

# **Structural Stigmatization of Sex Workers in Cambodia**



**A two-part report by Melissa Ditmore, Ph.D. for Women's Network for Unity, a community-based organisation of sex workers in Cambodia, and Womyn's Agenda for Change**

# STRUCTURAL STIGMATIZATION OF SEX WORKERS IN CAMBODIA



Map of Cambodia

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# Part I: Everyday Lives of Female Sex Workers in Cambodia

## Abstract

*Multiple structures unwittingly collude to promote the stigmatization of marginalized populations in Cambodia, including sex workers. These international, national and local structures include recent history in Cambodia, an impoverished Southeast Asian nation; donor policies in an aid-dependent environment; the hierarchical structure of local culture; and finally, widespread stereotypes of people in the sex industry that are reinforced in new policies and proposed reforms. 31 interviews with sex workers about their lives and work illuminate the effects of these multiple interactions upon poor and vulnerable women in Cambodia's sex industry. Findings include*

- *20 interviewees (65%) had experienced violence from gangsters, police and/or clients.*
- *6 (29 %) were duped or sold or otherwise trafficked.*
- *5 (16%) reported family debt as the reason they entered prostitution – they borrowed money to repay the family debt and in doing so entered debt bondage;*
- *Corruption prevents the investigation and prosecution of violent crime;*
- *Police enforce not the law but popular perception that sex workers are bad;*
- *Many young women attempt to sustain extended families financially but this is unrealistic and unsustainable;*
- *New funding requirements have isolated WNU, the only organisation working for the empowerment of sex workers, exacerbating all of these conditions for sex workers, and*
- *Stigmatization of sex work is compounded by new US funding policy and thereby further marginalizes sex workers, which works against the health and human rights of sex workers, their families and their communities.*

## Background

### ***Recent Cambodian history and current context***

Cambodia suffered covert and overt war from the late 1960s until 1997. It was bombed by the US during the Vietnam War (known to Southeast Asians as the American War), and suffered extreme devastation including, in some estimates, the deaths of a quarter of the population under the Khmer Rouge regime from 1975-1979. In 1979, the Vietnamese invaded and defeated the Khmer Rouge, occupying the country for ten years. The Khmer Rouge were still strong in remote areas, along the Thai border and had the support of China, Thailand and the US who were united with the Khmer Rouge against Vietnam. The Vietnamese pullout in 1989 enabled the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, which was in place until 1995. During UNTAC, non-governmental organizations proliferated and offered basic services that in other places are provided by the government. Fragile coalitions have yet to truly govern and real fighting ended in

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Phnom Penh in 1997. Government services are minimal and non-governmental organizations remain the primary method of service delivery for people who cannot afford to pay private sector prices. Most people live on less than \$1 per day. Women generally earn less than men for the same work. The Khmer Rouge Tribunal is just beginning to organize war crimes trials.

The health care system is largely available only to those who can afford to pay for it. NGOs deliver primary health care to far more than the number of people who can pay for health care. Most people go to the pharmacy or to a traditional Khmer healer if they are ill instead of seeing a doctor. Some traditional remedies may be effective, but they are ineffective in situations in which antibiotics or anti-retrovirals are required. Doctors are paid hospital and clinic fees, but their income is supplemented by patients and their families who directly pay or bribe the doctor in addition to the normal fees. Medical costs have led to the ruin of many families who have sold their homes and land to pay for medical treatment for ill family members.

Moneylenders charge usurious interest rates that would make the most rapacious credit card company drool. Farmers may borrow at 500% interest to buy seed. When crops fail, they may have lost their land and their homes. Additionally, personal and family debt is highly stigmatized in Khmer society. Debt is a given for most Westerners, but is not treated lightly in most of Asia.

Education is not paid for by the government. Government-run school fees range from 300 to 1000 riel [US 8 – 25 cents] per day in Phnom Penh, depending on the level of education (higher grades cost more). Transportation and meals away from home are additional expenses. While school fees may sound low to some readers, they are prohibitive for many who live in squatter areas in Phnom Penh, who have many children, and for impoverished farmers and people who have lost their land.

Many poor and displaced people from around the nation have relocated to the capital and to provincial capitals in search of employment. People from rural areas migrate to towns and cities for work. Some of this work is in garment factories producing clothing for export. Most garment workers are women, living apart from their families for the first time. Women who have left their natal areas find themselves working long hours, living in cramped dormitory-style housing, and eating food that has often been prepared in unsanitary conditions. Those who find work in the factories may be the most fortunate, as others work as labourers and many find no recognised labour at all. For many with little money or capital, stable housing, changes of clothing, school fees, and even a mat to sleep upon are luxuries.

Many people in Cambodia pay a fee for the introduction to a potential employer. Many garment workers pay one month's wages *before* beginning a new job, requiring a capital outlay before any return. Sex workers may pay the person who takes them to a brothel where they can find employment. Naivety is the downfall of many rural women and girls who relocate from the countryside with a friend or acquaintance who invites them to work with them in another area. Many such girls have never attended school and are



unable to read or write. Many have never been out of their villages. Many women and girls look forward to working as a domestic servant, restaurant worker or factory employee. Some will find themselves in debt bondage, some in brothels. Many girls understand that they will be employed in the sex industry and intentionally borrow money from the business owner to send to their families, which they will pay back with their future labor. In a good situation, they will repay the amount they borrowed, with low or no interest. In a bad situation, they may be expected to repay a debt that escalates beyond their incomes, effectively debt bondage.

Family size in Cambodia has typically been quite large, although this may be changing in urban areas, and many people have many siblings. Extended families are the cultural norm and many people live with grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles and cousins. School fees can overwhelm a large family. Many sex workers interviewed were struggling to provide enough money for their families to send numerous younger siblings to school and to support elderly relatives. It is unrealistic to expect one uneducated and unskilled young woman to support all the demands of an extended family.

Violence is common, and weapons abound despite recent reductions in small arms. The reduction in the prevalence of small arms in Cambodia coincides with a 50% decrease in the number of instances of firearms being used reported in the *Phnom Penh Post* (Small Arms Survey 2006). However, most weapons are in the hands of armed forces and other state agents, who are the prime violators of sex workers' human rights. Ninety-seven percent of 1000 sex workers interviewed in Phnom Penh in 2004 reported having been raped in the previous year (Jenkins 2005). Gang rape is common in large cities (Jenkins et al 2006, Wilkinson and Fletcher 2002), but our interviews showed less violence in other parts of the country.

### ***Legal context of sex work***

Sex work has ambiguous status under Cambodian law. It is neither legal nor illegal. However, women in the sex industry are highly stigmatized despite the social acceptance of men's patronizing prostitutes. Sex workers often face arrest by police. In effect, the police are enforcing not the law but the widespread stigmatization of sex workers. It is common for people arrested in Cambodia to pay a bribe to be released. It is also common for those who report a crime against them, including violent crimes, to pay the police to investigate and prosecute. A larger bribe paid by the arrested party usually ends any investigation.

## **Methods**

This report was commissioned by Womyn's Agenda for Change (WAC), a Cambodian non-governmental organization, and Women's Network for Unity (WNU), an organization of over 5000 sex workers that campaigns for the human rights and labour rights of sex workers in Cambodia. WAC offers technical and material support to WNU. It was conceived with a participatory methodology in order to advocate for sex workers' empowerment in a climate of mounting discrimination against sex workers on the local, national and international stage. Sex workers from WNU were involved in every stage of

the planning of this research. They determined what would be the investigative focus of the project. These topics were chosen to depict the lives of female sex workers in Cambodia.

WNU participated in a ground-breaking large-scale participatory study of violence against sex workers in Phnom Penh (Jenkins 2006). This report is intended to further add to the understanding of sex workers' lives in Cambodia, and the unrecognized effects of international forces upon their lives.

### ***Interviews with sex workers***

WNU recruited research participants from their chapters and affiliates in ten locations in five provinces in Cambodia. Their stories and locations varied throughout the country and included urban, small town and rural sites. Interviews were coded in a matrix and analyzed using content analysis.

Thirty-one female sex workers, all WNU members, were interviewed. All interviews with sex workers were arranged by WNU.

The researcher traveled to three areas of Phnom Penh and three areas in the provinces to conduct interviews about the lives of women in the sex industry in Cambodia. Additionally, interviewees came to the WNU office from a fourth area of Phnom Penh and two additional provinces to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted with a translator. Interviews took place in brothels, guesthouses, karaoke bars, squatter areas, homes, one restaurant and the WNU office. Some interviews were begun in a brothel or a home that was not private enough and so were rescheduled for a better location. Other interviewees were invited to be interviewed in a very private situation away from their neighborhoods in order to ascertain further information about particularly sensitive topics.

Questions addressed how they entered the sex industry, what their lives are like, their families, sex work situations and other economic endeavors, mobility, access to health care, interactions with service providers, police interactions and response to violence, stigma and discrimination, and drug use and availability. All interviews were complete and each functions as an in-depth case study of one woman in the sex industry in Cambodia. WAC provided translation for the non-Khmer speaking research consultant.

In one case, the verity of an interviewee's answers were doubted, but were then confirmed by triangulation.

### ***Interviews with third parties***

Five owners and managers of different sex work venues in three provinces were interviewed. All five employed and/or were themselves members of WNU. Two were from among the sex workers interviewed. Two others were sought out to provide specific information about their locations.

### ***Focus groups addressing the history of WNU***

A focus group about the history of Women's Network for Unity was held with the WNU secretariat at their office in Phnom Penh. One former secretariat member was interviewed separately because she was absent for the focus group. A second focus group was conducted with four key staff members from WNU's umbrella organization to trace the status of WNU as an independent organization, the process of developing this independent organization, and interactions with other organizations and key figures.

### **Findings**

- While many people turn to sex work to supplement meager incomes, joblessness is high and there are few opportunities – sex work is a primary or sole source of income for many who would prefer to have other work.
- Many young women attempt to support extended families by doing sex work; however, the demands exceed the earning capacity of any one woman.
- 20 interviewees (65%) had experienced violence from gangsters, police and/or clients – violence is most common in the capital, and is much less common in some provinces.
- 6 (19%) were duped or sold into the sex industry or otherwise trafficked.
- 5 (16%) reported family debt as the reason they entered prostitution – they borrowed money to repay the family debt and in doing so entered debt bondage.
- 5 (16%) reported that they entered sex work when they left their husbands because of domestic violence.
- 5 (16%) reported paying a third party to introduce them to a sex work venue.
- 3 (10%) became sex workers because they were not virgins – they were not 'good women' after having been raped or married - and had no other prospects.
- Corruption prevents the investigation and prosecution of violent crime.
- Patronage and corruption compromise law enforcement, to the detriment of women in the sex industry and everyone who is a victim of violence.
- Police are unaware of the law on sex work and enforce instead the stigmatization of sex workers.
- Stigmatization is not only enforced by police but also by NGOs that further the misguided perception of sex workers – and other marginalized populations - as adjacent to community instead of part of the community. There are certainly more sex workers than NGO workers and they are more involved in their communities.
- Unfortunately, US policies exacerbate the stigmatization of marginalized populations by enshrining the discrimination against sex workers in NGO anti-prostitution policy. This does nothing to assist the vulnerable and poor women that much US funding is intended to assist. Rather the contrary.

### **Sex industry venues**

Cambodia is host to a variety of sex industry venues, some of which have no analog in the West, although they break down into the familiar categories of the streets, bars and

brothels or massage parlors. Women work in venues where there is a structure, or independently, with only their own motivation to structure their work.

### ***Brothels and massage parlors***

Brothels housed from one or two to eight or ten sex workers, and the brothels were usually clustered in an area. For example, the red light area in Sisophon had a row of 25 brothels. Most of the women employed in the brothels live there, but some maintain a house nearby, particularly if they do not want their children to know what they do or for others in their community to know.

One brothel in a rural area was also the local store. It was entirely enclosed by a wire fence, with six small rooms that were rented to the women by the month. The owner and the women settled money together, and the women and the owner had organized a system to enforce condom use among the workers.



**Massage signboard. Courtesy of Ama Marston.**

Many massage parlors offer erotic massage. The women who advertise massage are experienced in Khmer massage, and many also do erotic massage in addition to Khmer massage. Massage parlors can also be large, with six or more masseuses, and not all will feature erotic massage. However, erotic massage is also featured in many of the high-end

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massage parlors catering to foreigners including foreign women (who are not offered erotic massage).

There are also one-woman operations, sometimes with a sign advertising massage in front of her house when she is available for massage. One woman interviewed rented a room in a boarding house and brought some of her clients there. This was more common during UNTAC than now, when there were international soldiers spending hard currency in Cambodia. More common now is for women to work from their homes in communities in which prostitution is known. Some women will leave their own homes to work out of the home of another person in order to prevent their neighbors and families from knowing of their involvement in sex work.

### **Bars**

#### **Beer girls**

Beer companies and bars hire women to sell their beer in the bars and restaurants. Each brand available will have at least one beer girl to sell their beer. The women typically wear minidress uniforms with the brand name and logo. Beer girls are sometimes touched by bar patrons but sex is not expected. The beer girls are paid by the beer companies. They earn approximately \$50 per month. Some beer girls supplement their incomes with prostitution with the bar patrons. This does not usually take place on the premises but in a guesthouse or hotel nearby.



Karaoke bar exterior. Courtesy of Angus McIntyre.

## **Karaoke girls**

Karaoke bars are places where men gather to eat, drink and sing, usually with karaoke hostesses. The hostesses generally live on the premises, and are usually paid a small amount, between ten and fifteen dollars per month, as well room and board. In addition to the small salary, they earn money via prostitution on the premises of the bar.



**Karaoke bar. Courtesy of Angus McIntyre.**

## **Independent sex workers in the bars**

Independent sex workers will visit some of the bars, but they are there only if they have a good relationship with the owner and management. This is most common in the big cities of Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. The clientele of the bar will determine the economic opportunities for the sex workers there. We interviewed one woman who works in a bar geared toward foreigners, and she earned the most money of the 31 sex workers interviewed. However, another woman we interviewed was in this same venue until two years prior and her income had significantly dropped once she was no longer able to work in a bar with foreign clientele but now had a local clientele.

## ***Street-based sex work***

### **Street prostitution**

Some women work the streets every night, driven by need or professionalism. Street prostitution can also be opportunistic, and is sometimes the last resort of people who have run out of money before their next payday. Some will accompany a client to a guesthouse

or hotel while others will indulge clients in quiet parts of parks and other public areas. Street-based sex work can overlap with working in bars, particularly in areas where tourists are found, such as Phnom Penh's riverfront, but this is less reliable than the known areas for prostitution such as the Garden outside the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh.

### **Orange sellers**

Orange sellers and sex workers in the Garden outside Phnom Penh's Royal Palace and their playful double entendres about orange sizes and shapes is part of their appeal. Some clients purchase oranges, with or without sexual services ranging from feeling a woman's breasts and erotic talk to activities more directly linked to orgasm.

## **Entry into sex work**

### ***Economic pressures*<sup>1</sup>**

Economics is the driving force for most work, including sex work. A lack of other economic opportunities and low wages in the jobs that are available also push women to do sex work. The need for money for essentials and for medical care drive some people into debt, and some people undertake sex work to pay back debts. Five women (16 %) reported that they became sex workers because they were in debt. Bopha said, "I moved because of debt. Because of a flood, we couldn't grow rice. One of my relatives was sick and we had to spend a lot of money on treatment, but that person has died." She added, "The total debt is one million riel [\$250]. I send home \$50 per month. When I arrived at this bar, I borrowed 100,000 riel [\$25] to send home. I am in debt to the owner now for 50,000 riel [\$12.50]."

Medical expenses also put families into debt. Ann said, "My father was very sick so I went to work in a karaoke parlor to make more money. My friend told me I could earn more money there. I could earn \$40 – 50 per month as my salary but I'd earn more for sex with clients. I earned about \$800 per month, but I have nothing left. My father was ill and my son has brain damage from a fever. I worked in the karaoke parlor for three months and then my father died. I spent a lot on doctors for my father and my son and now I am in debt."

