

## **Unlikely Alliances and the Sex Trafficking Industry of Cambodia**

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### **Abstract**

*Within the past decade, intervention on behalf of the United States to end sex trafficking has increased due to the advocacy efforts of a seemingly unlikely alliance between abolitionist feminists and evangelical Christians. Developing a cross-disciplinary case study of Cambodia, this project examines a variety of factors that shape the vulnerability of victims and processes of trafficking in Cambodia; the major players involved in the anti-trafficking campaign and their respective motives; and implications of U.S. intervention for Khmer people today. This study concludes that activists must be culturally sensitive to victims and/or sex workers in order to generate and implement effective intervention efforts.*

Following the events of September 11, 2001, the issue of sex trafficking has notably surfaced in the media and the political arena. Television episodes such as *Dateline's* "Children for Sale" depict disturbing footage of a young Cambodian girl offering "yum yum" or oral sex to a male English-speaking customer (Soderlund, 2005). According to Sandy (2007), such media coverage has triggered passionate campaigns among prominent non-governmental agencies (NGOs) and stirred heated public debates in regards to what actions should be taken.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, US intervention in the sex trafficking industry has also increased. The United States has positioned itself as a significant force in the anti-trafficking arena, with the Department of Justice spending an average of \$100 million each year to

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<sup>1</sup> Denton (2010) conducted a content analysis of 191 human trafficking incidents that were covered by the media. The intent of her study is to provide a greater understanding of the actors involved, as well as the role of the media in the anti-trafficking campaign.

combat trafficking domestically and internationally (Soderlund, 2005). This monetary commitment surpasses any other country's contribution to anti-trafficking. It is worth noting that the Bush Administration pledged to fight sex trafficking on a global scale in the midst of economic and political unrest on its own soil. During this time, the US waged wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, while troubling evidence began to emerge of an impending economic crisis in the US.

While the United States has thus become an important player in the fight against sex trafficking, feminists have been discussing the issues surrounding sex trafficking for decades. Soderlund (2005) explains the heightened attention to sex trafficking as the product of an "unlikely alliance" between two groups who often take opposing sides on social issues: abolitionist feminists and right-wing Christians. Their common ground in this instance is a commitment to end prostitution and sex trafficking. By working together they have successfully lobbied Congress, influenced legislation, and increased public awareness of sex trafficking issues. Nonetheless, differences exist within and between the groups – especially regarding whether and how to support the sex workers – and these divisions add to the overall complexity of the issues.

Gaining even a basic understanding of the sex trafficking industry can be a complex task due to the industry's underground nature and wide scope. For one, it is difficult to estimate the size of the industry due to the lack of comparative data between countries in indicating the severity of the problem (Kangaspunta, 2010). The Future Group, an organization committed to improving the health and well-being of all people globally, estimates that there are 40,000 to 100,000 prostitutes in Cambodia, while others estimate 300,000 to 500,000 (Batstone, 2007; Blackburn, Taylor & Davis, 2010; Chuang, 2006; Kangaspunta, 2010; Smith and Mattar, 2004; Yen, 2008). Estimates of the profits generated by the industry vary from millions to even billions of dollars (Blackburn, Taylor & Davis, 2010). These points illustrate the magnitude of the problem. Furthermore, major players involved in the anti-trafficking

campaign disagree on definitions relating to the industry (David, 2010; Outshoorn, 2005). Article III of the 2000 UN Protocol against Trafficking in Persons includes the following definition:

“Trafficking in Persons” shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. (David, 2010)

This definition does not consolidate the wide array of classifications relating to sex trafficking as major actors still disagree on many terms within the definition itself. For instance, what are coercion, servitude and forced labor? This dispute has consequently made it challenging to implement appropriate policies to combat sex trafficking (David, 2010).

