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## Negotiating (In)dependency: Social Journeys of Vietnamese Women to Cambodia\*

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### Abstract

Since the issue of human trafficking is subject to judicial, moral and political constraints, this research chose to study Vietnamese sex workers in Phnom Penh as a common migration phenomenon in order to see when, how and why some women ended up in situations of bondage. On the basis of four months of research in the Mekong delta, the paper explores the journeys leading Vietnamese women to Phnom Penh. It concurs with the recent literature that debt-bonded sex work is not always an unending situation and that it could be an effective means to cope with socio-cultural pressures. We argue that, in addition to labour arrangements, some women find in sex work a way to deal with their (in)dependency with regards to their families, achieving greater control over their resources and experimenting different meanings of womanhood. Far from denying human trafficking, the paper tries to explore the grey area that lies between this extreme and voluntary migration. While the results of this research are not representative of the whole phenomenon, we argue that these few elements help explain why women keep taking the risks of migration for sex work and expose themselves to situations of bonded labour.

### Keywords

sex work, migration, independency, control over resources, womanhood

### Introduction

Prostitution seems to be one of the most obvious categories for the study of 'bonded' or 'unfree' labour relations. Its growing scale, economic significance and increasing international dimension have heightened concerns related to population mobility and health threats, requiring a political commitment to

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tackle ‘commercial sexual exploitation,’ ‘trafficking,’ or ‘modern forms of slavery’ (Lim, 1998; Derks et al., 2006). Among the affected areas, Cambodia has become notorious for sexual tourism and paedophilia. Although sex work is difficult to quantify,<sup>1</sup> up to one-third of the women involved in this business is believed to be Vietnamese (Steinfatt, 2003) and many of those are debt-bonded to their employer (e.g. Steinfatt 2003; Reimer, 2006; Brown, 2007). By contracting a debt before migration, or receiving an advance payment upon arrival, they are deprived of personal autonomy and obliged to remain in the working premises until repayment. At times, charged with excessive fees for food, clothes or medicine, leading to continuing loan renewals, they sometimes get trapped in the vicious circle of unending indebtedness (Brown, 2007).

Recent literature, however, has provided a more nuanced understanding of sex bondage in the Cambodian context. Derks (2008) raised questions about the systematic link between bondage and sex work since it does not reflect the diversity of arrangements existing in Phnom Penh’s sex sector. Busza (2004) argues that the restriction of personal freedom and the ability to negotiate working conditions can vary among women. And Sandy (2008) disputed the widespread belief of self-perpetuating indebtedness, since most of the women she met experienced debt bondage on a temporary basis and were able to ‘move on to become autonomous.’

Human trafficking is a controversial, unstable and politically-loaded concept (Busza, 2004; Augustin, 2005; O’Connell Davidson, 2010). Within Cambodia, the issue is further disputed because of the stakes surrounding the irregular migration of Vietnamese. This encouraged us to adopt a wider approach to the subject. Instead of trafficking or debt bondage, we studied the movement of Vietnamese women of the Mekong delta to Phnom Penh as a common phenomenon of migration in order to see when, where, why and how some experience situations of bondage.<sup>2</sup> Looking into the women’s journey to Phnom Penh, this research provides us with a better grasp of the women’s motivations and capacities to negotiate dependency. Starting with the study of labour arrangements of Vietnamese sex workers in Phnom Penh, the paper underscores the diversity of labour arrangements, involving various degrees of bondage. It then presents the story of three women we interviewed. In the third part, we discuss the women’s motivations to migrate to Cambodia and what they considered to have achieved in terms of (in)dependency. On

<sup>1</sup> Steinfatt et al. (2002) have revised the urban legend of 80,000 up to 100,000 victims of human trafficking circulating among organisations to the figure of 20,829 sex workers nationwide, among which 5,250 are found in Phnom Penh.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the Mekong delta does not refer to the Mekong basin, but to the part of the Mekong delta in Vietnamese territory.

the basis of our findings, we concur with the most recent literature that debt bondage is not necessarily an unending situation and that sex work might be a way for some women to cope with socio-economic pressures. In this respect, we argue that some can find in sex work a way to deal with dependency situations related to their work as well as with their community of origin. Sometimes, dependency at work even helped achieve a greater independency from a family or couple situation.

