

# Sex trafficking in Cambodia: fabricated numbers versus empirical evidence

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**Abstract** Large numbers of sex trafficking victims, on the order of 80,000–100,000, have been alleged to exist in Cambodia over the past decade. Empirical results obtained from measuring the numbers of such victims in Cambodia are contrasted with the lack of support for the widely circulated guesstimates of these numbers. Examples of similar fabrications are discussed and followed through some of their early publication history. The methodology of conducting empirical field research in less developed countries is discussed and the origin of the guesstimates is probed in detail. Both the multiple methodologies employed by and the results of a program of empirical research on trafficking numbers in Cambodia conducted from 2002 to 2008 are discussed. These are compared with the results of additional empirical studies, and with the guesstimates. The existence of empirical results creates location knowledge of victims, presenting ethical questions.

## Introduction

Trafficking in persons occurs in every country based on the desire to profit illegally from the work of others. It may involve various forms of deception and illegal behavior in order to achieve this profit including sexual trafficking in women and children. Other forms of trafficking and abuse may be more common, as with domestic laborers such as maids. Some societies have institutionalized these traditions with children in the form of *mooi jai*, *restavek*, and related practices [10, 23]. UN researchers studying Cambodian deportees from Thailand found 23% of the 89,096 Cambodians deported in 2009 to have been trafficked. More men than women were found among the worst situations of exploitation and trafficking involving no freedom of movement and no pay at the

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end. The greatest proportion of trafficking among returned deportees was 31% in seafaring laborers [32].

Some students of human trafficking regard all sex workers as trafficked, arguing that at some point all sex workers must have been tricked or forced into the business. Agustín [1] and Kapur [11] caution against this and similar views emanating from Barry's assertions [2] that all women who are seeking a better life through sex work are "victims," possessing less agency than women from perhaps financially better circumstances. Weitzer [38] argues that applying such "oppression" paradigms to sex workers is based on flawed research, which he reviews.

### **Human trafficking, migration, smuggling, and kidnapping**

The concepts of migration, smuggling, kidnapping, and trafficking are related. *Human migration* involves the movement of people from one place to another. *Human smuggling* involves engaging in the movement of people secretly and illegally. Both concepts often refer to groups rather than individuals. *Kidnapping* and *human trafficking* usually involve force, fraud, or coercion in unlawfully seizing and detaining people. They may or may not involve the movement of people to another location either outside or within a country. While kidnappers usually attempt to profit from promised return of the victim(s), traffickers usually attempt to profit from the continued control over and possession of the victims. Human trafficking is often referred to as trafficking in persons or TIP, as in the US State Department's annual TIP reports. When trafficking involves movement of people we may refer to the locations involved as source, transit, and destination trafficking. Persons under 18 who are engaged in sex work are automatically considered to be trafficked.

The United Nations definition of trafficking emphasizes obtaining or controlling the services of a person by threat, force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, the abuse of power, the person's vulnerability, or the use of payments in order to exploit them [30, p. 2; 24]. The U.S. Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 [35] defines trafficking as knowingly obtaining by any means—often by force, fraud, or coercion—any person for involuntary servitude or forced labor. The US definition of sexual trafficking also emphasizes the use of force fraud or coercion, particularly in inducing the performance of sexual work, or in any sexual work of persons under 18 years.

While interventions against trafficking during the source and transit stages of trafficking are ideal, difficulties of detection associated with these stages often leads to concentration on destination trafficking. It is the easiest to detect and is thus more likely to provide both an accurate count and a greater possibility of intervention and rescue.

### **Operational definition of trafficking**

Application of conceptual definitions to real world settings is often difficult [7, 24]. Trafficking seldom involves a victim chained in a dark room. More commonly it is defined and observed in practice as a person clearly under 18 who is available for sex, and/or control over an adult sex worker's freedom of movement by venue

management. This control may be manifest as the inability to leave the venue unless well escorted, or as the existence of a debt contract, often only in oral form, between the family of the trafficked person and the traffickers. Trafficking is concentrated among *direct* sex workers, in which partner selection is made by the customer prior to any communicative interaction with the worker. In *indirect* sex work, as with bar workers and streetwalkers, some form of communication occurs between customer and worker prior to the agreement to go. Indirect sex work does not eliminate trafficking, but gives the worker greater ability to communicate her plight if she chooses to do so and thus makes her more difficult to control.

### Interest in trafficking numbers

People gain interest in social issues in various ways. My interest in numbers of trafficking victims began in 1988 during research on health communication and AIDS in Thailand. These HIV/AIDS studies resulted in the book *Working at the Bar*, a detailed study of the beliefs and behavior of Thai sex workers [19]. In the late 1980s an estimate began circulating in Bangkok that 800,000 children under 18 were working in the Thai sex industry. It originated in print from a single individual employed in Bangkok by the Children's Rights Protection Center (CRPC) who stated that of 2,000,000 Thai sex workers, 800,000 were children. A *Bangkok Post* editorial of January 17, 1989, questioned the basis for the estimate, joined by several Thai language media outlets. “*Estimate*” has two distinctly different meanings in English. *Empirical* estimates are based on observed data and can usually be checked for accuracy. But *estimate* can also mean a *guesstimate*, a wild guess, as in estimating that the moon is made of green cheese. Many people, including the general public and many of those who write for and edit Western and international media sources, regularly fail to distinguish between the two. The 800,000 children “estimate” was taken essentially as fact in much of the media, and repeatedly publicized to billions of people across the globe. Simple repetition of the claim, with one media outlet quoting another as the source and then being quoted itself as the source, led to belief in and presumed credibility of the claim, severely damaging Thailand’s international reputation.