This paper has two aims: First, it will outline the unlikely alliance between abolitionist feminists and evangelical Christians in their anti-trafficking efforts. Although these groups often disagree on social issues, many have recognized the strategic advantages of uniting in the fight against human trafficking. Second, this paper focuses on the sex trafficking industry in Cambodia. Using historical background, feminist theory, international relations concepts, and socio-cultural analysis, this study attempts to answer the following questions: (1) Who are the major actors intervening in the sex trafficking industry of Cambodia and what are their motives? How have they been successful at drawing attention to the issue? (2) What factors contribute to the vulnerability of victims and processes of trafficking in Cambodia? (3) What are the implications of US intervention for the Khmer people today?

Cambodia’s sex trafficking industry is arguably one of the worst cases in the world. Here, children as young as ten years old are forced to work in the brothels of the Svay Pak district near the capital of Phnom Pehn. In a comparative study between the sex trafficking industry of Cambodia and

Thailand, Blackburn, Taylor & Davis (2010) suggest that it is easier to find prostitutes under the age of sixteen in Cambodia than Thailand. Home of the UNESCO World Heritage site Angkor Wat and the Temple of Preah Vihear, Cambodia has a rich yet troubling history. According to Cambodian scholars, Angkor was the greatest city in the world during the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Today, Cambodia is the poorest nation in Southeast Asia after Burma (Central Intelligence Agency, 2011). From 1975 to 1979, the Khmer people (the predominant people group in Cambodia) were victims of a mass genocide when a communist faction came into power. During this three and a half year reign of the Khmer Rouge, an estimated two million Cambodians— equivalent to one fourth of the population – were killed at the hands of the regime (Brinkley, 2011). Today, the Khmer people are still scarred by their horrific history while the country continues to be plagued by poverty and corruption.

Sex trafficking is currently a major exploitation mechanism affecting young children and women in and beyond Cambodia. Case study research is needed to shed light on the complexity of the issue before any costly recommendations can be made. A key dilemma for analyzing the issue is whether, and how, interventions are effective. For example, evidence suggests that “rescues” may be counter-productive. In reference to the brothel raid conducted by MSNBC/International Justice Mission in 2004 that was televised on *Dateline’s* “Children for Sale,” six out of the thirty-seven rescued child prostitutes ran back to the brothels in Svay Pak. According to an interview by journalist Maggie Jones with a shelter manager, at least 40% of the young adolescent and women would return to work in the red light district shortly after their rescue (Soderlund, 2005). Soderlund (2005) suggests that this can be attributed to the post-rescue conditions of the shelter, something that is rarely discussed or televised. For instance, while some victims see the raids as an opportunity to escape from the sex trafficking industry, some see the rehabilitation process itself as a form of imprisonment as they are forced to learn new skills, like sewing and jewelry making. Soderlund (2005) therefore argues that scholars must investigate the premises underlying claims about global sex trafficking, as well as efforts to “free” sex workers justified by these

claims. This paper will also identify the actors responsible for such underlying claims and will examine their motives and strategies for success.

### **Transnational Activists: Motives and Strategies for Success**

Abolitionist feminists and conservative Christians have formed an “unlikely alliance” in the fight to combat prostitution and sex trafficking (Hertzke, 2004). Although these two groups disagree on other social issues such as gay marriage or abortion, their common stance condemning prostitution has strengthened the partnership (Weitzer, 2007). Some feminists and Christians have recognized the strategic advantages of being a bi-partisan coalition with a united front. Laura Lederer, founder of the anti-rape movement and author of *Take Back the Night*, states that “having faith-based groups come in with a fresh perspective and a biblical mandate has made a big difference” because abolitionist feminists would otherwise receive international attention (Weitzer, 2007, p. 450). This coalition was extremely successful in persuading the conservative Bush administration to enact policies relating to anti-trafficking and human rights (Hertke, 2004). Soderlund (2005) claims that since 9/11, members of this coalition have climbed “to the top of the anti-trafficking milieu, gained control of most federal anti-trafficking funds, and become the most prominent media and policy spokespeople on the topic” (p. 68). The following section will highlight literature on the evolution of intervention in the sex trafficking industry by feminists and evangelical Christians, as well as the internal and external conflicts these two actors face by arguably overstepping their respective boundaries.