This research is based on repeated field trips to Bình Thạnh Đông village in An Giang province, Vietnam, (at the border with Cambodia) and in Phnom Penh (Cambodia) in 2007 and 2008, using participative observation and semi-structured interviews. Since local Vietnamese authorities insisted on introducing us to the respondents, we decided to focus our research on Cambodia.<sup>3</sup> In Phnom Penh, they were selected using snowball sampling in different Vietnamese settlements and areas of the sex service industry. No organisation was solicited, but brothel owners and managers were approached first, if the situation required so. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese. While some were chaotic and interrupted by the arrival of customers, others took place in quieter settings at the respondent's house or outside of working hours. Among a total of six households in An Giang and 15 respondents in Phnom Penh with whom at least four hours of interviews were conducted, six sex workers shared with us enough information in order to reconstitute their life itinerary based on personal, family story, as well as occupational and geographical mobility.<sup>4</sup> While numerous respondents have confirmed the persistence of bondage, human trafficking and the sale of girls' virginity, we only met sex workers who were — at the time of the interview — free enough to talk to us about their lives and working conditions. Without being representative of all sex workers in Cambodia, these few testimonies brought to light some insights on work and dependency relations in the case of Vietnamese sex workers in Phnom Penh.

### **Sex Work in Phnom Penh: Bondage and Labour Arrangements**

Most of today's attention on sex work has considered the 1986 Vietnamese economic liberalisation as a starting point. Accordingly, migration for sex

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<sup>3</sup> We received the assistance of the Social Science Research Institute of An Giang University, as well as local hosting and day-to-day guidance by the local Women's Union. Further details on this phenomenon in this region and a more complete literature review can be found in Lainez (2010) and in his forthcoming Ph.D. thesis.

<sup>4</sup> The translation is ours and the exchange rates are those of September 2007 (1 USD = 2,500 Cambodian Riel or 16,000 Vietnam Dong), before the 2008 exchange rate variations.

work has increased ever since because of greater socio-economic pressure on rural households. It is worth recalling, however, that neither sex work, nor migration to Cambodia are new phenomena (Lainez, 2008). Throughout the 20th century, French colonisation and the Indo-China wars have fuelled, not disrupted, migration and sex work. Because of a long history of population movements between Vietnam and Cambodia, well established social networks, low transportation costs, as well as the prevalence of the informal economy, many Vietnamese women count among sex workers in Phnom Penh.

While looking at the sex work of Vietnamese women, there was a large variety of labour arrangements. Women could work in massage parlours or sub-let rooms from their manager and split their revenues with the latter. They were also free to work, rest, enter or leave their work. Other women were freelance in nightclubs. They were not related to the nightclub owner and did not need to pay anything to him. They would come to meet customers and then leave for a hotel. They were free to take one or not, and come and go as they pleased.

Bar hostesses enjoyed a different situation. They were employed to attract customers into the bar and entertain them. Working conditions varied from one place to another, some forcing the women to drink alcohol instead of soft drinks. However, while it was possible for them to sell sex services or develop other relations with the clients, their employer did not require them to do so and only received compensation if the hostess was absent during working hours. Among the large variety of sex services provided in Phnom Penh, many sex workers in massage parlours, nightclubs or bars were not required by their employer to engage in sex work. While some were under the influence of pimps, boyfriends or drug dealers, many were free to enter and exit the (sex) labour market as and when they chose (Brass, 1999).