Well aware of this damage, the Thai government established a working group in 1994 charged with reviewing the methodology that had produced the numbers. The group included representatives from the police, the Prime Minister's Office, the Thai Red Cross, Chulalongkorn University, and the National Statistical Office. Dr. Werasit Sittitrai was a member of the commission. The CRPC worker was summoned to it and related his method to the group essentially as follows: He had entered several brothels and noticed that two of the five workers in one appeared to be under 18, and that this seemed to be about the case in the others. Two of five is 40%. Multiplying 40% by the 2 million sex workers that “everyone knows” exist yielded 800,000. But no empirical studies of Thai sex worker numbers indicated anywhere near 2 million such workers, or that 40% of existing sex workers were underage. Sittitrai and his colleagues employed snowball sampling of Bangkok sex workers in a study suggesting about 120,000–150,000 such workers existed in Thailand on any given day during that time, with about 13,000–23,000 of them

under the age of 18 [17]. The 800,000 child sex workers estimate had no basis in fact whatever, and the CRPC stated that it had done no scientific sampling or surveys to reach its conclusions. Now, one would think that the existence of some 13,000 or more children working in the sex industry should be sufficient to turn heads, but the number was represented to be 800,000. Why do people feel the need to fabricate and communicate such claims?

### **“Estimates” of trafficking numbers in Cambodia**

The 2001 NGO statement

As an example in 2001, large numbers of sex trafficking victims were said to exist in Cambodia. The statement, presented jointly by several Cambodian NGOs at the *2001 Second World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation Of Children* in Yokohama, Japan, claimed the existence of 80,000–100,000 trafficked women and children per year in Cambodia, with “10,000–15,000 child prostitutes” in Phnom Penh alone [15]. In comparing these numbers with worldwide estimates it seemed unlikely that Cambodia could have 80,000–100,000 of the 700,000 such persons estimated to exist by the US State Department’s first Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report [36]. This would amount to 11–14% of the estimated 700,000 of the world’s cross-border international trafficking total within about 00.194% of the total world population. The most recent TIP Report was released in June 2011 [37].

*Child rights foundation (CRF)* Numerous other sex trafficking reports on Cambodia cited similar figures at that time. For example, in 2001 the Child Rights Foundation of Cambodia under the heading of “Trends in Sexual Slavery” reported the number of trafficked women and children as “17,000 in Phnom Penh, 30% under 18 years old, 80,000–100,000 nationwide” [5, p. 14]. Many NGO and media reports published throughout the past decade quote the 80,000–100,000 numbers. Those few providing a reference source for these numbers cite one of those mentioned above, often [5].

*The future group* Similarly, Perrin, Majumdar, Gafuik, and Andrews [16] writing in the same year state:

On the higher end, it is estimated that there are between 80,000 and 100,000 prostitutes and sex slaves in Cambodia. By far the lowest statistic for the number of prostitutes and sex slaves in Cambodia is between 40,000 and 50,000. With a population of just 10–12 million, Cambodia’s sex slave and prostitution problem is enormous. Indeed, more than 1 in 150 people in Cambodia are sex slaves or prostitutes ... It can be expected that at least 1 in 40 of children born in Cambodia will be sold into sex slavery. The number of sex slaves and prostitutes has peak (*sic*) and has normalized as a well-established phenomenon in Cambodia [16, p. 13].

They also estimated 17,000 “sex slaves” to exist in Phnom Penh in 2001 [16, p. 14].

## Origin of the numbers

None of the groups that issued these numerical estimates studied or even sponsored an empirical study of the problem. Each group simply reprinted in their report what other reports had said or what other people had told them orally, citing these other reports as the source if a source was provided. In addition to this problem, the primary source reports cited at the *2001 Second World Congress* by the NGO group [15] and by the Child Rights Foundation [5] do not in fact say what the secondary reports cite them as saying. Most Cambodian NGO reports that provided a numerical estimate of trafficking numbers published between 2001 and 2011, including [5] and [15], can be traced back to one of two primary sources as the origin of their 80,000–100,000 numbers. These are:

- (a) (CNCC 2000) [4]: The Cambodian National Council for Children *Summary Five Years Plan against Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation of Children, 2000–2004*; and
- (b) (CHDR 2000) [3]: the Cambodia Human Development Report 2000 of the Ministry of Planning & the National 5Year Plan against CSEC.
  - (a) But [4] does not contain the numbers “80,000–100,000” anywhere, either in the context of sex workers or as a number of trafficked women and children. This is true both in its draft form (February 1999) and in its final form (17 March 2000). These numbers are never mentioned. The only numerical estimate of trafficking in [4] is that of 14,725 *sex workers* found throughout Cambodia, obtained from the National Assembly study of 1997 [12]. Thus, source (a) [4] is not the origin of the 80,000–100,000 numbers. Source (b) [3] is the only other source cited for these numbers.
  - (b) Source (b) [3] clearly states the “80,000–100,000” numbers, as cited by [5], but in reference to the total number of *sex workers* in Cambodia in its only mention of those numbers, not as trafficked women and children or sex slaves. It also estimates 5000 as the number of under 18 sex workers in Phnom Penh. Source (b) [6] is an official Cambodian government report prepared with the assistance of UNDP. Since the authors of this report, the Cambodian Ministry of Planning, did not conduct a study, is instructive to follow the references for the numbers they cite to their respective sources.

