

Suffer little Children: Legacies of War in Cambodia

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Despite a "crackdown" on rampant illegal sex, Cambodia is still a world capital of pedophilia.

At 12, Pov knows the sexual geography of the riverfront area in Phnom Penh like the seasoned prostitute he has become. The four middle-aged Frenchmen in front of us? "They like girls," he explains, giggling. "Small girls." The sun-blackened and tattered woman a few yards away? She will rent her daughter for the price of a hamburger. If I don't like boys he can fetch girls. Otherwise, in exchange for the meager contents of my wallet, Pov and his three barefoot, scruffy friends will guide me to a safe hotel and stay the night. "What would we do there?" I ask. "Up to you," he says.



Child-sex broker in Poipet on the Thai border. He approached me in the street and asked me if I wanted "young girls" aged 10+. He brings customers to local brothels on the Cambodian side. "The best customers are Japanese and Koreans. They have money." (All photos David McNeill)

As the sun sinks over the Mekong, Sisowath Quay in Cambodia's choking capital is a slow-moving river of human traffic. Young couples walk arm-in-arm, tourists gaze at one of Asia's most beautiful sunsets and children like Pov ply their trade, zeroing in on what they call rich

foreign “lady-boys”, or gay men. In the crowd of mainly brown-skinned people, white men stand out like flies on a cake. Some are alone, wearing hats and jackets in the stifling evening heat, strolling or sitting on the river wall, eyeing the crowd. The Frenchmen stand chatting and smoking, exuding the easy calm of long-term residents.

“Girls?” says one of the men in heavily accented English, naked gut bulging over the waist of his khaki pants. “There are too many girls here; as young as you like, as often as you like.” A man with a Liverpool accent calls Cambodia a “sweet shop” before becoming suspicious and hurrying away. These are no idle boasts. Give any city taxi driver five minutes and he’ll find a brothel where 12-year-old girls are hawked for US\$20-\$40. For \$500-1,000 and a little more time, they will locate a virgin, boy or girl. Campaigners say children as young as three are still being trafficked and rented out all over this country, mostly to Asian men but also to foreign tourists pouring in through some of the most open borders in the world.

“I know of a brothel with 100 under-aged girls run by high ranking police and military officials,” says one NGO worker who requested anonymity. “There are brothels in some parts of the country where the clients are brought in buses.”

Such stories should belong to the past. After a decade during which Cambodia earned its reputation as a haven for pedophiles, anti-trafficking campaigners have recently begun to bare teeth. Dozens of foreign men have been imprisoned or sent back to courts in Europe and the US, many by the tough deputy head of Phnom Penh’s anti-trafficking bureau Keo Thea. The 2002 deportation to Vietnam of faded glam-rock star Gary Glitter, who was renting a house in the city center, also served notice, said then Minister of Women's Affairs Mu Sochua, that Cambodia was no longer open

for business to the world’s child abusers.

Last year, the local courts convicted two of the most notorious pedophiles in the country, Karl Heinz Henning and Thomas Baron von Englehardt, of raping girls aged 10-14. Henning and Englehardt, a ponytailed German who claimed aristocratic descent, paid US\$30 per girl to pimps, often parents, before taking the children to a Phnom Penh apartment, drugging them with ecstasy and videotaping hundreds of hours of sex sessions. Some of the children were bound and gagged while the men tortured them in Nazi regalia. The police were called after neighbors heard screaming.

But these successes only scratched the surface. Cambodian Minister of Women's Affairs Mu Sochua quit soon after Glitter was kicked out of the country, saying corruption was making her job impossible. Two years ago, the US threatened sanctions after the State Department said Cambodia had failed to meet “minimum standards” to tackle the trafficking of children.

Today, with tourism increasing by 30 percent a year and many police, judges and politicians on the take, the illegal sex trade is booming. At an age when Western kids think having their first illegal drink is a gas, Cambodian children are being abused by men three or four times their age. US charity World Vision last year said that 15 percent of the Cambodian boys they surveyed had been sexually abused before reaching their tenth birthday. About a third of the roughly 80,000 - 100,000 prostitutes in Cambodia are children, according to Canada-based NGO Future Group. The area around Siem Reap, home to Cambodia’s most popular tourist destination, Angkor Wat, is experiencing an “explosion” of brothels, says Don Brewster, an American who moved here with his wife in 2004 to set up a shelter for sexually abused children.

The abuse of children is so routine that local

newspapers barely cover it. “Its levels of depravity,” explains Irishman Kevin Doyle, editor of the Cambodia Daily. “You think you’ve seen it all and then something new comes along. ‘Ok, Nazi porn S&M and four year-olds; we haven’t had that before,’ you know?”

Arrests are often smothered with cash. Men pay off the families of the victims and the authorities in a country with a barely functioning legal system where the average civil servant earns about US\$30 a month. “The families are happy to get the money and drop charges,” says Sourm Dear, Cambodian Director of Rapha House, a center for victims of sexual abuse, who says his organization has to pay the police to chase down missing girls. Traffickers and pimps, protected by military police and even politicians, target poor, broken families, paying \$20 to locals for information on potential victims.

Sarom Vath was 15 and living with her grandmother near the border with Thailand when she was approached by a woman with an offer to work as a waitress. Instead, the woman sold her virginity and locked her in a room with the buyer, a middle-aged taxi driver. “It hurt a lot,” recalls Sarom. She was sold to a brothel, drugged and forced to have sex with up to a dozen men a day. “We were given pills and something to smoke, so I couldn’t sleep and didn’t care about anything.” Now 16, and living in a center for abused children, Sarom is angry and rebellious, but says talking about what happened helps “lighten my heart.”

