

SEX WORK AND MIGRATION:  
The Dangers of Oversimplification—  
A Case Study of Vietnamese Women  
in Cambodia

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In recent years, the international sex trade has received increasing media coverage and policy attention, particularly in regard to associated migration and the growing role played by organized criminal networks. In an effort to protect women from exploitation, the 2001 United Nations *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children* made all forms of trafficking illegal, explicitly including forced prostitution. The Protocol defined trafficking as:

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments of benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.<sup>1</sup>

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In the popular imagination, however, all migration for sex work gets conflated with “trafficking,” regardless of whether it meets the definition’s emphasis on force and coercion.<sup>2</sup> Many authors, including the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, have observed that policy makers often assume that all sex workers outside their country of origin have been deceived, abducted, or otherwise exploited and disregard the extent of women’s voluntary participation in the sex industry.<sup>3,4</sup> Others have highlighted the ways in which advocates have attempted to use the debate around trafficking as a tool to codify moral opposition to all sex work, oversimplifying women’s realities and choices.<sup>5-7</sup>

The reality, however, of what brings women to sex work and why they stay is far more complicated. The international trafficking definition does not necessarily describe all individual sex workers’ experiences, nor does it indicate how best to meet the needs of their communities. Evidence from countries, including Russia, Nepal and China, suggests that sex workers’ experiences fall along a continuum, with women who have undergone widely varying degrees of choice or coercion working alongside each other in the same sites.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, individual sex workers may go through different phases; for example, a woman who was originally tricked into selling sex might then independently choose to continue doing so.<sup>9,10</sup> Initial pathways into sex work, therefore, do not necessarily define sex workers’ current perceptions, motivations, or priorities, which are likely to be more important for designing appropriate HIV/AIDS and social interventions to meet immediate needs.<sup>11,12</sup>

Furthermore, failure to recognize the complex dynamics behind why women enter the sex industry and how it is subsequently organized can lead to “anti-trafficking” measures that actually harm the communities they aim to serve. Illustrative of this point is the case study upon which this article focuses its attention. The case study of migrant Vietnamese sex workers in Cambodia presented here demonstrates how local interpretations of protection from trafficking and debt bondage can contribute to abuses of sex workers’ human rights and exacerbate their vulnerability to HIV and other adverse sexual health outcomes. Using qual-

itative data, it examines the women's trajectories into sex work as well as their own perceptions of work conditions and related risks. The data suggest that responses focused on merely blocking trafficking neither address the concerns voiced by sex-worker communities nor meet their needs but rather exacerbate the inherent difficulties of working as illegal immigrants in a criminalized occupation.

### **Intervention Research**

Data presented here are drawn from a wider operations research study that assessed the impact of a social intervention for sex workers in the brothels of Svay Pak village in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF/Belgium-Holland-Switzerland) implemented the intervention in order to expand their services from clinic-based treatment of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) to a wider community mobilization approach, including outreach, health promotion and counseling. As a core component of the project, sex workers helped to establish the Lotus Club, a "drop-in" center housed above the clinic where MSF staff facilitated regular participatory workshops on a range of topics, such as negotiation with clients, saving money, coping with homesickness, and general health and well-being. The project's objectives were to strengthen networks, communication, and trust among sex workers; build skills; and stimulate collective action for improving work and living conditions, including reducing vulnerability to STIs, particularly HIV/AIDS.

The evaluation took place between March 2000 and April 2002 by Cambodian Researchers for Development, under the auspices of the Population Council's Horizons program. It collected quantitative and qualitative data to measure changes in sex workers' personal mobility, social capital, negotiation skills, experiences of violence, and use of male and female condoms. Further in-depth qualitative work specifically explored sex workers' experiences of entering the sex industry. All research activities were conducted by the same young, female, Vietnamese-speaking project staff who facilitated participatory workshops and who had thus developed a good rapport and trusting rela-

tionships with the sex workers being interviewed. Participants gave verbal informed consent prior to all research activities through a specially designed procedure that included a visual diagram designed by sex workers themselves, in addition to a standardized statement approved by the Population Council's ethical review board.

