

Expatriate Christians in Cambodia Face Sexual Challenges: Potential Strategies to Help

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The number of Christians involved in short term missions, to Cambodia is increasing and the number in long-term service appears to be decreasing. Cambodia is a popular destination for missions and also has hundreds of international and local Christian NGOs.

At the same time, the huge number of erotic massage parlors in Cambodia's capital of Phnom Penh, provide a range of sexual service for locals as well as expatriates and tourists. Sexual behavior outside of marriage is seen as 'normal' for men even though the Buddhist faith does not condone it and Cambodian Christian men would take a biblical stance on sexual behavior. Katsulis describes how, sex is cheap and available and becomes part of the expat lifestyle.¹

The relevance of this issue for Christian men in mission is first, their own sexual dissonance that may affect their capacity to work with and be a model to local men. Second, the prevalence of sexual dissonance amongst Cambodian Christian expatriates that suggests the need for support. Furthermore, this research points to exposure to sexual harassment, assault, and abuse. This article looks at the use of pornography, sexual services, and experiences of sexual harassment among expatriate Christian men and women involved in mission.

Literature Review

Christians generally profess in accordance with the Bible's exhortation to "Flee sexual immorality..."² and "... sexual immorality and all impurity,"³ whereas in western popular culture it is generally condoned and assumed that unmarried couples are free to experiment with sexual intercourse as part of the courtship process. Many Christians aim to maintain the Bible's recommendation to abstain from sexual behavior outside of marriage. Therefore, viewing pornography and purchasing sexual services from persons working in prostitution and erotic massage, are deemed by most Christians to be inappropriate.

Since the early 1990s there have been many research studies in the West regarding Christians' use of pornography especially with the proliferation of online pornography. However, even some peer-reviewed data may be considered outdated especially given the fast-paced advancement and proliferation of online pornography.⁴

With that caution in mind, surveys conducted by *Christianity Today*⁵ and *Leadership Journal*⁶ have suggested that 33%–43% of clergy

have admitted to visiting a pornographic site. Of the clergy that watched pornography in these surveys, 6%–18% admitted to viewing it "a couple times a month or more." This is confirmed further in a follow-up poll by *Christianity Today* which found that of the 680 pastors surveyed, 57% stated that pornography is the most sexually damaging issue to their congregation.⁷

Any peer-reviewed research that is relevant to this topic has college-aged participants and are focused solely on men.⁸ Therefore, little is known regarding the scope of the usage of pornography, as well as pornography amongst older Christian men, as well as Christian women generally.

There are some surveys that have analyzed the differences between older and younger Christians which primarily show that college aged Christians have more liberal attitudes to the morality of pornography than older Christians.⁹ However, what is missing in this literature is a peer-reviewed study of those who have sought external help e.g. counseling, and whether these external programs are effective.

The aims of phase one was to measure the perceptions and prevalence of pornography and purchase of sexual service amongst expatriate men in Cambodia. Furthermore, to measure the coping mechanism that these men use to resolve with their sexual behavior, specifically, as to their prevalence in utilizing counseling services. The aims of phase two were to measure the perceptions and prevalence of pornography, sexual harassment, and purchase of sexual service amongst expatriate men and women in Cambodia. Finally, this study aimed to uncover the significant gender differences between men and women in the phase two sample.

Ethical Considerations

As there was no immediate governing body to seek ethical approval to conduct this study to the ethical guidelines in online research, those outlined by Jewkes et al.¹⁰ and Coles et al.¹¹ were adhered to. Prior to conducting the interviews informed consent was obtained from participants, and right to withdraw was stated prior to beginning either questionnaire. Participants reserved the right to not answer particular questions if it suited them. Anonymity of the interviewees as well as confidentiality of the data was ensured as no names or email addresses were recorded. Given the subject matter of such a survey, the provision of a counseling contact at the end of the questionnaire was provided.

Participants

A total of 164 participants took part in this study, with an even split between the two phases. In phase one all 82 participants were male whilst in phase two there was an even distribution of males and females. A questionnaire was created on Survey Monkey (surveymonkey.com). The link to the survey was then distributed through three e-lists: ICF InfoFlow, the International Christian Fellowship's website used by a wide range of Christians to access information of interest; Men's Prayer Breakfast contacts, which many Christian men in Cambodia are recipients of; and Chab Dai's e-list, which includes leaders of fifty-two faith-based NGOs in Cambodia working on the issues of human trafficking.

The Survey Instrument

Phase One

This was a descriptive, cross-sectional, quantitative study involving a completely anonymous online survey. The first part was

the purchase of sexual services from persons working in prostitution and erotic massage. The second was viewing pornography, especially on the internet which, for the first time in human history, had virtually transcended every geographical boundary in the world.

