SLAVES, SAVIOURS, AND SEWING MACHINES

SLAVES, SAVIOURS, AND SEWING MACHINES:

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF CAMBODIA'S COMMERCIAL SEX IMMEDIASCAPE

By ALANA SELDON, B.A.

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Abstract

Cambodia's commercial sex industry has long been the subject of transnational concern, yet this enduring problematization has yielded little in the way of lasting 'solutions.' Central to constructions of Cambodia's sex trafficking problem are stories – narrative and numerical – that are not entertainment or fact, respectively, but political and ideological discourses that structure social problems and their solutions while masquerading as unmediated. In this media ethnography, I thematically analyzed aid documentaries, websites, reports, and tax returns to explore how sex trafficking in Cambodia is constructed in aid discourses as a problem to be solved. I argue that anti-trafficking rhetoric, narrated over iconographies of Cambodia's savagery, entangles notions of material and moral poverty. Documentaries construct Cambodian families as both broke and broken, and thus as giving rise to Cambodian sex trafficking's central, archetypal dyad: the bad mother and the innocent daughter. I further articulate how the trope of the innocent daughter is contingent on her framing as a 'sex slave.' These reductive discursive constructions enable similarly oversimplified solutions. The solution to 'bad mothers' is 'better parents,' enacted through maternalistic and paternalistic interventions; the solution to 'sex slavery' is 'freedom at all costs,' articulated through raid and rescue interventions. I suggest that articulations of the civilizing mission run through anti-trafficking discourses and interventions, evidenced by their attempts to use numbers to render the complexities of sex trafficking knowable and therefore manageable, but also in their commitment to 'developing' the Cambodian sex slave through rehabilitation programs that replace sex trafficking with more civilized, though still exploitative, forms of gendered labour. The ways in which sex trafficking in Cambodia is constructed in aid discourses as a

problem to be solved therefore ensures the ongoing presence of the anti-trafficking apparatus in Cambodia and the ongoing exploitation and abuse of the Cambodian girls subjected to aid interventions.

Keywords: aid, anti-trafficking, sex trafficking, sex workers, Cambodia

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Introduction

In a promotional video for former *New York Times* journalists Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn's 2012 documentary*, Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, Hillary Clinton states:

> The way that Nick and Sheryl use stories to capture attention, to break through the either resistance or indifference that still exists when you talk about women and girls, is exactly the right way to go about it, because first of all, stories are powerful. They are not just about one person, even though that's who we're reading about. They are about problems and trends that this one person represents. But to take one person's story, like Somaly Mam's story,[1] and be able to say, "Oh my gosh, what can I do to help this extraordinary woman continue her mission to save girls from the life that she was subjected to? And how can I help her to convince the decision makers in her society to be on her side, to change the laws, to prevent the practices by the police and the courts that have led to this human trafficking abuse?" So it gives you a tangible way to get into what could otherwise be an overwhelming sense of rage and helplessness in the face of such horrific injustice against girls and women. (Half the Sky Movement, 2013, 0:06)

I remember watching *Half the Sky* eight years ago from a bar called Meta House in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where I was working as an English teacher. It was daytime

[1] In her memoir, *The Road of Lost Innocence*, "former child sex slave and anti-trafficking activist" Somaly Mam describes being sold into sexual slavery by a family member in Cambodia (Somaly Mam Foundation, 2020, para. 2). Mam eventually founded a Cambodian anti-trafficking organization, Agir Pour Les Femmes en Situation Précaire [AFESIP], that conducts brothel raid and rescue missions and runs rehabilitation programs for rescued Cambodian girls. In a series of articles for Cambodian newspaper *The Cambodia Daily* in 2012 and 2013, journalist Simon Marks began questioning the legitimacy of many of Mam's claims, including whether she was ever trafficked. AFESIP continues to operate.

and I was drinking a mug of Angkor or Anchor beer – I couldn't figure out how to pronounce them differently and never knew or cared which one I ordered – and trying to sit in such a way that the backs of my thighs wouldn't leave sweat pooled on the seat. I remember this documentary because it made me feel angry and confused and privileged and a little bit sick, although maybe that was the beer. This is the power of stories.

At the time, I thought *Half the Sky* was telling me the parts of the story of commercial sex in Cambodia that I wasn't able to understand from my nighttime bike rides through Phnom Penh. With few friends and no air conditioning, I often spent my evenings trying to outpace loneliness and oppressive heat by biking the city's dark streets. Looking back with learned anthropological sensitivity, I am now troubled by my naïve fascination with bar light vignettes staged to seduce: young women in short dresses and heavy makeup lined up in plastic chairs outside hostess bars, beer gardens, and karaoke clubs. Of course, the night showed me other women: women selling fresh fruit and fish and flowers, women pushing carts piled high with plastic bins and buckets, women riding motorbikes with and without their children standing up on their thighs, tiny hands clutching handlebars, surfing through the night. It was scenes of Phnom Penh's sex workers, though, that held my curiosity into daylight.

I began combing the Russian Market's counterfeit DVD stalls for commercial sex documentaries. Discovering films scored by Nick Cave, narrated by Mira Sorvino, and produced by Lucy Liu, I was surprised to find celebrity activism in a country that so rarely made the Western news. I somewhat uncomfortably admit that these sensationalist films, given weight by their celebrity endorsements, did to me what they were made to do: they kindled my desire to know more about Cambodia's commercial

sex industry and the women and girls seemingly trapped within it. This is how I ended up at Meta House among a crowd of expats, watching a screening of *Half the Sky*.

Because I remember feeling that potent mix of anger and confusion and privilege and sickness, I cannot indict those who have felt alive with a sense of urgency to 'do something' after bearing witness to (what they think is) incomprehensible suffering. I will not condemn those individuals who moved to Cambodia and started NGOs after having transformative experiences abroad that shook their understandings of the world and their places in it; my experience in Cambodia was too similar to too many of these NGO creation stories for me to castigate them. Thankfully, though, while this project (and really, my academic career) has roots in my ignorant curiosity, I consider myself fortunate to have taken courses that taught me to think critically, and to have been guided by an excellent supervisor, Dr. Cal Biruk, who encouraged me to 'flip' my research question instead of abandoning it when COVID travel restrictions scrapped my in-person fieldwork plans, the result of which was a complete reorientation to this topic – from studying down to studying up.

What I offer here is thus not a commentary on individual aid actors' good intentions, however misguided, nor an on-the-ground ethnography of aid organizations combatting commercial sex in Cambodia, nor Cambodia's commercial sex workers themselves. Instead, this is a media ethnography exploring how sex trafficking in Cambodia is constructed in aid discourses as a problem to be solved. Part of this is logistical – in this era of COVID constraints (and ennui), instead of being able to travel back to Cambodia to conduct ethnographic fieldwork, I once again found myself watching commercial sex documentaries as a "tangible way to get into"

this project. In the spirit of coming full circle, I return to Hillary Clinton's words as a prologue to what follows: a thesis about stories told by foreign actors, problems, trends, and representations; stories about missions to save girls; stories about a society whose laws and police and courts led to human trafficking; and stories about horrific injustice against girls and women. What follows, then, is a story about stories.

This project centres anti-trafficking documentaries due to their accessibility and prominence in transnational conversations about sex trafficking in Cambodia: *Tending Clouds: Sold, Survived, Stronger* was chosen as an Official Selection by 16 film festivals, including two Academy Award nominating festivals, in the 2020-21 season. *Nefarious: Merchant of Souls* has garnered, at the time of writing, over 1.9 million views on YouTube since January 2020. *The Pink Room* won an Emmy in 2014 for Best Documentary, as well as 10 other film festival awards. While I turn to aid organization websites, reports, and tax returns later in this project to nuance and complicate the constructions of Cambodia's sex trafficking problem put forth by these titles, I foreground them in this project to explore this problematization in the same way that broad swaths of the public do: through documentaries.

Documentaries are hardly toothless forms of entertainment or neutral accounts of fact, however. Rutvica Andrijasevic and Nicola Mai (2016) claim that visual media representation of social problems "plays an increasingly crucial role in setting the 'primary definitions' according to which these are subsequently understood and addressed" (p. 1). Lyndsey Beutin (forthcoming) asserts that studying anti-trafficking media "reveals how multi-sector media repetition stabilizes anti-trafficking's status quo-preserving truth claims" (p. 7). Carole S. Vance (2012) argues that anti-trafficking documentaries rely on "the seeming authenticity of the real" to obfuscate

the ideological and political work that these films do: in constructing oversimplified narrative accounts that render the complexities of commercial sex legible, they "mobilize emotional and urgent support" for aid interventions that engage narrow and perpetual solutions to the problem (p. 201). Heidi Hoefinger (2016) notes that, in addition to sustaining aid interventions, these stories also have the power to cause harm to the 'victims of sex trafficking' they claim to advocate for by creating hierarchies of victim worthiness while disregarding structural factors engendering commercial sex in Cambodia like poverty, gender inequality, and lack of education and employment opportunities. Building off these scholars, this project takes anti-trafficking films to be both produced and productive – and therefore worthy of critical inquiry – despite their framing as fact or entertainment.

Cambodia's commercial sex film boom arguably began in 2004 with *Children for Sale*, a Dateline NBC special investigative report that combined undercover footage of Cambodian children and alleged American pedophiles, a dramatic brothel raid, and interviews with aid actors. The transnational interest in commercial sex in Cambodia, however, is nothing new. Commercial sex is illegal but commonplace in Cambodia, with men frequently visiting sex workers as a premarital rite of passage or culturally sanctioned extramarital endeavor (Rosas, 2011; Yang et al., 2016). Yet despite commercial sex being widely socially accepted among many Cambodians themselves (Couture et al., 2011), foreign actors have long framed it as a critical problem in need of intervention (Chow, 2020; Martínez, 2016; Rosas, 2011), from French colonial programs enforcing weekly medical examinations for *les filles publiques* ('public girls,' Ovesen & Trankell, 2010), to the present-day United States Agency for International Development [USAID]- and United Nations [UN]-funded

SMARTgirl HIV prevention program for female entertainment workers (Lee et al., 2020).

As in many other postcolonial contexts in the Global South, Cambodian sex workers continue to be essentialized into tropes of the "dangerous" and the "endangered" (Stoler, 1995, p. 141), both of which warrant intervention. The framing of the 'dangerous' sex worker largely hinges on fears of sexual contagion. Concerns over rising rates of sexually transmitted infections in imperial troops legitimated the transposing of sanitary regulations from the metropole onto the colonial brothel (Ovesen & Trankell, 2010); rampant increases in HIV in the mid-1990s, meanwhile, attracted legions of intergovernmental organizations [IGOs] and nongovernmental organizations [NGOs] to Cambodia, which remain chiefly responsible for HIV/AIDS programming and funding (Busza, 2014). The figure of the 'endangered' sex worker, and, in its most dramatic iteration, the 'sex slave,' alternatively, is substantiated by colonial and development projects that collapse the distinctions between sex trafficking and sex work, conflating both as inherently exploitative and victimizing. For instance, colonial officials pledged to abolish sexual slavery to rationalize imperial expansion and intervention (Martínez, 2016). Similarly, contemporary aid organizations rescue sex workers during brothel raids without differentiating between those who have been trafficked and those who have not (Bradley & Szablewska, 2016).

HIV/AIDS and sex trafficking are problems worthy of attention, and scholars have rightfully focused on disproportionately high rates of HIV/AIDS among Cambodian sex workers (Couture et al., 2011; Page et al., 2013; Sisowath, 2006) and the conceptually fraught tension between trafficking victims and agentive sex workers

in Cambodia (Law, 2000; Sandy, 2007). Few studies, however, have tracked continuities and ruptures in forms of knowledge, narratives, and moral projects that make commercial sex a problem to be solved in a specific site, nor, crucially, the role of aid discourses in constructing this problematization.

This project aims to unsettle the legacy which presumes commercial sex in Cambodia to be a problem in need of solving by taking up Laura Nader's (1972) provocation that "studying 'up' as well as 'down' would lead us to ask many 'common sense' questions in reverse" (p. 289). Towards the aim of examining how, and to what end, transnational circuits of stories, problematizations, and solutions are articulated in Cambodia-centric anti-trafficking discourses, I ask the following research questions: (1) How is sex trafficking in Cambodia constructed in aid discourses as a problem to be solved? (2) How does this enable and foreclose particular solutions and interventions? (3) What logics and technologies produce and justify demands for interventions? (4) How do present-day framings of this problem intersect and repurpose longstanding tropes and ideologies in framing the problem as particularly Cambodian?

I argue that anti-trafficking rhetoric, narrated over iconographies of Cambodia's savagery, entangles notions of material and moral poverty. In doing so, documentaries construct Cambodian families as both broke and broken, and thus as giving rise to Cambodian sex trafficking's central, archetypal dyad: the bad mother and the innocent daughter. I further articulate how the trope of the innocent daughter is contingent on her framing as a 'sex slave.' I follow the trajectories of these two key constructions – 'bad mothers' and 'sex slavery' – to their corresponding solutions. I argue that these reductive discursive constructions enable similarly oversimplified

solutions to Cambodia's sex trafficking problem: the solution to 'bad mothers' is 'better parents'; the solution to 'sex slavery' is 'freedom at all costs.' The ideology of 'better parents' is enacted through, quite literally, maternalistic and paternalistic solutions. The ideology of 'freedom at all costs' is articulated through raid and rescue interventions that seek to liberate sex slaves from brothels, KTV [karaoke] clubs, and bars. I argue that these oversimplified interventions and discursive trajectories inflict actual harm on not only the sex slaves they aim to rescue, but Cambodia's broader sex worker population caught up in anti-trafficking interventions. Lastly, I argue that articulations of the civilizing mission run through anti-trafficking discourses and intervention. This is evident in their attempts to use numbers towards the aim of making the complexities of sex trafficking knowable and therefore manageable, but also in their commitment to 'developing' the Cambodian sex slave through rehabilitation programs that replace sex trafficking with more civilized, though still exploitative, forms of gendered labour like sewing and jewelry making. The ways in which sex trafficking in Cambodia is constructed in aid discourses as a problem to be solved therefore has the power to ensure the ongoing presence of the anti-trafficking apparatus in Cambodia, as well as the ongoing exploitation and abuse of the Cambodian girls subjected to raid and rescue and rehabilitation interventions.

I structure this project as follows. Below I provide a literature review discussing Cambodia's entanglement with the aid apparatus, Third World Women as sites of transnational intervention, the role of data in constructing Cambodia's sex trafficking problem, and the contrasting but symbiotic power of stories and representations. I then outline my methodology, synthesizing an analytical framework and briefly describing the documentaries and aid organizations substantiating this

project, before signposting my chapters. After exploring my research questions throughout my chapters, I conclude by locating contemporary discursive constructions of Cambodia's sex trafficking problem within their broader milieus.

Cambodia and the Aid Apparatus

To better situate contemporary constructions of Cambodia's sex trafficking problem, I begin with a brief discussion of Cambodia's recent history, particularly as it intersects the rise of the transnational aid apparatus and foreign interest in solving its social problems. Formerly part of French Indochina, Cambodia is a landlocked, largely Buddhist country in Southeast Asia, bordered by Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. France ruled over Cambodia from 1863 to 1953 as a so-called "charming, powerless protectorate" (Chandler, 1997, p. 37). Following independence, Cambodia's civil war (1967 to 1975), Khmer Rouge autogenocide (1975 to 1979), and Vietnamese occupation (1979 to 1989) decimated its infrastructure, economy, and social fabric (Ear, 2007; Ovesen & Trankell, 2010). The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia [UNTAC] assumed political control in 1992 and facilitated Cambodia's first democratic elections in 1993, underpinned by a "culture of violence discourse" that constructed Cambodia as savage and in need of civilizing (Springer, 2009, p. 306). Despite rapid increases in industrialization, urbanization, and foreign investment, the legacy of decades of successive conflicts – widespread poverty, insufficient infrastructure, political and judicial corruption, and human rights abuses – endures (Hoefinger, 2016; Keo et al., 2014). So, too, does the logic that "the humanitarian expertise of a 'civilized' west is once again called upon to tame the 'savagery' of the Asian 'other'" (Springer, 2009, p. 306).

In the 1990s, the transnational aid apparatus entered this milieu and continues to spearhead development efforts (Bourdier, 2013; Busza, 2014; Chow, 2020; Keo et al., 2014). The UNTAC era saw a marked uptick in not just the aid industry, but the commercial sex industry: many scholars and Cambodians alike link the influx of approximately 20,000 UN peacekeepers, and relatedly, foreign wealth and influence, to stark changes in social and sexual mores, including inflation, corruption, and commercial sex (Chow, 2020; Hoefinger, 2016; Keo, 2014). Prime Minister Hun Sen is quoted as succinctly defining UNTAC's legacy with the response, "AIDS," referring to United Nations [UN] peacekeepers' infamous influence on the health of Cambodian sex workers (as cited in Chow, 2020, p. 59). Ear (2007) similarly notes that, despite Cambodia becoming one of the most aid-dependent nations in the world since 1993, the influx of 'aid' has not been conducive to human development, save for political stability indicators.

This timeline only skims the surface of Cambodia's history. For the purposes of this project, however, what bears emphasising is that Cambodia, from the 19th century through the present, has consistently been an object of knowledge production and humanitarian concern for transnational actors, whose interests in it have been variously motivated by projects of colonialism, foreign protection, occupation, or aid. This presents something of a paradox, wherein underdevelopment and its "tendencies towards inequality, backwardness and dependence" (Rodney, 1979, p. 275) act as beacons for foreign aid in constructed-as-savage Cambodia, yet the same social problems that attract attention, including poverty, corruption, and human rights abuses, are often perpetuated or exacerbated by aid interventions.

That the transnational aid apparatus intervened in Cambodia in response to a slate of social problems and remains rooted there is not exceptional. We might see this as an echo of the French colonial civilizing mission, but also as an iteration of the global boom in transnational development initiatives beginning in the late 20th century. Indeed, Ferguson (1994) notes that, across the Global South, "one seems to find closely analogous or even identical 'development' institutions, and along with them often a common discourse and the same way of defining 'problems,' a common pool of 'experts,' and a common stock of expertise" (p. 19). This transnational transposability of problems, experts, and expertise assumes "universal facts" championing Western ideals, as well as a continuum of development that ostensibly represents civilizational progress (Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1994; Mohanty, 1991; Pigg & Adams, 2005, p. 26). What this apolitical, ahistorical development continuum fails to account for, however, is the legacy of Western discourse and intervention in constructing the developing world and its subjects – and, importantly, in maintaining their underdevelopment (Escobar, 1995; Mohanty, 1991). Malkki (1996) argues that there is a certain logic to perpetuating underdevelopment and its attendant social problems since aid interventions are the mode through which the transnational aid community reifies itself.

