

Drug Addiction Keeps Sex-Trafficking Victims in Prostitution

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Many teen prostitutes who have been liberated from Southeast Asian brothels return to the brothel because they are addicted to drugs. In fact, many brothel owners believe that addiction will keep prostitutes dependent on them. The girls trafficked into prostitution are also so broken and ashamed that the brothel is the only place where they have any self-esteem. The best way to reduce prostitution is therefore to prevent the trafficking of women and girls in the first place.

After I purchased Srey Mom from her brothel for \$203 [in 2004] and brought her back to her village, the joy was overwhelming. Her parents and siblings had assumed she was dead, and they shrieked and hugged and cried.

I had doubts about the other sex slave I had purchased, Srey Neth, . . . who in fact is thriving and is now preparing to become a hairdresser. But I was pretty sure that Srey Mom would make it.

So I'm devastated to say that a year later [in 2005], I found Srey Mom back here in the wild town of Poipet, in her old brothel. She's devastated, too—when she spotted me, she ran away to her room in the back of the brothel until she could compose herself.

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"I never lie to people, but I lied to you," she said forlornly. "I said I would not come back, and I did. I didn't want to return, but I did."

Yet, sadly, such an experience is common. 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.

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.

Some brothel owners welcome addiction, because it makes the girls dependent upon them.

Srey Mom, too, has zero self-esteem, but in her case no one in her village knew her background, and she was clear of debts. The central problem, as best I can piece together the situation, is that she was addicted to methamphetamines, and that craving destroyed her will power, sending her fleeing back to the brothel so that she could get her drugs. . . .

An aid group looking after Srey Mom, American Assistance for Cambodia, gave her several more chances, once bringing her to Phnom Penh to enroll in school to become a hairdresser. But each time, Srey Mom fled back to drugs and the brothel.

"Ninety-five percent of the girls take drugs," Srey Mom told me. Some girls inject morphine, but brothel owners worry that needle holes make girls look unsightly, so methamphetamine pills are most common.

Some brothel owners welcome addiction, because it makes the girls dependent upon them. But Srey Mom said that is not true of her brothel owner, Heok Tem, whom she calls "Mother."

“Mother doesn’t want us to use drugs,” Srey Mom said. She has an eerily close relationship with Mrs. Heok Tem, and these days that emotional bond keeps her in the brothel as much as do her debts. Mrs. Heok Tem seems to feel genuine affection for Srey Mom and truly helped in the effort to get Srey Mom to start a new life, but she also cheats Srey Mom ruthlessly—I examined the brothel’s account books—and rakes in cash by pimping the girl, which exposes her to AIDS.

“It’s wrong,” Mrs. Heok Tem admitted. But for now, she says, she needs the money.

Srey Mom still says her dream is to start life over in her village. “I want to go away,” she said. “I don’t want to stay here long. I’m not happy here. I will just look after my younger sisters. I’m already bad, and I don’t want them to become bad like me.”

I don’t believe it will ever happen. I hate to write anyone off, but I’m afraid that Srey Mom will remain in the brothel until she is dying of AIDS (36 percent of girls in local brothels have HIV, and eventually it catches up with almost all of them). I finally dared tell her my fear. I described some young women I had just seen, gaunt and groaning, dying of AIDS in Poipet, and I told her I feared she would end up the same way.

“I’m afraid of that, too,” she replied, her voice breaking. “This is an unhappy life. I don’t want to do this.”

Maybe that’s what I find saddest about Srey Mom: She is a wonderful, good-hearted girl who gives money to beggars, who offers Buddhist prayers for redemption—but who is already so broken that she seems unable to escape a world that she hates and knows is killing her.

President [George W.] Bush declared in his [2005] inaugural address this week that “no one deserves to be a slave” and that advancing freedom is “the calling of our time.” I can’t think of a better place to start than the hundreds of thousands of girls trafficked each year, for this twenty-first-century

version of slavery has not only grown in recent years but is also especially diabolical—it poisons its victims, like Srey Mom, so that eventually chains are often redundant.