Devi left her home because of debt. "I left my homeland when I was 25 years old because I divorced my husband. Moreover, I was in debt because I borrowed money from a moneylender to buy pesticides for my rice field. Because of high interest I couldn't pay it back. So I had to sell my house, land and farm and rice paddy to pay my debt."

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<sup>1</sup> A note about currency in Cambodia: The Cambodian currency is called the riel, and at the time of interviews exchanged to the US dollar at 4123 riel per US \$1 at banks. However, most transactions over 4000 riel are conducted in US dollars. The "street rate" of exchange is 4000 riel to US \$1, and this is the rate used for all exchange below as it is the rate used by the women interviewed in their daily fiscal interactions. In Sisophon, the Thai baht is more common than the US dollar. The official exchange rate again differs from the street rate, which was 100 riel to one Thai baht and 40 baht to US \$1. This is the rate used for the exchanges below as it is the rate used in most monetary exchanges.

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Money often changes hands when a person begins a new job in Cambodia, and this money is expected to be paid by the new worker. This takes many forms, from an advance that allows someone to pay all or part of a debt and which they then pay for through their work, or paying for an introduction or being hired. Workers in many fields in Cambodia report that a bribe is necessary to get a job, and that this can be as high as a month's wages. Five women (16 %) reported having paid someone to introduce them to a place where they could do sex work. Pagna knew she wanted to do sex work and approached a pimp to help her get into the trade. She paid him \$10 to make some introductions to her. She was never in debt bondage. "I asked him because he lived near my house. He took me to a brothel." She borrowed \$10 from the owner to give him and she repaid it to the owner. Rin added, "When my father died, I went to Battambang with a friend and I went to work in a karaoke bar. I paid my friend 500 baht [\$12.50] and I was in Battambang for two months." Ros reported that "When [a friend] sent me there, I tried to borrow \$10 from the owner for transportation, but the owner would only give me \$5, and I gave it to that lady [the friend who helped her find the place]."

The most devastating manifestation of money changing hands when one person begins a job is when a person is deceived and effectively sold. Money may have been given to a friend or acquaintance who brought a person to a job, and the new worker may have little or no information about the work. Six women (19 %) interviewed had been deceived this way into doing sex work. International NGOs and governments call this trafficking. In some cases, this happens the first time a girl leaves her home to migrate for work in a place where she has no family or social connections.

Seng said, "I was cheated by my friend in Kratie. My friend used to work in a factory in Phnom Penh and told me 'you can go to work there and earn much' so I decided to go. At first, my friend asked me to sit with her in front of the Royal Palace [in the Garden] all night. In the morning, she brought me to a brothel – there were four or five girls there. She told me it was her relative's house. When I wanted to go out, the brothel owner told me that my friend had sold me for \$200. I lived there for five months. One client helped me. He paid the owner \$500. That client just helped me and advised me to go home and not come back because I'd be cheated again. He gave me \$50 to go home."



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**Billboard with an anti-trafficking message. Courtesy of Angus McIntyre.**

Chanta's experience starts the same way, but includes forced rehabilitation. "I was cheated when I was 13 years old. I was cheated by my friend and sold to a brothel owner. I lived there for five months. I tried to escape but the owner always stopped me. A client, a Khmer man, helped me to escape. Then I was arrested by the police and they took me to Koh Kor island. On the island, there are a lot of cemeteries. There were more than 200 girls there, to prevent us from becoming sex workers they put us in prison there. We had to farm vegetables. I was there for one year. It was very dirty and they guards beat me if I didn't work hard. When I was released, I went to Toul Kork to do sex work."

Devi left her home and worked as a cleaner in Phnom Penh for more than a year. "Then one of my friends told me 'if you go to work there, you can earn more money. Here you can not earn enough to support your child.' I didn't know that place or that it was a sex place. That was here, Svay Pak. I worked there for one year and a client bought my freedom" She had been in debt bondage because her friend cheated her and sold her to the brothel owner when she was 27 years old. She was freed in 1989. Yan said, "My friend sold me to a brothel. She said please come with me to Phnom Penh to work as a maid, but she sold me to a brothel for \$90."



Billboard with an anti-trafficking message. Courtesy of Angus McIntyre.

### ***Social pressures, social connections***

Social pressures are an additional factor. Family issues have direct bearing on entry into sex work. Older children are expected to support their parents, younger siblings and their own families. Girls are expected to be good, and this means chaste and virginal as well as obedient and supportive of one's family. Women who leave their husbands or are left by their husbands may have to earn more money than before, especially if they have children to support.

Three women (10 %) said that they became sex workers because they were not virgins. Rin became a sex worker in 2002, "because my relatives said I wasn't a good woman, and I had a sweetheart and I wasn't a virgin. When Seng returned home after having been trafficked, "Everyone blamed me when I told them the story. They discriminated against me. I was uneasy and they said 'we are poor but we don't want you to become a sex worker to earn money for us.'" This was her aunt, uncle and her blind mother. Her father is deceased. "After they blamed me, I asked them for permission to return to Phnom Penh to sell fruit or something and they said they wouldn't stop me."

Most people find jobs through personal connections, and many women around the world begin doing sex work when they are introduced by their friends who are already working. This is one reason why so many of the women who told us they were trafficked were trusting. Bopha said, "I had a friend who was a beer girl. She told me you can be a beer girl – wherever you see a restaurant, just ask." Ros said, "I couldn't find a job. I needed money. I met a woman selling fruit in the Garden and she asked if I wanted to work as a

sex worker. I said I didn't care about the work and she helped me find a job in a karaoke bar in Phsar Prampeemakara near Toul Kork."

Acceptance and proximity to the milieu are part of some women's entry into sex work. Tidah explained this well. "My mother owns a brothel in Kompong Som. I lived in a place with other sex workers and so I became a sex worker." Akara said, "Before, I owned a brothel in the Building area. ... When I saw the people at their building who owned brothels, I wanted to do it. My husband gave me the money to start. ... Since then, we had problems so we separated."

### ***Age at entry into sex work***

The average age of entry into sex work for the women interviewed was 21 years old, but the range was wide, with one person beginning sex work at 11 and as high as 31 years old. Five women did not answer the question of their age at the time they became sex workers. One said that she did not know and that she was over 30 now, which means that she was born in the turbulent Khmer Rouge regime and was an adolescent during the civil war.

A frequency analysis of the age of entry reveals that six women entered the sex industry before the age of eighteen, but that the most common age to enter the sex industry is in the 20s. Most of the women interviewed were in their 20s, followed by women in their 30s. One woman was nineteen, another was 43. One additional woman did not know her age but said she was "over 30".

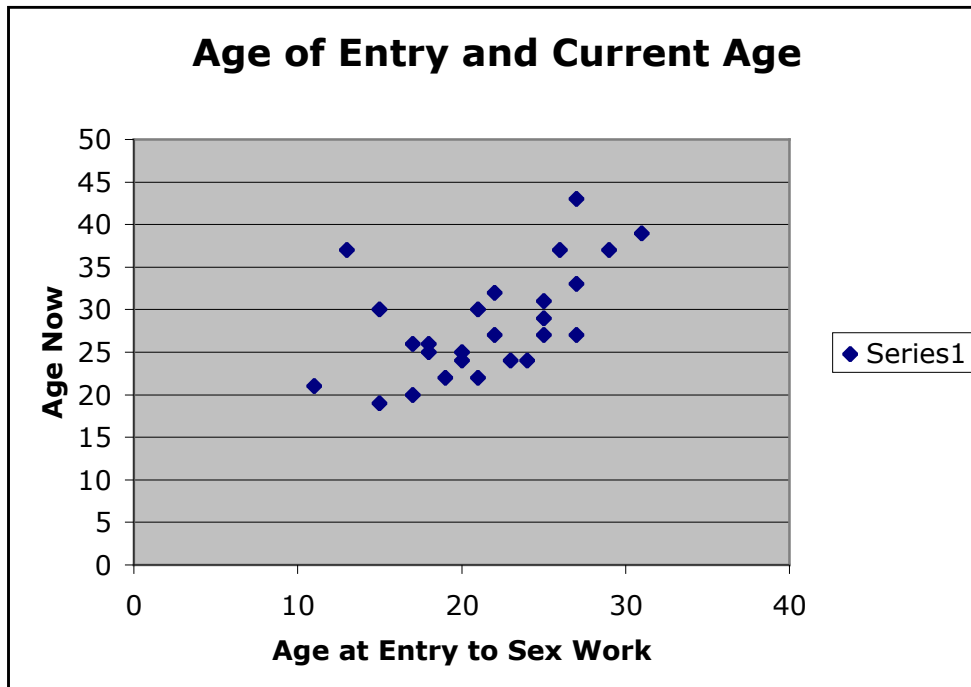
#### **Frequency Analysis of Age of Entry (N=26)**

11	1
13	1
15	2
17	2
18	2
19	1
20	2
21	2
22	2
23	1
24	1
25	3
26	1
27	3
29	1
31	1

#### **Frequency Analysis of Age Now (N=30)**

19	1
20	1
21	1
22	2
24	3
25	2
26	2
27	3
28	1
29	1
30	3
31	1
32	1
33	1
35	2
37	3
39	1
43	1

The scatter graph below (N=26) shows that some of the women have had long careers in sex work, while some were interviewed at the beginning of their stints in the sex industry.



This may be partly because many women reported undertaking sex work upon divorce.

### ***Divorce***

The women reported that men may leave their families for new wives, and women leave their husbands due to domestic violence.

Sothea has no husband now, but has had two husbands, both of whom live with other wives now. There was lots of domestic violence in her life with her husbands. Kung lives alone after domestic violence from a husband. Cham had a ‘broken heart’ when she divorced her husband. He drank too much and there was a lot of domestic violence in their home. She lives with her four children in Svay Pak. Seng said, “My husband is from Kompong Cham and my children live there. We are divorced because he beat me every day.”

There seem to be few social constraints on men leaving their wives. Ros said, “I was married at age 21, but my husband said ‘now we have nothing to eat.’ And he went to Battambang to find work and he never came back. I have one son from that marriage. Yin’s husband “has another wife now. He met her when I worked in the factory. He worked in the factory, too.” Pree said, “I came here in 2003. I had issues with my husband. He loved another woman so I left home to work here.”

Chanta doesn't know where her husband is, they have been divorced for ten years, since the birth of her son. Yan said, "Before I came to Phnom Penh, I was married and had a child. My husband left when I was three months pregnant. My child lives with my mother in my village." Her son is developmentally disabled due to malnutrition.

Women without children may support their siblings. Ny said, "I divorced my husband" and now she works to support her younger siblings.

## Family life

The overwhelming majority of women interviewed had familial ties and the obligations that come with them, to parents and siblings, to their own children and husbands, or both. Families tend to be large, and only two people reported having no relatives. Pia said, "My family died in the Pol Pot regime." Lina's life is also lonely, "I have no relatives, I'm alone." She added, "I went to Kampot in October 2005. I started doing sex work in 2000 when I divorced my husband."

The oldest child of any family has many responsibilities. All children are expected to help their parents but the oldest is expected to be the primary caretakers for their parents in their old age. School fees are an expense for women with children and those who have younger siblings in school. Schools are subsidized by not free, and students pay the teacher directly. There is pressure on older siblings to contribute financially to the household to send younger children to school. Ros said, "I have 8 siblings and I am the oldest in my family. My parents are farmers. My youngest brother and sister are still in Svay Rieng. The youngest is 12 years old. They both still go to school. All of the rest of us stopped going to school because of poverty. We couldn't afford to go to school. We are all working to support our family." She has a son who lives with her parents. Ny divorced her husband and now works to support her birth family. "There are 6 people in my family. My siblings all go to school. I am the oldest. ... I decided to go to Kampot because I have five siblings and only my mother was working. My family situation got worse and worse, so I decided to be a sex worker in Kampot."

Lin is the fourth of 9 children in her family, and she has one 3-year-old daughter of her own who lives with her mother. "I divorced my husband three years ago when he had another girl, right when the baby was born. In the village, I grew rice and then I helped others in the village and did odd jobs. In one day, I earned 3000 riel [US 0.75]." "I came to the karaoke because the money situation got worse and worse for my family. I have to spend money on the education of my younger siblings and caring for my grandmother. It's only me earning money to support them." She finished grade 2 at age 8 and has not attended school since.

Danee has two sons, 7 and 4 years old. The seven year old goes to school. She gives him 500 riel per day [US 13 cents] or 1000 riel [US 25 cents] if she has it. This covers his breakfast and lunch and school fees (paying the teacher).

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Ros was married at 14 to the man who is the father of her children. “Last year, I divorced my husband because he was drunk every day and was violent to me. He was not only violent but he had another girl. Then I couldn’t earn anything to support my daughters. We grow rice and other food crops but cannot earn enough to survive.”

Saoni said, “When I have money I will visit my family, but if I don’t have it, I won’t go. My family is not dependent on me.” Her situation is exceptional in that she is independent from her family.

Devi said, “I’m worried that even with medicine to prolong my life, I’m still afraid of dying soon if I have HIV, because my children are still young and no one will look after them. We are only three – me and my two children.” She has no other relatives to turn to. Hers was the most distressing situation, but perhaps that was because the other women had either much older or much younger children. “I just went to see my daughter because I don’t have money to pay my rent but she [daughter] went to Thailand.” I asked about this – her daughter lives and works with/for a businessman who has business in Thailand and so she was sent on business. I asked about her son, and he is now a ragpicker as he doesn’t go to school. He sells things he finds in the trash. He can earn between 400 and 500 riel [US 10 to 13 cents] but sometimes he earns nothing. She reports that she needs 1000 riel [US 25 cents] per day for food and that doesn’t include water or electricity, and that she really needs 5000 riel [US \$1.25] per day “5000 riel is enough for food and water but nowadays it is very difficult and sometimes I think I want to die.”

Kan is the mother of three. She has a 10-year-old son who is not a monk but who lives at a wat [temple] with monks. Her 8-year-old daughter lives with her sister in Kompong Cham province. The daughter has been adopted by her sister and attends school. She keeps a six-year-old daughter with her at the railway station; she doesn’t go to school because school in Phnom Penh costs 300 riel [US 8 cents] per day and she cannot afford it. “I want my child to go to school but it is impossible.” Her first husband died of HIV in 2000 and that is when she started doing sex work in the Garden area in order to live from day to day. Her second husband lost a leg on a landmine in 1990. He was a policeman but can no longer work. She supports him and her six-year-old daughter who lives with them.

Sothea has two daughters aged 14 and 7 and one two-year-old son. The two younger children live with her at the Railway Station in Phnom Penh. They do not go to school. However, the oldest daughter lives with her parents in Prey Vieng and goes to school. She has no husband now, but has had two husbands, both of whom live with other wives.

Divorcees have trouble making ends meet as single parents. Kung has an older sister in Kandol Province but she has no contact with her. She “cannot earn enough” and has no money to send or to visit. She sleeps outside and doesn’t have a house. Yin said, “I have six siblings – I have a stepmother and a stepfather. My three-year-old daughter lives with my mother.

Ros said, “I was married at age 21, but my husband said ‘now we have nothing to eat.’ And he went to Battambang to find work and he never came back. I have one son from

that marriage. Then I began working as a servant. My son stayed with my parents and I went to work." "Now I live in Tralockback with a new husband. He is a construction worker and he knows about my work."

## Living conditions

Housing in most of the areas visited included wooden homes, many on stilts and near water. The houses may look like huts or shacks to westerners, but many are considered desirable houses. Some women worked out of their homes. Homes visited were usually one or two rooms, with a thin linoleum or hard wood floor. Walls were made of wood, particleboard, woven reeds or cardboard. Most windows did not have glass or screens. Doors were secured with chains and padlocks. Some rooms had no windows. Roofs were corrugated tin or zinc, which is very hot, and well-off people had tile or wooden roofs. Some places were covered with thatch or a tarpaulin.

People lived with extended families, occasionally with a friend, and some lived alone.

A rooming house in Pursat had one sex worker in residence in January, but had many more when UN soldiers were in the country. Other residents have included soldiers and migrants. This was a typical teak house, on a lake, with space underneath for a hammock and large clay water jars outside. Renting a room was described as typical for independent or freelance sex workers in this small city, with a few bars and restaurants and karaoke bars just outside town.