Under the monolithic rubric of 'development,' aid interventions are enacted in idiosyncratic ways. Scholars have highlighted the ubiquitous but heterogeneous nature of the aid apparatus, specifically through its articulation by NGOs (Bernal & Grewal, 2014; Fisher, 1997; Kamat, 2004; Ticktin, 2014). Notably, NGOs seem to be literally defined not by what they are but, instead, what they are not: the state (Bernal & Grewal, 2014; Fisher, 1997). This expansive definition allows NGOs to champion a

highly diverse suite of political and moral projects that are nevertheless unified by their centering of the suffering body and their ostensible interest in doing good (Bernal & Grewal, 2014; Fisher, 1997; Ticktin, 2014). As Bernal and Grewal (2014) argue, "it seems as if every agenda and political project has a corresponding NGO, and this diversity has complicated theorizing about NGOs as a unified field of power" (p. 2).

My research acknowledges and moves past this complication that has challenged critical development scholars by exploring how the transnational aid apparatus, as a "unified field of power," is concentrated and articled in a particular social site, through certain actors and mediations, to achieve specific political and moral goals. Both the unified field and the concentrated site are of equal importance to this project. I am not offering a media ethnography of a single NGO, but instead, an exploration of what Krause (2014, p. 5) calls "practices of linkage" between transnational aid discourses and their Cambodian articulations and effects.

Third World Women as Sites of Intervention

Despite their multiplicity of political and moral pursuits, aid interventions cohere in that they are typically enacted on those perceived as innocents or framed as victims (Ticktin, 2016). The trope of the (somewhat outmodedly-phrased) "Third World woman" (Escobar, 1995, p. 8) embodies both of these constructions, as well as the 'dangerous' and 'endangered' tropes discussed above, and assumes a stable, homogenous, and natural subject category (or, more accurately, an 'object' category without agency) in need of intervention by Western actors, the latter serving as the developed, modern referent (Briggs, 2002; Escobar, 1995; Mohanty, 1991). As development ideology situates nation states along a continuum, these framings

similarly situate the Third World woman "in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions" (Mohanty, 1991, p. 56).

Such questions about bodies, sexualities, and agency come to the fore upon examining Cambodia's 1996 Law on Suppression of the Kidnapping, Trafficking, and Exploitation of Human Beings, which was passed under the guidance of the transnational aid community and the United States in particular. This law conflates sex trafficking and sex work by removing consent as a qualifier; criminalizing sex trafficking in Cambodia thus necessarily criminalized all forms of commercial sex and categorized all sex workers as victims (Chow, 2020; Keo et al., 2014). The collapsing of consensual sex work and coercive sex trafficking is not limited to Cambodian law, however. The broader commercial sex industry is shrouded in ambiguity – conceptual, ethical, moral, and legal – that adulterates the public imagination, mass media, academic studies, organization discourses, and aid interventions, making disentangling sex trafficking and sex work near impossible (Busza, 2004; Dempsey, 2017; Derks et al., 2006; Fedina & DeForge, 2017; Weitzer, 2007). Despite these debates, however, what persists is the framing of 'sex trafficking in Cambodia' as a problem to be solved.

Central to the problematization of sex trafficking in Cambodia is its construction as 'sexual slavery.' As discussed above, it is possible to trace foreign interest in Cambodia's commercial sex industry back through at least the colonial era. Kamala Kempadoo (2005) notes that concern with 'sex trafficking' and 'sexual slavery' in Southeast Asia intensified in the 1970s due to the Vietnam War and the

area's enduring American (male) military presence: "'sexual slavery' was claimed, from a radical feminist perspective, to be central to this understanding of trafficking, and it was taken to epitomize the very worst of patriarchal oppression and the greatest injury to women" (p. xi). The oversimplified, sensational discursive construction of 'sexual slavery' continues to captivate a diverse range of actors and their uncritical support of this common sense problem, from celebrity advocates (Haynes, 2014) to evangelical Christians and abolitionist feminists (Bernstein, 2010) to the anti-trafficking organizations I discuss in this project.

Quantifying, Concretizing, and Contesting Sex Trafficking in Cambodia

To solve Cambodia's sex trafficking problem, aid organizations must first establish that it exists: this is the work of data. Scholars note that quantification is not merely an act of counting, but, in our science-as-deity milieu, an act of concretizing and constructing social phenomena (Cruz, 2017; Gitelman & Jackson, 2013; Merry, 2016). Aid organizations and their interventions thus produce, interpret, and are contingent on quantification and data to establish social problems, and crucially, to secure funding (Adams, 2016; Keo et al., 2014; Lagon, 2015; Merry, 2016). Because Cambodia's sex trafficking interventions are spearheaded by a patchwork of aid organizations, there exist no centralized data on these phenomena. Scholars articulate three overarching problems inhibiting the accurate quantification of the scale and scope of sex trafficking: (1) definitional discrepancies between "sex work" and "sex trafficking," resulting in confusion about who should or should not be include in the target population; (2) the so-called "hidden" nature of the population, resulting in difficulties tracking and accessing it; and (3) the imbrication of data on the commercial sex industry and the organizations that produce it, resulting in its

inseparability from political, economic, and ideological purposes (Derks et al., 2006; Fedina & DeForge, 2017; Gan et al., 2014; Lagon, 2015; Tyldum & Brunovskis, 2005). Acknowledging these complications, my research regards the production and purpose of data on sex trafficking in Cambodia as worthy of investigation.

As with quantification of the commercial sex industry more broadly, data on the number of anti-trafficking organization in Cambodia varies. Keo and colleagues (2014) estimate the existence of approximately 200 NGOs focused solely on sex trafficking in Cambodia. While Limoncelli (2016) finds only 51, this still ranks Cambodia fourth globally for national anti-trafficking NGOs, behind only the United States, India, and Russia, countries with drastically larger populations, suggesting sex trafficking in Cambodia is considered a commonplace problem in dire need of intervention. Cambodian anti-trafficking NGOs remain highly dependent on international funding, with – and here I quote statistics warily, for the reasons discussed above – 62% of anti-trafficking programming funded by the Asia Foundation, Oxfam, and USAID, and an additional 31% funded by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Gan et al., 2014). In sum, Cambodian anti-trafficking interventions continue to be spearheaded and funded by foreign aid and maintain a relatively large presence in a country with a relatively small population.

The intersection of the above – framings of sex trafficking in Cambodia as a local and severe social problem, and reliance on foreign aid to solve it – represent what Mutua (2001) calls the "savage-victim-savior (SVS)" relationship (as cited in Chow, 2020, p. 59). Notably, Chow (2020) argues that "the human rights savior *created* the savagery of sex trafficking within Cambodia that perpetuated Cambodia's victimhood" (p. 59, emphasis mine). With this statement, Chow challenges the a priori

assumption that a local and pre-existing sex industry in Cambodia demanded transnational intervention, instead arguing that transnational intervention *produced* sex trafficking and its victims.

Unsurprisingly, ambiguities in operational definitions of sex trafficking in Cambodia and its victims are reflected in conflicting quantifications of these phenomena. Neighbouring Thailand's United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's [UNESCO] office states that, "when it comes to statistics, trafficking of girls and women is one of several highly emotive issues which seem to overwhelm critical faculties" (as cited in Weitzer, 2005, pp. 455-56). Attention must be paid to the term "emotive," as the above quotation suggests that statistics are influenced by human emotion, in opposition to the objective and neutral framing they are typically given.

Following this, Gitelman and Jackson (2013) argue that data are not so much discovered as they are produced and interpreted by certain actors in specific historical, social, and ethical milieus. Further, and "precisely because data stand as a given, they can be taken to construct a model sufficient unto itself: given certain data, certain conclusions may be proven or argued to follow" (Gitelman & Jackson, 2013, p. 7). Interventions and their orchestrators thus rely on, and selectively interpret, quantification and data to establish social problems (Lagon, 2015; Merry, 2016). In short, for sex trafficking in Cambodia to be reified as a widespread social problem in need of transnational intervention, actors must quantify it as such.

Embracing Gitelman and Jackson's (2013) argument that data are often assumed to be "the fundamental stuff of truth itself" (p. 2), what follows is an indication of the range of 'truths' told about the prevalence of sex trafficking in

Cambodia. This is perhaps best illustrated by Thomas Steinfatt's (2011) in-depth discussion of a prominent ghost statistic – data that is less than solid when examined straight on. In 2001, three separate anti-trafficking reports (from *The Future Group*, *Child Rights Foundation*, and a coalition of Cambodian NGOs presenting at an anti-trafficking conference) claimed that 80,000 to 100,000 women and girls were victims of sex trafficking in Cambodia, out of a population of approximately 12 million people (Steinfatt, 2011). This statistic has since been widely disseminated through mass media and NGO releases, although none of the three bodies listed above researched sex trafficking in Cambodia or commissioned independent studies of the phenomenon (Steinfatt, 2011). Steinfatt (2011) attempts to trace this ghost statistic back to its source, proposing it may have been picked from the *Cambodian Human Development Report* [CHDR 2000] published in 2000, as this is one of the two sources listed by NGOs when they make attempts to cite it, though few do. Crucially, however, Steinfatt (2011) notes the CHDR 2000 refers to the number of sex workers at 80,000 to 100,000 nationwide, not trafficking victims.

The *Cambodian Human Development Report* attributes this statistic to two sources, the first being *Human Rights Vigilance of Cambodia* [HRCV 1995], but HRCV 1995 does not report those numbers (Steinfatt, 2011). Instead, HRCV 1995 "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" (Steinfatt, 2011, p. 447). The second source of the 80,000 to 100,000 statistic cited by CHDR 2000 is an oral presentation given by the International Labour Organization/International Programme on the Elimination of Child Exploitation [ILO/IPEC] in 1998, who in turn cite UNICEF (Steinfatt, 2011). No UNICEF

documents report this figure; the only related statistic is a 1995 NGO estimate of 10,000 to 15,000 sex workers in Phnom Penh, though no study was performed to generate this data (Steinfatt, 2011). Steinfatt (2011) concludes that "these 80,000 to 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" (p. 449).

Steinfatt's (2011) dissatisfaction with this ghost statistic's legacy inspired him to develop a new method of quantifying sex trafficking in Cambodia. His novel technique of recruiting local Cambodian motorbike taxi drivers to locate and count victims of sex trafficking won his team the top trafficking research method prize sponsored by a United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking/United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNIAP/UNESCO] competition in 2007 (Steinfatt, 2011). Using the moto driver location method for studies carried out in 2002, 2003, and 2008, Steinfatt (2011) estimated the existence of 624, 1,074 and 1,058 trafficked sex workers nationwide, respectively.

Commenting on Steinfatt's 2002 study discussed above, Derks and colleagues (2006) note that "the one study on the extent of prostitution and trafficking in Cambodia that most thoroughly describes its research methods … has also become the most disputed" (p. 48). Critics question Steinfatt's methods and argue that his operational definition of a victim of sex trafficking, sample size, and use of Cambodian moto drivers as research assistants result in an "undercounting of unknown magnitude" (Swingle & Kapoor, 2004, as cited in Derks et al., 2006, p. 48).

In light of this ambiguity, and in response to the caveats that (1) sex trafficking is widely seen as "evil by definition" and thus categorically in need of intervention

(Weitzer, 2007, p. 451); (2) that anti-trafficking organizations rely on the existence of 'sex trafficking' to secure funding (Keo et al., 2014); and (3) that the existence of trafficking as a widespread problem requires data to quantify it as such (Merry, 2016), we must at least consider the possibility that much of the data on sex trafficking might be overblown, as Steinfatt aims to show. I am not particularly interested in chasing more accurate quantification of sex trafficking in Cambodia, however, nor in disentangling sex work from sex trafficking, nor engaging the moral dimensions of these debates. Rather, here I am interested in data as an object found in my field site – who made it, how, and what for?

Stories, Representations, and the Power of the (Ostensible) Real

As discussed above, while (and, arguably, *because*) numbers are a crucial part of the aid apparatus, they are constructed and contested. Adams (2016) argues that "it is perhaps for this reason that having great stories to back them up seems to give them a kind of credibility that, left to their own devices, the raw numbers never really seem to offer" (p. 49). Narratives and numbers – the two permutations of aid discourse I explore in this project – thus rely on each other for the kinds of work they do. Though data provide perceived certainty, stories offer, returning to Hillary Clinton's remarks that opened this project, "a tangible way to get into" social problems for "everyone who does not speak math (and perhaps even those who do)" (Adams, 2016, p. 49).

Using the seductive capital of "real people," anti-trafficking stories convince viewers to bear witness to uncomfortable reports of violence, abuse, and trauma – something that numbers likely cannot do (Vance, 2012, p. 200). Narratives and numbers do not work in opposition to one another, however. Rather, as Adams (2016) argues, they reinforce each other, filling in the gaps left by each discursive device to

present dense accounts of sex trafficking that appeal to both analytical (numerical) and emotional (narrative) faculties.

In their appeals to the emotional, though, stories and the representations they contain must not be discounted as powerless (Beutin, forthcoming; Hoefinger, 2016; Vance, 2012). This is particularly true when audiences exist at a distance from the on-the ground realities that stories ostensibly represent. As Appadurai (1990) notes, the greater the distance between media stories (like those about sex trafficking in Cambodia) and their audiences (like Western film festival circuit attendees, or viewers who see themselves mirrored in these films' Western aid actors, celebrities, and producers), "the more likely they are to construct 'imagined worlds' which are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects" (p. 299). This project looks to the ways these imaginaries – Cambodia, its sex trafficking problem, victims, and solutions – are constructed in contemporary aid discourses. I draw heavily on Carole Vance's (2012) work on melomentaries, or melodramatic documentaries, as films that

> present themselves as documentary reports, but the bits of empirical evidence (interviews, comments of experts, facts) are organized by a highly predetermined plot line and limited set of characters (or subject positions), all moving toward a triumphant endpoint that is highly overdetermined. (pp. 204-205)

It may seem trivial to focus on anti-trafficking films, when, if we are to believe the stories, "an estimated 50,000 sex slaves in Cambodia" (Sandvos, 2011, 53:42) are being subjected to violence, rape, and, in the words of anti-trafficking organization Agape International Mission [AIM]'s Clay Butler, "strange fetishes like torture and all sorts of weird stuff that most normal people would never ever think about or hear of"

(Sandvos, 2011, 6:27). As discussed, however, the "anti-trafficking mediascape" (Beutin, forthcoming, p. 7) provides a rich ethnographic field site for investigating the ways in which aid discourses influence knowledge production, policy, interventions, and the lives of the individuals caught in their sights.

Constructing Cambodia's Sex Trafficking Problem

We have seen that the transnational aid apparatus has long been embedded in Cambodia yet has failed to solve its social problems, perpetuating Cambodia's ongoing (under)development while ensuring its own durability. Third World Women in particular continue to be constructed as sites of intervention for foreign actors looking to rescue them from sexual slavery, whether or not they want or need saving. Aid organizations rely on numbers and narratives to garner support for interventions, though both discursive forms are produced by, and productive of, ideological and political work. I build upon this scholarship towards the aim of exploring how sex trafficking in Cambodia is constructed in aid discourses as a problem to be solved. My interest in the construction of 'sex trafficking' in particular ways complements existing literature by drawing attention to how politicized and interested framings enable some kinds of interventions and foreclose others. In a field so dominated by emotional stories of suffering and salvation, I focus on how such stories are upheld or bolstered, as well, through numbers. I challenge the dominant framings of Cambodian sex trafficking narratives (as 'sensational entertainment' or 'unscripted reality') and numbers (as 'neutral' and 'objective'), exploring the work that goes into producing aid discourses and the work they do in the worlds of anti-trafficking organizations and the Cambodian girls they seek to rescue.

Mapping Cambodia's Commercial Sex Immediascape

The purpose of this media ethnography was to explore how sex trafficking in Cambodia is constructed in aid discourses as a problem to be solved. I took an anthropological approach to this project in regarding aid discourses as human productions situated in, structured by, and themselves capable of structuring social milieus. In this project, which examined how, and to what end, transnational circuits of stories, problematizations, and solutions were articulated in Cambodia-based anti-trafficking projects, I addressed the following research questions: (1) How is sex trafficking in Cambodia constructed in aid discourses as a problem to be solved? (2) How does this enable and foreclose particular solutions and interventions? (3) What logics and technologies produce and justify demands for interventions? (4) How do present-day framings of this problem intersect and repurpose longstanding tropes and ideologies in framing the problem as particularly Cambodian? Below I outline my methodology by describing my study's analytical framework, sample, and methods of data collection and analysis. I conclude by clarifying key terms used throughout the ensuing chapters.

In constructing this project's analytical framework, I synthesized and extended two concepts put forth by Pooja Rangan and Arjun Appadurai, respectively: *immediations* and *mediascapes.* Rangan (2017) describes immediations as "the audiovisual tropes that are mobilized when documentary operates in the mode of emergency – that is, when it seeks to redeem dehumanized lives as a first-order principle" (p. 4). Appadurai (1990) defines mediascapes as

> image-centred, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements (such

> as characters, plots and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places. (p. 299)

Also building off Lyndsey Beutin's (forthcoming) work on anti-trafficking mediascapes, I thus imagined Cambodia's sex trafficking *immediascape* as my field site and framework, as well as the orienting imperative of the aid-affiliated documentaries I drew on in this project. I selected a corpus of aid discourses that were "narrative-based accounts of strips of reality" (Appadurai, 1990, p. 299) concerned with "redeem[ing] dehumanized lives as a first-order principle" (Rangan, 2017, p. 4). In other words, the melomentaries in this project, as well as the aid organization websites, reports, and tax returns they are in conversation with, largely centered narrative accounts of dehumanized Cambodian sex trafficking victims. This is very much a concept-in-progress, but again I draw inspiration from Rangan (2017) in offering that "what this approach loses in precision, I hope it makes up for in vitality" (p. 19).

