



Hidden violence in conflict Sri Lanka

SRI LANKA: Over 100,000 people have been killed in conflict between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan Government during the past 25 years.

Forced recruitment of soldiers, including children, and forced displacement of entire communities are commonplace. Under such stress, families' coping mechanisms can break down, and many people become psychologically traumatised. In this sort of environment sexual and domestic violence often proliferate.

Tracey Roberson is an Austcare Protection Officer recently returned from Vavuniya district, Sri Lanka. While there she worked on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) issues with the United Nations

Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Tracey explains that "the majority of perpetrators, like in other countries, are members of the victim's family. In some cases girls are attacked near forested areas on the way to or from school or work."

"Women in female-headed households with no adult male to protect the family are at higher risk of attacks from outside the home", says Tracey. This symptom of the Sri Lankan conflict highlights the interlinked nature of different forms of gender-based violence; the targeting of men for forced recruitment into armies or militia upsets the family and community balance, and leaves family members at home at greater risk of sexual abuse.

Austcare Protection Officers in Sri Lanka are working to strengthen support

mechanisms for victims of SGBV and to prevent further violence by raising awareness of it throughout communities. Many incidences of sexual violence go unreported by the victim due to fear of the social stigma associated with it.

These fears are often justified. Public knowledge of a victim's experience with sexual abuse can make it very difficult to find a marriage partner. Rather than the perpetrator being punished, in many cases of child sexual abuse or forced incest the survivor is sent to a children's home where they may be further ostracised by other children or even the home supervisors.

Our Protection Officers are working with local government and non-government

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Left: Women and children at Poonthoddam Welfare Centre. Right: Women Tracey worked with in Sri Lanka.



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organisations to provide ongoing counselling services to victims, to help them work through both their experiences with abuse and also with their plans for schooling, work and longer-term futures.

Tracey has been coordinating a new dual program for children and

supervisors in children's homes – where up to one in three children is a victim of sexual abuse. The program aims to de-stigmatise SGBV for the survivors and create a greater understanding of sexual and other forms of abuse.

The seminars for supervisors are similarly raising supervisors' awareness

of child sexual abuse and also educating them about support and care of the abused child, prevention of abuse and services available to victims of SGBV.

Tracey has recently coordinated the establishment of a men's group to work on stress and coping mechanisms for men living with displacement and violence, and raise men's awareness of sexual and domestic violence and what forms it can take.

Tracey explains that Austcare's protection partnership with UNHCR is "seeing positive, quantifiable results in many cases, and more people are willing to come forward and speak to us as awareness and support mechanisms for victims are improved." She makes one thing clear however: "there is still a long way to go."



Protection Officer Tracey Roberson at the Morton's Children's Home in Sithamparapuram.

What is gender in international de

Most people have a basic concept of what gender relates to, but a lot of us would be hard pressed to produce a definition of what gender actually *is*. Even harder is to explain why it's important to organisations like Austcare that are working with vulnerable people in conflict environments and regions of poor human security.

Gender is different from *sex*. While sex identifies the biological differences between males and females, gender represents the cultural, social and economic characteristics that influence women and men to behave differently and take on different roles in the home, work place and society.

Gender equality refers to the extent to which males and females enjoy the same access to rights, resources, opportunities and status. Promoting gender equality helps to reduce poverty and promotes fundamental human rights and good governance.

While gender is an important force in all communities (including ours), consideration of gender in **development work and emergency situations** is especially critical. Without considering how development activities will impact differently on women, men, girls and boys when planning and implementing programs, the best-intentioned actions can do more harm than good.

When planning programs, Austcare staff first meet community representatives to discuss the community's needs and desires. In regions where women don't bear positions of official leadership, extra steps are taken to ensure access for women in the community.

For example, Austcare staff in Aceh ensure the broadest community participation possible by recognising and accommodating the different roles that various gender groups play. Meetings are often organised outside of normal working hours, and are child friendly or incorporate child care facilities so that women, the child-minders in these communities, can take part.



Challenging a culture of impunity

INDONESIA: Women in Aceh are yet to enjoy the same social privileges and standards of living as men. They receive consistently poorer standards of education, healthcare and – as in many developed countries – receive lower wages for the same work.

Further to this, impunity for perpetrators of sexual assault prevails in Aceh. Sexual violence often brings shame not on the perpetrator of the crime but on the victim, their family and community. Although laws do exist, they are often not implemented as violence against women is commonly seen as a family problem.

