

“Don’t Look Down on Us.”: Assessing the Vulnerabilities of Female Massage Workers in Phnom Penh

According to the United Nations, trafficking is defined quite broadly in the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (Annex, 2000). This general definition leaves room for each of the signatory countries of the protocol to specify their own interpretations of trafficking. In Cambodia, the Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation (UNIAP, 2008: 10) regulates the definition and criminalization of trafficking in article 13 and defines it as the act of selling, buying or exchanging a person to unlawfully deliver the control over a person to another, or to unlawfully receive the control over a person from another, in exchange for anything of value including any services and persons.

Sexual exploitation through prostitution is rife worldwide, and is prevalent in Asia, affecting people of all genders and ages. Sexual violence is pervasive throughout Asia and the Pacific to varying degrees. Cambodia has been a prime focus of anti-trafficking efforts due to the high prevalence of trafficking and sexual exploitation in Cambodia. Aspects of Asian culture are frequently cited as key factors behind sexual exploitation include; filial piety; low status of women and children; and the association of virginity with purity that cannot be retrieved once lost (Chung, 2013). Since this is both a sensitive, as well as extensive topic, Cambodian culture and values as they relate to sexual exploitation are examined in more detail in the following section. The passage of the Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation (2008) established the prohibition of any type of prostitution in Cambodia and led to the closing of brothels throughout the country. In Cambodia, not only is trafficking

and sexual exploitation prohibited, but it goes so far as to criminalize any form of prostitution. Rather than abolishing the sex industry and sexual exploitation as intended the law has fostered the converting of sexual service provision into illegal, and therefore less observable, channels. Today, it is an open secret that certain establishments continue to offer services that cross the legal boundaries, amongst them many KTV bars, beer gardens and massage parlors in Phnom Penh.

A recent study by Chab Dai shows that the nature of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking has evolved over the past decade, in part due to the anti-trafficking efforts of the Cambodian government and NGOs (Brammer & Smith-Brake, 2013: 14). Because of these efforts, commercial sexual exploitation has shifted from establishment-based brothel settings to entertainment-based settings, including KTV, beer gardens, and massage parlors. Since it is illegal to solicit sex in Cambodia, sexual services are not officially provided by such establishments. However, several studies have shown the existence of sex work in such establishments in Cambodia (Phlong, Weissen, Holden, & Liu, 2012: 8; Miles & Meeks, 2013; Davis & Miles, 2012), as well as in western nations like the United Kingdom (Sanders, 2007).

Anti-trafficking work in Cambodia is directly influenced by international and local media focus, as well as by the interests of NGO donors, causing the primary focus of anti-trafficking efforts to be on brothel-based sexual exploitation of women and sexual exploitation of children. As a result, attention is diverted away from the complicated and less sensationalized reality of Cambodia's sexual exploitation within the entertainment industry. Research has been found to be the number one influencing factor in driving the anti-trafficking movement (Brammer & Smith-Brake, 2013: 69), therefore this research study aims to provide an initial surveillance of whether massage parlor women are in fact vulnerable to sexual and other forms of exploitation (Brammer & Smith-Brake, 2013: 76).

When exploring the vulnerabilities of women working in the massage industry, it is important to make a distinction between women who do not offer any sexual services to clients and women who engage in sex work for either a limited time or indefinitely. Common factors have been identified that may push women in Cambodia into a context in which sexual exploitation is more likely to occur (Brammer & Smith-Brake, 2013: 30). Debt, poverty, and lack of employment opportunities among others were all cited as heightening the likelihood of a woman's entry into sex work. Identifying poverty as a vulnerability factor can be misleading as it cannot be assumed that being poor will invariably lead to sexual exploitation within the massage industry. However, in many cases poverty and debt comes together, with families falling deeper into poverty because of the large sums of money that they owe. A study investigating the migration and trafficking of women and girls in Cambodia for sexual exploitation, found that 40% of Khmer women and girls credited their entry into commercial sex work to levels of debt incurred by their families (Brown, 2007: 9). Poverty is a common driving force behind many of the vulnerability factors experienced by masseuses, including, but not limited, to sexual health, challenging interpersonal relationships, and migration (McVerry & Lindop, 2005).

Factors relating to migration within a country often form the basis of counter-trafficking campaigns, as people are made vulnerable to sexual exploitation because of migration to a new city (Brown, 2007: 33). Migration research in Cambodia has previously focused on internal and external trafficking of people in Cambodia for sexual and labor exploitation (Maltoni, 2007: 3). However, in recent years it has become clear that a significant internal migration pull-factor is the garment industry. Providing over 250,000 primarily Phnom Penh-based jobs particularly for young women, this industry is the most effective rural to urban pull-factor in the country (Maltoni, 2007: 3). This has led to further research regarding the vulnerability of these garment workers to exploitation, including

sexual exploitation, both within and outside of the factories (Webber et al., 2010: 165).

Phlong et al.'s (2012) study of entertainment workers found that a significant number of them initially moved to Phnom Penh to work in the garment industry but later moved to entertainment work because it was better paid (Phlong et al., 2012: 24). Whether similar trends exist for massage parlor workers in Phnom Penh is a point of interest for this study.