In this project, I analysed the following films: *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*; *Nefarious: Merchant of Souls*; *The Pink Room*; *Tending Clouds: Sold, Survived, Stronger*; and *(Sex Workers Cry) Rights Not Rescue in Cambodia*. I also analysed website materials, annual reports, and tax returns from the following organizations: Agir Pour les Femmes en Situation Précaire [AFESIP], Agape International Missions [AIM], Destiny Rescue, Chab Dai Coalition, and International Justice Mission [IJM]. I describe each of these films and organizations for readers unfamiliar with them in the appendix.

The documentaries I selected needed to prominently feature (in practice, they essentially profiled) at least one of these aid organizations. I made an exception for *(Sex Workers Cry) Rights Not Rescue in Cambodia*, which follows the Cambodian grassroots sex worker-led organization Women's Network for Unity [WNU], as I included it in this project as a counterpoint to the other documentaries. This concentrated sample omitted many smaller organizations, as well as many films produced by media outlets that had thematic similarities but were not explicitly linked to aid organizations. What I was left with, however, was a cogent sample of aid organizations and documentaries that spoke in conversation with one another. I considered organizational materials and films together towards the aim of exploring discourses that appealed to both the emotional (via melomentaries and webpages) and the analytical (via annual reports and tax returns). Taken together, it is my hope that this sample substantiates a nuanced, if exploratory, inquiry into how sex trafficking in Cambodia is constructed in aid discourses as a problem to be solved. I am not presenting this as an exhaustive catalogue of all aid discourses on sex trafficking in Cambodia, but as a foray into the immediascape that invites further research that I look forward to undertaking in my doctoral work.

Towards the aim of exploring how sex trafficking is constructed in aid discourses as a problem to be solved, I amassed evidence for analysis in the form of documentaries, as well as aid organization websites, annual reports, and tax returns. Much of my data comes from interviews with aid actors that feature in documentaries for two reasons: one, as I will discuss in chapter 1, documentaries on sex trafficking in Cambodia largely consist of interviews with aid actors spliced with footage of daily life and rely on aid actors' language to 'interpret' visuals; and two, while I had

originally hoped to conduct an on-the-ground ethnography in Cambodia and interview individuals working in these organizations, I found that these films nevertheless provided a substantial amount of language for me to analyze when my travel plans did not come to pass due to COVID-19.

I analyzed my data following a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As this was an exploratory study, I chose this approach as it was an accessible form of analysis where I "need not subscribe to the implicit theoretical commitments of grounded theory if [I did] not wish to produce a fully worked-up grounded-theory analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). Moreover, I was drawn to the reflexive and interpretive slant of thematic analysis, in which themes are not said to 'emerge' from the data, like other approaches claim – rather, I was instrumental in selecting and interpreting them. I transcribed the documentaries by hand and imported them, along with downloaded website materials, annual reports, and tax returns, into NVivo. While watching and rewatching the documentaries, I also kept handwritten memos of my initial ideas. I coded for concepts across my textual materials in NVivo and organized concepts into themes and sub-themes in an iterative manner. I then began to construct this project's narrative based on each theme's data excerpts.

Clarifying Terms

Commercial Sex and Sex Trafficking

I did not want to do a project on 'sex trafficking' in Cambodia. When I conceived of this project, I imagined confining my research to 'sex work' and the adult women that engaged in it. The most straightforward reason why I could not write about sex work in Cambodia is this: consensual sex work, under Cambodian law, does not exist. Recall Cambodia's 1996 Law on Suppression of the Kidnapping,

Trafficking, and Exploitation of Human Beings, which criminalized all forms of commercial sex and constructed all sex workers as victims of sex trafficking (Chow, 2020; Keo et al., 2014). By seeking to only investigate sex work, then, I would have been attempting to pry apart categories from afar to sidestep the conceptual quagmire of 'work' versus 'traffic.'

Moreover, asking *How is sex work in Cambodia constructed in aid discourses as a problem to be solved?* is a dead-end query. Put simply: it isn't. Aid discourses do not construct 'sex work' as a problem to be solved; aid discourses construct 'sex trafficking,' and, as I will discuss, 'sex slavery,' as the problem. Rephrasing my research question from 'sex work' to 'sex trafficking' was thus an exercise in adhering to the ethnographer's imperative to learn her field site's language.

Girls, Girls, Girls

If I did not want to do a project on 'sex trafficking,' I really did not want to do a project on 'child sex trafficking.' In what follows, I reluctantly use the term 'girls' to refer to representations of Cambodian sex workers. Here I buttress this potentially problematic choice with Johansson and Sternudd's (2015) work on visual representations of mental suffering, who assert that, "while the age of the person is not known, the attributes and contexts of the images generally articulate young femininity. Girlhood, then, should be understood as a social construction rather than being indicative of an exact chronological age" (p. 342). Much like my choice to use the term 'sex trafficking,' I use the term 'girls' not without fear of essentializing, or "reproduc[ing] precisely the stereotypes that [I] wish to problematize" (Johansson & Sternudd, 2015, p. 342), but again towards the aim of speaking my field site's

language. ‘Women’ are not typically represented in Cambodia’s sex trafficking discourses – ‘girls’ are.

The discursive collapsing of Cambodian women and girls in the commercial sex industry as ‘girls’ may be a reflection of the Cambodia-specific challenges to neatly bounding these categories. Samarasinghe (2008) states that

> while many of the sex workers I managed to speak to ‘appeared’ to be young teenagers, they all claimed to be over 18 years of age … Their definition of ‘young’ was not at all clear. They may identify ‘unmarried’ younger women as simply ‘young girls’ who may not necessarily be under the age of 18 years. Furthermore, given the cultural norm prevalent in Southeast Asia in general that young single females do not travel unaccompanied, these females may not be minors. (p. 91)

I affirm, however, that in writing about anti-trafficking *discourses*, I am not writing about sex trafficking itself nor the girls cast, accurately or not, as its victims. I ask you to keep these distinctions in mind as you read on.

Chapters

In chapter 1, “Broke(n) Families, Bad Mothers, and Innocent Daughters: Constructing Cambodia’s ~~Sex Trafficking~~ Sex Slavery Problem,” I explore how sex trafficking in Cambodia is constructed in aid discourses as a problem to be solved. I argue that anti-trafficking rhetoric, spoken by aid actors over visual representations of Cambodia’s savagery, collapses ideas of material and moral poverty. Aid documentaries construct Cambodian families as both broke and broken, and therefore as the genesis of Cambodian sex trafficking’s central, archetypal dyad: the bad mother and the innocent daughter. Crucially, the trope of the innocent daughter is

substantiated by her construction as a 'sex slave.' Drawing on Vance's (2012) work on melomentaries and Beutin's (forthcoming) work on 'bad mothers' in aid discourses, I argue that aid documentaries on sex trafficking in Cambodia are both contingent on and constrained by their genre: these discourses are built upon the cultural capital of documentaries as "raw' and 'unmediated,' but also necessarily rely on reductive tropes and storylines (that is, 'bad mother sells innocent daughter into sex slavery') to make Cambodia's sex trafficking problem legible and solvable.

In chapter 2, "Better Parents and Freedom at All Costs: Solving Cambodia's Sex Trafficking Problem," I explore how the discursive construction of Cambodia's sex trafficking problem discussed above enables and forecloses particular solutions and interventions. I trace the two central constructions of the preceding chapter – 'bad mothers' and 'sex slavery' – to their associated solutions, arguing that these reductive discursive constructions enable equally limited solutions. The solution to 'bad mothers' is 'better parents'; the solution to 'sex slavery' is 'freedom at all costs.' The ideology of 'better parents' is enacted through, quite literally, maternalistic and paternalistic solutions. The ideology of 'freedom at all costs' is articulated through raid and rescue interventions that seek to liberate sex slaves from brothels, KTV clubs, and bars. These solutions, foregrounded in Cambodia's anti-trafficking melomentaries, foreclose broader structural and upstream interventions that attend to the complex social worlds that give rise to commercial sex in Cambodia. I close this chapter by exploring the harms that can arise from these interventions, arguing that these reductive solutions and discursive trajectories have the potential to harm not only the Cambodian girls they seek to rescue, but Cambodia's agentive, adult sex workers entangled within anti-trafficking interventions.

In chapter 3, "Good Numbers, Good Jobs, and Good Girls: Articulations of the Civilizing Mission," I explore the logics and technologies that produce and justify demands for intervention. I center aid organization websites, reports, and tax returns instead of the melomentaries I have focused on until this point, although I do draw on documentary segments later in the chapter. I explore the foundational ideologies that substantiate anti-trafficking interventions, arguing that iterations of the colonial civilizing mission underlie anti-trafficking discourses and interventions. This is evident in their attempts use numbers towards the aim of "capturing and appropriating otherwise recalcitrant features of the social and human landscape" (Appadurai, 1993, p. 320), but also in their commitment to "morally and materially 'uplifting,' 'improving' and later 'developing' the supposedly 'backward'" Cambodian sex slave (Watt, 2011, p. 1) through rehabilitation programs that replace sex trafficking with more civilized, though still exploitative, forms of gendered labour like sewing and jewelry making. I also provide an account of the other ways in which anti-trafficking organizations describe their work beyond the sensational film representations discussed previously.

I conclude by offering a prospective and tentative positioning of this problematization's key components – that together, I argue, constitute Cambodia's 'culture of complicity' in sex trafficking – within the transnational (post)colonial imagination. In doing so, I locate contemporary discursive constructions of Cambodia's sex trafficking problem within their broader milieus.

Chapter 1:

Broke(n) Families, Bad Mothers, and Innocent Daughters: Constructing Cambodia's ~~Sex Trafficking~~ Sex Slavery Problem

In the opening scene of Joel Sandvos' (2020) documentary, *Tending Clouds: Sold, Survived, Stronger*, Reaksmey Haas, now an adult, is riding a Ferris wheel at night, Apple EarPods in, eyes alternately gazing down at the neon amusement park lights and closed in apparent recollection. This scene gives way to a montage: shaky video of a young girl in matching cotton pyjamas watching a puppy in an alley pocked with plastic buckets while a rooster pecks at a puddle bleeding out from the house's darkened doorway, clothing hung up on the barred gate; sped-up footage of the Independence Monument in Phnom Penh like it was filmed from a motorbike; close ups of a much younger Reaksmey, eyes downcast; the Independence Monument again; a black and white shot of men in uniforms breaking the lock off a door and kicking it in; a low city skyline with clouds catching the sunlight; more clothing hung up outdoors behind a cluster of windowless corrugated tin and wood shacks bordering an open garbage dump filled with dark decay and bright plastic; another alley, cramped and shadowed; another black and white clip of men in uniforms inspecting, with flashlights, a wall plastered in photos or magazine tear-outs above a disheveled bed; newspaper headlines and a photo of a white man; men in vests marked "POLICE" marching up a flight of stairs with rifles raised to their shoulders; two young girls with their faces blurred out, the taller girl with her hand around the shorter girl's wrist as they climb up another flight of stairs; another newspaper headline: "LITTLE GIRLS SOLD TO PEDO-"; newspaper pull quotes: "Unspeakable…" and "Monstrous…" and "…showed absolutely no remorse," the last one above another

photo of the white man; blurry and off-kilter video of rows of young women seated on something like soccer bleachers before a large glass viewing window; another city view, this time of multi-level concrete houses in dense rows; the amusement park again; more newspaper headlines; photos of Reaksmey white water rafting, and in a poofy princess dress with long white gloves, and in a winter vest with the fur-trimmed hood pulled up, and in a sleeveless dress with her hair dyed a lighter brown, and in a flimsy "Happy New Year" tiara, and in a strapless dress with her hair cut into a bob; a sped-up shot of the Cambodia-Vietnam Friendship Monument in Phnom Penh; Reaksmey running her outstretched hand over the colourful painted palmprints covering a white wall; Angkor Wat at dawn or dusk; the Cambodia-Vietnam Friendship Monument again; rays of sunlight breaking through fast-moving clouds; a younger Reaksmey with bangs on a tire swing, smiling; Reaksmey in a red winter coat, perched by a lake flanked with evergreens and snowy mountains, smiling; Reaksmey walking slowly in a Western wedding dress, smiling; Reaksmey walking slowly through the amusement park; Reaksmey, face tilted to the sky, watching the clouds.

Watching Reaksmey, I feel like I know her. That's the point. Her story – the story of a Cambodian girl born into poverty, dramatically rescued from a brothel, and given a new life where she learns to smile – is made legible through visual representations that repurpose well-known narrative arcs and archetypes. In an early meeting with my supervisor, I told them I stopped watching *Tending Clouds* partway through as I already knew the story. This was a testament to the orthodoxy of the anti-trafficking melomentary genre.

This chapter thus explores how sex trafficking in Cambodia is constructed in aid discourses as a problem to be solved. I argue that anti-trafficking rhetoric, voiced by aid actors over scenes of Cambodia's savagery, conflates material and moral poverty. In this way, documentaries construct Cambodian families as both broke and broken, and thus as the source of Cambodian sex trafficking's central, archetypal dyad: the bad mother and the innocent daughter. I further articulate how the trope of the innocent daughter depends on her representation as a 'sex slave.' Building on Vance's (2012) work on melomentaries and Beutin's (forthcoming) work on 'bad mothers' in anti-trafficking discourse, I argue that anti-trafficking documentaries on sex trafficking in Cambodia are both substantiated and constrained by their genre: these discourses are legitimized by the cultural capital of documentaries as 'raw' and 'unmediated,' but also necessarily rely on reductive tropes and storylines ('bad mother sells innocent daughter into sex slavery') to make Cambodia's sex trafficking problem legible and solvable. Below, I begin where the stories do: in Svay Pak, Cambodia.

Setting the Scene: Iconographies of Savagery

In *The Pink Room*, captions over footage of rusted corrugated metal roofs, clothing hung up to dry around an open garbage dump, and dirt intersections mostly deserted introduce Svay Pak as "a small village 11 kilometers outside of Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh" (Sandvos, 2011, 4:03) that "is considered to be the epicenter of child sex trafficking in Cambodia" (Sandvos, 2011, 4:25). Actress and activist Mira Sorvino, in the *CNN Freedom Project's* documentary, *Every Day in Cambodia*, states that "if you were not born here, if you did not come from this place, you'd never know it exists" (Cohen, 2013, 1:02). Don Brewster of AIM, Sorvino's guide and partner throughout the film, continues: "There's no map. There's no sign" (Cohen, 2013,

1:13). While this may be true, in this section, I briefly explore how aid melomentaries nevertheless map Svay Pak, and Cambodia more broadly, as the epicenter of child sex trafficking through signs and scenes that substantiate iconographies of savagery.

The following three screenshots are typical of the way Svay Pak, Cambodia, and Cambodian girls are represented in aid documentaries. The first shows cramped shacks and floating houses with rusted roofs on the outskirts of Svay Pak where it meets the Tonle Sap River. Overlaid with the subheading "Parental Complicity," this setting – housing typical outside of newer urban concrete buildings or rural homes in Cambodia – becomes something sinister.

Figure 1.1. Cambodia as introduced in Nefarious (Nolot, 2011, 39:13).

The second shows Svay Pak's open garbage dump, which is shown repeatedly in multiple documentaries, as if it is unique and meaningful instead of simply indicating what garbage disposal looks like in much of the world.

Figure 1.2. Svay Pak, Cambodia as introduced in The Pink Room (Sandvos, 2011, 31:25).

The third shows a Cambodian girl spending time alone with a puppy and a chicken. In a pastoral setting, this would seem wholesome and idyllic, but in a concrete alley and in shaky footage, this scene becomes something foreboding (a girl alone) and savage (a girl among animals).

Figure 1.3. A Cambodian girl just watching her pup (or maybe about to be trafficked) in Tending Clouds (Sandvos, 2020, 1:36).

Many documentary scenes do not show anything other than daily life in Cambodia but are voiced over by aid actors narrating the story of Cambodia's sex trafficking problem. Through these narrations, aid discourses transmute scenes of daily life – Svay Pak's ubiquitous open garbage dump, children running wild in mazelike alleys, women selling vegetables and combing their daughters' hair[2] and doing nothing particularly noteworthy – into sites of sex trafficking instead of acknowledging them as typical living conditions in many parts of the world (Vance, 2012). In this way, "the horror of sex is amplified by the horror of poverty" (Vance, 2012, p. 208), and also substantiated by it.

[2] My desire to showcase typical melomentary scenes here is outweighed by my speculation that many (most? all?) of the Cambodian women and girls in these shots of daily life might not be aware that their faces are being shown alongside sex trafficking rhetoric. I have thus not included any images of identifiable Cambodians, though they are crucial to these anti-trafficking films.

In what follows, then, I analyze aid actors' language, knowing that it is almost certainly edited, scripted, or otherwise mediated, to substantiate my argument. This is not to say that these iconographies do not play crucial roles in constructing Cambodia's sex trafficking problem in melomentaries – they do – but without interpretation by aid actors, these images only tell part of the story.

Broke(n) Families: Material and Moral Poverty

Voiced over iconographies of savagery, narratives of the Cambodian family are similarly constructed. Cambodian families are portrayed in melomentaries as broke and broken, suffering from both material and moral poverty. Below I touch on the few instances where aid actors discuss material poverty in isolation before exploring the ways in which familial material and moral poverty are collapsed, and, at times, challenged as the root causes of Cambodia's sex trafficking problem.

Given their dedication to replaying images of poverty – dirt roads, rusted shacks, the ubiquitous open garbage dump – one might reasonably expect melomentaries to situate sex trafficking neatly within material hardship, but this is rarely the case. In one of the only instances where material poverty is centered, in the beginning of *Tending Clouds*, Reaksmey discusses a watershed moment in her family's financial situation:

> I remember when it began, there's a fire. We were sleeping, taking a nap with my baby brothers. The fire was behind our house and the stuff we have, you know for us, we were so poor and we are, we will already struggle. When it happened we just have to leave it all behind, you know. There's no picture of us when we were babies, when I was a kid. My mom was able to save one. To just stand across the field and watch everything that we have and my flowers

> and the land that I used to play at, it was all just burnt. From then on, we barely survived. We lived in a tent and, you know, we do whatever we could to survive. (Sandvos, 2020, 5:33)

Reaksmey's remarks, given in response to an off-screen interviewer asking, "Was there a point where something happened?" (Sandvos, 2020, 5:21) verbally foreground material poverty as lived experience instead of referring to it in an off-hand manner. This passage is also notable as Reaksmey describes her family, though living in poverty, as something functional: she napped with her baby brothers, she played behind her house, her mother at least attempted to save baby photos from the fire that changed the course of their lives.

