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“What We Say Is What You See”: Portrayal by Christian Faith-Based Organizations of Female Survivors of Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking in Cambodia

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ABSTRACT

The representation of trafficking survivors in marketing, research, and other materials can have a significant impact on the stigma placed on survivors and the services they receive. This study explores the representation of trafficking for sexual exploitation by several Christian Faith-based Organizations (CFBOs) in Cambodia. Major sources of information included interviews with Christian Faith-based Organization (CFBO) leaders and staff, and a review of publicly available secondary resources (aid agency websites, reports, advertisements, and other documents). This research examines how these organizations define their beneficiaries and communicate to their supporters using concepts, words, and images rooted in the agency's particular perspective on Christianity. The paper explores CFBO discourse in that it includes the influence of CFBO metaphors and rhetoric on their framing of trafficking and exploitation issues and responses to it, and the impact of those portrayals on how their beneficiaries are viewed by their local communities both within the wider Cambodian context as well as internationally. Results revealed a sharp contrast between how trafficking survivors define themselves (i.e., how they make sense of their own lives in relation to trafficking and sexual exploitation) and how they are defined by society, their families, and CFBOs in relation to being trafficked and in the context of receiving CFBO assistance.

KEYWORDS

Sexual exploitation; trafficking; christian faith-based organization; survivor representation; stigma; gender discrimination; identity

The ongoing fight against human trafficking worldwide includes a vast diversity of organizations, governments, missions, and approaches (Wietzer, 2014). Christian faith-based organizations (CFBOs) have long been involved in a significant portion of this effort and hold meaningful influence in many parts of the world, including Cambodia (Frame, 2017). In Cambodia, CFBOs have been present in developing and running services primarily for women and girls who are survivors of sex trafficking in the form of residential facilities, employment opportunities and training, and mental health services (Frame, 2017; Miles, 2016). Despite this known involvement of CFBOs, there continues to be little literature examining the perceptions of these CFBOs and their services. The current study seeks to fill this gap through an understanding of the perceptions and portrayal of survivors of sex trafficking through the eyes of both CFBO leaders and the survivors they serve.

Foreign Aid to Cambodia

Cambodia has long been at the receiving end of vast amounts of foreign aid from bilateral, multilateral, and non-governmental organization (NGO) sources. Increasingly, the appropriateness of external assistance to low-income countries (LIC) is under question globally (Chan & Chung, 2015; Ear, 2013;

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Shiobhan Miles was a nurse practitioner who worked on various issues including HIV/AIDS and human trafficking. She was the manager of the Chab Dai Butterfly Project in Cambodia. She died suddenly leaving behind her husband and three daughters.

Greenhill, 2013). Nevertheless, aid continues to flow to countries like Cambodia primarily in the form of assistance for economic development, protection of human rights, and basic social services (Khieng, 2014; Moolio & Kong, 2016). The focus of foreign aid evolves in response to real and perceived changes in the political, economic, and social environment. One aid sector that has been particularly dynamic over the past two decades is anti-human trafficking (Bradley & Szablewska, 2016; Cordisco Tsai et al., 2021). International NGOs have been active in Cambodia since the early 1990s assisting people (primarily girls and women) they define as having been trafficked for sex and/or who have been sexually exploited (Keo et al., 2014). Despite this history of assistance, there remains a lack of clarity and consistency on how “human trafficking” and “anti-trafficking” are defined within the context of service provision. “Trafficking” is often conflated with sexual exploitation, commercial sex work (prostitution), and labor migration although these varying forms of exploitation are increasingly differentiated (Tyldum & Brunovskis, 2005).

Human-trafficking in Cambodia

The extent and scope of human trafficking in Cambodia, and globally, particularly sex trafficking, is debated and historically difficult to identify (Wilson & O’Brien, 2016). Estimates of the numbers of females who are victims of sex trafficking in the country vary widely, with published numbers ranging from 20,000 to 100,000 (Steinfatt, 2011). One of the reasons that it is difficult to quantify is that the contours of human trafficking are continually morphing as perpetrators evade evolving legal frames. As attention and visibility (domestic and international) have increased, those who benefit from the sale of other human beings alter the way they work to avoid detection and incarceration. The most recent Trafficking in Persons (TIP) publication affirms both the observation that the domain of human trafficking is morphing, as well as the fact that Cambodians (especially women and children) continue to be exploited for labor and for sex:

All of Cambodia’s 25 provinces are sources for human trafficking. Sex trafficking is largely clandestine; Cambodian and ethnic Vietnamese women and girls move from rural areas to cities and tourist destinations, where criminals exploit them in sex trafficking in brothels and, more frequently, clandestine sex establishments at beer gardens, massage parlors, salons, karaoke bars, retail spaces, and non-commercial sites. In recent years, the rapidly growing and largely unregulated presence of Chinese casinos, entertainment establishments, and other commercial enterprises in Preah Sihanouk province led to an increase of local sex trafficking and forced labor among Cambodian women and girls (U.S. Department of State, 2021, p. 161).