### **Study Setting**

Svay Pak is an ethnically Vietnamese village 11 kilometers north of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, with brothels clustered on two main streets. At the start of the project in May 2000, there were 24 brothels employing an estimated 320 women. By March 2002, 17 brothels remained with approximately 279 sex workers (the lower number being due to decreasing client numbers).<sup>13</sup> Clients comprised local men, both Vietnamese and Khmer (Cambodian), and foreign visitors from China, Japan, Australia, North America, and Europe. Despite long-standing ethnic tensions between the Vietnamese and Khmer, Vietnamese sex workers have been particularly popular in Cambodia because of stereotypes that position them as sexually adventurous and uninhibited, as well as less worthy of respect than Khmer women.<sup>14</sup>

Young women, primarily in their late teens and early twenties, followed established migration routes from southern provinces in Vietnam to specific brothels in Svay Pak. Brothel managers paid each woman's family or intermediary a sum ranging from \$50 to \$3000 (median \$300) US dollars. The women worked off this debt with an average of 14 clients per week. Repayment normally took between six months and two years, creating a high turnover of sex workers. At any given time, approximately half of the women had lived in Svay Pak for six months or less. Although sex workers attracted particular attention as illegal migrants, many other local inhabitants, most all of whom were Vietnamese immigrants, had tenuous citizenship status and would sometimes flee across the border during violent outbursts against Vietnamese communities. Similarly, while sex work is not explicitly illegal in Cambodia, unregulated police control and laws against brothel ownership, pimping, and the sale of individuals for sexual exploitation

have all coalesced to support the *de facto* criminalization of sex work, a situation detailed below.<sup>15</sup>

As with much of Cambodia, Svay Pak experienced political instability and corruption in the post-conflict period of the mid-1990s. Brothel managers suffered extortion from local authorities while sex workers experienced raids, arrests, and rape from armed military and civil police forces operating under loose governmental control. Managers further imposed constraints on sex workers' mobility and in many instances dictated the terms of employment—for example, by insisting that sex workers not use condoms with certain favored, regular clients. Thus, despite Cambodia's official "100% condom use policy" for brothels, sex workers could not always choose safer sex, putting them at risk of HIV/AIDS and other STIs. Indeed, at the start of the MSF project, national statistics showed that one-third of all sex workers in Cambodia were infected with HIV, and an earlier survey found a 19% HIV prevalence rate in Svay Pak (the lower figure likely being due to the population's high turnover).<sup>16,17</sup>

## Methods

The data presented here draw from 28 in-depth interviews with sex workers and 15 participatory workshops (with 72 total participants) that addressed women's pathways into sex work. The individual interviews and the participatory workshops brought forth different types of data: the in-depth interviews focused on individual experiences and opinions related to entering and practicing sex work, while the workshops elicited group norms and common discourses surrounding migration and conditions of sex work.

The individual interviews were conducted in private by a regular workshop facilitator and were recorded with permission. Interviews followed an open-ended topic guideline and lasted 20 to 30 minutes in order to minimize the number of missed clients and other inconveniences. Verbal informed consent was obtained using a visual tool designed specifically for the study.<sup>18,19</sup> The workshops were each attended by six to ten participants and focused on group norms and common discourses. These participants shared concerns with peers from other brothels, whom they rarely

met otherwise. All data from both the interviews and the workshops remained anonymous and confidential. Transcribed notes and transcripts were translated from Vietnamese to English and discussed with all three field workers prior to entry and coding by the author (using the qualitative analysis software "N6" for the final analysis). No inducement was provided for the research in particular, but each woman was compensated for participation in any of the Lotus Club activities with two dollars (the equivalent of payment from one client) in case they missed a client while away from the brothel.

There are potential sources of bias and unreliable data in the study. The marginalization of the sex worker community made access to potential participants difficult. As a result, sex workers were self-selected into research activities. This presents several potential sources of bias as women included in the study were not necessarily representative of the wider population of sex workers in Svay Pak. Moreover, the validity of some data deemed sensitive is also questionable. Throughout the project, women were generally reluctant to discuss poor relationships with brothel managers or to admit their age if they were under 18 (due to potential legal repercussions). Researchers were trained not to probe into areas that could cause discomfort or lead to negative consequences for sex workers. Nonetheless, some of our study participants did address sensitive topics related to their experiences, including having been coerced or deceived into sex work, suggesting that researchers were able to gain access to a varied cross-section of the community.