*Human rights vigilance of Cambodia: HRVC (1995) [8]* CHDR 2000 lists HRVC (1995) [8] as one of two sources for the 80,000–100,000 figures. But those numbers are not reported in HRVC (1995) [8]. Rather, [8] says 3,919 sex workers of age and 1,800 under 17 were found in Phnom Penh together with eleven of the remaining twenty-three provinces studied. [8, p. 2]. No other figures relating to the number of sex workers, either in Phnom Penh or in Cambodia as a whole, are given in [8]. Thus, [8] does not support the *Cambodia Human Development Report 2000* numbers as claimed. However, the following year’s HRVC Annual Report [9] cites the Cambodia Women’s Development Association (CWDA) as claiming the existence of 17,000 sex workers in reference to all of Cambodia [6, p. 26].

*Cambodia Women's Development Association: (CWDA)* Unfortunately CWDA did not issue this 17,000 estimate as claimed, nor any other such estimate in any of its published reports prior to 1997 [6]. To resolve this issue, this author sought a personal interview with the Director of CWDA on 28 July 2003 at her office. She stated that it is possible that someone from CWDA might have made such a statement orally to someone, but to her knowledge she confirmed that the 17,000 estimate has not appeared in any CWDA report at any time. Additionally, she stated that there has never been a CWDA study of the number of sex workers in Cambodia.

*UNICEF* In attempting to track down the source of the 17,000 estimate, all additional reports from trafficking oriented organizations operating in Cambodia at that time were sought. While not cited as the source by [9] or by [3] the 1996 UNICEF situation report on Cambodia states that "17,000 sex workers were active in Phnom Penh in 1994" [34, p. 144]. It [34] cites no source for this statistic and mentions no study from which it might have come. The statement simply appears out of nowhere on p. 144, printed only in a sidebar in the page margin. Neither the statement nor the number appears elsewhere in the publication. There is no form of reference or attribution for the statement or number, and no discussion or explanation whatever in the text itself. Further, the statement is out of context with the surrounding textual discussion. Thus, the 1996 UNICEF situation report for Cambodia [34] appears to be a possible source for the CHDR (2000) [3] claim of 17,000 sex workers in Phnom Penh, a claim with no study to support it, printed randomly in a sidebar margin, of a page discussing unrelated issues. And since it was not possible to establish which was published first between [9] and [34], it is possible that the 17,000 number first appeared in [9] with the misattribution to [6]. In either case, the number simply materializes in print apparently out of nowhere, with no study to justify and support its existence.

*Sopheha, 1998* The second source cited in CHDR (2000) [3] for the 80,000–100,000 sex workers in Cambodia figure that the CRF changed into '80,000–100,000 sex slaves,' is an ILO/IPEC oral presentation given in Bangkok in January of 1998 [18]. The figure of '80,000–100,000 sex workers in Cambodia' appears only once, in a table on page 8 of the typed post presentation notes apparently taken down by the speaker's assistant as: "Total Prostitutes in Cambodia: (*Unicef, 1996*) 80,000–100,000" [18, p. 8]. Thus, Sopheha [18] cites UNICEF as the source of the 80,000–100,000 estimate of sex workers in Cambodia. No claim is made, confirmed by interviews by this author with ILO/IPEC officials in Phnom Penh in the Spring of 2003, that this is an ILO/IPEC finding.

There is no mention of a UNICEF publication in the brief reference list on p. 17 of Sopheha [18]. A multi-person search of the library of UNICEF Phnom Penh for all publications from the 1994–1998 period that mention either a number of sex workers or a number of trafficked women in Cambodia or Phnom Penh yielded two reports. They are UNICEF's 1995 and 1996 situation reports on Cambodia discussed above [33, 34]. There is no mention in [33] of any study of sex workers that found 80,000–100,000 workers. The closest statement to that effect appears on p. 4 of [33], to the effect that in 1995, NGOs estimated, without a study to confirm these estimates, the presence of 10,000–15,000 sex workers in Phnom Penh. UNICEF (1996) [34] is cited as the source of the 80,000–100,000 Cambodian sex workers on p. 8 of Sopheha

[18] but these numbers are not mentioned anywhere in [34], including the out-of-context sidebar discussed above. No UNICEF documents available in the Cambodia office in Phnom Penh support either the 80,000–100,000 figure, or any study of any estimate of trafficking not already discussed above.

### **Summary of problems with published numerical estimates**

Most current published estimates of the numbers of sex workers, under-aged workers, and trafficked women and children in Cambodia cannot be relied upon. In following the references for the source of the 80,000 to 100,000 figures back to the earliest dated source [18] no study or empirical data in any form can be located to support the number. As with the false claim of 800,000 child sex workers in Bangkok, the presumed propaganda value of large trafficking numbers may be at work [22]. This author is forced to conclude that these 80,000–100,000 numbers are simply bogus, that they were fabricated at some point by someone, and the bogus numbers were simply reprinted, circularly citing other such reprints as the source.

### **Empirical research on trafficking numbers in Cambodia**

These unsupported estimates of trafficking numbers in Cambodia led to our research there beginning in the summer of 2002 and our first paper [25]. A Fulbright to Cambodia from January to August of 2003, an extension of that Fulbright, and a research grant from USAID led to additional research and our second empirical paper [20]. In early 2007, UNIAP/UNESCO in Bangkok announced a competition to determine best methods of measuring human trafficking. My methods proposal received the top award in the UNIAP/UNESCO final competition for best methods of measuring human trafficking, held in Bangkok in November 2007. Data collection for that research, supported by a United Nations grant, began in May 2008 and ended that December, with the final report published by UNIAP/UNESCO in January 2011 [24]. The results and methods of these three studies are summarized below. Those studies provide numbers concerning sex trafficking in Cambodia only. They do not provide numbers representing all forms of trafficking victims. Abuse of female domestic laborers and spousal abuse victims are not included in these numbers, nor are any of the persons trafficked for maritime labor, for begging, for factory labor, or for any male trafficking victims. A 32 point detailed theory and rationale for the methods used in our studies to obtain data on sexual trafficking may be found in our 2011 UNIAP Report [24, pp. 8–10]. A summary of the rationale is given below providing the basic theory for our methods.