Anti-trafficking Efforts in Cambodia

Many NGOs within the anti-trafficking sector in Cambodia self-identify as Christian (MoSVY, 2011; World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFD), 2012) and draw their inspiration for their work from Christianity (Marshall, 2013). This presence is, in part, driven by the high priority placed on combating trafficking among evangelical Christians and also Protestant Christians globally (Bales, 2018; Wood, 2014). As approximately 95% of the Cambodian population identifies as Buddhist in their religious beliefs, the majority of the CFBOs come to Cambodia from abroad (Davy, 2014; Wood, 2014). Though the Christian-lens is shared, the foundational mission of these organizations can differ. Specifically, for some, trafficking is the central and primary issue and services and efforts focus mainly on “rescuing” survivors and providing aftercare services (Graw Leary, 2018; Shih, 2016). Broadly, these CFBOs provide a range of services in residential or community-based settings to their beneficiaries who are predominantly women and girls although increasingly there is attention to males trafficked for labor (Crawford & DoCarmo, 2014). Each CFBO may offer a unique combination of services which may include (but is not limited to) rescue, counseling, psychosocial care, spiritual care, formal or non-formal education, skills training, alternative employment, and legal support (S. Miles et al., 2013). In contrast, other CFBOs may instead focus in part on the issue of trafficking but also broadly on the social and economic disparities that

exist that can set the stage for vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation (Graw Leary, 2018). This difference in the perceptions of the “causes” of human trafficking and the attention placed on either individual and/or societal contributors can sometimes lead to tension and disagreement among CFBOs in the area as each vies for limited resources and global support. A noted benefit of this landscape within Cambodia is the presence of Chab Dai (Graw Leary, 2018), a collaborative network coalition that is tasked with the coordination of services for trafficking survivors across country and across service providers (Marshall, 2013; G. Miles et al., 2019). This intentional coordinated entity has aided in what is often a conflictual view amongst CFBOs of what the most effective target is to combat trafficking. Chab Dai has instead provided practical support and coordination regardless of these varying institutional viewpoints (G. M. Miles et al., 2021; G. Miles et al., 2019).

While the nature of support and approaches to combatting human trafficking may vary, there remains a similar conformity among CFBOs in their public portrayal of the beneficiaries of their services (L. M. Campbell & Zimmerman, 2014). Visions of chains, capture, and imprisonment are common among CFBO marketing and messaging aimed at eliciting an emotional response from the public to “take action” and support the work of the CFBO financially (Frame, 2017; Graw Leary, 2018). These rescue efforts have recently become notorious in many ways (Soderlund, 2005; L. M. Campbell & Zimmerman, 2014; Twis & Praetorius, 2021). One such example is the rescue and raid efforts of the International Justice Mission (IJM; Rhodes, 2019). These efforts often involve a coordinated response by organizational personnel and sometimes local law enforcement to enter and rescue suspected victims of human trafficking and arrest and prosecute perpetrators (Rhodes, 2019). These forceful responses have an effective and almost immediate impact on their intended audience (often wealthy potential donors) and can bring both funding and people into the mission and work of IJM and similar organizations. Further, messaging and marketing around this work often involves the stories, pictures, and lives of those who have been rescued, offering survivor testimony and stories as promotion to continue to combat the exploitation of people in Cambodia (Cojocaru, 2015; Twis & Praetorius, 2021). Despite recent calls by multiple scholars for increased transparency and empirical evidence of the impact of anti-trafficking CFBOs and similar organizations in Cambodia, little literature exists to understand this impact on survivors and communities (Frame, 2017; Marshall, 2013; Thrupkaew, 2009).

The Current Study

Despite the known and significant influence of CFBOs in Southeast Asia broadly, and Cambodia specifically, little research has been done to understand the impact of these organizations on the people they serve. Further, no known literature has investigated the perspectives of sex trafficking survivors from the voices of both CFBO representatives and the survivors they serve. Given the large presence of CFBOs in Cambodia and their ongoing influence on the response to sex trafficking in the country, the current study sought to fill these gaps in understanding the perspectives of CFBOs and the survivors they serve on the causes of sex trafficking, the impact of marketing and messaging to the broader public, and the impact of stigma on survivors.

Methods

Participants & Procedures

The current study included two groups of participants. The first was a sample of 18 Cambodian women who are survivors of sex trafficking recruited for a larger study effort to understand the longitudinal experiences of sex trafficking survivors in Cambodia (The Butterfly Project, 2020). For the larger study, each of the 18 women was interviewed at least annually, and usually more than once each year, over an 8-year period. The women were interviewed by one member of the research team (including the first, second, and third author of the current study) and completed an informed consent

document prior to each interview. Survivors’ interviews included inquiry regarding their experiences of exploitation in childhood and adulthood as well as their experiences with service providers and authorities in the country.

