# SEX TRAFFICKING IN CAMBODIA AS A COMPLEX HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the history of humanitarian interventions that focus on prostitution and sex trafficking in Cambodia. It contends that Western influence in Cambodia both helped to create and now extend the problem, creating what the paper defines as a complex humanitarian emergency. The paper outlines the historical roots of the influence and then examines the ongoing humanitarian response, highlighting areas in which this response has maintained or exacerbated the emergency. It also addresses in a brief outline the implications for international social work practice.

Cambodia's recent history is devastating. In the four years that the Khmer Rouge held power in the country (1975-79), an estimated two million Cambodians were killed in what many consider a genocide (CGC 2010). The reign of the Khmer Rouge ended with the Vietnamese invasion and subsequent occupation of the country for more than a decade. During that time international intervention was precluded by Cold War politics. After the end of the Cold War, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) was deployed to the capital city, Phnom Penh, in 1992. UNTAC aimed to create a peace agreement among warring UNTAC factions and reconstruct the Cambodian government (Widyono 2008).

Cambodian intervention thus took place during an era of the "complex humanitarian emergency," which evolved in the wake of the Cold War and became the lens through which most humanitarian crises were evaluated (Hyndman 2004). Whereas humanitarian emergencies had been seen as caused by a natural disaster, or an evil regime, the complex humanitarian emergency was defined as a crisis rooted in various causes, by various players, necessitating urgent international response. For the purposes of this

analysis, humanitarianism will refer not only to post-war aid for which it is widely known, but also for the subsequent on-going ethical imperative to reduce suffering (Calhoun 2008).

This paper contends that Western influences, specifically UNTAC's involvement in the creation of an environment conducive to sex work, played a profoundly influential role in the social construction of sex trafficking in Cambodia as a complex humanitarian emergency. It will explore the subsequent humanitarian response and its role in the international construction of sex trafficking as a locally caused social problem, highlighting areas in which this response has maintained or exacerbated the emergency, and close by considering the implications for international social work practice.

## WESTERN ROOTS OF THE CAMBODIAN CRISIS

Documentation suggests forced prostitution grew during Cambodia's status as a French protectorate. While prostitution was never formally condoned, the only period in which it was successfully banned was during the Khmer Rouge dictatorship (Derks 2008). It is of note, however, that the entry of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) marked a boon for the sex industry: the supply of Western troops seeking services greatly increased demand (Widyono 2008). In response to local complaints to the growth of prostitution, the UNTAC director suggested he had neither control nor responsibility for the behavior of his "hot-blooded young men" (Economic and Political Weekly 1992). The sex industry grew so substantially following the entrance of the UNTAC troops that when Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen was asked what UNTAC's legacy would be, he replied, "AIDS" (Richburg 1998).

It has been argued that this new consumer base, together with long-standing patriarchal cultural norms, provided prostitution in Cambodia the ideal environment in which to expand. Importantly, the notion of Cambodian men's broad acceptance of prostitution and the silent opposition among Cambodian women are thought to be deeply entwined within cultural gender norms, factors that are blamed for the maintenance of the sex industry beyond UNTAC's exit (Samarasinghe 2008).

By contrast, other scholars contend that Western politics—the politics embedded within many of the parties which comprise the UN—create an environment which could foster the sexual abuse of women by habitually defining elite groups (e.g., men) who demand obedience from weaker groups (e.g., women) (Nordstrom 2004). The United Nations' reconstruction efforts have a history of accommodating women only to

the extent that their generic intervention mandate allows. As a result, new policies fail to protect the women they profess to serve (Hyndman 2004). Citing her experience in Bosnia, journalist Lesley Abdela (2003) sharply refutes the notion of the discretely local construction of patriarchy in a transitional society, contending that the United Nations continually fails to include or consider women in the reconstruction of war-ravaged humanitarian sites. An oversight at best, an intentional imposition of chauvinism at worst, she suggests that the exclusion of women in reconstruction efforts systematically establishes, through the institution of new infrastructure and legal systems, an environment of gendered power differentials. With direct reference to Abdela's contention, Aoláin (2009, 1061) elaborates: "While the international presence is lauded for rescuing such societies from the worst of their own excesses, what is little appreciated is that such men also bring with them varying aspects of gender norms and patriarchal behavior that transpose into the vacuum they fill."

Accordingly, UNTAC did not include women in the formation of Cambodia's reconstruction. When UNTAC tried to encourage Cambodian women to vote in a new, male-dominated system, the women felt a common sentiment that "the UN may have had good ideas about women's participation in politics, but it did not practice what it preached" (Whitworth 2004, 71). UNTAC workers themselves noted the animosity directed at their efforts, citing Cambodian men's fury regarding troops' sexual assault of Cambodian women, and the men's exasperation that the perpetrators were not held accountable (Widyono 2008). That Cambodian men consistently and angrily objected to the exploitation of local women indicates that forced prostitution may not have been a culturally condoned phenomenon prior to UNTAC involvement.

