



December 23, 2009

Silk Scarves Combat Sex Trade



Listen to the Story

Morning Edition

[3 min 53 sec]

+ Add to Playlist

↓ Download

A retired priest in Nashville, Tenn., is using an online store to help keep Cambodian women out of the sex trade. Socially-minded entrepreneurs have used the Internet to help artisans from remote regions earn a living selling their wares around the world. One project that supports silk weavers is called Mekong Blue.

Transcript

RENEE MONTAGNE, host:

Our next story is about a retired Episcopal priest in Nashville who wanted to help keep Cambodian women from being drawn into the sex trade. She enlisted volunteers for an Internet venture designed to help Cambodian women earn a living by making silk scarves.

From member station WPLN, Blake Farmer has the story.

BLAKE FARMER: Some of the best known social enterprises leveraging the power of the Internet were started by savvy MBA students. Not this one.

Mr. CHARLES RIDDLE: I'm not much of a typist.

FARMER: Volunteers aren't required to be tech whizzes either.

Mr. RIDDLE: Whoops.

FARMER: Seventy-three-year-old Charles Riddle plays hunt and peck as he types shipping information for two brightly colored scarves - one lime, one berry. Riddle and his wife, Ann, have been spending their Mondays learning the ropes of e-commerce at St. David's Episcopal Church in Nashville.

Ms. ANN RIDDLE: We do a lot of volunteer work. But I mean, the volunteer work I do, I'm not sure how much I really make a difference, but I really feel like I make a difference here.

FARMER: The neatly folded scarves piled on the shelves were woven in the rural village of Stung Treng on the Mekong River. If not for the weaving jobs, the women who work there would likely be forced into prostitution.

Ms. ANN WALLING (Retired Episcopal Priest): They have no education, so they have nothing to sell but their body.

FARMER: Ann Walling is a retired Episcopal priest who linked up with a socially-conscious Cambodian woman selling silk under the label Mekong Blue. The weaving operation goes from silk worm to scarf and has grown to 40 looms and more than 100 women. Walling says the business still relies on donors like her family.

Ms. WALLING: They still do need some donations, but very close to being self-sustaining. So the answer to becoming self-sustaining is to sell more silk.

FARMER: Walling is no Web expert herself, but this grandmother helped create a distribution site for Mekong Blue called Bluesilk.org. Since launching in October, more than \$25,000 worth of scarves have been sold.

Chantha Nguon runs the looms in Cambodia and says online sales already represent more than half her business.

Ms. CHANTHA NGUON (Store Owner): The online store is our savior, to be honest.

FARMER: The weavers earn as much as \$150 a month - nearly what a Cambodian doctor makes. With the global economic downturn, fewer tourists are visiting her shops in Cambodia. Boutiques in Europe have cut their orders too. Nguon says she considered layoffs.

Ms. NGUON: We had discussed about how to cut down the expenses and maybe we have to send them back to work on the rice fields.

FARMER: Nguon's weavers spend a year in literacy training before learning the silk craft. For scarves with fine stripes, just setting up the loom takes more than two weeks. Nguon says she has a high standard for quality because she wants the women to create something with real value instead of asking people to buy junk out of charity.

Jim Schorr teaches social entrepreneurship at Vanderbilt University's business school. As a class project, his students will help draw up a marketing plan for Mekong Blue. Schorr says similar online stores like eBay's World of Good have had success appealing to consumers.

Professor JIM SCHORR (Vanderbilt University): You're seeing the Internet being used as a platform to connect the developing world with the developed world in a very important way. Certainly that's - not everyone is going to put that much thought into the products that they buy, but some are.

Ms. RIDDLE: This one's for Mary.

Mr. RIDDLE: Correct.

Ms. RIDDLE: And this one's for Laurie.

Mr. RIDDLE: For Laurie.

Ms. RIDDLE: And this one's for Kelly.

Mr. RIDDLE: For Kelly.

Ms. RIDDLE: There you go.

FARMER: Spoiler alert. If you're a female related to Joe Rotella of Cincinnati, you will probably be unwrapping a silk scarf Christmas Day. On a visit to Nashville, he picked up his order in person. Rotella says he'll gladly shell out \$50 a scarf because of who ultimately benefits on the other side of the world.

Mr. JOE ROTELLA: And it's not very painful because you walk home with a beautiful scarf.

FARMER: Or in Rotella's case, six beautiful scarves.

For NPR News, I'm Blake Farmer in Nashville.

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=121798354>