### *The internal struggles among feminists*

At the end of the nineteenth century, Europe and North America witnessed dramatic industrialization, urbanization and migration. Outshoorn (2005) discusses growing suspicions in the 1880s about “white-slavery,” or the recruitment of white women into sexual slavery, and their link to mounting fears over the proliferation of prostitution and trafficking (p. 142). People’s anxieties lessened when an international law was passed in 1904 that outlawed the trafficking of women. Later in 1949, the United Nations International Convention for the Suppression of Traffic in Persons called on all states to suppress trafficking as well as prostitution (Outshoorn, 2005), but failed to be implemented fully as prostitution faded from the public eye due to a lack of enforcement.

This issue reemerged in the 1970s due to the rise in global tourism and overall progress toward modernization. As societies became more accepting of pre-marital sexual relationships, the issue of prostitution and sex trafficking returned to political agendas (Outshoorn, 2005). In addition, the AIDS epidemics in the 1980s “gave further fuel for societal worries about the health hazards of sex—[which] also reinforced the need for prostitution and trafficking to be on the political agenda for these states” (Outshoorn, 2005, p. 143). Feminists became major actors in the fight to end sex trafficking starting in the 1990s by introducing topics relating to women’s rights into the international political arena (Soderlund, 2005). Feminist activists first sought to bring the issue of violence against women into traditional human rights doctrine. While some feminists genuinely believed that physical acts of violence against women were one of the biggest concerns relating to human rights of the twentieth century, others envisioned a victory as an opportunity to gain recognition and respect from other international organizations (Soderlund, 2005). They started influencing major transnational bodies and conferences by shaping the priorities of the United Nations, dominating the 1993 Vienna World Conference on

Human Rights, the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women and by demanding attention to end violence against women.

As the trafficking debate continues, it is important to note the division among feminists that has emerged and continues to separate them today. Outshoorn (2005) notes that the two waves of feminism have divergent understandings of what prostitution is and how it relates to the trafficking of women. The first wave emerging in the last half of the nineteenth century had the goal of ending all state-regulated brothels. Also known as the “older abolitionist position,” these feminists promoted the use of state power to eradicate all practices relating to prostitution, as well as to help women escape prostitution (Outshoorn, 2005). The second wave consisted of two opposing positions: the sexual domination perspective and the pro-rights or sex work approach (Augustin, 2007; Ditmore, Levy & Wilman, 2010). While the former regards all prostitution as oppression of women or as an act of violence, the latter sees sex work as a possible option or survival strategy taken by women, which should be respected (Outshoorn, 2005). Above all, the perspective of each camp constructs the lens through which migration of women in sex work is viewed.

The two waves of feminism perceive male and female sexuality differently in terms of its relationship to trafficking. Outshoorn (2005) suggests strong resemblances between the older abolitionist position and the sexual domination perspective. For instance, the older abolitionist position believes that male sexuality is a problem as it is fundamentally linked to violence and domination. Similarly, the sexual domination discourse acknowledges male sexuality as “a given but also as a natural and potentially dangerous trait that needs to be controlled” (Outshoorn, 2005, p. 146). So while the abolitionist and domination viewpoint take male sexuality as a given but deny the presence of active female sexuality, the pro-rights or sex work approach believe in the presence of male and female sexuality (Outshoorn, 2005). Furthermore, the divergence among second wave feminists is evident in

how they view the role of migration and trafficking in the sex work industry. From the sexual domination discourse, forced sex trafficking is worthy of political intervention because the trafficking of migrant women is always against their will and prostitution is the cause of trafficking (Soderlund, 2005; Outshoorn, 2005). The sex work position takes gender out of the issue by arguing that “trafficking for the sex industry is no different than coercing people into forced labor or slavery” (Outshoorn, 2005, p. 417). More importantly, it is how feminists from each respective camp collaborate with or against one another that shapes the politics of anti-prostitution and anti-sex trafficking efforts.

