SEX WORK AND TRAFFICKING IN ”WESTERN” DISCOURSE

Examining the dissonances between US narratives and Cambodian women’s experiences

Author: Johanna MANSSON DELERCE
Supervisor: Maria ERIKSSON BAAZ

Word count: 19882
Pages: 68
Abstract

By examining Cambodia as a case study, this thesis is exploring the resonances and dissonances between “Western” discourse reflected in US policies and NGOs and women’s experiences of sex work and trafficking. The massive attention to human trafficking driven by the US “War on trafficking” has undoubtedly had tremendous consequences on women’s lives in Cambodia, as the US still exerts a very prominent influence on the country especially through development aid. Examining the discourse upheld by US policies and NGOs in relation to that particular issue and comparing it to Cambodian women’s lived experiences allows us to reflect on the possible power relations that still subsist in the representations of sex trafficking. Taking a post-colonial perspective, this study uncovers the problematic “Othering” imbued in US discourse, creating a patronizing attitude towards “non-Western” women onto whom the victim status is projected, therefore reproducing colonial tropes. The result is that women’s voices and their multilayered experiences are silenced and remain largely unexplored. When listening to the women and those working close to them we learn that sex, money, desire, love, kinship, and Khmer norms all come together to influence women’s decisions to migrate and to enter the sex industry. In Cambodia, there is a complex interplay between structural factors, social obligations and personal desires which is crucial to understand sex work and trafficking. In other contexts, this interplay of factors might take different forms but structural conditions must always be examined and labor migration and participation must be linked to the context-specific economic, political and ideological landscape in which women act.

Key words: sex trafficking, sex work, Cambodia, US discourse, post-colonialism
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I wish to thank my respondents and especially women working in the bars of Phnom Penh to have taken the time and strength to tell me about their experiences. You all made my thesis so much more meaningful.

A special thanks to my supervisor Maria Eriksson Baaz who encouraged me and gave me confidence throughout my research. Your advice was always very helpful.

I also want to thank Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, professor at Sciences Po Paris who inspired me to follow my dreams and convinced me to go to the field. You gave me the courage to stand up for my interests.

I also want to express my profound gratitude to all the friends I made in Phnom Penh. You made my stay unforgettable and it would have been so much more difficult without you. Thank you Malin for sitting down with me to study and motivate me (even though you distracted me quite a lot too). Thank you to Antoine who provided me with invaluable contacts and who even offered to accompany me to the bars at times of despair. Thank you to my wonderful flatmates who always made me laugh (and cooked for me as I don’t know how to), and especially to Justine and Lena who were always here to listen to my doubts and grand theories. Thank you to my colleagues at IRIS, and especially Toch and Srey Mom who showed me incredible sides of Khmer culture.

Last but not least, I would like to say thank you to my parents, who have never fully understood neither my choice of subject for my thesis nor my thorough interest for Southeast Asia but who have always stood by my side and respected my decisions.
Table of content

1. **INTRODUCTION**  
   1.1 AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS  
   1.2 BACKGROUND  
   1.3 CONTRIBUTION  
   1.4 LIMITATIONS  
   1.5 OUTLINE  

2. **THEORY**  
   2.1 HUMAN TRAFFICKING, SEX TRAFFICKING AND SEX WORK  
   2.2 POST-COLONIAL THEORY AND US DISCOURSE  
   2.3 POLITICAL ECONOMY THEORY: THE FEMINIZATION OF SURVIVAL  

3. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN  
   3.1 DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF US POLICIES AND NGO DOCUMENTS  
   3.1.1 MATERIAL FOR DISCOURSE ANALYSIS  
   3.2 INTERVIEWS AND ETHNOGRAPHIC WORK SURROUNDING WOMEN’S LIVES IN CAMBODIA  
   3.2.1 INTERVIEWS WITH NGO WORKERS  
   3.2.2 INTERVIEWS WITH KHMER SEX WORKERS  
   3.2.3 POSITIONALITY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS  
   3.3 COMPARISON AND ANALYSIS OF US DISCOURSE AND KHMER WOMEN’S STORIES  
   3.4 SECONDARY MATERIAL  

4. **SEX WORK AND TRAFFICKING IN US DISCOURSE**  
   4.1 PROSTITUTION AND SEX TRAFFICKING AS INEXTRICABLY LINKED AND PROSTITUTION AS INHERENTLY BAD  
   4.2 VIOLENCE AS OMNIPRESENT IN SEX WORK AND SEX TRAFFICKING  
   4.3 SEX WORKERS AND WOMEN VULNERABLE TO SEX TRAFFICKING ARE ALWAYS VICTIMS AND SHOULD BE THANKFUL FOR BEING SAVED. CONSENT/AGENCY IS IRRELEVANT  
   4.4 CUSTOMERS AND TRAFFICKERS ARE THE PERSONIFICATION OF EVIL  

5. **WOMEN IN CAMBODIA AND THEIR EXPERIENCES OF SEX WORK AND TRAFFICKING**  
   5.1 POVERTY AND LARGER FACTORS  
   5.2 SOCIETY EXPECTATIONS  
   5.3 PERSONAL DESIRES  

6. THE RESONANCES AND DISSONANCES BETWEEN US DISCOURSE AND KHMER WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES OF SEX WORK AND TRAFFICKING  
   6.1 VIOLENCE  
   6.2 CONSENT AND AGENCY  
   6.3 TRAFFICKERS, BAR OWNERS AND CUSTOMERS  
   6.4 KHMER SEX WORKERS AS OTHERS  
   6.5 KHMER WOMEN, SEX WORK AND TRAFFICKING: A NEGOCIATED TENSION  

7. **CONCLUSION**  

8. **REFERENCES**  

9. **APPENDICES**
1. **Introduction**

The issue of human trafficking has garnered enormous attention in recent years, driven in large part by the United Nations Protocol to Prevent Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, ratified in 2000. It has been presented as a very lucrative transnational enterprise controlled by organized crime and which affects more than 12 million people (Keo, 2014, p.1). More noticeably, it has been coined by the UN, the US government and other Western governments, as well as many NGOs and scholars (e.g. Bernat and Winkeller, 2010) as “modern-day slavery”, reminiscent of the old “white slave trade” that panicked the “West” at the turn of the century\(^1\) (Doezema, 2002, p.22). One form of trafficking is particularly put forward by these actors: the trafficking of women for sexual exploitation. It is true that although it is affecting men, women and children, trafficking has long been conceptualised as a women’s issue because women have comprised the majority of trafficking victims (Duong, 2014, p.5). Starting from 2000, it became increasingly captivating for the international community to be concerned with the fate of young women abroad. As the perceptions about female sex workers are still constructed through the lens of women’s expected role in society (Bradley and Szablewska, 2016, p.465), women will remain the main focus of this thesis.

Western powers, and especially the US, expressed a mixed bag of security, moral and human rights concerns around sex trafficking and to advocate for a zero-tolerance policy, leading a global “war on human trafficking” (Keo, 2014, p.6). Images of tortured, raped, abducted women locked in brothels, or even cages, became common in popular media. Such narratives are powerful for their ability to provoke indignation and outrage from their intended audiences. Rarely critically assessed, however, these commonly accepted stories are equally powerful for the ways in which they can cause harm—namely to already marginalised populations of people involved in the sex trade either by choice, circumstance or coercion (Hoefinger, 2016, p.56). For instance, a sex worker who has travelled illegally to another country for work and has been lied to concerning the working conditions in

---

\(^1\) In the early 20\(^{th}\) century, there was a great public outcry against “white slavery” in Europe and the US. “White slavery” referred to the abduction and transport of white women for prostitution and was widely covered in the media. See Doezema (1999).
the host country but has in no means been forced, coerced or raped does not fit into this narrow frame and might not receive the legal assistance that she needs\textsuperscript{2}.

As Doezema (1999) argues, the myths of “white slavery” and “trafficking in women” both reinforce and are reinforced by fears and anxieties about women’s sexuality and independence, and of “foreigners” and migrants (p.39), creating an endemic moral panic allowing for a certain social and moral governance. Cambodia is one of the countries that has been most influenced by this global anxiety, and images of helpless women abound in local and international news media, television and films, of academic and development literature, of policy and humanitarian debates, of social and political discourse, and of NGO interventions (Hoefinger, 2016). However, as many postcolonial scholars such as McEwan (2001), Spivak (1988) and Mohanty (1991) would argue, these narratives are not innocent and are part of the process of “worlding”, denying the supposed “victims” a free space to speak for themselves (in Kapoor, 2004, p.627)\textsuperscript{3}.

The narratives around sex work and trafficking put forward by the “West” and particularly by the US have often revolved around a “rescue” rhetoric, placing women as victims lacking agency (see Agustin, 2007; Dagistanli and Milivojevic, 2013; Doezema, 1999; Soderlund, 2005). Such discourse not only matter for the creation of meaning but also for the ways in which we organize society (Phillips and W. Jørgensen, 2002). As such, “Western” discourse around sex work and trafficking has important consequences on policies to address the issue and on women’s lives directly. It is thus crucial to investigate comprehensive discourses from the “West” that radically reshape the social reality of sex workers and trafficked women all over the world. So how do Khmer women’s lives fit into such “Western” narratives?

\textsuperscript{2} By only referring to women as unsuspected innocents being abducted or raped in horrible ways, an – ideal victim – is created which makes social and legal recourse for most victims of sex trafficking only remotely possible as these victims commonly know their attackers and are not abducted. See Dagistanli and Milivojevic (2013).

\textsuperscript{3} Spivak (1988) argued that the epistemic violence of imperialism has produced the “Third World” in a certain way that obfuscates “Western” superiority and dominance so that it becomes naturalized. “Worlding” thus referred to the cultural production and domination of colonial societies, which can be applied today as well.
1.1 Aim and Research Question

In order to shed light on the above problem, this thesis will rely on postcolonial and political economy approaches and will attempt to answer the following question:

How do women’s lived experiences in Cambodia fit into “Western” – as expressed by US actors - narratives on sex trafficking and sex work: what are the main resonances and dissonances and how can the dissonances be understood?

The thesis focuses on US discourse and actors as the United States plays an important role in shaping the international agenda targeting human trafficking and sex work. While there might be some divergences in how various “Western” countries frame human trafficking, the US is particularly important to analyse given its crucial influence over the global discourse (Bradley and Szablewska, 2016, p.474). The overarching research question is divided in the following sub-questions which will guide the thesis:

- How is sex trafficking and sex work framed in US discourse? What is the problem, for whom and who are the agents of change? In what ways, if any, does the discourse reflect colonial identities and representations? (RQ1)
- How do women engaged in sex work and people working close to the women in Cambodia talk about and experience trafficking and sex work? (RQ2)
- How does the US narrative relate to women’s lived experiences in Cambodia and what light may post-colonial and political economy perspectives shed on how the potential dissonances could be understood? (RQ3)

1.2 Background

With its colonial past, Cambodia is a very interesting country to study because it still carries a lot of legacies susceptible to have an impact on sex work and trafficking today. The sex industry grew very rapidly after the arrival of UNTAC personnel in 1992 and the radical economic liberalization that took place after its
removal (Keo, 2014, p.99). Steinfatt (2011) estimated that in 2003 there were 18,256 sex workers in Cambodia of which 2,000 were supposedly trafficked (p.457). Indeed, while it is important not to conflate prostitution with sex trafficking, scholars and policy makers have often made a very apparent link between the two (Weitzer, 2007, p.454). Hughes (2000) explains that “evidence seems to show that legalized sex industries actually result in increased trafficking” (p.651), but the opposite statement can also be claimed (Trotter, 2011). The relaxation of Cambodia’s borders during the 1990s increased population mobility significantly and facilitated the trafficking process (Munro, 2012, p.164). Facing rampant pressure from foreign governments and NGOs, the Cambodian government put in place several measures within the frame of repressive legalistic response of the West: the 1996 anti-trafficking law, which was repealed by a new one in 2008, and the creation of the National Taskforce (NTF) to combat trafficking in 2007 among others. However, these measures have had very mitigated results in addressing human trafficking (Keo et al., 2014). It is not the scope of this thesis to delve into Cambodia’s response, but it should undoubtedly be put in relation to “Western” discourse as the latter has tremendous influence on Cambodian policies mainly for funding reasons (Bradley and Szablewska, 2016, p.469). Today, the “West’s” and particularly the US’ development aid to Cambodia remains of crucial importance to understand the framing of sex trafficking in the country.