The second sample consisted of representatives from 11 CFBOs in Cambodia who had previously, or were currently serving at least one of the 18 women in the first sample. Positions of the representatives were varied and included CFBO directors, psychologists, and direct care staff members. To gain an understanding of the public image of each of the CFBOs, the current study also included review and analysis of publicly available messaging and images on CFBO websites, and hard copies of promotional materials available to the public. Interviews with CFBO representatives broadly focused on inquiry regarding the CFBO’s perceptions of how sex trafficking of women happens in Cambodia, who is a “victim” of sexual exploitation and trafficking, and how their faith does and/or does not contribute to their work in the field. Demographic information regarding both the survivors and CFBO representatives is outlined in [Table 1](#).

Analysis

Following data collection, interviews from both samples were transcribed verbatim and double checked by a member of the research team for accuracy compared to the recordings. Thematic analysis was then conducted to analyze the data into cohesive and comprehensive themes. Specifically, the current study followed the steps for thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clark (2012). First, two coders from the research team (the first two authors) reviewed all of the interview data to become familiar with the data and the message of the participants. Second, all interview data were then coded for meaning by the same two coders. The two coders then met to come to a consensus on the codes and also to discuss preliminary themes. The preliminary themes were then reviewed and finalized based on an overall look of the data. Consistent with the methodology, once the codes were finalized the coders worked to create definitions of the codes and name them as outlined in the results. Finally, themes across the two samples were examined and compared to understand the differences and similarities in the perspectives of the two samples (i.e. CFBO representatives and survivors). The outline of these final themes and a comparison between these two samples is presented in the results section.

Table 1. Survivor and CFBO Representative demographics.

Variable	Survivors (n = 18)	CFBO Reps (n = 11)
Gender		
Male	0 (0%)	3 (27%)
Female	18 (100%)	8 (72%)
Nationality		
Cambodian	18 (100%)	1 (9%)
Expatriate	0 (0%)	9 (82%)
No Answer	0 (0%)	1 (9%)
Occupation		
CFBO Director	–	3 (27%)
CFBO Psychologist	–	1 (9%)
CFBO Direct Care Staff	–	7 (64%)
Religion		
Christian	–	11 (100%)
Other	–	0 (0%)

Results

Results found several unique and overlapping themes across survivors and CFBO representatives regarding sex trafficking, its roots, and its impact on survivors. First, we review unique perspectives of CFBO representatives regarding the driving factors of sex trafficking based on their knowledge and experience with survivors. Second, both survivors and CFBO representatives had opinions regarding the marketing and messaging of the CFBOs. Finally, both samples reported on themes regarding the stigma and labeling of sex trafficking survivors both in the context of service providers and broader society.

Survivors View of Themselves

The 18 women who participated in this study see themselves in a very different way than they are portrayed by CFBOs. One woman, for instance, wants to be a lawyer one day and to “advocate for others who have been trafficked.” Another expressed a dream to “run a stall in the market, selling clothes; to be an upstanding Christian; and to get married.” A third said, “I want to lead a quiet life as a “normal woman” and not srey kouch. I want to give my daughter the education I never had and opportunities I have never had.” Another was very pragmatic in her hopes for the future: “I want to become financially independent of my husband in case he divorces me or dies. To do that I want to own my own beauty salon business.”

CFBO Perspectives on Driving Factors of Sex Trafficking

CFBO representatives repeatedly stated their understanding of underlying causes of sex trafficking in Cambodia. Results revealed that of the 11 CFBOs interviewed, 10 spoke to causes of sex trafficking related to a) poverty, b) powerlessness, c) cultural norm contributions, d) parental contributions and e) the legacy of the Khmer Rouge.

Poverty

Results analyzing CFBO statements regarding factors contributing to sex trafficking in Cambodia indicated that poverty was a common theme. Five CFBO representatives reasoned that poor families in Cambodia were vulnerable to injustices because societal structures favored the rich and socially powerful. Particularly, accounts provided by CFBO representatives indicated that “poor, uneducated girls” ended up in sex work and prostitution “because they lack other options” to financially support their families. One CFBO representative explained how poor families were particularly vulnerable to foreign pedophiles and sex tourists who “prey upon parents to sell their children.” The representative explained that “some people are so poor, they’re even willing to sell their own children into the sex trade to survive – and [our organization] isn’t ok with that.”