Phase Two

Conducted four years later, this was also a descriptive, cross-sectional questionnaire study involving a completely anonymous online survey. The survey was opened to include women. In addition, questions around sexual harassment and sexual violence towards the participant were included particularly in light of the recent “Me too!” campaign which has brought to light how prevalent this is in a wide variety of sectors and has given people more confidence in speaking about it when it happens to them¹². In summary, both men and women can be consumers of sexual services and victims/survivors of sexual harassment and violence and both may be hidden so this gives a chance for people to anonymously admit it. The results found in both phases of this study were extracted from the online questionnaire and transformed into SPSS.

Survey Results Phase One

Views on Prostitution and Pornography

The male expatriate Christian sample was slightly less disapproving of prostitution than it was of pornography (85% compared to 93%, respectively). One of the findings involved the question of expatriate Christian men's comparison of prostitution with erotic massage. Of all the participants (n=82), 43% saw the two as categorically different whilst another 15% said “it depended.” Only 17% said they did think erotic massage was the same as prostitution.

Prevalence of Using Pornography, Prostitution, and Erotic Massage

Just under half (46%) of all participants said

they totally abstained from pornography. Of those who do not abstain, the frequency of using pornography ranged from an occasional indulgence (33%) to regular usage (20%). When asked if they had experienced a traditional, non-sexual massage where they had been touched sexually 32% said they had, 56% had not (n=72). In terms of actual intercourse with a prostitute, 11% admitted to it (n=70).

Of those who, ostensibly, went to a masseur for non-sexual services, one-third of them were nevertheless touched sexually. Just under a third of this group (31%; n=26) encouraged the masseur to continue, while 77% did not. Of that latter group, a majority simply ignored the advance (46%) rather than rejected it directly. When these figures are compared between single and married men, only 23.5% of married men asked them to stop compared to 44.4% of single men.

Seeking Help and Counseling

Although the figures are too small to be statistically significant, it appears that there is a trend between time spent in Cambodia and likelihood to have sought help or being interested in seeking counseling or being part of a group (See Table 8.1).

Survey Results Phase Two

Demographics

There were an equal number of men and women who completed the survey which included a spread of ages; the highest numbers being between 25 and 34 years old (51% women, 46% men), followed by 35–44 years (24% of each). 10% of men said they were homosexual and 7% of women said they were bi-sexual. The rest said they were heterosexual. 39% of women and 71% men said they were married, 54% of women and 24% men said they were single. 85% of women and 80% of men said they were strong believers in their faith. The time participants had lived in Cambodia stretched from under a year to over ten years.

Prevalence of Using Pornography, Prostitution and Erotic Massage

Men were more likely to have viewed porn than women (42%: 5% more than monthly). When asked if they had experienced a traditional, non-sexual massage where they had been touched sexually 14% said they had (3 women and 9 men), with the remaining participants stating otherwise (n=82). Only 4% of all participants (3 men and no women) admitted to having sexual intercourse with a prostitute, with 4 men and 1 woman admitting to seeking out an erotic massage. When asked why people use prostitutes for both men and women the search for intimacy and loneliness were the two top reasons mentioned.

Sexual Harassment and Violence

When asked whether they had experienced sexual harassment, 30% of participants answered affirmatively. Women were much more likely to experience sexual harassment compared to men at a ratio of 4:1. For all the men who stated that they had been sexually harassed, a local Cambodian outside the work context was the perpetrator. Whereas for women, 50% (n=10) had been by locals outside the work context but 5 had been expatriates outside the work context, four locals in the work context and one expatriate in the local context. When asked whether they had reported sexual harassment of the 29 that responded, 15 women and 7 men said they had not. In fact, only three women and one man had reported it.

A smaller percentage of participants who answered (n=78) stated that they had experienced sexual violence (10%; 6 women, 2 men). For the two men who reported sexual violence it happened by a local outside a work context. For the seven women, three by a local outside of work, three by an expatriate outside of work, and one by a local inside of work. When asked what type of sexual violence had occurred one man said he had been raped and another experienced aggressive sexual behavior. Of the women two said they had experienced aggressive sexual behavior, one attempted rape, and four unwanted sexual touching. Of the ten people who experienced sexual violence only three women and one man reported it.

Transparency with Organization/Church

When asked “Are you fearful that if you are honest about some aspect of your sexual behavior then you might face church/mission organization discipline?” 27% of women and

TABLE 8.1 WILLINGNESS TO SEEK HELP AND COUNSELING

	Single	Married	5+ Years in Cambodia	2-5 Years	1-2 Years	<1 Year	All
Sought Help	25.0%	17.7%	18.8%	17.4%	17.6%	30.0%	19.5%
Be Part of a Group	35.0%	9.7%	15.6%	8.7%	11.8%	40.0%	15.9%
Total (n=x)	20	62	32	23	17	10	82

A table that shows the percentage of participants that either sought counselling or wanted to be a part of a support group relative to their relationship status and time spent in Cambodia.

32% of men said that they were, 44% of women and 56% of men said they hid some of their sexual behavior from others. The majority of men and women (except for two of each gender) said that they thought the church/mission organizations should address sexual challenges expatriates face.

