

## **Apsara's Ordeal of Fire: The Politics of Sense in the Everyday Life of Cambodian Bar Girls<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the relationship between sensory experience and the everyday life of Cambodian bar girls, sex workers employed by urban bars and nightclubs. Complicating previous research that views these women as marginalized or victimized, I introduce novel ethnographic evidence exploring sex workers' strategies for harm reduction. I argue that bar girls develop a sense of hazard, reflecting their agency as individuals and the strong group solidarity they forge in the peril of everyday life in sex-selling space. Forced to confront the occupational dangers of sex work behind closed doors, bar girls mitigate risks of violence and disease by producing a communal space of learning. Yet bar girls' primary strategy for ascendancy—marriage to a foreign client—actually magnifies their risk of HIV infection as they perform the sexual role of wife.

**Keywords:** Sensory experience, Cambodia, Sex work, Constrained agency

### **Introduction**

In the Cambodian cultural imaginary, Apsara, or angels, are beautiful immortals who reside in heaven and entertain the demigods. An enduring trope of Hindu mythology, in Cambodia Apsara connote an ideal type: beautiful women of good ascendancy. At nightclubs and bars in Sihanoukville, Cambodia's most famous beach town, Cambodian bar girls—the modern Apsara—work in a tourist paradise, entertaining the tourist demigods. Embraced by the

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illusory bonfire of the bars' neon signs, bar girls believe their work constitutes an *Agni Pariksha* ritual—an 'ordeal of fire.' Just like sacred fire that faced Sita in the Ramayana, this fire can burn the bar girls or even kill them. Yet it can also purify, proving the women's virtuousness and transforming the 'sin' of their sex work into an act of morality and loyalty to their families living in poor rural areas. Cambodian bar girls come to Sihanoukville for this ordeal of fire<sup>2</sup>. They know that when they come they are to be tested, excluded, and stigmatized, but they also know that going through this ordeal they can reconceive their lives and reimagine their futures. Risks of sex work are manifold, and beyond nightly concerns for personal safety and health, sex workers also contend with societal stigma against their professional, non-marital sexuality. Yet despite its many dangers, sex work is a rare job in Cambodia that can offer young women with little formal education the opportunity for stability, capital accumulation, and personal advancement. Successful bar girls can support their families with money from sex-selling. They may even emerge from the fire like Sita, affirmed of their purity, through marriage to a rich foreigner.

My study of the lived experiences of bar girls was based on eighteen months of ethnographic research in Sihanoukville. During the first six months, I worked as a volunteer at a Catholic organization that provides help to children and sex workers. During my last twelve months of fieldwork, I worked as a bar girl at Rose Bar, a local bar owned by Sophea<sup>3</sup>, a thirty-three-year-old single mother of two sons. Rose Bar is located on Victory Hill, a famous nightlife area in Sihanoukville, widely recognized among foreign male tourists. There are twenty-three bars located in this area, all well known for cheap drinks and pretty women.

During my twelve months of field research in Rose Bar, I conducted semi-structured interviews in Khmer with 49 bar girls and in English with 25 Victory Hill customers.<sup>4</sup> I had daily conversations with the bar girls with whom I lived and worked. I also visited five bar girls' villages of origin and attended four wedding ceremonies.

Following Rekart's (2006) paradigm of sex work harm reduction, this essay analyzes sex workers' motivations, their goals for their tenure of employment, and the strategies sex workers employ to keep themselves safe on the job.<sup>5</sup> I argue that by examining the relationship of sensory experience and the production of space, we can better understand not only how sex trading among Cambodian bar girls is politically and economically produced, but also how the life ordeal of a Sihanoukville bar girl is experienced and understood. Interrogation of the political economy of sex trade and the sensory experience of Sihanoukville bar girls allow us to interpret local strategies of harm reduction in spaces of constrained agency.

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<sup>2</sup> This article focuses on the experiences of women who migrated to cities of their own volition and who chose to engage in sex work. Of course like all decisions about migration and employment, these choices are made under various constraints (Murray, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Names have been changed. Rose Bar is also a pseudonym.