Powerlessness

Results of CFBO representative statements indicated that there were also frequent themes of powerlessness and a lack of agency regarding factors contributing to sex trafficking. One of the most prominent messages promulgated by anti-trafficking CFBOs about the women and girls they assist is the view of these individuals as “victims.” One CFBO director, an experienced psychologist, described her perspective on factors leading to the involvement of women and girls in prostitution:

My view of it all is that I only ever met one girl in Cambodia who went into sex work who had no regrets. Every other girl I’ve counseled over the years has told me that they regretted it. Most said they were forced into prostitution, and they were physically and emotionally abused, humiliated, and cheated. These are the girls’ words. I’m not just coming in as a Westerner and judging against sex work because I don’t happen to like it. Based on what girls have told me over the years I consider all women in sex work and prostitution to be victims of sex work, sex slavery, and sex-trafficking.

These themes of powerlessness and regret were echoed by several other CFBO representatives.

Cultural Norms Contributors

CFBO representative accounts described contributors to trafficking carrying themes of the *srey laor neak* ideal, which operates on the tenet that women must remain chaste. Specifically, two CFBO representatives noted how the loss of virginity made women (and girls) increasingly vulnerable to sex trafficking. In their accounts they explained that due to cultural norms that exist in Cambodian society, women and girls who have lost their virginity, either by choice, rape, or sexual abuse, were more at risk of ending up in prostitution and trafficked because they are viewed as impure and were therefore undervalued in their communities.

Parental Contributions

Several CFBO representatives reported common beliefs that parental choices are a direct cause of sexual abuse and trafficking of young women and girls. Several CFBOs explained how parental views and behaviors contributed to the sex trafficking of children in Cambodia. Results of the interview with one CFBO director revealed themes of filial piety, and the Confucian value that demands respect for one's parents, as a contributing factor to sex trafficking. In their account, one representative stated that because Cambodian culture sometimes requires girls to pay their parents for being born, some daughters use prostitution as a way to help to support their families financially. This message was consistent with the statement provided by an expatriate female staff member: "Parents use filial piety against their children, for evil, and for selfish gain." Additionally, some CFBOs asserted that parents intentionally sold their children into prostitution. In a blog post about parents and financial motivations, one CFBO shared their perspectives on parental contributions to sex trafficking: "Sadly, the odds are this kid's father played a role in her being here. He is most likely sitting at home drinking whiskey, gambling or doing drugs, all paid for by his daughter's flesh."

Results also revealed themes of parental weakness and inability to protect their children as being a contributing factor to child sex trafficking. CFBO representative #5 stated their belief that oftentimes CFBOs have to protect the children from their own parents. They went on to state that CFBOs often offer the only positive parental presence in the lives of the girls, and asked that others in the Western world make an effort to get involved:

I know that I or one of my team is the closest thing so many of these kids will ever experience to the love of a father ... to all of us living in the West, these kids need each of us to step up and be their mothers and fathers, their brothers and sisters!

The Khmer Rouge Legacy

Several CFBOs highlighted the negative impact of the Khmer Rouge legacy on their beneficiaries' parents. This finding is consistent with accounts of scholars and survivors of the Khmer Rouge period, as they agree that virtually all Cambodians who directly lived through this time experienced some degree of trauma (Kinzie et al., 1984). In their public digital space, several CFBOs attributed the cause of trafficking to the Khmer Rouge legacy on Cambodian society and family. The CFBOs concluded that the decimation of the family caused by the Khmer Rouge introduced the need for kids to raise themselves independent of the presence of role models. One CFBO representative put it this way:

The family unit was systematically torn apart during the Killing Fields revolution [sic]. This has a large impact on the children of these survivors. Parents suffering, untreated, from post-traumatic stress disorder can fail to provide necessary safety for children at risk of being trafficked, and sometimes become desperate enough to sell their own children into situations of exploitation.

In contrast to portraying parents as the enemy victimizing their own children, this portrayal of parents who survived the Khmer Rouge era transforms parents into victims and survivors themselves. Specifically, through this lens, CFBO representatives often portrayed parents as being damaged psychologically from the Khmer Rouge and thus unable to protect their children from trafficking.

CFBO Marketing and Religion

In reviewing both the themes of participant interviews as well as the publicized content available on the marketing materials and websites of the CFBOs, several themes emerged. Themes of CFBOs include a) a focus on western audiences, b) use of slavery metaphors, and c) considerations of confidentiality and dignity. In contrast, survivors overwhelmingly noted feelings of disrespect and dishonor associated with CFBO marketing. Together, results revealed significant discrepancies in samples regarding the perception and goals of the marketing of CFBOs and their services.

CFBO Perspectives and Themes

Western Audiences

The first theme that emerged regarding CFBO marketing and messaging was the overt target of the messaging to western audiences outside of Cambodia and others in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) group. Results revealed that messages are designed to resonate with Evangelical Christians in Western countries, that is, Christians who are or will or could be sympathetic to the CFBO's emphasis on individual human redemption. The use of distinctly Christian concepts such as "mission," "ministry," "church," and "pray" are noteworthy and repeated in several marketing materials including:

Join us in our mission to eradicate sex-slavery in Cambodia! We need support from our friends around the globe.