**Five room boarding house in Pursat. Courtesy of Angus McIntyre.**

Svay Pak is only 11 kilometers from Phnom Penh, along a road lined with garment factories, but feels a world apart from the capital. Horses and ox-carts pass through alongside the cars at all times of day. Leaving the main road, the buildings change from

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concrete factories and hotels to wood and rattan houses on stilts, over a lake in which some people grow snails for the restaurants of Phnom Penh. Svay Pak is known for the number of sex workers there, many of whom are ethnically Vietnamese. Svay Pak received media coverage for the presence of children selling sex there. There are many brothels featuring groups of women alongside smaller buildings and women working out of their homes.



Homes in Svay Pak, December 2005. Courtesy of Ama Marston.



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**Exterior scenes of The Building, February 2006. Courtesy of Angus McIntyre.**

“The Building” is a specific concrete multi-story building in Phnom Penh, and there is a shantytown behind it. This is sometimes called “the Building area” or “the Bird’s Nest”. This is where many of the sex workers who seek clients in the Garden of the Royal Palace live. The area is overcrowded and lacks running water and sewers.



**Homes in the Bird’s Nest, behind the Building. Courtesy of Angus McIntyre.**

Most people live in one room. Many are from other parts of the country and came to the area because it was more affordable for them than other areas, especially those with better conditions.

The area had its own brothels, but at least one was burned down as part of what was reported to be a government effort to push people out in order to gentrify the area. The central location has made the land more valuable than when the Building became a slum and the shantytown went up behind it.

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**Street scenes from the Bird's Nest, behind the Building. Courtesy of Ama Marston.**

Homeless people in Phnom Penh slept at the Railway Station, sometimes with their children and even extended families. There is some daily rail traffic, but the train runs in each direction every other day. The train is slow and infrequent, so the overwhelming majority of travel occurs by road and boat. People lived and slept under the eaves where the railway workers would try to push them out, and on and under picnic tables owned by the bars and restaurants that serve the community of people living around the Railway Station. Single-story wooden buildings extend over Boeung Kak Lake behind the station, with one-room homes along walkways extending behind each bar, restaurant or pool hall between the tracks and the station itself. At night, sex workers of all genders stand outside the station looking for clients. Many more women who are sex workers work in the Garden of the Royal Palace at night.



**Residences at the Railway Station, Phnom Penh. Courtesy of Ama Marston.**

The women who work in brothels and karaoke bars often live onsite with their co-workers. If they have children, they may send their children to live with relatives elsewhere. Some brothel areas were full of children, but it is impossible to determine whether all the children lived with their mothers in the brothels. A brothel may have more residents than rooms, and so rooms were often but not always shared.

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**Brothel district, Sisophon. Courtesy of Angus McIntyre.**

The brothels visited were usually made of wood, with as many as six rooms inside, each furnished with a bed and many had satin sheets. Some rooms were decorated with safe sex posters and pictures from magazines. Walls were made of wood, rattan or cardboard. Many poor areas lacked running water, and the brothels within them also had no running water. Clients at the brothels were generally quick and did not linger.



**Brothel interiors, Sisophon. Courtesy of Angus McIntyre.**

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Karaoke bars looked like higher-end businesses than the brothels. The bars also offer food in addition to the sound and video system for karaoke. Sex work is ancillary to another business in the karaoke bars, while prostitution is the sole business attraction in the brothels. Karaoke bars were often sturdy one or two-story buildings made of concrete or brick, with running water and solid walls. The karaoke singing occurred outside in a garden with a roof over part of it, and with tables under the sheltered part of the garden.



**Karaoke bar exteriors, Pursat province. Courtesy of Angus McIntyre.**

Karaoke bar patrons eat and drink and sing, hanging out all evening and into the night. They may spend more time with the sex workers over all, but not in a private room. They would go to a private room for sex a little while, but most time was spent in the garden of the karaoke bar. The women lived on the premises and saw clients in their bedrooms, which were shared when there were more women working at the bar than rooms.



**Karaoke bar and girls, Krakor. Courtesy of Angus McIntyre.**

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A different kind of brothel in one provincial area was also the local general store. The brothel and shop were entirely fenced in and had a wooden floor throughout. The general store sold laundry powder, milk, and other household goods alongside condoms. There was an area where people sat and drink beer. There was one large roof over everything, and then smaller huts under this roof. Each sex worker rented her own separate hut within the compound.



General store and brothel exterior, Krakor. Courtesy of Angus McIntyre.

### ***Earnings from sex work<sup>2</sup>***

The venues for sex work vary widely and the incomes they generate vary as well. Most sex workers in Cambodia sell sex because they have few other options and most other jobs do not offer the income that a young woman can earn in sex work. They may prefer another occupation, but options are few. There are more people to support than there is work to support them. However, incomes decline over time as women age. The financial arrangements for compensation are also diverse. Room and board may be the only

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<sup>2</sup> A note about currency in Cambodia: The Cambodian currency is called the riel, and at the time of interviews exchanged to the US dollar at 4123 riel per US \$1 at banks. However, most transactions over 4000 riel are conducted in US dollars. The “street rate” of exchange is 4000 riel to US \$1, and this is the rate used for all exchange below as it is the rate used by the women interviewed in their daily fiscal interactions. In Sisophon, the Thai baht is more common than the US dollar. The official exchange rate again differs from the street rate, which was 100 riel to one Thai baht and 40 baht to US \$1. This is the rate used for the exchanges below as it is the rate used in most monetary exchanges.

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compensation for a karaoke hostess who may only earn money directly by having sex with clients. Other karaoke girls may be paid a salary, while some bar hostesses and brothel workers pay for room and board and utilities out of their earnings from sex with clients. Beer girls are paid by the beer company and may also augment their incomes by having sex with clients. Independent and street-based sex workers negotiate fees directly with clients, and their incomes are dependent on their negotiating skills, which are directly related to youth and beauty.

Ros said, “I work in a brothel. I keep half the money. The brothel owner gets the other half. My clients pay 5000 riel [\$1.25]. Some stay for 4 or 5 minutes, some stay for 20, some stay for an hour. But all pay 5000 riel [\$1.25].” Tidah said of the brothel where she works near the railway tracks in Sisophon, “The client pays 50 baht [US \$1.25]. Most clients are Khmer and Thai. Thais pay 100 baht [US \$2.50]. All the brothels here charge the same.” These prices were confirmed by other women in the brothels in the area. Rin, who works in the same area, said “Last night I had four clients, all Khmer.”

Pagna explained, “If we have more than two clients, I get my half and the owner gets her half. But the first client goes entirely to the owner.” This corresponds to another girl saying they pay 10 baht [US 25 cents] per day or half the fee (which would be about 50 cents) of a client for water and electricity. “When a person has her period that’s a problem because we can’t have clients.” This owner does not build a backlog – if a girl has no clients, she doesn’t pay for water and electricity. Pagna added, “It’s no problem, 3 to 4 days without a client, like menstruation is 4 to 5 days. We don’t owe anyone.” In general, she said, “we have 7 or 8 clients each per day.”

Bopha works as a beer girl at lunchtime, and at night she works in a karaoke bar in Pursat. “Here in Pursat I am a waitress and a beer girl. As a beer girl, I earn \$50 a month. As a waitress, I earn 50,000 riel [\$12.50] a month. As a beer girl, I work in another restaurant to sell Angkor Beer, it’s near the bridge.” “Sometimes I have sex with clients and for ‘one sex’ the client pays \$10, and the room costs 5000 riel [\$1.25]. For the whole night, it’s \$20 and 10,000 riel [\$2.50] for the room.” She usually has two clients each week.

Pick is a karaoke girl, and she earns 40,000 riel [\$10] per month and her living expenses are paid by the owner of the bar where she lives and works. She has clients 2 or 3 times per week, and charges \$5 for ‘one sex’ and \$7 or \$7.50 for the whole night. Clients are always seen outside the karaoke parlor at a guesthouse or hotel, and she keeps all of the money earned this way. There is no place to see clients at the bar where she works. Lin works at the same karaoke bar with the same arrangement. She added, “‘One sex’ costs \$5 and the whole night is \$10. Prices depend on what the girl negotiates with the clients. I have sex with clients four or five times a week.”

Pheap is an independent sex worker in Pursat. She rents a room in a boarding house. Her clients pay from 5000 riel [\$1.25] to 7000 riel [\$1.75] for ‘one sex’ and 30,000 riel [\$7.50] for the whole night. Her income has declined. “Before, there were five or six clients each week, but now there are only two.”

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Yin and Saoni work in a karaoke bar with 11 karaoke girls. Yin said, “I work whenever clients come. They come at night, from 8 or 9 pm. We are finished by 11 pm.” “We can ask for leave or for a day off.” “I have two clients each week. Sometimes, only one. None stay the whole night. It costs \$5 for ‘one sex.’ I don’t go out from here. There are two girls to each room. A client can go to any free room.” Saoni described their working arrangement saying, “Clients pay \$5 or \$10. I negotiate the price with the clients. For karaoke, if the client wants to sing, it’s 20,000 riel [\$5] an hour but the owner keeps all that money. When I have clients, I keep half and the owner keeps half. I don’t get a salary. All the expenses [rent, food, water, electricity] are paid for by the owner.” “Here, no one gets a salary.” Saoni added that “some clients stay only 20 minutes but some stay the whole night. That costs between \$10 and \$15.”

Maly works in a massage parlor. Her clients pay 5000 riel [US \$1.25] and she gives 2500 [US \$0.62] to the owner and keeps 2500 [US \$0.62]. She has two or three clients per night and said, “before, I couldn’t earn enough and I still can’t earn enough. I am earning the same as before.” Devi also does massage. She negotiates the prices with her clients, who pay “3000 riel [US \$0.75] or maybe 4000 riel [US \$1] or sometimes 2000 riel [US \$0.50].” She is older and her income has declined since her youth. She has at most one client per night, and sometimes none. Cham works in the same place as Devi. She is younger than Devi. Her clients pay 5000 riel [US \$1.25] and she sees two or three clients each night.

Danee works in a bar and in the Garden. She is young and attractive and her clients pay between US \$5 and \$7. Yet she is already feeling the effects of age on her income. “I used earn more when I was beautiful. And now, things are more expensive than before – things like clothing, food and transportation.” Sasah is at the height of her earning power as a sex worker, and sees only foreign men whom she meets at a chic bar where Danee also used to work. Foreigners pay her between \$15 and \$20 for one hour of sex. “Sometimes I can earn \$100 for the whole night from one man.”

Lina, who works in a brothel in Kampot, said, “In one day I have six clients. Almost every day. Sometimes, no, but almost every day. I work whenever clients come. They pay 5000 riel [US \$1.25]. Normally, it’s half for the owner and half for me, but if I have a day with only one client the owner will take it all.” Ny works in a brothel in Kampot “We share half the money with the owner and keep half the money. Customers pay 5000 riel [\$1.25] and stay for at least ten minutes and up to 20 minutes.” “I know that owner supplies the electricity and water. The 5000 riel that I give the owner may cover this, too.” She has about ten clients each week. Sarun, who works in Takeo, said that the rate “is not fixed, they pay sometimes 5000 riel [US \$1.25], sometimes 10,000 riel [US \$2.50].” She has up to two clients in one day.

Kan meets her clients in the Garden next to the Royal Palace. “From one client, I can get 3000 riel [US \$0.75], sometimes only 2000 riel [US \$0.50].”

### ***Other income***

Women with other sources of income have an advantage in that this may be steady and reliable, unlike sex work, which is akin to piecework in that most sex workers are paid for each individual transaction and have no set salary. For example, Kan's financial situation has improved since she began a cleaning job, which gives her a small but steady income, she is still in debt and continues to do sex work to supplement her cleaning income. The jobs held by sex workers are not particularly lucrative and do not offer room for advancement. Sothea said, "I am a part-time laundress so I can earn 3000 riel [US \$0.75] per day." However, "it seems more difficult than before because it's hard to earn money and things are more expensive now. We earn the same amount as before but things are more expensive. Now, with my children, I have to spend a lot."

### ***Everyday expenses***

Cambodian people are among the poorest in Asia and the world. Approximately half the people live on less than \$1 per day in Cambodia. Everyday expenses are out of reach for the poorest members of society. There is no social security or welfare system for the neediest people. The monetary amounts paid for rent and other expenses may seem negligible to westerners, but the amounts are truly difficult to earn for unskilled people without useful connections in Cambodia. Simply supporting oneself is less common than a young woman working in a bar or brothel to support her extended family. Many women in the sex industry send money to their families elsewhere, supporting parents and siblings and/or their own children and husbands.

Many sex industry venues are places where the workers can sleep and eat. Room and board are usually charged by the owner. The exception is the karaoke bars, which are generally more upscale businesses than the brothels, and the women working in them earn more than those in the brothels. Bopha and Ny are karaoke girls. Bopha explained, "I live here at the karaoke bar where I have my own room. Only two girls live here. ... I don't pay for the room or water or electricity or food." Ny said, "I live with the bar owner and there were five girls living there." Yin lives at the karaoke bar where she works with ten other women. They have no expenses, but also no set salaries. The time spent in the karaoke bar is not compensated. However, they each earn about \$40 per month as sex workers.

Akara works in a brothel in Sisophon. She said, "I have to pay 10 baht [US \$0.25] per day for electricity and water [at the brothel]. [At another brothel here], I paid 25 baht per day [US \$0.60] with or without clients. This house, if I have no clients one day, the owner won't take any money from me." Rin reported, "The owner is generous. She considers me her daughter. The owner pays for water and electricity and charges us. But she pays for the clinic transportation which we do not have to pay back because it isn't expensive. It's only 10 baht [US 25 cents] for transportation and one motorbike taxi can take three girls – so it is 20 baht [US 50 cents] for all the girls to go to the clinic."

Paree works in a brothel in Krakor. "I pay 33,000 riel [US \$8.25] to the owner each month and I have water, electricity, and food. He pays the police."



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Women who live outside their workplaces arrange their housing, utilities and food and water on their own. Rents reported ranged from \$7.50 per month to \$30 per month (which is relatively high but included electricity and water). Devi lives in Svay Pak and pays \$10 monthly rent. She lives in an area where there are few sex workers and does not work out of her home because she does not want her neighbors to know that she engages in sex work. "I'm afraid to open my business at my house and so I work here [at a friend's house]. At night I go back to my house." She reports that she needs 1000 riel [US \$ 0.25] per day for food and that doesn't include water or electricity, and that she really needs 5000 riel [US \$1.25] per day. "Five thousand riel [US \$1.25] is enough for food and water but nowadays it is very difficult."

Prices for electricity and water varied throughout the country. Pursat has a power station and electricity is less expensive there than in Sisophon. Rin reported that electricity cost her 500 Thai baht [US \$12.50] per month in Sisophon. Lina said that when she worked in a brothel in Sihanoukville, "I had to spend 30,000 riel [US \$7.50] on water and electricity." Sarun explained, "When I was in Phnom Penh, I rented a room. I paid 30,000 riel [US \$7.50] for rent each month. Electricity cost 20,000 riel [US \$5]." She now lives in Kompong Speu. "If I stay there for a month, I will have to spend maybe 10,000 riel [US \$2.50] per month for electricity."

Expenses for food and water depended on the number of people living with the women. Ros was a master of economy. "To save money, I buy fish heads to eat, and I spend about 2000 real [50 cents] on food each day. I also spend 500 real [US \$0.13] per day on my husband's cigarettes and another 500 real [US \$0.13] on porridge for the baby." Cham's expenses at a minimum are 5000 riel [US \$1.25] per day but 10,000 riel [US \$2.50] is better. Her money covers only what they need and sometimes it isn't enough for food. "If I had clients every day at least I could survive. But sometimes I have no clients and no money." Pia has no family but is still not able to make ends meet. "Some days I cannot earn even 100 riel and so sometimes I do not have food to eat."

Danee spends at least 7000 riel [US \$1.75] per day, in addition to the \$15 per month that she pays for rent. She has a seven-year-old son who goes to school. She gives him 500 riel per day [US \$0.13] or 1000 riel [US \$0.25] if she has it. This covers his breakfast and lunch and school fees (paying the teacher). She cooks in the evening. Her husband lives with her and takes care of the children when she works, as he is jobless.