Similar to the fire being framed as the cause of financial difficulties, Clayton Butler of AIM acknowledges the entanglement of poverty and trafficking when he explains that "a lot of kids get sold by their parents because of financial needs, you know, medical costs, food costs" (Sandvos, 2011, 31:33). A fire, medical costs, and food costs are discrete, nameable trajectories to material poverty that are, if not entirely free from moralization, perhaps easier to chart.

Butler's simple statement that "a lot of kids get sold by their parents" is the central narrative in Cambodia's sex trafficking discourses, overwhelmingly told *without* specific reference to survival or crisis like in Reaksmey's passage above. In the silence where this is not said, assumptions about families being not just materially impoverished, but also, and crucially, morally impoverished, proliferate. In the words of Benjamin Nolot (2011), the director and narrator of *Nefarious: Merchant of Souls*, "We could see that poverty had been an underlying factor driving girls into the sex industry but what we didn't understand is how a parent could sell their own child into

sex slavery" (44:37). The subtext here is that no parent would ever sell their child if they loved her, if they were good parents in a normative family unit. The camera cuts to Helen Sworn of Chab Dai Coalition, who refutes the idea that grinding material poverty, and the need for things like food and medicine, might factor into parents selling their daughters:

> So we carried out research and many people said, you know, "The reason that those communities are selling their daughters is because they're the poorest. It's about poverty. It's about poverty." So we said, "Well, let's go in there and really see what's happening in those communities." But we saw in some of these communities, it wasn't actually the poorest families that were selling their daughters. It could be that some of the families that wanted to sell them for more luxury items like mobile phones, televisions, that kind of thing. (Nolot, 2011, 44:59)

Sworn calls this "a culture of complicity in selling" (Nolot, 2011, 46:12), underscoring her interpretation of families selling their daughters as willful moral wrongdoing as opposed to the possibility that material necessity might play a role. Don Brewster of AIM similarly challenges the idea that material poverty might lead a family to traffic their daughter:

> If we walked around and I pointed to the girls, I don't know if I could point to ten girls that aren't being trafficked. The truth is, it's not – you know, again, look at that little girl out there. If she was your little girl, would you sell her? If you didn't have enough food, would you say, "Oh, I can afford to get rid of her so I can have food?" You know, you wouldn't do it for food. You wouldn't do it for medicine, right? So I mean, that whole idea that poverty is an issue

> really, really takes a big leap. How could that really be an issue, that you choose your daughter? You choose to sacrifice your daughter. (Nolot, 2011, 49:43)

Neat narratives like Sworn's and Brewster's, in casting doubt upon the role of material poverty in Cambodia's sex trafficking problem, obfuscate broader socioeconomic considerations in favour of stories of broken families. This is typical of anti-trafficking discourses that position bad Asian parenting as the cause of sex trafficking (Shih, 2018).

While the 'family sells daughter' storyline is central to constructions of sex trafficking, permutations of the morally impoverished Cambodian family trope abound. Melomentaries also frame the Cambodian family as a spectre that influences their daughters to traffic themselves. In many accounts, Cambodian girls traffic themselves to provide income for their families. In *The Pink Room*, a Cambodian girl, captioned and blurred out, says: "At the time I wouldn't have done it if I knew what they were going to do to me. But at that time, my grandma was really sick and we really needed money so I forced myself into it" (Sandvos, 2011, 16:10). Don Brewster of AIM adds a moral element – a father's gambling and drinking, in contrast to a grandma's sickness – to his discussion of the family's role in pushing a girl to traffic herself:

> Mien grew up in a family where her father was an alcoholic. He would take the money her mother earned and lose it gambling and drinking. Then the baby, her siblings would cry because they had no food and he would beat the children and the wife. In her own words is, "I couldn't stand for my mother to cry anymore and there was nothing else I had so I sold myself into a brothel."

> And she sold herself into a brothel in Svay Pak at the age of 14. They locked her in a room and she waited, because she was a virgin, for a foreign man who would pay a lot of money to be with her. After just a few days, she was brutally raped, and that began her life in the brothel. (Sandvos, 2011, 4:42)

Discussing what he imagines might be going through a Cambodian girl's mind as she stands before foreigners looking to buy sex at a KTV club, Brewster similarly positions the spectre of family as a central factor:

> We did some work, some undercover work for IJM in a karaoke bar in Siem Reap. We went in, 200-300 girls waiting for us when we get in there, big numbers on their chests. You just pick whatever girl you want, and it's a weird feeling. It's almost like the girls don't know how to feel, like, "Please, oh God, don't pick me," versus, "If you don't pick me, how am I going to have any money? How am I going to take care of my family?" (Nolot, 2011, 40:15)

These excerpts contradict what aid actors posit above, namely, that material poverty is not a major consideration in Cambodia's sex trafficking problem. While these narratives do not explicitly describe families selling their daughters, families are nevertheless a central, if spectral, figure in Cambodian girls' 'choice' to traffic themselves.

In addition to financial obligations, aid discourses also highlight Cambodian girls' moral obligation to provide for their broke(n) families. Another Cambodian girl captioned and blurred out says: "My friend introduced me to the work. At the time I was so young, I didn't understand. They said that they would ruin my parents' life if I didn't do it. I didn't want to do that, so I just ruined my own life" (Sandvos, 2011, 16:53). Helen Sworn of Chab Dai Coalition elaborates on this dynamic:

> We knew that the mothers, as much as the fathers, were responsible for selling their daughters. We also knew that those daughters, for them, it was about an honour relationship with their parents. So because their parents had brought them into the world, they then had a debt honour to pay back to their parents for bringing them into the world. So we were seeing that some of these girls that were approaching adolescence were actually grooming themselves, knowing that they would be sold. They'd seen it happen to families that were around them so they knew what was happening. So they would groom themselves because they wanted to honour their parents. For them, if their parents could get more money for them, wouldn't that be a greater sense of honour for them as a daughter? (Nolot, 2011, 48:50)

While parents are referred to throughout these documentaries, fathers are rarely singled out for trafficking their daughters. In one of the few scenes where fathers are the focus, Don Brewster of AIM states:

> But across the way there's six men that sit there every day, smoke cigarettes, gamble, and drink beer all day long. From 10 o'clock in the morning to 10 o'clock at night, that's all they do. And so how could they afford to do that? Because they all traffic their daughters. They'll sit there. They could work, but they don't work. And they traffic their daughters every single day. (Nolot, 2011, 45:34)

These accounts do not absolve fathers of blame, but they differ from the ways in which mothers are constructed as central in sex trafficking narratives. Fathers are largely neglected in accounts of family life and decision making – they are out smoking, gambling, and drinking – and while Brewster states that these fathers traffic

their daughters, overwhelmingly, mothers are referred to in isolation and are explicitly said to have sold their daughters.

Bad Mothers and Innocent Daughters

In Cambodia's sex trafficking immediascape, the broke(n) family is further distilled into a central, archetypal dyad: the bad mother and the innocent daughter. Many constructions of the bad mother follow similar outlines as the immoral families described above, but in this section, I pay special attention to the discursive contours of the flawed female mother/daughter as the crux of Cambodia's sex trafficking problem.

Narratives of the bad mother construct her as such before she is even technically a mother. In *Nefarious: Merchant of Souls*, Helen Sworn of Chab Dai Coalition explains:

> What began to happen in communities if a woman was expecting a baby, if she had a baby girl, they would say to her, "Ah, you've scored the jackpot. It's okay, because you've had a girl. And now if you have financial challenges in your life, you've got this security asset, and if you need to, you can sell her." And people would say, "Well, they can't love their children then. How would any mother, you know, be complicit in the selling of her child? She must hate her child. She must not think anything of her child." (Nolot, 2011, 46:39)

In this excerpt, the bad mother conceives of the innocent daughter as nothing more than a "security asset." What these narratives do not elaborate, however, is that much of the Cambodian population relies on subsistence farming to survive – again obscuring the complex socioeconomic factors that might engender trafficking in favour of simple storylines. Recall Reaksmey's discussion of the fire that pushed her

family further into poverty. In a clip of a TEDx talk shown in *Tending Clouds*, Don Brewster of AIM introduces Reaksmey simply as "a Cambodian girl that was sold by her mother at the age of nine. Her mother sold her to a trafficker who sold her to an American pedophile" (Sandvos, 2020, 8:56). In *Half the Sky*, Somaly Mam of AFESIP similarly introduces another Cambodian girl to actress Meg Ryan: "Srey Pov has been sold when she was seven years old by her own mother" (Chermayeff, 2012, 51:18). In these excerpts, aid actors make no effort to situate 'sex trafficking' within its broader context, instead reducing it to an oversimplified 'bad mother sells innocent daughter' narrative arc.

Bad mothers are not just to blame for selling their daughters to be trafficked, but also for being sex workers themselves. Filmed in profile, with shadows concealing her identity, a girl identified in *Nefarious* as "Champei, Formerly Prostituted" says:

> My mother and a lot of women in my neighbourhood were sex workers. I saw that they were able to make a lot of money, so I decided to become a sex worker, too, so that I can give that money to my mother. (Nolot, 2011, 46:24)

This raises the question: when does a Cambodian girl become a 'mother'? When does a victim become a perpetrator? In aid discourses, mothers do not tend to be situated as actors constrained by broader sociopolitical forces, but as lone villains acting freely.

Even when bad mothers are framed as loving their daughters, they still traffic them, as Don Brewster of AIM discusses:

> We had a girl in our center, aftercare center. This family lived here. And so we'd bring them back for family visits, a supervised family visit. And when I would come with her, she and her mom would – you would swear her mother loves her deeply. I mean, she would weep when she saw her, she'd hug her and

> kiss her, but she trafficked her every day before she was rescued. You know, and I talked to these six pastors, individually, these six Vietnamese pastors and I said, “I just don’t understand. How can that be? How can you tell if the mom really loves the daughter?" And all six of them, individually, said to me, “Well, was she trafficked locally or away? If she was trafficked away, that means they don’t really love her. But if they traffic her locally, where they get to see her, that means they love her.” I mean, how can you understand that? (Nolot, 2011, 47:21)

Bad mothers are also constructed as preventing their innocent daughters’ rescue from sex trafficking. Don Brewster of AIM describes at length an intervention where he attempts to rescue several Cambodian girls from a karaoke bar:

> Well, we’re getting ready to leave, right? And one of the girls with one of the other guys doesn’t want to go. And so she starts running away – now we’ve already paid, we’ve already paid. She starts to run away. The manager goes gets her. I mean, literally, as close as you can get without beating her, screaming at her, that she needs to go with us and do whatever we say and smile all the time. So my wife and the counsellors talk with them and say, you know, “We have a place. You can get out of this. We have a place where you can come, and we can make sure you get healthy, and you’ll get good food. You’ll get an education. We can help you to have a brand-new life.” And the three girls that we had just wept to think that there was that opportunity. There was only one thing we needed to do to be able to take them. They needed their mothers to say it was okay. We called all three moms. All three moms said, “No.” All three mothers said, “No, we’re not gonna – they can’t do it. We need

> the money." We told them, "We'll give you money. We'll actually give you a loan to start your own business. We'll provide all the things you need with it. We'll provide you with training and everything you need to start your own business, and your daughter can go get a great education. When she's done she can earn way more money and she'd be in a way better situation." Even after all that, all three mothers said, "No." So we had to drive those girls back to the karaoke bar. (Nolot, 2011, 42:14)

Reaksmey Haas, in *Tending Clouds*, paints a more detailed portrait of the bad mother, who stands in starker contrast when considered in relation to the innocent daughter – in this case, Reaksmey herself. In this passage, Reaksmey, now an adult, has returned to Cambodia from her life in the United States, and is holding a wedding that she has invited her birth family to:

> I don't know why I do it because I want to run away from her. I wanted, I want my peace so bad, but somehow I felt like I need to be in her life. To see the way that my mom think we owe her something, it was hard to love her. At eight years old, I don't have to take care of the household. I don't have to take all of those weight by myself, and I surely didn't have to be put in a position where I would be exploited or abused and yet somehow she had the audacity to tell me that she sacrificed for me, when all my whole life, as I could remember, I was the one doing the sacrifice. I was the one putting myself in harm's way for my family. I think in that moment I was, I lost it and told her the truth, that sadly I was the parent in this household. (Sandvos, 2020, 27:29)

Taken together, these excerpts suggest the centrality of the bad mother/innocent daughter dyad in constructions of Cambodia's sex trafficking problem. This reductive

framing satisfies melomentary and cultural demands for recognizable tropes and storylines. The bad mother who sells her daughter figures prominently in anti-trafficking discourses as a scapegoat that redirects attention from the complex social and economic factors that might force mothers to make "decisions under constraints and … [negotiate] a complex set of demands on their resources" (Beutin, forthcoming, p. 89). Melomentaries rely on embodied characters, not more nebulous forces like 'honour' or 'poverty' to carry their oversimplified sex trafficking narrative arcs. As Vance (2012) asks, "How does one insert the World Bank, structural readjustment plans, or enforced free-trade policies as characters in this seemingly realist depiction?" (p. 202). The innocent daughter, for her part – read as unquestionably naïve, endangered, and in need of outside rescue – is particularly suited to attracting funding for aid interventions (Okyere et al., 2021). Far from being simple casting choices, these constructions have consequences for the types of solutions they necessitate, as I will discuss in chapter 2.

Cambodia's ~~Sex Trafficking~~ Sex Slavery Problem

The trope of the innocent daughter loses legitimacy if she is represented as choosing to be in the commercial sex industry. As discussed, while more abstract concepts like 'honour' – voiced above as a possible reason girls might enter the commercial sex industry – can be narrated verbally, more commonly, in aid documentaries, Cambodian girls are discursively constructed as sex slaves captured and kept in the commercial sex industry.

In the beginning of *Half the Sky*'s Cambodia segment, Hillary Clinton sets the tone for the scenes that follow:

> A lot of the brutality against girls and women is rooted in deep cultural stereotypes about the worth of women and it's not that different from the way African American slaves were viewed in 18th to 19th century America or Europe. These were not fully human. These were some other kind of being that, under the Bible or under a convenient social rationale, were put on earth to serve somebody else. (Chermayeff, 2012, 42:21)

Sheryl WuDunn continues: "This has led to one of the most pernicious forms of gender abuse today. It's called 'sex trafficking' but that's really a misnomer. It's actually more like 'sex slavery' because girls literally are bought and sold" (Chermayeff, 2012, 43:00). Here WuDunn clarifies what she means by 'sex slavery,' but aid discourses often use this phrase without doing so, suggesting it stands for itself.

In the beginning of *The Pink Room,* Clayton Butler of AIM explains the trajectory of sex slavery in Svay Pak:

> So uh as child sex slavery grew in Cambodia, it became available in the major tourist areas. So in order for Svay Pak to stay in business, they started to cater to the extreme fringes of sexual perversion, so offering the very young girls and allowing people to exercise um kind of strange fetishes like torture and all sorts of weird stuff that most normal people would never ever think about or hear of. (Sandvos, 2011, 6:10)

At the end of *The Pink Room*, screen captions declare that "Today, there are an estimated 50,000 sex slaves in Cambodia and millions globally (Sandvos, 2011, 53:41). Somaly Mam of AFESIP uses this phrase reflexively:

> I remember the man who came to help me find my family. When we arrived in his house, he took me as a child labourer. But I remember he was always touching my body. And then he raped me. I didn't have any notion about rape, about sex. I never heard that. I just know that he made me very painful. He turned me into a sex slave and then he sold me to a brothel. (Chermayeff, 2012, 1:09:08)

Journalist Nick Kristof narrates an AFESIP brothel raid he goes on with Somaly Mam:

> There are ten little rooms in the brothel, shabby little rooms essentially with just a bed. They lock from the outside. Presumably that's so a girl can be locked up inside and the customer is brought to her. If there were any doubt whether this is slavery, look at those locks on those doors. (Chermayeff, 2012, 1:03:43)

These passages use language and symbols – the lock – to further problematize 'sex trafficking' into 'sex slavery.' The Cambodian 'sex slave,' for all her supposed helplessness, has great ideological and political power. She is unquestionably a "helpless, ignorant and dependent" victim in need of rescue, and this construction sanctions interventions that cast aid actors (and their sidekicks, as discussed in the next chapter) as heroes and maintain the sex slave's victimhood and subordination (Sandy, 2007, p. 195). Moreover, the discursive construction of 'sex slavery' attracts attention away from socioeconomic forces that might engender commercial sex (Sandy, 2007), instead pinning blame on savage Others' pathological culture (Beutin, forthcoming).

Aid discourses disseminated through melomentaries thus construct Cambodia's sex trafficking problem as one of culturally-situated savagery, broke(n) families, and bad mothers selling innocent daughters into slavery. Engaging this narrow framing renders the complexities of commercial sex in Cambodia legible, and therefore solvable, by obfuscating nuance in favour of the almost universally-recognized symbols of 'bad mothers' and 'sex slavery.' Cambodia's sex trafficking problem is thus constructed as a problem to be solved through iconographies, archetypes, and story arcs. These reductive framings perpetuated by melomentaries are also constructive in that they have the power to invite correspondingly narrow solutions and interventions, which I turn to in the next chapter.

Chapter 2:

Better Parents and Freedom at All Costs: Solving Cambodia's Sex Trafficking Problem

In *Nefarious: Merchant of Souls*, following a scene introducing Cambodia with a shot of a mud-coloured river lined with rusted shacks and floating houses and the subtitle, "Parental Complicity" (Nolot, 2011, 39:11), director and narrator Benjamin Nolot and AIM's Clay Butler are shown confronting a man as he tries to get on the back of a motorbike. Nolot's narration claims that

> When we drove into the city today, we were coming down the street and we actually saw a pedophile. Older, probably in his 50s, and we were able to track him down, to chase him down, and to warn him not to come back to this city. (Nolot, 2011, 39:16).

Figure 2.1. Nolot and Butler confronting an alleged pedophile in Svay Pak, Cambodia (Nolot, 2011, 39:37).

It is not clear from this clip how they know he is a pedophile, or what happened before or after this. The documentary genre's "seeming authenticity of the real" (Vance, 2012, p. 201), however, buttresses this scene's claims that this man is, in fact, a pedophile, with no proof needed other than that Nolot and Butler say he is a pedophile, and that he is a white man in Svay Pak (though the scene's heroes, Nolot and Butler, are also white men in Svay Pak). This scene exists as a standalone vignette and I engage it here in much the same way: to introduce the saviour mentality present in representations of Cambodia's sex trafficking interventions.