Every purchase you make is an investment in freedom.

Engage your church [to free these victims]

We are always interested in people who want to pray for us and for Cambodia.

Give donations and pray.

The equating of the work of the CFBO with God/God's plan for humanity, and subsequent appeal for Christians to respond with prayer and financial giving was a constant theme of marketing materials. Relatedly, these messages to international audiences very often focused on the individual action that someone can do to help "solve," "cure" and/or "rescue" people from sex trafficking and exploitation.

War Metaphors

Found in the current results and in previous studies, CFBOs also commonly used slavery metaphors in their marketing materials (Bales, 2012; Eichler, 2015) and war rhetoric to describe their struggle and fight against sex trafficking. For example, some CFBO representatives described their beneficiaries as "prisoners of war." One CFBO representative described Cambodia as "ground zero" and another described their efforts as "Christ's church fighting the ground war on sex-trafficking in Cambodia." Another CFBO representative described its founder as hearing "... the call to arms" and referring to its staff as "foot soldiers." Another described itself as "ordinary people who became unlikely heroes in fighting evil" One CFBO website asserted that it was committed to "fighting to end trafficking in our lifetime" and that "... as long as sex-trafficking and child sexual exploitation exist in our world, we will continue to fight and be advocates on behalf of the enslaved and vulnerable." At the same time this marketing also warned the war will not be won unless there are more people on their side of the battle: "Until there are more people determined to stand and fight for these kids than there are people willing to sell and abuse them, we will not win."

The addition of a theological dimension is often used to amplify this message, as CFBOs (unintentionally or not) equate their role with God's for the redemption of humanity.

[We] exist to Rescue, Restore, Protect, Empower and be a Voice for the Voiceless.

Our sole purpose is to offer a new life of freedom to victims of sex-trafficking and sex-exploitation in Cambodia.

Our purpose is singular; we restore broken lives ... we do whatever it takes for as long as it takes to restore life in all its fullness.

Her hope was not in a government or politicians, but in a Christian non-profit powered by Jesus' Church.

Confidentiality and Dignity

In contrast to the emotive depictions and narrative of "slavery" used by the majority of CFBOs, one CFBO used instead human rights as a way to frame its discourse, simply describing beneficiaries as "victims of trafficking" and "victims of sexual exploitation." This CFBO did not describe nor depict beneficiaries as slaves or women/girls who had been tricked or trapped.

Though it remained their target audience for services, another CFBO did not refer to trafficking or to their beneficiaries at all in their marketing materials and messaging. Their public description of beneficiaries was startlingly simple and brief: "[Our] non-profit organization ... empowers and skills Cambodian women ...". Staff from this CFBO unanimously spoke about the importance of maintaining strict confidentiality and treating their beneficiaries with dignity, which they defined in part as taking great care to not disclose their beneficiaries' past experiences even by association.

The reason why we don't put stuff on our website, advertise, or let people know the girls we work with were formerly sexually exploited and sex trafficked is because it's not dignifying. That's the biggest thing for us ... this is about their new life so we don't want any reminders of their old life so ... it feels gossipy. We've got girls who have been through programs from other places, and they are too embarrassed to show people the certificates they have earned from their programs because if they show that certificate then everyone knows about their past and what they have come out of ... we don't want them to be embarrassed to say, 'this is where I work.' We really believe in upholding their confidentiality and dignity.

This final CFBO stands in contrast to the other ten interviewed. This CFBO sells its food products to raise the necessary funds to operate, without ever portraying employees as "beneficiaries," "victims," or "slaves." This CFBO does not advertise itself as a "social enterprise." Rather emphasizing providing a quality service that attracts adequate business to make a profit, money which is then used to pay for the support services they provide to the women that are in their care.

Survivor perspectives/themes

Though CFBOs reported their purpose was to assist and restore women who were victims or survivors of trafficking, survivors reported that the marketing and messaging of CFBOs, especially those featuring or "outing" survivors, would often instead contribute to feelings of dishonor and disrespect.

Dishonor and Disrespect

The frustration experienced by survivors is clearly illuminated by the way two women in particular were featured by the CFBO that sought to serve them. The first woman spoke about how important it is in Cambodian culture to be treated with dignity and honor. She then reported feeling dishonored by the CFBO assisting her, specifically noting feeling dishonored by the pity sought from foreigners using her life story: "... I understand my organization wants to help us. They need money to do this and they get it through pity from foreigners. The brochures seem to make them feel sad for us." However, this woman also reported that the leaflets/portrayal did not generate sympathy among Cambodian patrons of the restaurant and often made living in her residential town more difficult.

Similarly, a second woman expressed her concerns that CFBO portrayals were potentially detrimental, yet she reasoned that because she benefited from their assistance, she would simply endure the hardship they caused her. She was particularly worried some of her friends who featured in CFBO videos might later regret their decisions. In her analysis, she compared CFBO videos to pornographic videos as in both cases, the subjects of the videos had been coerced and would thereby face a lifetime of stigma due to the loss of control of their story and their image.