Sasah's expenses are high. Her rent in the Building area is 50,000 real [US \$12.50] per month and she spends 15,000 riel [US \$3.75] per day. She pays a makeup artist 7000 riel [US \$1.75] each time she goes to work. Sasah is an independent sex worker who meets her clients in a bar that caters to a foreign clientele, and so her income is high. She supports her children and her mother, who lives with her and takes care of her children while she works.

School fees and childcare are additional expenses for some women. There are many sex workers with one or two small children who live with them, away from their extended families and their villages. This is because of stigma, as people will talk about a woman

with children but without a husband. Akara works in a brothel, but unlike the other women who work there, she lives outside the red light area in a separate house. She has taken on the added expenses are US \$40 per month for rent, food and childcare to ensure that her youngest child, who is one year old, lives apart from the red light area and does not endure the stigma associated with prostitution.

School fees also vary by province, as they are directly related to the cost of living for the teacher. Pick said, “My daughter pays 100 riel [US 3 cents] a day for school.” Chanta had more to say. “I have to give my son 1000 riel [US \$0.25] each day. He pays the teacher from 300 to 500 riel [US 8 to 13 cents] each day. Before, when he was 5 and 6 years old, he went to Friends Mitt Samlann NGO but they have no schools now so he has to pay the public school teacher.” Lin, a karaoke girl in Pursat, spends US \$5-6 per week on the education of her 5 younger siblings. These fees are prohibitive for the poorest women. Kan cannot afford the 300 riel [US 8 cents] per day that school costs in Phnom Penh. “I want my child to go to school but it is impossible.” Devi cried when she said, “What I want now is for my children to go to school. I don’t want them to be like me. If they don’t go to school, they cannot earn much. I cannot earn enough now to have enough food.”

Women with small children sometimes pay their neighbors to take care of them. They reported paying as much as 2000 riel [US \$0.50] for childcare for each child each day. It is usually only the very young – infants and toddlers – who are looked after this way. Older children are expected to look after themselves. Women who live near to their extended families sometimes rely on their relatives for childcare. This is most common among women who are married. Ann, in Phnom Penh, turned to sex work to pay off debt and medical expenses. “In one day, I can earn 4000 or 5000 riel [US \$1 or \$1.25].” Her rent is US \$7.50 per month. She lives with her husband and son. He is a shop clerk, but works only when new merchandise arrives, about twice a week, and he earns 8000 riel [US \$2] per day. He takes care of their son while she works. When they both work, a relative takes care of him, without payment.

### **Paying off the police**

Sex workers reported paying the police for protection or to avoid arrest and to investigate or prosecute criminal incidents including violence and theft. This can be interpreted as corruption or as a form of taxation on an untaxed business. It seems that for sex workers in Cambodia, paying the police is an unavoidable cost of doing business. Some women pay the police directly, while others do so through the owners of the places where they work. For women in formal businesses like karaoke bars and brothels, the relationship is more formal than for women who work independently and especially those who work on the street or in the Garden.

Ny, a karaoke girl from Kampot, said, “Since the time I became a sex worker, I only earn enough to survive. When I return to grow rice, it’s not enough money. Even the money I send back from sex work is only enough for my family to survive.” She added, “I know that if it was a serious problem, I’d call the police. But if it were a simple case, I would

not. I believe that if I call the police, they'll come immediately, because the owner always contacts the police and gives them money. The police get 50,000 riel [\$12.50] from the owner and the girls have to give 5000 riel [\$1.25] per month to the PM. PM is another kind of police, but they can help us whenever we ask. So we have to give money to two different kinds of police – the official police and the PM. The owner also charges from the girls to pay the police. When I first came to the bar, I had to give the owner 10,000 riel [US \$2.50] for the police and the PM. But now, the 5000 riel [US \$1.25] I pay per month includes both the police and PM.” “With the smaller number of girls, now that two have left, I do not have to pay more. We pay the same 5000 riel [US \$1.25].” Lina confirmed Ny's report, saying that in Kampot, brothel and karaoke girls pay 5000 riel [US \$1.25] per month and owners pay 50,000 [US \$12.50] riel per month. “There are only 3 brothels in my area and all three houses have about 15 or 20 girls total. But in another area there are more.” At these numbers, the money generated by kickbacks to the police is significant.

Paree, who works in a brothel in Krakor, said, “I have to pay the police. I pay 33,000 real [US \$8.25] to the owner each month and I have water, electricity, and food. He pays the police.”

Akara described how paying the police was mitigated by the previous governor. “In 2005, the governor supported sex workers. He told the police not to harass us or to take money from the girls. Before that we had ID cards that made it easy for the police to ask for money for each girl.” There was a new governor at the time of the interview. “I'm afraid because I don't know if the new governor is good or not. Maybe it will be all right – the last few months, we haven't heard that the police asked for money from the girls. The new governor came in last month.” Nonetheless, suspicion remained high. “I think they changed the governor because he was so good and cared about people. They only think of money. If the government asked us to vote for the governor, I'd vote for the old one.”

In addition to the clear bribe-for-police-services described above, street-based sex workers pay bribes to avoid arrest or to be released. This severely cuts into the income of these most destitute women. Kan meets her clients in the Garden next to the Royal Palace. “From one client, I can get 3000 riel [US \$0.75], sometimes only 2000 riel [US \$0.50].” Kung also works in the Garden and explained that “Before we could earn a lot but now we cannot earn a lot because of the police, gangsters, violent clients, especially the police because they always want to arrest us and we have to pay them money.”

### **Homelessness**

Nimol, Ree, Sothea and Kung are homeless in Phnom Penh. Sleeping outside and not having a place to live incurs other expenses related to health, food and water. Ree was eight months pregnant at the time of the interview. Kung said that she “cannot earn enough” to meet basic living expenses. Sothea added, “I worry about my son's future, especially education. I don't have my own place to stay, last night I stayed in a public place without a roof.” She very much wants a mat to sleep on and a mosquito net. Nimol

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and her family – her mother, siblings, and her son – live under the eaves of the Railway Station in Phnom Penh. Nimol has HIV and is blind. Her eight-year-old daughter leads her around and does not attend school. Nimol’s neighbors, many of whom are also homeless, give her food.



**Outdoor residence at the Railway Station, Phnom Penh. Courtesy of Ama Marston.**

### **Remittances**

Many people in Cambodia contribute financially to their extended family. Those who leave their families and who find work in other places are generally expected to send remittances to their family. This is often a reason for migration from one’s home village. The older children in a family are expected to help support their younger siblings, and many women reported that their children lived with their extended families, sometimes while the women lived and worked in other places.

Sasah, who earns more from her foreign clients than the other women interviewed, sends \$200 to her relatives in the provinces every two months. “I send money to my relatives in the provinces so when I stop doing sex work I can go there and have a small business. I want to be a tailor.” Rin said, “I send 2000 or 3000 baht [\$50 - \$75] every month.”

Sasah and Rin send much more than most women reported sending. Smaller amounts are more typical. Bopha said, “I send home \$50 per month. When I arrived at this bar, I borrowed 100,000 riel [\$25] to send home. I am in debt to the owner now for 50,000 riel [\$12.50]. Pick sends 40,000 to 50,000 riel [\$10 - \$12.50] home each month. Pheap said, “I send 50,000 riel [\$12.50] home each month but for the past few months I sent no money. I could not send money because I didn’t have many clients and couldn’t earn any money.” When asked what this money is for, she replied, “I send money home for the education of my younger siblings. They are 17, 13 and 10 years old. Their education and food costs 8000 riel [\$2] each day.” Ny reported, “I don’t send home money every month, but maybe every other month I’ll send 100,000 riel [US \$25].” Pree explained that her parents could be suspicious if she sent a lot of money. “If I have money, I go to visit my family. I give them 40 or 50 thousand riel [\$10 – \$12.50]. My parents don’t know that I am a sex worker. I say I live with a grandmother and I help her to grow rice in Battambang.”

Remittances from one young, unskilled woman are not enough to support an extended family. Sarun said, “I send home 5000 riel or 10,000 riel [US \$12.50 or \$25] every few months. I know that this is not enough for my parents and two children, but my younger sister also sends money home. I don’t know how much, but it should be enough for them to survive.”

Akara described the changes in her remittance patterns. “I don’t send money to Kandal now. I used to send money to my mother who looked after my children, I used to send 4000 baht [US \$100] each month but now my older siblings can look after them. They pay for my children to go to school. I used to help them and now they look after my children.” “That house has a pump to bring water from the river to the house, they can earn money with this, so they are the water sellers. My siblings used to do this but now my children do it and they can earn 10,000 riel [US \$2.50] each day. That is enough to support them.” Other women reported sending less money home as their local expenses increase. Danee sent money to her family but has stopped because her expenses have increased. “Before, I used to send money home, but since my son started school I don’t send money home.”

Sex workers’ incomes are subject to a retrogressive dynamic, in which their income declines as they grow older. The women’s remittances and their standards of living are limited by their diminished earning capacity. In the worst cases, they are the recipients of funds from their families. Chanta explained, “I am old. I can’t earn money. No one is interested in me, so I ask my mother for money – she is a street cleaner.”

## **Access to health care and services**

There is no national health service in Cambodia. Most people pay for medical care directly when they are ill. This includes going to a pharmacy and telling the pharmacist their symptoms in order for the pharmacist to prescribe treatment. Health care is a for-profit industry and is out of reach for the destitute in Cambodia, including many sex workers who earn only subsistence level incomes. There are some clinics sponsored by

## STRUCTURAL STIGMATIZATION OF SEX WORKERS IN CAMBODIA

non-governmental organizations (NGOs); those targeting sex workers generally focus exclusively on gynecological matters and do not offer general health services. The Red Cross is exceptional in that it offers general health care.

Lina described having some of the symptoms common to rape survivors. “When I am sick, I go to the hospital and pay for the service by myself. Sometimes I ask a private doctor to treat me. I am often sick with dizziness with lack of sleep.” She added, “I went to the doctor. The doctor did well because I paid. If I had no money, he would not have taken care of me. So I try to earn more money in case I get sick. If not, no one will take care of me.”

Prenatal care for pregnant women in general is rare. Yan had received absolutely no prenatal care with her last pregnancy. She used to go to an NGO clinic, that she felt was very good, but “I never go since I’m pregnant. I heard that they charge money to check babies. I used to talk to the nurse and she said that they charge money.” Ree was eight months pregnant at the time of the interview but had had no prenatal care – “I didn’t know where to go, I didn’t ask and no one told me. But I haven’t had any problems.” One woman reported having received MCTC when she was pregnant to prevent the transmission of HIV to her child, but not other prenatal care.

Nimol was HIV+ and very ill. She has never had ARVs. She had been a sex worker in the Garden, but has gone blind and can no longer work. Her eight-year-old daughter led her around. She goes to a clinic where she feels that she is well treated. However, it costs 5000 riel [US \$1.25] each way to go there, and she does not have the money to go. She described taking medicine and vitamins given to her by the doctor at a hospital. “I go there very month. I can get medicine to treat my sickness and this includes multivitamins. ... I go there by myself [they do not pick her up]. The first time, my neighbor brought me to show me where to go.”

A number of different organisations offer free STI clinics for sex workers. Sex workers may be better served than most for this aspect of healthcare, but sorely lack access to general health care. Twenty-six of the 31 (84%) sex workers interviewed reported that they go to a clinic or that a doctor comes to their neighborhood at home or work free-of-charge, generally only for STI checks. Three more reported paying out of pocket for medical services. Two described going without health care during pregnancy – one because she didn’t know where to go and another because she had no money to pay for health care. Some NGOs compete for the same target population, often sex workers. Sasah explained that to attract sex workers and sometimes other people to attend the clinics, “They give small gifts like soap and toothpaste to those who check their health.”

Many sex workers described attending NGO clinics monthly. Sex workers in many parts of the country reported being able to find free clinics for STI care. Sarun said, “I know that in Phnom Penh there is a health center that is free for sex workers but I don’t know of any health center in Kompong Speu or if it would be free. I hope that there is a free health service in Kompong Speu. I cannot earn enough for food, so I can I spend on health?” There may be a health service that the interviewees who were new to the

province were unaware of. Pick is fortunate to live in an area where the clinic addresses general health issues. “They are very friendly and give us advice. ‘You have to use condoms when you have sex, and if you have problems, please come to the health center immediately – do not wait until it is serious.’” Pheap’s local clinic, on the other hand, has limited its focus to STIs. “Before at the health center, they did general health and STI checks. Now, it’s only STIs. I have no problems, so I haven’t asked them for any other kind of care.”

These clinics are generally very focused on STIs, and do not usually have the materials to offer other care. Ros said that at the clinic where she goes, “They are good but they don’t have enough medicine. They have medicine, but they don’t address some of our complaints. For example, if I say ‘I hurt here and here’ they say that’s normal and just give me paracetamol and vitamins.” The NGO clinicians that visit Yin’s workplace have a similar practice. “But if we have a flu or a cold, they have no medicine for us. The health check is free. There are no general health services – only STIs. I can buy condoms from the pharmacy. Three packets of four condoms costs 1000 real [25 cents].” Saoni reported that sometimes they have common remedies, “When we have a headache or the flu, if they have medicine for that they will give it to us. But they don’t always have medicine for general health. When they do, they give it to us.”

The women interviewed reported going to a pharmacy when they have more general complaints, particularly those that they do not deem serious. Bopha said, “When I have a headache or the flu, I buy medicine from the pharmacy.” Lin does the same, “When I feel sick, I buy medicine from the pharmacy.” Maly is clear about the division of labor between the clinic and the pharmacy. “If it’s not an STI, I go to buy medicine at the pharmacy.” Cham explained that both the clinics in Svay Pak only address STIs. “If I’m sick, I go to the pharmacy to buy medicine.”

Transportation to a clinic or hospital can be a prohibitive expense for subsistence-level sex workers. Brothel and bar owners sometimes pay up-front for transportation. Most insist on being repaid. Tidah said, “The owner pays for my transportation to the health center.” Akara explained that this is up to the individual owners. “I go to check my health every month and the owner pays for the transportation, but at number XXX, I had to pay her back.” Pagna reported, “If I go to the clinic, I have to pay 20 baht transportation.” She explained that the madam pays for the transport to the clinic and does not expect to be repaid for this because, “If the owner isn’t good and doesn’t give money for transportation, the NGO will blame her and say that the health check is free and she should pay for the transportation.” Rin said that the cost of transportation is minimal for the owner of a sex business: “She pays for the clinic transportation which we do not have to pay back because it isn’t expensive. It’s only 10 baht [25 cents] for transportation and one motorbike taxi can take three girls – so it is 20 baht [50 cents] for all the girls to go to the clinic.”

Other clinics send their own transportation to fetch sex workers. Ros said of the clinic that services sex workers in Trolockback, a suburb of Phnom Penh, “They have a truck to pick us up and if they pick us up at 10 am, we are back at noon.” An NGO also picks up

women from The Building neighborhood. One of the women who use this service reported taking her children to another service. “Every month they come to bring the girls from the Building to the clinic. They also offer health care to my husband. I brought my son to the National Hospital for Children.” Yin said, “An NGO come to do health checks every month. They come here to the bar to do this.” They do not offer general health care, only internal exams and STI checks. Saoni confirmed this. “The clinic comes here every month. They do blood tests and treat STIs. When we have a headache or the flu, if they have medicine for that they will give it to us. But they don’t always have medicine for general health. When they do, they give it to us.” There was concern about sanitary issues, particularly when a mobile clinic or a doctor goes to the bars and houses. Pree said, “They don’t clean it, they use a new one for each girl. They have many. They are metal and they are cleaned at [the NGO office],” about the speculums used for internal exams.

One NGO sends a doctor to the Railway Station neighborhood of Phnom Penh. Kan said that they will come at other times as well, apart from scheduled visits. “They took a car to collect people from this community to check their health. We can call them and they will come.”

