

The story of Pisey, survivor of sexual abuse

Pisey is now thirteen years old. Two years ago, a sad life-changing event occurred. As too many children in Cambodia he has been affected by sexual abuse. Since that day Pisey's life will never be an easy walk. It has never been though. Pisey has grown up in a challenging environment. He is one of six children of a single mother who divorced from her husband ten years ago. With two of his brothers presently in jail for drug usage and involved in drug-business related activities, a broken family, a vulnerable mother left alone in a small rented house, and traumatized by what happen to him two years ago Pisey is, against all odds, on a path to a successful recovery.

Pisey referred to First Step Cambodia

Recognized as an important player in the protection of children towards sexual abuse and unique specialist service providers for boy victims, the non-governmental organization First Step Cambodia (FSC) has been supporting Pisey for two years. Pisey was referred to FSC by the NGO Action pour les Enfants (APLE), which holds a emergency hotline for all potential victims of sexual abuse or exploitation. In the case of Pisey, local authorities informed APLE that one perpetrator had been abusing five children.

How did it happen?

As in most of the cases, the perpetrators are usually adopting very friendly behavior towards the children and their families. Pisey was invited many times to some resorts or to restaurants while also given some free meals for him and his family by the perpetrator. If Pisey and the other victims were naïve regarding the intentions of the perpetrator, so was Pisey's mother. She reported having great appreciation of the offender, as he was "friendly and generous". Gaining the trust of the mother made easier for the offender to abuse Pisey as he could spend more time with him. Besides that, the mother was not able to understand the nasty intentions of the offender and she now reports that "at this time I had no idea sexual abuse could happen to boys and I thought that only girls needed protection". Unfortunately, this is a very common ignorance in Cambodia.

What support has Pisey and his mother received from First Step Cambodia?

When a child access First Step Cambodia's services, social workers automatically start to work in parallel with the most adequate family member or caregiver. In this case Pisey and his mother received support from FSC. During the last two years Pisey and his mother have been provided holistic support from First Step Cambodia benefiting from counselling and therapeutic services to access to vocational training and education and including healthcare or income generation activities with families.

Right after the incident Pisey's mother shared that he displayed sign of strange ailments with recurrent and unexplained headaches, fevers and anxiety. Since the day he was sexually abused Pisey had often experienced nightmares, sleep disorders and displayed unstable behavior. He was also extremely afraid each time he came across someone with the same physical appearance than the perpetrator.



“At this time, I had no idea sexual abuse could happen to boys and I thought that only girls needed protection”

Pisey’s mother

The photo here does not represent the victim nor one of FSC client, the face of the children being used as a model

When interviewed separately after two years of receiving the services from FSC both Pisey and his mother recognized the great support provided highlighting the necessary material support enabling Pisey to pursue its studies and his mother to maintain a decent level of food security while generating income from a small business.

FSC’s social worker relates to us that the work with the mother is essential in improving Pisey’s situation mentioning she is currently facing mental struggles being overwhelmed by the situation of her family and his economical vulnerability increased by the current economic crisis as a result of the global pandemic. The help brought to Pisey’s mother takes various forms. She benefits from material support to meet the basic needs of her family and psychosocial support to release the large amount of toxic stress she is experiencing. Plus, our social worker tries to empower her as a mother teaching her positive parenting skills to increase the protection of her children with adapted actions taking into account her very difficult situation and her personal struggles.

As far as Pisey is concerned, after two years of being supported by FSC, his situation has drastically improved. He can now sleep properly without disruption or nightmares and displays more stable behavior allowing him to socialize normally with other children and teenagers. However, the fear of individuals having the same physical appearance than his offender is lower but persists. The recovery process is not finished and Pisey still needs support. He shared with us that he would like to become a professor in the future and he is now “working hard at school”. Nonetheless, the harmful familial environment with the example of two brothers in jail can be an obstacle for Pisey and as he mentioned himself, he still needs vital support.

As we are speaking, the case is still in the courts and no sentence has been given to the perpetrator as yet. Pisey and his mother receive human and financial resource from FSC in this jurisdiction process.

Protecting children is “everyone’s business”.

Protecting children from sexual abuse has to be addressed at all levels of Cambodian society. At the national level there is a strong evidence that poverty can indirectly be a factor of violence against children including sexual abuse. When children are starving, they can be lured by a meal offered by someone unknown or attracted by drug-related activities to generate quick income. Parents left with toxic stress use much more violence towards children. In these uncertain times, it is crucial to ensure all Cambodia’s citizen access to decent level of life which will increase their protection.