

Summary of “The Ties that Bind; Migration and Trafficking of Women and Girls for Sexual Exploitation in Cambodia” Report

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A Note on Language

There is much debate about the choice of terminology when speaking of “prostitution” as opposed to “sex work”, with the terminology often reflecting the ideological position of the speaker. In the context of this report, we speak of “commercially sexually exploited women and girls” (CSEWGs). The choice of wording does not reflect an ideological stance on the part of IOM regarding the legalization of sexual exploitation.

Research Objectives

The focus of this study was on internal trafficking within Cambodia, among both Commercially Sexually Exploited Women and Girls (CSEWGs) and domestic workers. This report presents the summary of key findings regarding trafficking among CSEWGs of Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese origin within Cambodia.

The research goal was to map the processes and mechanisms of trafficking within Cambodia. The study was conducted in 3 target provinces – Siem Reap, Koh Kong and Kampong Som, which had been previously identified in IOM’s counter-trafficking work as having a high prevalence of trafficking.

Methods

Two main methods were used to assess the patterns and mechanisms of trafficking among CSEWGs. The research conducted 203 in-depth interviews (Survey 2) with women and girls working in direct and indirect commercial sex locations. A minority of these interviews (15) took place in the commercial sex locations, to minimize bias. Furthermore, a rapid assessment tool previously piloted by Arensen (2004) that was designed for use among semi or low literate populations and is self-administered by respondents was used in brothel-based commercial sex locations (Survey 1). This survey was statistically significant for all of the research locations studied.

The definition of trafficking used followed the UN’s Palermo Protocol, though this was operationalised in different ways. In Survey 1, trafficking was defined as 1) being underage (under 18 years) either at the time of the survey, or at the time of entry into commercial sexual exploitation, or entry into commercial sexual exploitation through 2) deceit/deceptive practices, or 3) through force. Survey 2 operationalised trafficking in similar ways, but additionally included force through acquired debt.

The limitations of the study mainly concerned problems of access. It was found that access to respondents often was a reflection of the strength of counter-trafficking efforts by local government agencies and NGO partners. While strong efforts were made to minimize bias, especially interviewer and location bias, in many cases there was strong suspicion from the target group that may have led to an underestimation of certain factors, such as people accompanying women and girls into commercial sexual

exploitation, or concerning current age. Lastly, trauma and social affiliation was found to have a strong effect on narratives in in-depth interviews. Women and girls may be reluctant to openly criticize people who have exploited them if they perceive little redress to their current exploitative situation.

Patterns of Commercial Sexual Exploitation

The patterns and social structure of commercial sexual exploitation were found to be extensively interlinked to the paths of trafficking, in a dynamic and evolving process. Counter-trafficking efforts appeared to have affected the social structure of commercial sex establishments. Both public health and counter-trafficking monitoring systems, for instance, register and focus on lower-scale establishments, which are often labeled as 'direct' commercial sex establishments, such as brothels. Brothel-based CSEWGs were the only group who were consistently interviewed and registered by local authorities. In all of the provinces studied, this had led to a substantial shift in the CSEWG population from 'direct' to 'indirect' commercial sexual exploitation, apparently to evade detection by local authorities. 'Indirect' CSEWG populations substantially outnumbered 'direct' CSEWG populations.

The assumption that trafficking is more likely to occur in 'direct' commercial sex locations, such as brothels, compared to 'indirect' commercial sex establishments, where women and girls may have more choice in accepting or refusing clients, was found to be false. Trafficking was found in all different kinds of commercial sex establishments, and certain kinds of exploitation, such as the forced sale of virginity, was found to be widespread in 'indirect' commercial sex establishments.

The exploitation of women and girls within the commercial sex establishment, principally the brothel, is strongly supported by a semi-parental relationship, which is reflected in the language used in this social context. This may be especially socially significant for women and girls who have fled their households due to extreme patterns of sexual and physical abuse. Women and girls with few options for survival, often fleeing exploitative relationships with their family, could integrate into the social structure of the brothel, that often mimics kin relations, despite its exploitative nature. This was found to be the case even among smaller mobile groups of CSEWGs, often operating in nightclubs and bars, who would be controlled by a 'mamasan', who they referred to as a 'mummy'.