When it comes to abuse of sex workers, Maher et al. (2011) found that in Phnom Penh violence and police interaction are mediated by locations in which sex is sold. Furthermore, police attitudes have been found to frame their view of sex workers as vulnerable and easy targets for abuse (Derks, 1997: 5) leading to many sex workers feeling threatened by police violence. The illegal status of sex establishments has been found to exacerbate women's vulnerability to police violence, often [meaning] that they exist in a corrupt and symbiotic relationship with local authorities (Brown, 2007: 12). Phlong et al.'s (2012) study found that as well as having experienced domestic violence as girls, female entertainment workers were commonly faced with violence and harassment in their day-to-day work, often from clients. Many of these women viewed sexual harassment as part of their job and would not even report instances of rape to the authorities as it was assumed that no legal help would be offered to them (Phlong et al., 2012: 27-28). The traditional expectations for respect of elders coupled with a culture of shame, especially regarding a family's public image, makes it difficult to disclose instances of any sexual abuse, particularly if it is interfamilial (Hoefinger, 2013: 90).

These vulnerabilities provide an alternative narrative to the older sex workers in the entertainment industry. That this work is far less voluntary as many organisations have portrayed it to be. In the effort to distinguish between sex workers in Cambodia that are forced into their position and those who freely choose it, a study was conducted by Steinfatt (2003). This nationwide census of female sex workers working in direct and indirect sectors

of the industry produced an estimated 19,000 workers, concluding that around 20.2% of those women were trafficked. This is supported by other studies that estimate that approximately 72.9% of Cambodia's sex workers voluntarily choose their work (Sandy, 2006: 456).

Sandy (2006) critiqued the idea that coerced versus voluntary entry into sex work is as black and white as is often assumed. In a case study presented in her report, Sandy seeks to personify the type of sex worker whose choice of work demands respect from those who might label her as a victim of coercion. One story, typical of many women in the sex industry, starts with the birth of a child from an ex-husband. She had to provide for her child and mother yet had no skill training and very little education. Due to these circumstances, every job she sought turned her away. Finally, she 'chose' to enter brothel-based sex work. The irony of her situation is revealed as her choice was the result of having nothing else to choose from. Considering this case study, the question raised by feminist activist MacKinnon is applicable: if prostitution is a free choice, why are women with the fewest choices the ones most often found doing it (Lansink, 2004: 11)?

Despite the large presence of human rights organizations in Phnom Penh, the experiences of women working in the massage industry have largely remained unexplored to date. To identify and meet the needs of these masseuses appropriately and effectively, dialogues about their work and life situations need to be created and maintained. The study aims to be a first step into this direction by providing an initial exploration of the reality of life as perceived by Phnom Penh's female masseurs in the lower-priced massage parlors i.e. those charging under 4 USD per massage. This report utilises a within-subjects design with uses a mixed quantitative-qualitative approach, in the form of interviews, to assess the vulnerabilities and resilience of these women. The reasoning for this approach was to ascertain not just the fiscal realities and demographics of this research but also attain the nuanced realities of the sexual exploitation of these women, something that has not commonplace in previous research.

Field research was conducted using semi-structured interviews in Khmer to measure the participants vulnerabilities, primarily sexual exploitation, sexual abuse, and physical abuse as part of or as a result of their occupation. Other factors measured included family relationships, financial dependencies, sexually transmitted diseases, and low self-worth.

Methodology

Ethical Considerations

As there was no immediate governing body to seek ethical approval to conduct this study to the ethical guidelines outlined by Jewkes (2008) and Astbury (2012) were adhered to. Prior to conducting the interviews informed consent was obtained from participants, and right to withdraw or not answer was clearly stated. If a participant expressed a desire for help of any kind they were given a Precious Women 1 business card with numbers to call if they wished to enquire about alternative employment, counselling, skills training, and more. This information was only offered if the women asked for it, seeing as the research was explained as not having an interventionist agenda. In addition, interviewers and researchers were sensitive to the safety of the participants; if a manager was present their permission was obtained, and if managers asked the interview to be stopped or the participant appeared to be in danger in any way then the interview would be ended. No images were taken during the research and anonymity of the interviewees as well as confidentiality of the data was ensured.

Participants

A total of 98 female participants (n=98) were gathered for questionnaire-based interviews conducted with women working in massage parlors throughout Phnom Penh, Cambodia. It is not an easy group to determine the exact number so the results cannot be statistically significant but we tried to get women from a wide geographical area in Phnom Penh. Interviews were conducted in 10,000 Riel (\$2.50 USD), \$3 and several \$4 massage parlors in the Phnom Penh area, following mapping of roads and areas. We did not include those

working in the more up-market massage parlours/hotels but this does not imply that women are not exploited in these establishments but may have different experiences. The sampling method used was then convenience sampling: to be granted interviews the researchers would ask permission from a manager if they were in sight, as well as the masseurs themselves.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the interview and were told they had the right not to respond or end the interview at any point. In some cases, an interview was conducted over several sittings because the participant had to serve a client. Upon completion of the interview a \$2 phone card was offered to the respondent as a token of gratitude. This was not considered to be unethical. When more than one woman in the same parlour was willing to participate, several interviews would be conducted in the same location. All interviews were conducted over a period of three weeks during July 2014.

Survey Instrument

The questionnaire used was adapted from and complemented previous related studies conducted with female KTV workers in Phnom Penh, and male massage workers in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. Sections covered in the survey were like these prior studies: demographics, entrance into the industry, finances, relationships, stigma and discrimination, personal sexual history, sexual experiences at work, sexual health, substance abuse, physical violence, work satisfaction, and existential well-being. The breadth of topics covered in the interviews was surveyed using a mixture of open-ended and multiple-choice questions and interviewers were encouraged to note down any additional relevant quotes (see appendix A).