Led by radical feminists, the dominant global anti-trafficking agenda has impacted Cambodia in important ways. The current narratives around sex trafficking and sex work are very much inspired by the “white slave panic” in Europe and in the US which was triggered by the huge increase in migration between 1860 and the outbreak of the First World War, of which women formed a large part (Doezema, 1999, p.39). The “panic” then referred to the “procurement, by force, deceit, or drugs, of a white woman or girl against her will, for prostitution” (Doezema, 1999, p.24-25). Combatting “sex slavery” became a key priority during the Bush administration, and since then the fight against sex trafficking has been a common denominator political issue in the “West”, uniting people across the political and religious spectrum against this seemingly undeniably barbarous act (Soderlund, 2005, p.67). The US-led “War Against Trafficking” has significantly shaped the
approach to such issue as presented by many other countries and is thus crucial to examine in order to understand the dominant worldwide perception of sex trafficking. Shortly after the international negotiations of the Trafficking Protocol presented by the UN, the US introduced the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), which enabled the US to influence anti-trafficking provisions worldwide by imposing unilateral economic sanctions and refusing aid to countries not meeting the “minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking” (Bradley and Szablewska, 2016, p.474). The Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (JTIP) and the Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report were also two significant developments aimed at tackling human trafficking. The TIP Report (2019) measures the compliance of every country against the US’ abolitionist standard (Kamler, 2019, p.61). With his arrival in office soon after, President Bush was eager to claim that the US was supporting many global initiatives to combat the traffic in women, and asserted in a famous speech that “Each year, an estimated 800,000 to 900,000 human beings are bought, sold, or forced across the world’s borders… The victims of the sex trade see little of life before they see the very worst of life” (Bush, 2003). The meaning attributed to sex trafficking in such discourse is a horrific one of suffering and exploitation. Working closely with faith-based groups and feminist organizations that have an anti-prostitution (e.g. abolitionist) agenda, the US government has made noteworthy efforts to stem human trafficking - and more precisely sex trafficking. It has invested an average of $16.3 million annually to combat trafficking since 2001 (USAID, 2012, p.2). Consequently, the US is able to pressure and mobilize other countries into participating in the “War against human trafficking”, being the world’s biggest foreign aid donor and one of Cambodia’s main donor (Keo, 2014, p.59). Its influence is even bigger through NGOs such as the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) who receives US funding and works directly on the ground. Examining the discourse stemming from US policies and US NGOs allows us to understand the broader meaning attributed to sex trafficking from a “Western” perspective, and to in turn compare it to the lived experiences in Cambodia.
1.3 Contribution

The problematizing of “speaking for others” and “worlding” has been exposed quite extensively by post-colonial scholars. Spivak (1988) is probably the most renowned scholar to have challenged the experiences of speaking and writing for others, but many others have attempted to recover the lost voices of the marginalized through a general critique of development. Mohanty (1991) produced an enormously influential analysis of the failure of “Western” frameworks for understanding the cultural and historical meanings of women’s experiences and structural locations outside the “West”. Moreover, the ways in which outsiders have narrated women’s lives have been characterized by a pornography of violence (Hunt, 2008; Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2013), putting only the worst-case scenarios of rape and abduction forward and masking other structural problems.

When it comes to “Western” discourse around sex work and human trafficking, Doezema (1999) has examined the moral panics and boundary crises of contemporary discourses on trafficking in women, outlining how such discourses serve to reinforce women’s dependency and purity, further marginalizing them and denying their agency. Keo (2014) is one of the scholars that has brought up that same global moral panic around trafficking and its consequences in Cambodia. Dagistanli and Milivojevic (2013) have also questioned whether increased attention to the sexual victimization of women and the discourse around it have actually benefited women and represented their perspectives. Linking these debates to Cambodia, Sandy (2006), Derks (2008) and Hoefinger (2011) have all attempted to unveil Khmer sex workers’ voices with ethnographic research and are thus very useful to this thesis.

Nevertheless, no direct link has been made between post-colonial critiques and sex work and trafficking in Cambodia before, which is the purpose of this thesis. Additionally, emotive words like “duped,” “lured” and “abducted,” and notions of “deceit,” “bondage” and “sale” are most often used to label the sex trafficking of women, but few studies actually scrutinize the meanings and limits of such concepts (Sandy, 2006, p.455). Does the discourse used by the US government and NGOs really describe what trafficked women in Cambodia live on a daily basis? The
potential mismatch between “Western” narratives and women’s context-specific lives in Cambodia remains under-explored, and this thesis will bring important original empirical material to the subject. The idea that we need to reject hegemonic knowledge and to build a heterogeneous one is rather new, and as Lugones (2003) would put it, “travelling through each other’s worlds” allows the navigation of one’s own plurality and therefore to gain knowledge about the Other while questioning our own privileged position. In order to understand the dynamics behind sex work and trafficking in Cambodia, then, looking at women’s lives is particularly crucial.

1.4 Limitations

This study is limited in several manners, first of all given the time constraints of the four months spent in Cambodia. Consequently, the resonances and dissonances that will be explored throughout this thesis will be based on a postcolonial perspective and will thus be limited to four aspects, although many others could be identified. As a thorough empirical analysis is difficult to undertake in such a constrained time, the factors shaping those dissonances will mainly be selected following a theoretical standpoint.

Moreover, while the main rationale for the study is to uncover the resonances and dissonances between US discourse and women’s lives in Cambodia, the current political landscape in Cambodia has severely restrained my access to women’s stories directly. Firstly, many NGOs have seen their freedom of expression decrease following the repressions of 2016 (Human Rights Watch, 2017), which is probably why most Cambodian NGOs were reluctant to answer my questions. Therefore, women’s stories are sometimes narrated through the eyes of “Western” NGO workers and can be subjective to their own positionality. However, in these cases the people interviewed were mostly social workers who had extensive experience from working close to the women in the field and were asked to account for and give examples of women they had worked with, rather than giving their own opinion.
Finally, limitations also stem from the ethically problematic interviewing of women in “Girly Bars”. For ethical reasons, questions would only come if women started to confide and remained very broad, which made it difficult to get precise answers. Language barriers along with the difficulty of building trust in such a short time frame were also significantly challenging in my enterprise to collect information directly from the women. Furthermore, ethnographic work was limited to the “Girly Bars” in the touristic area of Phnom Penh which only cater to foreigners, as the NGO I was working with only reached out to such bars for security reasons. Bars serving a local clientele remain thus unexplored in ethnographic work but are reflected in interviews with NGOs.

1.5 Outline

In the first chapter, I have presented the purpose of the thesis, the questions asked, a preliminary background and the contribution I hope to make to the field of research. The second chapter outlines the theoretical foundations upon which this thesis is based, with first and foremost a discussion around the UN definition of human trafficking. Major assumptions in post-colonial theory will then be exposed with scholars such as Spivak (2002) or Mohanty (1991), before turning to Sassen’s (2000) theory of the feminization of survival which turned out to be useful in explaining the dynamics behind sex work and trafficking in Cambodia. The third chapter covers the methodology and the research design of the thesis. I thereafter study US discourse around sex trafficking globally and in Cambodia in chapter four, separating the main narratives in four different parts. In chapter five I will present my main findings regarding the experiences of sex workers in Cambodia. Finally, the sixth chapter will present a comparison between US discourse and women’s stories and will offer an analysis of the dissonances identified.
2. **Theory**

The following section outlines the theoretical foundations upon which this thesis is based. Firstly, I offer a critical discussion around the framing of human trafficking given by the UN Protocol against Trafficking and explain why it is problematic. Secondly, the main ideas behind postcolonial theory will be exposed with concepts such as “worlding” and “Othering”. Finally, I will include a political economy standpoint that may help to understand sex work and trafficking in Cambodia and the experiences of the women exposed. While the postcolonial approach was central to the thesis from the beginning as it provides the rationale for conducting the study by highlighting “Western” hegemony, “worlding” and the systematic silencing of women in the global South, the latter perspective emerged in the course of the study as a useful one that shed light on women’s experiences.

2.1 Human trafficking, sex trafficking and sex work

The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (UNTOC) and the protocols thereto - in particular the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons defines human trafficking as:

> “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by the means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs” (UNODC, 2000, p.42).

According to this definition, trafficking is comprised of three key elements: the process (recruiting, transferring, harboring...), the means (coercion, use of force, deception...) and the goal (prostitution, forced labor, removal of organs). Nevertheless, this definition comes with several problems. Firstly, it remains very vague and diffuse. What do we mean by coercion? By exploitation? Cross-cultural interpretations of a particular situation can be subject to misunderstandings. For
example, a Cambodian young woman marrying an old “Western” man and staying at home to meet his demands might seem like exploitation to many in the “West”, but for the Cambodian woman it might signify an improved livelihood (personal communications with NGO worker n°1 on 6 November & sex workers n°6 and n°7 on 13 December 2019).

Secondly, and relatedly, the definition treats trafficking as a coerced act in any situation if any of the means listed are used and consent becomes irrelevant. However, the term “coercion” here is problematic. As Schwarz (2017) would argue, laborers can be coerced into certain exploitative practices through their relative poverty, family pressure, or the general lack of options, which would in that case constitute an application of their constrained agency (2017, p.10). Similarly, the line between an exploited trafficking victim and an exploited undocumented worker who deliberately chose to be transported into a country is narrow (Keo, 2014; Sassen, 2000). Furthermore, the Protocol considers that any dealing with a person for sex work is prohibited, but does not define it at any stage (Maher et al., 2015, p.104). Presumptions about consent then become central to the discussion, which brings us to sex work. For the CATW, the latter is not “work”, it is only a form of violence against women and girls, and the end point to sex trafficking (Berg, 2015, p.146). It also argued that 'trafficking' should include all forms of recruitment and transportation for prostitution, regardless of whether any force or deception took place (CATW, 1999). Not only does this view conflate prostitution, migration and poor working conditions with trafficking, it also affects policy implementation which results in interventions focusing on abstract problems of morality (should sex be sold or not?) rather than concrete ones of labour rights. Arguing that women can never consent to commercial sex “coincides all too easily with anti-feminist ideas about female sexuality, and particularly with that of the threat of women’s sexual autonomy” (Doezema, 2002, p.21). Because sex work and human trafficking are so deeply entrenched in popular discourse, they have to be treated accordingly along this thesis.

---

4 Women I interviewed usually referred to their foreign partners as barang, meaning men coming from the Americas, Australia or Europe.
The above framing of sex trafficking and sex work is of crucial importance to this thesis as it may have harmful consequences on the supposed beneficiaries and on countries’ national policies. It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a new definition of sex trafficking, although it is firmly believed that consent and agency should be incorporated into models tackling trafficking. Rather than defining the concept beforehand, this thesis searches to uncover emic understandings of trafficking, relying on women’s own experiences of it in their precise cultural context.

2.2 Postcolonial theory and US discourse

In this section I will outline the main theoretical framework that will guide the analysis of the US discourse on trafficking and sex work (RQ 1) and that may shed light on how the dissonances could be understood (RQ 3), namely post-colonial perspectives. As such, the dissonances between US discourse and women’s experiences of sex work and trafficking in Cambodia can have many potential causes, but this thesis will only explore those related to the colonial aspects of meaning-making. Post-colonial theory plays an important role in challenging “Western” knowledge as the dominant one. As Radcliffe (1999) would argue, post-colonialism refers to ways of criticizing the material and discursive legacies stemming from colonialism (Radcliffe, 1999, p.84). It attempts to recover the ongoing significance of colonized peoples in shaping their identities as opposed to Western rationale and seeks to unveil the constant reproduction of power in meaning-making (Smith, 2001). The term identity is crucial; it is considered dependent upon shifting social configurations and power relations and has therefore undergone quite radical changes since the shift to postcolonial rule (Eriksson Baaz, 2005). Nevertheless, post-colonial theory maintains that decolonized situations are still very much marked and defined by the imperial pasts they wish to disavow (Eriksson Baaz, 2005), which is the main point of interest of this thesis.