Other women, however, experienced conditions of bonded labour. By contracting a debt at the time of their recruitment, they yielded their physical autonomy as a guarantee for repayment, placing themselves in conditions of dependency towards their employer. This is clearly illustrated by the story of Mây, one of the sex workers we met in Phnom Penh. She was working as an independent sex worker in a massage parlour but used to be in a situation of bonded labour. At that time, she borrowed US\$ 300 from the brothel owner and sent it back to Vietnam for the refurbishment of her mother's house. She could neither leave the brothel, nor refuse any customers. Yet, she worked off the debt within three months. And she claimed that even before that, she had gained the confidence of the owner and obtained the permission to go out a half day each week. 'Like in any other company, you've got good workers and bad workers,' she argued. 'It is only after the brothel owner trusts you, only

once he is sure you will not run away and that you are OK to work, that he allows you to go out a couple of hours every week.' Mây was well aware that the favourable terms of bondage she negotiated over time were related to her performance as a sex worker. Other women in the same brothel who did not show the same willingness to work were more controlled. While Mây's analogy to corporate work certainly does not apply to all cases, the transition from bonded labour into independent sex work is more common in Phnom Penh than some would suggest. It is, therefore, possible for women to work under bondage, but have their labour conditions softened, or tightened overtime, depending on performance and financial arrangements.

Despite the persistence of today's political response against human trafficking, the common association between bondage and prostitution did not really match the reality of Phnom Penh's sex sector. Sex work in Phnom Penh assumed many different forms. Bondage was one among others and could be temporary.

### **Three Stories of Sex Workers**

Understanding labour arrangements alone is not sufficient to unveil the complexity of the journeys which led women to Phnom Penh. Mây's story of debt bondage is not complete without situating it within its wider context. For this reason, it is essential to recall her journey to Phnom Penh, as well as for two other women.

#### *Mây: Taking Control of Her Life*

Mây first came to Cambodia as a child, when her parents hid from a debt (*chôn nợ*) they owed in their home village in An Giang province. Staying in a slum area of Phnom Penh, they lived off petty trade, selling corn and crushing ice. After the death of Mây's father, the family returned to Vietnam where her mother worked off the debt. Mây considered that there were too few working opportunities in her village and returned to Phnom Penh, where she got married to a Khmer man. 'I thought it would be easier to integrate into the Cambodian society if you became one.' But the man started beating her. Mây left him and then worked in a brothel under the debt-bondage arrangement described above. During a visit to Vietnam, her mother convinced her to give up the job. However, after a short trial period as a household servant in Ho Chi Minh City, earning 500,000 Vietnamese Dong (US\$ 30) a month, she returned to Phnom Penh.

She worked in a café-brothel where she met her second husband, a Vietnamese wood carver. Enjoying a substantial fortune, she ran a fish farm from home. However, her husband kept on checking every single expense she made. Mây insisted: 'I had to tell him how much money I spent at the market, everywhere. I could not even send money to my mother.' She claims she was frustrated by the lack of financial autonomy and therefore left him. Mây resumed her work at the café and met her third and current husband with whom she has had a child. She explained: 'He is not like the others. He is very sweet (*hiền*). He lets me work and take care of our expenses (*lo cho nhà, các chi tiêu*). He even gives me his salary and I leave him some pocket money.'

Apparently, this desire to manage financial resources was also clear in her work. In the massage parlour, she earned 10,000 Riel (US\$ 2.50) for each customer, split half to the manager for the room rental and could make almost US\$ 100 a month. She could work or rest, and decide whenever she would take a customer. Thanks to her savings, Mây started running her own massage parlour. When we last met, she had become the one renting the place and sub-letting rooms to other fellow masseuses.

It is interesting to notice to what extent Mây's involvement in sex work was almost uninterrupted. The two short intervals of household work and fish farming were dropped because of the hard work, the low salary or the lack of financial autonomy. Although her working and family experiences did not follow a linear path, she expressed her satisfaction today to be able to manage household finances and become a manager herself.