Questionnaires in Khmer that had been translated from an initial English version of the survey were used. The interviews were conducted and recorded by a Khmer interviewer. A non-Khmer speaking researcher acted as a reference for the Khmer interviewer for should any questions arise and recorded relevant field notes.

Results

Surveys were analyzed using SPSS 20.0 (SPSS Inc). Both descriptive and thematic analyses were utilised. Descriptive analyses were used to examine the frequencies of various responses. Thematic analysis was used to explore the responses to open-ended questions included in the survey, with key features of this data coded and sorted in a systematic manner to reflect patterns in the data and inform themes and subthemes relevant to the questions used in the survey (Boyatzis, 1998).

Demographics and Financial Implications

Several pieces of demographic and financial information were recorded in this study such as; participants age; the age they began working at the massage parlour; weekly and quarterly income; and family debt. All income values included tips. Mean and ranges were recorded and can be observed in table 1.

[Insert Table 1]

Most participants (82%), of which answered questions concerning their income (n=71), stated that they do not receive all the money they earn, instead receiving a portion of their earnings. The most common amount received was 30% of the price of the massage, as stated by thirty-eight women (54%). The standard price of a massage in the massage parlors targeted was \$2.50, therefore, these participants would receive \$0.75 per massage. However, twenty women (28%) responded that they did not know what they had earned.

Migration

Out of all participants, 93% were not from Phnom Penh (see image 1). Many women (30%) came from the province of Kampong Cham, followed by Takeo being home to 10% of participants. A significant proportion of women (30%) had only lived in Phnom Penh for less than a year, i.e. eleven months or less.

[Insert Image 1]

Participants who had migrated to Phnom Penh primarily had moved to earn money (69%). The greatest proportion of participants (35 %) came to work in the massage parlors because of a friend. This is followed closely by women finding the job themselves (32%). When asked why the participants entered the massage industry as opposed to other work, economic benefits (good money, family poverty, free accommodation/food, paying off debt) were cited by a total of 28% of participants. However, 24% of participants entered this line of work for negative reasons. Specifically, 17% stated that they entered this work due to lack of choice. Four women cited physical limitations such as illness or disability as the primary reasons for entering this work as opposed to another job. In contrast, only 5% of participants stated that they considered working in the massage parlour to be a good job.

Seventeen participants had never worked prior to entering the massage industry. The remaining participants had previously worked a large variety of jobs immediately prior to entering the massage industry, with a major proportion of the sample (39%) having worked in a garment factory directly prior to their massage parlor job. Over half of participants (51%) had at some point worked in the garment industry, which appears to be a major pull-factor for young Cambodian women to move to the capital. The two primary reasons given for leaving the garment industry (n=36) were the need for greater income (13%) and becoming too sick to work in the factories (11%).

Vulnerabilities

violence and sexual abuse.

Sixty-three women (64%) [n=98] gave similar definitions of rape much like this response:

“Rape to me means forcing someone to have sex”

Almost half (48%) of all participants described consensual sex as a situation of mutual affection between both parties. Another 45% of participants described consensual sex as an agreement between all parties or a willingness to have intercourse with someone. Three participants included the possibility of consensual sex in the context of a commercial transaction involving an agreement between them and their clients. Just above 30% of the participants stated they were aware, while eight women mentioned having seen, forced sex on TV or in the news. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of all participants stated they had never been raped, leaving over a quarter (27%) of all participants that had been raped at least once in their lives. Ten participants (14%) also reported experiencing physical violence by an intimate partner or husband in the past 12 months.

vulnerabilities experiences at work.

clientele.

Over a third (34%) of all participants were found to have less than fifty clients per month. Ten participants had 150 or more clients, with one participant having three hundred clients. The age range of clients was found to be between sixteen and eighty-seven years of age. It was also found that over a quarter of participants (28%), of those who answered the question (n=71), had sex with foreign clients.

services required by clients.

Services required by participants such as massage, masturbation, and sexual intercourse were recorded. From the frequencies they gave compared with the number of clients they had per month, percentages were calculated (see graph 1).

[Insert Graph 1]

physical violence.

Fourteen participants claimed to have experienced physical violence at work, six said that they were subject to physical violence often, with four identifying their experiences as occurring only once. Another four participants said they experienced physical violence a few times. Six of the participants who had experienced physical violence [n=14] said that clients perpetrated the violence, followed by husbands (two participants), and police (two participants). Co-workers, family members, and boyfriends were each cited as perpetrators of violence by one participant each.

sexual abuse.

The frequency of participants (n=98) who had experienced different types of sexual abuse over the last three months was recorded (see graph 2).

[Insert Graph 2]

When the participants were asked who sexually harassed them, clients were the most common response (cited 36 times), followed by police (cited 5 times), co-workers (cited twice), and finally one participant saying it was their friend. One participant also said that everyone sexually harassed her.

Stigma and Discrimination

Thirty-seven women (52%) stated that they had experienced stigma or discrimination as a direct result of their work and 34 participants (48%) saying they had not (n=71). It was found that 21 participants (30%) identified their clients as the top perpetrators. Fourteen (20%) said friends, nine (13%) identified their neighbors, five (7%) identified police, and two (3%) said family were top perpetrators of stigma. Only one participant said her co-workers stigmatized or discriminated against her.