### **Summary of rationale**

Sex trafficking is a *commercial* enterprise. Its purpose is to make money. Repeat customers keep a sex venue afloat, but they alone can not form the sizeable new customer set required for the level of profits which are its primary motive. Given their

current economic position and skill set, in any society some individuals are willing to provide sexual labor in exchange for something of value if the monetary reward is sufficient. As the cost of sexual labor—the money received by sex workers for their labor—increases, the desire of management in sex work venues to lower labor costs also increases. Using underpaid or unpaid labor, or even forcing persons to work, or using children who provide a much greater profit margin, comprise one form of solution for management. This profit motive and its criminal solution leads to the trafficking of sex workers.

Greater profits are dependent on a constant stream of new customers with some form of advertising required in order to provide new customers. Such advertising for sex venues often occurs by word-of-mouth and consists of contact with a population likely to be interested in the purchase of sexual services. One efficient method of such contact is through local persons who normally encounter this population and also serve to prescreen it for sex venue interest. Locals generally make up the great majority of the customer base for most sex venues throughout the world. Local customers know both local price structures for sex and alternative locations where sexual services can be obtained. Thus they provide less revenue per customer than traveling businessmen, military personnel, transportation workers such as truck drivers, and foreigners who may not know local prices or know of the availability of similar competing services nearby. Increased profits are often related to the ability to contact and sell to this potential customer base.

Due to the nature of sexual services such contact requires a level of discreteness and privacy. Public advertising, such as the media or posters or announcements made by a bus driver carrying a load of passengers into town from an airport, do not provide this discreteness and privacy. Taxis and Limo services also encounter the desired populations of traveling businessmen, military personnel and tourists, often those of greater economic means. They normally carry a small number of passengers with similar demographics, often providing the desired level of discreteness and privacy. Taxi drivers are often astute judges of the desires of their fares. Thus taxi drivers provide an ideal medium for word of mouth advertising of sex businesses and are a principal source of new customers for sex venues in any area large enough to support a taxi business. Many taxi drivers in any area of the world become familiar with locations of sex areas in their territory. They make money from both passengers who want to go there and from the businesses which may give them a kickback from the customer's payout. They are often among the venues' best customers as well, and tend as a group to have elevated HIV rates.

This understanding leads to the method of locating sexually trafficked women and children of this study. Based on profit motive assumptions, it is assumed that while brothels in any form are discreet and far more so with underage workers, they are not hidden in the sense that people who are looking for them cannot find them. There is no such thing as a hidden brothel, for if it were truly hidden an insufficient number of new customers could find it for it to make the high profit desire implied by opening it in the first place.

## General methods

The moto driver location method was used in all three studies in addition to variations in other methods between studies. The description below is brief.



Interested readers can obtain details in the full reports [20, 24, 25]. The first step was to obtain an initial mapping of sex work locations in the area to be studied. The second step was to conduct interviews to gather information from the obtained locations.

*Locating sex venues* The 2002, 2003, and 2008 studies [20, 24, 25] employed research teams composed of Khmer and Western members, each headed by a trafficking researcher experienced in our methods. When more than one team was used these teams did not meet each other and did not share information, thus providing independently obtained estimates from each team. Venues were identified and data from the teams were collated by GPS coordinates they provided. Khmer assistants on each team were hired as day laborers by the team leader with advice from the primary research assistant. This was based on their familiarity with the sex venues in a specific area. Instructions included the duty to report immediately to the PI any person or persons in possible distress or in imminent danger, or any children observed serving as sex workers. In 2008 data collection [24] an additional team was used only to locate sex venues throughout Cambodia in both the areas studied and not studied by other teams. It did not conduct interviews. It served to locate the population of sex work venues, allowing estimation of the proportion of coverage of that population achieved by other teams.

*Moto driver location method -geographic mapping* The moto driver method was used as one method of venue location in 2002, 2003, and 2008 [20, 24, 25]. In this method, a moto driver passing by in traffic is hailed by a lone team member and asked if the driver knows where sex can be purchased. Stationary moto drivers waiting for passengers are not selected. The answer is invariably 'yes' to this question. The driver is then asked to transport the passenger to such a location. On arrival, the team member clicks the pocketed GPS unobtrusively in order to record the location, looks briefly at the venue from the outside, and asks if the driver would like to be paid or whether he would like to show the passenger another venue. In almost all cases the driver wishes to continue. The driver is encouraged to drive to "hidden" locations in addition to popular locations, perhaps those not often visited, or visited only by people with money, or with sex workers who were unusual in some way, or young. After several such locations have been recorded, the passenger pays the driver what is owed, but asks if the driver would like to work with him longer for a set amount. The driver usually accepts. If accepted by the driver, the process continues until the driver wants to stop or when the driver can think of no new places. If the driver does not accept he is paid. If there is time left in the day, the team member then walks one block, hails another moto that is driving down the street, never one parked at a location, and continues the process. This provides a clean break between each successive moto driver on a given day and none knows of the other's work, or of any prior actions of the researcher. While there are hundreds of moto drivers in Phnom Penh, in areas such as small villages there are few drivers and they know each other. In such cases, one driver passing by is hailed and employed. The assistance of two or more local males, depending on the population size, is then requested. If the male says he knows the sex outlets in the area when approached by a Khmer assistant, he is asked to show the location to the assistant if

it is not far. If it is some distance away the male is then asked for specific directions which are recorded. This process continues between 8 am and 4 pm, seven days. Location data so obtained were transferred at the end of each day to both a GPS and a hardcopy map.