<sup>4</sup> All interviews have been translated into English.

<sup>5</sup> In addition to Rekart 2006, see Vanwesenbeeck 2001 for a comprehensive bibliography of prior research on sex work and harm reduction strategies.

## Sex-Selling Space from Angkor to Contemporary Cambodia

The documented history of sex work in Cambodia dates back to the country's political renaissance in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries (Chandler, 2008). At the height of the Khmer Empire, both women and men worked as prostitutes; there is also evidence of same-sex male sex work (Tully, 2005). The advent of imperialism introduced early iterations of the transnational, interracial partnerships bar girls aspire toward today. Beginning at the close of the fifteenth century, some Cambodian women found work as “temporary wives” to European men, performing as maids in the daytime and wives at night (Reid, 1988:161). Throughout the French colonial period (1863-1953), European men contracted with local women to serve as temporary wives, though colonial administrators discouraged procreation (Muller 2006; Jacobsen 2008; Ovesen & Trankell, 2010). The French also permitted sex-selling spaces such as brothels. All sex workers—both brothel-based and illegal street-based workers—were obliged to register with the police and submit to weekly medical check-ups; sex workers who were found to have sexually transmitted diseases were detained and treated in prison infirmaries (Derks, 2008:89-91; Ovesen & Trankell, 2010:62-65).

Following independence in 1953, women-owned sex-selling spaces flourished with foreign as well as local clientele, though prostitution was considered a moral pollutant. Throughout the Cambodian Civil War (1970-1975), sex work was prevalent in urban areas. When the Khmer Rouge seized control, however, sex-selling was forcefully outlawed. In early 1975, the Khmer Rouge shut down all sex-selling spaces, making adultery and sex selling punishable by death (Derks, 2008:90).

During the 1980s, following the Vietnamese invasion, sex work began to appear again sporadically (Gottesman, 2003:304). After the defeat of the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese troops, the arrival of United Nations troops facilitated the reestablishment and expansion of sex-selling space, which flourished with the influx of over 20,000 civilian and military personnel in 1992 (Derks, 2008). Sex work became more visible as red light districts opened in different parts of Phnom Penh, as well as in major provincial towns such as Sihanoukville.

In Cambodia today, education rates remain low, the healthcare system is poor, and unemployment is rampant (Derks, 2008). Sex-selling spaces, however, continue to expand in key cities, offering poor women with few other options an opportunity to support their families and pursue economic independence. Yet sex work remains heavily stigmatized, and workers seek their wages in spaces of hazard.

The different types of sex-selling spaces mentioned above typically expose sex workers to different degrees of hazard. In Sihanoukville, as in Phnom Penh, brothel-based sex workers live and work in a small house and are supervised—and to an extent protected—by a *Maeba* or madam. There are also karaoke or bar-based sex workers, employees of bars or restaurants who

may leave with customers when 'bought out' by a fee paid to the establishment. In such situations, a separate transaction for purchased sex is negotiated elsewhere. Finally, street-based sex workers, who solicit or negotiate sex outdoors, generally experience the most hazard among sex workers. When not indebted or managed by a pimp, street-based sex workers may be entirely independent, free to set their own schedules, negotiate their own prices, pick their own clients, and keep all of their earnings. Yet street-based workers are subject to arrest, detention, and violence at higher rates than their institution-based counterparts (Maher, et al., 2011; Ditmore, 2014). Brothels and bars have been shown to be safer than street-based sex work, with higher rates of consistent condom use and lower violence (Maher, et al., 2011).

### **Theories of Sensory Experience and Production of Space**

A large body of feminist scholarship about sex work engages critical questions of agency and constraint.<sup>6</sup> Anti-prostitution feminists tend to contest the possibility of consent in situations where sex is sold, believing that sex work operates across an insurmountable gradient of power and that sex sold by women to men emboldens global patriarchy (Barry, 1984; Farley, 2006). The prevalence of sex trafficking in Southeast Asia raises additional concerns about agency in sex work (Jeffreys, 2009), though recent scholarship has complicated earlier assertions about the experiences of "victims" of sex trafficking (Murray, 2003). By analyzing bar girls' everyday lives through theories of sensory experience and the production of space, we can explore a novel dimension of the debate, looking at the material and emotional logics of sex work.