## **Results**

### **Prior Knowledge and Expectations of Sex Workers**

Almost all women in this study had heard of Svay Pak before their departure from southern Vietnam, receiving information from relatives, friends, or other community members. These women often spoke to former sex workers or relatives of current migrants. Examples of financially successful sex workers returning to villages and resuming a normal or improved lifestyle offered incentive:

My neighbor [told me about Svay Pak] because her daughter was working in Svay Pak. . . . I saw her daughter making good money to help her family. They were buying a lot of things for their house such as: TV, stereo, fan. . . .! (Interview with sex worker, age 18)

My friend, she worked here before but now she is married and stays in Vietnam. . . . She got some money, got married, and had a baby. (Interview with sex worker, age 20)

Although usually discussed only in vague terms, going to Svay Pak clearly implied engaging in sex work. Most women understood that the decision to migrate entailed entering a brothel and incurring a debt, although they preferred to disguise this fact to “save face” in the community:

Did she [aunt] tell you that you would work as a sex worker? - Yes she did, but she told other people from my village that I came to work at the coffee shop. (Interview with sex worker, age 19)

I think everybody [at home] knows about Svay Pak, so if I go back I don't need to tell anyone about this. (Interview with sex worker, age 18)

This “open secret” gave women the opportunity to explore options, discuss working conditions, and receive practical advice prior to departure, without compromising their reputations. Some women received specific information from returned sex workers, including how to use condoms and warnings about violence from clients. For the most part, information passed back to Vietnam emphasized the positive, causing the sex workers to complain that they had not received adequate descriptions of negative experiences and that the reality of Svay Pak did not match their expectations:

They were brought by friends who worked in Svay Pak before, people in the same village. [They] told them that it is very easy to earn money. But after they came and worked here for awhile, they recognized that is not easy like they had heard. The police come to disturb, and [there are] raids, drunk and violent clients, etc. (Notes by facilitator from participatory workshop on prior knowledge of Svay Pak)

Interestingly, some of these same women indicated that they too would paint a rosy picture of life in the brothels on their return in order to avoid being perceived as unsuccessful or as discouraging friends from benefiting from the opportunity.

### **Entry into Sex Work**

Vietnamese sex workers in this community shared a background of rural poverty that encouraged them to move to Svay Pak for economic reasons, although circumstances, decision-making processes, and experiences of coercion differed among individuals in this study. Many women reported that returned migrants' success and tales of easy money made the decision to follow easy:

My aunt told my mother about Svay Pak. She ... saw my family had a difficult situation, so she told my mother about her daughter who was working in Svay Pak and sent money home. . . . I believed her immediately, and we came with her (me and my young sister). . . . Because I see my family is poor and, even when we were working hard in the field, we still couldn't save any money and were also in debt, so that's why I decided to come here. (Interview with sex worker, age 22)

In some cases, women exhibited remarkable ambition, deceiving their parents who they suspected might resist their plans. One woman had already contributed to her household income by secretly selling her virginity in Ho Chi Minh City for \$300 before deciding to enter into debt in Svay Pak for a larger sum. Not all women forwarded their earnings home; for some, sex work represented an opportunity to achieve a financially independent lifestyle:

Because I want to have money and I like going out with friends, so that's why I want to do this. (Interview with sex worker, age 18)

In other cases, however, the decision to migrate to Svay Pak did not rest with the women. Many sex workers underwent varying degrees of pressure, usually by family members. Severe poverty, often catalyzed by an illness in the family, and a lack of other options drove families to push their daughters into sex work:



My mother was thinking about this a lot before she sent me here, and also because my father got sick, so that's why my mother . . . [decided] I should come here. (Interview with sex worker, 18)

In my village, rich families' parents send their children to learn to make clothes and learn other skills; but poor families, their children have to find some work (Participatory workshop)

Some had hoped to find other forms of employment in Cambodia, but, earning little in these other jobs, had consequently transferred into brothels to avoid returning home empty handed. Several narratives described this process of "ending up" in sex work because of financial reasons.

When my mother and I first came, we worked as maids for somebody living in Svay Pak. After two months we didn't save any money and the work was also hard, they looked down on us. I decided to work as a sex worker but my mother disagreed. . . . But I told her I wanted her to go back to Vietnam and I would work here to earn money, so my mother went home with \$100 borrowed from the [brothel] owner. . . . I also decided to work because I see the sex workers wearing jewelry, it looked like they had an easy life. I have two younger brothers in Vietnam, my father died, so nobody's taking care of us. That's why I decided to work as a sex worker. (Interview with sex worker, age 16)

At the extreme end of the spectrum, at least six women included in this study reported having been tricked into sex work. They offered evidence of community members and motorcycle taxi drivers recruiting women through deliberate deception, taking advantage of their vulnerable circumstances. For example, one woman had recently divorced and was experiencing family problems. She was targeted by a recruiter in Vietnam who took her to Svay Pak under the pretence that his sister would give her free accommodation and a chance to work in a coffee shop.