#### *Phương: A Heart-broken Mother of Two*

Phương was 41-years old when she arrived in Cambodia three years before we met her. She left her home village in Vietnam after she realised that her husband was cheating on her. She left all her possessions and went back to her family together with her two daughters. Phương explained that staying in her home village was not a sustainable option for her as her only income came from working a few hours a day scaling fish and on an irregular basis. Therefore, she started working as a household servant in Ho Chi Minh City, earning around 500,000 Dong (around US\$ 30) a month. 'I was working from dawn to dusk, the salary was low and there were so many girls doing a better job,' she complained. She then got hired in a shoe factory, earning 570,000 Dong (US\$ 35) a month, working overtime.<sup>5</sup> She explained she liked this job better because she could work overtime, increase her income accordingly and

<sup>5</sup> The salary is 13,000 Dong a day but includes the possibility to work overtime at 3,000 Dong an hour.

decide when to do so. After a few months, her eldest daughter joined her and worked in the same shoe factory, while her youngest daughter remained in the village.

Phường moved to Cambodia after an acquaintance suggested that she should visit the country and look for better job opportunities. She was aware she could be lured and sold into prostitution but she did not consider herself to be at risk: 'I thought it would be ridiculous if this happened at my age.' Working as a household servant in a massage parlour in the outskirts of Phnom Penh, she only started sex work after a customer repeatedly expressed his affection. 'Of course I did it for the money, but it felt good to know that that man had some affection for me (*Người ta thương mình*).' From then on she accepted other clients, but no Vietnamese customers. 'When I hear Vietnamese, it reminds me of too many sad things. Also, I don't want anybody from the village to hear it through the grapevine (*mang tiếng*).' Thanks to a loan from her brother, Phường rented a small wooden barrack, bought beds and sheets and sub-let the rooms to other sex workers. From time to time taking a customer, she rented another barrack, brought over her two daughters over (then 15- and 12-years old) and upgraded it into a small café-karaoke. She thought that the earnings from her business, around US\$ 100 per month, were sufficient to support her daughters and herself.

While Phường claimed her daughters were not involved in sex work and in the household income, there was no way for us to either substantiate or doubt her sayings at the time of the interviews. Her experience shows, however, that her decision to move away from her home village was tied to a family crisis. After having explored various opportunities in her home village and in Ho Chi Minh City, she could rely on her social networks to try working in Cambodia.

### *Nhung: An Exploration of Womanhood*

Nhung was a hostess we met in a bar of Phnom Penh aimed at a foreign clientele. She was a Khmer Krom in her twenties and a native of Sóc Trăng province. Like Phường, she came from a better off family, and left her village for personal reasons. Raising ducks with her in-laws in a remote area of the Mekong Delta, she left her husband because he did not take her defence against the criticism of her father-in-law. She insisted: 'My husband is not a bad person. He did not beat me up, he did not insult me. But he neither defended me, nor suggested we could live in a different place. When I returned to my family, he never left any money in order to help me raise our baby. I felt I deserved more than this. I don't know how to explain, I want more than this (*Tôi muốn nhiều hơn*).'



Nhung explained that an acquaintance suggested that she marry her son and run a cafe in a coastal town of Cambodia. She left her baby to her parents and decided to give it a try. When she arrived, she realised that all the promises were true but she felt anxious about getting married and having to live in an isolated place again. She was given some money for her trip back to Sóc Trăng province, but left instead for Phnom Penh in order to visit her sister. The latter suggested that she stay and work in a bar so that she could fulfil her responsibilities as a single mother. She worked as a bar hostess, sat down and chatted with customers. Soon afterwards, her mother and child moved to Phnom Penh so that they could live together.