The production of space gives us a dialectical understanding of sex-selling space as both a form of social control and power, as well as a 'becoming' that produces possibilities and chances. The senses give us an understanding of how bar girls experience their lives and how they make sense of their worlds (Lefebvre, 1991; Howes, 2003).

Beyond production of space, everyday sensory experiences are important aspects of how people relate to their world (Chuengsatiansup, 1999). The senses give us an understanding of how the life of bar girls is experienced and how they perceive and navigate their worlds (Lefebvre, 1991; Howes, 2003). Moreover, ample evidence suggests sensory perception is not merely a physical act but also one influenced by culture (Herzfeld, 2001). The way a society senses is the way it understands the world. Sensory perception—and values and discourse about sensory perception—can elicit how a society understands itself, framing experiences, ideals, hopes and fears (Classen, 1993).

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Ditmore 2014; Dworkin 1981; Farley 2006; Farley & Kelly 2000; Jeffreys 2009; MacKinnon 1993; Sandy 2007.

Based on this understanding, I investigate how the relationship between production of space and sensory experience operates and evolves within multiple domains of practice that shape the agency of Cambodian bar girls. This approach helps us to explore the problem of agency of sex workers by moving beyond the problem of treating sex-selling space as either a fixed structure or an ungraspable liquid, as either a container or nothingness. Space can be treated as something we make in conditions we do not choose; as something simultaneously past, present and future; as something that offers the possibility for resistance to domination. It can also move us beyond the problem of treating sensory experience as only perception, mere function of sensory organs. Sensory experience can be treated as something shaping and reshaping our world, embodying our self and arenas of agency (Herzfeld, 2001).

### **Everyday Life at Rose Bar**

It was a sweltering hot night in April, the hottest month of summer in Sihanoukville, and the busiest month for tourism. My watch showed 11 p.m., the peak time of bar business in Victory Hill. Rose Bar was filled with foreigners, slowly sipping their drinks. Srey Junn, Srey Nari, and I were sitting on the wicker chairs in front of Rose Bar. Two Westerners arrived and sat next to Srey Junn and Srey Nari. I watched one man shove his hands down Srey Nari's shorts before moving on to grind his hand on Srey Junn's shirt.

Srey Junn was still smiling, but I could tell that she was steaming with anger. Srey Junn used to tell me that she hated men who groped bar girls upon first meeting—forward, indecent behavior that not only broke the understood code of Rose Bar etiquette but also indicated dangerous disregard.

The man continued to reach inside Srey Junn's shirt. He then lifted her up and put her on his lap. Srey Junn closed her eyes and smiled, keeping herself calm. Fronting a naïve, innocent manner, Srey Junn kissed him and talked to him sweetly: "Honey, you are the most handsome man I ever met in my life. Could you buy me and my friends some lady drink?"<sup>7</sup>

Hearing these words, the man fell under Srey Junn's spell. He followed her to ring the small bell that hangs in the middle of Rose Bar, indicating he wanted to pay for everyone's drink. After two hours, he spent two hundred and thirty dollars and did not have enough money to pay for Srey Junn to have sex with him. When the customer ultimately left by himself, Srey Junn told me, "This is a lesson for a rude man."

Clearly, to assume either that Srey Junn was being taken advantage of, or that she was

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<sup>7</sup> In the Cambodian bar scene, "lady drinks" are typically small mixed drinks customers purchase for female employees, inviting further conversation with the recipient. The cost includes a US\$1 surcharge, which is ultimately added to a bar girl's wages.

exploiting the rude man—using her sexuality to get money from him—does not let us comprehend the complexity of the bar as a sex-selling space, nor the complexity of Srey Junn’s interactional tactics and her spatial practices. Indeed, Srey Junn informed me this was a strategy she employed to get rid of customers she deemed dangerous; the man’s initial forwardness betrayed hazardous disrespect. To understand more deeply the lived experience and body politics of bar girls, we will now explore the sensory experiences and the politics of sense in the space of sexual desire and sex trading.