Two major transnational alliances have developed in response to the opposing feminist camps. First, the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) supports the sexual domination discourse and is opposed to any kind of legalization of prostitution (Outshoorn, 2005). Along with other abolitionists, the CATW is now in an alliance with the International Human Rights Network which “[insists] on including the end purpose of trafficking as prostitution or sexual exploitation” (p. 150). Second, the Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women (GAATW) allied with the International Committee for Prostitutes’ Rights (ICP) to promote distinctions between coerced and voluntary prostitution. According to Outshoorn (2005), the GAATW is committed to working for the prostitutes’ rights movement and improving the position of sex workers. These transnational alliances lobby for legislation that will advance their goals. The resulting conflict of interest between groups complicates how policies are enacted to deal with prostitution and sex trafficking.

### *The external struggles of evangelical Christians*

It is worth tracing how evangelical Christians have become powerful in the sex trafficking debate. According to some scholars, evangelical Christians “seized control on the issue of sex slavery in the late 1990s in a self-conscious effort to expand their base and political power through the vehicle of



human rights” (Soderlund, 2005, p. 68). They saw it as an opportunity to build the ministry internationally, attract new believers and extend their political reach. Saunders (2004) suggests that evangelical Christians were initially approached in 2002 by HIV/AIDS advocates who sought funding for their projects. These AIDS activists chose religious organizations which in turn were able to influence the conservative Bush administration. Since then, intervention in the sex trafficking industry by faith-based groups has been criticized for using HIV/AIDS funds to impose their Christian morality on others by heavily influencing anti-trafficking legislation (Pearshouse, 2008).

For Hertzke (2004), intervening in the sex trafficking industry as advocates for justice and human dignity is the religious calling of Christians. He refers to sex trafficking as the “dark voids” of human rights protection, and believes Christians must continue “going forth” in “freeing God’s children.” Hertzke (2004) claims that along with politicians, religious and feminist activists have a genuine commitment and passion for human rights. As “passionate social movement mobilization” can alter the calculus of politics, their international humanitarian effort serves as a bridge between evangelicals and the community at large (p. 337). Hertzke also justifies intervention by pointing to the blurry definition of coerced prostitution versus voluntary prostitution. In affirming the rights of women to be sex workers, one should question the validity of the sexual consent a woman may give while in a vulnerable state. Therefore, Hertzke (2004) suggests that most women would not choose to be sex workers if they had other viable options. In this case, he contests the sex work approach in order to give legitimacy to actions taken by Christians.

Faith-based groups have been criticized for imposing their Christian ideology of procreative sex within marriages as a response to the sex trafficking issues. This ideology involves curtailing reproductive rights, ending condom distribution programs and rigorously opposing prostitution. For example, Saunders (2004) highlights how Christians have amended the 2003 Global AIDS Act to advance

extremely conservative views on sexuality. She notes that the Pro-Life Caucus amended the house bill to restrict the global funds for AIDS, giving priorities to programs promoting:

“abstinence until marriage” education as a part of HIV prevention; providing a "conscience clause" that allowed "faith-based groups" to choose not to distribute condoms at all and still be eligible for HIV prevention funding; analyzing the "impact that condom use has had on the spread of Human Papilloma Virus (HPV); and prohibiting organizations that do not have a policy "explicitly opposing prostitution and sex trafficking" from receiving any funding made available under the law. (p. 182)

The final bill contained all the aforementioned “anti-condom amendments” and may foreshadow future US HIV prevention practices. Lastly, Saunders (2004) concludes that the fallacy of the conservative logic is that only "sexual restraint, purity, and reproductive heterosexual monogamy" are worthy of life-saving services. She reprimands evangelical Christians for endangering HIV prevention programs by imposing their morality on others.

