



An unlikely hero

Somaly Mam is a driven, dynamic, inspiring and indefatigable leader. Those are some of the qualities that make her one of Time Magazine’s 100 most influential people and a CNN Hero.

Somaly Mam is also an unlikely hero. She is a victim of human trafficking and was sold into a brothel in Cambodia at the age of 12.

Nearly a decade later, she escaped with the help of a French aid worker and in 1993 went to Paris. She returned to Cambodia two years later and founded “Agir Pour les Femmes en Situation Précaire” (AFESIP) or “Acting for Women in Distressing Circumstances.”

Now at 39, she and her organisation have freed thousands of children and women, educated them and provided vocational training in Cambodia and other countries in Asia. Her foundation campaigns around the world against human trafficking. She spoke recently to INSEAD Knowledge, shortly before giving a talk at INSEAD’s Asia campus in Singapore.

“We explain (to the victims of human trafficking) how to stand up and fight. Stand up and show (them) that we have hope around the world,” says Mam. Despite all she has been through, Mam radiates hope. Her biggest frustration is dealing with corruption. Human traffickers and organised crime groups have influence over the courts and the police, setting her work back. “They have money, so they can buy anything,” she says.

Mam’s own organisation works at the grass-roots level, helping the women and children who are the victims of human trafficking.

She believes global problems require the involvement of both local non-governmental and major international organisations, but often, she says, when they try to coordinate there seems to be more talk than action. Also, Mam’s timetable is different to that of many big NGOs. For her, each day is precious, but for large organisations a day or a year isn’t a very long time. “When you are in the brothel, one day is (too) long,” she says.

AFESIP needs money, but also volunteers and help in educating the rest of the world. “No woman, no child wants to be abused,” she says. “If you pass them in the red light district, don’t look down on them,” she says.

Beyond that, combating human trafficking will require educating men. “If we really want to end the problem we have to end the demand.”

The women and children helped by AFESIP get shelter, education and vocational training so they can escape the brothels for good. “I want them to be lawyers because, with what they’ve been through, they can’t be corrupted,” says Mam.

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She praises the work Lexis-Nexis has done with her foundation because the company has given not only money, but also expertise in grant writing, technical support and the time of company professionals. One senior manager spends half his time helping her.

Mam and her foundation have very visible support from global celebrities, including Angelina Jolie and Susan Sarandon, and says their power and connections help raise awareness.

“It’s not just money that I need. I need them to come and see my world. This world is so big. I can save 5,000 girls but there are so many more.” And Mam says, the children targeted by the traffickers are getting younger.

Mam claims that dealing with donors and government officials is more nerve-wracking than death threats. “You have to know how to talk to them, but I’ve never been educated,” she says. “(It’s) hard work making the people understand me. That is my challenge.”

On the ground in Cambodia, Mam works to save girls one at a time. “My goal? Save the children and make them happy.”

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