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# Shifting Cambodia Away from its Economic Dependence on Human Trafficking

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# Shifting Cambodia Away from its Economic Dependence on Human Trafficking

## Introduction

Human trafficking is an issue that has become increasingly complex as more people and countries become involved in the chain of illegally trading humans. It has grown to an extent that it seems almost impossible to eradicate without shaking up the economies and governments of the affected countries. Moreover, there has been a significant increase in human trafficking over the last few years despite the presence of government policies and non-governmental organizations (NGO's).

My interest of human trafficking focuses on the trafficking of women and girls in Cambodia for the purposes of sexual exploitation and forced labor. Studying the root of human trafficking in Cambodia is of interest because it will help to reveal the dependence of its economy on human trafficking. In order to clarify the direction of my research, I would first like to define some terms in the context in which I will be using them. First, human trafficking refers to the trafficking of women and girls in brothels across Cambodia. It also refers to the transport of girls through Cambodia from other neighboring countries, such as Vietnam. Second, international trafficking refers to human trafficking around the globe and therefore not involved in human trafficking in or through the United States. Third, economic dependence refers to Cambodia's reliance on human trafficking as a large source of revenue that contributes to sustaining the economy in a sustainable state.

In my research findings, there was significant information about human trafficking in Cambodia. More specifically, I focused on the causes of the increase in human trafficking in Cambodia. I found that there were a handful of reasons, including the rural and urban poverty gap, corrupt government and officials, and tourism that contributed to some of the main causes. I also found that there were a number of non-governmental organizations and policies (both domestic and international) that were implemented, but did not work for the same reasons listed previously. There was an evident positive correlation between the increase in human trafficking and the increased number of different causes of the human trafficking in Cambodia.

I became interested in this trend and began wondering why the various policies and NGO's were not being effective in reducing the chain of the illegal trade of humans in Cambodia. I concluded that NGOs and government policies may only serve to try to stop human trafficking at a personal level, such as punishing the traffickers or "empowering" the individuals who are at risk, but not taking care of the problem systematically, as in, changing an entire system as the economy.

<sup>1</sup> Mohanty, Chandra Talpade "Feminism without Borders" Durham: Duke UP, 2003 56.

<sup>2</sup> McCauley, Heather L., Michele R. Decker, and Jay G. Silverman "Trafficking Experiences and Violence Victimization of Sex-trafficked Young Women in Cambodia." *International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics* (2010): 266-67.

<sup>3</sup> Mam, Somaly, and Ruth Marshall *The Road of Lost Innocence* New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2008 175-78.

<sup>4</sup> McCabe, Kimberly A., and Sabita Manian *Sex Trafficking: a Global Perspective* Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2010 33-45.

<sup>5</sup> Derks, Annuska. "Trafficking of Vietnamese Women and Children to Cambodia." *IOM and Centre for Advanced Studies*: 8. *Gender Studies Database*. Web. 02 Feb. 2011.

<sup>6</sup> *Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000*. Fact Sheet.

<sup>7</sup> Batstone, David B. *Not for Sale: the Return of the Global Slave Trade-- and How We Can Fight It* New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007.

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<sup>9</sup> Bernstein, Elizabeth. "Militarized Humanitarianism Meets Carceral Feminism: The Politics of Sex, Rights, and Freedom in Contemporary Antitrafficking Campaigns." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 36.1 (2010): 45-71.

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Most NGOs and activists may think that problems happen at an individual level. Elizabeth Bernstein, in her article, states how people think that there are “bad men” and “bad women” making sex trafficking happen. However, this is far from the case. Women and men are just reacting to oppressive economic, political, and cultural condition, some perpetuated by their won governments, many perpetuated by the west. Examples of these conditions are sweatshops, corrupt government policy, corrupt government officials, and the opening of free markets for the exploitation of workers by western corporations. The west has been trying to instill the “neo-liberal” mentality (the idea of individualism and free markets) in these countries by creating situations where the poor are exploited. Therefore, people find an alternative to exploitation from the government and West sweat shops in human trafficking. It’s only a reaction. So, NGOs and activists who try to incarcerate the “individual men” who abduct the women, or teach the “individual women” how use sewing machines so they can do “other work,” or teach communities the “good western values of masculinity and femininity” will never solve the problem, because they are just focusing on interpersonal interactions and not the systemic problem.<sup>9</sup>

In order to help Cambodia develop a stable bridge towards a stable economy without the dependence of human trafficking, it is useful to discuss the issue through the theory of post-colonial feminism, which is a concept proposed by Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her academic book called, *Feminism Without Borders*. She stated that in order to change or impact the views of a society, country, or group of people, it is important to look at the situation from their perspective. By doing this, one can impact change from the inside out and understand the situations from the perspective of the affected nation rather than from a biased or Westerner perspective. Change is more effective if it is implemented from a post-colonial feminist point of view<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, even though one may take someone out of sexual slavery, Westerners run the risk of enslaving them again by putting them to work in a sweat shop (Bernstein). Thus, post-colonial feminism helps to understand that what may seem like good intentions on the part of westerners (whether its NGOs, activists, Christian leaders, or feminists), could very well be another oppressive force that enslaves the women and children in new ways. The colonizing by westerners can happen in two way. 1) by trying to define the situation for the women in human trafficking as opposed to letting the women themselves define the situation. 2) by putting them to work in a capitalistic world where the rules are set by westerners only and disregard the needs of Cambodian or south east Asian women.

