



# CICP Commentaries

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## **The Agony of Cambodian Female Victims of Sex Trafficking and Exploitation**

By

*Sopheap Chak*

*Migration Platform Program*

*Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace*

I first became aware of prostitution in Cambodia when I was 10. On the way home from the Phnom Penh Airport, we drove down Tol Kork Street. I was puzzled to see so many ladies wearing short skirts and heavy make-up. They were standing in front of their small cottages and waving at us. It was explained to me that they were prostitutes. Yet, I became even more puzzled. Why did they choose to become prostitutes? Will I end up like them? Are there other choices?

The word for prostitute in the Cambodian language is, “Srey Khauch,” or, “Srey Phaka Meas.” The phrase indicates a bad lady who chooses to earn income by having sex with men. It does not acknowledge the vulnerability of women to sex trafficking. Yet, the reality is that given a choice, they would not become prostitutes. Events, circumstances, and conditions force women into prostitution, and I prefer to call them victims instead of prostitutes.

### **Factors that Make Women Vulnerable to Sex Trafficking and Exploitation**

In the search for economic opportunities, many migrants become victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation, labor exploitation, begging, or forced marriage. In Cambodia, many people migrate from the poorer rural areas into the cities for work. The International Organization for Migration conducted a survey of returned trafficking victims and found that 62% reported that the main reason for migration was to find jobs to help support their family. They are often exploited by co-workers, relatives, friends, or in some cases by their boyfriends, who sell them to brothel owners or other men. A survey of Cambodian sex trafficking victims in Thailand reported that 25% of victims were trafficked by a stranger, while two-thirds of the victims were trafficked by someone that they knew.

According to, “Traffick report: Cambodia,” from World Vision, other factors that contribute to

trafficking are gender discrimination, physical and sexual violence, family dysfunction, impact of HIV/AIDS, and indebtedness. The following are examples taken from the World Vision report. Their real names have been changed.

**Nary:** She came from a small village. Five armed men raped her when she was 13 years old. The shame and guilt from this attack stigmatized her, and she drifted from family to family until one family sold her to a Phnom Penh brothel. Nary was trapped there for over two years as a sex worker. She tried to escape but was caught, beaten and forced to work again. Finally, the police raided the brothel, found Nary, and placed her at World Vision's Trauma Recovery Centre. She is receiving trauma counseling plus healthcare advice. Nary is HIV positive.

**Srey:** She borrowed money from a broker to come to Phnom Penh and work as a domestic servant. One day, after she came home later than she should have, the family who had employed her threw her out. She was too afraid to tell her mother that she had lost her job, but she still owed the broker a substantial amount of money. The broker placed her into a brothel to pay off the debt to him. She was never able to do so. Srey contracted HIV and AIDS at the brothel, where she was forced to have sex with clients without protection.

**Sopheap:** Now 16, she quit school when she was in the third grade because her family needed her to work. She would scavenge for garbage to sell on the nearby Thai border. As an illegal immigrant, she was imprisoned in Thai custody many times. When a young woman flattered her beauty and told her how much she could earn working in a karaoke bar, she decided to go, without informing her parents. She did not expect that her employer would force her to have sex, or that they would not allow her to leave. She was rescued by her father. He filed a complaint against her trafficker, but the young woman who tricked her had already fled.

**Pross:** Pross was kidnapped when she was 13 and sold to a brothel in Phnom Penh. She was beaten and tortured until she agreed to have sex with customers. You can read more detail in the New York Times story by Nicholas D. Kristof, "If this isn't Slavery, What is?"

### **The Suffering of Victims of Sex Trafficking**

Girls who are forced to work as sex slaves are controlled by beatings and torture. They are electrocuted or have parts of their body cut off. In Pross' case the brothel owner gouged out her right eye with a piece of metal. Torture, fear and degradation are employed to make the girls compliant, to get them to accept their fate, and not try to escape.

Somaly Mam is a former sex slave who escaped from a brothel and who has transformed her suffering into courage to fight the evil of sex-trafficking. She founded the Somaly Mam Foundation and became the leader of AFESIP (Agir Pour les Femmes en Situation Precaire). Her story reveals much about the terror and fear of being a sex slave. When she was 15, a man posing as her grandfather sold Somaly Mam to a brothel in Phnom Penh. In an interview with Time Magazine, she described that time as a decade of horrific rape and torture. She simply said "I was dead. I had no affection for anyone."

While a smaller percentage of rescued victims can rebuild their strength on their own and assimilate back into society, the majority of girls are very traumatized by their experience. They also find it difficult to return home due to social stigma and shame. Sadly, some accept their fate in life as sex workers, with some resigned to waiting for death from HIV/AIDS.

### **Does the Current Economic Crisis make Females More Vulnerable?**

With the current economic crisis, many female workers in the Cambodian garment sector have lost their jobs. As a result, many have sought work in the entertainment business where there is a great risk of becoming entrapped in sexual exploitation and trafficking.

Singapore Reuters reported that recently, HE Mrs. Chou Bun Eng, Secretary of State for Ministry of Interior of Cambodia, in a meeting in Singapore warned that "More women and more girls will be entering the entertainment business and will face issues of sexual exploitation," A survey by The United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking (UNIAP) estimated between 15 and 20 percent of former garment workers who have lost their jobs during the global economic crisis have joined the capital's entertainment sector. According to statistics from the Ministry of Labor, more than 30,000 garment workers lost their jobs in the first three quarters of 2009, meaning that, at least 4,500 women have entered the entertainment sector this year alone. In November 2009, Mom Kunthear, a journalist with the Phnom Penh Post reported that an additional 30,000 garment worker jobs have been suspended.

### **Hope and Motivation from Anti-sex Trafficking Activists**

The only hope for the reduction of sex trafficking comes from the anti-sex trafficking activists and the government. Under the leadership of Somaly Mam, AFESIP employs a holistic approach that ensures victims not only escape their plight but provide therapy and education so that they have the emotional and economic strength to face the future with hope.

She launched the Somaly Mam Foundation in 2007. It is a funding vehicle to support anti-trafficking organizations and provides victims and survivors with a platform from which their voices can be heard around the world. She has earned much respect, recognition, and accolades because of her efforts, including being honored as one of Time Magazine's 100 Most Influential People of 2009, being featured as a CNN Hero, and being the recipient of the Prince of Asturias Award for International Cooperation, The World's Children's Prize for the Rights of the Child (WCPRC), Glamour Magazine's 2006 Woman of the Year Award, and accolades from the US Department of Homeland Security.

However, her efforts have resulted in death threats to herself and her family. Even worst, in 2006, her 14-year-old daughter was kidnapped by brothel owners, who drugged and raped her. This has not stopped Somaly Mam, but motivated her even more. Once, when asked why she continued to fight in the face of such fierce and frightening opposition, she resolutely responded, "I don't want to go without leaving a trace."

She established a model for addressing the sex-trafficking issue and has already helped more than 4,000 women escape the brothels. In turn, some of them have also become activists fighting against sex trafficking.

Sex trafficking in Cambodia is against the law. The government of Cambodia must enforce the law and arrest sex-traffickers. They have raided many brothels and prosecuted many sex-trafficking cases. The government should also monitor sex trafficking and make an effort to minimize the conditions which make women vulnerable. In response to the economic crisis, the Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training has plans to create regional job centers aimed to provide vocational training for unemployed workers. It was reported that one job center has already opened in Phnom Penh, and six more are expected to be opened by the end of 2010. This effort by the government is an excellent effort by the government to help people that are vulnerable to sex-trafficking. Never the less, the government needs to drastically increase its law enforcement efforts.