Site visits to a specific area by a team usually involved (a) the initial location of potential trafficking sites, followed by (b) later visits to areas near those sites to observe working hours, customer demographics, and still later (c) to collect trafficking data within the venue. In some cases (a) and (b) were accomplished on the initial location visit. Khmer team members were successful in locating many places with predominantly local clientele, usually brothels, massage, and karaoke, and occasionally common evening meeting areas for dating, and at times with freelance workers. Expatriate team members were also shown such venues, but often were shown considerably higher priced establishments as well, such as large expensive clubs. In some areas, particularly Bavet, Phnom Penh, Battambang, Pailin, and Poipet, the clubs were occasionally part of a complex involving a hotel, or hotel and casino.

Not all villages have a sex work venue. Teams noted that the probability of a sex work venue existing increases with the population of the village, the traffic past the point, and with increasing distance to the nearest village with a sex work venue. GPS coordinates are obtained unobtrusively for each potential sex venue so located. The mapping of sex venue locations obtained is ruled essentially complete when five independent informants in a row familiar with sex work locations in a given area produce no new venues in that area. The product of this method is a GPS mapping of potential sex work locations for each area.

*Obtaining data from venues* At different times during the day two team members went separately to the area of each venue—or venue area if several locations were in close proximity—to determine the operational hours of the location and to observe the demographic characteristics of persons entering and exiting the venue. For each mapped venue, two interviewers were selected to match the demographic characteristics of typical customers of the venue. For venues in close proximity different sets of interviewers were used. The interviewers visited the venue during normal working hours and, in populated areas such as a city, town, or large village, at least one day apart. In smaller villages and rural areas only one interviewer entered and collected data. The expatriate team member entered and obtained data from those venues with an expatriate customer base. If one of the Khmer team members matched the venue's customer demographic, that team member served as interviewer. If no team member matched the customer demographic, a local individual, usually a moto driver who had not been encountered previously, was engaged in conversation by a Khmer team member and asked if he was familiar with the venue in question. Potential interviewers were selected for the task only if they were reasonably talkative and responsive in their meeting with the team member, as they were to talk with the workers and with management about typical brothel information as to whether particular workers could leave the brothel, and if small ladies who were not currently visible also worked there.

These interviewers were hired as day laborers and given the specifics of the information desired. They could obtain this by discussion with workers or management and by observation. Interviewers were not told how to obtain the information or why it

was being requested. The specifics of how to request or obtain the desired information were left to the personal style of the individual data gatherer. As an intentional part of our method informants received no instructions in terms of specific questions to ask or scenarios to present in obtaining the requested information. Training observers on how to ask questions may create a ‘clerk’ or ‘actor’ mindset within the data gatherer and this mindset can become obvious in the data gatherer’s behavior. The informant may begin to ‘act’ rather than to behave normally when asking for information. Measurement of the reliability of the information so obtained occurs through the use of multiple observers, with data obtained several weeks apart.

The Khmer interviewers were given a single location and asked to confirm by observation whether sex was being sold at that location. If so, the interviewer was to visually determine the number of sex workers present and their ethnicity and the number of “small ladies” (workers apparently 17 or younger). We asked them to bring us the number of workers observed, whether any worker who was selected could leave with the interviewer to go to a local hotel, whether any “small ladies” might be available, and whether any worker of the informant’s choice would be able to leave the establishment with them or if some could not, and how many of these there were. He was encouraged to talk with the workers and management informally, just as he would in entering any brothel or other such venue. Informant reports to team members were often brief, and in a simple form such as ‘five Vietnamese, one small and she cannot leave.’ They were told to memorize the information rather than take notes, and were never to take notes within or near any venue they surveyed. If notes were needed they could write them out of sight of the venue, especially if this were some distance from the recording team member. Western interviewers used the same process in their assigned venues.

*Provincial areas not studied* Several unsafe areas were not studied, particular the Preah Vihear Temple where occasional shots were exchanged between the Cambodian and Thai militaries. Impassible roads limited data collection across many rural areas, and roads to several mountainous areas in southern Cambodia were blocked by armed guards wearing Cambodian military uniforms. Research teams did not challenge their orders to turn and leave.

*Correction for provincial areas not studied* All major national and provincial roads, and many local roads and areas were studied. While the population of the unstudied areas is relatively small, and sex work at any geographic point and thus sex trafficking is directly related to the size of the male population near that point, the unstudied land area itself is substantial. An estimate of the extent of trafficking in the under-interviewed areas was sought, based on the number of venues of a given type in each such area, and the extent of trafficking in such venue types that was observed in the interviewed areas.

### **Additional methods of study 1 in 2002**

Two methods in addition to the moto driver method discussed above were used to obtain the estimates of the number of sex workers and the number of those trafficked in 2002. These are Local Government Counts and City Block Sampling.