It is also important to note that although many people believe that all women and girls who are being trafficked are forced to do so against their own will, it is not always true. Many women and girls in East Asia and the Pacific voluntarily chose to go into the trafficking business because they would like to get more money, tourist visas, or other financial and security benefits. McCabe and Manian also note that women and girls who are trafficked tend to develop strong bonds with their traffickers or pimp due to a language barrier or other cultural barriers.<sup>4</sup> Some

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people may think that the women and girls have the worst relationships with their traffickers, but that is not always true since trafficking can be a voluntary act in many cases. This fact is hard to accept for many western social workers and activists, but it is essential to understand where the women and girls in Cambodia are coming from, what they are feeling, why they may reject what many consider being help, and how to work with them to improve the situation. As privileged people working in the Western world, we cannot take on a position where we think “we know better, or where we think we can impose our values and our solutions to a problem we don’t even want to understand if we don’t take what the survivors of human trafficking feel or say seriously.

Furthermore, I will now discuss the current situation of the human trafficking in Cambodia, previous solutions that have been implemented to prevent the continuation of the problem, and how the economy of Cambodia can create a platform to fall on once as it slowly tries to break away from human trafficking.

### **Causes of Dependence on Human Trafficking**

In regards to some background information on trafficking in Cambodia, it is important to understand that more than half – about 52.2% of girls and women who are trafficked in Cambodia are under the age of 18. Also, 29.2 % of the girls and women who are trafficked, are done so under the knowledge of their parents who are also involved and tied up with the process.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, family members may be involved and the process may be forced or voluntary. This indicates the aspect of the increased urban and rural poverty gap. The families in the rural areas are so poor that they are forced to sell their women and girls to brothels in exchange for a small amount of money. The parents become involved because they are desperate to get money to provide for their entire family. Therefore, human trafficking is essentially providing a balance for the increasing poverty gap. The richer the elite get, the poorer the lower class becomes, forcing them to resort to trafficking their women and girls. Although this may seem to be helping sustain a balance in the economy of Cambodia, it may also be making the situation worse because many of the brothels that buy the women and girls tell the families that they will be paid at a later time or get paid very little. Therefore, the rural population remains in its same condition or an even worse condition while the number of people involved in the human trafficking chain increases while benefitting from the process.

The presence of corrupt government practices and officials also contributes to how Cambodia’s governing body actually promotes the maintenance of the human trafficking brothels because they provide a source of revenue. The corrupt officials actually have allowed the brothel leaders around the country to become so powerful that even they cannot be put in jail for being caught in the act of human trafficking. For example, in the novel called, *The Road of Lost Innocence*, Somaly who was a rescued victim of human trafficking describes the first hand situations that she faced everyday. She also provided an account of a non-governmental

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organization called AFESIP (Acting for Women in Distressing Situations), which rescued girls from the brothels. In 2004, there was a case with the biggest brothel called, Chai Hour II, which raided the shelter where AFESIP housed the girls. The brothel took the girls back from the hotel shelter. The author commented on an interesting point stating, “What can you do when the mafias that run the trade in women become so rich they are more powerful than the law.”<sup>3</sup> In understanding this situation, it is evident that Cambodia’s government is suppressing the need to close brothels and put the criminals in jail because they provide its economy with the money that they need. Therefore, Cambodia is resorting to human trafficking in order to prevent its economy from collapsing due to a lack of money.

Furthermore, tourism has also contributed to the reason why human trafficking has been hard for Cambodia’s economy to do away with completely. The tourists from other countries come specifically to Cambodia or other East Asian and Pacific countries in order to pay for women and girls. Again, this helps bring in much of the revenue that Cambodia’s economy needs, and without human trafficking, it would lose a major source of revenue. Elina Penttinen describes how people continuously face different ethnoscares such as tourism, immigrants, refugees, exiles, and guestworkers. This movement of people creates the movement of international capital, production and technology, and immigration policies of the different countries.<sup>8</sup> This concept is an idea of how Cambodia has adjusted its economy and policies in order to adapt to the movement of tourists, traffickers, refugees, and other people.