### ***HIV/AIDS infection and ARV access***

Cambodia has one of the highest rates of HIV/AIDS infection in South-East Asia. There are an estimated 170,000 people living with HIV/AIDS in Cambodia. Among these people living with HIV/AIDS, many are sex workers. ARV treatment cost \$40-\$120 per month, per person at the end of 2005. Of the 170,000 people living with HIV/AIDS, currently only 5,500 receive ARV treatment [3%]. Of those people who do secure ARV treatment, lack of education and inadequate basic health infrastructure and discrimination from the health service often entails ARVs are taken incorrectly, leading to a detriment in health to the prescribed person and potentially to the creation of a multi-resistant virus.

Women’s Network for Unity pioneered an ARV access program for sex workers including strong health education and supervision of medicines. They successfully obtained ARV treatment for fifteen members in 2004. At the end of 2005, that number had increased to 22. The goal for 2006 is for 50 sex workers to receive ARV treatment.

### **Condom use and access**

Sex workers around the world describe using condoms at work to prevent HIV and STIs, but less frequently in their personal relationships. Ros said, “I use condoms with clients but never with my husband.” Pia reported that learning about HIV prompted her to use condoms. “When I was in Phnom Penh, I didn’t use condoms. In Takeo, I used them. At that time, I started using condoms when I heard about HIV infection.”

PSI, a social marketing company, makes condoms available at a low price in Cambodia. Women’s Network for Unity has peer educators and team leaders who sell condoms in



their neighborhoods. Despite this, Kan described that affordable condoms were not always easy to find. “The price of condoms has dropped, but it is still “hard to find condoms, there is only one place that sells condoms near the Garden where I work. Other places like pharmacies are too expensive. ... The condoms that are available at a low price are PSI’s Number One condoms, sold in packs of four for 300 riel [US 8 cents].” Sothea said, “It’s easy to find condoms but I don’t always have the money to buy them. One packet is 300 riel [US 8 cents]. I ask the client for money to buy them first.” This price is lower than what other women reported paying and may be harder to find.

Not everyone prefers to use the PSI Number One condoms. Sasah said, “I never bring condoms with me because my clients are foreigners and they bring their own modern condoms.” Chanta concurred, “Most of the time the client brings condoms.”

### ***Condom distribution by health services***

A number of NGO clinics distribute condoms to sex workers. Seng reported that the Red Cross was particularly generous, giving her 40 condoms every week. Ros said, “When I go to the clinic, some clinics give us condoms and if that’s not enough, the brothel owner buys more.” Devi said, “Sometimes I get condoms from the health center for free.” Yan gets free condoms from the hospital that distributes them in her area.

Not all clinics offer condoms. Bopha said, “The clinic doesn’t distribute condoms.” Pheap described a change in condom availability at her clinic. “They used to provide condoms, but in the last few months, they haven’t had any condoms.” At her location, the city of Pursat, some changes in services were attributed to new US funding restrictions.

### ***Condom supplies at work***

Some sex business employers make condoms available. Tidah said, “The owner buys the condoms from the pharmacy (PSI No 1). I don’t pay, but sometimes NGO staff distribute condoms to us.” Pagna said, “The owner gives money to the girls to buy condoms. It’s 45 baht [US \$ 1.12] for the box of 100.” Rin, at the same venue, confirmed, “The brothel owner buys condoms and we don’t have to pay for them.” They cost 40 baht [US \$1] for a box of 100. Ros also described a work situation in which the owner ensures that condoms are available. “When I go to the clinic, some clinics give us condoms and if that’s not enough, the brothel owner buys more. We don’t have to pay for them.”

Phirum said, “When I worked in a house [brothel] the owner provided condoms, and outside, the clients have them. If not, I bought them. Sometimes WNU distributes them.”

Bopha, a beer girl and a karaoke hostess, said, “The owner of the restaurant buys condoms from PSI. PSI brings them every month and if I need condoms, I just ask the owner. I don’t pay for them.” Maly also uses condoms provided by the owner of her workplace. “The owner of the house buys the condoms. I take them when I have clients.” Ny also works for someone who provides condoms. “The owner buys the condoms for us. He buys them from the pharmacy. When WNU comes, they give some. We don’t pay

for the condoms.” Lina confirmed, “The owner buys condoms and I take them if I need it.”

### ***Purchasing condoms***

Devi from Svay Pak said that she buys condoms from the secretariat member in Svay Pak, and that “Sometimes Kao Tha gives them to me for free.” Cham also buys condoms from Kao Tha. “I never buy from anyone else. ... Before I met WNU, 3 years ago, before then, I bought condoms from the pharmacy and it’s expensive.” Danee said, “It’s easy to get condoms because some girls sell condoms in the Garden, 500 riel [US 13 cents] per package of four of PSI’s Number One.”

Pick is a karaoke girl who sees clients outside the bar. “I have to buy condoms from the hotel or guesthouse. A packet of 4 PSI Number One condoms is 1000 riel [25 cents].” Prices seem to be higher at hotels than other places. Pheap works independently. “I buy condoms from [NGO across the street from her residence]. A box of 100 condoms costs 4000 riel [\$1].”

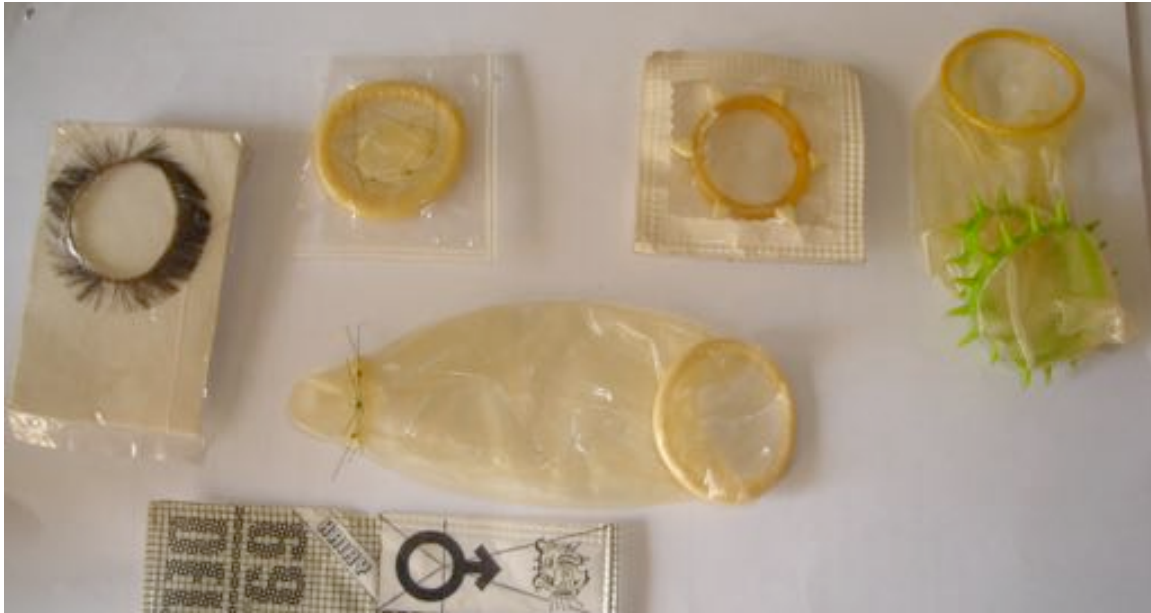
Yin said, “I can buy condoms from the pharmacy. Three packets of four condoms costs 1000 riel [25 cents].” Saoni said, “The owner buys them from another place and I buy them from the owner.” She gets twelve condoms for 1000 riel [25 cents]. Ree also buys her own condoms. “I can buy condoms near my workplace. Other places are expensive.” Sarun said, “I always buy condoms from the pharmacy and sometimes I get them from WNU. A small box of four is 500 riel [US 13 cents].” Pia also buys condoms, “I buy them from the pharmacy, where one box of 100 cost 5000 riel [US \$1.25]. It’s the same in Kompong Speu and Takeo.”

### ***Mandatory condom use***

One business mandated condom use and enforced this with condom counting and fines. Paree explained, “The owner also takes care of condoms. If a girl has four clients in a day, she takes four condoms. Then if there is someone who wants to see that there are four used condoms in her bin. If there are only three, she will be punished. It’s the way we protect our health.” The punishment is to be fined 60,000 riel [\$15, an enormous sum considering that this could be nearly a month’s earnings] and double that the next time. “Since we implemented the punishment system, only one person has been punished. No one else dares to do this.”

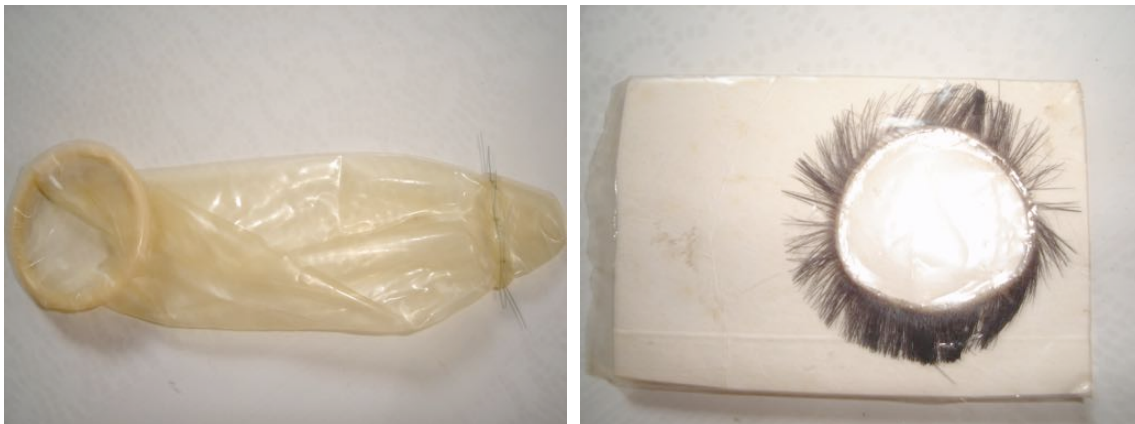
### ***Unsafe condoms***

Unsafe condoms are those with sharp bristles or spines coming from them, or which have had beads attached to them. These sadistic condoms cause pain to the receptive partner during sexual contact. Such condoms are available in Cambodia and rightly complained about when they are brought by condoms or used in rape. (Ditmore and Neth, 2006)



**Unsafe condoms. Courtesy of Womyn's Agenda for Change.**

The most hated of these are the “tiger’s mustache” condoms and rings, because the attached bristles are sharp and numerous.



**Condom and ring with bristles attached. Courtesy of Womyn's Agenda for Change.**

## **Violence and abuse by clients and others**

Sex workers reported very different experiences in different parts of the country. Sex workers in Phnom Penh face rape, particularly gang rape, at the extraordinary rate of 96% in 2005 (Jenkins 2006). This sample of 31 sex workers included 20, or 65%, who had experienced violence. Eleven, or 35% of sex workers interviewed, had been raped. The geographic patterns of violence shown in this data expose rape and gang rape as phenomena of the capital city, while in other places, for example Sisophon, a military town in the north of the country and near to the Thai border, sex workers reported almost

no violence at work. This information was corroborated by sex workers who used to live and work there and have relocated, by other sex workers not interviewed for this report, and by ancillary figures to the trade, including hotel owners and bar owners.

The same patterns of violence as described in Phnom Penh by Jenkins (2006) were reported by the sex workers interviewed: sex workers were frequently safe in their workplaces if they worked at an established venue. However, leaving an established venue for a hotel or other rendezvous outside the workplace was a vulnerable situation, in which more than the number of men contracted to be served might appear, or in which violence was more likely without the mitigating presence of colleagues and co-workers. A significant difference was that the sex workers interviewed in some other parts of the country were less likely to leave their workplaces with a client or to meet a client. These decisions were sometimes enforced by owners and managers directly in response to past violence.

A little-discussed feature of sex work in the developing world and elsewhere is that of men pooling their money and offering a sex worker a lump sum to see all of them, usually but not necessarily in sequence. Some sex workers accept such offers as a consensual arrangement. This is distinct from gang rape, which is an extreme act of violence and not in any way consensual.

### ***Sisophon***

Four women were interviewed in the red light area of Sisophon, and one reported having been raped. No other violence was reported by them. Rin said of being raped, “This place is safe but when we go someplace else, ... [describes rape by 2 or 3 men] and they took my money.” Akara explained, “Most girls don’t go out with clients so they don’t have any problems.”

### ***Pursat***

One of three women interviewed in Pursat City described having dealt with violence at work. Pick, a karaoke girl, said, “I have faced a situation when a client didn’t pay me after sex. And I have gone into the room and found three or four men but I begged them and they let me go.” She was fortunate to avoid what potentially could have been a gang rape situation. The description of going to the room and finding more people than she had been told is indicative of a situation outside the karaoke bar where she works, as there are no rooms for sexual commerce there.

### ***Krakor***

A karaoke bar in Krakor is owned by a policeman, and the two people interviewed there both explained that this contributes to the peaceful atmosphere. Saoni said, “Here we have the police who arrest anyone who is violent to the girls. The owner is a police officer so no one makes trouble here.”

A store and brothel has a different situation. Paree explained, “In 2004, the clients asked me to go out, and they took two girls. The owner came with us. When we got to the guesthouse, the owner said ‘you cannot go, there are many people there.’ Since then, the owner allows no one to go out.” One of the expenses at Paree’s workplace is paying the police. This unofficial ‘tax’ seems to have bought some service. “There are two groups of police – from Kompong Leung and from Pursat. When any problems happen, I can call the police to protect me. Last time, a group of gangsters came here to destroy everything and I called the police and they came and arrested the gangsters. The gangsters came to drink and then when they were drunk they beat the girls. That group of gangsters still wants revenge – that happened four days ago.”

### ***Kampot***

Lina, a sex worker in Kampot, described a harrowing rape. “I have faced violence, including gang rape in February 2005 in Kampot. One client asked me to have sex and we went far away to a field and nineteen people were waiting there. Only nine raped me. But fortunately they all used condoms.” She added, “The rest could not because one person in the group helped me. He tried to stop the other ten people from raping me and he let me run away from the group and they fought with each other.” Lina exhibits symptoms common to rape survivors. “It’s difficult to forget it, I’m a sex worker and I want to forget the rape but doing sex work something always reminds me and makes me remember this. I am still afraid.”

Ny said, “I never faced violence from a client. When I have clients, I stay in the house. I used to go outside but when I go to a guest house, I make sure to know the clients well.”

### ***Kompong Speu***

The two women working in Kompong Speu at the time of the interview had not experienced violence there. However, both reported violent experiences as sex workers in Phnom Penh, especially in the Garden.

### ***Phnom Penh***

Pia, who has left Phnom Penh for another part of the country, said “I worked as a sex worker in Phnom Penh for three years. In Phnom Penh, I faced many problems like gang rape, violence from clients, and some clients wouldn’t pay after having sex. Sometimes, they promised to give me 10,000 riel but in the end gave me only 2000 or 3000 riel and I couldn't do anything about this.”

### ***The Garden***

Sarun has left Phnom Penh, but used to work in the Garden. She described a typical set-up for gang rape. “On my first day, I was raped by ten people. One client came to ask and negotiate the price, and he took me to the outskirts and ten people were waiting and raped me. They took my clothes and I couldn't even find any clothes to wear to come back. They also threatened me with a gun and told me to keep silent and not cry. ... I begged them not to kill me, to let me live and return home.” She added, “I faced a lot of violence from clients. I had a client who ... beat me.” Sarun also described fear of gangsters. “I

never gave money to the police but I gave money to the gangsters. They stabbed a girl in the Garden, so I was afraid of them and gave them money.” She also described having been raped by 19 people, and escaping after nine of them had sex because one of them helped her. Since then, she described having classic trauma and rape survivor symptoms, including fear of doing sex work, and almost an inability to do anything that is associated with the trauma.

Ree, a sex worker from the Railway Station who works in the Garden, said “Three months ago I was raped in Pochentong [the area near the airport, seven miles from the center of Phnom Penh]. I didn't tell anyone, I didn't even tell my neighbors. It's useless to tell the police or anyone because it is over. It has already happened.”