Seeking Counseling

Of all the participants in this phase of the study, 23% (4 women and 15 men) have sought out counseling specifically for help dealing with their sexual behavior. Men were more likely to have sought out counseling than women. Critically, amongst the 21% of participants (7 women:10 men) that said they wanted counseling (n=80), two women and 8 men said they would like to be part of a support group for people who are seeking help for unwanted sexual behavior.

Discussion

Overwhelmingly, these self-identified Christian expatriates disapprove of pornography. Almost 93% perceived it as always negative. However, there are 20% of participants who view porn regularly in spite of this negative perception. It would appear that there is a dissonance between what they believe and what they regularly practice. They may be experiencing a pattern, which has been described as the Addiction Cycle. This is a pattern in which the person tries to avoid the unwanted behavior by willpower, followed by temptation, leading to fantasizing, then to “playing around the edges,” and finally resulting in acting out. This is followed by feelings of shame and despair, which eventually gives way to new internal promises to not do it again.¹³ It was clear from the results that single men were significantly more likely to seek help and have a desire to be a part of a support group compared to married men.

There appears to be a general reticence on the part of mission organizations and the church to address sexual temptation and misconduct. Researchers felt that pastors and mission leaders may convey the message that sexual misconduct is in a special shame category and this has the effect of deterring people from engaging in honest dialogue, either in a group or in one-to-one relationships. Related to this is what we have heard in comparing secular support groups with Christian-based, namely that, everything else being equal, people are more specific, candid, and honest in secular groups. Is this because the Christian has been socialized to hide the sexual component of his/her life?

It is our opinion that with the increasing recognition of sexual abuse of children in church institutions, they should no longer be able to get away with neglecting/ignoring sexual issues if it intends to be a responsible institution for God's service.

Many people felt uncomfortable about informing these organizations if they struggle with sexual challenges, e.g. porn, erotic massage, prostitution. This needs to be considered both before they leave for the ‘field’ as well as while they are there. What could be done in the recruiting process to identify those who are at risk? Regarding sexual harassment and sexual violence, the results were concerning. The researchers are not aware of any training provided to those on mission trips or by mission training organizations that prepares people for this. In rare cases where it is done, the focus is on women even though the evidence indicates that men are also at risk.

Recommendations for Church and Mission Leaders

Christian helping professionals as well as church and mission leaders must see sexual challenges as a serious issue. Training is needed for new Christian expatriate mission workers that adopts a biblical approach to the prevention of sexual misconduct through men's support groups that cover both general and specifically sexual issues. Similar programs should be considered in other contexts. In Cambodia, one of the researchers developed a Bible study that was used in several international churches that focused on the life of King David and the consequences of his infidelity on a wide range of people. Another helpful Bible story illustration is that of the Prodigal who spent all his money in a far land effectively being a sex tourist. The father (God) was waiting for the son to return and his graciousness covered and redeemed the sin. He only needed to return to the father to receive it.

Men require different approaches – one to one counseling for some, but many have found 12-step small group programs helpful for expatriate mission and development workers abroad, as well as Christian men recovering at home with addictive patterns.

Leaders of expatriate missionary organizations and Christian development NGOs must take the issue seriously, not in a punitive way, as staff may currently be afraid to admit that they have a problem even in the early stages when intervention is most effective. A plan should be developed that creates a culture


within the mission organizations of candor and transparency with regard to sexuality, using the new resources that are being made available for prevention and treatment. Help should be sought from professional counselors and experienced leaders early in situations when members have violated standards of appropriate sexual behavior.

Questions in application forms and orientation packages for new workers should include previous emotional and sexual histories that may require further consideration before acceptance, depending on the resources available on the field and the extent of the problem. Mission administrators should also be aware that applicants may downplay negative past sexual behaviors and/or even sexual trauma.

Installing Covenant Eyes or similar accountability software on all computers, laptops and smart phones supplied by Christian organizations to their staff will reduce access to pornography. In places where massage is used extensively as a way to relieve tension, which is helpful, as well as achieving sexual release, which is not helpful, then massage establishments that are “safe” may be sought and recommended to those who are less susceptible. As ‘safety’ cannot be guaranteed, additionally, being accompanied by a spouse or, if unmarried, by an accountability partner.

Regarding sexual harassment and sexual violence, again, preparation should be given in self-care, even self-defense before they leave for the field. Single women may be considered to be particularly vulnerable, but men may be also. In a transparent environment help can be sought quickly and further abuse may be avoided.

Conclusion

Our survey has shown the presence of a significant number of men that have a sexual dissonance between what men believe and what they actually do. These results suggest that individual coping strategies may not suffice to deal with these issues. Seeking external help is more effective in addressing both, especially in the early stages, with the active participation of professional counselors that adopt a holistic approach. Addressing this issue “with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience” is of the utmost importance as the expatriate Christian community's presence in Cambodia is motivated by a desire to share “the hope that is in you.”¹⁴ 

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Notes

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