During one of our interviews, Nhung told us that she had been invited by a foreign customer to spend a few days in Siem Reap in order to visit the Angkor Wat temples. She would not receive any money but he would take care of all expenses. The offer sounded dubious, but she decided to take the risk. We and her friends were relieved when she came back unharmed. She was thrilled by her experience: 'I spent four days in a hotel, at the pub, going to the spa and the restaurant. The guy even hired a Vietnamese guide when we visited Angkor Wat. He was so *galant*!' (Literally borrowed from the French, *galăng*). The fact that he would return to his country without leaving money or a promise to return was not an issue to her. 'I spent a wonderful holiday. I don't expect anything else from him.'

Nhung's experience shows another migration motivated by family reasons. It suggests, however, that her job as a hostess with additional extra services helped her fulfil other desires than mere economic achievements.

While these three testimonies are certainly not representative of all Vietnamese sex workers in Phnom Penh, they nevertheless show interesting commonalities. These women had been married beforehand. They had several job experiences (domestic servant, industrial worker, petty trader) before entering the sex sector. They did not come directly from their home village but had been 'on the move' in other provinces in the Mekong delta and in Ho Chi Minh City before working in Phnom Penh. It is precisely by looking beyond labour arrangements and further into their lives that we can have a better understanding of what brought these women to Phnom Penh.

### **Negotiating (In)Dependency**

After presenting the labour arrangements of Vietnamese sex workers in Cambodia and enlarging our grasp of their journeys to Phnom Penh, the paper



now discusses their motivations for migration and the ways the women dealt with the issue of (in)dependency.

As noted before, the economic liberalisation in Vietnam since 1986 has marked a renewal, not a creation of migration practices as a means for coping with socio-economic change. The growth of household indebtedness as a result of the need of cash for production (JDR, 2004), the privatisation of social services (education, healthcare), and increased expectations in social and cultural practices (weddings, funerals) (Gironde, 2009) have encouraged rural households to diversify cash generation strategies. While women endure a great burden because of this process, some have engaged in — among other initiatives — migrating for sex work as a way to cope with these challenges (Derks, 1998; McNally, 2003; Nguyễn Võ, 2008; and more generally Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003). As Nguyễn Võ (2008) has suggested, sex work can be a fast lane for upwards social mobility since its only entry barrier is to be young and pretty. By earning significant amounts of money, women climb up the social hierarchy and experience their new status by expressing both contempt towards poorer customers and submission to richer ones.

We concur in the idea that migration for sex work is one way of coping with their existing situations. Field research in the Mekong delta and in Phnom Penh confirmed the influence of the socio-economic environment and the potential for upwards social mobility. However, we would add, on the basis of our findings, that sex work is also a way to deal with issues of (in) dependency with regards to personal and family matters.

### **Economic, Social Environment and Upwards Social Mobility**

During our fieldwork, the socio-economic conditions of sending areas were certainly precarious. In the village of Bình Thạnh Đông in An Giang province, it has become difficult for households to make a living on the sole basis of gardens, ponds and agricultural land. Nearly all our respondents experienced underemployment or seasonal unemployment. Land cultivation nowadays required less human workforce, leading to an increasing competition for non-agricultural jobs (service sector and petty trade). Moreover, these activities were also limited by social pressure, such as negative social responses. For example, one of our respondents had started working as a dishwasher in a nearby café but she had to give up her job after only three weeks because her father-in-law considered it tarnished the family reputation. Similarly, an old lady staying at her daughter's house was urged to stop selling lottery tickets for the same reason.

The scope of cash generation strategies was much larger in Phnom Penh, both in terms of the availability and range of possible jobs one could perform without encountering stigmatisation. While experiencing social limitations in their home village, individuals could engage in a wider range of activities without affecting their families. When referring to their work, sex workers resorted to euphemisms, calling their work selling things (*bán hàng*) or having customers (*có khách*). They did not openly talk about it in all situations, but parents and neighbours tacitly knew about it.