In all but one of these instances of deception, the women had agreed to migrate to Cambodia but with the promise of alternative work, such as being a maid or waitress. Once in Svay Pak, these women owed money to cover

transportation costs and quickly realized that brothel work was the only realistic way to pay this debt or earn savings:

That middleman brought me to Svay Pak. . . . When she took me to a brothel I knew that they tricked me. I refused to stay in three brothels and I told her I wanted to go home, I didn't want to work here and I was crying. She said if I want to go home, I have to pay her \$300 for the transport. I didn't have money. . . . so I had to stay and borrow money from the [brothel] owner. . . . Then I stayed but I refused to have clients. The owner was not happy with me, she said I'd borrowed money so I had to work to pay my debt. I was afraid of them so I had to work. (Interview with sex worker, age 22)

Women tricked into sex work responded to these deceptions in a variety of ways. The woman quoted above remained distressed and hoped to pay her debt as quickly as possible. Others accepted sex work as temporarily necessary, particularly if they felt they were earning good money. Still others actively chose to remain or return to sex work over time:

She was tricked when she was 16 years old and when she first arrived in Svay Pak she refused to have clients. . . . Not too long [after] she agreed to work because the brothel owner was nice with her, she said. . . . [Then] she went back home and got married. But after she broke up with her husband and had a child, she came back to Svay Pak again by herself. (Facilitator's notes from participatory workshop)

### **Views on Sex Work, Risk and Exploitation**

Regardless of how women entered sex work or their initial expectations, their views of sex work varied widely and often depended heavily on daily working conditions and their relationships with colleagues, brothel managers, and clients. When discussing their work, women commonly juxtaposed a sense of shame with an appreciation for the work's earning potential. Most women stated that they were "ashamed" of sex work, that it was "bad work," and yet simultaneously expressed pride in making a valuable contribution to their families' livelihoods:

This work is not good at all and no one wants to do this work, but [you have to] because of your family situation. . . . We do this because we want to help our family and we have no job. That's why we chose this kind of work. (Interview with sex worker, age 19)

It's [sex work] not good at all. . . . But it's easy to earn money. (Interview with sex worker, age 19)

A minority of women, however, actively challenged negative views of the industry, choosing to accentuate its advantages:

Everybody has their own opinion, but I believed my friends, that if I came here I would earn more money than in my village. . . . My mother cried a lot when she knew that [I was a sex worker]. I told her not to cry because I am willing to do this and I didn't feel bad about this. (Interview with sex worker, age 24)

Life in Svay Pak is very interesting: clients treated me well, tip a lot money. Sex work is not hard work, easy to earn money. (Interview with sex worker, during participatory session on hopes for the future, age 23)

Comparisons between sex work and alternative employment demonstrated that some sex workers felt it presented the most favorable of limited options. This partly explains why women decided to remain in sex work even if they did not originally choose it, or why they returned to Svay Pak after repaying their debt:

I just know that coming to Phnom Penh to work as a sex worker is easy to earn money. In Vietnam, working in the fields is very hard and not easy to earn money. (Interview with sex worker, age 22)

Because it is an easy life in the brothel—only sleeping, eating, and attending to clients. In Vietnam we have to try to work hard. . . . It is difficult to adjust to life in Vietnam, so some sex workers return to Svay Pak. (Participatory workshop)

The perceived quality of life, however, could vary according to the relationships sex workers had with the

brothel managers who controlled their ability to socialize and move about freely. Some brothel managers tried to create a warm, supportive, family atmosphere; others treated sex workers more harshly:

My brothel owner she is very kind, loves us, she doesn't let us play cards and smoke cigarettes. She teaches how to use condoms, and she said, . . . "If clients don't use condoms, get out!". . . She wants us to try to work hard and pay off the debt and go back to Vietnam soon. (Sex worker, during workshop on work conditions)

Some brothel owners beat the sex workers, cheat money from the sex workers, ask the sex workers to get up early, and don't allow sex workers to visit their families in Vietnam. (Facilitator's notes during workshop on work conditions)

### **Violations of Human Rights**

Many aspects of life described by sex workers in Svay Pak reveal threats to their human rights, dignity, and well-being. Brothel managers denied these women agency through strict control and by placing restrictions on their personal freedom, self-determination, and ability to safeguard their health. Sex workers reported the means by which unsupportive brothel managers dictated how many and which clients sex workers should entertain. These managers might also insist workers agree to clients' terms, including not using condoms:

Foreign clients . . . don't want to use condoms. . . . They don't like it and if we refuse the [brothel] owner would blame us because we are not making them happy and they might not come back again, so the owner is not happy. (Interview with sex worker, age 18)

The system of "debt-bondage" exacerbated the situation, both by further tightening the control of brothel managers and by making it difficult for women to negotiate better terms of work. However, sex workers themselves rarely raised concerns about these arrangements, which were accepted as standard practice in Svay Pak. For example, women who repaid their initial debt could choose to

work freelance by renting a room in a brothel or other accommodation, but they more frequently opted to receive a lump sum and enter a new cycle of debt.

