

Neoliberal Sexual Humanitarianism and Story-Telling: The case of Somaly Mam

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Abstract:

Stories of trafficking into the sex industry in Cambodia are a popular feature in local and international media, academic and development literature, policy and humanitarian debates, social and political discourse, and NGO interventions. These stories are powerful for their ability to evoke deep emotions and outrage from their intended audiences. However, they are equally powerful for the ways in which they can cause harm—namely to already marginalised populations of migrants and people involved in the sex trade either by choice, circumstance or coercion. One of the most contentious contemporary trafficking stories is that of the controversial case of Somaly Mam—the self-declared ‘sex slave’ turned ‘modern-day hero’. This paper outlines Mam’s prolific trajectory of self-representation according to the tropes of sexual humanitarianism and argues that these narratives helped to set in motion one of the most lucrative, and in many ways, most exploitative and problematic anti-trafficking endeavours in Cambodia, to date. The paper concludes with offering suggestions for how the anti-trafficking industry might better address real cases of trafficking and exploitation by focusing on structural violence and systemic injustice rather than on sensationalised humanitarian rhetoric, which can perpetuate harms.

Keywords: Cambodia, Somaly Mam, sex work, sexual humanitarianism, anti-trafficking industrial complex

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Introduction¹

Lurid stories of trafficking into the sex industry in Cambodia abound. They are a prevalent feature of both local and international news media, television and films, of academic and development literature, of policy and humanitarian debates, of social and political discourse, and of NGO interventions. The images are disturbing, yet enticing: young female ‘sex slaves’ locked in brothels, or even cages; regular, violent abuse by pimps and managers; or the systematic sale of child or adolescent virginity by family members. These stories are powerful for their ability to evoke deep emotions and outrage from their intended audiences. Rarely critically assessed by the viewers, however, the narratives are equally powerful for the ways in which they can cause harm—namely to labour migrants and already marginalised populations of people involved in the sex trade either by choice, circumstance or coercion. No greater and more prolific a contemporary ‘trafficking story’ is that of the controversial case of Somaly Mam, a self-proclaimed ‘survivor of the Cambodian slave trade’.²

This article contextualises Mam’s story within Cambodian history and argues that narratives of trafficking into the sex industry expedited the setting in motion of one of the most exploitative and problematic anti-trafficking endeavours in Cambodia to date. The paper will draw on Mai’s idea of ‘sexual humanitarianism’ as a global and repressive form of social and moral governance that is activated through the production of moral panics around sexual behaviour (in this case trafficking in the sex industry), and that is used to show the inseparability between neoliberalism and development aid in post-1991 Cambodia. The article will explore the relation between sexual humanitarianism and neoliberalism by building on Leigh’s notion of the ‘anti-trafficking industrial complex’ referring to the systems and institutions operating under the banner of anti-trafficking initiatives, which create economic opportunities for the organisations involved in eradicating trafficking through punitive means while exacerbating the socio-economic vulnerabilities of sex workers.

¹ The author would like to thank Nicola Mai, Rutvica Andrijasevic, Rebecca Napier-Moore, Carol Leigh, and two anonymous peer reviewers for their helpful feedback and comments on this article.

² Somaly Mam Foundation, ‘Somaly Mam Foundation Annual Report’, Somaly Mam Foundation, New York, 2011.

Self-Representation

Mam's story is one that has both inspired and shaken the global anti-trafficking movement, and it begins in Cambodia. As painstakingly detailed in her memoir, *The Road of Lost Innocence*,³ Mam describes her own life of violence, rape and torture, and years of enslavement by various abusive men after being orphaned as a child in the Cambodian countryside. The images are vivid and painful, and drawing on the standard narrative of extreme control and exploitation typical of the patriarchal repertoire of Western representations of 'sexual slavery',⁴ the autobiography virtually projected Mam onto the world as the beautifully damaged, global anti-trafficking 'poster child'.⁵

Mam's anti-trafficking work actually began a decade before her book's publication alongside her French ex-husband, Pierre Legros, when, in 1996, they co-founded AFESIP (Agir Pour Les Femmes en Situation Précaire, or Helping Women in Danger)—a Cambodian-based NGO devoted to 'saving' women and children from sexual exploitation. The international media first took interest in their work in 1998 when a French television show, *Envoyé Spécial*, aired a compelling story about child sexual exploitation in Cambodia, featuring graphic on-camera testimonies of an 'enslaved' young girl named Meas Ratha with Mam seated by her side.⁶

After this first public media appeal, Mam was soon touring the world as an ambassador and activist for anti-trafficking. In 2007, she went on to start the New York-based Somaly Mam Foundation (SMF), which became the global fundraising arm of her work. The 'eradication of slavery' was one SMF's key objectives. In the 2011 *Somaly Mam Foundation Annual Report*, SMF, through the efforts of AFESIP, boasted of rescuing 30 victims from Cambodian brothels, of airing the national radio show *Somaly's Family* five days per week in Cambodia, of offering 668 sexually transmitted disease tests to 'victims of exploitation in the sex trade', and of reintegrating 120 survivors back into the community. According to AFESIP's current website, the three AFESIP centres in Cambodia are presently helping 170 women and girls who are 'victimized by human trafficking and sex slavery'. While these are all perhaps commendable achievements, these numbers do not seem to add up to the 4,000 victims Mam regularly claims to have 'rescued' to date.⁷ The numbers seem even less impressive when the total revenue for SMF in 2011—well over USD2 million—is considered (which was mostly gained through supporter contributions).⁸

In an attempt to keep the momentum going, and portray to the world harrowing first-hand accounts of child sexual abuse in order to drum up funding, Mam also mobilised the victim script of Long Pros—a teenage Cambodian girl who, while imprisoned in a brothel, allegedly had her eye gouged out by an angry manager when she refused to have sex with clients after an abortion.⁹

The narrative was gripping and both Mam and Pros shared the story on the *Oprah Winfrey* show in the US while on a celebrity tour, where they shared stages with Hilary Clinton, Meg Ryan and Susan Sarandon, to name a few. Journalist Nicholas Kristof jumped on the bandwagon and published Pros' story in the *New York Times*,¹⁰ as well as in a 2012 PBS documentary titled *Half the Sky* (which was based on a book by the same name co-authored with Sheryl WuDunn in 2009).¹¹ In 2011, Mam and Kristof strengthened their alliance during an infamous brothel raid in which Kristof broadcast his 'bravery' to the world through a series of 15 live *Twitter*

³ Originally published in French as *Le silence de l'innocence*, Editions Anne Carrière, Paris, 2005. The first English translation was *The Road of Lost Innocence: The true story of a Cambodian childhood*, Virago Press, London, 2007.