How bar girls perceived peril is fundamental in explaining how the politics of senses play an important role in this sex-selling space. These perceptions caused bar girls to take certain actions to protect themselves from violence, injury, or death. Bar girls could not predict if men who bought sex from them would become violent, therefore they depended on a sensory instinct of hazardous situations. Their sense of hazard involved multiple modalities: perceptions of dialect and linguistic distinctions, gestures and bodily language, smell, dress, and facial expression combined to signify the assessment of risky situations. Of these, the sense of smell was most essential, elaborated by bar girls in both literal and rich metaphorical terms. Rose Bar women taught each other to use smell to exercise agency and keep safe. Bar girls employed sensory perception as a nightly tactic to discern who was likely a safe customer, worthy of attention, that may be a good husband in the future and who was likely a dangerous person, a customer one should avoid.

### **The Everyday State of Peril and the Sense of Hazard**

The sunlight through the door was gray and pale. The smell of rain was in the air, and the clouds looked heavy and dark. The wind blew slowly and it was slightly cold. The evening was just beginning and Rose Bar was open, although this rainy day was not a good day for business.

Four bar girls and I were sitting in front of Rose Bar, eating dinner. Srey Nan, a new bar girl who had been working at Rose Bar just half a week, walked slowly across the road, carrying a bowl of noodles in her hands, to join the other bar girls for dinner. She looked very young for a woman who was twenty-five and had two children. Srey Mom, the oldest bar girl in Rose Bar, looked attentively at the bite mark on Srey Nan’s shoulder, then asked about her first customer last night.

Srey Nan sat, silent, tears streaming down her face. Everybody around the table stopped eating. After a couple of minutes Srey Nan stopped her tears. Slowly Srey Mom took her spoon in her hand and spoke.

*“Kayom pau hear, wheir klen odd laur.”*

“I told you already, that guy smelled dangerous.”

After dinner, Srey Mom told me that last night when Srey Nan went out with that

customer, she felt he was not a good guy. She told Srey Nan to be careful, to use her nose, but Srey Nan was focused only on the forty dollars from this man for her sexual service. That night the man forced Srey Nan to have anal intercourse with him, and he bit her several times.

I asked Srey Mom, "Why didn't she go to the police station?" Srey Mom smiled at me and replied slowly, as if I were a child: "If she goes to the police station, that means she will lose her forty dollars for nothing." She concluded that Srey Nan had to practice using her nose more, and then she wouldn't cry again.

Cambodians often consider 'smell' a regulated sense, an actual and also figurative input modality that does not merely *identify* matter but can also detect the values it possesses (Hinton, et al., 2004). At Rose Bar, the 'smell of danger' had its own special meaning, and bar girls believed smell was the most functional sense to identify hazard. In Rose Bar's space, the eye could not see clearly because of the dim red light, but it made every bar girl look beautiful. The ear could not hear clearly through the ambient noise, but it made everyone sit closer, all the easier to touch each other. The nose, though sometimes impaired by cigarette smoke, was regarded as the most reliable way to detect the hazardous.

In some cases, smell could supply information about hazard no other sense could perceive. For example, bar girls were vigilant toward a customer who had an odor of substance abuse. A bar girl could not see when a customer used amphetamines, but she could smell it. Other cues about danger were visual. Bar girls often acted in preemptive self-defense to avoid customers like those who had previously caused them harm. For instance, Srey Mom always said that a man who made no eye contact while speaking was dangerous or Srey Nut rejected customers who wore military boots that made her insecure. While some bar girls thought soldiers were the safest customers, some thought fat men were safer than thin men. Yet even hazards bar girls perceived visually were often expressed through a metaphor of smell. Bar girls incorporated visual information to make decisions about who smelled dangerous, using extensive descriptive language to communicate this sense of hazard. For instance Srey Rann told me she refused one customer, "This man smells like a snake." Bar girls' metrics for acceptable customers analyzed dense sensory information and memories of pain inscribed on the body to avoid anticipated hazard.