### *Strategies and rhetoric of the anti-sex trafficking campaign*

Abolitionist feminists and evangelical Christians have been successful at drawing attention to sex trafficking because of their effective strategies and usage of rhetoric. First, abolitionist feminists have incorporated the term “abolition” within their name to stress the urgency of the problem. This term began in the Civil War era when historical abolitionists fought to end slavery, and was also used in progressive era campaigns to end prostitution. Soderlund (2005) states that “central to such rhetoric is the construction of captivity and freedom as diametrically opposed states of existence” and argues that the “War Against Trafficking” gave a “human face” to the war on terrorism for the Bush Administration. Scholars have suggested that these excessive efforts directed by the US, in combination with its superpower status, are an American initiative to introduce policing in other countries. This includes

forcing “other countries to allow its [American] citizens to raid brothels and send prostitutes into rehabilitation programs as well as to create domestic legislation that further criminalizes sex trafficking” (Soderlund, 2005, p.76).

Two other theories have been proposed by Weitzer (2007) and Aradau (2004) which explain the construction of the sex trafficking issues by abolitionist feminists and evangelical Christians. Weitzer (2007) criticizes the social constructionist perspective, where social conditions only become problematic as a result of claims-making by interested parties, and such claims may or may not reflect actual social arrangements. He states that moral crusaders, such as abolitionist feminists and evangelical Christians, are responsible for turning such conditions into “problems” (Weitzer, 2007). In particular, the alliance between feminists and right-wing Christians has been extremely successful because they are able to effectively lobby legislation and create widespread public concern. Again, while abolitionist feminists see prostitution as “an institution of male dominance and exploitation of women,” Christians see prostitution as “sexual deviance, a cause of moral decay, and a threat to marriage” (Weitzer, 2007, p. 451). Nonetheless, Weitzer (2007) believes there are flaws in this construction. Since moral crusaders often consider the issue of sex trafficking to be unambiguous, they may often ignore counterevidence and only present the extreme cases and horror stories.

Second, Aradau (2004) articulates the difference between the “politics of pity” and the “politics of risk.” She states that the “politics of pity” are used to promote an identification and sympathy for the victims and their situation. This is achieved by directly focusing on the physical pain and suffering caused by trafficking, as well as by drawing attention to the perpetrators of the violence. On the other hand, the “politics of risk” provide scientific explanation of the victims’ vulnerability” (Aradau, 2004). Women involved in the sex trafficking industry are defined as a group “at risk” because they may be the roots of future illegal migration issues for Western society. Therefore, for the sake of risk management, efforts

must be taken to contain this risk. Lastly, Aradau (2004) argues that “risk management becomes the insidious, disavowed presence within the humanitarian discourse that infuses and subverts the politics of pity” (p. 276). In sum, the work of Soderlund (2005), Weitzer (2007) and Aradau (2004) illuminates the rhetoric and strategies used by abolitionist feminists and evangelical Christians to promote their goal of ending prostitution and sex trafficking.

### **Factors of Vulnerability: Historical, Political and Social Dilemmas in Cambodia**

Examining Cambodia’s troubled history may shed light on the evolution of its current political and social dilemmas. Cambodia was a dominant regional power at the beginning of the ninth century with a population of one million and a land area twice the size of present-day Los Angeles (Brinkley, 2011, p. 17-18). The government was highly regarded for building roads, bridges, and irrigation canals for the rice farmers. At the same time, practices of exploitation also emerged as King Indravaman III, like the kings who ruled before and after him, “conscripted immense slave workforce to build temples and monuments to his gods” and often sold positions in his government” (Brinkley, 2011, p. 18). In fact, Angkor Wat – the largest religious building in the world – was a product of slave labor. The Angkor Empire began to decline at the turn of the fiftieth century as the city became too populated. Cambodia’s neighbors – Thailand to the west and Vietnam to the east – quickly took advantage of the situation and took over part of the country. In 1863, King Norodom introduced Western forces to Cambodia by signing a treaty with France, offering timber and mining rights in exchange for protection from Cambodia’s neighbors (Brinkley, 2011). The harmonious alliance lasted a few years, but the protectorate relationship deteriorated when the French levied steep taxes and demanded King Norodom make governmental changes. In 1935, the French built a school aimed at educating the royal family and elites in Phnom

Pehn, and a few dozen talented students were even sent to be educated in France. One of these students was Saloth Sar (better known as Pol Pot), the future leader of the Khmer Rouge.