In such an environment, taking action to support the rights of women is a serious and necessary challenge.

To meet this challenge, Austcare and ActionAid recently carried out an innovative program with KKTGA, a

Banda Aceh-based organisation that focuses on women’s rights. The program aimed to raise community awareness about violence against women and the importance of their safety and security. It also worked to increase respect for the rights of women and to develop positive actions to be taken to combat violence against women.

Through the project, 31 KKTGA members, 66 community organisers and 30 community leaders were trained in methods of raising community awareness about preventing violence against women. In addition, 2,050 people attended group discussions and 945 students and teachers took part in a schools program.

Educating high school teachers and students, community leaders and influencers has helped open discussion on women’s rights within the community.



High school students discussing the prevention of violence against women.

Deborah Leaver, Austcare Country Director Indonesia, highlights the fundamental importance of these activities: “Women play key roles in the social, cultural and economic activities in any society and need to be recognised for their many contributions. We can already see this project having a positive effect on attitudes towards women and girls in our partner communities and we remain committed to supporting further positive change.”

Development?

Measures such as this ensure that the interests and needs of all groups are met, and that the working knowledge and experience of women is incorporated into decision-making. In many cultures this knowledge covers critical areas such as water management, firewood collection, forest management, food production, health care and child and elder care.

Similarly, it is critical in **conflict situations** that humanitarian agencies recognise the different experiences and needs of women, men, girls and boys. While women and girls in conflict environments more often suffer sexual violence and exploitation, boys are



Displaced women and girls in Sri Lanka on World Refugee Day 2007.

targeted for recruitment as child soldiers and men are the most common victims of landmine accidents during and after conflict.

Effective responses to these very different issues must of course entail

different strategies. Agencies must also be careful to ensure that their assistance helps communities rebuild themselves in ways that give all people equal political and social representation in community decision making.



United we take a stand against sexual abuse

THAILAND: There is little opportunity for employment and few public facilities in most refugee camps. Frustration and stress can lead to alcoholism and sexual and domestic violence.

Horrifically, there have also been cases internationally of sexual exploitation by humanitarian workers, who have abused their power by exchanging relief items for sex.

When abuse or exploitation occur, in many cases people are unsure of whether their rights have been violated. It can also be socially very difficult for people to come forward and report abuse to authorities.

Through our partnership with the International Rescue Committee, Austcare has recently been working to combat these problems in camps for Burmese refugees in Thailand. Part of this work has involved the establishment of the *Prevention of Sexual Abuse and Exploitation* awareness-raising program in Mae La camp. Mae La is currently home to more than 50,000 Burmese refugees.

As part of the project, youth teams developed slogans for use within the camp to promote awareness of people's rights and of mechanisms available for reporting cases of sexual abuse and exploitation. The winning messages included:

- United we take a stand against sexual abuse and exploitation!
- Together we can banish sexual abuse and exploitation!
- Communities have the right to be free from sexual abuse and exploitation!

See more on this program in our [Interview from the Field](#) below.



Claire Sanford (top) in a mine risk education workshop with Burmese children, Mae La refugee camp, Thailand.

Interview from the Field

Claire Sanford, Program Manager South-East Asia

You've been busy lately! Tell us about your recent field trips.

Since November 2007 I've travelled to Cambodia and Thailand to review our programs and monitor the work of our partners, and to Bangladesh to assist in establishing our new program supporting Rohingya refugees.

Visiting Bangladesh really impressed upon me how vulnerable the country is to natural disasters. It's all low-lying regions with no high ground, so when there is a cyclone or flooding there's nowhere for people to go. I was there just after Cyclone Sidr so I saw first-hand the devastation that these events can have on so many people.

How are communities reacting to our sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) program in Thailand?

A lot of girls and women in our partners' workshops are very keen to learn more about SGBV – what it is and what they can do about it. It was really interesting to hear about how they shared the information they have learned with their families, and then to see other family members – husbands, siblings, children – coming back to learn more.

Girls said to me "it's really important that boys and men are involved. Through these activities, more men and boys will understand what abuse is and how it affects women. In the end this will mean less sexual abuse overall."

Why is it important for Austcare staff to travel out to the field?

As Austcare is funded by and accountable to the Australian public, Australian Government and other donors, it's essential that we monitor our programs effectively to ensure that they're being implemented in the most efficient way and that we are reaching the most vulnerable communities.