Beyond the abuses of brothel managers, however, persecution and assault by the police was by far the greatest risk reported by sex workers. Each brothel paid monthly protection fees to the local police, but this did not prevent regular harassment, refusals to pay for sex, and rape from roving military police. Furthermore, Phnom Penh police consistently conducted crackdowns against the sex trade. These crackdowns could be instigated by the police themselves or by the mayor's periodic "clean-up" campaigns, designed to protect Cambodia's international reputation. Crackdowns also included forced "rescues" organized by local or international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working to free sex workers from trafficking and exploitation. Although more recently these "rescue missions" have targeted establishments housing sex workers younger than 18, at the time of this study project staff observed that the NGOs involved appeared to be less discriminating. Sex workers, brothel managers, and project staff were often unable to identify the particular group conducting the "rescue" or its justification. In truth, these NGO "rescues" more closely resembled raids, with police authorities participating as well. These "rescues" were accompanied by fear and chaos, as sex workers attempted to avoid arrest and occasional episodes of violence by fleeing or hiding.

Both police raids and NGO "rescues" resulted in a range of negative consequences for the sex workers. First, when taken into custody, women generally secured their release through bribes, both from prison and from "rehabilitation centers," which by law are not supposed to hold adult women against their will. These payments increased sex workers' personal debts. Moreover, the heavy police presence during crackdowns scared off clients, depriving women of regular work and reducing their weekly incomes:

I was raided by police when I had just come for one month. . . . [When] my friend's sister came to take us back, I had to pay \$100 [additional debt]. (Interview with sex worker, age 22)

Now not many clients visit brothels, and the police walk around Svay Pak, arrest the sex workers. Sometimes we close the door many times in a day [to lock out police]. We live in the brothel with fear, so we are fed up. (Conclusion from workshop on work conditions)

As a corollary to these financial consequences, police harassment and job insecurity also directly and adversely affected sex workers' sexual health. Although women generally had good knowledge of STIs and HIV, they identified that protection lay outside their control. Assault by armed police, for instance, offered no opportunities for negotiation of safer practices. Similarly, confronted with rising debts and fewer clients, women did not feel able to risk losing revenue by insisting on condom use:

More raids, so we have no clients but still have to pay for food or whatever we need, so debt will increase, that's also the reason [for not using condoms]. I don't want to lose clients, so I have to force myself to have sex without a condom. (Sex worker, workshop on work conditions)

## **Discussion**

### **Understanding the Local Context**

Most adult sex workers in Svay Pak would not fit the UN Protocol's definition of being trafficked into sex work, although they are frequently referred to as such.<sup>20,21</sup> The majority of sex workers knew about Svay Pak prior to departure, understood they would be engaged in sex work within a debt system, and underwent a complex decision-making process that took into consideration family expectations, financial incentives, and personal ambition. Although they may have relied on community members, motorcycle taxi drivers, or other intermediaries to arrange their travel, most did not suffer abduction, force, or deception, apart from the admittedly important sense of having received an unrealistically positive account of brothel life from returnees.

Among many of these women, however, a subtle gradient emerged, wherein varying levels of pressure were brought to bear by family or community members. Some women did not want to enter sex work but felt it was a familial responsibility given the lack of other options to earn

money; others voluntarily migrated to Cambodia for different work but then moved to brothels when other options proved difficult. Finally, a few women reported being “tricked” into sex work and subsequently forced into debt. These women’s experiences of deception and fraud clearly represent “trafficking” and intended exploitation.

Yet despite following varied pathways into sex work, women worked and lived together, and many came to share immediate priorities and concerns based on daily work conditions. As described by sex workers themselves, these rarely related to how they initially entered the industry, but centered on their ability to avoid violence and harassment, earn a decent living, and control negotiations with clients. Sex workers hoped for a conflict-free environment in which they could work safely and efficiently so they could return home with financial security and pride. Throughout the research, women decried the abuses perpetuated by police and specific brothel owners, which posed threats to their emotional well-being and ability to safeguard their health. The prevalence of these abuses thus overshadowed sex workers’ concerns regarding exploitation inherent in the overall system, such as debt-bondage and restricted personal freedoms.