## THE EVENTUAL OUTCRY

The internationally based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that followed UNTAC's presence initiated the outcry against the plight of sex workers in Cambodia. To their international counterparts, NGOs framed the issue in part by claiming that the emerging Cambodian government was too weak to address the problem. They then pressured international agencies to intervene (HRTFC 1996). Since cultural willingness is key to initiating social change (Nelson 1987), the paternalistic, uncooperative tone with which international groups highlighted the issue proved an immediate barrier to Cambodian society's acceptance of forced prostitution as a social problem. Thus, with the world's eyes now on a previously devastated and isolated country, the international outcry over what Westerners labeled "sex trafficking" fell on deaf ears in Cambodia (Derks

2008). As the first people to identify a problem often shape how others perceive it (Nelson 1987), the international movement to change forced prostitution in Cambodia without the cooperation of the Cambodian people set a strong precedent for the humanitarian responses to come.

By reinforcing the perception of the Cambodian female "victim," internationally-based NGOs described all women in prostitution as "trafficked," reasoning that most women are forced or coerced into the industry (Derks 2008). The NGOs then adopted an abolitionist view that no woman would choose prostitution as a career if any other options were available to her (Samarasinghe 2008). Cambodian studies often vehemently disagree, with some reports suggesting that up to 90% of sex workers freely chose prostitution as their best available job option (Agustin 2009). This divergence exemplifies the dissonance—the result of a lack of collaboration—between international aid workers and the local population. As international agencies exposed the plight of sex workers and the local Cambodians aimed to mollify the outcry, the involvement of, and high stakes for, opposing claims-makers allowed for biased, skewed interpretations of the situation in Cambodia (Linders 1998).

Spurred by the international attention paid to the vulnerability of women within Cambodia's sex industry, global predators flocked to Cambodia for illicit sex (Samarasinghe 2008). According to the website Humantrafficking.org, in 2006, only three foreign sex tourists were convicted of prostitution-related crimes, despite an estimated 15,000 sex workers in Phnom Penh, of which 5,000 are estimated to be children. This has ravaged the region with sexually transmitted infections; Cambodia maintains one of the highest prevalence rates of HIV in Asia, and up to 40% of new infections in Cambodia are thought to be related to the sex trade (AVERT 2010). Cambodian men now patronize the sex trade as an apparent cultural norm; it is estimated that 70% of Cambodian men will have sex with a sex worker or trafficked woman at least once (Samarasinghe 2008). Furthermore, Cambodia has become not only a destination country for sex tourists, but a transit country, through which women are indeed trafficked en route to other locations (Samarasinghe 2008).

This demonstrates how globalization has created an immediacy with which an emergency surfaces and intensifies in a way not previously possible (Calhoun 2008). With roots of the problem stretching back toward French colonialism and profoundly exacerbated by UNTAC involvement, the Western influences which helped create the new sex trade in Cambodia were ignored, and Cambodians were alienated as the burden fell on their shoulders. Although the percentage of sex workers who are "voluntary" remains in contention, it is widely accepted that women in the sex trade endure life-threatening, cruel conditions that are virtually impossible

to escape. Thus, fitting with Calhoun's (2008) definition of a complex emergency, prostitution in Cambodia has many causes, has many actors, and compels an international response (84).

## THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

The prominent role played by NGOs in large humanitarian crises is now well recognized. The scale of the phenomenon is explained in part by the ease of entry into the non-profit arena—anyone can create an NGO and contribute to humanitarian efforts (De Waal 1997). An element of most NGOs' failure to collaborate with Cambodians on the issue of sex trafficking was surely the sheer volume of aid workers in Phnom Penh, which lead to a disjointed intervention of competing NGOs with similar missions. As NGOs compete for resources and rush to "rescue" the same "victims," many NGOs habitually develop a materialist agenda—constructing practice methods to attract profit—and are left with dysfunctional results (Cooley and Ron 2002).

The materialist agenda is in some sense essential for the survival of an NGO; the invocation of compassion (or pity) among distant donors is commonplace among agencies whose work does not necessitate media beyond the funding it procures (Boltanski 1999). NGOs may seek to exploit the stories from the women they serve, creating lucrative "trauma portfolios" through which supplies and donations are encouraged, establishing an economy of trauma (James 2010). Some scholars contend that even those who aim explicitly to avoid such exploitation inadvertently project their own perceptions onto victims to conform to preordained ends (Rajaram 2002).

Accordingly, global media portrayals of Cambodian sex workers consistently characterize the women as either "broken" or as victims, a portrayal which, through repetition, has come to seem like an absolute truth despite the little evidence to support the characterization (Derks 2008). Reductionist media headlines read "Girl, 6, Embodies Cambodia's Sex Industry," divulging the girl's name, the price for which she was sold into prostitution, and her HIV status (Rivers 2007). Simultaneously, local media portrayals of Cambodian sex workers depict the women as immoral and of little worth (Hill and Ly 2004). In other words, sex workers are either vilified as evil or silenced as naïve and helpless.

