Besides their lack of knowledge and understanding, our social worker discovered that Nita's father was abusing alcohol and was being violent to the family, including to Nita. We addressed these issues and started helping her parents understand the factors and impacts of sexual abuse on their child, how to help Nita to recover from her experiences and trauma resulting from the sexual abuse, and provided support in developing problem-solving and positive parenting skills. Additionally, essential practical support was provided with a food allowance, hygiene materials, and accesses to health care services.

On average, it takes around 24 months before we can confidently initiate an exit plan from our counseling and social work services. Thus far, after eight months, Nita has rebuilt her confidence and has significantly reduced her extreme fear for strangers. She has stopped to inflict self-harm and her aggressive behavior, showing a positive attitude towards other children and her younger brother. She has returned to school, starting in grade 2 at public primary school. Working closely with her parents, Nita's father has changed his behavior, showing a positive attitude towards his family and significantly reducing his alcohol consumption. With our support, he has started to generate income for his family as well. Step by step, we see the father looking after his children more and more and becoming more supportive. Guiding him through all these changes, we intend to eliminate all forms of domestic violence and see Nita grow up in a healthy, caring and safe home environment.