After years of political unrest, the communist Democratic Kampuchea (DK) took control of Cambodia on April 17, 1975. The regime was more popularly referred to as the “Khmer Rouge,” meaning “Red Khmer” in French. The leaders of this regime sought to return Cambodia to “year zero,” where “money, markets, formal education, Buddhism, books, private property, diverse clothing styles, and freedom of movement” were abolished (Chandler, 2008). The DK regime was committed to doing whatever it took to promote its agenda, including forcing people out of their homes into work camps. Within four years Pol Pot and the DK killed an estimated two million Cambodians, including 80% of all teachers and 95% of all doctors (Brinkley, 2011; Chandler, 2008). According to the Khmer historian David Chandler (2008), the number of regime-related deaths in Cambodia is one of the highest recorded in world history if considered on a per capita basis. The Vietnamese would eventually rescue Cambodia by forcing the DK out of power on January 7, 1979. Yet the relief was short lived as Cambodians would face internal and external political conflict for the next decade.

Political and social unrest afflicted Cambodia as multiple domestic factions sought for power. The United Nations intervened in 1992 and helped Cambodia establish a constitution and a democracy. While the UN operation was successful in promoting democratic elections, it also brought other issues. As many have noted, international peacekeeping operations too often fuel booms in local prostitution (Farr, 2005). This can be explained through a term called congregational prostitution, which posits a relationship between demands for prostitution and the number of men congregating away from their families (whether for military or other reasons). Data indicates that “the number of girls and women working in prostitution in Cambodia grew from estimated 1,500 in 1990 to 20,000 in 1993” (Farr, 2005). This is arguably the beginning of the sex trafficking problem in Cambodia.

Today, Cambodia is significantly underdeveloped compared to its neighbors. At least 80% of the 13.4 million Cambodians live in rural areas where access to education, clean water, and proper nutrition is problematic. Most children will leave school by the second or third grade to help their parents with farming (Brinkley, 2011). Moreover, work by psychiatrists has shown that more than half of the Khmer Rouge survivors living in Cambodia have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which often leads to intense and sometimes violent outbursts against family members. Even more alarming, Cambodia is the only case in the world where PTSD has been shown to be passed down to a second generation (Brinkley, 2011). These points clearly illustrate a historic pattern of Khmer suffering at the hands of nefarious leaders. Respecting the human rights of their people has never been a priority of Khmer leaders.

Sex trafficking is a major issue among many others in the political and social instability of present-day Cambodia. Sandy (2007) suggests that a relationship exists between the country's political-social infrastructure and the likelihood of women choosing to stay in the sex trade. Potential factors include the high level of poverty, lack of employment opportunities for women, and increasing familial responsibilities. Some researchers theorize that sex trafficking, like other economic matters, can be explained by a supply and demand model. Two elements play a role in this: push factors relating to the home country and pull factors relating to the destination country. While push factors include poverty, unemployment, economic and/or political instability, government corruption, pull factors include the demand for commercial sex and cheap labor, restrictive immigration policies, and existence of legal avenues for sex work (Gajic-Veljanoski, 2007).

Most NGOs are aware of Cambodia's corruption but continue to provide aid and remain at work in the country. As Phnom Penh continues to grow, it adopts more Western characteristics. NGO workers are thus more inclined to stay but to do so they must secure grants and funding from their home countries. The on-flow of aid donations to the Cambodian government encourages them to continue

pursuing corruption and pocketing side money. At the same time most NGOs have overlapping goals and do not communicate effectively, which leads Brinkley (2011) to question the effectiveness of so many working organizations within such a small country. In other words, political dilemmas are contributing factors to the vulnerability of sex trafficked victims in Cambodia.