⁴ R Andrijašević, 'Beautiful Dead Bodies: Gender, migration and representation in anti-trafficking campaigns', *Feminist Review*, vol. 86, 2007, pp. 24–44.

⁵ E O'Brien, 'Ideal Victims in Human Trafficking Awareness Campaigns', in K Carrington, M Ball, E O'Brien, and JM Tauri (eds.), *Crime, Justice and Social Democracy: International perspectives*, Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke, 2013, pp. 315–326.

⁶ S Marks and P Bopha, 'Sex slave story revealed to be fabricated', *Cambodia Daily*, 12 October 2013.

⁷ Voice of America, 'AFESIP offers new start for abused girls', *Voice of America - Khmer*, 26 February 2008.

⁸ Somaly Mam Foundation, 2011.

⁹ S Marks and K Sovuthy, 'Questions Raised over Symbol's Slavery Story', *Cambodia Daily*, 26 October 2012.

¹⁰ N Kristof, 'If this isn't slavery, what is?', *New York Times*, 3 January 2009.

¹¹ The book and film went on to be branded as the *Half the Sky* movement, in which Kristof profits from the economic and physical oppression of young women and girls all over the global South, while advancing his 'white hero' complex. See www.halftheskymovement.org.

messages shared with his 1.3 million followers.¹² (This is after Kristof had purchased two Cambodian sex workers from a brothel for USD353 in 2004 with the goal of ‘setting them free’).¹³

In the introduction to the Cambodia segment of the *Half the Sky* film, Mam proclaims herself to be the ‘mother and the grandmother to all the suffering girls who have been sex slaves in Cambodia’. Then a few clips later, to the tune of *We Are the World* in the background, Kristof and Mam are shown heroically raiding brothels alongside machine-gun armed police. Images of bloodied toilet paper dumped from a garbage bag and stained pillows on a bed are followed by a clip of Mam holding an allegedly raped and sold three-year-old girl.



Image 1: Somaly Mam holding an alleged three-year old rape victim; *Half the Sky* film still. Photo Credit: Independent Lens, PBS

With Mam narrating, slides of statistics then state that there are 57,000 sex slaves in Cambodia alone; that the average starting age of sex slavery decreased from age 15 in 1993 to age 2 in 2013; that 2.4 million girls are forced into sexual slavery (the timeframe and location unclear); and that 40-50% of sex slaves are HIV positive (location again unclear). At no point are the sources of these dubious and exaggerated statistics cited.¹⁴

¹² See ‘Nick Kristof Live-tweets a Brothel Raid’, retrieved 8 July 2016, <https://storify.com/twittermedia/nick-kristof-live-tweets-a-brothel-raid>

¹³ N Kristof, ‘Bargaining for freedom’, *New York Times*, 21 January 2004.

¹⁴ According to a UNIAP report published in 2011, for example, there were 1,058 trafficking victims in Cambodia, and 127 were underage—significantly lower than the 57,000 cited in the film. See UNIAP, *UNLAP Trafficking Estimates. Measuring the extent of sex trafficking in Cambodia—2008*, Bangkok, Thailand, 2011.

The wounded character of Long Pros depicted the perfect ‘true victim’¹⁵—already historically and culturally coded as female, unfree, and the passive object of male violence.¹⁶ The film itself is a clear example of a cinematic genre of what anthropologist Carol Vance has termed ‘melodramatic’ whereby the ‘horror of sex is amplified by the horror of poverty’.¹⁷ Viewers need not know the true context of bloodied toilet paper (perhaps evidence of menstrual blood), or worn bedding (perhaps evidence of poverty-stricken living conditions); they are already convinced that both are proof of sex trafficking, and that the ‘true’ victims in the film are worthy of Mam’s (and Kristof’s) sexual humanitarian interventions.¹⁸



Image 2: Meg Ryan and Long Pros in *Half the Sky*. Photo Credit: Independent Lens, PBS

Through the use of these heart-wrenching trafficking scripts, Somaly Mam had catapulted herself into the global spotlight as a brave and beautiful freedom fighter, and earned honours such as the Prince Asturias Award for International Cooperation in 1998, Glamour Magazine’s ‘Woman of the Year’ Award in 2006, the US State Department’s ‘TIP Report Hero’ title in 2007, Time Magazine’s ‘Most Influential People’ recognition in 2009, the USD1.27 million Roland Berger Human Dignity Award in 2009, Fortune Magazine’s ‘Most Powerful Women’ recognition in 2011, a CNN Freedom Project hero in 2011, one of Fast Company’s League of Extraordinary Women in 2012, the Posco TJ Park Foundation Community Development & Philanthropy Prize in 2012, and the Nomura CARES Award in 2012.

Mam has had meetings and encounters with Pope John Paul II, the Dalai Lama, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, and boasts support from Queen Sofía of Spain, Angelina Jolie, Lucy Liu, Ashley Judd, Bonnie Rait, Jane Seymour, Katie Couric, Bill Maher and Shelley Simmons (the Body Shop). SMF had as advisory board members in 2011: Daryl Hannah, Laurie Holden, Ron Livingston, Susan Sarandon and Sheryl Sandberg (partial list). Through a combination of storytelling, networking, and performance, Mam became a million-dollar enterprise in her quest to ‘free the slaves’.

¹⁵ A Cole, *The Cult of True Victimhood: From the war on welfare to the war on terror*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2006.