While the designation of sex workers as victims may reap immediate financial rewards from sympathetic donors, by resolutely assuming that all women within the sex trade were trafficked into prostitution against their will, agencies endanger the women who remain in sex work. Many Western NGOs who follow this intervention strategy, most notably the International

Justice Mission, boast sensationally of "brothel raids," in which agencies collaborate with police forces to shuttle sex workers out of brothels and into temporary shelters. Many of the women are furious with their detention in these shelters and immediately return to sex work (Haugen 2005).

Moreover, in response to the steep increase in raids over the last several years, brothel owners have decentralized, scattering their workers in karaoke bars, massage parlors, and beer gardens (Derks 2008). Decentralization undercuts the protections that were once available to workers within a brothel, including medical care and dependable access to condoms (Agustin 2009). Other workers leave the relative safety of a brothel and find themselves in potentially life-threatening situations when entering customers' homes alone (Derks 2008).

In the creation of many NGO interventions (Derks 2008), individual women were used only to help the media sensationalism and thereby to support the mission of the NGO. Their testimony would only be used if it represented the "exemplary victim," or the victim whose biological needs supersede others' (Malkki, 1996). The reduction of sex workers to voiceless bodies leads to one of the most stringent criticism of humanitarianism: victims are diminished to "bare life" (Agamben 1998), an object of mere survival.

By reducing sex workers to mere bodies to be saved, such NGOs do not consider apparent violations of an individual's rights. Fittingly, interventions are targeted almost exclusively as rescue efforts with perpetrators left unpunished. The Cambodian Government has drafted sound anti-trafficking laws that would provide substantial protections to sex workers (US Department of State 2008). However, when police participate in "brothel raids," brothel owners are not typically charged with crimes and the sex workers are often left unprotected, with little or no rehabilitation services provided to them (US Department of State 2009; Samarasinghe 2008). Indeed, police often arrest the sex workers themselves and charge them with illegal prostitution, assuming—distinctly contrary to NGOs—all sex workers are voluntarily working in prostitution (Samarasinghe 2008). The threat of arrest as a deterrent from work in prostitution is not only irrelevant if the sex worker has been forced into the job, but it also misdirects the blame for the behavior. Further, police harassment of sex workers is common, and women often report to NGOs that police have beaten them or stolen their earnings. Police brutality is so widespread that sex workers cite police harassment as their primary fear, not rape or violence within forced prostitution (Derks 2008).

It is clear, then, that when individually, empathically interviewed, sex workers reveal concerns that require more than a banal humanitarian approach, highlighting issues that could potentially be addressed through

legal advocacy, worker mobilization, and political processes. However, by resorting to strictly humanitarian efforts that silence the individual, this NGO strategy replaces law with charity (Agier and Bouchet-Saulnier 2004). Media representations, in turn, prolong the perception of a complex humanitarian emergency in which immediate humanitarian services are constantly needed, effectively relieving the government of addressing structural shortcomings. The government can contend, then, that more in-depth needs can be indefinitely bypassed in the interest of maintaining sex workers' "bare life." In other words, "Policy emphasis on sex slaves as 'victims of trafficking' limits the state's obligations toward them" (Davidson 2006, 83).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Some contend that even if victims are provided the environment in which to speak, the Western humanitarian aid worker will not know how to listen (Rajaram 2002). A select few NGOs—acknowledging the presence of the false humanitarian "Western expert," whose role silences the women, the true experts (Rajaram 2002)—are ensuring that sex workers themselves are involved in crafting an anti-trafficking intervention (CACHA 2009). For example, some organizations using group interviews with sex workers have determined that the women interviewed urgently need safe family planning and abortion services (Delvaux 2003). Other organizations have employed a "participatory learning" model, whereby individual women in their program develop personal interventions while simultaneously attending group sessions in which broader interventions are discussed. While this program appears successful thus far, it utilizes an individualized social work model that is not financially sustainable for most NGOs (Busza and Schunter 2001).

An obvious complexity of involving sex workers in the intervention involves the available pool of participants to craft the efforts. "Rescued" women in shelters may be available to contribute, though it may be difficult for them to participate since violent reprisal for interference in the sex trade is commonplace (Haugen 2005). Women who are currently active within the sex trade and working from a brothel would require permission from brothel owners to participate, limiting their involvement and potentially jeopardizing their safety.

While traditional humanitarian anti-trafficking efforts respond to immediate crises, it may be beneficial to consider the reduction of suffering by means of long-term interventions. The imperative to relieve the suffering of those in immediate crisis is dominant, but taking a longer

view may allow for a broader scope in considering crises worldwide and recognizing emergencies as the rule and not the exception (Calhoun 2008). By acknowledging crises as the rule, humanitarian efforts can begin to look beyond distinct causes—too often incorrectly identified—and move forward toward integrative, locally involved preventive and rehabilitative measures.

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