Also, as an organisation helping people in far-away places, we need to understand the situation on the ground and the problems communities face day-to-day so we can design our projects accordingly.



Devastating fire in Goldhap refugee camp

NEPAL: On 2nd March 2008 a catastrophic fire tore through Goldhap refugee camp, where Austcare completed over ten years of work last year. The fire destroyed the homes of around 12,000 Bhutanese refugees. It claimed the money, valuables, household materials and personal and identification documents of almost all resident families. However, the blaze spared the Austcare-supported training centre in the camp.

Much of Austcare's work in Nepal's Bhutanese refugee camps has been in partnership with *Bhutanese Refugees Aiding Victims of Violence* (BRAVVE) and Lutheran World Federation (LWF).

Austcare and its partners provided vulnerable refugees with services such as micro-credit loans for small



businesses and vocational skills training. Our most recent work with BRAVVE in 2007 aimed to build the capacity of the organisation in business management, organisational development and provision of vocational training, so that it could continue to provide its essential services to refugees.

Immediately after the event of the fire, BRAVVE was able to distribute

1,700 pieces of clothing produced in the training program to mothers, children and disabled people. Catherine Chalk, Austcare Program Manager, said "It's great to see that our work with BRAVVE in strengthening leadership, resilience and capacity has enabled the organisation to respond so quickly and will continue to benefit Bhutanese refugees in Nepal."

Australian pedal power rebuilds school in Cambodia

It's shaping as a long day ahead on the bikes as father and son duo Michael and Greg Harriden wake up to another chilly morning in regional Victoria. Sore bodies make the thought of another day in the saddle something of an unappealing proposition, but as the muscles warm up things quickly start to feel good again.



As they roll through their marathon Melbourne to Sydney bike ride, Michael and Greg have time to reflect on what their efforts will mean to a group of people in genuine need a long way away. The pair are raising money to fund the rebuilding of a school in Samraong Village in Banteay Meanchey province, Cambodia.

Kong Phaloeuk, Austcare Provincial Co-ordinator in Banteay Meanchey, Cambodia, explains that "the old school had just a zinc roof with no walls. In the rainy season the water would come straight in to the classroom. Some of the structure was broken, making it dangerous for students. All children

from levels one to five were in the same room."

Teacher Mr San Piet represents the community in saying "If all the children can study full time in safety every year then they can get good jobs later on. This will also help develop this village, which is good for everyone."

Back in Australia it was a gruelling time on the bikes for Michael and Greg Harriden. Two weeks riding with only two rest days was always going to be tough on mind and body. But their goal inspired them and has helped a remote community in north west Cambodia move towards a brighter future.

Margaret gives the greatest gift of all

Margaret Hounslow is an Austcare Companion from Queensland. A truly inspiring person, Margaret has worked with refugees for over 30 years.

Having visited refugee camps throughout Asia, housed refugee families in her home and taught English to refugee adults and children for many years, Margaret has recently edited a book and CD set called *A Whole New World* for refugee adults and children learning English.

All the proceeds are donated to refugee organisations.

Margaret explains, "While I donate now, I am also leaving a bequest to Austcare. It is also important to let Austcare know." Margaret recognises that "for the foreseeable future there will be refugees around the world in desperate need, so there will always be a need for Austcare."

Margaret looks forward to continuing her work with refugees and plans to spend time volunteering her education skills overseas in 2009.

Contact us to find out more about leaving a lasting gift to Austcare and become an Austcare Companion.



Margaret with students in Aceh in May 2007.

Sydney students get their hands dirty in Cambodia

Six students from Wesley College in Sydney recently travelled with Austcare to Banteay Meanchey Province, Cambodia, to experience first-hand Austcare's programs in agricultural

and livelihood assistance, school development and integrated mine action.

Wesley student Jayne Hanford explains "the activity with the most profound impact on me was our visit to a mine-clearing site. It was eye-opening to see the sheer number of mines in such a small area, and the impact they have on the local people's lives."

Staying out with remote communities overnight, the group also enjoyed the experience of Khmer culture and life in villages. "The village functioned as a community rather than individual households", says Jayne. "Contrasted

with many people here not even knowing their next-door neighbours, it was quite a different way of living." "I never realised that this short time spent in Cambodia would have such a huge impact on my life."

See the full interview with Jayne at www.austcare.org.au



Left to right: Austcare team member with Wesley students Georgie Hubbard and James Strang



OUR MISSION

To work with people affected by conflict and natural disaster to build human security.

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