In other commercial sex locations, it was found that there was a high variety of means of control and force used to manipulate women and girls into providing sexual services, and that this did not always correspond to the perception of the levels of choice that women and girls had to choose their clients. Many overt forms of control were found in karaoke establishments, for instance, though workers here are perceived to make their own decisions about providing sexual services. This perception is actively manipulated in many cases for the purpose of recruitment of young girls, often through deceptive practices, into karaoke establishments, and forms an active part of the virginity trade.

Recent alterations in the social structure of the commercial sex trade are posited to have resulted from concerns to evade counter-trafficking monitoring systems, and arguably to sustain the virginity trade. This can be seen, for instance, in the systematic shift from 'direct' to 'indirect' commercial sex locations in most of the provinces studied. Trafficking also appears among small mobile groups in certain 'entertainment' places, though it is impossible to say whether the prevalence of these groups is increasing.

Cultural Norms and their Influence on Trafficking

Cultural norms, such as gender-based norms, were found to have a strong influence and to sustain trafficking practices. Most clearly, it delineates the demand for the virginity trade. Furthermore, norms that stigmatize and blame women and girls for 'immoral and unwomanly' behaviour, while excusing sexual promiscuity in men, contribute to patterns of violence against women that are pivotal to trafficking. Shame and social stigma were found to be strong tools used by traffickers or recruiters from source communities.

Social Profile

In terms of patterns of social vulnerability to trafficking, the research explored how a woman or girl's relationship to her household can make her more vulnerable, not only to trafficking, but also to sexual exploitation, and migration into commercial sex in general. It is argued that in some cases, a woman's relationship to her household can be indicative of her social vulnerability, which can then be taken advantage of by trafficking networks.

Three different relationships to the household are hypothesized, which influence the pattern of migration and trafficking – connected, disconnected and 'satellite'. This allows the analysis to differentiate between forms of trafficking that are formed by the involvement of the household, and those that are not. Migration and trafficking that is facilitated by the household, often through female networks, is 'connected'. In other cases, a woman or girl may be working in commercial sexual exploitation, with the tacit acceptance of her family who may depend on her income. She will often be unable to reintegrate into the household because of the social stigma of her work, and becomes a 'satellite' of her household. Lastly, persistent forms of social vulnerability to trafficking were seen among women and girls who had left their households, and become disconnected with it.

Women who became disconnected from their households often did so because of patterns of abuse, or a consequent response to the social shame and stigma resulting from the abuse. In cases of sexual abuse and rape, it was found that women and girls were consistently blamed for this abuse, particularly as they would no longer be virgins before marriage. Women and girls would then themselves choose to leave the household, or be recruited through 'friendship' networks that often led to trafficking. Women and girls who have left their households were also found to be extremely vulnerable to sexual exploitation and rape, as well as to trafficking, once they have left the protection of the household.

In Survey 1, there were crucial differences in terms of work experience and social problems experienced before entry into commercial sexual exploitation, which appeared to vary according to ethnicity. As can be seen from Table 1 below, Khmer women had more experience in rural sectors, whereas ethnically Vietnamese respondents had less. Ethnically Vietnamese women and girls also appeared to experience significantly more unemployment, though it is unclear whether this is entirely due to the effects of discrimination, or because of a process of 'grooming' for the commercial sex industry.

Table 1 – Percentage of Work Prior to Entry to Commercial Sexual Exploitation, by Ethnicity (Survey 1, n= 312)

Work Pre-Commercial Sex	% Ethnically Vietnamese	% Khmer	% All
Farm Worker	22	61	52
Domestic Worker	12	33	28
Garment Worker	7	21	18
Coffee Shop Worker	28	16	19
Beer Girl	1	16	12
No Work	26	16	18
Other	26	31	30

Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Domestic Work – The Links

The links between migration and trafficking into commercial sex and domestic work were explored through the Child Domestic Worker (CDW) survey, as well as through in-depth interviews with CSEWGs who had formerly worked as CDWs in Survey 2.