Work Satisfaction

When asked whether participants liked their current job (n=98), forty participants (41%) answered affirmatively, while forty-nine participants (50%) did not like their job. Of the remaining nine women, five (5%) liked their job "sometimes", and four (4%) did not provide an answer.

When asked to elaborate on their affinity to their job (n=40), 11 participants (28%) stated that they liked their job because of its overall easiness or lack of physical strain. A further 11 (28%) also cited the higher pay in comparison to alternative jobs. Four participants (10%) were satisfied with their job due to the freedom or independence it offered them. However, six participants (15%) made additional implications that this job was their only option.

The 49 participants who expressed dislike towards massage work were also asked to give reasons why. In their responses, one in five participants (20%) underscored prejudice and discrimination yet again as the primary reason for disliking their job. A further 20% of participants who did not like their jobs indicated an absence of alternatives in choosing their work. Still others were dissatisfied with their work due to problems with clients (6%), threats to physical health (6%), and embarrassment from family knowing about their work (6%). Two participants expressed that massage work damages their hopes for a future.

Job Recommendation

After having been asked whether they would recommend their job to a sister or friend, a vast majority (90%) of participants said they would not. The most cited reasons for not referring a friend to this line of work were: thinking it is not a good job (22%), not wanting others to undergo adverse experiences (20%) and being afraid of others knowing where they work (19%).

The remaining 11 participants (10%) who said they would recommend this job to a sister or friend gave reasons that did not necessarily portray their job in a positive light. Six participants would recommend the job if they felt their friend or sister had no other options or were too poor. Two participants said they would recommend the job because it was "easy" or "good". In contrast, one of these participants stated this despite experiencing sexual and physical violence at work as well as providing sexual services.

Well-being

self-worth.

Results found that a third of participants (33%) indicated that they had direct control over their sense of value or confidence (n=71). Over half (56%) of these participants (n=32) believed that being self-confident and loving themselves could increase their value, while some others would engage in 'good behavior' (31%). Eight participants from this group emphasized working hard or striving more in life would increase their sense of value.

In contrast, 41 participants (42%) posited external factors as fundamental to increase self-worth. Of these participants (n=41), 46% implicated money in increasing their sense of value, which complements the finding that 43% of women felt that a lack of money was their greatest current obstacle. Moreover, 13 participants (31%) specified leaving the massage parlor and changing their job to find greater worth. Two participants similarly felt that a change in their environment was crucial to increasing their value, but preferred further study or receiving an education rather than alternative employment. Twelve participants did not know how to increase their sense of value or self-confidence.

emotional susceptibilities.

To assess the participants emotional wellbeing because of their line of work, participants were asked to state whether they had or had not experience a series of nine specific feelings

that they may have had in the past twelve months. Two of the nine feelings had positive affect, while the remaining seven had negative affect (see graph 3).

[Insert Graph 3]

Out of these participants (n=71) shame was found to be the emotion experienced by the largest proportion of the participants over the previous twelve months.

obstacles and ways to overcome them.

When asked what the participants biggest obstacles in life were, seventy-five participants [n=98] cited having a large variety of obstacles. Only six participants said they faced no obstacles in life or had already overcome those they had previously experienced. Participants answers were recorded and presented (see graph 4).

[Insert Graph 4]

Encouragingly, of the 75 women who told interviewers that they had obstacles, 81% (n=61) felt that there were ways to overcome these problems. Only one participant explicitly said there was nothing she could do to overcome her obstacles and seven participants did not know how to overcome these problems.

Discussion

This study overall has revealed critical vulnerabilities and needs that have not been previously addressed in previous academic work. This includes, but is not limited to, vulnerabilities to; sexual and physical violence; sexual exploitation and harassment; and sex work. The researchers in this study and the participants collectively have demonstrated the challenges of working in this industry and have begun the groundwork needed to meet the needs of these women. This section of the report will elaborate on the implications of the findings found in this study, as well as providing recommendations to non-government

organisations (NGOs), government organisations, and faith-based groups as to how these vulnerabilities could be addressed.

Vulnerabilities

Irrespective of whether participants offered sexual services to clients or not, many women in this study experienced sexual violence, physical violence, and harassment. Of all the participants in this study, leaving 23% of participants chose to tell us that they had experienced attempted rape, as well as 6% had experienced actual rape in the past three months. Due to the nature of questions surrounding such extreme sexual violence, these numbers are likely to be conservative. However, this data implies that massage parlor workers are at a significant risk of rape as a direct result of their work.

Stigma and discrimination associated with massage parlor work due to its presumed association with sex work makes women more vulnerable to sexual violence and physical violence. For example, clients often assume that massage workers offer sexual services and so rape or sexually harass women who decline to service them. This is exemplified by the results that show the most common perpetrators of physical violence and sexual violence against the participants were from clients and police (who often are clients). Common experiences included; verbal threats; physical bodily violence; and even use of weapons, including guns. Vulnerability to police violence is a significant problem, possibly due to the illegality of sex work, so massage parlor workers who offer sexual services, and even those who do not, are at risk of sexual abuse by policemen who do not respect or recognize the rights of these women. For example, one respondent exemplified this in the following statement,

“A lot of police tried to rape me but only 20 had sex with me.”