In this chapter, I explore how the discursive construction of Cambodia's sex trafficking problem discussed above enables and forecloses particular solutions and interventions. I track the two central constructions outlined in chapter 1 – 'bad mothers' and 'sex slavery' – to their parallel solutions. I argue that these oversimplified discursive constructions prescribe similarly narrow solutions to Cambodia's sex trafficking problem: the solution to 'bad mothers' is 'better parents'; the solution to 'sex slavery' is 'freedom at all costs.'[3] The ideology of 'better parents' is articulated through maternalistic and paternalistic solutions. The ideology of 'freedom at all costs' is enacted through raid and rescue interventions that seek to liberate sex slaves from brothels, KTV clubs, and bars. The solutions centred in Cambodia's anti-trafficking melomentaries therefore impede broader structural and upstream interventions perhaps more suited to the intersecting social, economic, and political forces that engender commercial sex in Cambodia. I conclude by exploring some of the harms arising from these interventions, arguing that these reductive

[3] I borrow this phrase from the slogan on the AIM website landing page, stylized as "FREEDOM. AT ALL COSTS." (Agape International Missions, 2022b, para. 1).

interventions and discursive trajectories have the potential to cause harm not only to the Cambodian girls they seek to rescue, but Cambodia's agentive, adult sex worker population caught up in anti-trafficking interventions.

Better Parents: Maternalistic and Paternalistic Interventions

In this section, I link the discursive problematization of 'bad mothers' to its solution: 'better parents.' 'Better parents' take the form of individual actors' moral orientations, but also, as maternalistic and paternalistic aid interventions that seek to nurture, love, and raise Cambodian girls rescued from sex slavery. Individual aid actors draw upon their moral positions as better parents to differentiate themselves from the bad mothers who sold their daughters into sex slavery. Somaly Mam of AFESIP states: "I'm the mother and the grandmother of all the suffering girls who have been sex slaves in Cambodia" (Chermayeff, 2012, 44:09). Don Brewster of AIM speaks about a failed rescue attempt where three Cambodian girls' mothers refused to accept money from AIM in exchange for their daughters' liberation from a karaoke bar:

> You know, I have three daughters and five granddaughters, and my granddaughters are almost the age of the girls that we took back. You know, I can't explain it. I can tell you this: that I can't get the pictures of those girls' faces out of my mind, still today, and I don't imagine that I ever will. (Nolot, 2011, 44:07)

These rhetorical claims to being better parents invoke moral superiority and reinforce the discursive boundaries between saviours and savages who sold their daughters.

The ideology of better parents is entrenched in maternalistic and paternalistic aid interventions that seek to nurture, love, and raise Cambodian girls rescued from

sex slavery. Bridget Brewster of AIM discusses how this mission begins as soon as girls join the restoration home:

> On the first night that the girls arrive at the center, we have a princess ceremony. They're called up one by one and everybody claps and cheers and they have a little crown that they put on their head and they give them their picture and then they give them their gifts. They just welcome them, and it goes one by one and everybody cheers and then afterwards they have a dinner and a little party of dancing and cake and ice cream and soda. When the new ones come in, there's so many girls applauding. The noise is just so loud and they're kind of bewildered and overwhelmed. They're like, "What is this?" but then when they get the crown on and you know they see the picture of themselves, a poster, and you know they're just like, "Wow." You know they've heard before, you know, from their customers, their guests, you know, "I love you," and so they're like, "Yeah, I've heard that before." But they are full of hope and promise with a great future and anything they want to do they can do it and we're going to help them achieve that goal. They start believing it and then they know it's true. It's really just an honour to be a part of to see. (Sandvos, 2011, 29:03)

Reaksmey notes that this initiation was a wonderful experience: 'The word that I would describe it was "heaven.' I felt safe there. It was home … I have a crown placed on my head. I feel good to be a princess. It was the beginning of something great" (Sandvos, 2020, 17:19). My point here is not to discount Reaksmey's own interpretation of her experience. Rather, I wish to draw attention to Brewster's discursive emphasis on treating girls as 'princesses' and 'loving' them. This suggests

that these girls have not been properly cherished or loved before – and while this may be true, it also underscores how aid interventions seek to be better parents than the Cambodian parents who sold their daughters into sexual slavery. This continues through until girls mature out of the rehabilitation program. Bridget Brewster of AIM states:

> You're just sad to see them go, you know, like your own children. You don't want them to leave but at the same time you're thrilled. You're thrilled that they finally have this wonderful life that they never thought that they'd have. (Sandvos, 2011, 52:08)

Cambodian girls also articulate this mother/daughter dynamic and the love it engenders, in contrast to the overarching construction of the bad mother/innocent daughter dyad that aid actors frequently frame as devoid of love. Bopha, a rescued Cambodian girl, says:

> When I arrived at ARC [Agape Restoration Center], you know that at ARC we call the staff "mom" but I didn't call them mom. I called them "auntie." When I stayed there longer, I realized I felt that I was safe. I felt comforted, actually given with the truest love. It was something that I'd never received before. When I left there, I knew that I was grown. I was liberated and I could do anything. (Sandvos, 2020, 31:58)

What is interesting about this passage is the way Bopha expresses her reluctance to use the term 'mom' before she felt that she was safe, comforted, and loved. This suggests that Bopha's idea of a good mother is one that provides these things, unlike the bad mother who presumably sold her.

Mak Mom, Reaksmey's former counsellor at ARC, further articulates this when reunited with Reaksmey:

> You can withstand every challenge. You are strong. Reaksmey will stand strong. You're a good child in a mother's eyes. You are a special princess for me and I have a crown [holding tiara] because I love you, daughter, and I believe that you are my princess. In all the accomplishments that you have, it means that I accomplish them too. That's why at an old age, I'm still happy always. I'm happy because first I see your life success, daughter. It was the beginning of the organization and Reaksmey was the youngest child in the center, the smallest and the youngest and the smartest. You are my princess then and now. Understand? And I love you, daughter. Mother will always love you. I want you to be a person of strength and lead the children of this generation. (Sandvos, 2020, 47:47)

Reaksmey replies: "Thank you for protecting your daughter. I told you when I came back I saw my mom. I didn't tear up but when I saw you, I cried. Thank you, mother" (Sandvos, 2020, 49:24). Earlier in *Tending Clouds*, Reaksmey also discusses her birth mother in comparison to Mak Mom:

> My mom never told me to be selfless. My mom tell me to take, take advantage of the people around me. Mak Mom always tell me to serve, to encourage, to educate and empower. To be able to have somebody that tell me, even when you're a child, you can dream how big you want, that's empowering. (Sandvos, 2020, 29:27)

It is not just aid actors who imagine being better parents to Cambodian girls. These excerpts demonstrate that Cambodian girls are also portrayed in aid discourses as

being in need of better parents and allowing aid actors and interventions to occupy that role. Safety, comfort, love, support – these are essential to human development and wellbeing, and in and of themselves do not seem to be problematic or harmful.

What must be emphasised here, though, is that articulating the solution to Cambodia's sex trafficking problem as 'better parents' necessarily reinforces the construction of the problem as one rooted in bad parenting and a lack of love, as was evident in the previous chapter's excerpts. Anti-trafficking discourses often construct aid actors and organizations as "better parents to the children than their actually existing parents" while obfuscating the socioeconomic conditions that constrain parents' decisions (Beutin, forthcoming, p. 96). Because Cambodia's sex trafficking problem is discursively constructed as arising from a flawed bad mother/innocent daughter relationship and not the juncture of social, economic, and political pressures, after a girl is rescued from sex slavery, aid programs discursively attend to better parenting at the expense of broader upstream or structural interventions. Further, the framing of sex trafficking as the result of bad parenting as discussed in the previous chapter legitimizes not just "caring" maternalistic and paternalistic interventions, but heroic ones (Shih, 2018, p. 1078), which I turn to next.

Freedom at All Costs: Heroic Raids and Rescues

In this section, I follow the construction of sex trafficking in Cambodia as 'sex slavery' through to its discursive solution: 'freedom at all costs.' I discuss the raid and rescue model that is central to anti-trafficking melomentaries and anti-trafficking interventions, beginning with the saviour mentality that underpins it.

Anti-trafficking discourses showcase the saviour mentality that appears embodied by individual actors. In *The Pink Room*, Clay Butler of AIM confronts an

alleged pedophile much like he did in *Nefarious*, despite claiming that "we don't confront pedophiles anymore because we found that they basically just go down the street to find someone else that will offer them a girl. So it doesn't solve the problem" (Sandvos, 2011, 9:21). Nevertheless, the film follows Butler as he sits down across from an older white man drinking coffee and proceeds to ask what the man is doing in Svay Pak. In the next clip, Butler speaks directly to the camera:

> Obviously he's not going to admit to being a foreign pedophile, but there's no reason to be in Svay Pak other than that. If he doesn't leave now, the reality is, he will rape a child tonight, which is just crazy, so I just want to wait until he leaves. (Sandvos, 2011, 7:45)

And to the man again: "This is what I do, okay? When you're finished with your coffee, you're going to have to leave" (Sandvos, 2011, 8:30). Similar to the vignette that opened *Nefarious*' Cambodia segment and this chapter, it is unclear how we are to know that these men are pedophiles, other than that we are told they are by aid actors, and they appear to be Western men in Svay Pak. What is clear is that a saviour mentality appears to guide Butler as he is shown in two unrelated films confronting alleged pedophiles outside the boundaries of planned interventions.

This saviour imperative is also present in Don Brewster of AIM, though it is represented in a less dramatic manner. Speaking to Don and Bridget Brewster of AIM, Reaksmey says: "You know how you always tell us about Abraham Lincoln fighting to free slaves and he was your hero and this freedom fighter, and then, like, that's you to me" (Sandvos, 2020, 41:58).

Organized anti-trafficking interventions are also constructed as heroic endeavours. In *Half the Sky*, Nick Kristof introduces the timeline of a typical

melomentary brothel raid: “Somaly [Mam of AFESIP] will periodically stage a raid on a brothel with the help of the anti-trafficking police. That has to start with intelligence about a young girl being kept inside a brothel” (Chermayeff, 2012, 1:00:10). Gathering intelligence involves going undercover, as Clay Butler of AIM explains:

> We’re gonna be going to two karaoke clubs and one hotel. Our goal here is to play the part of the pedophile and you’re trying to gather useful information: who sold them, how much they sold them for, what province they came from. Tomorrow we have a meeting with IJM and some anti-trafficking police and so if they deem the information compelling enough they’ll act on it. (Sandvos, 2011, 22:18)

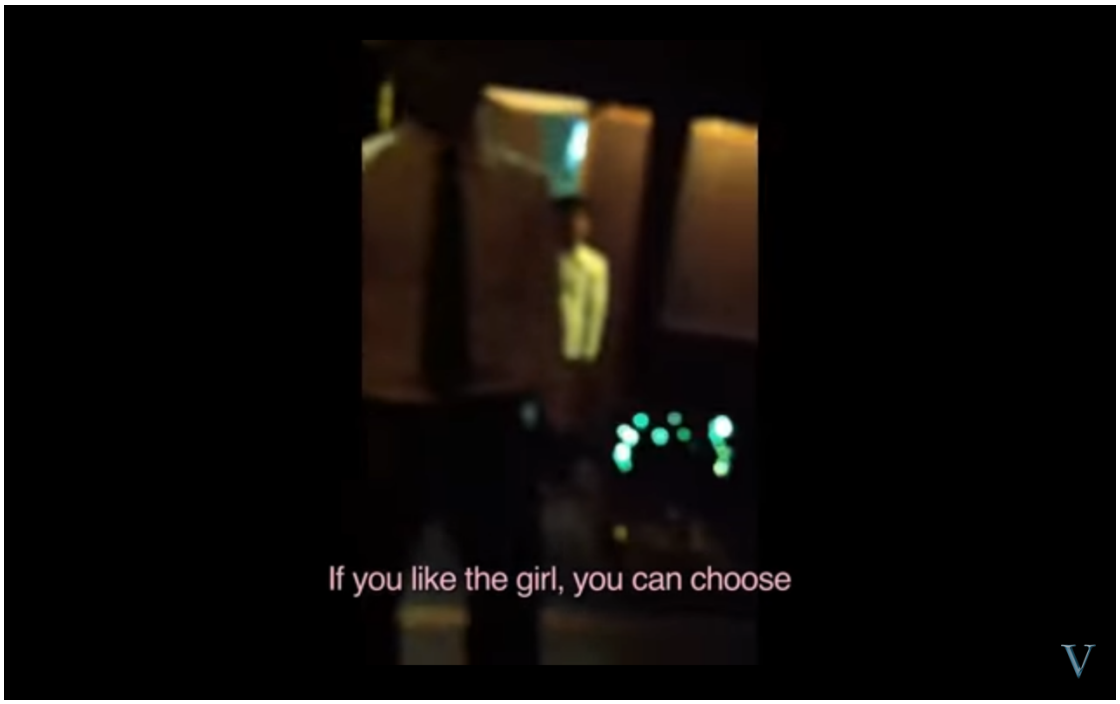

Figure 2.2. Undercover footage of AIM gathering intelligence (Sandvos, 2011, 23:11).

Figure 2.3. Undercover footage of AIM choosing a girl (Sandvos, 2011, 23:27).

Don Brewster of AIM continues:

> It's crucial that we document everything we've seen, everything we've heard, in order for organizations like IJM to put a complete report together in order to get judges to issue warrants to go back in to rescue the girls. (Sandvos, 2011, 36:17)

Here Brewster clarifies that aid organizations, like AIM and IJM, follow certain protocols and work in conjunction with Cambodian authorities to conduct rescues. AIM's website states that their team works with Cambodia's Anti-Human Trafficking and Juvenile Protection Police, that "no outside parties can join us on raids" (Agape International Missions, 2021, "Are raids dangerous?" section) and that they "try to stay out of the limelight as much as possible" (Agape International Missions, 2021, "Isn't it risky?" section).

In *Half the Sky*, however, actress Meg Ryan speaks to the camera over footage of Somaly Mam of AFESIP and journalist Nick Kristof riding in a truck with a Cambodian man in uniform driving:

> Nick has gone off to participate in a raid[4] on a brothel that is run by a military family. He's going with Somaly and a squadron of police so it's a dangerous situation given the words "military" and "police." I just don't have the Nick Kristof, whatever that is, that gene. The danger gene. (Chermayeff, 2012, 1:01:45)

In this passage and in the film, Kristof – an American journalist and outside party – is cast as a hero. Indeed, throughout AFESIP's brothel raid, Kristof is filmed as being right alongside Cambodian authorities as they break locks off brothel doors.

[4] In the midst of the action, Kristof found time to live-tweet the raid:

> 3:50 pm: Joining raid on brothel in Cambodia that imprisons young girls. Following @SomalyMam. Very tense.
> 3:56 pm: Brothel owners have military ties and said to be well armed. 2 cars of police from capital, also well armed.
> 4:05 pm: Police burst in, disarmed brothel owners, took their phones so they can't call for help.
> 4:08 pm: Girls are rescued, but still very scared. Youngest looks about 13, trafficked from Vietnam.
> 4:13 pm: Social workers comforting girls, telling them they are free, won't be punished, rapes are over.
> 4:17 pm: Brothel has 10 rooms for sex, all lockable from outside. It has operated with impunity with underage girls for yrs.
> 4:29 pm: Some girls known to be here are missing. Not sure if they're hidden somewhere, e.g. in underground cell. Police searching.
> 4:32 pm: Just got word we've got to leave. Brothel owners reportedly sending reinforcements. Concerned abt what might happen.
> 4:35 pm: I've been told to rush out of town for safety. That's what I'm doing now.
> 4:42 pm: Huge respect for @SomalyMam for rescuing these girls at some risk to herself.
> 5:42 pm: Armed soldiers just showed up at brothel, ordered police to release army officer who is alleged brothel owner.
> 5:51 pm: Prosecutor refusing to release military officer accused of owning brothel. Tells soldiers they can shoot him if they dare.
> 6:47 pm: Prosecutor faced down soldiers. Military officer & wife, alleged brothel owners in N. Cambodia, taken to police station.
> 9:29 pm: I'm safe & my live-tweeting of the raid on brothel in northern Cambodia is over. You can see them all on my Twitter page. (as cited in Barnes, 2020, pp. 154-155)

Figure 2.4. American journalist Nick Kristof involved in the action (Chermayeff, 2012, 1:03:25).

Figure 2.5. Breaking locks of brothel doors (Chermayeff, 2012, 1:04:08).

Here I argue that the recurring image of breaking locks off brothel doors has a central role in anti-trafficking melomentaries for two reasons. First, the lock is a legible symbol of slavery, and its removal is a legible symbol of slavery's discursive solution: freedom. Second, forcibly breaking locks off brothel doors – as opposed to unlocking them, though I imagine aid workers and police do not have the keys – can be interpreted as not just freedom, but heroic rescue.

After Cambodian girls are rescued, in *Half the Sky*'s brothel raid clip, a man pulls Kristof aside and says Somaly has to leave. Kristof narrates: "Apparently we have to leave now because the brothel owners have apparently sent word out and supposedly reinforcements are coming here to try to liberate the brothel from the police. We gotta go" (Chermayeff, 2012, 1:05:24). Kristof also discusses, with Somaly Mam of AFESIP, what happened after a past brothel raid:

> I remember, when I've been here in Phnom Penh in the past, there was a raid and you brought the girls back to your shelter and then they came, the brothels raided your shelter and took the girls back. And you've had traffickers hold a gun to your head. (Chermayeff, 2012, 1:01:14)

Somaly replies: "Yes, you're going to take their own money. The girl is their money. So you bring the girl, of course they're not happy with you" (Chermayeff, 2012, 1:01:30).