Labeling and Stigma

Both survivors and CFBO representatives voiced experiences of stigma, discrimination, and labelling that happens to victims and survivors of sex trafficking. While CFBO perspectives broadly focused on the themes within societal norms, survivors spoke primarily of the contributions of the CFBOs to their stigmatization.

CFBO perspectives/themes

Some CFBO staff expressed an awareness of the reality of stigma as something adversely affecting their beneficiaries. Specifically, CFBO representatives noted themes of a) *srey kouc*, and b) purity and sexuality in contributing to the stigma experienced by survivors in Cambodia.

Srey Kouc

One Cambodian CFBO staff member strongly expressed her views about the concept of *srey kouc* (“broken woman” in Khmer). Though she personally had never experienced prostitution or any form of sexual violence, in her work she had counseled many women with such experiences. As a compatriot, having lived in Cambodia her entire life, this woman expressed empathy with women who had been commercial sex workers.

I think our culture is not fair to women. Our society has double standards between men and women. We value women who are sexually pure, which means women must remain virgins until marriage and then faithful afterwards ... However, for men it does not seem to matter they have sex with prostitutes, girlfriends and mistresses on the side. But for women, this matters. Everyone looks down on the promiscuous woman and stigmatises the sex worker for selling sex. She is despised, disrespected and shunned because they think she is impure and a very bad person. People see her life as worthless, and they call her *Srey Kouc* ... This thinking is so different from our organization’s way. We listen to our beneficiaries’ stories and see they have suffered a lot in their lives. They deserve our pity not our scorn.

From this person’s standpoint as a Cambodian woman, her own culture’s biased and discrepant gendered expectations, particularly regarding chastity and promiscuity were a source of frustration and anger. Though she did not clarify her specific understanding of “suffering” (whether it was their experience of prostitution and/or bearing the label of *srey kouc*, or other hardships in their lives) in this CFBO staff member’s opinion, women who had worked in the commercial sex trade clearly deserved pity, understanding, and care, not stigma and blame.

An expatriate male CFBO director expressed his frustration with how his organization’s beneficiaries were treated by their communities when they attempted to return to their home communities. His CFBO considered all their beneficiaries to be victims of prostitution, thus not at fault and not *srey kouc*. Despite the CFBO ostensibly treating the women with dignity and respect, when the women and girls returned to their original communities, he reports, they were immediately stigmatized as *broken women*.

The bottom line is that these girls, when they go through therapy, they learn they have inherent value. We try to communicate to them that they are not trash and they are not at fault for what happened to them. Being forced into prostitution and sexually exploited is a crime. These girls are victims of this. We don’t blame the victims, do we? ... But the truth is, from a cultural standpoint, back in society they are trash. We haven’t changed the community; we haven’t changed the culture of Cambodia. After they leave us, our social workers follow up every month to check up on and encourage them. They have observed and overheard people’s gossip referring to our former beneficiaries as *srey kouc* and other bad names. Society blames and stigmatizes our girls.

Purity and Sexuality

In contrast, two CFBOs portrayed their beneficiaries as comparable to *srey laor neak* – the ideal that women must remain chaste, regardless of circumstance. From this perspective these CFBO

representatives explained that women and girls who have lost their virginity, either by choice, rape, or sexual abuse, were more at risk of ending up in prostitution because their value decreased as a result of transgressing culturally defined sexual mores. Of note, there was no mention of the culpability of the perpetrator of violence and/or exploitation against these women and girls.

Survivor perspectives/themes

The understanding of victimization held by the CFBOs often contrasts with understanding of the concept among survivors. As an example, contrary to expatriate staff views of their beneficiaries as “victims deserving of support and sympathy,” several of the women participating in this study said that they had experienced harsh stigmatization and blame from family, neighbors, and the wider community. Rather than being treated as blameless and innocent victims, these women reported being regarded in Cambodian society as immoral or “broken” according to prevailing social norms in Cambodia. Further, several survivors noted themes related to the contributions of both the CFBO and society to this stigma.

CFBO Contribution to Stigma

One of the survivors expressed her anxiety about CFBO depictions of its beneficiaries who worked in its social enterprise restaurant. As this woman’s English language skills improved, she realized that the leaflets and signs written in English stated that all its employees were “former sex workers” – what she was told was confidential information – in its effort to motivate people to “do good” (support the CFBO enterprise). Upon realizing how she and her peers were being advertised, and thus recognizing that all the customers who came into the restaurant would be aware that she formerly worked in the commercial sex industry, the woman said that she felt exposed and vulnerable.

