

SEEKING JUSTICE

Lawyers can help rebuild the lives of exploited Cambodian women and children through an international organisation new to Melbourne.

International human rights organisation Hagar has opened an office in Melbourne as it expands its advocacy work on behalf of women and children who have suffered extreme human rights abuses and exploitation.

Hagar Australia's chief executive Kate Kennedy said the organisation, which was set up in Cambodia in 1994 and which has operations in Cambodia, Afghanistan and Vietnam, was looking to grow in response to an increase in human trafficking.

"The UN estimates the number of people who are trafficked annually is around 1.2 million," Ms Kennedy said. "Eighty per cent is occurring in and around the Cambodian, Laos and Vietnam borders and we [at Hagar] feel we need to start bringing not just programs and services to the people who suffer in-country, but we need to start bringing it as an advocacy issue to Australia."

Speaking at a legal justice lunch, Ms Kennedy said Hagar was a sophisticated and well-established body that differed from other international development agencies due to its individual case management approach and the way it linked social rehabilitation with economic empowerment.

"Unlike a number of other agencies we haven't had a developed world position before now; instead we have been the on-ground program deliverer for other agencies including the US Justice Department, International Women's Development Agency, World Vision and Red Cross," Ms Kennedy said.

Hagar employs 250 staff in Cambodia. It works with women and children who have been trafficked or experienced horrific human rights abuses by providing health services including extensive psychological counselling, education and vocational training, and employment pathways.

"Our programs are transformational," Ms Kennedy said. "After recovery, the ultimate goal is independence and we aim to work with each individual for as long as it takes to restore their lives."

Hagar runs a foster care program, a school and several social enterprise initiatives including a catering business, which provides more than three million meals annually as well as meaningful employment for women who wish to pursue a career in hospitality.

In July last year it established a legal and protection unit.

Hagar's legal and protection unit adviser Priscilla Chan told those at the April lunch that nearly all the women and children on Hagar's books had some kind of legal issue. Ms Chan said once clients felt safe and protected they wanted to seek justice. "A major part of what I do is make sure all our clients have timely access to legal services," she said. "We work with external lawyers to make sure children are adequately represented in court when they are acting as victim witnesses, whether that is in a Cambodian court or in foreign cases, which are mostly in the US."

In 2011 Hagar was involved in 27 cases, including four in foreign courts that involved sexual exploitation of children, mainly boys.

Ms Chan said Hagar was looking for partners to support the continuation of its legal and protection unit work, including



LOOKING FOR LAWYERS: Hagar's Priscilla Chan

important research documenting the experiences of children in the Cambodian criminal justice system.

Ms Kennedy said Hagar Australia had received pro bono support from a number of Australian firms. "We are having discussions with several firms about future pro bono support which is wonderful," she told the *LIJ*.

Ms Kennedy said lawyers could join the organisation's three-day legal tour in Cambodia in October. ●

CAMBODIAN LEGAL TOUR

Hagar's October tour will include visits to its programs and meeting with the women and children who have survived human rights abuse and enslavement; meeting local specialist lawyers and legal organisations who support Hagar's clients; touring a local court house with a focus on the challenges for women and children; and visiting Hagar's school and social enterprise initiatives.

Hagar CEO Kate Kennedy said a number of Australian lawyers had already signed up to participate in Hagar's three-day Cambodian legal tour in October.

"We welcome other lawyers who would be keen to attend," she said.

"We are very pleased with how well the legal community has welcomed the issues and Hagar Australia."

She said lawyers could support Hagar by volunteering to be a pro bono legal adviser for the organisation's ad hoc legal needs. "Another idea we had was for a group of lawyers to get together and have a fundraiser to support part of the salary of a Hagar worker in our legal and protection unit in Cambodia," she said.

For more information see www.hagar.org.au or email kate.kennedy@hagar.org.au