Extensive links with migration into child domestic work were especially found among those identified as being ‘disconnected’ from their household. Over 50% of Khmer CSEWGs had formerly worked as domestic workers, and they were often removed from their households due to family dysfunction, such as the risk of abuse or rape from a step parent. Yet, within the domestic work situation, they were also very vulnerable to sexual exploitation – 18% of CSEWGs who had formerly worked as CDWs had experienced attempted rape, and 10% were actually raped. Perpetrators of the abuse were often CDW employers or their immediate relatives. Kin relationships between the house owner and the CDW appeared to have no effect on reducing the risk of abuse. In only a very small minority of cases was any remedial action taken. Most commonly, rape victims viewed entry into commercial sexual exploitation as their only remaining option, due to their loss of virginity.

Entry into Commercial Sexual Exploitation

Problems prior to entry into commercial sex were found to be high though this appeared to vary according to ethnicity. Both Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese CSEWGs identified ‘illness’ as a factor that facilitated their entry into commercial sex, at 53% and 32% respectively. However, levels of debt were found to be significantly higher among ethnic Vietnamese CSEWGs’ families, at 62%, compared to 40% for Khmer CSEWGs’ families. This supports the findings of other research which has shown the link between debt and patterns of trafficking among the ethnic Vietnamese (Farrington, 2002). Family dysfunction, such as the effects of divorce and step-parents, appeared to have a stronger explanatory power among Khmer CSEWGs.

Table 2 – Family Problems before Entering Commercial Sexual Exploitation (Survey 1, by Ethnicity)

Family Problems before entered Commercial Sex	Illness	Lack of food	Debt	Loss of land	Domestic Violence
Vietnamese	36	32	62	11	9
Khmer	51	53	40	31	34
All	47	48	45	26	28
	Alcoholism	Gambling	Step-parent	Other	Divorced or dead parents
Vietnamese	15	3	11	15	29
Khmer	21	9	32	28	55
All	20	8	27	25	49

The Virginity Trade

A significant minority – 38% (n=78)- of women interviewed in Survey 2 had entered commercial sex through the sale of virginity. Entry into commercial sex after this sale appeared to be perceived to be axiomatic. Ethnically Vietnamese CSEWGs were again an over-represented group, at 28% of all respondents who had sold their virginity. Ethnicity is a strong factor in risk of having virginity sold – 52% of all ethnically Vietnamese women and girls interviewed had sold their virginity, compared to a lesser 34% of Khmer respondents.

Girls in the virginity trade were overwhelmingly younger than their commercial CSEWG counterparts – age at first sex was on average 16 years old for ethnic Vietnamese and 17.2 years for Khmer girls. The results from the qualitative research also strongly support the idea that the virginity trade fuels underage entry into commercial sexual exploitation. Girls may initially sell their virginity and then enter work in a commercial sexual establishment after a gap of up to several years, by which time they are over minimum age requirements.

In terms of client groups, the majority were Asian with ‘Western’ men accounting for only 9% of the total client group. Cambodian men formed 49% of the total of clients buying virginity. The majority of Cambodian clients preferred Khmer girls, whereas ethnically Vietnamese girls were most commonly sold to Asian clients.

While in the majority of instances this trade appears to be voluntary for women and girls selling their virginity, there was a high use of force and incapacitation through drugs or alcohol at the time of commercial sex. 18% of women and girls were incapacitated in some way, with up to 10% being completely unconscious. Clearly, this corresponds to forms of coercion used in the trade. In terms of force used, Table 3 below shows that this also varies with ethnicity. While it appears that the use of force may be more common among Khmer women and girls, this could refer to overt force only. Pressures and coercion used by members of the household, for instance, on girls may not be perceived by them as being ‘force’.