The option of sex work in Cambodia was also attractive because it could generate a greater salary. Most of our respondents had previously been exploring various options in different parts of the Mekong delta and in Ho Chi Minh City. Mây had worked as a petty trader in Phnom Penh, as a fruit farmer in her native village, as a household servant and as a fish farmer, apart from sex work. Phương also tried many alternatives after she had left her husband: Scaling fish and doing day to day assignments were not very lucrative; working as a household servant and as an industrial worker was better, but did not suffice to reunite her with her daughters. Sex work allowed for many women a steadier and more comfortable salary.

Apart from the income, many of our respondents also showed that sex work helped achieve a greater working autonomy. Mây started under debt-bondage, but moved on as a sex worker in a café, a massage parlour and was now trying to turn into a manager as well. Phương did the same once in Phnom Penh. As soon as she got a loan from her brother, she gave up her job as a household servant and sex worker to manage her own place. By sub-letting the rooms of one wooden barrack, she was able to save enough money to rent another one, upgrade it into a karaoke bar and bring her daughters over. Both women expressed a certain satisfaction to have become their own boss.

As many other women involved in this occupation, sex work offered these women working opportunities and potentially greater autonomy. Because of the steady demand, low investment costs and the possibility to generate savings, some women could more easily achieve their desire to be their own boss and even someone else's boss, than if they had remained in their previous occupations.

### **Achieving Another (In)dependency**

Another motivation for women to engage in migration and sex work was the possibility to exit a problematic family situation. Mây had escaped a violent husband before entering the brothel. Phương initially left home because her husband was cheating on her. However, their cases were not isolated. While

migration helped redefine troubled family or couple situations, these situations were not necessarily related to oppression or violence. Nhung's decision to leave her husband was not linked to any history of abuse. Facing the criticism of her in-laws, the alleged cowardice of her husband and the boredom of raising ducks in a remote area, she realised she wanted more than what this lifestyle could ever offer her.

In line with this experience, a Vietnamese karaoke owner in Phnom Penh explained that working in her establishment was not the worst situation women could encounter. Although workers were confined to the premises and dependent on her good will, some preferred this situation to another form of dependency. She recalled that a young woman had been required by her parents to return home and get married. At the very idea that she would be bound in matrimony to a fisherman and live on a *sampan* over the Tonle Sap Lake, the woman fled overnight and returned to work at the karaoke again — this time, without the consent of her parents. This all suggests that some women would even prefer bonded labour arrangements in sex work over what they consider being oppressive relationships with families, husbands or in-laws.

The migration of women away from their home village did, however, not imply that they rebelled against tradition and cut all ties with their family. They contributed to the household income, but decided when and how much money they sent. They also expressed filial piety towards their parents. Thanks to the debt Mây contracted with the brothel owner, her mother could refurbish her house. Many bar hostesses were extremely proud to claim: 'I send all my salary to my parents in Vietnam.' The latter did not know, however, that the women kept the extras for themselves and sometimes amassed a small fortune. It is a delicate question to determine whether filial piety is a pure matter of rhetoric or a real motivation for entering the sex industry. These testimonies suggest nonetheless that women are not simply negating their filial duty, but rather trying to adapt it to their present situation.

This reveals a more complex relationship between earnings, piety and family relationships. Most of our testimonies show that women attached great importance to the control of financial resources. For some, this even outweighed overall wealth. Mây was richest when she was married to her second husband, fish farming at home. But because he lorded over her spending, she preferred going back to sex work in a café, despite the lower social status and lower income. This preference also came to the fore in the case of another younger, single sex worker with regards to her family. She recalled the time she was harvesting rice in Vietnam and how she had to hide anything she had bought from her family: 'I remember it was at the end of a harvest that I bought the top I am wearing tonight. I was the one responsible for delivering

the paddy. I bought it on the way back home but I didn't tell my mom!' she laughed. While daughters are expected to subordinate a personal preference to the common interest of the family in the Mekong delta, they could spend their income without many restrictions in Phnom Penh. To them, control over their earnings seemed to be at least as important as the level of their income.