Equally important are social and cultural values. Cambodia is often viewed as a patriarchal society where women's rights are ignored, and many women are victims of domestic violence (Ostberg, 2010; Eng, Li, Mulsow & Fischer, 2010). The traditional Cambodian proverb "men are like gold, women are like cloth" illustrates the perception of women as the second, lesser gender. Similarly, the Chbap Srei (Code for Women) is a primary example of traditional literature that describes a woman's role in the home. This set of normative poems incorporates Buddhist principles to serve as a guideline for appropriate and inappropriate behaviors for women (Brickell, 2011). The text was part of a required curriculum in school for young girls until 2007, while also heavily embedded through socialization. One section of the Chbap Srei "instructed [women] to move around the house quietly, be polite, avoid vulgarity, and be careful to preserve the dignity and feelings of her husband despite any indiscretion on his part" (Brickell, 2011, p. 438). The role of the Chbap Srei in people's perception of womanhood is changing as Cambodia modernizes and women gain more mobility and access to education. But such embedded cultural values may help explain why sex trafficking is so prevalent in Cambodia, since women have long been perceived as second to men.

Brickell and Chant (2010) identify altruistic load as a rationale for some young adolescents' and women's agreement to enter or stay in the sex trafficking industry. Being a good daughter is an important cultural value to the Khmer. This includes alleviating one's mother's suffering and improving one's family's financial situation. Therefore, some young girls agree to let their families sell them into prostitution knowing that it will ensure their families' survival. Similarly, widowed women with children

may also choose to work in the sex trafficking industry for the sake of economic survival. However, Brickell and Chant (2010) found that “women’s promotion of [the] children’s interests over their own tends to owe largely to circumstances borne out of necessity rather than out of adherence to tradition that emphasize the importance of female altruism” (p. 151). Given these points, they suggest that cultural values relating to economic and socio-cultural altruism may be factors of the vulnerability of victims in Cambodia.

By the same token, cultural myths relating to sexuality exist within the Khmer culture and may perpetuate demands for prostitutes. Freed (2003) writes that men are believed to have “limitless” sexual urges, and that sexual experiences outside the home are frequently viewed as acceptable. While it may be threatening for a man to form an emotional bond to a woman, visiting a brothel is socially acceptable. Furthermore, some men believe that engaging in sexual intercourse with younger girls can boost their virility and health. Blackburn, Taylor, and Davis (2010) suggest that this is based on the underlying assumption that younger girls are less likely to be infected by STDs. An even more absurd myth is that having sex with a virgin can cure one of HIV/AIDS (Molland, 2011). In a society where arranged marriages are common, a Cambodian woman is expected to remain a virgin until she is married. As quoted in Molland (2011), virginity is then a symbol of exclusiveness and inaccessibility, or something that is elite. A virgin is an elite female among females, withheld, untouched, exclusive. Most men are willing to pay high prices for a virgin, with figures ranging from \$300 to \$700, and even to thousands of dollars. It is disheartening that younger girls, sometimes as young as five years old, are recruited or tricked into sex trafficking as the demand for virgins increase.

Lastly, the dominant religion of Theravada Buddhism in Cambodia also complicates the victims’ internal worldviews. Some of the beliefs promote an acceptance of pre-destined fate and Karma. If people find themselves in a bad place, it is assumed that they committed some kind of offense in their



past lives (Freed, 2003). As a result, some victims of trafficking have come to accept their current situation in the brothels of Svay Pak to be a form of religious punishment. All of these points illustrate how Cambodia's history, economic, current socio-political and cultural conditions shape current sex trafficking practices.

### **Intervention in Cambodia's Sex Industry**

U.S. intervention in the sex trafficking industry of Cambodia has various implications for Khmers. With other international bodies, the U.S. pressures the Cambodian government in several ways. For instance, the U.S. Department of State publishes an annual assessment of human trafficking called the Trafficking in Persons Report. There are three levels of classification in which each country may fall depending on their anti-human trafficking efforts: Tier 1 are those in compliance with US recommendations, Tier 2 "are borderline cases;" and Tier 3 are deemed "failed efforts" (Soderlund, 2005). Designations from the annual report affect the amount of funding a country is eligible to receive, hence it is to Cambodia's advantage to comply with U.S. recommendations and enforce appropriate policies.