*Local government counts* In addition to the well-known major sex work locations mapped by moto drivers, many smaller local oriented venues exist throughout cities. The Municipal Tourism Department counts the number of nightclubs, karaoke parlors, and discos in Phnom Penh. These counts include many small locations frequented largely by persons living or working nearby, as well as the larger and better-known venues. The MTD counts were used to estimate the number of small venues by subtracting from these counts the known number of businesses of these three types operating in the major venues. The result of the subtraction was used as a measure of the number of small venues. Several major venues consisted of many small businesses clustered together along a street as a natural area. The mean number of workers obtained in each type of small business in the major venues—nightclubs, karaoke parlors, and discos—was used as an estimate of the number of workers in the same type of small business in similar smaller venues.

*City block sampling* While the government makes every attempt at accuracy in its counts of nightclubs, karaoke parlors, and discos, this method will miss locations such as car washes, small local guest houses, and other business types that occasionally employ sex workers, as well as private homes. We wanted to locate these other minor venues as well as those already identified, in order to provide a better estimate of the total number of workers in Phnom Penh.

City blocks in Phnom Penh were selected as sampling units and the number of blocks was enumerated. Two counts were obtained which varied by only 1.9%, and the larger of the two was selected for use. The blocks were numbered for sampling purposes and a sample of  $N=44$  city blocks selected using a computer-generated table of random numbers and sampling randomly from it. Each of these 44 blocks was subjected to intensive study. Two Khmer, one Vietnamese, and one Westerner each observed each block for a total observation period of no less than 48 h. In addition to these observations, conversations were struck up with local people about unusual numbers of comings and goings on the block, and possible sex venues were pursued. All locations that could have involved one or more individuals charging for sexual services were approached by an observer whose culture was similar to that of the individuals in the business. When located, the numbers of workers, their ethnicity, approximate ages, and their state of indebtedness was sought and recorded for each location.

## Results of study 1 in 2002

*City block sampling results* Observation of the 44 randomly selected city blocks yielded an additional 4 sex work locations, all smaller and all locally oriented within Phnom Penh and not among the three MTD categories, or an average of .09091 locations per block. The 44 blocks were 3.026% of the 1454 enumerated city blocks in Phnom Penh. The 4 locations found were thus multiplied by 33 ( $1/.03026$ ) to obtain an estimated additional 132 venues throughout Phnom Penh (or  $.09091 * 1454$ ). The size of the upper 95% confidence interval for these data is 125 (S.E.Mn = 0.04384;  $1.96 * .04384 = 0.0859$ ;  $0.0859 * 1454 = 124.9$ ) suggesting that the actual number of additional minor locations is unlikely to be more than 257 ( $132 + 125$ ), with 132 the center value.

*Workers located—Phnom Penh* The numbers in the 2002 report represent point-in-time estimates of numbers of workers and of those who are trafficked. The 22 mapped major locations held 2,309 workers, with 19 other workers found at the four minor locations observed, for a total of 2,328 observed workers. The observed small karaoke/nightclub-type businesses within the 22 major venues averaged 4.8 workers in each. The 482 estimated additional MTD venues were multiplied by this 4.8, to yield an additional 2,314 estimated workers. If the overestimate of 1,206 operating locations were used in place of 482 it would yield 5,789 estimated workers. The four minor locations averaged 4.75 workers. When 4.75 is multiplied by the 132 additional locations in Phnom Penh estimated by the City Block Sampling it yields another 627 workers. By addition,  $2,309+2,314+627=5,250$  as the best point-in-time estimate of the total number of sex workers in Phnom Penh. Using the upper 95% confidence interval value of 257 in place of the best estimate of 132 additional locations would produce an estimate of 5,844  $\{2,309+2,314+(257 * 4.75)\}$  as the number of additional workers.

*Proportion of workers indentured 2002* Workers were counted as indentured if, through management identification, they were either currently indentured or had been indentured in the past. Most of the workers at the venues observed, 1,416 or 68.8%, were not indentured, while 642 or 31.2% were indentured. The great majority of the indentured workers were Vietnamese (95.0%), with 63.2% of Vietnamese workers indentured either now or in the past. Another 4.7% of the indentured workers were Khmer; and the remainder were of undetermined origin.

*Total empirically estimated number of sex workers in Cambodia* In 2002, the number of sex workers and the number trafficked outside of Phnom Penh were estimated from UNDP data [31] and population data, assuming proportionality with Phnom Penh corrected for tourism [25, pp. 10–14]. The Phnom Penh proportions were corrected for population differences and multiplied by population sizes in other major cities, by the highway proportions obtained from UNDP, and by half of the UNDP highway proportion for the remaining towns, villages, and rural areas of Cambodia. The 2002 report [25] provides a more detailed discussion of the method.

The calculation includes the 5,250 estimated workers from Phnom Penh, 4624 as the best estimate of the total number of workers in the nine next largest cities in Cambodia, a highways estimate from UNDP information of an additional 9,390, and an additional 1,565 for rural areas, for a total of 20,829 as the best estimate of the total number of sex workers of all ages and ethnicities in Cambodia in 2002. Additional discussion of the results may be found in the 2002 report [25].

## Methods of study 2 in 2003

Based on this 2002 report, the US Embassy human trafficking officer in Phnom Penh obtained funding for the 2003 study through USAID. Data from Study 1 were used as Phnom Penh numbers for Study 2. The two-part Geographic Mapping method used for Phnom Penh in Study 1 was applied across the Cambodian

countryside in study 2. The areas in and near Phnom Penh studied in June 2002 were revisited in June and July 2003 to count the number of persons under the age of 18 who were available as sex workers and to confirm previously obtained data on trafficked women. Two areas were revisited once each month from February through August to obtain sequential data on change versus stability in the sex worker population of those areas.