### **Strategies of Harm Reduction**

Bar girls developed a sense of danger through sensory experience, but in order to remain safe they also had to develop tactics of negotiation and harm reduction. In teaching each other to enact safekeeping behavior, bar girls created a communal space of learning and resistance.

Eluding the dangers and harm of sex work was the task of the workers, and the women of Rose Bar never spoke of workers' rights or limits on customers' conduct. As the bar girls would

often say, "When the door is closed, everything depends on yourself." Likewise, the bar girls' four rules of engagement were recited as a mantra of personal safety: First, get your payment before service. Second, remember where the door is. Third, put your clothes near the door for an easy escape. Fourth, no condom, no sex.

In Cambodia, when sex workers are subjected to violence, they are also subject to blame for it. Bar girls are constructed as 'unworthy victims,' and given the illegal status of their sex work, they often have hostile relationships with police and may be systematically ignored and mistreated by officers (Maher, et al., 2011). As a result, bar girls in Rose Bar were on their own. Personal safety depended on their ability to follow their 'sense of hazard,' which they learned through practice in everyday life and through conversation with other bar girls. At every dinner in Rose Bar, bar girls sat together and produced a community of learning, where they taught and learned from one another. These spaces were also opportunities for dark or ribald humor that fostered solidarity. For instance, Srey Kong often joked over dinner about small and ugly foreign penises.

Bar girls' similar experiences circumscribed this space of sharing and humor, their strongest fortification from harms of the sex-selling space around them. They came from low socioeconomic backgrounds, migrated far away from their rural families, and had been excluded from the society of 'respectable' women. Marginalized because of their poverty, their distance from home, and their chosen profession, their peer solidarity was generally very strong (Hoefinger, 2013:79). The bar girls understood this solidarity was important to their survival. Relationships among them reflected the way they helped one another informally to negotiate the space in which they lived.

Solidarity at Rose Bar was also institutionally imbedded. Sophea, the bar owner, took pride in making Rose Bar a space for opportunity, permitting socioeconomic ascension of women who arrived as poor as she was once herself. Indeed, Sophea told me she tries to make Rose Bar feel like a "big family" or Srey Mom called "*Bong Sarie Gour Sae*" "The family of sister." An idea reflected in the collective sharing among bar girls.

Bar girls derived protection through their affiliation with the bar, as well as extra measures of safety by selecting customers and conducting initial transactions within the bar space. Finally, most Victory Hill customers were foreigners, so most Rose Bar employees spoke English well and benefitted further from regular employer-organized language classes.

### **'Good Ascendancy' and Moral Ambiguity**

Once inside their ordeal of fire, bar girls learned to seek each other for support, creating a space of learning that fostered solidarity and safety. Communal space also permitted bar girls to share aspirations and ideology. Motivations for bar girls' work were unsurprisingly consistent:

through earning money in sex-selling space and ultimately through marriage to a foreigner, women sought status advancement for themselves and material advancement for their families. More remarkable was the consistency in how bar girls understood their moral position: Each believed their sex work was sinful, but also that the suffering they endured as bar girls weighed into a system of belief based in Khmer Buddhist philosophy of karma. This seeming contradiction—moral ascendancy through labor of sin—created a space of moral ambiguity for these women, at once enabling and constraining their success.

### **Collecting Against Karmic Debt**

It was the sort of day that made you want to be swimming in the sea. There was a beautiful blue sky dotted with white wisps of clouds and the kind of sun benevolent enough not to burn your skin. I sat on Victory Beach with Srey Samnang, a twenty-two-year-old bar girl named for the Cambodian word for good fortune.