¹⁶ R Andrijasevic, ‘The Figure of the Trafficked Victim: Gender, rights and representation’, Chap. in M Evans, C Hemmings, M Henry, H Johnstone, S Madhok, A Plomien & S Wearing (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Feminist Theory*, London, Sage, 2014, pp. 359—73.

¹⁷ C S Vance, ‘Innocence and Experience: Melodramatic narratives of sex trafficking and their consequences for law and policy’, *History of the Present*, vol. 2, issue 2, 2012, pp. 200—18.

¹⁸ Mai, 2013.



Image 3: Katie Couric and Somaly Mam at a Somaly Mam Foundation Fundraiser; Photo Credit: Andy Kropa

Context—Neoliberal sexual humanitarianism

Wendy Hesford's notion of 'spectacular rhetorics' is useful in analysing Mam's efficiency in touching on various humanitarian tropes or themes of suffering in an effort to shape how western spectators understand and uncritically support her form of human rights advocacy.¹⁹ By compelling audiences to witness 'human rights spectacles' of trauma, exploitation, rape, and abuse, Mam has created a 'visual vernacular'—or visual culture which ultimately perpetuates violence (as described below), and crafts a discourse that affirms, rather than rhetorically engages with, oppressive power imbalances between the spectacles (in this case, Cambodian female trafficking victims) and the gazing spectators (western human rights advocates and donors).

These western viewers and 'holders of rights' have the power to bestow justice, benevolence, morality, and even freedom upon the powerless, victimised 'Other' through uncritical acts of charity, which is archetypal of Mam's brand of 'sexual humanitarianism'.²⁰ As defined by sociologist Nicola Mai, 'sexual humanitarianism' is a repressive form of social and moral governance that often emerges through the production of global moral panics around sexual behaviour. Sexual humanitarianism, in the case of Mam, is activated through a strategy of self-representation and instances of humanitarian interventions that 'attempt to recreate the notion of a unified, West-centric, hierarchical humanity around essentialised and moralised understandings of...gender and sexuality'.²¹ With regard to Mam and Cambodia, there is a definitive relationship between sexual humanitarianism, neoliberalism, and globalisation—similar to anthropologist Don Kulick's²² renderings of the connection between the implementation of the Swedish Model (i.e. the criminalisation of clients of sex workers) and Sweden's entry into the EU. Local Cambodian articulations of the encounter between sexual humanitarianism and neoliberalism lend themselves to the neoliberal form of sexual humanitarianism illustrated in this paper. Some historical context is necessary here in order to further elucidate this connection.

In the second half of the 20th century, Cambodia suffered decades of conflict in the form of civil war, genocide under the Khmer Rouge regime, and Vietnamese occupation.²³ In a move towards reconciliation and

¹⁹ Hesford, 2011.

²⁰ Mai, 2013.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²² D Kulick, 'Sex in the New Europe: The criminalization of clients and Swedish fear of penetration', *Anthropological Theory*, vol. 3, issue 2, 2003, pp. 199–218. Here Kulick argues that the passing of the Swedish law had more to do with anxieties around Sweden's entry into the EU and the potential wave of European liberalisation regarding prostitution that might occur when the country was literally and metaphorically 'penetrated' by Europeans (or more specifically—Eastern European sex workers). The fear was based in the notion that the country could potentially lose its 'Swedishness' and become vulnerable to moral contamination. Thus, measures were taken against prostitution, an obvious target, to attempt to maintain Sweden's position that the 'polity was politically more aware, humane, and moral than that of many other nations' (p. 209).

²³ D Chandler, *A History of Cambodia, Third Edition*, Boulder, Westview Press, 2000.

liberalisation, the Paris Peace Accords were signed in 1991, with the belief that peace (and, importantly, foreign investments) could be achieved through free markets and democratisation. The United Nations Transitional Authority of Cambodia took control from 1991 to 1993 (known as the UNTAC era), and in 1993, the first ‘democratic’ elections were held, whereby the current Prime Minister, Hun Sen, and his Cambodian People’s Party gained power (and have remained in power ever since). There were sharp increases in industrialisation, privatisation, expansion and rural to urban migration as the Cambodian government turned towards capitalism as a solution to 30 years of overwhelming violence and devastation. As Simon Springer points out, ‘neoliberalism’s relationship with “post conflict” development [and peace building] is an integral one’.²⁴

During the UNTAC era, an estimated 20,000 UN international peacekeepers entered Cambodia, and many scholars associate this period with changes in social and sexual culture, and increases in sexual permissiveness and depravity, corruption, inflation, rape and assault, prostitution and the spread of HIV/AIDS—and trafficking—all apparently due to the sudden appearance of wealth and foreign influence.²⁵ And, as illustrated above, it was also during the 1990s that the link between ‘human trafficking’ (namely in the form of child sexual exploitation and prostitution) and Cambodia hit the global stage—through Mam’s endeavours and first TV appearance. In that ‘spectacular’ moment, she became the Cambodian face of the larger moralistic and sexual humanitarian project of addressing ‘sex trafficking’, as she metaphorically represented, on a global platform, the beauty, resiliency, and bravery of Cambodia, yet also its vulnerability. As the country was busy reorienting itself as modern, global, and progressive, in neoliberal terms, in its attempts to attract foreign investments and capitalist expansion, the state was, and still is, very much dependent on foreign aid for social programming (despite the fact that its reliance on donor money ultimately worked to undermine efforts at democracy).²⁶

The work of historian Trude Jacobsen shows how sexual humanitarianism was, and is, acceptable to the government because it transfers responsibility away from the state and on to individual actors (and their resources). For Cambodian actors like Somaly Mam, it provided an opportunity to acquire resources through an issue that inflames first-world guilt (sex tourism, orientalism, the legacy of the Vietnam War, the Khmer Rouge). Non-Cambodian donors and activists gained prestige within their communities (church, friend group, families) for contributing (financially or through activism or other means) to a cause viewed as morally worthy.²⁷