Children like Sarom get a brutal crash course in the economics of flesh. For many -- 38 percent, according to a 2007 report by the International Organization for Migration -- entry into the sex trade comes by selling their virginity, sometimes for as little as \$100. Some do so ‘voluntarily’; most are trafficked or tricked. Rady Yen, for example, was 15 and alone on Sisowath Quay when she took up an offer to work cleaning tables, only to find that

her virginity had been auctioned off to a Japanese tourist. “I got sick and couldn’t see any more men,” she says.



Rady Yen, tricked in Phnom Pehn into selling her virginity and subsequently raped. Now 18 and living in a refugee centre for sexual victims.

She escaped, but the market value of girls who stay in the sex trade plummets: a couple of hundred dollars for a pre-teen, up to \$40 for a 12-year-old and on a steadily sliding scale thereafter. Sarom has no idea how much she changed hands for, but thinks it was \$5-6 a time.



Rady with her family in Sisophon, a dirt-poor area menaced by sex traffickers.

Crushing poverty fuels the trade. In a festering Phnom Penh slum known simply as “the building”, where naked children play on

garbage dumps, watching parents hawk their beautiful 13-year-old daughter to sweating, middle-aged tourists makes twisted sense; she is the only thing of value they have. This slum is home to prostitutes like Kanha Thy, who sold her virginity, aged 14, to a foreign man “aged between 40 and 50” for US\$150. At the time her mother was sick and bleeding following a miscarriage and a male neighbor peddled her to the foreigner, persuading her that her mum would die if she didn’t work. The man earned \$50 for finding the client. “He tricked me.” She says. Today, Kanha is pregnant with her second child but hides her bump as she works Phnom Penh bars like the “Martini” for foreigners, as does her friend Rous Mach, who has been a prostitute for the last year.



Missing girl poster on lamppost in Poipet.

Foreign intervention, in all its forms, has played a central part in the country's modern tragedy. French control ended in 1954, but in the mid-1960s, the country was sucked into the Vietnam maelstrom. As the US-led war accelerated, Cambodia’s leadership leaned toward China and North Vietnam.

In the early 1970s in an attempt to eliminate North Vietnamese troops en route to the South, the US carpet-bombed much of the country illegally and relentlessly for three years. This destabilizing of the countryside laid the foundation for the rise of the Khmer Rouge regime, which ran Cambodia into the ground

and may have been responsible for well over a million deaths by the time a Vietnamese intervention overthrew the regime in 1979. Three decades later five top surviving Khmer Rouge leaders are in prison facing trial for crimes against humanity and war crimes, in a special tribunal set up by the Cambodian government and the United Nations. But the country has yet to recover from its traumatic past. “Cambodians have developed a numbness to horror because of their history,” says Don Brewster. “There are no barriers; they will do anything for money and they live for today.”

Astonishingly, given how freely pedophiles operate there, Sisowath Quay is the most heavily watched area of the country. Undercover cops and NGOs patrol here and the post-2002 crackdown has pushed some of the trade underground. The notorious brothel area of Svay Pak, on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, no longer sells children openly on the street to men with British, American and Irish accents, though pimps with mobile phones still hover around the area.

But outside the capital, anything goes. In Poipet, a booming town on the Thai border fuelled mostly by gambling and prostitution, the tuk-tuk motorcycle taxis ferry hundreds of Thai, Chinese, Japanese and other tourists daily to brothels on the Cambodian side, where children of any age can be bought with a handful of dollars or Thai Baht. The street vendors even sell Viagra for about \$14 a pack. “According to Mr. Dear, “In some cases trafficked girls are worth less than the price of a cow,” he says.



Sign on the road leading into Cambodia from Thailand: Absolutely against Child Sex.

He deals with the consequences. At Rapha House, rescued girls are brought back to normality, sent to school and taught to sew, fix hair and grow vegetables. They must come to terms with their experiences and the fact that in this culture they are devalued because they are no longer virgins. “Everybody knows that I’m a victim because I stay at this center,” says Sorum. “People feel sorry for me. That makes me sad.” Some open up and emerge relatively unscarred. Others rebel, fight with other girls, cut themselves or try to leave, often back to

poverty, then prostitution. The “recidivism rate” for rescued child prostitutes is 80 percent, according to Pierre Legros, founder of a Phnom Penh NGO that fights trafficking. “The hardest work is not rescuing the girls, it is making a life for them afterwards,” he says.

On the sidewalk of Sisowath Quay, in front of the city’s best restaurants, Pov and his friends tuck into a pizza, bought by a tourist. Like many of the street children here, he is an unsettling mix of naivety and knowingness, his hand resting on my thigh as he pleads for the name of my hotel. He and his friends are desperate because he knows that most of the foreign men come for girls. But later, when photographer Androniki Christodoulou begins to take pictures, the boys drop their sales pitch, curl up like cats on the Quay wall, and smile shyly. They are, after all, just children.

David McNeill writes regularly for a number of publications including the Irish Times and the Chronicle of Higher Education. He is a Japan Focus coordinator. Earlier versions of this article appeared in The Irish Times and The South China Morning Post. Posted at Japan Focus on March 6, 2008.