In light of these key elements that have caused Cambodia to become dependent on human trafficking in order to maintain its economy, it is necessary to note that other countries in East Asia and the Pacific also rely on Cambodia’s economy in order to sustain their own economy. This is so because countries like Vietnam use Cambodia as an intermediary in trafficking as they have set up brothels that communicate with each other through networks in different countries.

### Implications

“Cambodia is perceived as a country where money can be easily earned, especially since the opening up of the country for the liberal market economy induced an economic boom.”<sup>5</sup>

Although Cambodia has developed this title as the country where money can be easily attained, its economy is being sustained with a black market economy and because of all of the wrong reasons: corruption, tourism, and increased poverty in Cambodia.

Although there may be concrete solutions in the future, I would like to propose a new way of thinking about this issue more systematically. Thus, solutions to this problem could be a combination of Cambodian policy making, protesting and changing the western influences on the local economics, building a sense of community in different parts of Cambodia so people feel like they can take care of each other and survive oppressive economic forces. This means changing the efforts being done currently by NGOs and activists, who focus solely on individuals, and start working with local leaders to build community and change that will help

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people survive. These economic models have not yet been created, but I am proposing a new approach, an approach that will hopefully be heard by some NGOs and activists to change their ways, prevent them from colonizing these people and their experiences, and build a sense of community and alternative economics.

Additionally, it is necessary for Cambodia to, slowly, let go of its dependence on trafficking in order to create a better society, government, and country. If Cambodia continues its corrupting path with trafficking, then the complexities involved in trafficking will become worse and the situation may come to a point where it can no longer break away from human trafficking.

In order to help Cambodia become independent from human trafficking, it is necessary to look at the long term solutions that can be implemented so that the situation can be slowly alleviated. It is essential to think about the solutions or implications with the idea that one is not necessarily going to solve the problem of human trafficking, but rather propose a variety of long term goals that may have a greater impact on the overall state of the economy. First, I will describe a number of programs that have already been implemented in order to alleviate the problem of human trafficking. Then, I will discuss how these programs and new viewpoints, such as the post-colonial feminism theory, can be used to provide Cambodia's economy with a strong platform to stand on while it slowly progresses away from the complex chain of trafficking.

First, there is an act called the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, which was established in 2000 in order to prevent human trafficking and brothels from rising and going out of control at a fast rate. It was established by the United States in order to protect the trafficked victims and prevent trafficking overseas. Cambodia is part of this act and meets its minimum standards for following the rules put forth by the law, but the surrounding countries around Cambodia do not fall within minimum standards of the number of victims that are trafficked. Therefore, Cambodia is essentially forced to work with the surrounding countries in order to help them with the transport of trafficked victims in their country. This is an example of international government intervention, which is a long term tactic that many other countries need to implement as well.

The IJM (International Justice Mission), which protects the justice of sexually trafficked victims, has adopted four organizational strategies which include the following: victim relief, perpetrator accountability, victim aftercare, and structural prevention. In order to help Cambodia lose its dependence on human trafficking, the fourth strategy can be implemented, which states that it is necessary to strengthen community factors that decrease the "vulnerability of at-risk population, empower local authorities to stop abuses, and deter potential oppressors."<sup>7</sup> Thus, by implementing the fourth strategy in Cambodia, its economy can become stable by pulling itself out of the black market revenue, actually enforce the policies against human trafficking, and support the 26 different non-governmental organizations that are present in Cambodia.<sup>2</sup>

David Batstone also suggested a different approach to alleviating the problem of human trafficking Cambodia. His approach did not directly affect or help the economy of Cambodia, but

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it promoted awareness of the situation. I agree with some of his approaches because Cambodia's government will see the human trafficking awareness that people have created will become more likely to help their own situation by reducing the amount of corrupt events that take place. The number of methods include: shooting a home movie and making it viral, shaping government policy, and creating an international network for research on slavery in communities. Therefore, this method of intervention is instilling the idea that one person can make a difference to help Cambodia's government realize the magnitude of the problem and its future implications if it does not do anything to prevent it.

Lastly, I believe that by helping Cambodia's government establishment alternative institutions, it will be able to ease into a smoother transition. In other words, if the government is helped with building new policies, programs, and ideas of their choice, they can slowly move into an economic state where it can leave the older, corrupt and western policies and programs behind since they have already developed these alternative institutions.

### Conclusion

It is evident that there are several different causes of human trafficking that provides revenue to the economy of Cambodia. Therefore, the government has not implemented any strict regulations to stop human trafficking because it has become embedded in their system. In order to help Cambodia steering away from human trafficking without having its economy break down, it is necessary to propose a systemic solution rooted in economics, where an overhaul of the economic system is needed to solve the situation of human trafficking. The overhaul of an economic system is guided by post-colonial feminism. This system must not include systems of oppression, but rather systems that understand the issue from within and with the perspective of the Cambodian people.

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