Kung saw a violent client in 2005. WNU helped her to make a police report and to reach a settlement with the police and the client. She added, “Yesterday a client tried to take my money.”

Sothea reported a decline in her own experiences with violence. “Before, I had a lot of problems like violence from clients and gangsters – that still happens but it is reduced.”

Kan said, “In 2002 I was raped by a client and I didn't know that I could report this and I was afraid of the client and no one helped me.” She linked some violence to amphetamine (*yama*) use. “When clients use it, they take more time and the sex worker faces more violence from clients who use *yama*.”

### **The Building**

Seng, who lives at the Building and works at the Garden, said, “Some clients were also violent but some weren't violent and just didn't pay any money,” and, “For the past few months I cannot work in the Garden because of the gangsters there. I work in front of the pagoda and cannot earn much money. Those gangsters have a problem with another girl, a friend of mine. They always want revenge so they don't let us work there.”

### **Svay Pak**

Cham said, “some clients have slapped, kicked or beaten me.” Devi also reported having been beaten, saying, “he slapped me and beat me.” Maly reported that she had not dealt with violence, but had been threatened. “I haven't faced many difficulties in this place. Sometimes some clients don't pay and some have threatened me,” and that some clients had stolen money from her and used this to “pay” for her services.

### **Trolockback**

Ros said, “I have never dealt with violence because I never go far away with clients. I always stay close by. When I go outside the brothel, I only go with old men, I am scared of young men.”

## **Police response to violence against sex workers**

Most sex workers reported not attempting to report violence to the police, especially in Phnom Penh. However, some sex workers who paid the police either regularly or for one-time assistance and those who have personal relationships with the police report that they can be helpful. Others have described assistance from NGOs. Sex workers in Pursat province, including Krakor, had the most success with the police and the most formal relationships.

Cham of Svay Pak has chosen not to report violence to the police. "Some clients have slapped, kicked or beaten me. ... My neighbors know that I'm a sex worker and I don't want to make trouble. They would blame me for the violence. ... I don't want to interrupt others with a police investigation. It's small violence and not big violence so I decided to be patient." Devi, also from Svay Pak, said, "I don't dare complain to the police. They will not help and furthermore they will blame me."

Ree, a sex worker from the Railway Station who works in the Garden, said "Three months ago I was raped in Pochentong. I didn't tell anyone, I didn't even tell my neighbors. It's useless to tell the police or anyone because it is over. It has already happened. ... I didn't remember his face, so I know the police cannot catch him." I asked if she thinks the police would help and she said, "No, I have no money."

Sothea, from the Railway Station, said, "I never reported violence, I think it is useless because the police won't find justice for me and even worse, I'd have to pay money to file a complaint."

Yan is from the Building and works in the Garden. She said, "I never reported violence to the police. If I tell them, they won't help me. I know if we give them money they'll help but if we don't have money, no way! My friend used to report [violence] to the police but they never helped."

Sarun was equally pessimistic about seeking assistance from the police. She added, "I faced a lot of violence from clients. I had a client who ... beat me. At that time I wanted to complain to the police but I didn't know where is the police station. If I complain to the police, they won't come, they only want money."

Danee works in the Garden and in a bar. She has experienced client violence and said, "I complained to the police but they didn't do anything for me because I didn't have any money to pay them."

Seng, who lives near the Building and works in the Garden, said, "Some clients were also violent but some weren't violent and just didn't pay any money. I never reported this to the police because the police always want to arrest us. They'll say 'you girls always make problems.' "

Chanta, an orange seller in the Garden, said, "Just December 10 [two weeks before the interview] one officer pissed on my body and tried to strangle me. No one helped me –

my friends were far away. There were three policemen. I complained to the other policemen nearby but they pretended not to know.”

Pia attempted to report violence to the police, to no avail. “I used to complain to the police, but the police said ‘you are a sex worker, it is your job.’ The police looked down on me and laughed at me, and that is why I left Phnom Penh.” She explained that sometimes turning to the police for help led to police violence. “I faced violence from the police in Phnom Penh. When gangsters tried to rape me, I asked for help from the police, but the police insulted me and beat me and didn’t help me.”

Kung, of Phnom Penh, eloquently assessed the problem, saying, “I want the police to really do their job, without corruption. It’s useless if they arrest people and release them when they pay money.”

Sex workers outside Phnom Penh were equally dismissive. Akara of Sisophon said, “The police wouldn’t help.” Pagna, also from Sisophon, said, “I don’t know if the police could help.” Rin did not believe that the police would be able to help her after she was raped in Sisophon. “I didn’t complain to the police, I don’t know their faces, all I know is these guys were from Battambang province.”

Lina, of Kampot, did not report a brutal rape to the police. “I didn’t complain to the police because I think that they cannot find those people. And I don’t think that the police would help me because the police are only interested in money. If we have money, they will help us.”

Sex workers at the two interview sites in Krakor, either worked in a bar owned by an officer or paid the police through the owner of their workplace. Both venues were reported to have success reporting difficulties to the police. Yin said that she felt safer working for a police officer than in other venues. Saoni explained, “Here we have the police who arrest anyone who is violent to the girls. The owner is a police officers so no one makes trouble here.” Patee, who pays the police monthly, described an incident when the police were called. “There are two groups of police – from Kompong Leung and from Pursat. When any problems happen, I can call the police to protect me. Last time, a group of gangsters came here to destroy everything and I called the police and they came and arrested the gangsters. The gangsters came to drink and then when they were drunk they beat the girls. ... The police came from Kompong Leung and from Pursat. But the police from Kampong Leung came first – it’s much closer, only five minutes away.”

Ny has a similar relationship with the police in Kampot, but has not had to call on them for assistance. “I know that if it was a serious problem, I’d call the police. But if it were a simple case, I would not. I believe that if I call the police, they’ll come immediately, because the owner always contacts the police and gives them money. The police get 50,000 riel [\$12.50] from the owner and the girls have to give 5000 riel [\$1.25] per month to the PM. PM is another kind of police, but they can help us whenever we ask. So



we have to give money to two different kinds of police – the official police and the PM. The owner also charges from the girls to pay the police.”

Ann, who lives at the Building, said, “ I had violence from clients when I’d leave the parlor. I reported it to the police and they helped me. They advised the client not to do this again. I promised to give money to the police – 5000 riel [US \$1.25].”

Ros, who works in the Trolockback area just outside Phnom Penh, said, “One time, I saw a girl cheated by an owner, he kept more than half of the money, so that girl went to the police and they helped her and punished the owner.” She added that this is not a reliable strategy. “I have a friend at another brothel and it was hard for them there. The owner there cheats them and is tricky. No one helps them.”

### ***NGO assistance reporting violence and abuse***

Kung said that she hasn’t complained to the police herself, but that when she saw a violent client in 2005, she told WNU and they helped her to make a police report. In the end, the client paid 150,000 riel [US \$37.50] and she split this with the police. She kept 75,000 riel [US \$18.37]. Another NGO has helped her, the Women’s Crisis Center (WCC). “WCC gave me a place to stay, to avoid the vengeful client.”

Kan, who lives at the Railway Station and works in the Garden, said, “In 2002 I was raped by a client and I didn’t know that I could report this and I was afraid of the client and no one helped me.” Phirum said that she never reported violence to police or NGOs but that she may try as WNU has explained her rights to her.

Ros described the difficulties enlisting support from advocates when dealing with abuse and reporting to police. “I have a friend at another brothel and it was hard for them there. There owner there cheats them and is tricky. No one helps them. I couldn’t say anything. Even the NGOs know about this but they do nothing. [Name of NGO] knows about this but they are scared to and only do health outreach. They say it’s not their job, they only educate about STIs and condoms. ... [The NGO] only does health work and not empowerment to demand our rights.”

## **Abuse and violence by police**

### ***Police violence***

Reports of police violence only involved incidents in Phnom Penh. Pia described a situation in which reporting violence was a prelude to police violence. “I faced violence from the police in Phnom Penh. When gangsters tried to rape me, I asked for help from the police, but the police insulted me and beat me and didn’t help me.”

Sarun, who now lives in Kompong Speu, said that in Phnom Penh, “The police used to be my clients, and it was the same. It was gang rape. It would be only one, and then when we get to the guest house, there would be five policemen there.”

Chanta is an orange seller in the Garden, who said, “Violence has increased, especially from the police. The police look down on sex workers in the Garden and treat us like animals. Just December 10 [2005] one officer pissed on my body and tried to strangle me. No one helped me – my friends were far away. There were three policemen. I complained to the other policemen nearby but they pretended not to know.” She added that police abuse is not limited to violence, saying, “Sometimes the police steal money from us.”

Seng lives at the Building and works in the Garden. She said, “The police used to fight and beat me.” She also described sexual situations and theft of services. “Two police asked me to go with them but I said no because police never paid me. Sometimes the police tried to arrest us but I escaped by running to the temple.”

Phirum, from Phnom Penh, reported that police extorted \$20 from her (an enormous sum for a street-based sex worker in Phnom Penh) under threat of being sent to a rehabilitation program. Rehabilitation is akin to imprisonment but worse, because while freedom of movement is curtailed as in prison, there is no clear sentence and so rehabilitation can endure for years on end. (One other interviewee referred to rehabilitation. She had been sent to an island far from her home and forced to work on a farm for two years before her release.)

Sothea also reported paying the police. “When I worked in the Garden and saw the police, I’d have to pay 1000 or 2000 riel (25 or 50 cents). If I had no money, I had to escape or run away.”

### ***Arrest as a form of abuse***

Sex workers described arrest as a form of violence. It is clearly an opportunity for extortion by the police. Sex work is not illegal at present in Cambodia, and so police who arrest sex workers are effectively either enforcing local morality or creating opportunities for bribes and extortion. Arrest and almost any unsupervised involving law enforcement and sex workers is an opportunity for sexual, physical or other misconduct including violence against sex workers and bribery and extortion.

Phnom Penh was the site with the most abuses reported. Chanta, who works in the Garden in Phnom Penh, said, “The police often arrest us.” Yan, who also works in the Garden, said, “I was arrested twice but the police were never violent with me. The arrested me in the Garden for doing sex work.” Danee, who also lives and works in Phnom Penh, said, “Uniformed police used to come to arrest us, but now the police come undercover. If they arrest you, you have to pay 5000 riel [US \$1.25].” Ann has stopped doing sex work because it became too dangerous and difficult. “I haven’t worked as a sex worker again. I want to go out at night to earn money but I’m afraid of the police and gangsters. I’d like to earn money at night but it could bring a lot of problems.” Seng confirmed that in Phnom Penh “the police always want to arrest us.” Kung reported that in 2003 she was arrested and sexually harassed by the police. She was made to take off

her clothes and made to chew condoms and keep them in her mouth, to stand in front of a mirror while they used rulers to poke and point at her.

This problem is not limited to Phnom Penh. One woman who had worked in Takeo said that while she was there, “the police tried to arrest me but I have always escaped. They say that we are a problem for society and make trouble and encourage others to be bad, too.”

## **Drug use**

The most talked about drug in Cambodia is *yama* or “crazy medicine”. It is an amphetamine, and is often adulterated with additional substances that contribute to “crazy” behavior. Eight women said that they had no information about *yama*. One of these eight women was reputed by other sex workers to be a big user of *yama*. Other interviewees shared a great deal of information. A small number of sex workers described self-medicating with alcohol. Lina said, “Sometimes I drink palm wine when I have problems.”

*Yama* is sold in tablet form and smoked. Phirum, a former heavy user of *yama*, described the drug’s appearance. “*Yama* comes in different colors, orange, dark brown, another one is red. Sometimes they have [the letter Y, which she drew on the table instead of using the word for – she does not speak or read English] on them. Dark brown is the strongest and orange is weakest.” The tablets come in different colors, some say that the colors correlate to strength. Pick described the way people smoke *yama*: “They put the *yama* on a piece of plastic and burn it while sucking the smoke through a straw.”

It is widely but not universally available, and is produced in some parts of the country. It was reported to be produced at Phnom Bat, near the Thai-Cambodia border not far from Sisophon, and at Anlong Veng, in the remote far north of Cambodia near the Laos-Cambodia border. More *yama* has at times come from Thailand than is produced in Cambodia, depending on police activity on both sides of the border. One interviewee explained that the drugs sold in her area, “Those drugs come from the Lao border, at Anlong Veng. The Thai-Khmer border is closed to drugs – there are more police there now – so the drug trade has changed.”

*Yama* was reported to be cut with paracetamol sometimes in the production stage and sometimes at the time of use. Pree explained, “I know how to make another kind of *yama*. ... We cut it with two tablets of paracetamol to stretch it. I learned from my friend who used to do this.” Kung said, “For people without money to buy *yama*, they take paracetamol, and they use it the same way as *yama*. They smoke it. One of my neighbors injects it.”

## **By sex workers**

Six sex workers discussed using *yama* themselves. More people have probably used *yama* than discuss *yama* because drug use is stigmatised and therefore some people are

wise to not discuss their own use. Indeed, one woman interviewed who said that she did not use *yama* reported few expenditures and a healthy income, but had very little savings or clothing and described selling her clothes, which is done by the desperate including people who want to buy drugs but have no money. She had traveled to places where *yama* was reputedly produced.

*Yama* offers a temporary burst of energy. Pia explained that there are good reasons for sex workers to use *yama*. “Other sex workers I know use it, because it can help you have sex for a long time, and the girl is tired so *yama* helps to have sex. It makes them happy and stop thinking about problems they have.” Others concur. Phirum said, “I used to use *yama*. My friend told me to use *yama* to be able to work if I am sick.” Ros from Phnom Penh’s Trolockback suburb, explained that as an upper, *yama* makes people more energetic. “The girls say that in some brothels the owner makes them use *yama* to wake up and work harder to solicit clients. They girls say that when they use *yama* when they are not well, it makes them feel better.”

Kan used *yama* in grief. She used *yama* for three days only, in 2003, after her husband died of HIV. “I used to use *yama* but I used it when I was worried about my family or my job or with my broken heart, not to get energy. I used it for three days but it was expensive, so I smoked cigarettes instead, because they were less expensive.”

Yan said, “I’ve tried it a few times now. I don’t know where to buy it but my neighbor shares it. Sometimes I give them 1000 or 2000 riel [US 25 or 50 cents]. I’ve only used it three or four times. At first I wanted to taste it.”

Ann started using *yama* in 2004. Her husband doesn’t use *yama*. “At first, I just saw them smoking and they invited me to try it, saying ‘Try it, you won’t die,’ so I did. My house is near people who use *yama* and when I smell it, I think it is delicious. I’m still using it. I feel happy and relaxed and I don’t worry about anything when I smoke it. I use it every day, at least one tablet and if I have money I use two.”

Seng said, “I use *yama*. ... I use very little, only half a tablet. I use about one tablet per week.”

Akara said, “I used to use *yama* and I could control it. I saw many of them use it and I saw the results. They sell everything, even their clothes.”

### ***Regional availability and use of yama***

Drug use and prices are determined in part by availability and so vary by region. Sarun said, “I don’t know about *yama*. I heard about it in Phnom Penh. I haven’t seen it in Kompong Speu.” Use of *yama* was reputed to be high in Sisophon, close to a place where the drug is made, and close to the Thai border, where drugs have at times come into Cambodia. Sisophon is also relatively close to Anlong Veng, another place where *yama* was reportedly produced. Akara explained, “Here, many people use *yama*. The biggest problem in Sisophon is drug use among sex workers. They spend a lot of money

on the drug.” Rin, also from Sisophon, said, “Many people use *yama* in the house. Most clients ask for *yama*. For other girls, if a client asks, they will buy it. Me, no, I’m afraid of the police.”

Prices of *yama* vary regionally. Akara linked prices to market forces. “Before, when there were many dealers, it cost 55 – 60 baht [US \$1.40 – 1.50]. Since the police arrested the other sellers, only one dealer is left – and that is at House XXX. Now it is 100 – 150 baht [US \$2.50 – 3.75]. That lady sells *yama* to all the brothels.”