Many post-colonial scholars have highlighted the production of power through discourse that has resulted in a shift of focus from people’s lived realities to endless discoursing about it. Spivak (2002) has joined this argument by outlining
that discursively framing the Third World is also about getting to discipline and monitor it, to have a more manageable “Other”; and helping the subaltern is often a reaffirmation of the social Darwinism implicit in ‘development’, in which ‘help’ is framed as ‘the burden of the fittest’ (in Kapoor, 2004, p.632). In that sense, the “worlding” of the “Third World” is reproducing various forms of “Western” hegemonic power and says more about the “West” than about the represented themselves. Such representation is problematic because it reproduces the us/them dichotomy with “Western” feminists knowing what is best for “Other” women because of their position as civilized and superior. “Western” women are thus constructed as modern, secular, sexually liberated and having control over their own lives; having the “freedom” to make their own decisions (Mohanty, 1991). This also deepens the silencing of women in the “Third World” and associates them with values that may fit poorly in their lived realities. Mohanty (1991) has argued that the creation of the “Third World woman” as a stereotype ignores the diversity of women’s lived experiences in the South across boundaries of class, race and so on and automatically relays women in a position of victim (in McEwan, 2001, p.999), which can be reflected in sex work and trafficking discourses coming from the “West”. For instance, structural conditions such as poverty, unemployment and income insecurity faced by these women may be silenced if sex trafficking is construed as a common oppression coming from ruthless powerful males (Schwarz et al. 2017, p.12). The general post-colonial theorizing therefore allows us to better understand potential dissonances between US discourse and women’s lives in Cambodia (as they reflect long standing identities that embody various forms of hegemonic ones and recreate privilege) and provides us with a rationale for listening to women themselves.

2.3 Political Economy Theory: the Feminization of Survival

As explained above, research on the feminization of survival emerged as a useful perspective that sheds light on women’s experiences and agency during the course of the study. In particular, Sassen’s (2000) theory of the “feminization of survival” highlights the structural factors and links labor migration to specific economic and political conditions of society in ways that resonate with the women’s experiences
and life situations in the context of the economic restructuring taking place in Cambodia. Indeed, acknowledging constrained choice-making in a globalized world uncovers the complexity of women’s agentive decisions in the prism of sex work and trafficking and makes room for women to express their own meaning-making themselves. As Sassen (2000) mainly relies on markets as a level of analysis, this thesis will use her argument to understand women’s decision-making processes in order to better grasp how they mismatch the “Western” approach to the issue. Sassen (2000) employs the term “feminization of survival” to illustrate how households, communities and states increasingly rely on women to secure a revenue. She argues that the globalization of capitalism developed certain cross-border circuits on the backs of the truly marginalized have become an important source of livelihood (2000, p.503). These circuits include illegal trafficking and migration of women for the sex industry, as women in this industry have become a crucial link supporting the expansion of the entertainment industry and thereby of tourism as a development strategy (Sassen, 2000, p.519). Many women in the Global South have witnessed a reduction in the number of legitimate opportunities to survive and an increase in the number of illegitimate ones (Keo, 2014 p.167). Sassen’s (2000) theory is thus particularly useful to examine the push and pull factors that might play a role in women’s trafficking and/or entering into sex work.
3. **Methodology and Research Design**

The following chapter will account for the methodological foundations upon which this thesis is based. As explained above, in this thesis I attempt to understand how the discourse used by US policies and NGOs fits the lives of sex workers and trafficked women in Cambodia, which implies an assumption that, while material and economic contexts clearly matter, the world around us is also socially and discursively constructed. Consequently, an interpretivist - and thus qualitative - methodology is needed. Both discourse analysis and ethnographic research will be used, and I will first briefly cover the theoretical assumptions behind discourse analysis and how it is used in this thesis which will be employed to answer RQ1, before outlining the ethnographic methodology used to answer RQ2 and the general analysis behind RQ3.

Before divulging the methodological framework of this thesis, I would like to stress the conflicting context in which I did my research. From September to December, I was working with IRIS Cambodia, a Phnom Penh-based US NGO combatting human trafficking. My primary goal with partnering up with IRIS was to get an easier access to women working in bars as it would have been challenging for me to approach them on my own. IRIS provided me with the knowledge and expertise necessary to understand the context in which I was walking in, and gave me very valuable advice on how to interact with women. However, I also encountered a number of issues. The more time I spent with IRIS the more I understood how its approach was inscribed in the “Western” discourse I was trying to explore, and it was thus difficult for me to position myself within the organisation. Nevertheless, it also allowed me to get a more general picture of how this discourse took form in Cambodia and to better understand the dynamics behind it. Although I will not use my observations in my study, the analysis of US documents and the identification of dominant themes became easier as I was confronted with them every day.

3.1 **Discourse analysis of “US” policies and NGO documents**

In order to investigate the narratives brought up by the US, discourse analysis will
be used because it focuses on the construction of meaning through language. As I want to understand how “US” language around sex trafficking and sex work fits into the lived experiences of women in Cambodia, this method is particularly useful. I will take as a starting point the theory advanced by Laclau and Mouffe (1985) who argue that all social phenomena are discursive. In that sense, all discourses and articulations (and therefore all aspects of the social) could have been somewhat different - and can become different in the future (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002, p.50). In other words, “a discourse is a particular way of talking about and understanding the world” (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002, p.1). Moreover, this perspective emphasizes that meaning is always relational in that a phenomenon or concept is provided meaning through its relation and difference from other signs (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002). This has for instance been adopted by feminist scholars showing that gender is relational, that the meaning provided to men and masculinity is made possible through its relation - and indeed rejection - of femininity (what it is not). In a similar vein, the “West” is provided meaning through what it is not, which is to say the “East” or “Global South”. Because meaning is always relationally constructed, then, Khmer women working in the sex industry are constructed through their relation to, and difference from, the constitutive outside. Their identities become merged into an exclusive one and their differences become invisible. Seeing discourse in that way is very effective in unveiling power relations shaping the dynamics behind various policies targeted at sex work and trafficking. As Susen (2015) would argue, “what is crucial to all versions of discourse analysis is the socio-ontological significance that they attach to the systematic study of the meaning-laden constitution of human existence” (Susen, 2015, p.67). Therefore, discourses have important implications since they affect how we construct society: they not only matter for the creation of meaning but also for the ways in which we organize society (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). This is relevant in my study since discourses around sex trafficking have important consequences on policies to address the issue and on women’s lives directly. Furthermore, I drew on Fairclough’s (1992) notion of “power behind discourse” (in Bergström et al., 2017, p.210) and I investigated comprehensive discourses from the US that radically reshape the social reality of sex workers and trafficked women. These narratives were considered as socially and historically situated
practices involving certain understandings of the world. Due to important time constrains, the transformation of meaning and the construction of different subjectivities through language and writing were unveiled by only observing discursive processes of the US, who is the main actor behind the “War against human trafficking”. Drawing upon the concepts of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), sex trafficking is taken as the nodal point in the discourse: it fixes the latter through temporarily stabilizing the meaning of a chain of signs in order to impart sense (1985, p.112). These signs were identified by looking at the proliferation of words that have similar meanings and that come up frequently in US documents, and were considered as temporarily fixed and constituting hegemonic discourse - thus reproducing power relations. From these signs were then drawn chains of equivalence to be able to uncover the general meaning behind sex trafficking. Following the assumption that this meaning is relational and drawing upon the post-colonial perspective outlined above, the following interrelated questions have guided the analysis:

- What meanings are attached to sex trafficking? What other phenomenon/concepts (e.g. prostitution, consent, forced, voluntary, violence, poverty) are linked to it?
- What driving forces and actors appear in the texts and where are they located (e.g. male sex buyers and/or traffickers demand for sex and money, women’s poverty and search for better livelihood, global capitalism etc.)?
- How are women and their daily struggles represented and what characteristics are attached to them (victimhood, agency, vulnerability etc.)?
- Who emerges as the savior providing the solution?

3.1.1 Material for Discourse Analysis

As explained above, the US has been one of the major international players when it comes to the global, and often local, fight against human trafficking and its influence on the anti-trafficking discourse cannot be denied (Bradley and Szablewska, 2016, p.474). In my attempt to disclose the dominant claims in US
discourse on sex work and trafficking, I have analysed four official government documents, one presidential speech, four US NGO documents or websites including three actively working in Cambodia, and two newspaper articles written by Nicholas Kristof. For each of these sources, I searched for human trafficking and sex work, but on an international level only human trafficking came out as relevant when it comes to policies or official US documents. In the most prominent US newspapers, sex work was never mentioned separately from sex trafficking in the case of Cambodia.

The most prominent policy measures adopted by the US were undoubtedly the TVPA (2000) and the TVPRA (2013), but other official documents have had a tremendous impact including the TIP Report (2019) and US Immigration and Customs Enforcement publications. These were scrutinized carefully to understand their representation of trafficking “victims”, their influence on women in Cambodian and to unveil the hegemonic rhetoric constraining the possible meanings upheld. These documents are in the center of the anti-human trafficking stage as they set international standards to which governments must comply in order to receive aid from the US (Soderlund, 2005), and thus have a tremendous influence on the framing of the problem worldwide.

Moreover, in order to comprehend the global anti-trafficking discourse in relation to Khmer women’s lives, it is necessary to acknowledge the lobbying influences of diverse US faith-based or secular organisations, radical feminists and neo-conservative groups, often termed collectively as the “rescue industry” (Agustin, 2007). Only NGOs were taken as point of analysis in this thesis, and after thorough research on US organisations combatting human trafficking, four faith-based organisations came out as the most relevant ones for my study: the CATW, Agape International Missions (AIM), the Faith Alliance Against Slavery and Trafficking (FAAST) and IRIS have tremendous worldwide influence and/or are very active in Cambodia. The CATW has had tremendous influence on strategies against trafficking being developed at an international level (Kapur, 2002, p.19) and lobbied for the writings of the TVPA and the TIP Report (Soderlund, 2005). The other three came out as the most active US NGOs in Cambodia that are only
working on human trafficking and are directly involved with sex workers and “victims” of trafficking. Various documents issued by these entities were closely scrutinized, both global ones and those directly targeting Cambodia. They are useful to study in order to grasp how various constructions of sex trafficking “victims” reflect struggles over how reality should be represented.

Lastly, looking at popular newspapers allows us to also uncover how US mass media narrates human trafficking stories and how the general public perceives the issue. After searching for “human trafficking Cambodia” in the four most prominent journals in the US - USA today, the Wall Street Journal, the New Work Times (NYT) and New York Post - only the NYT had more than one result. Among these results, Nicholas Kristof had written nearly all of them which is why I chose to focus on his articles to reflect mass media’s discourse. Therefore, two of his articles were analysed. His involvement with the famous Somaly Mam\(^5\) in Cambodia is also particularly interesting and tells a lot about US discourse on sex trafficking.

3.2 Interviews and Ethnographic work surrounding women’s lives in Cambodia

For the purpose of this thesis and to answer RQ2, interviews were necessary to unveil women’s own understanding of sex work and trafficking. They took a semi-structured form, as it provided an opportunity for me to investigate or probe further any topics of interest that arose (either intentionally or unexpectedly) throughout the course of the interview.

Interviewing ‘may provide data on understandings, opinions, what people remember doing, attitudes, feelings and the like that people have in common’ (Arksey and Knight, 1999, p.2). Semi-structured interviews not only permit a level of flexibility that corresponds to the complexity of social life and the complexities of people’s thoughts and feelings’ (Liston, 2005, p.124), but also to get closer to

\(^5\) Mam’s story is one that has both inspired and shaken the global anti-trafficking movement, and it begins in Cambodia. She declared herself a former victim of sex trafficking and founded an anti-trafficking organization, and Kristof interviewed her and made a couple of series in relation to her work. They even partnered up to raid brothels in Phnom Penh. Somaly’s stories were then proved false and her organization had to shut down. Many US personalities including Hilary Clinton and Meg Ryan had supported her work before and many of them argued that it did not matter if her story was false.
the interviewee in a more efficient manner (Gallahger, 2013, p.193). They allow flexibility in generating and collecting data and the interviewer is able to direct the discussion by raising particular points on which he/she wishes to focus. However, the semi-structured form of interviewing is also designed to allow room for ‘unexpected themes’ that are relevant to the study (Mason, 2002, p.62).

Sex work and trafficking are complex social phenomena and interviews enable the researcher to be more sensitive to any nuances arising within the interview as well as seeking to better grasp into the inconsistencies and contradictions of women’s lives. Using interviews therefore gives the opportunity to explore the ‘multiple shades of grey’ (Rubin and Rubin, 2005) and gain further insight into the experiences of the interviewees. Due to the difficulties of quantifying a complex and transnational social problem, employing a qualitative research methodology allows for a thorough exploration of normative and theoretical questions.

Each interview recording was transcribed and analysed as soon after the interview as possible. The accuracy of the transcription was checked against the interview recordings, and changes to the transcripts were made when needed. For the analysis and thematic coding of the interviews, jottings and mind maps were useful in order to get a global picture of the dominant themes.