Anti-trafficking discourses thus construct dramatic raid and rescue interventions as heroic endeavours that draw on actors' saviour mentalities in dangerous situations. To some extent, this white saviour mentality might be part of the job. Recall Clay Butler of AIM's remarks to an alleged pedophile he confronts on the streets of Svay Pak: "This is what I do, okay?" (Sandvos, 2011, 8:33). The white

(male) saviour mentality appears to be contagious, however; to draw on an extreme example, I turn once again to Nick Kristof, who accompanies Somaly Mam of AFESIP on a brothel raid featured in *Half the Sky.* Kristof's live Tweets of the raid, footnoted a few pages prior, cast him as a hero risking his own safety to rescue Cambodian sex slaves (Barnes, 2020). Kristof is not an aid worker, but nevertheless has embedded himself within the aid apparatus through his sensational journalism that foregrounds "the ways that impoverished women around the world are being helped by people just like him" (Mathers, 2012, p. 22). These tweets, and his prominent role in *Half the Sky*, do not just have Kristof telling the story of sex trafficking in Cambodia, but starring in it as a saviour working selflessly to free Cambodian girls. Kristof's hero role is enabled by the 'bad parent' construction that allows him to be a "benevolent parent performing the work of care Cambodian men and women are unwilling or unable to do" (Barnes, 2020, p. 151) and also, importantly, the colonial civilizing precedent that permits a white saviour with (I presume) no relevant qualifications or training to rescue vulnerable Cambodian girls (Mathers, 2012).

The Costs of 'Freedom at All Costs': Rescue as Harm

In this section, I examine the ethic of 'freedom at all costs' from another perspective, exploring how rescue interventions can be experienced as harm by Cambodian girls. I draw on the melomentaries that have substantiated this project so far, but also analyze a film entitled *(Sex Workers Cry) Rights Not Rescue in Cambodia*, produced by WNU – a grassroots organization led by Cambodian sex workers – in conjunction with filmmaker Paula Stromberg. I defend my decision to include this film, despite its incongruence with the others I have discussed so far, based on two claims. First, WNU's vision is as follows: "Sex workers have full human

rights in a society free of violence and *freedom [sic] from exploitation and human trafficking*" (Women's Network for Unity, n.d., "The Vision" section, emphasis mine). WNU can therefore also be considered an anti-trafficking organization. Second, recall how all iterations of commercial sex are criminalized as sex trafficking under Cambodian law (Chow, 2020; Keo et al., 2014). As I will expand on below, this often translates into raid and rescue interventions being enacted on sex workers who do not wish to be rescued. For these reasons, I argue it is worth exploring the harms these interventions may inflict not only on the Cambodian girls rescued from sex slavery, but from broader swaths of commercial sex workers.

Despite their centering and celebration of dramatic rescue interventions, anti-trafficking melomentaries also complicate constructions of rescue as unequivocally good, though likely inadvertently, by discussing how these interventions sometimes inflict harm on Cambodian girls. Nick Kristof, in *Half the Sky*, describes how a brothel raid conducted by Somaly Mam of AFESIP appears to affect the girls being rescued:

> In the raid, almost the first people in are Somaly's staff who immediately go to these girls. We're comforting them. These girls are terrified. They don't know who to trust. They're still afraid that the brothel raid will fall through. (Chermayeff, 2012, 1:04:25)

Reaksmey Haas, as a girl who was rescued from a brothel herself, describes how she felt during an AIM raid:

> There was a bunch of cops. I don't even remember how many. I was really scared because I didn't know what to expect. I didn't know if they were, that we were, we committed crime. To us we were in danger, not able to trust.

> They were separating me from my mom, who I know, who I thought was my protector. (Sandvos, 2020, 10:51)

This is similar to Don Brewster of AIM's narration of Mien's experience, another Cambodian girl:

> Mien was in this brothel in Svay Pak the day that IJM made a raid. She hid, feeling that she was going to get in trouble with the police, and one of the pimps found her and took her to another brothel. (Sandvos, 2011, 13:04)

These excerpts illustrate that while the raid and rescue model has a central role in anti-trafficking films and on-the-ground interventions, dramatic rescues might be frightening and confusing to Cambodian girls who are not aware that they are being 'rescued,' or might not want to be 'rescued' from their jobs. Importantly, though, these films do not portray aid organizations taking accountability for the harms resulting from their raid and rescue interventions. In what I imagine is an attempt to mitigate these harms while still upholding their 'freedom at all costs' mandate, Don Brewster of AIM discusses training rescued Cambodian girls to accompany their SWAT team on raids:

> When we started the SWAT team we needed to make sure that they were really victim-centered and when we do a raid there are social workers who were actually rescue victims, right, that have gone through the program, and then went to school to become a social worker, so when they come in, they're not just trained on how to handle someone that's in a traumatic situation, they've been through it themselves, and that's made all the difference in the world. (Sandvos, 2020, 12:43)

Undercover reconnaissance work performed by aid actors to gather information before staging a raid also has the potential to inflict harm on Cambodian girls. After pretending to be a client interested in buying a girl, Clay Butler of AIM discusses the way he interpreted the girl's response:

> The whole core reason of why you're there is just to get her out of there and she's just kind of numb against you and it's just, your mind's just like on the brink of just like breaking down, you wanting to cry, and breaking down, you just wanting to kick somebody's head in and just get her out of there. Even being next to her I knew she was just terrified, you know, like just the way she freaking touched me and everything just felt, you know. She's reaching for my hand and, you know, doing everything she was taught to do, but you could tell she just, she was just scared out of her mind. It was a trip, man. (Sandvos, 2011, 24:46)

Beyond psychological harms, Brewster of AIM notes that "girls were being actually put in jail along with the perpetrators. There was no place for them to go" (Sandvos, 2011, 14:05). These passages detail how anti-trafficking interventions seeking to rescue Cambodian girls from sex slavery are also frequently discussed as responsible for inflicting harm.

As victims of sex trafficking and sex workers are conflated under Cambodian law, consenting sex workers also experience harm through raid and recue interventions. In *(Sex Workers Cry) Rights Not Rescue*, WNU coordinator Keo Tha says:

> I am a massage sex worker. WNU is an association of sex workers – adult women, men, and transgender people. We work in karaoke bars, massage

> parlours and the street. We choose to work. We are not victims. We are not trafficked. No one owns us. We don't have pimps. No brothel owners enslave us. We do not want to be rescued. (Stromberg, 2014, 6:30)

Note how Tha mentions that WNU's adult, consenting sex workers work in the same places that girls framed as sex slaves do, which would conceivably make it difficult to differentiate victims who need to be rescued during raids and those who do not. Ros Sokunthy of WNU continues:

> We are particularly troubled by some police arrests under the raids and rescues program. Cambodian Ministry of the Interior defines all sex workers as victims, ensuring the police arrest everyone during raids, not just children and sex slaves locked in brothels. But sex worker union members are over 18. We are not all victims. The trafficking law that says consenting adults are victims creates problems. Governments, religious groups, well-meaning NGOs, international charities, and some women's groups brand all sex workers as victims in need of rescue. We face violence from the very organizations supposed to be helping us. (Stromberg, 2014, 14:22)

When Sokunthy says "well-meaning NGOs, international charities, and some women's groups," she is speaking over images of the Somaly Mam Foundation and AFESIP's signs, explicitly linking Somaly Mam and AFESIP to inflicting violence. The stills taken from *(Sex Workers Cry) Rights Not Rescue* below further articulate these harms:

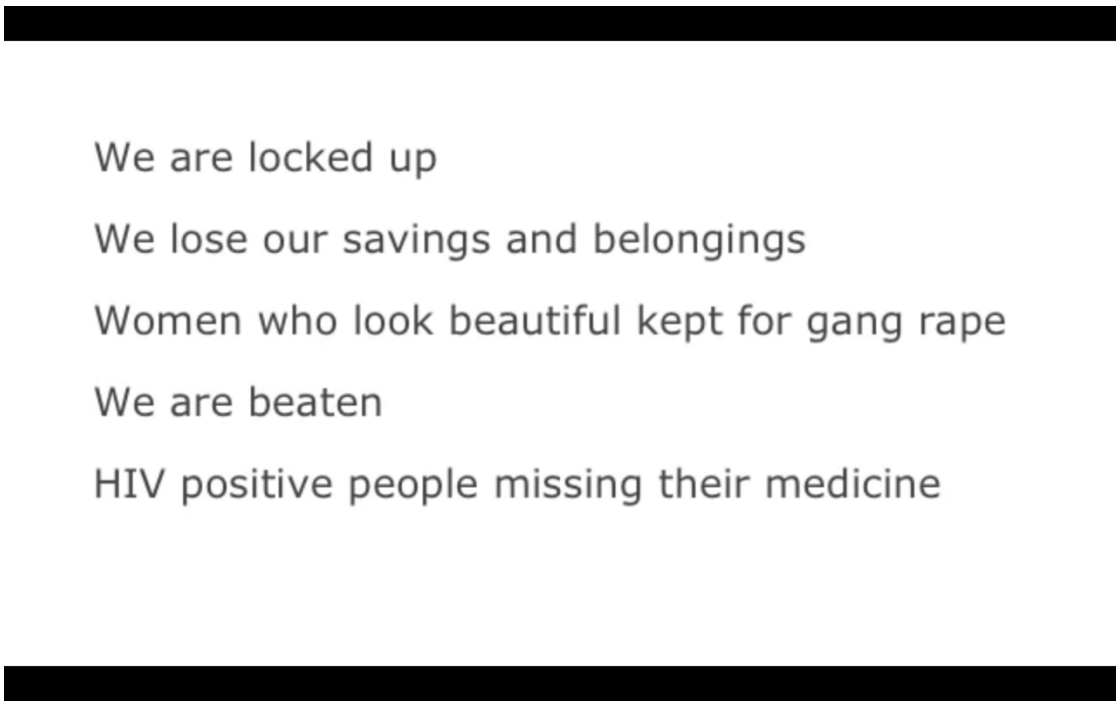

Figure 2.6. Harms experienced by sex workers through raid and rescue interventions (Stromberg, 2014, 15:54).

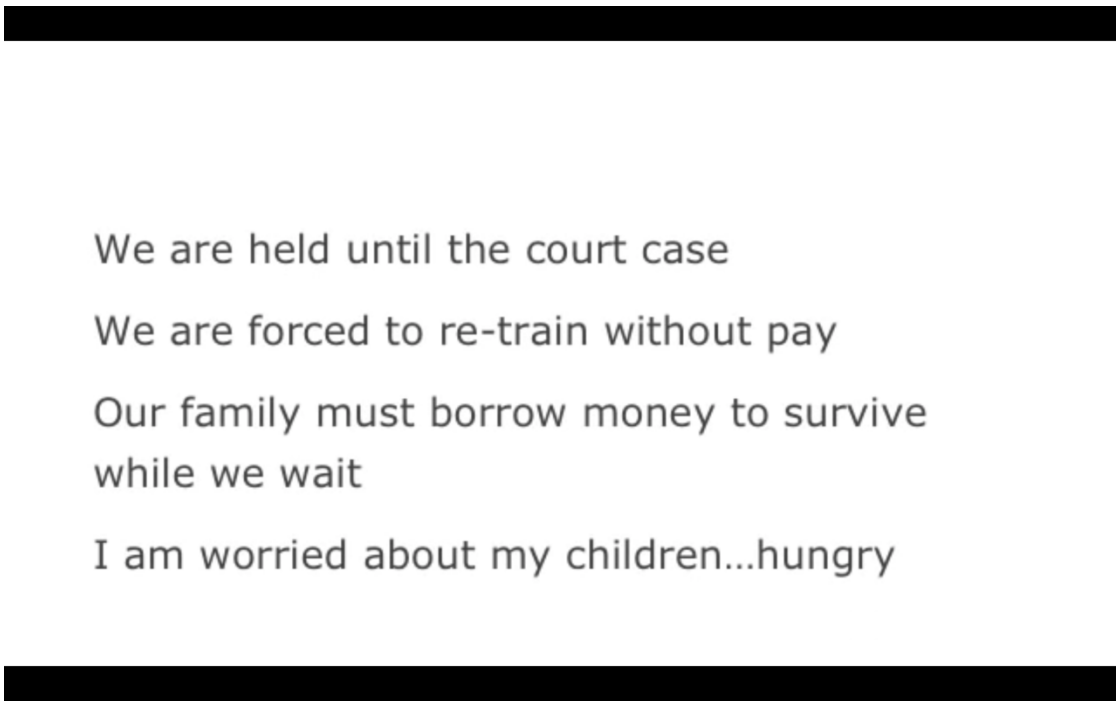

Figure 2.7. Harms experienced by sex workers through raid and rescue interventions (Stromberg, 2014, 16:06).

Rights Not Rescue takes care to frame anti-trafficking NGOs as "well-meaning," but nevertheless states that "because of the rescue industry's contributions in bringing about the anti-trafficking police raid and rescue policies, adult freelance sex workers ask that the rescue industry also be accountable for the impact of these policies" (Stromberg, 2014, 2:24).

While some of these harms may appear to pale in comparison to the physical and sexual abuse victims of sex trafficking endure, it is still worth noting that 'doing good' often has unintended repercussions, even for those framed as sex slaves unquestionably needing rescue, and especially for the adult consenting sex workers subjected to indiscriminate raid and rescue interventions. Brothel raids, whether enacted by police or aid organizations, result in a variety of harms: physical and sexual assault, incarceration and forced rehabilitation, loss of savings through the need to bribe officials, reduced income attributed to a newly wary customer base, and increased risk of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections as sex workers negotiate increased debts and fewer customers with riskier sexual practices (Busza, 2004; Steinfatt, 2011). The reductive discursive construction of 'sex slavery' enables these consequences by invoking heroic, forceful interventions that champion freedom at all costs.

Chapter 3:

Good Numbers, Good Jobs, and Good Girls: Articulations of the Civilizing Mission

In this chapter, I explore the logics and technologies that produce and justify demands for intervention. Switching focus from documentary films, below I foreground aid organization websites, reports, and tax returns, though I do return to documentary segments towards the end of this section. I explore the foundational ideologies that substantiate anti-trafficking interventions, arguing that articulations of the civilizing mission can be traced through anti-trafficking discourses and interventions. This is evident in their attempts to use numbers towards the aim of "capturing and appropriating otherwise recalcitrant features of the social and human landscape" (Appadurai, 1993, p. 320), and also in their commitment to "morally and materially 'uplifting,' 'improving' and later 'developing' the supposedly 'backward'" Cambodian sex slave (Watt, 2011, p. 1) through rehabilitation programs that train girls with skills in sewing and jewelry making – more civilized, though still exploitative, forms of gendered labour. Through this discussion, I also explore how anti-trafficking organizations frame the scope of their work beyond the sensational melomentary stories outlined above.

Good Numbers: Counting and Concretizing the Complex

In this section, I explore the ways in which aid discourses use quantification to produce and justify demands for intervention. I begin by discussing the discursive utility of numbers in establishing Cambodia's sex trafficking problem before charting how aid organizations employ numbers to legitimize and perpetuate their work.

Aid organizations often use numbers for referential purposes (Appadurai, 1993) to provide a quick overview of human trafficking, and sex trafficking in Cambodia in particular. Destiny Rescue, in their downloadable documentary screening toolkit, disseminates the following infographic:

Figure 3.1. Big-picture stats from Destiny Rescue's documentary screening toolkit (Destiny Rescue, 2020b).

Bold graphics on AIM's website declare that "40.3 million people are estimated to be living in modern day slavery worldwide. 1 in 4 of those living in modern day slavery

are children. 4.8 million of those are trafficked for sex. 99% of sex trafficking victims are women and girls" (Agape International Missions, 2022c, "The Issue" section). Scrolling down, the numbers continue: "261,000 people in Cambodia live in conditions of modern slavery. That is over TWELVE sold-out Madison Square Garden arenas filled with exploited individuals" (Agape International Missions, 2022c, "Human Trafficking in Cambodia" section, emphasis in original). AFESIP's "Fast Facts" page is substantiated by statistics that describe sex trafficking in Cambodia:

- The population is 14.8 million.
- 65% of Cambodians are under 25 years old, 33% under the age of 15.
- 1/3 of Cambodians live below the national poverty line (2,473 riel or US$ 0.61).
- 85% of the population lives in rural areas.
- 50% of young girls in rural Cambodia work rather than go to school.
- The labor force increases at 250,000 per year, compared with the current 350,000 jobs in the whole garment industry, by far the leading industry in Cambodia.
- Trafficking is defined as the act of recruiting, transporting, transferring, harboring or receiving a person through a use of force, coercion or other means, for the purpose of exploiting them.
- Prevalence of trafficking in Cambodia is highly contested, with few available statistics for Cambodia.

- Government estimates say there are over 34,000 commercial sex workers in Cambodia, and other sources say as many as one third are children. (Agir Pour les Femmes en Situation Précaire, 2022, "Fast Facts" section)

While claiming that "prevalence of trafficking in Cambodia is highly contested" (Agir Pour les Femmes en Situation Précaire, 2022, "Fast Facts" section) and "in the world of child trafficking, where there is a universal effort to hide in the dark, statistics vary wildly" (Destiny Rescue, 2020b), these aid organizations use numbers in a referential manner to establish the existence of Cambodia's sex trafficking problem. As is the case with development objectives more broadly, numbers are useful here in that they cloak a social problem as complex and contested as sex trafficking in "an aura of objective truth and scientific authority despite the extensive interpretive work that goes into their construction" (Merry, 2016, p. 1).

Building on this framework, anti-trafficking organizations rely on numbers to discursively concretize their interventions. This imperative often manifests as simple, eye-catching statistics that look more like advertisements than spreadsheets. Under the heading, "AIM SWAT starts the year with rescue," AIM briefly describes multiple raid and rescue interventions beneath graphic statistical representations indicating the number of rescues and the number of arrests, like the one below (note the locks in the background):

Figure 3.2. AIM SWAT's winter raid statistics (Agape International Missions, 2022, February 9, "2022 Winter SWAT Update" section).

Similarly, Destiny Rescue showcases the number of rescues with text proclaiming, for instance, "7 girls rescued in Cambodia" over a heavily edited image of a busy street aglow with neon bar signs (Destiny Rescue, 2022c, "Rescue Update Archive" section). The first page of Destiny Rescue's (2020a) Celebration Report proclaims, in large numbers, that "751 girls, boys, women and men were rescued from sex trafficking, labor trafficking, child marriage, sexual abuse and exploitation across 7 different countries" (p. 1). The second page of the two-page report lists these countries, including Cambodia, with "1 rescue per week on average," and gives very brief blurbs about the organization's work in each place (Destiny Rescue, 2020a, p. 2). Chab Dai Coalition's (2021) Impact Report also uses bold numbers over minimal text to highlight their interventions: "32 convictions reached" (p. 5) and "12 NGO partnerships established" (p. 9) and "2 sex trafficking & online sexual abuse cases" (p. 10). AIM's most recent Annual Report quantifies their work "Over the Years": "150+

raids. 460+ arrested. 1700+ years in prison for offenders. 1550+ rescued" (Agape International Missions, 2021a, p. 9).