In addition, sex work was also an opportunity to experience different meanings of womanhood. Women expressed their pride in having a job, friends, discussions, laughs and social experiences they would never have imagined if they had stayed in the Mekong delta. Nhung would have perhaps never visited Angkor Wat temples if she had not met that customer. She was expecting neither promises, nor money from him. According to her, to once 'be treated like a lady' was well worth it.

Indeed, several of the women we met seemed to be thrilled by the fact that someone had looked at them as 'ladies' and not as workers or progenitors. Life in Phnom Penh offered much more than their home village, despite the dangers associated with sex work. To some women, it could even outperform the promises of life overseas. Đa was another bar hostess. In contrast to Nhung, she came from a poor family and had been working since the age of 12 as a seasonal worker and as a household servant in different parts of the Mekong delta. She was expecting a baby with a foreign customer. Since the beginning of the pregnancy, the latter had started completing the paperwork needed so that both could come and live with him overseas. However, Đa expressed concern about going abroad. Far from being a dream, she would be far away from her friends and family, and from the bars and the clubs she liked to go to. She would feel very lonely. Yet, she knew it was the best solution for the child. Contrary to the widespread idea some women engage in sex work as a passport overseas, Đa's impressions suggest that she might even prefer her lifestyle in Phnom Penh to a situation where she would be isolated and dependent on the good will of another person. To Đa, life and work in Phnom Penh seemed to offer greater independence.

In sum, women migrating to Phnom Penh and entering sex work were not simply pushed away from the precarious socio-economic and cultural situations in Vietnam. Sex work was one of the many ways in which they could get out of it. But it offered perhaps a sound option to achieving social mobility, as well as personal desires, despite the possibility of encountering labour dependency, abuse and health risks. Although women did not always craft themselves into successful entrepreneurs, they nevertheless insisted that they had achieved significant personal objectives through sex work compared to other alternatives. Given the geographical proximity, the lack of substantial obsta-

cles to migration and the often temporary nature of unfavourable working conditions, such as bonded labour, women could not wait a lifetime before getting the chance to achieve these personal goals. Some had to try it; they chose to act.

## **Conclusion**

Instead of opposing human trafficking to voluntary migration, the research took the deliberate approach to study the movement of Vietnamese women of the Mekong delta in Vietnam to Phnom Penh in Cambodia as a common phenomenon of migration and sought to understand when, where, why and how they experienced situations of bondage. Far from denying the existence of human trafficking and other forms of bonded labour, we believe it is crucial to study the various shades of grey that exist between these two poles. The cases of the women we interviewed show that the issue of (in)dependency in the case of migration for sex work is not only related to ongoing working conditions but also to their social and personal life preceding employment. By looking beyond their labour arrangements and into their journeys to Cambodia, sex work has helped some women achieve economic and occupational, as well as personal, objectives. It was an effective way to escape the under-employment of the countryside or an abusive relationship. But it also allowed greater opportunities, better control over the resources and opportunities to experience different meanings of womanhood.

That said, sex work is not a guarantee for success to all women. Especially since we could only interview a few respondents, there are good reasons to believe that these testimonies are not representative of the whole sex work phenomenon in Cambodia. However, to us, the question of knowing how many sex workers achieve gains through migration for sex work is legitimate, but not essential. What is more important is to understand better the link between migration for sex work and human trafficking.

Human trafficking often emphasises the passivity of its victims, while voluntary migration underscores agency; however, the two cannot be treated as two separate phenomena. Our research shows that migration for sex work can lead to a large variety of labour arrangements that include bondage. In this respect, the experience of a few women — even a handful — is relevant. If some women manage to achieve some of their personal goals, despite the risks and against all odds, other young girls will undoubtedly try to do the same. As long as irregular migration to Cambodia remains a trivial issue and sex work is possible within a large variety of labour arrangements, other women will be

willing to take their chances and expose themselves to the risks of human trafficking.

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