A mother of two sons, Srey Samnang came from Kampong Thom, a provincial town located in Cambodia's northeastern highlands. Beaches were a novelty to her, and we often walked by the water together, chatting about our lives. That particular morning, Srey Samnang told me how she came to Sihanoukville, seeking a safer and more respectable life:

I lived with my widowed mother and three younger siblings. My family was very poor. I went to Phnom Penh when I was fourteen, in search of a job to support my family. I found a job as a domestic servant. One day, when I came home to visit my family, my neighbor dragged me into a field and raped me. Then this man came to my house and told my mother he wanted me to be his wife. I absolutely hated this bad man. But nobody could help me. In Cambodia, if you have money, you can get away with anything; you just pay the police to keep everything quiet, so my mother thought it was the best way for me. Because I had lost my virginity, I was a *srey kouch* [broken woman]. Nobody wanted to marry me; hence I moved to his house and lived with this man without a wedding ceremony.

After 5 years of domestic violence that left several scars on her body, Srey Samnang managed to get divorced. She then migrated to Sihanoukville to earn money for her mother, her siblings, and her two sons. Alongside her hope to support her family, Srey Samnang wanted to be a “good ascendancy woman,” inspired by Srey Kumpai, another neighbor, who married a foreigner after working as a bar girl at Rose Bar for 8 months.

I asked what Srey Samnang would like to do after she married a foreigner.

“First and foremost, my wedding will be three consecutive days,” she said. “I will invite all my friends and neighbors, and then I will take care of my mother, my sons, my siblings and my new husband. I will prepare food for them and stay at home as a good wife.”

Srey Samnang pressed her hands together on her forehead and added, "I pray to The Buddha every day, please help release me from my *karma*."

Though sex work is vilified as impure and sinful, bar girls frequently expressed moral and religious motivations for their actions. In fact, almost all the women I spoke with described their lives and goals with reference to *karm* and *bunn* (merit, good deeds, goodness). Bar girls explained their life as *meain karm jae* (having sin) because of something they did wrong in the past, perhaps in a previous lifetime. Bar girls understood the need to work in sex-selling space as suffering, and therefore, as payment for their karmic debts.

Beyond personal karmic repayment, bar girls also emphasized their obligation to support their families with money from sex-selling space. They regarded this as *ta-ver bunn*, making merit. The money they received from sex-selling space to support their families, especially their mothers, became an effective karmic agent for their families' futures, within their current lives or in the next.

The interrelationships among merit, karma, and dharma form Khmer Buddhist conceptions of social order, and belief in this ideology allows bar girls to accept their position within this framework (Ledgerwood, 1990; Jacobson, 2008). Their acts as sex workers are chances to accrue merit as well as to pay for karma, the ill effects of past actions. Moreover, as they collect *bunn* against their karma debts, bar girls understand they will receive rights to change their status; they may become 'good ascendancy women' by marrying rich foreign men and by funneling money—proof of loyalty—back to their rural families.

Beyond the material risks I have discussed above, bar girls encounter overwhelming social hazards in their efforts to procure financial and karmic support for themselves and their families. As sexually active unmarried women, sex workers are said to be *srey kouch*, broken women (Derks, 2008). Social disapproval and disrespect from the larger society confronts these women from all corners, including, perhaps ironically, from the families they support. As sex workers, they stake a professional claim outside the bounds of respectable womanhood (Ledgerwood, 1990:3).

Families' disapproval of sex work is often borne of concern about status; a Cambodian female without her virginity at marriage undermines her family's standing in her local community (Derks, 2008:44; Tarr, 1996:2). The value ascribed to female purity is well encapsulated by a famous Cambodian proverb: "*Prous jee-a daw dail meas, srey jee-a daw dail knornath saw*," or, "men are like gold and women are like white cloth." Gold can be cleaned of dirt and it will look new again, but cloth will always bear a stain (Derks, 2008:50; Jacobsen, 2008:268). In common usage, the proverb is frequently deployed with reference to men's and women's respective sexual lives. Men can have sex at any point without being questioned or judged, while a family's reputation is dependent upon the purity and obedience of its daughters (Derks, 2008:12).