Within Mam’s neoliberal brand of sexual humanitarianism, humanitarian interventions and market transactions are constructed as mutually reinforcing (rather than contradictory) modes of individualistic worldly engagement.²⁸ Essentialised and vulnerable victims of sexual oppression and exploitation are deemed entitled to protection and support,²⁹ yet the commercial objectives of seeking that support are cloaked in sanctimonious moral agendas and human rights language. NGOs are viewed as experts in knowledge production, the ‘real’ voices of the apparent victims are marginalised—if not completely ignored—and there is a commercialisation or celebritisation of humanitarianism, whereby funds are raised through red carpet galas, celebrity endorsements, ‘sex trafficking tours’,³⁰ and the sale of victim-made products (where consumers are reminded they are ‘buying for freedom’).³¹

In this system, there is a flow of funds from more developed countries to charitable anti-trafficking projects in less developed countries in the form of celebrity, corporate and private donations. Often the donors have very little knowledge about the complexity of the issues they are supporting, and funnel money into ‘worthy’ organisations that lack transparency in both their activities and outcomes. In this context, ‘Band-Aid solutions’ tend to mask deeper systemic injustices³² and short-term fixes supplant long-term structural change. Mass-mediated spectacles and ‘victim scripts’ are the only evidence needed to justify the cause, and west-centric, moralised understandings of sex and gender are reproduced around the globe.

²⁴ S Springer, *Violent Neoliberalism—Development, discourse, and dispossession in Cambodia*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2015, p. 7.

²⁵ T Jacobsen, *Lost Goddesses: The denial of female power in Cambodian history*, Gendering Asia, vol. 4, Copenhagen, NIAS Press, 2008.

²⁶ S Ear, *Aid Dependence in Cambodia: How foreign assistance undermines democracy*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2012.

²⁷ T Jacobsen, email communication, 10 July 2016.

²⁸ E Bernstein and E Shih, ‘The Erotics of Authenticity: Sex trafficking and “reality tourism” in Thailand’, *Social Politics*, vol. 21, issue 3, 2014, p. 435.

²⁹ Mai, 2013.

³⁰ For an ethnographic case study of this, see Bernstein and Shih’s (2014) analysis of sex trafficking ‘reality tours’ in Thailand.

³¹ E Shih, ‘The Anti-Trafficking Rehabilitation Complex’, *Contexts*, vol. 13, issue 1, 2014.

³² P Mahdavi, ‘The charitable industrial complex: Justice, not charity, is what’s needed’, *Huffington Post*, 24 June 2014.

Mam's Story and Reactions to it

Basking in the celebrity fame and glory of her neoliberal sexual humanitarianism for nearly a decade, Mam's reign as global anti-trafficking hero came to a halt in May 2014 with the publication of a *Newsweek* story in which investigative journalist, Simon Marks (who, alongside Khmer colleagues, had been breaking small stories in local Cambodian media for several years), uncovered that most of her stories were allegedly fabricated.³³ Mam was not orphaned and sold into the sex trade as a child, but instead lived with both her biological parents throughout high school, before sitting the teachers exam (privileges that many girls do not have in Cambodia due to gendered inequities in education).

The publicised trauma stories of Mam's rescued 'sex slaves' were also allegedly untrue. Meas Ratha (from the 1998 French documentary) had apparently auditioned for the part and was chosen because she was the most convincing at performing misery. In exchange for the emotional performance, Ratha received education from Mam's organisation.³⁴ In 2012, Long Pros' parents revealed that her eye was not savagely maimed by a brothel manager, but instead was the result of a non-malignant tumour that had developed when she was age seven. At the suggestion of her surgeon, Pros' family contacted AFESIP to see if she could be admitted to their vocational training program. She was accepted, and her disfigurement soon launched her into the position of an ideal spokesperson for the Somaly Mam Foundation's Voices for Change programme, which was designed as a platform for survivors of sex trafficking to share their (fictional, in this case) stories.³⁵

There were other falsehoods and exaggerations, including a story told in a speech at the UN General Assembly about eight girls Mam had rescued in a botched AFESIP brothel raid in 2004 who had apparently been murdered by the Cambodian army. In 2012, she admitted that this claim was false. And several sources, ranging from rights workers, to police officials, to AFESIP's former legal advisor, to her ex-husband, Pierre Legros, have all strongly denied Mam's claim on film in 2006 that her 14-year old daughter was kidnapped and gang-raped by traffickers, as retaliation for Mam's anti-trafficking work. Instead, her daughter had apparently run away with her boyfriend.³⁶

The global reaction to these revelations of falsehoods was mixed. Many former supporters were saddened and dismayed. Across news and social media, there was a sense of disillusionment and betrayal at having been lied to. Even Kristof, her former rescue partner (and supporter of the Long Pros story), had back-pedalled and stated shortly after the scandal broke that he 'now wished he had never written about her'.³⁷ But there also remained unfettered support. The many people invested in her tale (such as Susan Sarandon, AnnaLynne McCord, designer Diane von Furstenberg among some other of the celebrities listed above) simply refused to believe that she had exaggerated her story, while others argued that the fabrications did not invalidate her important anti-trafficking work.³⁸

Days after the publication of the *Newsweek* article, SMF released a statement confirming that Mam was stepping down from the foundation after an independent investigation had been conducted by a California-based law firm, Goodwin Proctor. Four months later, SMF officially closed its doors.³⁹ Mam remained silent throughout all of this until an interview with *Marie Claire*, in which she vehemently denied the allegations against her. When asked why she remained silent for so long, Mam replied, in reference to 'her girls' in Cambodia, 'I was not silent. I had so many lives to fix'.⁴⁰ And despite a statement by a Cambodian Council of Ministers spokesperson that the government would not allow Mam to 'run this kind of activity again',⁴¹ it was announced in an email to her supporters in December 2014 that Mam would be involved in a new US-based organisation called The New Somaly Mam Fund: Voices of Change. The new NGO would combine with AFESIP (which lost most of its funding after SMF withdrew support after the scandal) and focus on post-rescue care and education.⁴²

³³ S Marks, 'Somaly Mam: The holy saint (and sinner) of sex trafficking', *Newsweek*, 21 May 2014.

³⁴ Marks and Bopha, 2013.

³⁵ Marks and Sovuthy, 2012.