3.2.1 Interviews with NGO workers

NGOs working with human trafficking in Phnom Penh were firstly mapped and contacted by thoroughly researching which ones are directly in contact with sex workers and only focusing on human trafficking. Three of them answered and were interviewed. All the other NGOs were interviewed after meeting NGO representatives in Phnom Penh and being introduced to new ones, or simply by making friends working for various NGOs. In total, eight interviews with different NGO workers (see appendix 1) - 3 Khmer and 5 foreigners - were conducted to get a more general overview of women’s situation. As mentioned above, the interviews took a semi-structured form with approximately 20 prepared questions, which were or were not asked depending on the respondents’ answers. The questions were
modified after the first two interviews to become more specific and to easily relate to the discourse analysis (see appendix 3). The questions were turned in a way that brings out women’s experiences, not the NGO workers’ subjective look on the situation. Indeed, NGOs workers that are directly in contact with sex workers in Cambodia might have important insights on the contextual lives of women, especially social workers. To remain as transparent as possible, their responses were kept exactly as they were formulated, using either the first or third person to tell women’s stories.

3.2.2 Interviews with Khmer sex workers

While working for IRIS Cambodia, I had the opportunity to directly intervene in three different “girly bars”6 where sex workers operate, selected by the NGO. The latter’s aim is to establish trust with the women, providing them with a free space to speak about their feelings and distributing sanitary products. The outreach teams were usually constituted of at least 1 Khmer staff and 3 foreigners, so that language barriers could be overcome and trust was easier to establish. In order to introduce myself, trust was facilitated with shorter, preliminary interventions of observation before actual information was collected (Kapiszewski et al., 2015, p.256). In addition, Feldman et al. (2003) consider that “seeing access as relational emphasizes the importance of relationship-building skills in gaining access” (in Wangel, 2018, p.82f). In that sense, going to the field prior to actual interviews helped me build important ties to approach and understand sex workers. One should not forget that getting the trust of these women was an absolute necessity, and it pays off to remain as transparent as possible (Harvey, 2011, p.436). I thus went to the bars four times before starting the interview process, in addition to four other times when I conducted interviews. In total, seven women (see appendix 2) were interviewed in a very open and informal manner directly on their workplace.

These interviews were done in a much more informal way, as the aim was to grasp

---

6 “Girly bars” are places where sex workers operate. They usually sit down with customers to earn tips or drinks. For each drink purchased by a client for a woman, a $1 surcharge is added and is then added on top of the woman’s wage. In order to be able to talk to these women and not impede on their working hours, the NGO usually bought drinks to all the girls in the bar.
a picture of women’s lives in general (see appendix 4). Emphasis was put on themes such as the reasons for entering sex work, whether trafficking was involved, and their view of their current situation for the process of data analysis. In that sense, the subjective and intersubjective meanings that the interviewees used to explain their own lived experiences were uncovered. The interviews are thus considered as a process to understand how the interviewees make sense of the world (Mosley, 2013, p.10). The presence of Khmer women during the interview helped to clarify meaning and interpret cultural and contextual cues. In sum, I attempt to unveil the micro-processes involved in shared understandings of the sex trafficking situation in Cambodia and introduce a context-sensitive approach.

3.2.3 Positionality and ethical considerations

My positionality was kept in mind during and after the interviews, as such positionality cannot be overcome and should therefore be studied and acknowledged (Mosley, 2013, p.13). Ethnographers’ reflexive scrutiny and analysis of their own interactions with informants generate more evidence about how those participants think and understand their social world (Kapiszewski et al., 2015, p.262). As such, personal interactions with NGO representatives certainly shaped the data collection process, as me being a woman can have altered the responses of male respondents. However, some interviews were conducted after a certain time spent with the respondents, which can have favorably shaped their answers as they might feel more confident and free to talk about sensitive issues. Nevertheless, it was crucial to critically reflect on my own role during the interaction with the agent and on its impact on data. Building trust and creating a relaxed atmosphere as the interview went on was one way to mitigate the effects of my positionality.

My personal interactions with sex workers also undeniably shaped the data collection process, but being a woman was in this case a major advantage. Nevertheless, my position as a white “Western” woman can have generated important barriers, not only of trust but also of contextual misunderstandings. These were mitigated by creating a relaxed atmosphere and by giving extra
thought to the empirical material collected. However, important questions remain. As a white “Western” woman looking into Khmer women’s lives, am I not reproducing the colonial power that I am trying to shed light on? I am certainly complicit in contributing to the extensive global attention to sex trafficking and in the power relations that require my own critical gaze. I certainly cannot claim that I have “unlearnt my privileged position” nor that I can adequately “speak for” (Spivak, 1988) sex workers in Cambodia. I am also guilty of simplifying a very complex issue and of giving a “self-righteous critique of others’ faulty or hypocritical engagement - without contemplating the potential effects this criticism might have for people whose survival depends on such engagement” (Eriksson Baaaz & Stern, 2013, p.105). Indeed, the colonial representations and interventions that I analyse might also have positively benefited women. But we also need to keep in mind that “the road to hell is paved with good intentions” (Keo, 2014, p.195).

Concerning ethical matters, due to the sensitiveness of the issue, the respect and anonymity of both sex workers and NGO representatives were ensured through the following of the four ethical principles of information, consent, confidentiality and utilization of the Swedish Research Council (2002). My participants were always informed ahead of the interviews about the specific roles they played in my research and how their responses would be used. Their right to disrupt the interview at any time was also highlighted, and privacy and confidentiality were at all times promised. Therefore, their names and entities are not revealed in the thesis: instead, they are numbered following the order of the interviews at precise dates. In the text, sex workers are given fake names when revealing their stories. Moreover, one risk with my interviews were the potential harmful consequences my questions would have on women’s mental well-being. Nevertheless, this risk was minimized through intense preliminary training with the NGO I was working with, who had extensive experience interacting with sex workers. In case strong emotions would emerge, my colleagues were here to help me tackle the situation and provide support to the women.
3.3 Comparison and analysis of US discourse and Khmer women’s stories

In order to answer RQ3 and identify the concordances and dissonances between US discourse and Khmer women’s experience of sex work and trafficking, I will start with a comparison between the two following the general structure of the discourse analysis part. Examining each assumption behind US policies and NGOs and contrast it with the data collected during interviews not only allows to uncover the blank spaces between the two but also to shed light on the particular meaning behind these dissonances. Despite the small size of my interview sample, it allows us to understand how important power relations are reproduced in relation to sex work and trafficking.

Subsequently, post-colonial theory is useful to expose how these power relations are enacted, and how the “Othering” of the Cambodian woman is created while simultaneously giving a particular savior role to the “West”. Moreover, Sassen’s (2000) theory on the “feminization of survival” appears as useful in shedding further light on the women’s lives and the context in which they use their agency.

3.4 Secondary material

In order to answer RQ2 and RQ3, I have also used some important secondary material comprised of three different researchers who have done important studies in relation to sex work and trafficking in Cambodia. They consistently strengthen my arguments and my findings as it was difficult for me to have a large sample of participants. Firstly, Sandy (2006) based her ethnographic research on sex workers in Sihanoukville, exploring how the voluntary/forced dichotomy in understandings of sex work does not fit into women’s lives in the city. Her primary aim was to engage with the daily lives of sex workers and to consider their views and subjectivities. She conducted forty in-depth interviews, which she complemented with participant observation and archival research (Sandy, 2006, p.453). Secondly, Derks (2008) also attempts to bring out Khmer women’s voices with his extensive ethnographic research in Phnom Penh. Her chapter on sex work exposes the stories
of six sex workers in a very detailed and comprehensive way, which also allowed me to support my findings. Lastly, Hoefinger (2011) is another researcher who conducted ethnographic work around what she calls “professional girlfriends” or women who work in the hospitality and entertainment sectors in Phnom Penh. She attempts to reveal how these women make sense of their environment and how sexuality, solidarity and subculture interact in the context of Khmer culture. As she was deeply immersed in the “girly bar” subculture with observant participation over seven years, Hoefinger’s (2011) insights are very useful to my study.
4  **Sex work and trafficking in US discourse**

In an attempt to uncover the dominant discourse around sex work and trafficking stemming from the US, I will separate the main narratives in four different parts as they emerged in my analysis and I will examine the combinations of meaning in chains of equivalence as explained above.

4.1  **Prostitution and sex trafficking as inextricably linked and prostitution as inherently bad**

Firstly, when analyzing the texts, prostitution and sex trafficking appear as undeniably intertwined. A recurrent account is that prostitution must be targeted because it is the root cause of trafficking. Following this, combatting trafficking without simultaneously fighting prostitution is described as treating the symptom rather than the disease (Weitzer, 2007, p.454). Such view was initiated in 1979 by Kathleen Barry, co-founder of CATW, when she stated that “from interviews and other research I learned that virtually the only distinction that can be made between traffic in women and street prostitution is that the former involves crossing international borders” (Barry, 1979). In that sense, “forced” and “voluntary” prostitution is not distinguishable. Many other documents issued by CATW support this claim. One of the main articles featured on their website reiterates that “Exploitation of prostitution and trafficking cannot be separated.” (2006, p.8) and

“Experience has shown that by legalizing prostitution the problem actually becomes bigger. Legalization, decriminalization or regulation of prostitution by the State would amount to the sanctioning of all aspects of the sex industry. Not only would the women’s activities be legal, but also that of the buyers. Pimps would be transformed into businessmen and legitimate sexual entrepreneurs. Brothels, sex clubs, massage parlors and other sites of prostitution activities would become legitimate establishments for commercial sexual acts with few restraints. In effect, through legalization and decriminalization of the sex industry, dirty money becomes clean. Criminal acts become legal” (CATW, 2006, p.9).

As reflected in this citation, identities such as “sex workers”, “pimps” and “businessmen” are constructed as homogenous groups containing people with
similar experiences. The identification of sex trafficking with sex work not only shows how these identities are mutually reinforced, but also how the “Other” is constituted. In this text, sex workers are put in opposition to women working in other legal industries, and are constructed as a homogenous notion of oppression and victimhood. Pimps are constituted as “Others”, uncivilized and ignorant, constructed in contrast to businessmen and legitimate sexual entrepreneurs whom they can never belong to. Moreover, places containing sex workers are constructed as dangerous illegitimate underground sites of criminal activities. It also implies that there is a “clean” way to earn money which cannot be found in sex work. In that sense, sex workers and pimps are discursively produced by their separation from “ordinary” citizens who have “ordinary” jobs. The entire sex trade is represented as a violation of women’s human rights, who then share a certain “sameness” in their oppression (Mohanty, 1991, p.65) and therefore it cannot constitute a legitimate form of employment.

Taking an abolitionist stance, the US government constructs prostitution as a “social evil” because it reduces women to commodities and is damaging their dignity, body and mind. This brings us back to President Bush’s speech in 2003 when he claimed that sex trafficking was a an “underground of brutality and lonely fear” and a “special evil” (Bush, 2003), reflecting a strong anti-prostitution rhetoric. In another directive, the President stated that “prostitution and related activities, which are inherently harmful and de-humanizing, contribute to the phenomenon of trafficking in persons” (2003a), depicting sex workers as undesirable citizens. The TVPA also refers to trafficking as an “evil requiring concerted and vigorous action by countries of origin, transit or destination, and by international organizations” (2000, p.1468). Later, the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2013 directly targeted the demand for commercial sex as being the primary cause of sex trafficking: section 221 underlines that states should “strengthen criminal provisions prohibiting the purchase of commercial sex acts” (TVPRA, 2013, p.26).

Moreover, US policy requires all anti-trafficking organizations who receive funding to explicitly reject prostitution in the form of a pledge, and evangelical Christians
were the main actors lobbying the Bush administration on that matter (Lobasz, 2009, p.336). For instance, Mandy Porter who works at the Faith Alliance Against Slavery and Trafficking (FAAST) argued that:

“FAAST and all of our partners are very intentional in that we say that all prostitution is inherently harmful [...] whether or not it’s consensual, whether or not they want to do it, if it’s high-end or streetwalking, it’s harmful, and it’s not good” (in Graham, 2015).

This discourse is strongly linked to other themes covered below. Firstly, prostitution is once again cast as something undesirable and harmful - the opposite of “good”. Once again, the homogenous group of oppressed women is constructed, as opposed to women who have “legitimate” jobs and who are not sexually constrained. Secondly, the possibility of consent is brought up but is portrayed as a fundamentally irrelevant concept which cannot undo the evil of prostitution. However, such definition implies that almost any sex worker could be classified as a victim of trafficking even though she migrated consciously to find work. This discursive practice unveils a particular meaning associated to prostitution: that of a dangerous and harmful practice that fuels sex trafficking. It also forms certain identities and subject positions, as sex workers are seen as victims of the patriarchal society and pimps as opportunistic evils.