## Results of study 2 in 2003

*Sex workers located/observed* Across the 24 provinces of Cambodia, 5,317 workers available for selling sex were observed directly in sex work establishments. Of these, 2,328 were in Phnom Penh (from Study 1 data); 1,885 were in the cities of Battambang, Kampong Cham, Kampot, Koh Kong, Poipet, Siem Riep, Sihanoukville, and Takhmau; 1,038 were in towns; 47 were in villages; and 19 were in special settlements. No workers were observed in rural areas that were completely isolated from villages and other housing units. Corrections from (a) City Block Sampling data, (b) for 183 towns existing while only 31 were visited, (c) for additional unstudied villages, and (d) for 377 special settlements, led to an estimate of 12,939 additional unobserved sex workers for a total of 18,256 estimated sex workers. The 2003 report should be consulted for a detailed report of the method.

*Observed trafficking* Workers were counted as indentured if, through management identification, they were either currently indentured or had been indentured in the past. For purposes of this study all persons ever trafficked—those with indentured contracts past or present—were counted as trafficked. We observed 1,074 trafficked individuals, 795 in Phnom Penh and 279 in the provinces.

*Empirically based estimates of trafficking* In addition to these observed trafficked individuals, other unobserved individuals were also trafficked in Cambodia. Adding the 13.56% undercount percentage for cities to the city totals and doubling the numbers obtained for towns and villages to represent unsampled areas, these assumptions predict a total of just under 2,000 trafficked women and children in Cambodia, the great majority of them in cities.

On its initial release for comment and prior to its submission to Washington, the 2003 study [20] led to considerable consternation, principally among the more heavily funded Western anti-trafficking NGOs. Spurred by Somaly Mam and Pierre Legros of AFESIP, the NGOs approached the British Ambassador to Phnom Penh as a group, asking him to intercede with the US Ambassador to quash the report, arguing that the numbers given were clearly too low. The ambassadorial conversation occurred, but the US Ambassador stood his ground and submitted the 2003 report unmodified. Persons working in Washington at that time described the consternation caused by the reception of the report, particularly among Bush appointees at the State Department. They could not refuse to accept it, but it was easy to bury. The State Department has multiple email systems and the 2003 report was consigned to be transmitted and available only on the most secure email system, with instructions it was not to be released outside of State. Jack Shafer of *Slate*

*Magazine* became aware of the report, likely through press coverage of the events, and requested to place it on Slate's website where it remains available. It continues to be ignored by the State Department in Washington, though not by US Embassy personnel in SE Asia.

Not yet finished, AFESIP then asked a lawyer on their Phnom Penh staff and a US sociologist to produce a critique of the report. The result was a two part attack on the 2003 report [20] that often misstated, and more than occasionally misunderstood, the contents of the 2003 report [26]. I responded with an extensive written critique of their criticisms [21]. Faced with a controversy, in early 2004 the US Embassy in Phnom Penh asked the Asia Foundation to conduct an *International Roundtable Discussion on Trafficking in Women and Children*, to be held at the Juliana Hotel in Phnom Penh in late May of 2004. Presiding and moderating was Dr. Frank Wiebe, Chief Economist for the Asia Foundation. Gender expert Dr. Janice Madden, former Provost of the University of Pennsylvania served as primary reviewer for our two reports available at that time [20, 25]. I served as one panelist together with the Directors of Cambodia's Center for Advanced Study and of Thailand's Asian Research Center for Migration of Chulalongkorn University. The panelists had been given copies of all existing research reports on trafficking numbers in Cambodia and all critiques of them, including AFESIP's [26]. Following the vetting of these reports and critiques, Madden delivered the *Roundtable's* conclusions. It provided good suggestions, and labeled our research [20, 25] as the "Gold Standard" against which future studies of human trafficking numbers in Cambodia should be measured.

Our results [20, 25] and critique [21] of AFESIP's criticisms [26] were accepted for presentation at the UNESCO, UNIAP, UNDP-SEAHIV Parallel Conference on AIDS, held in Bangkok in July of 2004. Not quick to give up, the AFESIP lawyer co-authoring their critique of our work [26] approached the Director of the UNESCO, UNIAP, UNDP-SEAHIV Parallel Conference on AIDS in July of 2004 where I was to speak on Trafficking and AIDS. She demanded that both my reports and I be removed from consideration by the conference. The Director declined her demand, and I presented [21].

UNESCO Bangkok has led the way in supporting the empirical study of human trafficking. In 2007, one of their initiatives, the UNIAP Trafficking Estimates Competition, solicited proposals seeking the best methods of measuring human trafficking. Six proposals were selected for presentation at a public forum to be held at the United Nations in Bangkok that November, three of which would be funded. Our methods received the top proposal rating at that forum and the funding from it resulted in our third study of trafficking numbers conducted in 2008 [24].

### **Methods of study 3 in 2008 (Published 2011)**

In place of a single team conducting Studies 1 and 2 [20, 25], multiple independent research teams were formed to blanket the 24 provinces of Cambodia. At least two teams traversed each province charting and obtaining data from sex venues, and an additional team traversed the entire country over a six month period searching for any possible additional or hidden locations. The full methods are presented in

considerable detail in Steinfatt and Baker [24, pp. 14–26]. During 2008 data collection, significantly reduced freedom to leave the brothel, as reported by both sex workers and management, was used as the measure of current trafficking. Lack of freedom to leave is trafficking. Sex workers listed as *Cannot Leave* in the 2008 data cannot leave at any time, not simply during a certain shift.

