

Missing girl feared trafficked

Rosa Ellen and
Buth Reaksmei Kongkea

MEAS Bopha, 47, sits in an outdoor pagoda over a lotus-filled pond on her property in Kampong Speu, home to 10 of her 12 children, and wipes back tears as she talks about her missing teenage daughter, Bophea, who vanished one morning last week.

The day she disappeared, Bophea, 15, woke up at 4am and prepared fried fish and rice porridge for the family's breakfast. Her younger sister recalls waking up and seeing her, but the teenager told her to go back to sleep.

Bophea once asked her mother about working in a factory to help her out.

"She said, 'you work very hard, can I help you? ... Can I work in a factory?' I said 'no'. She said [an acquaintance] told her about selling her body. I was angry."

There are fears she has been trafficked, by her own volition or otherwise. Bophea was well-behaved, seemed content with her relatively secluded life in their large household in Kong Pisei district's Snam Krapoeu



Meas Bopha (left) speaks to the *Post* yesterday about her missing 15-year-old daughter, Meas Bophea, (pictured at right). BUTH REAKSMEI KONGKEA/PHOTO SUPPLIED



commune, her mother said. But she had mentioned going off to work in the past, to help her mother out.

Young women going missing is a familiar story, though it is less common for it to occur without any knowledge from the family, says Eric Meldrum, an operations director at anti-trafficking organisation Sisha, which is investigating the case along with local police.

"It does happen," Meldrum said. "[But] the majority will be

that the parents give consent to a broker for a better life, better jobs, etcetera."

Piecing together the mystery of why and how Bophea left leads to much theorising among family and friends.

Bophea's adopted sister Bophuong, also 15, worries her sister was trafficked and fears the same thing could happen to her.

"I am now very worried about my own safety and security. I am afraid that I will

be taken or be trafficked," she said.

Thanks to the family's connections with a pair of foreign donors who help with medical costs for one of Bopha's sons, Bophea's disappearance gained attention on English-language social media, which spread pictures of her and a phone number.

Teenage girls leaving home and ending up in exploitative work is becoming more common thanks to the growth

of private phones and social media, country director for Action Pour Les Enfants Seila Samleang said.

"This is one of the emerging social problems," he said. Once on their own, under-age girls who leave for work are vulnerable to trafficking, with few connections outside their home community.

Bopha, who is a small-scale farmer, says she has opened her home to her many adopted children and women who had nowhere else to go, after her own children were taken by their father to the United States. Grief-stricken, she entered the Ang Lumtong pagoda in Kampong Speu province and lived there as a nun, which is where she found Bophea, orphaned at two days old.

Over the years her adopted charges grew to 10, and are now aged from two years to 15.

She thought her sleepless night were behind her, she said. "Now I'm sad and right now sick, because I can't sleep or eat enough not knowing where she is."

Tuy Then, deputy chief of Kong Pisei district, said police would continue to investigate the case.