4.2 Violence as omnipresent in sex work and sex trafficking

This brings us to the second major theme emerging in US policies and NGOs, that violence is omnipresent in both sex work and sex trafficking. The underlying discourse is that whatever its forms or manifestations, sex workers constantly face de-humanizing violence in their work. In one article of the CATW, it is stated that the very edifice of prostitution is built on the lie that women like sex, and that because “most prostituted women are under the control of pimps, traffickers and brothel owners, this lie is enforced by economic need, threats, and actual violence against women” (CATW, 2006, p.12). The report also asserts that the majority of women and girls in prostitution have been victims of male sexual violence in their girlhoods (2006, p.7) and that “women and girls are subjected to multiple forms of intentional violence and abuse. The methods and tactics may vary at different
times but the intention is similar to male perpetrators of domestic violence” (2006, p.8). Later in the report, the claims are made even sharper, as the authors declare that promoting prostitution as a legitimate career obscures the inherent sexual exploitation and violence to which women are subjected (2006, p.12). As articulated in one passage:

“[…T]o understand how violence is intrinsic to prostitution, it is necessary to understand the sex of prostitution. The sexual service provided in prostitution is most often violent, degrading and abusive sexual acts, including sex between a buyer and several women; slashing the woman with razor blades; tying women to bedposts and lashing them until they bleed; biting women’s breasts; burning the women with cigarettes; cutting her arms, legs and genital areas; and urinating and defecating on women (Raymond et al., 2002, in CATW, 2006, p.14).

As in our first theme, sex work is constructed as an illegitimate and exploitative labor practice and the focus is directed towards spectacles of suffering. More precisely, the use of “spectacular rhetoric” (Hesford, 2011) and a “pornography of violence” (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2013) have frequently characterized US policies in many different ways. For instance, the TVPA stipulates that “victims [of trafficking] are often forced through physical violence to engage in sex acts or perform slavery-like labor. Such force includes rape and other forms of sexual abuse, torture, starvation, imprisonment, threats, psychological abuse, and coercion” (2000, sec. 102).

Another interesting representation of sex trafficking and sex work is that of New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof, who created a series featuring himself “buying the freedom of two young sex slaves” in Poipet, Cambodia, in 2004 (Soderlund, 2005, p.78). In a quite recent article for the NYT, Kristof (2015) starts with obliterating that “and if you think, as Amnesty International suggested recently, that the solution is to decriminalize the commercial sex trade around the world, then pay special heed” and then goes on with terrific images depicting a girl’s life in a brothel in Nepal: “‘The man raped me,’ Poonam says. ‘I didn’t know what he was doing. But I was bleeding and hurting and crying.’” or “One day Poonam was hurting and refused a customer. She says the brothel-owner beat her and burned her with cigarettes; she showed me the scars” (Kristof, 2015). The
narrator clearly indicates that this violence would not have happened if prostitution was criminalized. His account also reflects the portrayal of customers and pimps as violent predators, and hence as a distant and irrational “Other”. What is more, Kristof’s own positioning as a savior of “brown women” from “brown men” and as “subject who sees” is very apparent in his discourse.

The official website of the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement is also full of horrific stories of violence. Laura recounts:

“I was 17 around when I met ‘Robert. [...] I was a runaway and wasn’t living anywhere stable, so since I was underage most of the time, I sort of needed him in order to get hotels and move around. [...] Towards the end, he held me against my will in a hostage situation and forced me to prostitute and took all the money and just beat me severely. The last time I saw him, he was just beating me until he was absolutely tired. I was covered in bruises, my face was completely disfigured and it’s causing me issue with my back to this day because of the way he was beating me and torturing me” (ICE, 2017).

Stories like Laura’s are powerful in their ability to provoke outrage from the audience. Because prostitution, sex trafficking and violence are inseparable in this discourse, a chain of equivalence can be established through which the US makes sense of the issue. As in the “white slavery” narratives, sex workers are strongly associated with victimization, which is the next theme examined in this thesis.

4.3 Sex workers and women vulnerable to sex trafficking are always victims and should be thankful for being saved. Consent/agency is irrelevant.

The above chain of equivalence can also be completed with “victim”. In effect, another major aspect of US discourse is the slave-like conditions in which women in prostitution and trafficking are held: they are most often “locked in brothels, abused, and unable to control the use of their time” (Kamler, 2019, p.77). Don Brewster, the CEO of Agape International Missions (AIM), a US-based Christian NGO working in Cambodia, claims that before they introduced rescue operations, “girls in Cambodia were trapped in brothels with very little hope of being rescued” (AIM website). In sum, these women would have absolutely no choice if AIM was not in Cambodia to do raids. In an interview with ABC News, Brewster paints an even
darker picture when he explains that “out of sight, out of mind, in back rooms and dark concealed locations, underage girls [...] are still being sold for sex to pedophiles. Locked away where they can’t be seen or heard” (ABC NEWS, 2017).

His claims give the impression that brothels and bars are mainly constituted of minors being the preys of dangerous pedophiles with no hope of getting out. The fact that he only refers to underage girls sends an image of true and pure victims, deserving to be distinguished as subjects particularly worthy of attention. Invoking youth and innocence is very powerful in order to attract public sympathy (Doezema, 1999, p.34). “Innocence” is also created through other subject positions, such as the victim’s lack of knowledge of her working conditions after migrating or her lack of options to survive due to poverty, a situation that is not explained. The TIP Report (2019) uses this rhetoric to attach meaning to sex trafficking in various case studies. For instance, it states that:

“Chinese men, sometimes with the complicity of other family members, incur large debts to pay brokers to lure rural Cambodian women to China with false promises of marriage into wealthy families or high-paying employment. When the women arrive in China, these men often subject them to forced labor or sex trafficking to repay those debts” (TIP, 2019, p.17).

The “luring of rural Cambodian women” suggests that these women are ready to migrate because of poverty and desperation while the “false promises of marriage” implies that the women did not know they were going to get involved in the sex industry, which casts them as innocent and naïve. In sum, trafficking “victims” are depicted as an “unsuspecting innocent in the wrong place at the wrong time” (Dagistanli and Milivojevic, 2013, p.231).

Not only does such discourse project an image of constant violence, but also of endless victimization, which implies that consent and agency are always irrelevant. The TIP Report (2019) states that “a victim in a vulnerable position cannot give valid consent to a crime violating their human dignity or personal freedom, thereby directing authorities that such consent should not prevent the prosecution of a trafficking case” (2019, p.230-231). However, it is very unclear who gets to decide
what “a vulnerable position” is and what kind of crimes violates “human dignity” or “personal freedom”. Furthermore, the CATW website states that one of the organisation’s goals is to “monitor the progress of the UN Protocol on Trafficking in which CATW played a key role in drafting a human right definition of trafficking which protects all victims of trafficking regardless of their consent” (CATW website). Indeed, just like the Protocol’s definition of human trafficking, CATW considers that consent and agency are irrelevant in the case of sex trafficking: in another prominent CATW document, Joe-Cannon (2006) asks herself:

“Shouldn’t an adult woman be free to make her own choice, and if the choice is to be in prostitution, shouldn’t it be available to her? Some people choose to take highly addictive and dangerous drugs and we still recognize that it is harmful to them. Most of us would not seek to legalize the hazardous drugs some people take. It is therefore the harm to the person and not the consent of the person that is the governing standard” (Joe-Cannon, 2006, p.11).

Using drugs as a comparison allows the author to position sex workers as helpless victims who are in no position to give consent, just like drug-users who consciously know the risks they endure but yet continue to take drugs. Consequently, consent to violation is simply a fact of oppression and is unhelpful in identifying trafficking “victims”.

From this statement also emerges the fact that sex workers should feel grateful for being “saved” by NGOs. IRIS states that “we enter establishments with no agenda other than to love and build life-giving relationships with these precious people trapped in vulnerable situations” (IRIS website). However, if these women decide to return to the sex industry, those “life-giving relationships” are immediately cut and the love is taken back. Nicholas Kristof also uses this rhetoric as he observed that one of the girls he had “saved” in the Cambodian city of Poipet had returned to the brothel. He writes that “Aid groups find it unnerving that they liberate teenagers from the bleak back rooms of a brothel, take them to a nice shelter—and then at night the kids sometimes climb over the walls and run back to the brothel.”, and “It would be a tidier world if slaves always sought freedom. But prostitutes often are shattered and stigmatized, and sometimes they feel that the only place they can hold their head high is in the brothel” (Kristof, 2005).
discourse, Kristof positions himself and Western NGOs as saviors of ungrateful beneficiaries who are unable to determine what is best for themselves. Referring to fixed identities, sex workers are first and foremost discursively produced as infantilized victims through the liberation of teenagers from dark rooms and the prostitutes as being broken and stigmatized. While the author does acknowledge agency, it is a very restrained and slave-like one. The world outside the brothel is discursively produced as being “freedom”, which positions captivity and freedom as diametrically opposed states of existence. Consequently, prostitution is constructed as being “captivity” and shelters as being the gate to freedom. If sex trafficking narratives equate brothels with prisons and evokes good locked away in an evil world, the introduction of a third party that not only witnesses but also takes decisive action to put an end to sex workers’ suffering is necessary (Soderlund, 2005, p.78). Also implicit in the discursive portrayal of “victimized” sex workers is thus the superiority of the normative Western “saviors” whose moral compass remains more legitimate than that of “brown” women. Irrevocably, every victim and savior need a villain, which is the next theme I will examine in this thesis.

4.4 Customers and traffickers\(^7\) are the personification of evil.

Another emergent theme in US discourse is the equation of traffickers and clients with merciless predators who brutalize women and use them as commodities. The TIP Report (2019) is full of “stories” that feature traffickers as evil individuals only looking to exploit and make profit out of women. For instance, one picture shows women lining up in an empty room, visibly leaving, with officials in the background surveilling the process. The caption reads: “Law enforcement officials raid a karaoke bar in Thailand, where traffickers exploited women in sex trafficking. They often deceive and lure women to Thailand from surrounding countries such as Laos and Cambodia and force them into commercial sex” (TIP, 2019, p.20). The “deception”, “luring” and “forcing” of women attributes a particular meaning to traffickers as being vicious and dangerous but also to women who are once again portrayed as naive victims. CATW also depicts pimps and traffickers as the

\(^7\) For the purpose of this thesis, traffickers encompass transporters and procurers for prostitution (i.e. purchasers of trafficked persons, brothel operators, pimps).
personification of evil: “the methods and tactics [employed by traffickers] may vary at different times but the intention is similar to male predators of domestic violence, in that they are designed to maximize control and compliance of the victim” (CATW, 2006, p.8). Domestic violence represents a relatable practice to the Western audience and is thus useful in order to evoke outrage. The sinister strangers that are embodied in such representation of traffickers allows to position them as a distant “Other” and as “barbaric brown men from the Global South” as opposed to the pure and innocent brown women, which also attributes a fixed identity to traffickers that is distant from larger structural conditions.

Furthermore, customers in general also take the role of deviant strangers in US discourse. Here again, CATW maintains that even in the most “free” context when a woman works for herself and sets her own conditions, the interaction between prostitute and client remains an exploitative one (CATW, 2006, p.13). Customers are most often depicted as predators that brutalize women:

“Prostitution is not sexual liberation; it is humiliation; it is torture, it is rape; it is sexual exploitation and should be named as such. Consequently, males who use women and girls in prostitution are sexual predators and rapists.” (CATW, 2006, p.11).

Along with traffickers, clients take the subject position of a deviant, constitutive outside that women need to be saved from, which also reinforces the subject position of the “Western” savior.

In sum, through a discourse of ‘sex trafficking’ and ‘sexual slavery’, US narratives have sought to eradicate not only the human rights abuses involving sexual violence, but also, in the process, to save “impoverished” “victims” of exploitation which, to them, means first of all to abolish all forms of ‘immoral activities’ such as sex work. The meaning attached to sex work is that of a social evil that is dehumanizing and violent and that inevitably fuels trafficking. This construction also suggests that women working in the sex industry, whether trafficked or not, are helpless victims incapable of rational decisions, and that traffickers and customers are sexual predatory “Others”. The subject positions of victims and offenders also require the embodiment of saviors, which is attributed to aid workers with their
interventions in brothels in order to “free” women. Sex trafficking as a nodal point is thus produced and temporarily fixed through the meaning attributed to prostitution, sex trafficking victims, customers and traffickers, and the US State and NGOs. I will now examine how this discourse relates to women’s lived experiences in Cambodia using participant observation, interviews and previous research.
5. Women in Cambodia and their experiences of sex work and trafficking

The dominant “Western” discourse around prostitution and trafficking which is outlined above has revolved around presenting women working in prostitution either as “broken” or “victims”. Are these representations reflected in women’s voices?

