

Bernadette Glisse, Citation

In 1979 Bernadette Glisse was the lead nurse-midwife of the obstetrics unit at the University Hospital St Stevens Woluwe in Brussels, when she decided to leave her post for the Thai-Cambodian border. She joined the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to assist Cambodian refugees who had fled the Khmer Rouge and persistent war in their country. Cambodia had been in a state of turmoil since 1970 with wars, invasions and political instability, causing increasing humanitarian problems over a vast area. Bernadette stepped into this chaos, disregarding borders and political alliances. She saw human needs and set about righting them. She set up Mother and Child Health Programmes, delivering thousands of babies in a camp where about 200,000 refugees lived who were totally dependent on international aid while waiting for repatriation to Cambodia. In early 1988, three years before the planned repatriation of the camp people, Bernadette decided to go into Cambodia itself, despite the oppressive communist regime, to help the local government to provide basic health services to the people who had remained, and to get ready for the repatriation of the refugees. Together with a few organizations, Bernadette worked closely with the government to re-start basic health programmes, tackling severe malnutrition and high maternal and child mortality rates. When the repatriation was complete, Bernadette joined Médecins sans Frontières Holland-Belgium and worked in the re-launching of a referral hospital in Svay Rieng, a very remote province of South Cambodia. Mothers finally received quality health services and maternal and child mortality rates declined drastically. Encouraged by her results, Bernadette and MSF proposed to the Ministry of Health a new Mother and Child Health system for the entire country. One by one, every province received better health care and the general health and survival rates of the population increased.

In 2005, while working in the Community Health and HIV/AIDS program of Siem Reap Province, Bernadette, then working with Caritas Cambodia (the social arm of the Catholic Church in Cambodia), received a request from the Siem Reap Prison Director to assist him with the health and psychosocial needs of the nearly 2000 prisoners in his care. (Siem Reap is known widely as the gateway to the ruins of Angkor, the vast complex of intricate ruins that includes the preserved main temple

Angkor Wat.) Bernadette responded to this urgent need and involved Caritas Cambodia in this project, which soon extended to eight other Cambodian Provincial Prisons, setting up a programme of health posts in each prison.

She trained prison health staff so that they could manage and treat common diseases and also introduced the management and treatment of tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS in the prisons. Once the health component was well established, she developed a system of complete care for prisoners, all based on rights: the right to education, to movement, to information, etc. She trained all prisoners to know their rights, such as the rights to have a lawyer, to receive visits, to communicate with families, and the right to learn. Using the right to learn, Bernadette developed vocational trainings at all nine prisons to restore the inmates' self-esteem and dignity through learning, and to facilitate their re-integration into society after release. Inmates at all nine prisons now access training in literacy, computer skills, motorcycle repairs, basic electrical skills, sewing, hair dressing, beauty skills and many handicraft activities. Once a training is successfully completed, inmates obtain a certificate recognized by the Ministry of Labour and are assisted into job placement on release. Through her advocacy at the Prison Department of the Ministry of the Interior, Bernadette obtained the establishment of a policy whereby inmates who produce handicrafts or clothing keep part of the income generated from the sale of their products as savings, which are handed to them on their release from prison. These facilities are provided by Caritas, but enabled and organised by Bernadette in all nine prisons supported by Caritas Cambodia.

The provision of quality health care and education in life-skills, literacy, vocational training skills and awareness of human rights in the nine Cambodian prisons supported by Caritas Cambodia, has contributed to greater human development of inmates and has led to the prisons becoming places of healing and reconstructing of all people, with peace and in dignity.