Paree said, “I know that if we buy it near the Thai border, it’s 30 baht [about 75 cents]. In Phnom Penh, it’s 40 baht [about one dollar]. But that’s last year’s price, I don’t know the price now.” This corresponds with the reports that most *yama* was imported from Thailand and that one of the few manufacturing locations was near the Thai border. Lina explained, “In Sihanoukville, it’s only 3000 riel [75 cents]. In Kompong Chnang, it’s 5000 [US \$1.25] riel. When I arrived in Kampot, I didn’t hear about *yama*. It’s different from one place to another.” Ny said, “I know that it costs 8000 – 12000 riel [US \$2 - \$3] in Kampot.

Ros, just outside Phnom Penh, described rising prices. “Now it costs 8000 riel [\$2] for one tablet. It used to cost 5000 riel [\$1.25].”

Buying directly from a dealer is generally cheaper than the cost of paying someone else to procure *yama*. Phirum said, “I can buy it in my area [the railway station of Phnom Penh] – the dealer is a person in my neighborhood.” It costs 5000 riel [US \$1.25] per tablet. Kung, who purchases *yama* for others in order to make a small profit herself, said that in Phnom Penh it costs 6000 riel [US \$1.50] for a tablet. Ann from the Building area of Phnom Penh said, “The cost is \$3. It was 6000 riel [US \$1.50] but the price has increased.” She buys *yama* from “the home of a rich person.” Seng, from the same neighborhood, said, “My roommate buys it. I never buy it myself.” She reported that “It costs 7000 riel per tablet, sometimes 8000 riel [US \$1.75 to 2].”

Yin works in a karaoke bar owned by a police officer in Krakor, in Pursat province. She said, “The owner says that if anyone uses *yama* – clients or girls – he will arrest them.” Her colleague Saoni corroborated this. Paree also works in Krakor. She explained that *yama* is not common there, but that she became familiar with *yama* in Phnom Penh. “I used to see *yama* in Phnom Penh – my husband is in Phnom Penh. But here, no one uses it. If a client uses it, then the owner will tell the police to arrest anyone who uses *yama*.” Paree said, “I know that if we buy it near the Thai border, it’s 30 baht [about 75 cents]. In Phnom Penh, it’s 40 baht [about one dollar]. But that’s last year’s price, I don’t know the price now.”

### ***By clients, police and others***

The two locations where *yama* was most discussed were Sisophon and Phnom Penh’s Railway Station neighborhood. One brothel in Sisophon was known to sell *yama*, but it seemed that many brothels were able to provide *yama*. Akara worked in two brothels in

Sisophon: “*Yama* attracts the girls to the other houses. For the old house, the girls got one or two tablets of *yama*, so they thought of nothing and enjoyed it. The woman keeps all the money they make then. The girls are now becoming dependent on *yama*. The owner can earn a lot selling *yama* to clients, and then the girls smoke it with the clients. If the brothel doesn’t sell *yama*, there aren’t as many clients. Our house sells only a little *yama*. Most buy it outside. The owner doesn’t sell it.”

Kung described the common phenomenon known in many drug situations of one person paying another to bring the drugs to them. “I know where to buy it and sometimes they ask me to get it. They don’t know where to get it. I get it near Phsar Chhar. When I buy it for them, they pay me 1000 riel or 1500 riel [US 25 to 38 cents].” She added that there is less drug use now at the railway station because, “they don’t have money now so I don’t buy it for them. ... Most people at the Railway Station use it, the whole community, not just sex workers. Almost all of them use it. Not frequently, just when they have money then they will buy it.” She went on that there is not a lot of addiction to *yama* because they don’t have money often enough to develop a dependency. Some sex workers report being concerned with becoming dependent on drugs.

Kung offered a great deal of information about *yama* and the use of other drugs. “I’ve never used *yama* but most shepherds at the railway station use *yama* and I know where to buy it and sometimes they ask me to get it. They don’t know where to get it. I get it near Phsar Chhar. When I buy it for them, they pay me 1000 riel or 1500 riel [US 25 to 38 cents].”

Pia explained that *yama* use is common among clients. “Most clients are middle class and usually use *yama* before sex. They use one tablet. They ask me to use it, too, but I decline because I worry that it will destroy my health.”

Pick said, “When I see clients, some smoke *yama*. One asked me to try it but I said no because I heard [from a public service announcement on television] that it’s not good. I don’t know if it will make me feel good although the client says it will.”

Lin told us about a client who did not want sex but instead wanted company while he did *yama*. “One time I went with a client and he asked me to take a tablet. I asked him ‘what is the medicine for?’ and he told me it was to give me energy. I wanted to take it. He said ‘stupid girl – don’t you know it is *yama*?’ He smoked it and I watched. At first, he asked me to have sex, but then he smoked *yama* and he sent me home without having sex. He paid me and accompanied me back. He used three tablets of *yama*. He invited me to try it but I heard it is addictive [from a public service announcement on TV] so I declined. How can I take it if I can’t earn enough to support my family. If I take it and become addicted, I can’t earn any money for anything.”

### ***Drug related arrests***

Police arrest sellers of *yama*, but this seems to focus on small-scale sales rather than larger businesses. Rin said, “The police often arrest the seller, not the buyer. If we buy it

and give it to the client, the police will arrest the girl. The owner pays money to the police and they release her.”

Ann told her own story of arrest. “I was arrested when I bought *yama* for the retail sellers but I kept it in another place so the police couldn’t find it. They kept me in jail for one night and then released me because they had no evidence. After that, I stopped using *yama* for two months. My friend who bought *yama* and was arrested in December 2005 is still in prison. [The interview took place over a month later.] She has a child and an NGO is looking after her child because she has HIV. This was the first time she bought *yama*. I pity her. Why don’t the police arrest the stakeholders?”

Akara said, “I used to use *yama* and I left the other place because if I was arrested for selling *yama* that would be a real problem.” She explained why she was so worried about an arrest at her earlier workplace. “House number XXX on the strip – the owner is the person who sells *yama*. Her relatives also sold *yama*, but the police arrested her family and not her. She can get information for the police, she has a relationship with the police. I used to live there so I know everything. I just moved to the new house one month ago. She’s like a wholesaler.”

Personal relationships with the police, usually based on offering money, drugs, or information, were reported to constrain arrests. One interviewee in Sisophon said, “Khmer police are crazy. ... The police make no problems for me because the owner pays them and they use *yama*. ... The police even saw the *yama* and [house number] XXX and pretended not to know.” Akara explained that law enforcement practices around drug sales were partly determined by the incumbent governor. “In Sisophon, it has just changed. The governor just changed. I don’t know if the new governor will be the same. The old one was here for one year. He did well arresting drug sellers but I don’t know if the new one will be as good. In 2004, the previous governor [before the one who just left] sold *yama* in public like other goods, in a basket on the road. It was cheap, 40 – 45 baht [US \$1 to \$1.10].”

### ***Violence and drugs***

Jenkins 2006 describes sex workers were more vulnerable to violence when they used drugs. Kan agreed, saying “Yes, they are more vulnerable when they use drugs. Sometimes they [users] destroy everything in the house and they have problems with clients.” “When clients use it, they take more time and the sex worker faces more violence from clients who use *yama*.” Kung described violence from people who wanted money to pay for drugs. “For the girls, when they use *yama*, they don’t bother others. But men who use it and can’t get the money to buy it, they bother the women in the Garden and ask for 500 riel [US 13 cents] from each. If she doesn’t give it, they slap the sex workers.”

Phirum blamed her experiences with violence in part her own irritability and paranoia when she was a heavy user of *yama*. “I was more vulnerable to violence from police and clients.” She offered a good description of paranoia without using the word paranoia. “I

feel better now. Before [when regularly using *yama*] I always felt angry with others, I imagined bad things – that people would beat me or fight with me. I thought everyone was not generous but instead was cruel to me. Even in my dreams, I dreamed only bad things, not good things.”

The police often seek informants, and those who offer information to the police are not liked. One member of WNU described fear of violence or revenge from people who use or sell drugs preventing her from bringing up the topic at meetings. “Sometimes I want to bring this up at meetings but I’m afraid. Afraid of members’ revenge when I go home, that they’d beat me. I raised the issue at one monthly meeting and then they said, ‘I didn’t take your money to buy it, why did you say this?’” She added, “I want to stop them from using drugs but I dare not – I’m afraid of everyone, especially if I inform on them to the police.” Rin said, “Police used to ask me to find a place with *yama* and drug users, but I was afraid and denied any knowledge.”

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

The issues that contribute to difficulty in the lives of sex workers are not unique to sex workers, and structural changes that would assist and empower sex workers would benefit many other people.

Financial hardship is the foremost reason people enter the sex industry. High-interest rate loans lead to landlessness among rural people, and consequently to urban migration. Debt relief and low- or no-interest lending is recommended.

Education costs are prohibitive for the urban poor. This lack of education creates an urban underclass that contributes to continuing poverty and drives some people to turn to sex work for income. Many sex workers support extended families, including school fees for their siblings. It is simply untenable for one unskilled and uneducated to support a family, particularly a large family.

Health care is woefully inadequate and out of reach for the poor. The healthcare that is provided targets too few people and offers too few services to achieve good general health among sex workers and the general population.

The structure of the labor market, with fees paid for introductions to employers by new hires in most occupations, contributes to debt and exploitation of impoverished and vulnerable people. Women and girls leaving home for the first time in order to find work to support their families are especially vulnerable to deception and coercion in the sex industry. Education and greater employment opportunities can combat this.

Violence, including rape and gang rape, is at epidemic levels against sex workers. Rule of law is absent in Cambodia, and there is a reasonable perception that police will be unhelpful unless they are paid directly by people seeking to press a claim, and then only if other parties do not outbid their price. Police enforce perceived sexual morality against prostitution rather than the law, taking opportunity for extortion of money and sex from



## STRUCTURAL STIGMATIZATION OF SEX WORKERS IN CAMBODIA

impoverished women. The establishment of rule of law is critical to respect for human rights by society in general and law enforcement in particular.

Empowerment and self-determination are key to each of these issues. Empowerment has been identified by Women's Network for Unity (WNU), the only sex worker-run organisation in Cambodia, as the strongest strategy for the improvement of sex workers' lives at individual and collective levels. UNAIDS best practices programs reflect this, as does the successes WNU has had expanding access to health care, ARVs, condoms and other services. However, global forces including US funding restrictions prevent this strategy from being adopted by many service organisations that address sex work in Cambodia.<sup>3</sup> This undermines efforts by sex workers and others to address their primary concerns at the same time as it contributes to stigma and discrimination against sex workers. Empowerment and self-determination are key to promoting the health and human rights of sex workers in Cambodia and elsewhere.

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<sup>3</sup> Part II of this report explains this further.

## **Part II: The History of Women's Network for Unity**

Women's Network for Unity (WNU) is a grassroots collective that encompasses sexual minorities, who are mainly engaged in sex work, and works actively for the *empowerment* of these groups to fight HIV/AIDS, violence, and discrimination. WNU was called in June 2000 by Cambodian sex workers (transgenders, men who have sex with men, lesbians, and direct and indirect female sex workers) to work together to voice their concerns and sufferings and advocate for changes that would improve their lives to Members of Parliament and the Ministry of State. In late 2002, the workers collectively decided that the existing representative structure, with local NGOs providing the conduit for advocacy, was not adequately representing their interests.

At the end of 2002, a meeting of over 160 males, transgender, lesbians and female sex workers was held in order to vote and recruit 7 secretariat members to work on behalf of WNU and work for representatives from the workers groups themselves. Aims included building network capacity, dignity and justice and reducing violence, discrimination and HIV/AIDS infection. Further aims included promoting the human rights and civil liberties of sex workers, and to demand recognition as workers with a right to earn a living from our bodies, as opposed to symbols of oppression. From that time the WNU has worked with the target groups (men who have sex with men, transgenders, lesbians, female sex workers) to outreach, educate, share ideas and discuss the collective challenges they face, and do advocacy for human rights and to reduce discrimination, violence, and for the right to protect and represent themselves. The WNU is the first sex worker organization in Cambodia and there are over 5000 members from 13 Provinces and Phnom Penh. The network has made significant achievements since its inception in 2000; the network is strengthened in confidence and capacity, and has established a well-built solidarity with a strong, united voice. The WNU has been registered with the Ministry of Interior since June 2004.

After three years of organizing together, the members have progressively moved towards more empowerment, strength and solidarity. Their increased confidence enables them to help each other in solving common problems and become one voice towards a better future, better living conditions, and improved health. The network focuses on building solidarity, assertiveness and self-empowerment among the community of sex workers, one of the few successful proven strategies to minimize HIV/ AIDS. The network provides a space for women to come together, share ideas and discuss the challenges they face and how to solve them collectively. Using this method of collective organising, the network has made significant achievements since its inception in 2000 - sex workers have improved their attitudes to healthcare and approaches to HIV/AIDS prevention; improved their client negotiation skills; gained the courage to speak out about their problems; gained assertiveness and confidence; and engaged in information sharing with their friends and peers following workshops on HIV/AIDS and sex workers' rights. Together they have achieved solidarity and the collective strength that comes from one voice. They have a thorough understanding of the value, importance and worth of their lives, and the importance of HIV/AIDS prevention.

Recent accomplishments include raised awareness to over 5000 sex workers in Cambodia about the unethical and inequitable drug trial on tenofovir and the mobilization of sex workers to express their voices on this issue (Kao Tha et al 2004). WNU presented this information to the International Conference on HIV/AIDS in August 2006, to a greatly appreciative audience of researchers and advocates. Further accomplishments include participation in the drafting of the National Policy on Reproductive Health, campaigns for access to ARVs (Medecines Sans Frontieres have as a result allocated special slots to the WNU), and campaigns against discrimination in the health service towards gays, lesbians, transgenders and sex workers. Strong links have been established with the Asia-Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW), and voluntary solidarity groups have been established to care for sex workers dying of AIDS.

### ***WNU and global forces***

Women's Network for Unity's history has been affected by outside forces at every stage. The origins of WNU are surprisingly tied up with US politics and WNU continues to be strongly affected by US politics. WNU began organising sex workers with support from 12 NGOs in Phnom Penh in 1999. These organisations supported WNU's mission of sex worker empowerment and for WNU to register as a separate organization, including the election of a seven-member secretariat. Five organisations withdrew their support in late 2002, days before WNU's first secretariat election. The withdrawal of support coincided with the receipt of a cable signed by Colin Powell, Secretary of State of the United States, to all US Agency for International Development field officers and grant recipients. This cable stated that

"ORGANIZATIONS ADVOCATING PROSTITUTION AS AN EMPLOYMENT CHOICE OR WHICH ADVOCATE OR SUPPORT THE LEGALIZATION OF PROSTITUTION ARE NOT APPROPRIATE PARTNERS FOR USAID ANTI-TRAFFICKING GRANTS AND CONTRACTS, OR SUB-GRANTS AND SUB-CONTRACTS"

Cambodia is dependent on foreign aid and support from various international and local NGOs was withdrawn immediately. Just before WNU held its first election, secretariat candidates received harassing telephone calls from NGO personnel discouraging them from organising and registering as a separate organisation. Some callers identified themselves and others refused to identify themselves.

WNU's mission of empowerment for sex workers was seen as inimical to new USAID funding restrictions. WAC/WNU declined a grant from Family Health International (FHI) in light of this new policy. Later, USAID organisational HIV-prevention and anti-trafficking grant and sub-grant recipients were required to have a written policy opposing sex work. This limitation was amended into the text of the act which allocated PEPFAR funds:

(f) LIMITATION. -- No funds made available to carry out this Act, or any

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amendment made to this Act, may be used to provide assistance to any group or organization that does not have a policy explicitly opposing prostitution and sex trafficking.

These policies have strongly and adversely affected WNU in its relationships with other organisations.

On May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2005, Ambassador Randall Tobias, Global AIDS Coordinator of the United States, told the CDC to refrain from applying this new rule (Brown 2005). The Federal Register was corrected on May 24, 2005, to stipulate that

“The U.S. Government is opposed to prostitution and related activities, which are inherently harmful and dehumanizing, and contribute to the phenomenon of trafficking in persons.