The effects of globalization and the desire to move on from the devastating atrocities committed during the Khmer Rouge regime has transformed Cambodia in ways that traditional understandings of power, love and sexuality are constantly being re-evaluated. Women, and especially women working in touristic “girly bars”, are particularly central to such transformation as they “negotiate their desire to accumulate economic and social capital through the selling or trading of sex, intimacy and even love, whilst maintaining cultural expectations of female morality” (Bradley and Szablewska, 2016, p.462). It is within this context that this study will explore Cambodian women’s lived experiences and attempt to shed light on their narratives in an objective way. By paying attention to women’s stories collected on the ground, I hope to gain insight into their subjective experiences and the meanings they attribute to their lives. Most importantly, I will attempt to give a fuller understanding of the ways in which women use their own agency in these processes of meaning-making.

As other ethnographic studies in Cambodia also show, the nature of the sexual exchanges that take place and the reasons for doing so not only reveals the complexity and diversity of these women’s lives, but also the ways in which they face their needs, desires and responsibilities within the Cambodian society. My research on the ground has allowed me to break down the dynamics behind sex work and trafficking into three main parts: poverty and larger factors, society expectations, as well as personal desires. These three themes were the most recurrent in my respondents’ answers and thus reflect their dominant views and experiences of sex work and trafficking.
5.1 Poverty and larger factors

Firstly, previous research (Derks, 2008; Hoefinger, 2011; Sandy, 2006) aligned with my own findings show that structural constraints play a major role in pushing women to migrate and to enter sex work. Furthermore, these factors are linked to cases where women are more likely to be coerced, forced or facing violence. Among these factors, the most prevalent are poverty, the lack of economic opportunities, the lack of education, and the absence of a welfare system. These four constraints are closely intertwined and were present in many stories collected. For instance, the story of Sonisay as told by one NGO worker clearly illustrates how the four interplay:

“Sonisay was 22 years old when her aunt came to her house in Ta Keo and talked about all the good opportunities she could find in Phnom Penh. At the time, Sonisay had an 8 years old little brother who was sick, that her mother had had from her relationship with Sonisay’s stepfather. Her mom’s job was to collect wood in the forest and to sell it on the street, they were thus very poor and could not afford the medical treatment for her little brother. Her stepfather was violent and repeatedly beat Sonisay and her mother. So when the aunt came and talked to Sonisay about a Thai-Khmer restaurant at the border which was seeking to employ new people, she did not think of it very long: ‘I will take you to Thailand’, the aunt said, ‘my friend has this restaurant selling noodle soup where you could wash the dishes and get $250 per month’. Sonisay had no job in Ta Keo and wanted to help her brother and her mother, so she followed her aunt. The first few days at the border went smoothly, she only had to do the dishes and her manager seemed gentle. Five days later, she woke up to a car outside with two men telling her to come with them. The manager tells her the aunt sold her to him and that now she needs to be a domestic worker; and Sonisay firmly refuses as her aunt had told her to stay here. The manager insists and tells her ‘You only need to cook and do the dishes, and watch the baby. You will get $500 per month’. So she finally accepts and goes into the car. She is then taken to Bangkok to work in a brothel, where she loses her virginity being raped. She is told that she needs to repay her debts as the brothel owner bought her from her previous manager, which she is able to do quickly. After that, nobody forces her to stay but she still does so for two years, as she realizes that she will be able to send a lot of money to her family”

In Sonisay’s story, we can easily see how the four factors mentioned above interact with each other. Sonisay first decided to migrate because of poverty and a lack of economic opportunities in her home province, and because her brother could not

---

8 Interview with NGO worker n°2 on the 22nd of November
get proper access to health care. Certainly, she experienced violence and was lied to about what she was going to do but she did make the choice to move away to another country. There is some sort of luring and coercion in her story, which could be the result of a lack of education as she might have said no had she known that the Thai-Cambodian border is a common ground of operation for traffickers. However, she still decides to stay in the sex industry after having paid off her debts, which suggests that she weighted her choice against the broader socioeconomic context in which she found herself, even though this choice was extremely limited. Violence was also mentioned in my interview with NGO worker n°5, who said that the working conditions these women faced could sometimes be “very degrading” (Personal communications, 24 November).

Furthermore, the economic returns in the sex industry in Cambodia compare very favorably to those of other kinds of workers. In Derks’ (2008) research, one sex worker pointed out that:

“As a sex worker, I can get some money, and save some. When I work in a factory and I need money quickly, for example because my mother is sick, I will not be able to get it. I can only get my money at the end of the month. We cannot just borrow money from someone. [...] In a factory, I can earn forty dollars per month and give the sum to my mother. Then there will be nothing left for me to buy new clothes or to buy something to eat.” (in Derks, 2008, p.106).

The sex industry often provides women in Cambodia with an improved livelihood that would not have been met in other sorts of jobs as sex work often pays a higher wage (Sandy, 2006, p.462). Even though there are significant differences between sex workers, all those I encountered and the NGO workers I talked to articulated sex work and migration as a means of expanding life choices and livelihood strategies. NGO workers n°4 and n°7 were also very insistent on this point, highlighting that in the current socio-economic context of Cambodia, migration for sex work is one of the easiest and fastest way to improve one’s livelihood (Personal communications, 25 November and 3 December). Furthermore, one woman I met in a “girly bar” said that:

« I come from Kampong Cham province. I’m 22, and my sister Nana is 23. We
used to work in a small factory, 7 days a week. We couldn’t even afford a pair of new shoes. We came to Phnom Penh to find work after our aunt told us about the better life she found here. She introduced us to a lot of people, including our current boss. We also met a very nice lady in a hairdresser shop who wanted to hire us and give us 25 dollars per day. But this was not comparable to what the bar could offer us, I make 150 dollars a night. So we decided to work in the bar. I like it here, even though I can’t really take any holidays. In four months I’m going back to see my family, which will be good”9 (Mini, 22).

While many might be tempted to portray Mini and her sister as victims of economic circumstances, she clearly insisted that they consciously decided to migrate together and to work in the sex industry, as no other job could offer them a convenient salary. Poverty and the lack of education probably played significant roles in their decision, but these women’s ability to act in a context of constrained choice is undoubtedly visible. In that sense, poverty and larger structural factors do play a role in women’s decision to migrate and to work in the sex industry, but agency is almost always involved in this process. As a result, what many could perceive as trafficking because of the migration process would be better framed in terms of agency and decision-making. Another major theme involving agency in sex trafficking and sex work is society’s expectations of these women, which will be the next theme covered.

5.2 Society expectations

Secondly, social obligations and traditional norms in Khmer culture play a significant role in sex trafficking and sex work. Oppression, double standards and taboos are common in the country, and the most important requirement for women is virginity at marriage (Hoefinger, 2011, p.253). Khmer women are not expected to initiate sex, demonstrate skills or even appear to enjoy sex (Hoefinger, 2011, p.254), and are usually required to marry very young. Consequently, many women also use sex work to counter these traditional expectations and explore their sexuality. Hoefinger (2011) points out that:

“participation in bar girl subculture provides young women the space to experiment with their sexualities and sexual practices as well. I witnessed

9 Interview with sex worker n°3 on 29th of November
girls openly talking to their friends about their sexual experiences, particularly while sitting around in the bar while it was quiet, or at the beauty salon. They would converse about their partner’s ‘size’, for example, or talk about issues related to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), HIV, contraception and abortion. As they receive no formal sex education in schools or from their families, they instead learn from each other.” (Hoefinger, 2011, p.254).

Furthermore, Mini’s sister Nana asked me:

“Do you have a boyfriend? All of the women here do, but I don’t. That’s what I like with this job, I don’t have pressure from my family to marry anyone and I’m independent. Boyfriends are hard work”¹⁰ (Nana, 23).

Nana clearly expressed her desire to counter the stereotypes and norms that she faces with regards to her family, as they would expect her to be married by that age. Lina, a sex worker working in a different bar whom I met earlier had also given me a similar account, asserting that sex work allowed her to “sleep with whoever she wanted” and choose a boyfriend herself, something that her family would not agree with (Personal communications, 22 November). Another recurrent theme in the interviews conducted is the obligations women have towards their families. As outlined by one Cambodian NGO worker I interviewed,

“In the Cambodian context, we feel the obligation to support our families when they are poor. Even I would do the same. If there is no rice in the house, someone has to bring it. Sometimes families have lots of debts - there is sheer pressure on children to leave the house and drop out of school to find jobs in the city.”¹¹

Therefore, on one hand women represent a paradox as their premarital sexual practices counter the rules around values and morality, and on the other hand they need to fulfill expectations of familial loyalty and care. Research conducted by Derks (2008) confirms this tendency, as she exposed Khim’s story:

“In the case of Khim it was her mother who led her into sex work. Khim’s entrance was part of an agreement between her mother and the brothel keeper. Khim perceived her situation as the only way to help her mother out of misery and willingly agreed, because she was “broken already” (kouc

---

¹⁰ Interview with sex worker n°4 on 29th of November
¹¹ Interview with NGO worker n°2 on 22nd of November
haey). Khim’s mother had had a difficult time with her second husband. After she divorced, she was left by herself to earn money and support Khim and three younger children. She borrowed money to buy lotus and tried to sell it for a profit. The stiff competition among lotus sellers made it hard to make any money, and she fell even further into debt. Seeing no other way, she brought Khim and her other children to Phnom Penh. She negotiated with a brothel owner about the conditions under which Khim could work and earn enough to pay back the moneylender in their village. Khim and her mother saw this as a temporary situation, lasting no longer than two to three months” (in Derks, 2008, p.102).

This story clearly shows how responsibility is put on the older daughter in Khmer culture for supporting her family. This norm also interacts with the structural constraints mentioned above: poverty, lack of job opportunities and education, and the absence of a welfare system. Srey Mom also told me that it was her mother who convinced her to move to the city and enter the sex industry, and that she had felt obliged to follow her mother’s wishes (Personal communications, 22 November). In Sandy’s (2006) research, Zoë entered the sex industry as she is the eldest in the family and wanted to look after her aging parents and her younger siblings (p.459). She explained that:

“[My family] sold vegetables but we did this at a loss, we made no profit. We owed money, my mother was sick and my brothers and sisters had no money for school. I wanted to help them to learn a lot of languages, I wanted them to be able to do this, and so, I had to find the money for them to go to school, right. I don’t know how to read and write very well, and so I sell sex everyday and in the afternoons now, I study. I want to know how to read and write, so in the afternoons I study English for one to two hours.” (in Sandy, 2006, p.458).

This example shows how social norms interact with poverty and the lack of education. Zoë felt that it was her responsibility to help her family improve their livelihood, but her inability to read and write made her options very limited. She wanted her siblings to have more opportunities than her, and sex work in the city seemed to provide a sufficient wage for her to support their schooling.

As such, Khmer women appear to be confronted with a complex double-edged situation. On one hand, they face traditional barriers related to their sexuality and on the other hand they have a stark sense of filial duty that is deeply entrenched in Khmer culture. Women not only attempt to defy the norms awaited upon them by
engaging in sex work, but are also “trapped” in them when attempting to help their families. Both factors closely relate to female migration for sex work, but are also often complemented with women’s personal desires and aspirations.

5.3 Personal desires

Thirdly, my findings also point to the very complex relationship between sex work and migration and women’s personal desires. Those desires take multiple forms and can be deeply intertwined. Among those, improved social status, love and relationships, and kinship were very often expressed by sex workers and NGOs. The most recurrent one in my interaction with them was that of improved social status and lifestyle. Indeed, some women highlighted the facility of working as a sex worker compared to many other jobs: NGO worker n°6 claimed that sex work allowed women “to be lazy” (Personal communications, 2 December). Sandy (2006) also found that some women became involved in the sex industry after having worked in the brick-making industry – another common low skilled labor in Cambodia – and finding it very tiring and demanding. Rowena states that:

“I carried these bricks on my shoulders, from where we made them to a place some distance away; I carried them with a yoke over my shoulders. I carried about thirty or forty bricks at a time and my shoulders always ached. It was very hard work and so I stopped doing it and came here to be a working girl [twer srei] because it is much easier. [...] I don’t have to do this anymore. The hours that we work are up to us, they don’t force us to work too much. If we want to we can work a lot, but the job is over quickly and we get a lot [of money] when we are done.” (Sandy, 2006, p.462).