According to Pearshouse (2008), sex trafficking legislation such as Cambodia's Law on the Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation has hindered HIV prevention programs. This law promoted a "wide crackdown on brothels and street-based sex workers" that had a negative outcome because more sex workers "fear[ed] that condoms may be considered evidence of a crime" (p. 21). Pearshouse (2008) cites a testimony from an interview with a sex worker: "When the police come, I run down into a hole, and sometimes I climb up a tree, not daring to bring a condom along because if the police find it, they will accuse me to prostitution and disorder." Furthermore, sex workers began working in locations outside of brothels, such as the streets or bars, to avoid the police. In the end, this

has made it more difficult for NGOs to reach out to sex workers in order to provide critical HIV prevention services (Pearshouse, 2008).

Various proposals to address sex trafficking are under consideration. The composite human trafficking severity index suggested by Kangaspunta (2010) would shed light on the underground nature of the industry by establishing comparable data between countries. This project would involve collecting data from various fields and agencies to address the “interdisciplinary nature of human trafficking” and “make it possible to evaluate the vulnerabilities; the social, economic, and cultural causes; as well as the impacts related to human trafficking” (p. 263). However, this composite system may take several years to develop as various statistical methods must be tested.

Another solution proposed by Yen (2008) tackles men’s demand for sexual services by developing educational programs aiming to change their attitudes towards prostitution and sex trafficking. This is also known as “schooling the Johns.” Yen (2008) insists that “as rational persons, Johns will make different decisions if they learn that the financial, legal, and health costs of their actions outweigh the momentary physical benefit they gain from prostitution” (p. 683). He suggests that the United States should follow in Sweden’s footsteps of banning prostitution and casting a national campaign to raise public awareness (p. 685). Although Yen’s proposal addresses the demand side of prostitution and sex trafficking, it is uncertain whether such educational programs would be viable and/or effective, especially in countries such as Cambodia, where getting men to participate would present a challenge in itself. In a traditionally patriarchal society where women are regarded as the lesser gender, it is particularly difficult to change or reverse such historically ingrained cultural values.

Importantly, faith-based groups, NGOs and non-profit organizations working to end sex trafficking should be committed to culturally-sensitive policies. A good starting point would be the evaluation of the effectiveness of current strategies and guiding principles. Future researchers must

investigate what victims and sex workers would prefer as “help” and support their rights in part by listening to their voices. With this in mind, directors and workers of such organizations should possess relevant background knowledge on Cambodia, such as its history and evolution, economic issues, political climate and socio-cultural infrastructure, in order to generate a more informed and culturally sensitive plan of action. These organizations can then develop partnerships with other organizations by sharing critical information with one another and ultimately establishing a collaborative coalition.

The sex trafficking of young adolescent and women worldwide is the quintessential human rights violation of the twenty-first century. While there are no answers or quick solutions, it is important that transnational activists involved in anti-sex trafficking campaigns continue working toward policies that alleviate suffering and violence. As the problem continues to spread on a local and global level, younger victims are often targeted. Research relating to the issues must continue in order to decode its complexity. One research project might be to investigate the evolution of sexuality and power in Cambodia and more specifically, how gender relations have developed in Khmer culture.<sup>2</sup> Another project might be a comparative analysis of countries with legalized prostitution versus countries where sex work is condemned. This policy analysis could inform the relationship between the legalization of prostitution and its subsequent effects on sex trafficking practices. Overall, researchers and activists must sustain international respect and support for human rights.

## References

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<sup>2</sup> Trudy Jacobsen’s *Lost Goddesses: The Denial of Female Power in Cambodian History* published in 2008 provides a good model for such research.

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