Entrance to Sex Work: Vulnerability to Sexual Exploitation

From this preliminary study, poverty can be seen to increase the likelihood of offering sexual services once within the massage industry. For many women like this, offering clients sexual services was a short-term financial solution. It was not directly exploitative in so far as the transactions that occurred were mutually agreed upon and followed through. However, the results show that most of the participants (82%: n=71) in this study felt that they were exploited in terms of not being paid, or not being paid enough, for providing sexual services. This not only happened to many participants in this study, it also seemed to be a well-known risk of offering sexual services within this line of work. As managers can exploit participants in their day-to-day massage work in terms of salaries being withheld it can also be stated that this can also result in sexual exploitation, given that participants could be forced to have sex with clients without be granted their pay from manager.

Factors which Increase Likelihood of Entering Massage Industry

Nearly half (48%) of the participants families owed some sort of debt, creating cycles of poverty and debt which make it necessary for women to work and send money home. This is linked to the cultural factor of filial duty as daughters towards both immediate and extended family, as well as responsibility as a mother to provide for their own children. Filial duty also increases likelihood of moving from rural provinces to urban centers in search for jobs, which may contribute to why 93% of participants had migrated to Phnom Penh.

Massage parlor work was not the job which many women migrated to Phnom Penh to get. Instead many participants had initially moved to Phnom Penh to work in the garment industry, which is the single greatest rural to urban pull factors for internal migration in Cambodia, providing 250,000 primarily Phnom Penh based jobs mainly for young women (Maltoni, 2007). Factors that contribute to why participants left factory work include low pay and the exploitative and physically demanding nature of factory work. This is reflected in the results of the study which shows that of the participants that stated that they liked their job

(n=40), 56% indicated that the reason for this were either due to a lack of physical strain or higher pain. Working in garment factories seems to increase the likelihood of entering the massage industry.

Dependency, Relationships and Identity

The dynamic interactions between many of the massage parlor women depicted a structure of kinship like the tight-knit homosocial ties discussed in Hoefinger (2011). Migrating to the city of Phnom Penh from their home province was seen to be related to a rift in the participants familial networks, either in terms of their migration pulling them away from their family ties or preexisting family issues pushing them away to the city. The relationships built between massage parlor women could provide a supplementary source of belonging and understanding to those who live apart from their families. This could be a factor that explains why despite many feeling much shame over the past year (79%), approximately an equal amount (72%) also felt respected and valued during the same period.

The mechanisms that bind female massage workers into a state of dependency may only heighten their vulnerability to exploitation. Researchers describe dependency as a structure that "works to trap and constrict rather than to liberate" (Peck, 1978: 105). It would be important for future research to draw links between the health of a massage worker's relationship to her family of origin and how equipped she is to gain independence from her household. Whether; her household is a source of confidence or self-worth for a woman; who is seeking to make her own sustainable living in an independent manner; could possibly be what separates those who become enraptured in a cycle of dependency on their massage establishment; and those who enter a process of liberation from such cycles. This would require further research in the form of an in-depth qualitative study.

identity and self-worth.

The emotional susceptibilities of the participants point to both short-term and long-term effects of working in the massage industry in Phnom Penh. After asking for the participants' greatest obstacle in life, there was found to be an imbalance in the dichotomy between intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsic factors encompassed anything belonging inherently to the participant's sense of self, upon which she herself exerted control to increase her confidence. Whereas, external factors were implied to be beyond the participant's control, such as increasing financial status or changing to a different job. The results demonstrated a stronger external locus of control regarding the obstacles that the participants faced. Specifically, that only 8% of the participants (n=75) believed that a lack of a 'desire to leave job' (internal locus) is their greatest obstacle, whereas, 56% believed that 'being poor' (external locus) is their greatest obstacle. By contrast, it is still striking in the extent to which participants believed in personal agency to changing their sense of value, rather than believing that factors beyond their control were paramount to deciding their worth. Emphasis on self-empowerment was also evident in participants' suggestions for advice to other girls considering work in the massage industry as many of the participants insisted the importance of learning to value oneself and improve one's own life.

The proportion of those who felt they should be punished (41%) as well as a disquieting number who felt suicidal in the year prior (16%) help to underscore the existence of a shattered identity among many of these women. This is a stark reminder of how a broken image of the self is not something that can be easily dispelled. It is important to note, however, that the data collected does not provide enough evidence that these emotional conditions were caused primarily by sexual exploitation related to their work. Further research should have focus on the change in emotional states longitudinally, comparing these women's emotional states before and after working at a massage parlor.

Discrimination and Stigma

It was clear that a major aspect in the lives of massage parlor workers is the discrimination and stigma that they face. While this may be expected when considering the perceptions of massage parlor women that exist, the roots and perpetuation of this discrimination should be examined. When directly asked whether they faced stigma and discrimination because of their work, a little over half of participants (52%) answered affirmatively. Twenty percent of the sample cited discrimination against them as the reason why they dislike their job. A little over 60% of participants admitting that their clients request sexual intercourse, it may not be surprising that these women face the daily discrimination that is often directed towards sex workers. The most frequent perpetrators of this stigma are the clients, the people that massage parlor women interact with most in a day. *Chhap Srei*, the code of conduct that often dictates the expected behavior from women in Cambodian society, is exemplified in the treatment of massage parlor women through the expectations from their clients. Women are often expected to submit wilfully to the desires and will of men, a standard that is seen in the massage industry. Yet it is the massage workers who carry the burden of stigma for it.