In her explanation, Rowena is careful to point out her own agency and decision to enter sex work. In this context, she simply seems attracted to a more independent and pleasurable life, which had little to do with economic constraints. In the same train of thought, many women appreciate the material benefits of the sex industry. One NGO worker remembers a woman telling her that:

“I never liked school. My parents forced me to go but I didn’t feel like I was smart enough so I dropped out. At least I don’t need to think a lot here. And I get to do some makeup and wear fancy clothes. The customers offer me lots of drinks, take me to fancy restaurants. With any other job, I wouldn’t
Once again, the agency of this sex worker is emphasized and we can see how her preferences came into play when choosing what to do with her life. On a slightly different note, one woman I talked to in a “girly bar” stressed her contentment of getting a lot of responsibilities, which she would not otherwise have.

“My manager is very nice to me. She gave me a lot of responsibilities. At night, I check that girls are ok and go around different bars. If there’s not enough girls in one I go and recruit some. If one of them does not do the job, I will try to understand why or tell my boss. I’m only 21 years old, so I wouldn’t get that many responsibilities in any other job.”

Many NGO workers confirmed the desire for an improved social status and a sense of meaning and responsibility. One of them stressed that while an investigation team was planning to raid a brothel, the information was leaked to one of the working girls with whom the NGO had close ties and were attempting to help. She directly went to the brothel owner to warn him about it, saying that she wanted to keep working there, and the raid was unsuccessful:

“She had very close ties with the brothel owner. She was lured in the beginning but became an important partner for the recruitment of sex workers. If the other girls would not want to have sex with costumers, she would be a messenger to the owner. She was very proud of her position, and it felt like a home to her. She really enjoyed the privilege she got from the owner.”

This shows the overarching desire of these women to be given a certain importance with responsibilities and a sense of duty. It also illustrates how a sense of kinship is playing a crucial role in women’s involvement with the sex industry. More precisely, women’s relationships to their managers/bar owners was a frequent point evoked as to justify why they liked this job. As an NGO worker explained,

“A lot of sex workers are very grateful to their pimps or brothel owners because they let [them] borrow money, they give [them] food and clothes. Women usually do not see that as a grooming process, and most of them feel

12 Interview with NGO worker n°1 on 6th of November
13 Interview with sex worker n°5 on 6th of December
14 Interview with NGO worker n°2 on 22 of November
like pimps are their godmothers\textsuperscript{15}. They really look up at them and spend more time with them than with their own families. Sometimes, after re-integration into the community, women get reached out by their previous brothel managers and are very quick to return to the industry.\textsuperscript{16}

As Derks (2008) found out, the relationship between brothel owners or pimps and sex workers is one of mutual dependency: the pimp cannot earn money without the women who work for her/him, and in return the pimp finds many ways to make them dependent as well (Derks, 2008, p.110). They often describe it as a parent-child relationship, where the brothel owner provides food and shelter in addition to medicines, clothes and police protection (Derks, 2008, p.110). The thankfulness women express towards their pimps or brothel owners demonstrates their need for a new system of kinship. NGO worker n°3 also stressed that kinship was usually something these girls were actively looking for when deciding to migrate and enter the sex industry (Personal communications, 24 November). It gives them a sense of meaningfulness and belonging, and along with their relationships to other sex workers, it “provides care and support in the face of stigma, hardship, abuse, depression and loneliness” (Hoefinger, 2011, p.252).

However, in contrast to Nana’s wish to stay independent from a boyfriend/husband, many women I talked to explicitly stated their desire to find a husband and/or love through the sex industry. Closely related to the aspiration for an improved social status, this allowed them to considerably elevate their prospective livelihoods. One night that I spent in the “girly bars”, I had an intense conversation on that matter with Pisey and Thom. Pisey asserted that she was actively looking for a husband while working here:

“I met my ex-husband while working in this bar. I had two children with him, the last one is only four months. I was heartbroken when he left me eight months ago. I came back to work here because I’m hoping to meet someone else.”\textsuperscript{17} (Pisey, 34)

Thom nodded and added:

\textsuperscript{15} In Cambodia, most of them are female: Keo (2014) found that between 1997 and 2007, just over 80% of individuals incarcerated for human trafficking were female (p.142).

\textsuperscript{16} Interview with NGO worker n°5 on 26\textsuperscript{th} November

\textsuperscript{17} Interview with sex worker n°6 on 13\textsuperscript{th} December
“I also met my husband in this bar. He’s from Australia. He will take me there soon. I am not seeing any men here, I love my husband too much. I am just hanging out with my friends on Friday nights.”

Hence, the “sex for cash” (Hoefinger, 2011, p.246) paradigm is not capturing the full diversity and complexity of sex work. Khmer women in this industry often seek love and marriage in addition to material benefits, where the term love might range from “sexual, passionate and/or romantic, to caring, respectful and appreciative” (Hoefinger, 2011, p.264). Many NGO workers confirmed this desire. One of them stated that:

“For a lot of the girls I talk to, their biggest dream is to find a husband. It gives them security. It gives them an identity as a wife and an opportunity to improve their lifestyles. I can see how this is a good pathway for them.”

Consequently, there is a complex interplay between pragmatic and material concerns and emotional desires which constantly attach meaning to sex work and migration. Khmer women working in this industry embrace multiple and conflicting subjectivities as they simultaneously face structural constraints like poverty or gender norms as well as their own agency and self-determination. Some women migrate for sex work as part of a long and conflicted process, sometimes deceived or lured. Nevertheless, some women suggest that the decision to enter the industry was calculated and determined and was the result of a conscious decision.

First of all, young women in Cambodia are confronted with important economic and larger societal constraints that have important consequences on their lives. Secondly, social obligations and norms also play a decisive role, and women will often try to meet the aspirations and needs of their rural families while simultaneously trying to resist what is imposed upon them. Thirdly, women are pursuing their own aspirations with regards to modern consumption, social status, kinship and love. These three factors are complex to reconcile, especially in a rapidly transforming society like Cambodia. It is now necessary to compare these insights with the US discourse and to make sense of the dissonances unveiled.

---

18 Interview with sex worker n°7 on 13th December
19 Interview with NGO worker n°8 on the 3rd of December
6 The resonances and dissonances between US discourse and Khmer women’s experiences of sex work and trafficking

In the last part of this thesis, I will attempt to highlight the resonances and dissonances and make sense of the dissonances between US discourse and Khmer women’s experiences of sex work and trafficking. I will first compare both and discuss the potential causes of these dissonances, and I will then provide a brief post-colonial and political economy analysis to shed light on RQ3.

6.1 Violence

Firstly, US discourse is characterized by the repetition of stories of horrific violence against women. In my findings, two NGO workers brought up instances of rape and of mental illness, but most stories were non-violent. It is of course necessary to question the fact that none of the women I talked to in bars mentioned any experience of violence in their work, as it might be difficult for them to open up so fast and to a white “Western” woman. However, their accounts can be counter-balanced with those of NGO workers who had no problem with speaking openly about violence, and although some of them acknowledged its existence, they all contested the fact that violence was omnipresent in sex work and trafficking. Certainly, then, one resonance between US discourse and Khmer women’s stories is that violence can be present in this type of work but does not seem to constantly shape women’s lives.

By contrast, in US discourse images of women being beaten (ICE, 2017), raped (Kristof, 2015) and being subject to inhumane and degrading sexual desires (CATW, 2006) are very frequently evoked to describe instances of sex work and trafficking. Only the worst cases are mentioned, which seems to imply that only stories of unthinkable violence are worthy of retelling to the “Western” audience. In Stearns’ words, it is as if observers try to “outdo each other with the most barbaric gang-rape scenario” (Stearns, 2009, paragraph 4). Consequently, the victimization of the “trafficked woman” is reinforced: the more violence, the more helpless the victim
Furthermore, it also introduces a popular sexual fantasy in a culturally acceptable manner (Doezema, 1999, p.35).

6.2 Consent and agency

Secondly, and in relation to the two points covered above, “non-Western” sex workers or “trafficked” women tend to be presented as helpless, childlike creatures who are easily coerced and unable to control their own fate. They are most often pictured as poor, naïve, and unempowered (Brewster, 2017; TIP, 2019), which perpetuates the typical dichotomy between the “willing whore” and the “innocent victim” and requires sex workers to place themselves into the victim narrative in order to avoid criminal charges (Doezema, 2010).

While it is true that women and NGO workers sometimes highlighted that it was not uncommon to find women who had decided to migrate but were lied to concerning the work in the destination countries/cities, consent was still evoked in most stories. Another resonance between US discourse and my own findings is that coercion, luring and exploitation of prostitution sometimes occur in the case of Khmer sex workers. Nevertheless, sex workers do not necessarily see themselves as victims: some of them make - what they present as - conscious decisions about their working in this industry and do not feel oppressed. By revealing the complexity of erotic labour, “the Cambodian girly bar scene offers a revealing case study of women’s diverse motivations to engage in sex” (Bradley and Szablewska, 2016, p.466), whether it be for money or other material benefits, desire or marriage, family obligations or a sense of belonging. Such workers then are invisible to US discourse as their accounts do not match the abolitionist goals (Weitzer, 2007, p.453). While most US documents did evoke the possibility of consent, it was most often one of a slave or tortured individual who cannot really decide for herself.

The interviews I conducted clearly dispelled the myth that sex workers are always held under slave-like conditions and portrayed women as agents consciously making decisions about their lives. Some women described sex work as an easier job than
for example studying or brick-making, offering more freedom and independence. All women and NGO workers outlined that this job was much more lucrative than any other job in Cambodia. Given the options they expressed, most of these women stated that they consciously chose sex work after having weighted all other viable alternatives. We thus have to be reminded of the limited choices that Khmer women have, although we need to cast a more nuanced look than the one emanating from US discourse. The latter clearly outlines the context of poverty in which most of these women live in - which constitutes another important resonance - but the larger structural conditions that bring about such poverty and the phenomenon linked to it (education, employment etc.) are never explored. Like Hoefinger (2011), we need to view women’s choices through the dual lens of structural constraints and dominant relations of power and women’s individual agency in sex work in order to grasp the multiple subjectivities embodied by them. There should be no denying of the negative consequences of sex work including physical and psychological violence, sexual abuse and depression, but there is an urgent need to go beyond the fixed identity of the victim-subject disconnected to structural constraints.

6.3 Traffickers, bar owners and customers

Thirdly, US discourse is premised on the idea that traffickers, bar owners and managers as well as clients are the personification of evil. They are either portrayed as menacing figures who only want to make profit out of women’s bodies and who make them work under terrible conditions, or as sexual predators and rapists. In contrast, women I interviewed usually contested these sensationalized claims, most of them stating that they had close ties with the individuals who facilitated their transportation and/or bar managers. In most cases, “traffickers” were either family members or close friends, and women did not express any remorse towards them. They also frequently highlighted the very close ties they had with bar managers, as they often relied on them to help save money and to protect them in risky situations. Some of them talked about the contentment of getting responsibilities delegated to them from their managers, which improved their self-esteem. When it comes to customers, many asserted that they had
established several long-term relationships with men and that their dream was to get married to one of them. Love was a recurrent theme coming up in our conversations, and many saw sex work as a possibility for escaping Khmer expectations of getting married very young and for being able to experience their sexuality while looking for a husband who would improve their livelihoods in significant ways. It is also important to keep in mind that, as Weitzer (2007) puts it, customers have very diverse backgrounds, motivations and behaviors, and the reasons for which they buy sex are most often very complex and diverse (Weitzer, 2007, p.452).

6.4 Khmer sex workers as “Others”

From a post-colonial perspective, my findings suggest that US discourse around sex trafficking reproduces significant stereotypes and power relations. The stories of endless violence and of constant victimization have produced Khmer women as victim subjects that “Western” NGOs need to save from the evil. As Mohanty (1991) would suggest, the victim discourse has served to create a patronizing attitude towards “non-Western” women onto whom the victim status is projected (in Soderlund, 2005, p.82), thus cementing the colonial trope. As such, the “Western” gaze on Khmer sex workers and trafficked women can appear somewhat reminiscent of imperial interventions into the lives of the native subject and which is characterized by its “uncivilized” and “backward” culture (Kapur, 2002, p.6). This discourse allows the construction of the “Western” woman as a civilized savior, who is able to make her own choices and who is sexually liberated. In contrast, the Asian woman is compelled into sex work by deception, force or poverty. As argued by Kapur (2002), such discourse is embedded in the idea of “an authentic Indian subject and the construction of the woman in prostitution as a victim of the (Western) market” (Kapur, 2002, p.26): chaste and vulnerable Asian women are set in opposition to Western women ruled by the (im)morality of the market.