³⁶ Marks and Bopha, 2013.

³⁷ N Kristof, 'When sources may have lied', *New York Times*, 7 June 2014.

³⁸ M Siegler, 'AnnaLynne McCord supports Somaly Mam's new charity', *Page Six*, 14 March 2015.

³⁹ M O'Neil, 'Somaly Mam Foundation Shatters Operations', *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, 14 October 2014.

⁴⁰ A Pesta, 'Somaly Mam's story: I didn't lie', *Marie Claire*, 16 September 2014.

⁴¹ H Robertson and K Naren, 'Gov't says Somaly Mam banned from running NGO', *Cambodia Daily*, 3 October 2014.

⁴² L Barron, 'Somaly Mam Foundation 2.0', *Phnom Penh Post*, 26 December 2014.

While The New Somaly Mam Fund continued to work to raise funds in the year following Mam's public opprobrium, there was yet another shift in rebranding—perhaps due to a negative association with Mam's name within the fundraising world of sexual humanitarianism. On 25 June 2016, at the Sofitel in Beverly Hills, California, the new, media-oriented and celebrity-endorsed Together1Heart organisation was launched—which has now replaced The New Somaly Mam Fund as the marketing and fundraising platform supporting AFESIP (and Mam). Perhaps in a direct or indirect smokescreen effort to remove, or limit obvious affiliation, Mam operates Together1Heart from the backseat. Though the 'face' and CEO of this organisation is model and actress AnnaLynne McCord (no other bios are listed on the 'Team' page, nor is there any mention of Mam's name anywhere on the website), Mam is centre stage alongside McCord in all the website and social media photos.⁴³

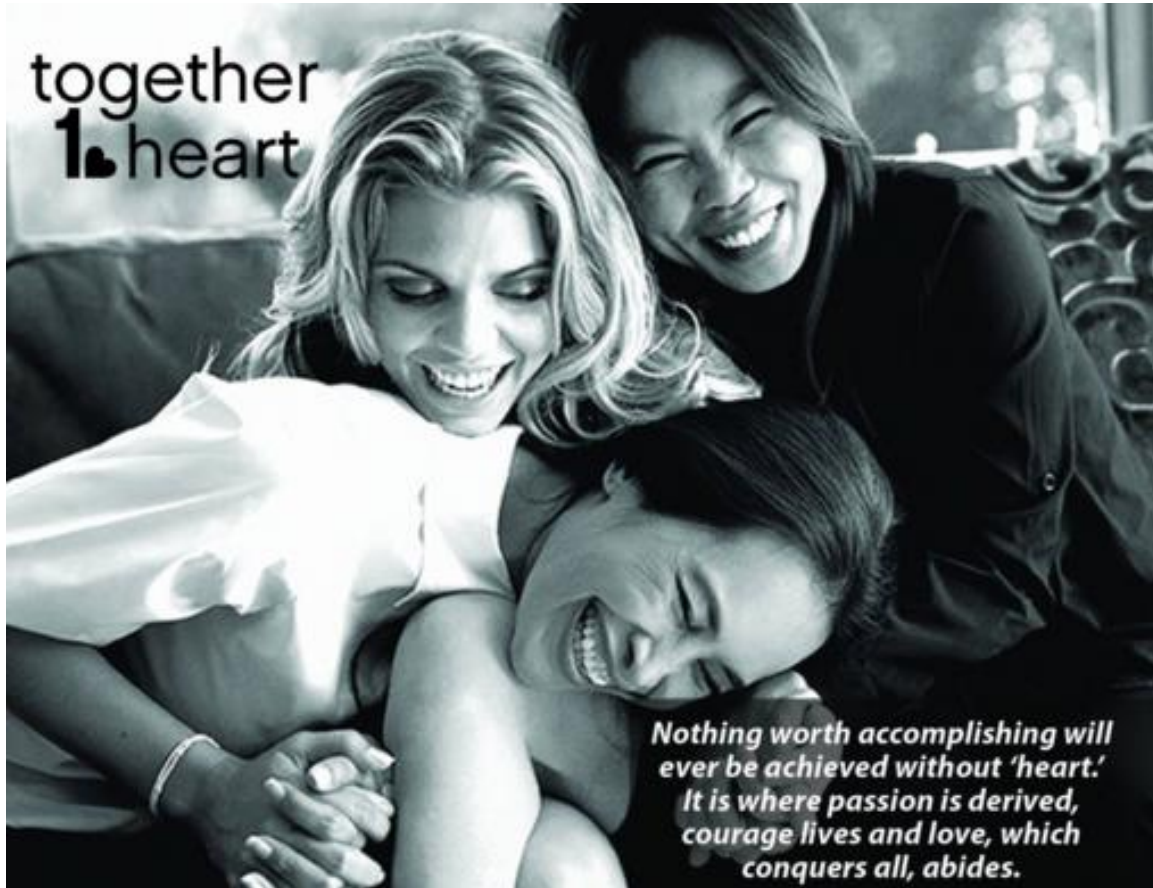


Image 4: AnnaLynne McCord, Somaly Mam, and Sina Vann (Cambodian trafficking survivor); from Together1Heart public Facebook page. Photo credit: Open Magazine.

The Facebook page of Together1Heart, the most active public media platform for the organisation, is dotted with feel-good quotes about 'love being a human right' and the need to end 'this atrocious sin on humanity', juxtaposed alongside celebrity images and endorsements, and barely-blurred images and stories of recused 'new girls' who were raped and beaten by their fathers and brothel clients. In this singular space, the paradoxes, oppressive power imbalances between western saviours and victimised Others, the spectacles and gazing spectators, and casual repetition of trauma, all come together visually to form, in itself, a 'ritualized pornographic act', which Hesford argues, works to perpetuate violence rather than remedy, or critically engage with it.⁴⁴

One may ask: How is it possible that Mam, and her work, have been resurrected after all the revelations and deception? Mai's notion of sexual humanitarianism as a hegemonic epistemology grounded in inequalities

⁴³ Together1Heart, retrieved 25 July 2016, <http://together1heart.org/the-team/>

⁴⁴ Hesford, 2011.

produced by neoliberalism could be an explanation as to why, even after the scandal, Mam is capable of mobilising symbolic and material resources. Even though Mam has been discredited, trafficking into the sex industry as a primary problem in Cambodia and the need for humanitarian responses have not withered away and her self-representation and interventions keep ‘making sense’ in sexual humanitarian terms.