I draw attention to these reports and webpages for their simplicity. These materials prioritize large, visually striking numbers over more detailed narrative accounts. Relying on the capital of quantification, these aid discourses center simple statistics in visually appealing formats to substantiate their claims of accomplishment to the public.

More importantly, however, aid organizations use quantification for rhetorical purposes (Appadurai, 1993) to justify to their funders that their interventions are effective. AIM's 2020 income tax return includes statistics in the Statement of Program Service Accomplishments "Restoration Pillar" section:

> The women and girls who've been sold, abused, held captive and devastated by sex trafficking need more than a one-night raid and one day of healthcare. Our restoration programs provide survivors with love, hope, healing and the tools for a brand new life that will last a lifetime. Survivors stay in our Restoration home for as long as they need, and our loving team of social workers follow up with these women for the rest of their lives. Programs include the Agape Restoration Home in Phnom Penh and transitional homes in Svay Pak and Siem Reap, Cambodia.
>
> AIM Restoration Programs impacted 36 new survivors in 2020 and 940 survivors since 2004. (Agape International Missions, 2021b, p. 2)

And the "Prevention Pillar" section:

> Preventing child sex trafficking starts by confronting the demand for trafficking and addressing the needs of the children in our community. This

> includes working to keep these kids out of the hands of pedophiles, pimps and traffickers who perpetrate and perpetuate the industry. If it's acceptable to sell your child, or to buy a girl for a night, the cycle will never end. AIM serves children and families in many ways through our community church, AIM School and the AIM Medical Clinic. In addition, there is the Lord's Gym, Emergency Family Care and the Lotus Kids' Club.
>
> AIM Prevention Programs have impacted 19,168 people since they were started in 2007. (Agape International Missions, 2021b, p. 2)

And the "Reintegration Pillar" section:

> We ensure survivors feel valued, loved, and are placed in a strong community with a sustainable job. Once they're ready to start their new life of freedom, they need to be equipped to survive in a world where some would still like to victimize them. This means training them with marketable skills that will enable them to work in healthy jobs, and in many cases, providing them with employment opportunities.
>
> AIM Reintegration Programs impacted 98 new survivors in 2020 and 1,088 since they were started in 2015. (Agape International Missions, 2021b, p. 2)

I include these excerpts together, though they may be redundant, to assert that numbers are not used haphazardly. Rather, they are used calculatedly and repeatedly to sum up and justify each of AIM's so-called Program Service Accomplishments. Statistics concretize more amorphous achievements such as love or hope or healing.

AFESIP's 2021 Annual Report uses numbers throughout to discursively substantiate their interventions, beginning with a table showing the breakdown of the number of girls supported by the organization:

Statistics of girls received care in 2021				Statistics of girls' movement and receiving ongoing care	
Description	Leftover 2020	2021	Total	Movement- out 2021	Ongoing care towards 2022
Girls receive care in center	63	(4 re-admitted) 27	**90**	18	72
Formal education at center	56	6	**62**	(7 CBE & 2 Bac II exam) 9	53
Outsourced skills trainees	4	11	**15**	(graduated 3 & dropped out2) 5	10
Community-based education	50	8	**58**	9*	49
Higher education in universities	9	(1 in-centered 2 CBE)3	**12**	0	12
Reintegrated business and job	0	(Job employment) 4	**4**	0	4
Survivor Empowerment Network	0	21	**21**	0	21
Active reintegration cases	125	(2without support)6	**131**	0	131
Total	**307**	**86**	**393**	**41**	**352**

9*: 5 CBE (KC-0090; PP-3353; PP-3380; PP-3437 and SR-0518) dropped out with some reasons for getting married; working to support the families etc... and 1 (KC-0041) requested not to receive education support from AFESIP-Cambodia because her family is able to support her to continue higher education in university in Phnom Penh and 3 others (KC-0090, PP-3353 and PP-3396) moved to get outsource skills training.

Figure 3.3. AFESIP's "project beneficiaries," or girls (Agir Pour les Femmes en Situation Précaire, 2021, p. 8, highlighting in original).

The annual report continues to use numbers to detail AFESIP's myriad interventions, including healthcare:

> 12 girls had received 1,265 healthcare follow ups and treatment. 77 girls had received national vaccinations of 11 vaccinations, 133 girls had received Covid-19 vaccinations, 36 girls has received tetanus vaccinations, 3 girls had received vaccination of hepatitis B and 5 girls had received vaccination of encephalitis. 56 girls of Tom Dy center had received dental care treatment. 8 cases of 6 young women and girls had received emergency care and [were] admitted to hospitals. (Agir Pour les Femmes en Situation Précaire, 2021, p. 11)

And psychosocial counseling:

> 111 girls has received ongoing psychosocial counseling follow-ups and treatment of 263 sessions. 72 girls had received 15 sessions of art therapy activities on trauma healing and remedies. 22 sessions of self-help group had been conducted for 55 girls on various subjects. 12 sessions of Primary Mental Health Care and Prevention Education had been conducted for 71 girls. 55

> weekend yoga-training classes had been conducted for 77 girls in Tom Dy recovery center. (Agir Pour les Femmes en Situation Précaire, 2021, p. 11)

And legal protection:

> 38 girls had received legal assistance throughout the legal process at courts. 17 of them have been leftover by end of December 2020 and 21 others are new cases in the reporting periods cover[ing] January to December 2021. 32 suspects had been arrested and detained, whom are 16 of them were arrested in 2020 and 16 others were arrested in 2021. 8 perpetrators had been convicted into imprisonment. The highest and lowest sentences were 5 to 13 year imprisonments. The compensation fined lowest were 8 million Riels and highest were 20 million Riels. (Agir Pour les Femmes en Situation Précaire, 2021, p.11)

In the same manner as above, AFESIP's (2021) annual report quantifies the outcomes of their other interventions: "formal education, English language, computer and library at center:" 62 girls educated (p. 11); "community-based education:" 58 girls educated (p. 12); "university scholarship:" 12 girls awarded (p. 12); "outsource skills training:" 15 girls funded (p. 12); "economic empowerment program:" 22 girls supported (p. 12); and "survivor empowerment network:" 21 girls identified (p. 12).

Chab Dai Coalition similarly uses the strategy that AIM and AFESIP employ in their reports, articulating it as follows: "The idea is to collect enough quantitative data to support the arguments from qualitative data" (2019, p. 3). In their evaluation report for their Community Based Client Care Project, Chab Dai Coalition uses numbers to ratify intervention goals and qualitative claims:

> Goal: Women and children survivors of sexual abuse and human trafficking regain normal life and reconnect with the family and community.
>
> 82% of all survivors reported that they will be able to regain their normal life. Many survivors mentioned that they are able to continue their normal life like before because of the counseling and mental support from Chab Dai staff and their family member. Survivors mentioned that "I feel happy now and forget all the sad feeling. Chab Dai staff come to help make me feel better and I am now waiting to get work or job to do." "I do not feel disappointment anymore. I feel better because Chab Dai staff could help find the solution to my problem." "I feel a lot better than before because Chab Dai staff gave me money and helped me with paper work to start my job in the garment factory." (Chab Dai Coalition, 2019, p. 3)

Chab Dai Coalition (2019) repeats this strategy in discussing their program outcomes and outputs, quoted here without their qualitative excerpts in the interest of brevity: "Outcome 2: Women and children survivors of sexual abuse and trafficking are restored [to] their emotional well-being and social interaction. More than 83% of survivors reported that they feel better with their mood condition," and " Output 2.1: Family and survivors of sexual abuse and trafficking relieve distress of trauma experience. More than 89% of all survivors reported better feeling and relief of stress and trauma experience after the intervention given by the project" (p. 3). Again, interventions that seek to restore wellbeing and relieve distress are difficult to qualify as effective or not; quantification does this rhetorical work.

If quantification can be used to concretize claims that Cambodia's sex trafficking problem exists, the converse is also true: numbers can be used to assert that it does not. An IJM press release states that

> In the early 2000's, estimates of the prevalence of CSEC [commercial sexual exploitation of children] in Cambodia ranged from 15%-30%. Today, thanks to international attention and investment, along with a strong commitment by Cambodian government officials, prevalence of minors in the commercial sex trade in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap and Sihanoukville has dropped to **2.2%** with minors 15 years and younger making up just **0.1%** of the sex industry.
>
> "The picture of very young girls being removed from horrific brothels in the Cambodian village of Svay Pak is seared in minds of the global community as an example of the horrors of sex trafficking worldwide, but this picture is no longer reality," said Sharon Cohn Wu, Senior Vice President of the Justice System Transformation for IJM. "Cambodia has progressed, and we need to tell the updated story of children rescued and restored, perpetrators apprehended and punished, antitrafficking police being trained and equipped, and effective deterrence established. This evidence-based model of change is an example that other struggling nations can learn from." (International Justice Mission, 2015, p. 1, emphasis in original)

Here IJM invokes numbers not only to show that child sex trafficking no longer exists (statistically speaking), but that "Cambodia's example of progress shows the world *that* ***justice for the poor is possible***" (International Justice Mission, 2015, p. 2, emphasis in original).

Anti-trafficking organizations thus rely on quantification for referential and rhetorical purposes: to both describe and justify the outcomes of their interventions. As numbers are not naturally occurring phenomena but constructed by actors towards the aim of achieving specific goals, it is not surprising that different organizations report a range of statistics on sex trafficking in Cambodia. Take IJM's claim above that minors make up 2.2% of Cambodia's commercial sex industry (International Justice Mission, 2015). Helen Sworn of Chab Dai Coalition states that "the reality is about 80 to 90% of families are selling their daughters, not 40 to 50%" (Nolot, 2011, 45:59). Don Brewster of AIM says that "if we walked around and I pointed to the girls, I don't know if I could point to ten girls that aren't being trafficked" (Nolot, 2011, 49:43). According to AIM, approximately 40% of the victims they rescue in Cambodia are minors (Agape International Missions, 2022c). While these numbers do not describe exactly the same phenomena, I highlight them here to give a sense of the range of statistics about sex trafficking in Cambodia. Cursory consideration may lead to the assumption that exaggerated statistics on sex trafficking would necessarily generate better outcomes for victims through increased awareness, intervention, and funding. Mike Dottridge (2003) cautions, however, that "this seems to be a rather idealistic, not to say naïve approach, which ignores the damage that can be done by misrepresenting the scale of the problem" (as cited in Tyldum & Brunovskis, 2005, p. 17). Importantly, identifying an individual as trafficked avails them to intervention, and, as discussed above, interventions often perpetuate violence on those they claim to rescue. Numbers are not neutral, neither in their construction nor their consequences.

Good Jobs and Good Girls: Civilizing the Sex Slave

In this section, I trace how the civilizing logics that run through anti-trafficking organizations' discursive reliance on quantification also undergird rehabilitation programs. I argue that aid interventions, in promoting specific forms of gendered labour, also seek to 'develop' rescued Cambodian girls.

Aid discourses often assemble rehabilitation narratives around girls being rescued from sex trafficking and trained in more respectable forms of gendered labour: overwhelmingly, sewing and jewelry making. This Destiny Rescue blog excerpt tells a story about Achariya, a girl rescued from a karaoke bar when she was 15:

> It is late in the day, and the warm light streams into the building from the low hanging sun, lighting up the table where her eyes are fixed. They narrow as she focuses intently on guiding the scissors through the cardboard pattern she has just drawn. It's hard to say how many jeans Achariya has completed for the premium denim brand she now works for. The process is meticulous, but she focuses on quality over quantity, and it took years of training before Achariya, and others like her, gained all the skills needed to create jeans that are up to scratch for selling in high-end fashion stores internationally. "Before, I couldn't imagine that I could do this, but I am so proud of myself," she shares. "I am so happy because I can make fashion jeans." (Destiny Rescue, 2018, para. 1)

The blog states that it was Achariya who dreamed of being a seamstress, and Destiny Rescue's aftercare team supported her in working towards her goal: "I had a good boss and was able to work at Destiny Café part-time to earn money while I was

studying sewing. They also encouraged me to apply for the job that I now have" (Destiny Rescue, 2018, para. 4). Though Achariya now works as a seamstress at a "high-end denim brand's production house" (Destiny Rescue, 2018, para. 6), Destiny Rescue also has intraorganizational clothing and jewelry production programs. Destiny Rescue's 2020 income tax return claims that

> The jewelry and apparel production programs offer girls the flexibility to work at home and care for their families, continue their education, or supplement their income. The sale of handmade jewelry and apparel from Destiny Rescue supports girls in earning a safe wage and equipping them with the ability to stay free. (Destiny Rescue, 2021, p. 2)

AIM also trains and employs Cambodian girls as seamstresses and jewelry makers, attributing a total program revenue of $658,713 to "bracelets and t shirts" on their 2020 income tax return (Agape International Missions, 2021b, p. 9). Under the "Empower" section of their website, AIM states: "Our employment center ensures that rescued girls are never trafficked again. We provide survivors and at-risk women with a safe job that includes a living wage, education, medical care, meals, counseling, and more" (Agape International Missions, 2022a, "Empower" section). Clicking on the "SHOP AIM APPAREL" button below that paragraph opens the AIM Apparel store:

Figure 3.4. AIM Apparel: together, for freedom (AIM Apparel, n.d.b).

Products purchased through AIM Apparel are advertised as "made with care in Cambodia," "supporting survivors & those protected from trafficking," and "empowering future generations to be free" (AIM Apparel, n.d.b). In addition to t-shirts, baby onesies, kimonos, pants, scarves, bags, and hair accessories, a subsection of AIM Apparel, Anthem Jewelry, sells Freedom Cuffs "inscribed with the name of a survivor who helped make it and the date of her rescue" (AIM Apparel, n.d.d, para. 1). AIM Apparel describes the Anthem Bar Necklace, also inscribed with a survivor/jewelry maker's name, as follows:

> Hopeful. Joyful. Free. The feature words on the Anthem Bar Necklaces were drawn from interviews with our Anthem artisans, who are survivors of trafficking. We asked them what words represent their lives now, after rescue. The theme of hope resounded throughout every response, and we quickly realized these words are not just part of their stories of rescue from trafficking, they are words of hope we can all carry with us daily. These necklaces are a

> perfect reminder to look forward with optimism and hope, no matter what circumstances lie around us. (AIM Apparel, n.d.c, para. 1)

For $95.00, AIM also offers the Abolitionist Box, which includes three Freedom Cuffs in silver, rose gold, and gold. The box's lid is printed with the phrases "END HUMAN TRAFFICKING" and "Welcome to the family of Anthem Abolitionists," and contains a "booklet of freedom stories" (AIM Apparel, n.d.a):

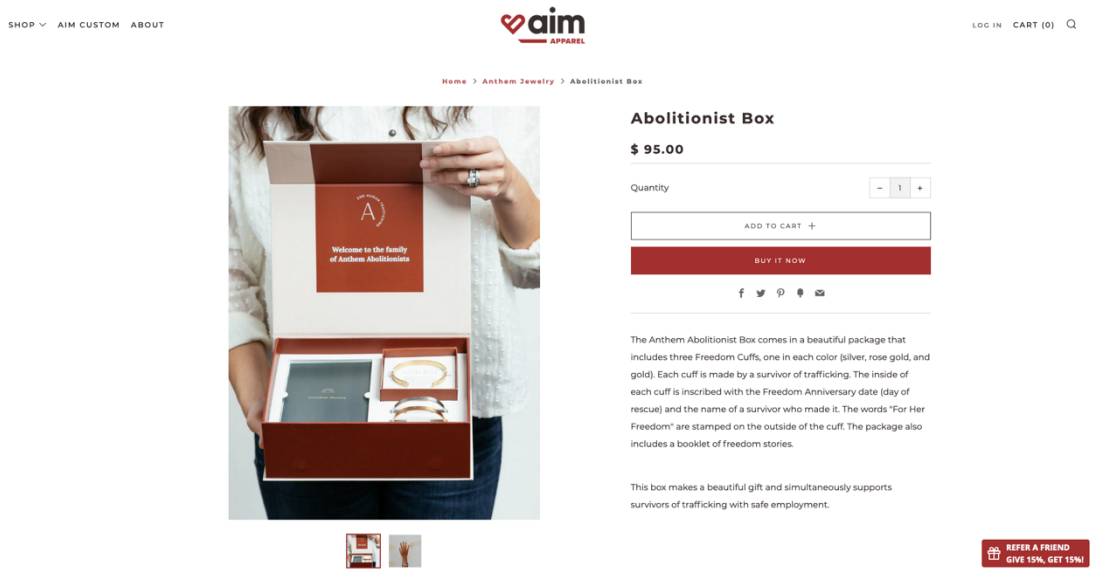

Figure 3.5. AIM Apparel's Abolitionist Box (AIM Apparel, n.d.a).

This process of rehabilitating rescued Cambodian girls through more civilized, but still feminized, labour also figures prominently in anti-trafficking melomentaries. In a TEDx Talk shown in *Tending Clouds,* Don Brewster of AIM tells Reaksmey's updated story:

> She decided that she had a creativity that wasn't being used as a beautician so she chose to quit and start her own business, and she started a business making and designing jewelry and she's wearing one of her creations right there. And you may wonder, "Why isn't she here telling that story?" Well, the reason is, she closed that company and two weeks ago she and her husband moved to

> Cambodia. Today she's in Svay Pak in our employment center teaching other girls how to make and design jewelry, giving them freedom that they never had. (Sandvos, 2020, 24:00)

Mien, discussed in chapter 1 as a girl who sold herself into a brothel for her broke(n) family, and in chapter 2 who hid from IJM during a raid and rescue intervention for fear of harm, discusses her rehabilitation in *The Pink Room*:

> I love fashion and I wanted to go to school but I didn't have a chance to and I thought that I would never have the chance. I wouldn't be where I am today if it weren't for Don and Bridget [Brewster of AIM]. Every day they are able to help me get education so I can have a better future. (Sandvos, 2011, 52:27)

Don Brewster of AIM provides additional context:

> Mien is a young woman who has suffered just so greatly but she's doing great in school. She'll be graduating soon. We'll be providing a loan for her to buy her sewing machines and maybe, maybe the best part of the story for me is my shirt because Mien made it for me. (Sandvos, 2011, 51:35)

I do not wish to condemn anti-trafficking organizations for providing alternative economic opportunities to Cambodian girls, but to highlight how very specific forms of gendered labour – sewing and jewelry making – are centered in aid discourses and interventions as 'rehabilitation.' Much like development ideology positions countries along a continuum of development, aid discourses position sewing and jewelry making at the other end of the continuum of development from commercial sex. In this way, aid discourses position certain uses of Cambodian girls' bodies over others: civilized sewing versus savage sex trafficking.