### **Assessing Anti-Trafficking Measures**

In November, 2001, Cambodia signed the UN Protocol against Trafficking in Persons, strengthening public commitment to its own 1996 Law on the Suppression of Kidnapping, Trafficking, and Exploitation of Human Beings that had not yet been consistently implemented.<sup>22</sup> However, during the course of the study, both police and NGOs routinely used the existence of “trafficking” as rationale for wholesale raids on brothels, with no apparent regulation. According to sex workers, these raids resulted in eruptions of violence as police forced entry into brothels and arrested sex workers regardless of whether they worked there voluntarily. Such actions contravene anti-trafficking guidelines issued by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to the Economic and Social Council—guidelines which stipulate that “anti-trafficking measures shall not adversely affect the human rights and dignity of persons, in particular the rights of those who have been trafficked, and of migrants.”<sup>23</sup>

In fact, as each of these raids potentially reduced the earnings of sex workers and cost them additional expenses because of bribes, a direct link emerged between forced “rescue” raids, increased debt, and an increased vulnerability to HIV infection (among other risks). Sex workers struggled to maximize incomes by taking on additional clients, including those refusing to use condoms. Other sex worker communities elsewhere in both Cambodia and the larger region have reported similar accounts.<sup>24-26</sup>

Police corruption and a lack of accountability in Cambodia undoubtedly contributed to much local repression—a fact used by some to argue that the problem is not in the “anti-trafficking” approach but in how it is implemented. Yet, in an environment where sex work is criminalized and related migration is deemed “trafficking,” the system will continue to pose significant barriers to sex workers’ livelihood strategies. As found in other settings, the ability of these women to seek redress for human rights violations is limited by the ambiguous legal status of their work and residency, as is their ability to advocate for improved terms of employment.<sup>27</sup> Sex workers are further disempowered by their lack of participation in the political processes that determine how international efforts to target “trafficking” will be both interpreted and operationalized in the local context.

### **Implications for Interventions**

In the end, simplistic approaches that equate all migration for sex work with “trafficking” and exploitation only complicate efforts to provide appropriate health and social services to meet the immediate needs of sex workers. Increased efforts to abolish the sex industry can force it underground, making access to sex workers in need all the more difficult. Furthermore, the participation of NGOs in forced rescues deepens suspicion among brothel managers and sex workers that other services targeting sex workers may be similarly motivated. Immediately after the raids in Svay Pak, all brothels remained locked and shuttered for days or weeks at a time, preventing sex workers from reaching the MSF clinic or the participatory activities at the



Lotus Club. And as brothel managers have no legal incentive to improve working conditions, these efforts also hinder the potential success of advocacy for structural changes in the industry.

Many studies have demonstrated that, while repressive policies like those documented here can exacerbate human rights abuses and limit access to services, adopting an empowerment framework that aims to give sex workers the skills and opportunities to manage their own work environment can improve both their health and human rights.<sup>28,29</sup> The case of Svay Pak offers further evidence that repressive policy measures can actually derive from an inappropriate interpretation of international commitments to protecting human rights. Yet donors such as USAID appear to be increasingly promoting the local “anti-trafficking” approach over interventions that work with sex workers to identify and address their own needs and priorities within the local industry.<sup>30,31</sup> This suggests that, until these policies change, women who have chosen to enter the sex industry, such as many Vietnamese migrants in Svay Pak, will remain in conditions that perpetuate vulnerability to violence, loss of personal freedom, and sexual health risks.

Finally, it is important to note that international debates surrounding migration and sex work often address wider issues framing the global sex industry, such as a lack of regional sustainable development, gender inequity, and international labor market demands. These issues also set the backdrop to Svay Pak women’s experiences. The sex workers in this study, with notable exceptions, migrated to Cambodia and into sex work primarily for financial reasons, without explicit coercion or force. The majority felt that sex work was the best of extremely limited options, and these individuals frequently referred to pressures faced by families confronted with sustained rural poverty in southern Vietnam. In the long term, only poverty alleviation, elimination of gender disparities, and local economic development will ensure that only those women who genuinely choose sex work migrate to Svay Pak. Improved opportunities for legal migration and decriminalization of sex work would further safeguard women’s labor and human rights. In

the meantime, however, preoccupation with whether women meet definitions of having been “trafficked” distracts efforts from deeper priorities and from effective measures to improve current working conditions.

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