Table 3 – Use of Force in Sale of Virginity (by ethnicity, Survey 2)

Stated Willing or Forced	Vietnamese %	Vietnamese No.	Khmer %	Khmer No.	Overall %	Overall No.
Willing	73	19	69	36	70	55

Forced	15	4	31	16	27	20
Don't Know	12	3			3	3

The virginity trade appears to range in its use of facilitators. Some respondents are directly approached by clients, particularly in karaoke locations. In many instances, the sale is brokered by local agents, often the managers – *maykaa* – in higher class karaoke establishments. The virginity trade has overwhelmingly moved out of the brothel, but can be found in a range of entertainment locations. Patterns of organization appear to be most systematized in areas catering to foreign clientele, and around locations such as casinos.

The structure of certain commercial sex establishments also ensures the availability of virgins to clients, without the use of overt force to ensure sexual exploitation. For instance, karaoke parlours regularly recruit ice pickers – *neak ja takok* – who serve ice to clients, and allegedly provide no sexual services. These women and girls may be independently approached by clients to negotiate virginity buying within the karaoke, without the direct involvement of the karaoke owner in the negotiations (though the karaoke owners conspired to make the women and girls ‘available’ to clients).

Estimations of Prevalence of Trafficking

The purpose of the current study was not to measure prevalence of trafficking. However, a measure of *ever* having been trafficked were compiled from the results of Survey 1 and 2, using aspects such as age, force and deceit (and a further aspect of force through acquired debt for Survey 2). In Survey 2, much of the trafficking was found to occur through the virginity trade. A total of 49% of women in survey 2 had been trafficked *at some point*. In Survey 1, 30% of women and girls had been trafficked when they entered commercial sex.

Table 4 – Breakdown of Types of Trafficking (Survey 1 and 2)

Type of Trafficking	Survey 1 (Percentage of Total Sample, n= 312)	Survey 2 (Percentage of Total Sample, n= 203)
Deceit	15	21
Force	5	9
Deceit and Force	16	8
Force through acquired Debt	N/A	13
Underage (current and at time of entry into SEW)	20	43
Total Percentage of Sample who Have Ever Been trafficked	33	49

Trafficking Networks

In terms of patterns of recruitment, the networks that facilitate trafficking were found to be dynamic, often evolving due to community-based counter trafficking efforts, among rural communities and/or CSEWG communities, as well as due to more formal counter-trafficking conducted by local authorities and NGO partners.

Networks appeared most prevalent in areas that had a high level of labour migration, into commercial sex and into other areas. Several case studies demonstrating the establishment of networks and their dissolution are discussed. Factors that maintain networks appeared to include perceptions of economic gains, high rates of labour migration, as well as impunity to traffickers due to lack of political, or allegiances between traffickers, local authorities and even client groups.

Several key recruitment networks were distinguished, including household-based networks, 'friendship' (former CSEWG) based networks, male-based networks and opportunistic networks. All of the networks were found to take advantage of dysfunction within the household, gender-based norms that support violence against women and patterns of social shame to perpetuate trafficking practices.

Household-based Networks

Household-based networks can either facilitate the entry of a woman and girl into commercial sexual exploitation, or more commonly, become dependent on her income once she has started earning money. Both Khmer and Vietnamese families can act to place the woman or girl into commercial sexual exploitation, and this was found to be particularly the case if the girl had been raped, or if there was the presence of a step parent. In cases where rape was perpetrated by the step father, the household often took steps to preserve its integrity, often by excluding the woman or girl, which often precipitated an entry into commercial sex.

Household-based networks were most clearly seen when other members of the family were involved in the commercial sex industry. Ethnically Vietnamese CSEWGs often used female relatives to facilitate entry into commercial sexual exploitation, though this is also found among Khmer women and girls. In some cases, victims of trafficking have later used the networks that they established to facilitate the entry of a younger sibling into commercial sex.

'Friendship'-based networks

'Friend'-based networks are pivotal not only for the recruitment of new girls and women into commercial sexual exploitation, but also often facilitate the mobility of CSEWGs from province to province. They seem to interact with trafficking practices in several key ways – firstly, as a means of 'cultural influence' in certain (urban areas) that supports the 'normalization' of perceptions of commercial sex; secondly, as a means of recruitment into commercial sexual exploitation; thirdly, as a means of re-trafficking, from one commercial sex establishment to another.