Damage Done

While Mam’s devoted celebrity supporters continue to celebrate the revival of their anti-trafficking hero, sex worker rights activists and other social justice advocates across the globe are reeling with outrage and frustration. Firstly, Mam’s belief that she can singlehandedly ‘fix’ people who have suffered trauma is arrogant and problematic. Genuine survivors need support, resources and justice—not ‘fixing’. Secondly, for many people involved in the sex trade in Cambodia—either by choice, circumstance, or coercion—Mam’s powerful legacy of stories has not led to protection and freedom, but instead increased suffering and violence.

The dominant discourse around sex work in Cambodia—at least the one most audible due to the hegemony of the international ‘rescue industry’⁴⁵ there—is that of anti-sex work abolitionism. Within this model, prostitution is conflated with trafficking and is always viewed as an act of violence against women. The anti-trafficking abolitionist movement that Somaly Mam helped spur gained momentum when the anti-trafficking agenda became a priority of the Bush Administration in the early 2000s. Along with the ‘Global AIDS Act’, the ‘Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act’ implemented by the US Government in 2003 created a series of conditions for organisations receiving US funding for HIV or anti-trafficking programming. One of these conditions, the ‘anti-prostitution pledge’, required recipients of funding from the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and USAID to explicitly oppose sex work and trafficking, and ‘forbid the promotion of prostitution’.⁴⁶ Sex worker advocacy groups that did not have these ‘anti-prostitution’ policies in place or that refused to sign the pledge had important funding pulled. As a result, certain condom programmes ended, and certain drop-in centres for sex workers were closed.⁴⁷

Public health scholar Joanna Busza offers an example of the ways in which those early policy shifts directly impacted a grassroots sex worker advocacy project she was involved with in Cambodia.⁴⁸ In 2002, the Lotus Club—which was a sex worker outreach project serving mostly Vietnamese girls and women in the Svay Pak area near Phnom Penh—had caught the attention of anti-trafficking activists and the US State Department. Operated by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), but funded by USAID, Lotus Club was one of approximately eight programmes presented before the Cambodian Government’s House Committee on International Relations on 19 June 2002 as an example of alleged ‘Foreign Government Complicity in Human Trafficking’.⁴⁹ According to Busza, the testimonial of the outspoken anti-trafficking activist Donna Hughes⁵⁰ grossly misrepresented much of Lotus Club’s work (which involved offering outreach services, primary healthcare, STI treatment, contraceptives, condoms, educational workshops, snacks, and a social space for sex workers). Hughes also demonstrated a limited understanding of the issues when she accused project staff of having ‘never called the police’⁵¹ (despite the fact that police were regularly collecting bribes in Svay Pak, and were clients—and allegedly owners—of some of the brothels).⁵²

Although the anti-prostitution pledge was not yet formally in place in 2002, the negative attention brought forth by the trafficking complicity allegation against Lotus Club, the resulting self-censorship adopted by MSF after the publicised criticism, the increased pressure to avoid being seen to condone prostitution, and the shift

⁴⁵ L M Agustín, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, labour markets and the rescue industry*, Zed Books, London, 2007.

⁴⁶ M Ditmore and D Allman, ‘An Analysis of the Implementation of PEPFAR’s Anti-Prostitution Pledge and Its Implications for Successful HIV Prevention among Organizations Working with Sex Workers’, *Journal of the International AIDS Society*, vol. 16, issue 1, 2013.

⁴⁷ See also L Lyons and M Ford, ‘Where Are Your Victims? How sexual health advocacy came to be counter-trafficking in Indonesia’s Riau Islands’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 12, issue 2, 2010.

⁴⁸ J Busza, ‘Having the Rug Pulled From Under Your Feet: One project’s experience of the US policy reversal on sex work’, *Health Policy Plan*, vol. 21, issue 4, 2006.

⁴⁹ US Department of State, ‘Daily Appointments Schedule for June 19’, 2002. Accessed 5 March 2006 at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/appt/2002/11251.htm> (found in Busza, 2006).

⁵⁰ D Hughes, ‘The 2002 Trafficking in Persons Report: Lost opportunity for progress’, Paper presented at Testimony to the House Committee on International Relations, Washington, DC, 19 June 2002. Unpublished.

⁵¹ Hughes, 2002.

⁵² Busza, 2006.

in discourse that conflated sex work with trafficking (despite that the vast majority of women in Svay Pak did not feel they had been deceived or forced into sex work, and instead desired improved working conditions and safety while working),⁵³ meant that Lotus Club ultimately ‘limped to a close as its funding sources diminished’ and as most brothel-based sex work moved to other tourist destinations throughout Cambodia.⁵⁴

Other grassroots community-led groups in Cambodia, such as Women’s Network for Unity (WNU)—the current sex worker union with approximately 6400 members⁵⁵—were directly affected by the anti-prostitution pledge in the early 2000s. Most local and international NGOs working with WNU at the time were heavily dependent on US funding, and as a result of the new stipulations, they ended their support for fear that collaborations with WNU would jeopardise their funding.⁵⁶ Already-marginalised sex workers and their supporters were further pushed to the periphery as the abolitionist anti-trafficking bulldozer raged ahead.