### ***Marriage and Moral Ambiguity***

Modern Cambodian feminists work to challenge patriarchal gender norms about women's 'purity,' but where family honor is at stake, the pace of change is slow (Derks, 2008: 171). This is especially true for marriage, an institution Cambodians continue to see as vital, both in maintenance of cultural and social norms, and also in access to economic and social security for one's self and one's family (Derks, 2008:183). Interestingly, though marriage remains a hallmark of Cambodian respectability, bar girls' access to the institution is somewhat limited: Foreign men who are older than fifty or earn less than US\$2500 per month are not allowed to marry Cambodian women, per new regulations introduced by the Cambodian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in 2011. For some bar girls, this law has prevented legal marriage to foreign boyfriends. Yet the law has not impeded bar girls' access to the accoutrements of success. Even when legal marriage is impossible, bar girls have brought honor to their families by undergoing elaborate, multiday wedding ceremonies. Marrying a foreign husband is a transforming from *srey kouch* to a good wife who upholds the dominant ideology of marriage, family, and wife.

Srey Junn was one such woman. A beautiful twenty-four-year-old from Svay Rieng Province, Srey Junn was the eldest of seven children in a farming family. She quit school when she was in grade five because her father was seriously ill. Her mother needed her to work as a street vendor to help support the family. When she was fourteen years old, she migrated to Phnom Penh to work in a garment factory. Srey Junn married at twenty and divorced a year later, after her Cambodian husband began to drink and see other women. She moved back to Phnom Penh to resume work in the garment factory, but Srey Junn found she could not earn enough money to support her family and pay for her father's medical care. One day she met up with an old friend who used to work in the same factory, but had since left to work in Sihanoukville as a bar girl. Srey Junn's friend told her how much beautiful women like her could earn at a bar, so she decided to go.

Seven months into Srey Junn's tenure at Rose Bar, she had received marriage proposals from three different foreign boyfriends. Srey Junn chose to marry a fifty-one-year-old Finnish man who planned to start a small business for Srey Junn after the ceremony. Srey Junn could not legally marry this man, as he was too old, but their three days of wedding festivities made Srey Junn's parents very proud. Even her chronically ill father was able to make himself strong enough to attend.

Though barred from legal marriage to her boyfriend, Srey Junn accessed various markers of success through simulated ritual. The marriage ceremony brought honor to her family, and the social contract of her marriage greenlit her small business, setting Srey Junn on the road to economic security beyond her sex-selling days. Srey Junn was unable to secure a legal marriage, but she was able to derive its social and material benefits. Still, though marriage to a

foreigner—legal or informal—may provide social support and financial stability, it is no happy ending.

### ***Epidemiological Dangers of Success***

As *srey kouch*, bar girls are considered women unfit to wed Cambodian men. But as Apsara inside the fire, all bar girls hope that their work is temporary, that marriage to a comparatively wealthy foreigner will revive their chastity and restore honor to their families. At Rose Bar, this hope was not unfounded: During my time in Sihanoukville, four Rose Bar girls married foreigners. One year after I left Sihanoukville, I learned five other Rose Bar girls had married. Over a three-year period, nine out of the fifteen women who worked at Rose Bar—60 percent—married foreigners.

Yet by attending wedding ceremonies and following up with former bar girls, I came to understand hazards that may find sex workers even in their retirement. A major source of risk was the desire to bear children. As in many societies, marital fertility endures as a strong social value in Cambodia, and a childless married Cambodian woman may face stigma. Beyond social approval, childbearing ensures women will have a caretaker in their old age. Especially for bar girls, having children with a foreign husband meant financial stability through childcare support payments, a source of hope, and confirmation that they were virtuous wives.

Former bar girls' desire to conceive babies within marriage created an exception to the "no condom, no sex" rule. After bar girls married, almost none used condoms with their spouses, regardless of whether their husbands stayed with them in Cambodia or lived in their home country, visiting Cambodia only part of the year. However, the cessation of condom use was not just to encourage conception. Bar girls explained that condoms were commonly used by men with women outside of marriage, but not with wives. That is, condom use differentiated the performance of wife from that of sex worker. Moreover, if a woman requested condom use with her spouse, it led to distrust and suspicion. And because Cambodian women's husbands are not expected to be monogamous (Hoefinger, 2014), the former bar girls' practice of not using condoms with their husbands leaves the women vulnerable to contracting HIV.