While I think anti-trafficking organizations are good because they help us, still I think they do not know how much they hurt us. In our culture, honor and dignity is really important and that is why most women who stop doing sex work want to keep their past stories a secret. However, when customers read our [CFBO] leaflets and look at the images, it means people I never met before already know I used to be a sex worker. I think foreigners, who are mostly Christians pity us. But, when Cambodians read these leaflets, I can see they look down on me and blame me for my past. To them I am *srey kouc*.

This woman observed that while foreigners may have regarded the staff as “victims” deserving of pity, Cambodians instead saw *srey kouc*, that is – women deserving blame and judgment for immoral behavior. She said that she wanted neither pity nor disdain: in her own words, she simply desired control over her own story, both her past and the future she wanted to write.

Another woman who recognized how she and her peers were being defined by a CFBO outlined two problems resulting from the content of the CFBO public materials. The first was her personal experience of being stigmatized at school. When classmates discovered she was sponsored by a CFBO, they looked up the organization on-line, and found that it assisted “victims of sex-trafficking.” Eventually, though the sponsoring CFBO advocated against mistreatment, this woman had to leave that school to ensure her physical safety.

One rich girl looked up our organization on the Internet and learned my shelter helps girls who have been trafficked into prostitution. After she found this out, she spread lots of mean gossip about me around the school. She told everyone that I was a sex worker. Everyone, even some teachers started calling me *srey kouc*. I was so ashamed. When I tried to explain, some kids beat me up. After a while of this, [the CFBO] moved me to another school because I was not safe.

The concern that this woman raised was that many CFBOs feature actual details about the beneficiaries on their websites and in other public media for awareness-raising or fund-raising. Several of the woman’s peers at the CFBO had been in these videos, their story and faces splashed across the internet. Though in theory each of the women who were featured likely provided consent, this woman’s view

was that in reality, the women felt compelled or obligated to agree to participate because they were in a situation of complete reliance upon the CFBO.

Though her friends had been reassured by the CFBO that their images would only be viewed by people who wanted to help victims of sex trafficking (i.e., Western Christian audiences in Western countries), another woman's own experience confirmed this was not true. In contrast, she had directly experienced stigma and oppression as a direct result of such public portrayals. She feared that her friends might also be targeted and bullied as a result of being featured in CFBO promotional materials, because, she explained: "Anyone and everyone can get on the internet. It is not just for people in America; whether people are sympathetic is not relevant. Anyone can see the internet."

Society's Contribution to Stigma

The women in this study consistently reflected upon their fears of being despised, shamed, or discovered by others in society. The following reflection exemplifies this:

People in our society think that if one fish in a basket stinks, then all the other fish stink People in my community always look down and spread bad gossip about prostitutes. They think we [prostitutes] are all bad and immoral *srey kouc*. They don't know our suffering and they make our suffering worse by blaming us. No one in my community knows my past story and every day I live in fear that I will be found out. I fear that my husband and his parents will reject me. I fear that people will look down on my children because their mother is *srey kouc*. Living with this secret causes me so much pressure [because] I fear one day being found out.

Taken together, CFBO portrayals in the public sphere analyzed for the current research often contrasted sharply with how the survivors viewed themselves; and were sometimes experienced as harmful to the women. While most of the CFBO staff interviewed expressed awareness that the prevailing social stigma against women involved in prostitution was distressing and disconcerting for those women, none applied this understanding to their own organization's public portrayals of the women.

Discussion

As evidenced by the current results, CFBO portrayals of female sex trafficking survivors can render the women they seek to serve particularly vulnerable to societal stigma and internalized feelings of powerlessness. Portrayals of the survivors in CFBO owned local businesses, as well as in the media without informed approval hinders the agency of the survivors, as it takes away their right to decide what parts of their stories they want to share and the way in which they want to share it. CFBO portrayals of the women (and girls) in their care as victims tend to be individualized, generalized, and reflective of prevailing ideologies of power and privilege rather than a true reflection of how those women/girls understand and make sense of their own personal situation. As Eichler (2016, p. 159) notes: "This individualization within the anti-trafficking discourse phenomenon—which is deeply entangled in the global political economy—limits a nation's responsibility to tackle worldwide inequality." The lack of agency offered by CFBO-chosen marketing can be detrimental to the mental health of survivors, as it likely impacts their self-image, feelings of self-efficacy, and sense of control (Chambers, 2019; Hagan et al. 2021).

Understanding the Complex Etiology of Exploitation

First, several of the CFBO leaders and members voiced various perspectives on the leading causes for sex trafficking in Cambodia. Their accounts attributed several cultural factors as contributors to sex trafficking including contributions of societal norms as well as the influence of parenting. While it may be true that socio-cultural norms, as well as intergenerational trauma caused by the Khmer Rouge legacy are some of the contributing aspects to the current sex trafficking situation, such a limited rendering does not account for individual experience. More importantly, this perspective neglects to

take into account much larger national and global socio-economic realities that have massive impacts on sex trafficking and its survivors (Barner et al., 2018). Future efforts must be aimed at understanding the larger, structural failures that contribute to practices of sex trafficking, eventually leading to intervention efforts that focus on dismantling such broken systems.