Our sample reveals that while many women are vulnerable to exploitation, dissatisfied with their jobs (48%), and engage in sex work, there are also women working within the massage parlor industry who do not fall into these categories. Some of the women interviewed found massage parlors to work where they are safer from being sexually exploited. Several parlors visited had the beds set up all together in the main room, making it impossible for clients to request any services other than massage. While these cases were the minority, they shed light on the fact that not all women working in the massage industry are subject to engaging in sex work. For some, the job simply entails massage.

However, for many women encountered, work in the massage parlors includes more than just their work. They find a new social support system, livelihood, and a new opportunity to provide for themselves and their families. These women often ask that they not be

discriminated against because of their occupation, even if it is a stigmatized one. For the women who do not engage in sex work, discrimination against them is based on a false assumption that massage work always involves sex work. Greater understanding about the circumstances which lead women to engage in sex work, such as the pressure to financially provide for the families and economic desperation needs to be understood. A quote from one participant serves as a constant reminder that even these women are undeserving of stigma:

“No girl wants this job. Do not look down on us.”

Limitations

The report at hand is not a prevalence study, because determining the actual number of masseurs in Phnom Penh is not possible. Data collected should not be viewed as representative statistical data but rather an investigative qualitative study providing information on the lives of the women interviewed. Results found here cannot be generalized and are only applicable to the specific cases encountered in this study.

Although the research assistants asked questions in Khmer, the inability of the research observers to speak Khmer, made it difficult to effectively monitor the quality of data collected, for example for clarification or elaboration of an answer. Furthermore, nuances of answers given in Khmer may have been lost since after the translation of the answers into English was often simplified version of the initial answers given.

A major limiting factor was that the women were all interviewed in their place of work, often in the presence of other people. Their managers were often present and frequently stated at the beginning of the interview that no sexual services were permitted to be sold at their massage parlor, potentially placing pressure on participants to support this message within interviews. Interviewing the women in a private space proved difficult as the interviews were conducted during their working day, so the women were unable to leave the

massage parlor. Where possible, chairs were pulled up away from other people and the interviewers were clear to ask people listening in to leave before sensitive questions were asked. Interviewers would lower their voices or change the order of questions to minimize the number of extra people listening in on interviews, generally being sensitive and responsive to the participants potential discomfort.

The Question of Choice

The questionnaire on which the report is based does not include an explicit question about the voluntarism of the work some of the female masseurs do. However, responses given throughout the interview by several interviewees point to interesting insights into this topic.

The issue of voluntarism, on the one hand, entails the women's own choice to working at a massage place in the first place. One of the questions that was asked in order to learn more about the entry factors that lead young women into working in the massage industry, was why the participants chose this job as opposed to another job. This being an open question, no probing for answers was done. Nevertheless, 17% of the participants gave the same answer, stating that they have not had a choice other than to accept this job. Since they did not, however, further specify in which way they have felt pressured to enter the massage industry, be it for financial pressures, the involvement of another person who forced them, or other reasons, this remains open for further investigation.

It must not, however, be concluded from this that many of the women work in the massage industry as a result from trafficking, or even just recruiting. The result section of this report clearly states, when asked how they came into this type of work, most participants answered to have been referred this job by a friend or that they have found it by themselves. What these findings suggest is that most women did indeed enter the massage work on voluntary terms in so far that they were not coerced by another person. The questions about the

women's financial situation, however, point to the fact that economic or social structures may lead to pressures that make them accept a job that they would otherwise not agree to doing.

On the other hand, the question of choice also entails whether the women working in the massage industry offer sexual services do so voluntarily or not. Without having been asked for it, 14 out of 98 participants mentioned that they had not been aware to be required to do sex work as part of their job at the massage parlor prior to their entry into this line of work. There are, however, also several cases in which the women were not required or even requested to offer sexual services but chose to do so for various reasons. The relatively easy access to clients that are willing to pay for sex, as well as seeing their peers, who do sex work earning considerably more than a normal masseuse, as well as poverty and financial burden, are all structural factors facilitating a decision towards entering the sex industry. As shown above, many of the women entered sex work due to financial burdens and a lack of other job options which very much in line with Sandy (2006).

When relating the findings of this study to the Continuum Volition model (MoYES, 2012), most of the cases encountered here would fall into the category of economically driven sex which lies in between voluntary and coerced sex. Examining these cases in more detail, however, reveals that the women choosing to offer sexual services to their clients do so because they do not see another way of making financial ends meet. This calls into question whether economically driven sex can indeed be less coercive than what the model calls coerced sex; if pressures, caused by socio-economic structures in these women's lives, lead to existential fear of not being able to provide for themselves and/or their children, does this fundamentally differ from fear of physical harm?

What can be concluded from the data gathered for this report is that each of the women interviewed has her own personal story and factors contributing to her current situation and each of them has a different stance on the work she does and her life as a whole. It is therefore

crucial, not only from the authors perspective but also as mentioned from the women themselves, that women working in the massage industry are not being grouped into one homogenous group that needs a one-fits-all solution.

Recommendations

This section of the report seeks to provide recommendations to different groups that can effectively utilise this information to aid these women to decrease stigma and discrimination against them.

ngo's and government.