“Any entity that receives, directly or indirectly, U.S. Government funds in connection with this document (“recipient”) cannot use such U.S. Government funds to promote or advocate the legalization or practice of prostitution or sex trafficking. Nothing in the preceding sentence shall be construed to preclude the provision to individuals of palliative care, treatment, or post-exposure pharmaceutical prophylaxis, and necessary pharmaceuticals and commodities, including test kits, condoms, and, when proven effective, microbicides. A recipient that is otherwise eligible to receive funds in connection with this document to prevent, treat, or monitor HIV/AIDS shall not be required to endorse or utilize a multisectoral approach to combating HIV/AIDS, or to endorse, utilize, or participate in a prevention method or treatment program to which the recipient has a religious or moral objection. Any information provided by recipients about the use of condoms as part of projects or activities that are funded in connection with this document shall be medically accurate and shall include the public health benefits and failure rates of such use.

“In addition, any recipient must have a policy explicitly opposing prostitution and sex trafficking. The preceding sentence shall not apply to any “exempt organizations” (defined as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, the World Health Organization, the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative or to any United Nations agency).”

This policy has also led to the isolation of Women’s Network for Unity (WNU), a Cambodian sex workers group that uses the slogan “Don’t talk to me about sewing machines, talk to me about workers rights” to emphasize the need to address working conditions within the sex industry. Their voices—incompatible with an abolitionist stance that is unable to accommodate the idea of better conditions within the sex industry as a valid human rights issue—have been ignored by US policy makers. At the beginning of 2003, the organizations with which WNU worked for three years no longer supported WNU, due to fear that supporting a sex workers’ organization with an empowerment agenda will jeopardize their American funding. Now, in 2006, only five of the original supporters remain unsupportive and uncooperative. However, this includes some of the largest international NGOs in Cambodia and in the world.

### ***WNU and local prejudices***

WNU members face isolation as individuals as well as organizationally. In the second half of 2005, plans were made to start a national network of men who have sex with men (MSM). This network was planned by five women who work with NGOs that receive USAID funding and two foreign men. Outreach workers were hired to recruit members for the new network.

In December 2005, two outreach workers were fired from their positions specifically because they reached out to MSM members of WNU. They were later reinstated in different capacities with the stipulation that they have nothing further to do with WNU. The saddest part of this is that reaching out to WNU would be the most efficient way to build this network because WNU is the organization with the largest number of MSM participants in Cambodia. WNU remains isolated and those who lose out are both the organizations that do not embrace the largest grassroots organization in the nation and those who would benefit from the services and information offered only to those who have nothing to do with WNU. This is a manifestation of the way US funding restriction have been used to discriminate against sex workers and against a specific organization, in contravention of the policy. The guidance for this policy states that it does not prohibit offering services to sex workers or any individuals.

### **US influence on the Cambodian legal system**

In 2003, a law was proposed that would criminalize prostitution and trafficking. This coincided with Cambodia being ranked Tier 2 watch list by the US government in its TIP Report. Later, Cambodia's rank dropped to Tier 3, a ranking that is accompanied by the threat of economic sanctions. This law has not been enacted, but as Cambodia is dependent of foreign aid, economic sanctions are presumed to be extremely powerful tools to influence government law and policy.

This proposed law coincided with another American innovation, a policy requiring organizations that accept US government funding to adopt a policy 'against trafficking and prostitution.' It is easy to state that one is against trafficking but more difficult to effectively address knotty social problems with a blanket statement.

### ***The current law***

As of today, Cambodian law does not criminalise prostitution. Essentially, prostitution is neither legal nor illegal in Cambodia. While the law does not prohibit prostitution, it prohibits profiting from the prostitution of another or owning a business of prostitution or recruiting people into prostitution both inside and outside of Cambodia. Despite this, law enforcement actually implements this law as if prostitution itself were illegal. The Law on Suppression of the Kidnapping, Trafficking and Exploitation of Human Persons is included in the Appendix.

This law is foremost a guideline to penalties and punishments for acts related to prostitution but not including prostitution itself, which is not a criminal act in Cambodia. What is criminal under this law is the luring of people to work in prostitution, pimping, living off the earnings of the prostitution of others, and any kind of kidnapping or restraining people for the purpose of prostitution. Higher penalties are given to those who involve people under 15 years of age in prostitution. Being a prostitute or a client of a prostitute is not prohibited under this law.

### ***Local context: Donor dependence and its consequences***

To understand the motivation for legal changes it is important to recognize that Cambodia is dependent on foreign aid, that the largest donor is the US, and that the US government is imposing a moral agenda upon foreign aid. The major sources of hard currency are tourism and foreign aid for development. There are some garment factories, but some factories are closing as economic agreements with Western nations expire. The largest donor (even at the lowest percentage of giving) is the US government and therefore the US government wields disproportionate power in the form of humanitarian aid in aid-dependent countries. This is the case in Cambodia.

In 2000, the US passed an anti-trafficking law and included provisions for a report ranking other nations on their response to trafficking. Countries that are ranked at the lowest level, "Tier 3," are expected to improve their response to trafficking in persons in a few months or face economic sanctions. Cambodia's rank has fluctuated between Tiers 2 and 3, being ranked at the lowest level in 2002 and subsequently improving to Tier 2 from 2003 to 2004 and then dropping again to Tier 3 in 2005. After the low rank in 2002, Cambodia introduced the Draft Law on Suppression on Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation (see Appendix). This remains a draft law and has not been passed.

The reasons for the 2005 Tier 3 ranking are clearly linked to events of December 2004. In the second week of December 2004, the non-governmental organization AFESIP led a raid at a brothel/hotel in Phnom Penh, accompanied by a French television crew. This raid may have been staged for the French media. Over eighty women were delivered to the NGO shelter. The following day, media all over the world reported that criminal elements had broken into the shelter and retrieved the prostitutes held there. However, the following few days, the *Cambodia Daily* reported that the reports of armed men storming the NGO offices were inaccurate, and that local witnesses said that the women left of their own accord and hired motorbikes to take them back to the hotel where they worked. This story was not picked up by the international media. In late 2005 and early 2006, the trial of the owners of the brothel hotel began and resulted in convictions. It remains to be seen whether these convictions are enough to raise Cambodia's TIP report rank to Tier 2 or whether further efforts will be undertaken by the government of Cambodia, perhaps in the form of enacting legislation, perhaps revisiting this draft law.

### ***The draft law and its potential impact***

The legal situation of prostitution in Cambodia may change. US government money for anti-trafficking efforts and HIV-prevention are given only to organisations and governments that adopt an anti-prostitution policy. Under the 1996 Law on Suppression

of the Kidnapping, Trafficking and Exploitation of Human Persons, prostitution itself is not criminalised in Cambodia but the Draft Law on Suppression on Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation would overtly criminalise prostitution.

Article 17: Definition of Prostitution

“Prostitution” in this law shall mean having sexual intercourse with an unspecified person in exchange for anything of value.

Article 18: Soliciting

A person who solicits another in public for the purpose of prostituting him/herself shall be punished with detention for 1 to 5 day and/or fine of 1,000 to 10,000 riel.

Sex workers the world over point to the state and its agents as the prime violators of their human rights. The effect of criminalisation of prostitution is generally to extend the reach of law enforcement further into the lives of sex workers, offering greater opportunity for graft, extortion and sexual offences to be committed against sex workers by authorities. There is no reason to believe better of the Cambodian authorities than others around the world. While some of the statutes prohibiting kidnapping and abuse are laudable, legislation that criminalises sex work leads to abuses rather than remedies for abuse.

Another change would be the adoption of the international standard of 18 as the age of majority. This would criminalise sexual activity with people over the age of 15 but not yet 18. Many Cambodian women marry young, and many work to contribute financially to support their families throughout their lives, even in childhood. The labour of minors and sexual activity by people under 18 years of age are common in Cambodia and will probably not be changed in the near future, and not by legislation alone. Considering this, it is worrying that there is no provision specifically *not* to charge minors who engage in prostitution.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The foremost effect of these funding restrictions is the further stigmatisation of poor women, many of whom exchange sex. While direct links to policy are elusive, it is clear that the policy is used as an excuse to not assist vulnerable people. Therefore, this policy exacerbates existing problems including stigma and discrimination. It is well known that stigmatisation promotes HIV.

US funding policies have strongly and adversely affected WNU in its relationships with other organisations. Furthermore, the effects on individual members are also strong – they are not welcome at some organisations and some individuals have lost their jobs because of their affiliation and affinity with organised sex workers. Discrimination of this sort – denial of services based on status – is counter to the US policy itself, but the guidelines are not well known, poorly understood, and enforced according to the interpretation of local implementing agencies, who do so without reprimand from the US supervisors of the aid they seek. This leads to the use of the new funding restrictions to enforce and promote existing social stigma and discrimination against sex workers in

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general, and WNU members in specific. This is counter to the stated intention of international aid and to the guidance offered by the US Department of State. In this way, the US Government is complicit in the discrimination against sex workers in Cambodia.

The policies referred to above are known as the 'anti-prostitution pledge' and have been contested in two lawsuits brought in the United States. The rulings in both cases were that the policy is unconstitutional, however, the US Constitution has no bearing outside the US and so the rulings have no bearing on WNU and other organisations outside the US.

It is imperative to acknowledge the adverse effects of this policy – promoting stigma and discrimination against sex workers and poor people who are vulnerable to HIV and violence – in order for organisations, advocates, and individuals to work toward policy change and legal reform to repeal these funding restrictions. It is recommended that Cambodia not adopt laws that would criminalise sexual commerce, despite outside pressure to do so. Such laws also promote stigma, discrimination and violence against sex workers. Cambodia's most vulnerable people cannot afford further structural discrimination against them.

Even as these policies strongly affect people outside the US, there has been little effort to find out either what Cambodian sex workers and other people affected by the policy prefer. US policy makers far away from Cambodia have determined what will happen, without concern for the way their decisions will affect vulnerable and poor people in other nations including Cambodia. WNU members and allies call on US policy makers to strike down the law enacting this policy in order not only to end the use of US policy to discriminate and stigmatise marginalized and vulnerable people but also to demonstrate the US' stated but undemonstrated commitment to liberty and justice for all, including people outside the US.



## **Appendix A: The existing law and the draft law**

### ***Law on Suppression of the Kidnapping, Trafficking and Exploitation of Human Persons***

#### Chapter One General Provision

##### Article 1:

This law has an objective of suppressing the act of kidnapping of human persons for trafficking/sale and the exploitation of human persons, in order to rehabilitate and upgrade the respect for good national tradition, protect human dignity, and protect the health and welfare of the people.

##### Article 2:

The kidnapping of human persons for trafficking/sale or for prostitution and the exploitation on human persons, inside or outside the kingdom of Cambodia, shall be strictly prohibited.

#### Chapter 2

#### Kidnapping of Human Persons for Trafficking/Sale or for Prostitution

##### Article 3:

Any person who lures a human person, even male or female, minor or adult of whatever nationality by ways of enticing or any other means, by promising to offer any money or jeweler [sic], event though upon there is or no connect from the concerned person, by ways of forcing, threatening or using of hypnotic drugs, in order to kidnap him/her for trafficking/sale or for prostitution, shall be subject to imprisonment from fifteen (15) to twenty (20) years, for the case if the victim is a minor person of less than 15 years old.

Those who are accomplices, traffickers/sellers, buyers, shall be subject tot he same punishment term as which of the perpetrator(s).

Shall also be considered as accomplices, those who provide money or means for committing offences.

All means of transportation, materials and properties which are used during the commission of offences shall be confiscated as State's property.

#### Chapter Three Pimp

##### Article 4:

Shall be considered as a pimp (male or female) or head of prostitutes, and person:

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- 1- Who supports or protects one or more persons, by whatever means with knowledge in advance of the act of prostitution of such person(s) or seeks customers for such person(s) for the purpose of prostitution, or
- 2- Who regularly shares the benefits obtained from the prostitution acts in any form, or
- 3- Who brings men or women by whatever form for a training and convincing them to become male or female prostitutes, or
- 4- Who acts as an intermediary by whatever form, to create relationships between male and female prostitutes with the head/owner of a brothel, or a person who provides benefits on the prostitution of other persons, or
- 5- Who confines men or women in his/her house or any place, for a purpose of forcing them to commit prostitution to earn money for him/her.

### Article 5:

Any male or female pimp or head of prostitutes, shall be punished from five (5) to ten (10) years in prison. In case of repeated offence, double term of the above punishment shall be applied.

Shall be subject to punishment to imprisonment from ten (10) to twenty (20) years, in case if upon a pimp:

- 1- commits an offence onto a minor person of below 15 years old, or
- 2- commits an offence by coercion and violence or by threat or weapon, or
- 3- who is a husband, wife, boy/girl friend, father or mother or guardian, forces a man or women to commit prostitution, or
- 4- who forces a victim to commit prostitution out side of the country or, a victim who is a foreigner to commit prostitution on the territory of the Kingdom of Cambodia.

The court may, in addition to the above principal punishment term, apply a sub-punishment, by restriction of the civil rights and non-authorization of residence.

### Article 6:

The accomplices or those who attempt to commit offences as stated in the articles 4 and 5 above, shall also be subject to the same punishment term as which of the perpetrators.

## Chapter Four Debauchery

### Article 7:

Any person who opens a place for committing a debauchery or obscene acts, shall be punished to imprisonment from one (1) to five (5) years and with a penalty of from five million (5,000,000) Riels to thirty millions (30,000,000) Riels. In case of repeated offence, the above terms shall be doubled.

### Article 8:

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Any person who commits debauchery acts onto a minor person of below 15 years old, even if there is a consent from the concerned minor person or if upon buying such minor person from somebody else or from a head of the prostitutes, shall be subject to punishment from ten (10) to twenty (20) years in prison. In case of not giving up, the minimum punishment term shall be applied.

The court may, in addition to the above principal punishment, apply a sub-punishment by restriction of the civil rights and non-authorization of residence.

### Chapter Five Final Provision

#### Article 9:

Detail instruction for the application of this law, shall be determined by a Sub-decree.

#### Article 10:

Any provisions contrary to this law shall be hereby repealed.

This law was passed by the National assembly of The Kingdom of Cambodia, on 16 January 1996, During the 5<sup>th</sup> of Ordinary Session of its 1<sup>st</sup> Legislature.

Phnom Penh, on January 1996.

Signed and sealed by:

Chea Sim

## **Appendix B: Interview Protocol**

Name

Age

Birth place

IF THEY ARE FAR FROM HOME, ASK MIGRATION QUESTIONS

How did you come to -----?

Is that when you started doing sex work?

How did you get involved in sex work?

How old were you when you got started doing sex work?

Do you live in the first place you moved to from your village?

Now lives at

What does that cost?

Family –

Lives with whom

If someone doesn't live with her parents, ask

Do you send money to your family?

How many children, and their ages, and where they live

Do they go to school?

How much does school cost?

Do your children face discrimination at school?

If the children live with her, ask

Who looks after the children when you go to work?

How much money do you need to live?

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What are your other expenses – rent, school, food, and what else?

How much do you spend on food per day?

Health questions

Do you go to the doctor when you are sick?

Where?

IF A CLINIC, ASK DETAILS –

How do you get there?

What does it cost?

Are they good?

Do they treat you like a human being?

Do they discriminate against you?

What kind of care do they offer (is it only STIs?) Do they offer general health care?

Do you use condoms?

With whom?

Are condoms easy to get?

What do they cost?

Work questions

Where do you work?

What is it like?

What hours do you work?

Money questions

How much do you earn?

What do your clients pay?

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How many clients do you see?

Have there been changes in the past three years, since 2003?  
[CONTEXTUALIZE THIS]

Have you experienced violence at work?  
ASK DETAILS AS APPROPRIATE, and BRING TISSUES

From whom?

Have you ever reported violence to the police?

Why not?

Have you experienced police violence?

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Drug questions – ask if alone, and reschedule if necessary

Some women told me that they use *yama* when they feel ill in order to be able to work.  
Have you tried it?

How did it make you feel?

How do you take it?

What does it look like?

What does it cost?

How do you buy it?

Who do you buy it from?

Do you sell it?

Do you want to stop/keep taking it?

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What kind of help would benefit you?

To whom would you turn?

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