Survivor-led Marketing

As evidenced by the current results, CFBO portrayals of female sex trafficking survivors can render the women they seek to serve particularly vulnerable to societal stigma and internalized feelings of powerlessness. Portrayals of the survivors in CFBO owned local businesses, as well as in the media without informed approval hinders the agency of the survivors, as it takes away their right to decide what parts of their stories they want to share and the way in which they want to share them. CFBO portrayals of the women (and girls) in their care as victims tend to be individualized, generalized, and reflective of prevailing ideologies of power and privilege rather than a true reflection of how those women/girls understand and make sense of their own personal situation. As Eichler (2015, p. 159) notes: “This individualization within the anti-trafficking discourse phenomenon – which is deeply entangled in the global political economy – limits a nation’s responsibility to tackle worldwide inequality.” The 18 women who participated in this study see themselves in a very different way than how they are portrayed by CFBOs. The lack of agency offered by CFBO-chosen marketing can be detrimental to the mental health of survivors, as it likely impacts their self-image, feelings of self-efficacy, and sense of control (Chambers, 2019; Hagan et al., 2021).

Moving forward, it is imperative that CFBO leaders and members honor the perspectives and desires of survivors when depicting their experiences to public audiences. Specifically, Christian organizations that work with vulnerable populations who are particularly discriminated against would benefit from recognizing the individuality, personal agency, and basic human rights of the people they are serving. Better yet, these organizations should listen to the perspectives of the people within their care and involve those people in decisions about how they will be cared for, and how they will be publicly portrayed. More strategically, and daringly, survivors of sexual abuse and trafficking could be invited to become NGO board members, and from that vantage, give a much needed, first-hand perspective about their reality. Given the negative repercussions of women being associated with prostitution in Cambodia, it is imperative that CFBOs pay much closer attention to the way they advertise their work and portray their beneficiaries. Failure to do so will continue to jeopardize the future of the very people they seek to help, and likely have on-going negative implications for future generations.

Furthermore, the primary target of messaging produced by CFBOs is largely, not intended for a domestic audience of Cambodians or others in the ASEAN group. Rather the messages are designed to resonate with Evangelical Christians in Western countries (perhaps especially the USA where most of the CFBOs originated), Christians who are or will or could be sympathetic to the CFBO’s emphasis on individual human redemption. This global audience often serves to spiritualize human trafficking and sexual exploitation as it removes attention from very human systemic problems and global complexities that contribute to exploitation. Instead, this marketing focuses on immediate personal action meant assuage the audience’s conscience and get them to support. In order to assist in the structural inequities contributing to vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation, organizations may benefit from diversifying their target audience, noting the power that can also come from change within local communities and their members.

Perpetrator Culpability

The concept of justice is largely absent in CFBO portrayals of the causes and solutions to sex trafficking. Not one CFBO implicated male responsibility nor discussed the demand side of the prostitution equation. No CFBOs referenced domestic or global inequalities. Instead, one CFBO staff shared that

the beneficiaries of his organization regarded suffering as their “fate” (*karma*). While they would not have chosen such a fate, they considered their suffering as a normal part of life; that is, their experience of (unjust) situations which cause suffering was inescapable. Though the perspectives and voice of survivors should never be questioned, the view of this suffering being a part of the life of their beneficiaries omits much of the discrimination, stigma, and inequality faced by women in Cambodia and globally (C. Campbell & Gibbs, 2016; Morrison et al., 2021; Stangl et al., 2019).

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study is not without its limitations. First, the sample of CFBO representatives includes only a portion of faith-based organizations operating throughout Cambodia and Southeast Asia targeting the trafficking and exploitation of people. As such, the generalization of the current results should be done with caution. Though a diversity of opinions and perspectives were expressed in the current study, it is possible that CFBO representatives and survivor perspectives were influenced by the fact that both had a current involvement with the CFBOs. The representatives may have wanted to paint the organization in a positive light, and the fact that survivors were currently receiving services from the CFBOs could have influenced their answers. Future research would benefit from a focus on understanding the positive and negative impact of certain efforts by CFBOs – specifically which ones are serving survivors best and/or are led by survivor voice and perspective. Second, the current study is limited in its demographic information regarding both survivors and CFBO representatives. Future research may consider collecting more comprehensive demographic and socioeconomic information on participants to more fully understand if and how this may influence perspectives on this work. Ultimately, CFBOs play a major role in the anti-human trafficking effort in Cambodia and globally. Given this influence, and similar to all efforts worldwide, there remains a need for ongoing examination of the impact of services, marketing, and relationships on the health and wellbeing of survivors of sexual exploitation.

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