'Friends' who act as recruiters and traffickers appear to be made up almost exclusively from former and current CSEWGs. Certain CSEWGs, within the hierarchy of the brothel, may become entrusted to seek out and recruit new women and girls, often from other commercial sex locations. However, these women may also return to their former rural communities seeking new recruits. Women and girls can be trafficked by 'friends' outside of the commercial sex establishment. Cases of collusions between former CSEWGs and regular clients to traffick women and girls, especially for the sale of virginity, were found. Women and girls who have become disconnected from their households and thus reliant on their friendship networks seem particularly vulnerable to recruitment and trafficking through these networks.

Male-Based Networks

Male-based networks actively use patterns of social shame and stigmatization to recruit and entrap women and girls into commercial sexual exploitation. Rape was used by several male networks, not only to 'break in' their victims into their roles as CSEWGs, but also to sever their ties to their communities. Threats to reveal women and girls' non virginal status to their families and communities was actively used in some cases to ensure that women and girls did not leave the commercial sex establishment.

Male-based networks make strong use of gender norms that make women alone responsible for maintaining sexual 'purity', especially before marriage. Women who have transgressed these social norms will be socially shamed. Fear of social shame was a tool that was most actively used by male networks, though all networks used them to some extent.

Opportunistic Networks

These networks are characterized by their planned opportunism, and most frequently can be seen to operate in areas that receive many rural to urban migrants, especially in Phnom Penh. Areas such as 'Bouding' and other areas in the centre of the city recur as locations where women and girls first made contact with recruiters and traffickers. These networks seemingly persist as they target young poor women and girls with few employment options, and often lure them into the virginity trade.

Conditions in the Commercial Sex Establishment

In terms of destination forms of control, these were found to vary widely according to location. They included the use of debt, systems of fines and payments, use of force and threats to families in source communities, threats of revelations concerning the women and girls' involvement in the commercial sex trade, as well as the evolving use of drugs.

Women and girls' own perceptions of 'force' and 'control' were found to be pivotal to perpetuating or countering trafficking related practices. The use of overt force was found, for instance, to be clearly defined as a trafficking practice by CSEWs, while debt often was not. In some cases, women and girls felt that they could approach local authorities for help to counter patterns of exploitation within a commercial sex establishment, and they identified this as a recent and evolving aspect.

Monitoring Systems

While an evaluation of the anti-trafficking monitoring systems currently in place was not within the remit of this study, it should be clear from *Estimations of Trafficking* that it has failed to detect many cases¹.

While noting that relationships with the police and counter-trafficking authorities are evolving, so that CSEWGs are coming to have more trust in their ability to report trafficking, corruption among local authorities frequently undermines that trust. In terms of 'rescue', this most frequently appeared to happen when clients chose to remove women or girls from the sexual exploitation, most often to become their mistress.

¹ Basic data on the numbers of women and girls rescued from sexual exploitation to date is unavailable, thus the research cannot conclude whether most women and girls have passed by the monitoring system.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, trafficking and related practices within Cambodia were found to rely and exploit gender-based norms that blame and stigmatize women and girls for involvement in the commercial sex industry, regardless of the patterns of force and violence that have led to their presence there. This strongly suggests that counter-trafficking efforts need to address patterns of social vulnerability and wider norms that support not only the trafficking of women and girls, but also sexual violence and exploitation, to be effective.

Furthermore, certain groups appear to be persistently vulnerable to certain kinds of trafficking. Women and girls who have severed their relations with their household, often because of a pattern of abuse, are vulnerable to recruitment by certain networks, such as 'friendship'-based networks. Trafficking appears to be very high among certain ethnically Vietnamese urban communities in Phnom Penh. Ethnically Vietnamese women and girls are often recruited into the virginity trade when they are underage, and this report confirms other research (Chab Dai, 2006) which has found widespread acceptance of child selling practices among these communities. Counter-trafficking needs to find effective community development strategies to overcome the difficulties encountered by these communities.