The messages that the participants in this sample would like to send to the NGO community and the government can broadly be grouped into two different realms. The first key message, which was reflected in about 25% of the participants answers, is an expression of appreciation that an NGO (Love 146) is interested in their situation. Secondly, there were numerous requests made towards the NGO community and government for support in the following areas: health related issues and sexual education, alternative employment and skills training, as well as help for their respective family situations. Finally, a recurring message was an appeal to end discrimination and stigma against them.

Working with massage parlor women highlighted their current invisibility to the NGO community, not only in terms of a lack of research, but also in terms of relationships being built with this group of people. Phnom Penh is saturated with NGOs many of which focus on vulnerable women, however there is no group which specifically works with massage parlor workers. Building relationships with these women would help to build a clearer picture of their vulnerabilities and needs.

NGOs that do wish to work with this group of women, especially those who want to exit the massage industry, should consider the development of skills training and job creation

for unskilled labor. Part of the cycle of dependency created by massage parlors which may prevent some women from feeling able to leave their jobs, is that massage parlors often provide accommodation and food for employees, as well as close communities of co-workers and managers which act as familial networks. These must all be carefully considered in efforts to work with women who want to leave the massage industry, for example that could be in the form of providing basic life-skills training, or in providing a similar structure of shared accommodation. Additionally, it should be noted that for many of these women leaving the massage parlors or any paid employment is not an option because they work to provide for their parents, children and themselves, and may have debts to pay off, therefore immediate employment or a way for them to earn whilst being trained in new skills would provide them with the option of leaving.

Working with women within massage parlors, and not just those who leave, is a key recommendation concluded from the variety of vulnerabilities and experiences found in this study. Working with managers may prove key to reducing the vulnerabilities of women to physical violence, sexual harassment, unwanted sexual touching, and rape within the workplace, as some managers already imposed open-door policies, and expressed the desire to protect their employees from these things. With managers who were willing to work with NGOs, creative strategies to protect women could be beneficial, for example creating posters to put on the walls of the massage parlors stating phone numbers women can call if they experience violence or sexual abuse, or even installing cameras to prevent abuse of employees, as was policy in one establishment that we visited. To prevent women from entering the massage industry and being exposed to so many vulnerability factors in the first place, results from this research would strongly suggest that NGOs and government campaigns focus time and resources on rural, provincial education and job creation, especially for women and girls.

Campaigns not only to promote the rights of women so that men understand consent, but also to end stigma, discrimination, and stereotypes of all massage parlor women being sex workers is recommended as it could prove instrumental in reducing the expectations of clients and wider society that these women must provide sexual services, thereby greatly increasing their vulnerability to unwanted sexual touching, harassment and violence from clients. Police training and accountability systems may also be implemented as the abuse of sex workers by them has been a well-documented phenomenon in Cambodia. Furthermore, campaigns to end these stereotypes would hopefully let these women live with less day-to-day discrimination in light of reduced stigma against them from being automatically labelled a sex worker, and for those that do provide sexual services to clients, campaigns which end stereotypes of them being labelled as bad women would hopefully also allow them to live free from such constant stigma. Stigma and discrimination faced by this group of women is perpetuated by labels attributed to them even by the NGO community, but can be ended with further research and through building relationships with individuals.

collaboration between ngo's and the sex workers union.

Collaboration between NGOs and the sex workers union is recommended in future work with massage parlor workers. Though such a collaboration may seem controversial and possibly unprecedented, it is vital in considering this recommendation to highlight the many goals and values held in common. This includes the belief that people should not be discriminated against for doing sex work, that no one should experience sexual violence, harassment or rape, that sex should be consensual, and that people who offer sexual services should not be at risk of physical violence. Massage parlor women's vulnerability to such abuses could be aided by promoting the rights of women.

Furthermore, extensive sexual education campaigns would aid this purpose which go beyond HIV awareness, and instead deal with issues of male sexual entitlement, what consent

and rape mean in real-world contexts, the illegality of unwanted sexual contact, and sexual harassment. These are only a few of a numerous creative campaign which could reach a further audience, and potentially be more inclusive and effective if created through a collaboration of NGOs and sex workers union groups, both of which hold the rights and protection of vulnerabilities of these women to be far more important than differences which they may have in other areas.

further research.

Though this research provides insight into the lives of a number of massage parlor women throughout Phnom Penh, it merely serves as an initial investigative study, thus, further research on a larger scale is recommended. It is recommended that thorough prevalence studies of massage parlors in Phnom Penh are conducted to investigate how many of these provide sexual services. Research investigating the managers themselves is also recommended as it may prove instrumental in forming strategies to help women within massage parlors and would provide insight into the structure of these establishments.

In addition, further investigation into the cycles of dependency fostered within massage parlors is recommended to better equip NGOs and other organizations that want to work with these women. Further research into the trajectory of the lives of these women is recommended, as many participants alluded to their present employment being temporary, whilst planning to move on within two years. Whether or not this happens would give a tangible indication of the degree of self-empowerment and agency which these women possess. Additionally, further research into the backgrounds of women working in the massage industry is recommended to see if there are links with KTV work, as some women implied that they entered massage work when they were unable to do KTV work anymore.

Because a significant number of respondents in this study (51%) had previously worked in the garment factory industry, targeted research about this group is recommended.

It is recommended that further research is conducted of the vulnerabilities faced by garment factory workers within the factories, as well as the vulnerabilities faced by women upon leaving the factories.

Conclusion

Rather than only drawing conclusions or assuming which lessons are best to learn from the data collected from this sample, women were asked directly what their advice would be to women thinking about entering the massage industry as well as to the NGO community and/or the government.