More importantly, the subjectivities formed around this discourse have a particular purpose. Spivak (2002) maintains that discursively framing the Third World is also
about getting to discipline and monitor it, to have a more manageable Other; and helping the subaltern is often a reaffirmation of the social Darwinism implicit in ‘development’, in which ‘help’ is framed as ‘the burden of the fittest’ (in Kapoor, 2004, p.632). In that sense, US discourse around trafficking reinforces and is reinforced by fears and anxieties about women’s sexuality and independence, and of “foreigners” and migrant workers. Policies based on notions of “coerced innocent” and the “evil traffickers and customers” might serve to strengthen the construction of state/gender relations that “determine that women’s purity and dependence are essential to family well-being and national honor” (Doezema, 1999, p.46). The problem with such discourse is that it obfuscates the relationship between women migrants’ involvement in sex work and the social inequalities and conflicts produced by globalization, and that it fosters a homogeneous group of “trafficked women” (Mai, 2018). In turn, women are unable to construct their own narratives: their voices remain completely dismissed and “the representation of violence becomes violence itself” (Andrijasevic, 2007; in Hoefinger, 2016).

6.5 Khmer women, sex work and trafficking: a negotiated tension

My findings also uncover that US/Western discourse around sex trafficking has important dissonances with women’s lives in Cambodia that possibly reproduce colonial power. It is not the scope of this thesis to offer an alternative analysis of sex trafficking in Cambodia, but some points can be put forward in order to clarify what would be needed to incorporate a more nuanced approach. What is first and foremost necessary is to focus on structural conditions and to link labor migration and participation to the context-specific economic, political and ideological landscape of Cambodia. Examining the gender-related characteristics of migration, Sassen (2000) argues that globalization created both legitimate and illegitimate opportunities in “global circuits of survival”, and that households have increasingly relied on women for their survival (in Keo, 2014, p.167). Under the new neoliberal order, the global economy has also relied on women’s low wage labor for its maintenance (in Kamler, 2019, p.12). Additionally, with the “reprivatization” of women’s labor, the responsibility for social welfare is put on the private sphere and thus on women (Mohanty, 2003). Consequently, women have been compelled to migrate in order to participate in a host of unskilled industries including that of sex work, in what Sassen (2000) calls the “feminization of survival”. Poverty is
indeed highlighted in US discourse as a driver of sex trafficking and sex work, but its causes remain unexplored. Not only do patterns of global income inequality and labor migration matter in our understanding of sex trafficking and/or migration for sex work, but immigration laws (Berg, 2015, p.151) and carceral approaches to sex work (Schwarz et al., 2017, p.19) also play a major role in fueling poverty and therefore sex trafficking. Poverty alone can thus not explain the dynamics behind sex trafficking and sex work, and neoliberal economic policies need to be acknowledged.

In the Cambodian context, I would like to suggest that it is not only a case of survival but also a complex interplay between structural factors, social obligations and personal desires. In other words, social and economic structures, constructions of gender in Khmer culture, Khmer women’s experiences and the historical background in which they interact all play a role in women’s migration to find work and the risk of them being trafficked. Sex, money, desire, love, kinship, and Khmer norms all come together to influence women’s decision to migrate and work in the sex industry. Cambodian women are “saving” themselves by using “girly bars” as an active place of resistance, freedom, solidarity and sexual exploration (Hoefinger, 2011, p.249). Therefore, clearly visible in the dynamics behind sex work and trafficking are the ways in which women manipulate, contest and reject certain forms of dominance to reshape their identities and communities. As Derks (2008) points out, migrating to Phnom Penh for work gives young women the opportunity to be part of the “modern urban world” and to challenge the old Khmer norms (Derks, 2008, p.13). This implies that women’s decisions are part of a “negotiated tension” between free will and the particular constraints that make some types of employment available to them (Derks, 2008, p.203). In that sense, we can say that they are “asserting their agency in forms of post-colonial micro-feminisms” (Hoefinger, 2011, p.248).

As such, individual trajectories of Khmer women need to be contextualized, and the complex social structures that shape the range of choices available to them must be thoroughly examined, which is to say the push factors such as poverty, unemployment and lack of education but also social norms and family obligations. To unveil such factors, it is necessary to create a free space where women can speak out about themselves and express their own understanding of their situation. Only then can the true dynamics behind sex trafficking be explored and addressed.
Conclusion

This thesis explored how Khmer women’s lives fit into US narratives on sex work and trafficking. Cambodia is particularly fascinating to study because of the complexity of its colonial past and its post-conflict recovery process which is shaped by a rapidly changing society. The massive attention to human trafficking driven by the US “War on trafficking” has undoubtedly had tremendous consequences on women’s lives in Cambodia, as the US still exerts a very prominent influence on the country especially through development aid. Examining the discourse upheld by US policies and NGOs in relation to that particular issue and comparing it to Cambodian women’s lived experiences allows us to reflect on the possible power relations that still subsist in the representations of sex work and trafficking.

Firstly, I have attempted to identify the main grand narratives around ‘sex trafficking’ in US discourse. Four major assumptions emerged: first of all that prostitution and sex trafficking are inextricably linked and that prostitution is inherently bad (TVPA, 2000; CATW, 2006; Porter, 2015). This brings us to the second main narrative upheld in US discourse which is that violence is omnipresent in both sex work and trafficking (CATW, 2006; Kristof, 2015; ICE, 2017). These constructions also suggest that women working in the sex industry, whether trafficked or not, are victims whose consent is irrelevant (Kristof, 2005; Joe-Cannon, 2006; Brewster, 2017; TIP, 2019), and that traffickers and customers are sexual predators (CATW, 2006; TIP, 2019), which are the two other narratives that emerged in my analysis. Sex trafficking as a nodal point has thus been produced and temporarily fixed through the meaning attributed to prostitution, victims, customers and traffickers, and the US State and NGOs.

Secondly, I have tried to uncover Cambodian women’s experience of sex work and trafficking/migration by collecting their stories on their workplace and through NGO workers. I hoped to gain insight into their subjective experiences and the meanings they attribute to their lives. Most importantly, I have attempted to give a fuller understanding of the ways in which women use their own agency in these processes of meaning-making. The stories told by women and NGO representatives working close to them has allowed me to break down the dynamics behind sex work and trafficking into three main parts: poverty and larger factors, society
expectations, as well as personal desires. First of all, young women in Cambodia are confronted with important economic and larger societal constraints, including poverty, the lack of job opportunities, the lack of education and/or the absence of a welfare system. Secondly, social obligations and norms also play a decisive role, and women often try to meet the aspirations and needs of their rural families while simultaneously trying to resist what is imposed upon them by Khmer culture. Finally, women are pursuing their own personal aspirations in relation to modern consumption, social status, kinship and love.

Thirdly, this thesis aimed to uncover the resonances and dissonances between the main rationale in US discourse and women’s experiences of sex work and trafficking in Cambodia. The resonances that came out were that violence and deception can indeed be present in sex work and trafficking; that poverty constitutes an important factor to explain the prevalence of sex trafficking and/or the reasons for women to migrate and to enter sex work; and that consent was most often mentioned in both accounts. However, what came out as evident is the need for a more nuanced approach that puts forward women’s agency and that considers women’s multilayered experiences within a system of structural constrains. In fact, US discourse is also imbued with important dissonances that do not correspond to women’s lived experiences in Cambodia.

From a post-colonial perspective, these dissonances can be understood as part of strategies that are reminiscent of imperial interventions. In the case of sex work and trafficking, such intervention usually take the form of “rescue” operations by “Western saviors” represented both by nation-states and individual “crusaders” from the sexual threat posed by racialized outsiders (Kapur, 2002, p.6). The “Third World” woman who is constructed in this discourse is that of an innocent virginal victims deprived of agency, which reflects the “West’s” anxieties around female sexuality and independence (Doezema, 1999, p.24). These anxieties generated massive attention towards sex trafficking in the “West” and the latter was put at the forefront of the social issues of our modern society. As Fairclough (2001) suggests, however, the selection of particular issues as “major problems” in the current social order attests of the need to sustain certain relations of power and
domination (Fairclough, 2001, p.126). Such representation and the resulting mismatch between Western narratives of sex trafficking and women’s lived experiences in Cambodia is very problematic as it silences women’s voices and compels Cambodia to adopt policies against trafficking that only reflect Western moral and values but do not necessarily fit the complexity of Cambodia’s post-conflict recovery process (Keo, 2014).

The negotiated tension around which women assert their agency need to be explored if we are to understand their experiences of sex work and trafficking, which can be true in any context. Women manipulate, contest and reject certain forms of dominance to reshape their identities and communities, and their decisions are part of a “negotiated tension” between free will and the structural constraints that make some types of employment available to them (Derks, 2008, p.203). Globalization has created both legitimate and illegitimate opportunities in “global circuits of survival” (Sassen, 2000), and this process is highly gendered as households have increasingly relied on women for their survival. In Cambodia, labor migration for sex work can be understood as a complex interplay between structural factors, social obligations and personal desires in which sex, money, desire, love, kinship, and Khmer norms all come together to influence women’s decisions. In other contexts, this interplay of factors might take different forms but the approach should still be the same: structural conditions must be examined and labor migration and participation must be linked to the context-specific economic, political and ideological landscape in which women act. By “travelling to others’ worlds” in that way, we not only navigate one’s own plurality but also “see ourselves through the eyes of others” (Lugones, 2003) and thus question our privileged position to eradicate power relations that prevent the articulation of women’s voices.
References


Stearns, J. (December 2009) *Are we focusing too much on sexual violence in the DRC?*. Available at: congosiasa.blogspot.com/2009/12/are-we-focusing-toomuch-on-sexual.html.


## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Profiles of NGO workers interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NGO worker n°1</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>International/Local Organisation</th>
<th>Date of interview</th>
<th>Way of contact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Khmer</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>6 November</td>
<td>Direct</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO worker n°2</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Khmer</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>22 November</td>
<td>Indirect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO worker n°3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Foreign</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>24 November</td>
<td>indirect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO worker n°4</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Foreign</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>25 November</td>
<td>Indirect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO worker n°5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Foreign</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>26 November</td>
<td>Direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO worker n°6</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Khmer</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>2 December</td>
<td>Direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO worker n°7</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Foreign</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>3 December</td>
<td>Indirect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO worker n°8</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Foreign</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>3 December</td>
<td>Indirect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

20 I call it direct when I myself took contact with the NGO by my own means. An indirect way of contact refers to a third party introducing me to an NGO worker.
## Appendix 2: Profiles of sex workers interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex worker n°1</th>
<th>Given name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Date of interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Srey Mom</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22 November</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lina</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22 November</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mini</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>29 November</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nana</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>29 November</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ong</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6 December</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pisey</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>13 December</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thom</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>13 December</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3: Interview questions for NGO workers.

- There are various definitions of trafficking, as you know. What would be a suitable definition according to you?

- According to you, how prevalent is the problem of sex trafficking in Cambodia (can you give statistics)?

- In your experience, how does sex trafficking operate in Cambodia? For example, is it through large organized crime, small networks of individuals, or what other forms of operation?

- How does sex work relate to trafficking?

- According to the women you work with, what are the structural (push and pull) factors that compel them to migrate for sex work or to make them vulnerable to trafficking? Give example of cases

- How is consent and agency involved in all this? How do the women you have met reason around this? Do you think some women knew what they were going into when they migrated?

- Are these women always referring to violence as part of their jobs? How do they talk about it? Give examples.

- What is the character of the violence women you are working with face? (forms, context and frequency)

- What are the effects on them? (physical, psychological, for them, for their families, children etc.) Give examples.

- What about love and relationships? How are they viewed by women?

- According to the women you work with, what are the main problems they are facing while working in the sex industry? What are the advantages?

- How do they view their current situation? Do you think some of them want to leave this industry? Give examples

- What about traffickers/pimps/bar owners? What do you think are the reasons for their involvement in sex trafficking? And how do women talk about them?

- What about the people who buy sex? What do you think are the reasons for their involvement in prostitution? How do women talk about them?

- What are the reasons women give you for returning to the sex industry after having been “helped” by NGOs?
Appendix 4: Interview questions for sex workers.

- Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
- How many people are there in your family?
- What did you do before working here? What was your life like?
- How did you end up working here? For how long have you worked here?
- What were the reasons that made you go into this work?
- What do you think about trafficking? Does it happen to a lot of women here? Did it happen to you?
- How do you see your life situation now?
- Would you like to continue in this work?
- How is it to work in this particular bar? Do you want to continue working here? Why?
- What relationships do you have with the other women working here?
- Do you have a manager here? If yes, what is his/her role?
- How would you describe your customers?
- Have you ever experienced any violence doing this job? Have you ever been forced to do something you didn’t want to?
- If you would like to leave this job, how would you do that? And what would you like to do instead?
- What is your biggest dream?