By 2008, the abolitionist movement had gained so much power in Cambodia that, under pressure from the US (Bush Administration)⁵⁷ and financial support from UNICEF, the Cambodian government passed the ‘Law on the Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation’.⁵⁸ This anti-trafficking law formally criminalised soliciting in public, procurement of prostitution, management of prostitution establishments, and provision of premises for prostitution. According to WNU and other human rights groups and academics, its implementation was (and continues to be) devastating to sex workers, as it gave way to a new form of what sociologist Elizabeth Bernstein refers to as ‘militarized humanitarianism’ and ‘carceral feminism’,⁵⁹ or a crime-control and protection agenda that constructs trafficking as a humanitarian issue that needs addressing through both punitive means, and victim-saving efforts often promoted and even carried out by privileged western feminists and western-funded NGOs. This agenda has contributed to the continued growth of the ‘anti-trafficking industrial complex’—which, as activist Carol Leigh explains, ‘is based on an historically xenophobic and anti-prostitution framework, that employs a type of double-edged sword—with its efforts to assist and empower victims on one side, and the sharp edge of human rights violations on the other.’⁶⁰

As a result of this type of militarised, sexual humanitarianism within the anti-trafficking industrial complex in Cambodia, undercover raids of tourist-populated hostess bars—raids which began being carried out because of governmental ‘morality’ campaigns that coincided with the new anti-trafficking law’s implementation—resulted in large fines being charged to establishment owners and bar workers who were deemed to be promoting or engaging in ‘immoral behaviour’ (such as having dancing poles or stages, or wearing short skirts—despite that neither of these activities were technically prohibited).⁶¹ Aided by Mam and AFESIP (among other anti-trafficking groups), large police sweeps of parks and brothels began taking place, where the possession of condoms was used as evidence of prostitution. This is despite that in the late 1990s, Cambodia implemented the 100% Condom Use Programme whereby owners and managers of all entertainment establishments had to enforce condom use as a condition of commercial sex.⁶²

According to WNU⁶³ and Human Rights Watch,⁶⁴ many cis- and transgendered adult women arrested during these sweeps were sent to vocational shelters (including AFESIP shelters), or to government-run rehabilitation centres where they faced a number of abuses including forced labour, confiscation of possessions, forced separation from their children, sexual assault, rape and the denial of HIV medication. These actions against sex

⁵³ J Busza, ‘Sex Work and Migration: The dangers of oversimplification. A case study of Vietnamese women in Cambodia’, *Health and Human Rights*, vol. 7, 2004.

⁵⁴ Busza, 2006.

⁵⁵ See Global Network of Sex Work Projects, retrieved 25 July 2016, <http://www.nswp.org/timeline/event/women-s-network-unity-wnu-established-cambodia>

⁵⁶ L Sandy, ‘International Agendas and Sex Worker Rights in Cambodia’ in M Ford (ed.), *Social Activism in Southeast Asia*, Routledge, London, 2013, pp. 154—69.

⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch, *Off the Streets: Arbitrary detention and other abuses against sex workers in Cambodia*, Human Rights Watch, Phnom Penh, 2010.

⁵⁸ Ministry of Justice, ‘Explanatory Notes for the Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation’, Kingdom of Cambodia & UNICEF, Phnom Penh, 2013.

⁵⁹ E Bernstein, ‘Militarized Humanitarianism Meets Carceral Feminism: The politics of sex, rights, and freedom in contemporary anti-trafficking campaigns’, *Signs*, vol. 36, issue 1, 2010, pp. 45—72.

⁶⁰ C Leigh, email communication, 15 July 2016.

⁶¹ Hoefinger, 2013.

⁶² W Rojanapithayakorn, ‘The 100% Condom Use Programme in Asia’, *Reproductive Health Matters*, vol. 14, issue 28, 2006.

⁶³ Women’s Network for Unity, ‘Annual Narrative Report’, Women’s Network for Unity, Phnom Penh, 2012.

⁶⁴ Human Rights Watch, 2010.

workers have been justified on the grounds of meeting international obligations to ‘protect’ exploited women and girls; and the law that was meant to ‘save’ victims of trafficking and prostitutes has actually put many more cis- and transgendered women in danger of violence, abuse, stigma, and HIV transmission. A recent study published by Lisa Maher et al,⁶⁵ documents how trafficking prohibition efforts are infringing on the right to health of female sex workers in Phnom Penh. Since the anti-trafficking law’s implementation, sex workers have been displaced out of brothels and into the streets and guesthouses, which has disrupted their peer networks, decreased access to condoms and services, adversely impacted their ability to negotiate safer sex, and increased their exposure to violence. In a 2009 Ministry of Health report, the National Center for HIV/AIDS, Dermatology and STDs (NCHADS) reported a 46% increase in the number of women working on the street, 26% reduction in women seeking STI services, and a 16% decrease in HIV testing following the law’s implementation.⁶⁶

Another harmful consequence of Somaly Mam’s efforts, and the global anti-trafficking movement, has been the establishment of a culture of permanent victimhood for poor women in Cambodia. Impoverished women who sell sex are all portrayed as duped, naïve, lacking agency and in need of saving, which is a convenient narrative for those profiting from the rescue industry and the anti-trafficking industrial complex. Mam’s shelters, and other NGOs built upon the attention she has brought to the issue of trafficking often require women to learn how to sew as part of their educational or vocation skills training programmes (in part of what could be viewed as what sociologist Elena Shih refers to as the ‘anti-trafficking rehabilitation complex’).⁶⁷ This type of labour is considered by prostitution abolitionists to be more dignified than sex or entertainment work, despite the equally, or more oppressive working conditions that await women in garment factories when training is complete, where they will earn a maximum of USD140 per month (estimated living wage in Cambodia is USD283⁶⁸). Rather than creating more opportunities for women, this trajectory of rescue-to-training-to-factory work is instead embedding the women firmly within what Anne Elizabeth Moore terms ‘a system of entrenched, gender-based poverty’,⁶⁹ Therefore, as Mai explains, by focusing solely on trafficking victimhood, and failing to engage with the ‘feelings and experiences of advantage, disadvantage and exploitation’ voiced by the sex workers themselves,⁷⁰ their lives remain largely ignored and entitlements to social justice and rights remain unattended⁷¹ by neoliberal sexual humanitarian interventions.

Beyond Neoliberal Sexual Humanitarianism

Many loyal supporters argue that Mam’s alleged fabrications and her rehearsed victim scripts do not negate the important global anti-trafficking work she has done. Others have rationalised that her stories have at least ‘helped’ people and raised awareness of the issues. So, does it really matter that she lied?