Cambodia has experienced the worst HIV/AIDS epidemic in Southeast Asia, originally driven by heterosexual transmission between men and commercial sex workers. Transmission rates ballooned as the sex industry grew, responding to demand from swelling United Nations forces and Western tourist populations (Cambodia's Country Report 1995). The economic beneficiaries and viral victims of this globalization, sex workers became disease bridges between high-risk and low-risk populations.

Today the brunt of HIV infection risk for sex workers is borne not while they are selling sex, but rather after they stop working and become wives. After the debut of the Ministry of Health's "100% Condom Strategy," HIV prevalence among brothel-based female sex workers

decreased from 42.6 % in 1998 to 28.8% in 2002. Cambodia's most recent HIV Sentinel Survey, conducted in 2010, estimated HIV prevalence among all sex workers at 13.9% (National AIDS Authority 2014). The prevalence of HIV/AIDS has also declined in the general population aged 15-49, from 3.9% in 1997, to 1.2% in 2003, and finally to 0.7% in 2013 (UNAIDS 2008; National AIDS Authority 2014). In this period, however, spousal transmission of HIV among married women has emerged as one of the main threats of new cases in Cambodia. The prevalence of partner transmission of new infections among women has dramatically increased from 13% of new cases in 1992 to 30% in 2007, and peaking at over 50% in 2008 (UNAIDS 2008; National AIDS Authority, 2014). 90% of these women acquired HIV from their husbands or boyfriends while in long-term relationships, because while most married women only have their husbands as partners, married men have no similar obligation to monogamy (UNAIDS 2008; Hoefinger, 2014).

Former bar girls who became HIV-infected became mystery persons, women the active bar girls did not want to talk about. During my eighteen months of fieldwork, I heard gossip that two bar girls became infected with HIV after marrying foreigners. Stigma led to silence over their social absence. Yet as my ethnographic evidence clarifies, stigma about condom use and HIV/AIDS was not salient for bar girls, only for former bar girls who became wives. Bar girls became vulnerable to HIV infection after marriage, rather than when they worked as bar girls. This was not due to lack of knowledge of condom use or lack of knowledge of HIV/AIDS, but rather due to cultural beliefs, practices in marriage, and the representation of the sex-selling space.

## **Conclusion: Constrained Agency of Bar Girls**

Much research and advocacy characterizes sex workers in Southeast Asia and elsewhere as "total victims"—indeed, this is the dominant narrative of anti-trafficking organizations (Brown, 2000; Dixon & Tyrell 2010; Leidholdt, 2011; Lindquist, 2008). By contrast, I found that bar girls actively use their sense of hazard, reflecting their agency and the strong solidarity that they build in response to the state of peril in their everyday lives in sex-selling space.

Tactics of resistance and resilience do not diminish the violence and inequality inherent to bar girls' line of work. Constraints on their agency are manifold. Bar girls face nightly threats of bodily harm. They have little to no formal education. Their livelihood hangs on their submission to the sexual prerogatives of strangers. Their careers fade naturally as they age. Their best chance of securing financial stability is establishing financial dependence on a foreign man. They are vulnerable to deadly disease, especially if they succeed in transitioning out of sex work. The

globalization of sex selling has brought a huge industry to Sihanoukville, but it remains a profession steeped in structural violence (Farmer, 1996).

Sex workers like the bar girls of Rose Bar develop intricate strategies to keep each other safe and exercise agency in power-laden sex-selling spaces. They identify who they are in this Victory Hills sexual service space through the practices that they act within the space as well as through the way in which they value and give meanings to their sensory experiences. Yet the political economy of sex work drives these tactics and precludes better options for these women's lives. For the daughters of poor, rural families, sex work is the labor regime offering the highest productive value and the highest chance of success. Thus these women face a double bind. Though Cambodian women's value as women is predicated on their purity, bar girls' capacity to provide for themselves, support their families, and transform into 'good ascendancy' women with families of their own is realized through their engagement in sex work. Like Apsara entering an ordeal of fire, they hope to emerge redeemed and alive.

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