The participants advice to girls or women considering entering the massage work can be grouped into four overall themes. The most frequent message (21 participants) had a very simple and clear message that is represented in the following quote by one respondent:

“Do not come to work here, people around us do not value us. Please find another job instead.”

The second theme, cited by 12 participants, revolves around how to conduct oneself within the massage work. Most of the advice given in this category includes making sure to protect oneself from HIV as well as to protect oneself when having sex with clients.

“I want them to know how to protect themselves from HIV when they have sex with clients.”

The third category of advice pertains to general life advice. More specifically, it included four areas of advice:

1. Valuing themselves and their work (15 participants):

“Every work is valuable, it depends on us. So we are the ones who make ourselves valuable, we help ourselves.”

2. To stop trusting men (eight participants):

“I have to endure no matter what. Get up and stop trusting men from now on.

Although men hurt you, you have to get up.”

3. To strive for good education and specific skills (six participants):

“If I would give advice, I would advise that they should learn specific skills. As long

as we have our own skill no one can look down on us.”

4. And finally, to stay away from drugs (ten participants):

“I want to share my idea to every girl and boy, go away from drugs.”

Clearly the collection of responses here provides an illustration into the obstacles these women and provides a basis for NGO's, unions and government organisations to address the vulnerabilities of massage workers. Such vulnerabilities and needs have yet to been addressed academically so the researchers believe that this broad, holistic understanding of the massage workers lives provides a strong foundation for more research and initiatives.

References

- Annex, I. I. (2000, November). Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children, supplementing the United Nations convention against transnational organized crime. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols Thereto.
- Brammer, A., & Smith-Brake, J. (2013). Journey of change: A Chab Dai study on the trends and influencing factors on counter-trafficking in Cambodia, 2003–2012. *Phnom Penh: Chab Dai Coalition*.
- Brown, E. (2007). The ties that bind: Migration and trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation in Cambodia. Retrieved from:
http://www.humantrafficking.org/uploads/publications/IOM_trafficking_report_Aug07.pdf
- Chung, R. C. Y. (2006). Human trafficking for sexual exploitation: psychological and cultural impacts. *Global Stud Rev*, 2(3), 10-11.
- Davis, J., & Miles, G. (2012). “The Lingha Boys of Siem Reap” A Baseline Study of Sexually-Exploited Young Men in Siem Reap, Cambodia.
- Derks, A. (1997). *Trafficking of Cambodian women and children to Thailand*. International Organization for Migration.
- Hoefinger, H. (2011). Professional girlfriends: An ethnography of sexuality, solidarity and subculture in Cambodia. *Cultural Studies*, 25(2), 244-266. Doi: 10.1080/09502386.2011.535990
- Hoefinger, H. (2013). *Sex, love and money in Cambodia: Professional girlfriends and transactional relationships*. London: Routledge.

- Lansink, A. Rapporteur, (2004). *Proceedings from International Law Association Berlin Conference: Women and migration: interim report on trafficking in women*. Berlin, Germany: Committee on Feminism and International Law.
- Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation, (2008).
- Maher, L., Mooney-Somers, J., Phlong, P., Couture, M. C., Stein, E., Evans, J., ... & Page, K. (2011). Selling sex in unsafe spaces: sex work risk environments in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. *Harm reduction journal*, 8(1), 30.
- Maltoni, B. (2007, May). Migration in Cambodia: Internal vs. external flows. In *8th ARPMIN Conference on Migration, Development and Poverty Reduction* (pp. 25-29).
- McVerry, S., & Lindop, E. (2005). Negotiating risk: how women working in massage parlours preserve their sexual and psychological health. *Health care for women international*, 26(2), 108-117.
- Miles, G., & Meeks, D. (2013). *Hand on the heart: Examining the risk factors and vulnerabilities of hostesses at KTV venues in Phnom Penh, Cambodia*. Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Love146. Retrieved from: <http://gmmiles.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/KTV-Final-Report.pdf>
- Miles, G., Blase, O., Clark, K., Ding, R., & Geyer, T. (2014). “*STRIVE NO MATTER WHAT*”: *Assessing the vulnerabilities of female massage workers in Phnom Penh, Cambodia*. Retrieved from: <https://web.archive.org/web/20170323111736/http://themessageparlour.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Massage-Parlor-Women-Report.pdf>
- Phlong, P., Weissman, A., Holden, J., & Liu, K. L. (2012). Examining Life Experiences and HIV Risks of Young Entertainment Workers in Four Cambodian Cities. *Phnom Penh: Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport Report, FHI*, 360.

Sanders, T. (2007). Protecting the health and safety of female sex workers: the responsibility of all. *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics & Gynaecology*, 114(7), 791-793.

Sandy, L. (2006). Sex work in Cambodia: Beyond the voluntary/forced dichotomy. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 15(4), 449-469.

Sandy, L. (2009). Just choices: Representation of choice and coercion in sex work in Cambodia. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 18(2), 194-206. Doi: 10.1111/j.1835-9310.2007.tb00088.x

Webber, G., Edwards, N., Graham, I., Amaratunga, C., Keane, V., & Socheat, R. (2010). Life in the big city: The multiple vulnerabilities of migrant Cambodian garment factory workers to HIV. *Women s Studies International Forum*, 33(3), 159-169. Retrieved from: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S027753950900154X>