It matters for many reasons. As a result of her personal declarations of abuse, and the parading of other female ‘victims of trafficking’ in front of cameras so that they may describe abuse in graphic detail, Mam has essentially used poor women and fraudulent stories for her own gain and international prestige. She is guilty of exploitation for profit, and this kind of feminised exploitation for gain is comparable to the actions of the ‘pimps’ and other third parties who profit from the labour of sex workers whom she so vehemently opposes in her abolitionist anti-trafficking work. In a tragic twist, the women and children whose bodies she has objectified and stories she has distorted subsequently become ‘slaves’ of modern-day media,⁷² and as gender scholar Rutvica Andrijasevic argues, the ‘representation of violence [becomes] violence itself’.⁷³ Along similar lines, one could argue that the ‘spectacular images’ of suffering presented by Mam deny those women and children ‘rhetorical agency’, or the ability to represent themselves—or construct their own narratives—beyond

⁶⁵ L. Maher, T C Dixon, P Phlong, J Monney-Somers, E Stein and K Page, ‘Conflicting Rights: How the prohibition of human trafficking and sexual exploitation infringes the right to health of female sex workers in Phnom Penh, Cambodia’, *Health and Human Rights*, vol. 17, issue 1, 2015.

⁶⁶ Ministry of Health, ‘Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for Continuum of Prevention to Care and Treatment for Women Entertainment Workers in Cambodia’, Ministry of Health, Phnom Penh, 2009.

⁶⁷ Shih, 2014.

⁶⁸ G Kane, ‘Cambodia Factsheet: Facts on Cambodia’s garment industry’, Clean Clothes Campaign, Phnom Penh, 2015.

⁶⁹ A E Moore, ‘Here’s Why It Matters When a Human Rights Crusader Builds Her Advocacy on Lies’, *Salon*, 28 May 2014.

⁷⁰ Mai, 2012, p. 1.

⁷¹ Mai, 2013.

⁷² P Allyn, ‘Stories are not for sale’, *Huffington Post*, 12 June 2014.

⁷³ Andrijasevic, 2007, p. 24.

victimhood.⁷⁴ Exaggerating victim scripts works to damage the credibility of real survivors of abuse. These false narratives add fuel to the existing culture of victim-blaming, doubt and denialism that often encompass sexual violence, and make it harder for real survivors to obtain justice. This undermines the furthering of rights and negates the ‘empowerment’ for which Mam and other anti-trafficking and human rights organisations claim to be fighting.

The use of celebrity endorsements, red carpet galas, media accolades, awards, and this brand of market-based sexual humanitarianism that cherry-picks only the most heart-wrenching tales also ends up distracting from, and obfuscating the day-to-day realities of those who suffer from various forms of structural violence and systemic injustice. Poverty, strict gender constraints, sexual and gender discrimination, disparities in education, and lack of viable employment options in Cambodia are not as ‘sexy’ and enticing as the type of traumatic spectacle that moves people to donate. Hijacking the stories of young women to portray only the most horrific narratives creates a hierarchy whereby only *those* stories seem worthy of attention and assistance, and a false dichotomy is created between ‘ideal’ and ‘real’ victims.⁷⁵ Prioritising the worst cases in media, and in celebrity-led anti-trafficking campaigns, also obscures the complexity of ‘trafficking’ and downplays deeper underlying issues around migration, employment, and feminised labour.⁷⁶

In the drive to maximise the ‘celebrity effect’⁷⁷ and attract publicity, raise awareness and procure funds, what gets lost are the voices of the women, workers, and trafficking survivors, and little space is left to critically analyse the intricate mingling of agency and precarity in the construction of women’s subjectivities.⁷⁸ In Cambodia and beyond, people who end up in the sex industry often express desires to be respected for the decisions they make within some very difficult circumstances and constrained environments.⁷⁹ They do not all want to be saved by ‘saviours’ who claim to know best. They want social justice, not charity.⁸⁰

The fight for social justice requires more nuanced understandings of global political economy and the complex situations that cause people to migrate and trade sex. It demands an interrogation of broader international issues around racial, economic and class inequalities, neoliberalism, and corporate globalisation,⁸¹ as well as around more localised issues in Cambodia such as domestic violence, inadequate healthcare, gender inequities in education and employment, rapid industrialisation that is leading to forced evictions and land disputes, poor working conditions in garment factories, violent governmental suppression of the labour rights movement, and political corruption—all of which profoundly affect the daily realities and decisions of women and girls.

The troubling case of Somaly Mam shows that stories are powerful vectors of sexual humanitarianism. Rather than exploiting spectacular and exaggerated stories of misery in an effort to abolish ‘sexual slavery’, Mam and her fellow humanitarians should turn their attention to the structural socio-economic preconditions behind the expansion of the contemporary Cambodian sex industry. Only then might the rights of sex workers truly be addressed, as well as the needs and desires of women and children involved in ‘real’ cases of exploitation and sexual labour against their will. It is the everyday stories of sex workers and survivors of abuse themselves that must be amplified if real change is to occur and justice is to be achieved.

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⁷⁴ Hesford, 2011, p. 153.

⁷⁵ C Hoyle, M Bosworth, and M Dempsey, ‘Labelling the Victims of Sex Trafficking: Exploring the borderlands between rhetoric and reality’, *Social & Legal Studies*, vol. 20, issue 3, 2011, p. 313—29.

⁷⁶ R Andrijasevic, *Migration, Agency and Citizenship in Sex Trafficking*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2010.

⁷⁷ M Wilson, ‘The Celebrity Effect: An exploratory study of the relationship between celebrity and giving using BBC charity appeals data’, Working paper, Centre of Philanthropy, University of Kent, 2015.

⁷⁸ Andrijasevic, 2014.

⁷⁹ Hoefinger, 2013.

⁸⁰ Empower Foundation, ‘Hit and Run: The impact of anti-trafficking policy and practice on sex worker’s human rights in Thailand’, Empower Foundation, RATS-W Team, Chiang Mai, 2012.

⁸¹ E Bernstein, *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, authenticity and the commerce of sex*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 2007.