Here I reiterate that safe employment opportunities for Cambodian girls are not to be derided. There is nothing 'wrong' with wanting (or needing) to work as a seamstress, especially in Cambodia, where garment making is one of the only viable economic opportunities for women. Sewing skills are easy to learn (and indeed are often passed down during a girl's domestic upbringing), and the transition to commercial sewing "is merely socializing an aspect of reproductive skills from the private to the public sphere" (Samarasinghe, 2008, p. 98). While I do not wish to draw comparisons between sex trafficking and commercial sewing, I do, however, want to underscore the narrow and gender-contingent economic opportunities available to rescued Cambodian girls,[5] and to caution that the civilizing mission to uplift, improve, and develop Cambodian girls through sewing and jewelry making rehabilitation programs must not be uncritically accepted as benevolent. Elena Shih has written extensively about what she terms "the anti-trafficking rehabilitation complex," arguing that "the focus of anti-trafficking NGOs on moral re-education, labor training, and selling their products does not favorably alter the long-term economic prospects of former sex workers" (2014, p. 21). Aid organizations reap the profits of selling products proclaimed as made by former victims of sex trafficking, but the former victims themselves earn lower wages making goods for aid organizations than they did as sex workers (Shih, 2014). Moreover, earning meagre wages inhibits them from providing much needed economic support to their families (Shih, 2018). If creating

[5] Daughters of Cambodia (an aid organization that I have not included in the body of this project) also runs a program called Sons of Cambodia. In contrast to the sewing and jewelry making opportunities they present to their rescued Cambodian girls, Sons of Cambodia employs their (confusingly termed) "male transsexual sex workers" or "ladyboys" or "young men [who] dress as women and sell their bodies to male customers" in their screen printing and wood workshops (Daughters of Cambodia, n.d., 8:10).

gainful and dignified employment opportunities for victims of sex trafficking is indeed the goal of these rehabilitation programs, they appear to fall short.

If rescued Cambodian girls needed to find new sites of employment outside their aid organizations, whether through choice or because their organization was closing or otherwise unable to retain them, where might they look for work? Along with the tourism industry, Cambodia's largest employer of women is the garment industry (Nguyen et al., 2020); taken into consideration with their skill sets, then, it seems at least possible that some girls might seek employment in large-scale garment factories. Scholars have noted, however, that not only do Cambodian garment workers often engage in sex work as well to supplement their low wages (Nishigaya, 2002; Webber et al., 2010; Yasar, 2010), but the garment industry fosters socioeconomic conditions that actually *engender* female sex trafficking. Samarasinghe (2008) attributes this to a greater number of young, female, rural-to-urban migrants than the garment industry can employ, leading to under- and unemployed girls being made vulnerable to the commercial sex industry, whether through coercion or agency.

Working conditions within Cambodia's garment factories can hardly be considered humane. In the film *Sex Workers Cry (Rights Not Rescue)*, captions laid over logos of global brands like Umbro, Nike, Puma, Fila, and Adidas describe the conditions garment workers – many of whom are rehabilitated victims of sex trafficking – face in factories: "long hours," "bad health," "docked wages," "low/no skills," "unpaid," "raped," "insecure job," "beaten," "isolated," "in debt" (Stromberg, 2014, 13:52). Citing similar conclusions found in a Human Rights Watch report, Leslie Barnes (2020) argues that "it is unclear how these sex workers become any less disposable once rescued and reintegrated into the global labour force" (p. 152). The

anti-trafficking rehabilitation complex's consequences outlined above call into question the suitability and durability of sewing and jewelry making rehabilitation programs as solutions to Cambodia's sex trafficking problem. That is unless, of course, stopping slavery, abuse, and exploitation were never their guiding missions.

While the anti-trafficking films discussed in this project do not devote much screentime to their respective organizations' religious orientations, aid organization websites provide additional context on the logics that underpin their civilizing mandates. AIM's website, for instance, explicitly states that Christianity is a crucial component of saving rescued Cambodian girls: "Girls are healed through experiencing the relentless, unconditional love of Christ at our Restoration Homes" (Agape International Missions, 2022a, "Heal" section). AIM frames Christianity as not only capable of redeeming former Cambodian sex slaves, but of eradicating sex trafficking: "At AIM, we believe that Christ through His Church will defeat the evil of sex trafficking, so we invite you, the Church, to join us in this fight!" (Agape International Missions, 2022d, "Work With Us" section). Destiny Rescue similarly claims to "equip churches with everything needed to launch their Rescue Sunday" that will "mobilize recue agents and reintegration teams across the globe," "rescue children and provide for their needs to stay free," "create opportunities for the Gospel to be shared with children and their families," and "ignite the faith of your church as you rise up against evil" (Destiny Rescue, 2022b, "Rescue Sunday" section). IJM asks potential job applicants "to submit a Statement of Faith describing their Christian faith and its relevance to the interest in serving with IJM" (International Justice Mission, 2022a, "Why does IJM require applicants to submit a Statement of Faith?" section). Chab Dai Coalition's work is less explicitly Christian but still "inspired by [their] diverse faiths

… to protect and care for as many people as possible" (Chab Dai Coalition, n.d., "Faith Inspired" section).

That the majority of this project's aid organizations are faith-based was accidental, but there are several reasons why religious organizations and Cambodia's sex trafficking problem make good bedfellows. Since 2001, explicitly faith-based American organizations – like those discussed in this project – can receive government funding to support their work and have thus increasingly taken up antitrafficking initiatives (Bernstein, 2010; Shih, 2016). Moreover, faith-based organizations and actors often foreground the sensationalism and immorality of sex and sexual violence, framing cultural savagery as the cause of sex trafficking while obscuring broader social, political, and economic causes (Bernstein, 2010). Elizabeth Bernstein (2010) writes

> As Brian McLaren, a progressive evangelical author and activist, observed to me during an interview, "It's disturbing that non-profits can raise money to fight sex trafficking in Cambodia but it's much harder to raise awareness about bad trade policies in the U.S. that keep Cambodia poor so that it *needs* sex trafficking." (p. 49, emphasis in original)

Ronald Weitzer (2007) argues that, in order to generate widespread support for social problems like sex trafficking, actors must "define a particular condition as unqualified evil, and see their missions as a righteous enterprise whose goals are both symbolic (attempting to redraw or bolster normative boundaries and moral standards) and instrumental (providing relief to victims, punishing evildoers" (p. 448). The 'unqualified evil' of sex trafficking in Cambodia demands transnational intervention,

from evangelical Christians to abolitionist feminists to aid organizations, which often overlap (Bernstein, 2010; Weitzer, 2007).

As discussed, though, these interventions – with their myopic focus on backwards culture, individual rescue, moral salvation, and rehabilitation programs that do not seem to engender lasting economic freedom – do little to bring about widespread social, economic, and political transformation. In this way, these contemporary faith-based organizations and their discourses draw on longstanding colonial civilizing logics in their missions to save Cambodian girls.

Conclusion:

Cambodia's Culture of Complicity in the Transnational (Post)Colonial Imagination

I feel it necessary to preface this conclusion with a confession: this project did not go as planned. When I wrote my thesis proposal, I intended to explore not only the present-day discursive constructions of Cambodia's sex trafficking problem (I was still calling it 'Cambodia's sex work problem'), but also its historical trajectory from the colonial period to the present. I imagined poring over French colonial and UN archives with as much attention as I gave anti-trafficking organizations' 2021 annual reports. It gives me some comfort to know that I am not alone in my (impractical, often overwhelming) idealism. Danilyn Rutherford (2016) states:

> When I was a little girl I wanted to know everything. I feel like those times have come again. These days, cultural anthropologists are like inquisitive children. They do not like having limitations placed on the questions they can ask. They want to know everything there is to know about the histories that have brought together the actors they study. They want to know everything there is to know about the forces that shape what these actors do. (p. 286)

I hope it is clear by now that this project has a contemporary focus – not because mapping the long arc of this problematization is unimportant, but because it was not pragmatic given the time and travel constraints that characterize MA work in the pandemic era. Thank you, Ellen, for pointing this out before I began.

Without conducting archival ethnography, I was not able to map the historical trajectory of Cambodia's sex trafficking problem in the manner I imagined. So what is to become of my remaining research question: *How do present-day framings of this*

problem intersect and repurpose longstanding tropes and ideologies in framing the problem as particularly Cambodian? Instead of trying to write a substantive chapter based on partial research, I offer a prospective and tentative positioning of this problematization's central components – that together, I argue, constitute Cambodia's 'culture of complicity' in sex trafficking – within the transnational (post)colonial imagination. In this brief discussion, I use the phrase 'culture of complicity' to mean that aid discourses construct Cambodia's sex trafficking problem as one rooted in Cambodia's 'pathological,' 'savage' culture (where, for instance, aid actors like Helen Sworn of Chab Dai Coalition imagine mothers casually sell their daughters for mobile phones), not social and economic conditions exacerbated by the same perpetual aid and development projects that immortalize themselves by never entirely solving this problem. Below, I return to where we began.

I have argued that discursive constructions of Cambodia's sex trafficking problem are built upon claims of Cambodia's savagery. By way of introducing this problem in *The Pink Room,* Don Brewster of AIM states:

> There are many countries in the world that suffer from abject poverty, and there are a number of countries who have suffered a genocide, but there's things about Cambodia that make it unique. In most countries it's an ethnic group against an ethnic group. In Cambodia, the genocide was actually imposed upon itself by all the people of Cambodia. (Sandvos, 2011, 9:44)

Here Brewster blames "all the people of Cambodia" for inflicting tremendous violence upon themselves. This savagery hypothesis underpinned the 1992 UNTAC intervention, which sought to promote peace and stability after decades of conflict by spearheading demilitarization, safeguarding human rights, and organizing democratic

elections under the logic that Cambodia was incapable of undertaking these developments for and by itself (Springer 2009; United Nations, n.d.). Similarly, the 1863 French colonial civilizing mission was both a moral and political endeavour (Ovesen & Trankell, 2010). Among other projects, the French shut down brothels and arrested sex workers towards the aim of abolishing sexual slavery (Jacobsen, 2014). Contemporary anti-trafficking discourses thus reiterate longstanding colonial and postcolonial ideologies about Cambodia's savagery as a culture at once violent, helpless, and in need of saving from itself.

I have argued that bad mothers and innocent daughters are the central dyad and the crux of discursive constructions of Cambodia's sex trafficking problem. Reaksmey, in *Tending Clouds*, says:

> I was such a good girl and I was a mama's girl. She have a way of, I don't know, you can say, "wrap people around her finger"? I truly believed that she cared and that she sacrificed for my life. I was such a fool that I believed that. (Sandvos, 2020, 8:20)

The bad mother – who, Reaksmey also notes, "was always in our neighbour's house playing card games but somehow we never have enough money" (Sandvos, 2020, 27:19) – figures in 20th century transnational discourse as the racialized "welfare queen" (Briggs, 2002, p. 3), as well as the "pathological Black mother" (Beutin, forthcoming, p. 87). Stoler (1995) also locates the bad mother and the innocent, if savage, child in colonial discourse. Contemporary constructions of Cambodia's sex trafficking problem thus repurpose transnational and colonial tropes of dangerous and endangered women and girls in framing the problem as particularly Cambodian.

In considering these central components of Cambodia's discursive culture of complicity – cultural savagery and the bad mother/innocent daughter dyad – together, I reiterate that Cambodia's sex trafficking problem is an assemblage of legible and durable (post)colonial tropes and logics repurposed through contemporary media. If these stories are substantiated by colonial and transnational tropes and ideologies, yet still seem to be incapable of concluding with pragmatic solutions to Cambodia's sex trafficking problem, why do they endure? In other words, why tell versions of the same story across time and space if the ending is, well, a dead end?

As Hillary Clinton claimed in the *Half the Sky* promotional video that opened this project, "stories are powerful" (Half the Sky Movement, 2013, 0:26). Working together, narratives – even if considered sensational, and therefore dismissible – and numbers, even if considered objective, and therefore neutral – have the power to construct Cambodia's sex trafficking problem as something both urgent and real. I hope, by now, this much is evident. Cambodia's sex trafficking problem is not just a story, though. Solutions corresponding to this problematization are enacted on Cambodian girls, by anti-trafficking organizations, outside the world of films and websites and reports. This problematization is rooted in constructions of cultural savagery, bad mothers, and innocent daughters, and therefore demands transnational intervention to overrule Cambodia's culture of complicity in sex trafficking. The ensuing maternalistic, paternalistic, heroic, and civilizing interventions have the potential to perpetuate harm against the Cambodian girls they seek to rescue, both during raid and rescue missions and in the rehabilitation programs that follow. The ways in which sex trafficking in Cambodia is constructed in aid discourses as a problem to be solved through a particular set of interventions therefore has the power

to ensure the ongoing presence of the anti-trafficking apparatus in Cambodia, as well as the ongoing exploitation and abuse of the Cambodian girls subjected to raid and rescue and rehabilitation interventions. In short, as Rutvica Andrijasevic (2007) argues, “the representation of violence is thus violent itself” (p. 24).

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Appendix

Documentaries and Aid Organizations Analyzed

As I argue in this project, language is powerful and political. With this in mind, below I provide a brief summary of each film and organization in its own words as much as possible.

Films

Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide

Half the Sky was directed by Maro Chermayeff based on a book by former journalists Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn. This film "follows Nicholas Kristof and celebrity activists … on a journey to tell the stories of inspiring, courageous individuals" (PBS, 2022, para. 2). While *Half the Sky* features footage from 10 countries, I focused on the segment featuring Kristof and Cambodian anti-trafficking activist Somaly Mam of AFESIP as they conducted a brothel raid.

Nefarious: Merchant of Souls

Nefarious was written, produced, and directed by Benjamin Nolot, the CEO and Founder of Exodus Cry, a registered American charity that is "committed to abolishing sex trafficking and breaking the cycle of commercial sexual exploitation while assisting and empowering its victims" (Exodus Cry, 2022b, para. 1). *Nefarious* "is a hard-hitting documentary that exposes the disturbing trends of modern-day sex slavery [and] also features expert analysis from international humanitarian leaders and captures the gripping, triumphant testimonies of survivors" (Exodus Cry, 2022a, paras. 1-2). While this documentary also featured footage from multiple countries, I

focused on the Cambodia segments featuring AIM and Chab Dai Coalition, organizations I discuss below.

The Pink Room

The Pink Room was directed by American filmmaker Joel Sandvos and produced by Goat Rock Films, who simply describes it as "a journey inside the fight against child sex trafficking in Cambodia" (Goat Rock Films, n.d.b, para. 1). This documentary featured anti-trafficking organizations AIM and Chab Dai Coalition.

Tending Clouds: Sold, Survived, Stronger

Again directed by Joel Sandvos and produced by Goat Rock Films, *Tending Clouds* follows Reaksmey, a Cambodian former victim of sex trafficking who was rescued by AIM and, after being rehabilitated through the organization's restoration home, moved to the United States. This film follows Reaksmey as she moves back to Cambodia to work with AIM,

> relentless in her pursuit to never let others experience what she did, while navigating through the hellish storms of her childhood resurfaced by the relationship with her mother and a retrial of her abuser, forcing her to testify again in the hopes that he will not go free. (Goat Rock Films, n.d.a, para. 1)

This film offered material on AIM, as well as Reaksmey's perspective as a rescued Cambodian girl who now works within the organization who saved her.

(Sex Workers Cry) Rights Not Rescue in Cambodia

Rights Not Rescue was cocreated by filmmaker Paula Stromberg and the Cambodian grassroots sex worker-led organization WNU. In this documentary, "the film subjects question Cambodia's focus on training 'rescued' female sex workers to sew in low wage garment factories" (Stromberg, 2014, para. 3). I used this film to

gain insight into Cambodia's sex trafficking problem (and related garment work problem) from 'rescued' victims themselves.

Organizations

AFESIP

AFESIP, founded by former victim of sex trafficking Somaly Mam, is a Cambodia-based anti-trafficking organization with national and transnational donors and partners. AFESIP

> works to care for and secure the rights of young women and girls who are victims or are at risk of being victims of slavery and to successfully recover, educate, train and reintegrate them into mainstream society through financial independence in a sustainable and innovative manner. (Agir Pour les Femmes en Situation Précaire, 2021, p. 2)

AIM

AIM was founded by former American pastor Don Brewster and his wife, Bridget, and has focused on sex trafficking in Cambodia since 2005. AIM is a

> Christ-led, non-denominational, not-for-profit organization that exists to glorify God through [its] dedicated efforts to love, protect, and care for survivors of trafficking as well as other vulnerable and exploited individuals. Through a holistic approach of rescuing, restoring and reintegrating survivors of trafficking and preventing sexual slavery, AIM seeks to meet survivors' spiritual, emotional, social, educational and physical needs. [AIM's] intention is that they may come to know their worth and value in Christ, develop a dependence on Him, and develop skills for a sustainable life. (Agape International Missions, 2021a, p. 4)

Destiny Rescue

> Founded by Tony Kirwan of New Zealand,
>
> Destiny Rescue finds and rescues children from sex trafficking in Cambodia and helps them stay free. [Their] reintegration services are culturally-relevant and focus on each child's future. Kids also experience Christ's love and care from [their] servant-hearted staff. (Destiny Rescue, 2022a, para. 3)

Chab Dai Coalition

Chab Dai was founded in Cambodia by Helen Sworn of the United Kingdom and seeks to "end all forms of abuse and modern slavery globally by building a movement to empower communities, to strengthen systems, and to restore justice and wellbeing with survivors" (Chab Dai Coalition, n.d., para. 2).

IJM

IJM is "the largest anti-slavery organization in the world" (International Justice Mission, 2022b, "Who We Are" section). In Cambodia, IJM initially worked in collaboration with Cambodian police to end child sex trafficking, though they have since broadened their focus to all forms of labour slavery.