### Results of study 3 in 2008

The great majority of sex workers, 23,009 or 82.4% of the 27,925 estimated sex workers in Cambodia work indirectly. Observed numbers alone are misleading concerning actual totals since a number of existing workers are always absent during observation for various reasons. Trafficking occurs less often among indirect than among direct workers due to open communication with the customer and the consequent lack of control that occurs as an inherent feature of most indirect sex work. A total of 4,916 direct sex workers, 2,422 in the countryside and 2,494 in Phnom Penh, were estimated to exist throughout Cambodia via calculations from empirical counts. Details of the method, formulas, and additional tables of results, are available in Steinfatt and Baker [24, pp. 14–26]. Steinfatt [19, pp. 17–22, 134–144] provides calculation methods for estimating various point-in-time and yearly estimates of sex work numbers from observed data.

The data indicate that trafficking occurs more among brothels than any other venue type including massage parlors. Work in indirect sex venues such as karaoke venues, bars, restaurants, or among beer promotion workers or streetwalkers was seldom associated with trafficking. The report estimated 1,058 trafficked sex workers to exist in Cambodia, constituting 21.5% of the 4,916 estimated direct sex workers in the country. Indirect sex work has increased in proportion over the past decade in Cambodia while the proportion of direct sex work has declined.

### Comparison of ten national studies of trafficking numbers in Cambodia

Derks, Henke, and Ly [7] provide a review of most reports on sex work and human trafficking in Cambodia conducted between 1995 and 2006. The exceptions are the large scale medical studies conducted by NCHADS, the National Centre for HIV/AIDS, Dermatology and STD, and our third study [24] which was not available at the time of their report. NCHADS studies are not intended to be trafficking counts but are part of the sentinel surveillance system regarding infectious disease related to HIV of the World Health Organization. They used WHO statistical health interview methods in obtaining detailed reports from sex workers who received medical assistance including sexual health. NCHADS obtained their data in 21 of the 24 provinces with three rural provinces not included. The NCHADS numbers provide an additional independent count of sex workers, with trafficked workers a smaller proportion of this number.

Comparing the results of the ten known empirical countrywide studies of the number of sex workers in Cambodia indicates good agreement between the average number of direct sex workers located by the NCHADS studies (4,881) [13, 14] and the average of our three studies (5,084) [20, 24, 25]. The National Assembly study



result for direct sex workers (14,725) [12] appears to be closer to the estimates for all sex workers rather than for direct workers alone. These results are presented and discussed in considerably greater detail in Steinfatt and Baker [24].

## Implications

Fabrications of trafficking numbers are unnecessary and obviously stain the credibility of the groups and individuals involved. It is clearly possible to obtain good empirical estimates of the numbers of trafficked and non-trafficked sex workers. Such studies not only provide empirical estimates of the size of the problem in order to assist victims but also suggest starting points for observing and potentially interviewing persons in desperate situations. A potential negative consequence of that information can occur when specific location information is also provided. Some anti-trafficking activists believe that the “rescue” of an individual sex worker ethically outweighs any possible harm that will accrue to the many other sex workers affected who do not want to be rescued. The workplace and property of these women, often supporting large family groups, often becomes collateral damage in such raids.

Children cannot be allowed to engage in sex work, period. That could not be clearer. But allowing the required removal of children to increase the misery of women in difficult circumstances is an evil in itself. Sex workers have agency. They must be granted it as individuals. It strains credulity to assume as some do that sex workers have all been brainwashed by the threat of reprisals, and as a result of that say they do not wish to be rescued. Sex workers are human beings, most doing the best they can for their families, and they need to be listened to by the would-be rescuers [28, 29].

Brothel raids require cooperation with at least some of the many overlapping local police agencies. The police are well aware of the activities in their area and typically either own or receive funding from them. When raids are held the lives of workers living in difficult circumstances are disrupted, their money and ancestor pictures stolen or destroyed, and they are typically raped and abused by local officials participating in the raids. If foreign, they are often sentenced to deportation to unfriendly governmental circumstances in their home country. If local they are locked in more comfortable surroundings with well meaning and well paid NGOs until they can find the will and means to try again at the most profitable enterprise available to them as workers. They will of course be taught to cut hair by the NGO, competing with the thousands of other jobless beauticians already familiar with and practicing that trade.

## Discussion

In sum, beyond our three Cambodia studies [20, 24, 25] are seven additional empirical national counts of sex workers that were conducted or supervised by three separate agencies in Cambodia. Each of these studies validates our methods and results, just as our studies co-validate their results, since each was conducted

empirically by independent groups of researchers using different methods [24]. Additional validation of our methods occurs from an International Justice Mission (IJM) raid result confirming 45 child sex workers found in the Svay Pak raids of early 2003 (personal report from the leader of the raid). This compares to the 46 such workers we reported as observed just prior to that raid [20]. Thomas [27] provides an excellent detailed discussion of the effects of closing Svay Pak, the location of the great majority of child workers.

Empirical evidence of the size and location of sex trafficking can be obtained through observational research. That evidence indicates sizeable numbers of victims, but substantially smaller numbers than are commonly spread as rumors and propaganda. The numbers of sex workers and of those trafficked is several levels of magnitude smaller than much NGO propaganda usually suggests. The solution is not to promulgate and propagate fake numbers, but to learn to locate and talk with those who are oppressed, listen to what they want and will accept, and to consider carefully both the effect of often brutal interventions on those persons' lives, and the likely consequences for the returning workers who escaped the raids in terms of future police actions against them and their workplaces.

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