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"They Chase Us Like Dogs": Exploring the Vulnerabilities of "Ladyboys" in the Cambodian Sex Trade


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Abstract

While the vulnerability of women and girls continues to be the subject of research and concern among social service providers, few attempts have been made to understand the vulnerabilities and lived experiences of transgender persons in the sex industry. Among the studies that have been done, most have focused on sexual health and their likelihood to contract or spread HIV/AIDS, often ignoring other potential vulnerabilities. This study aims to provide a broad baseline of data on the perspectives and experiences of transgendered persons in the sex trade in Phnom Penh, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of their needs, and vulnerabilities, including their trajectory into sex work and potential alternatives. In addition, this study aims to aid the development of programming and social services that meet their needs holistically, looking beyond gender expression and social identity to address often overlooked needs and vulnerabilities. This study notes the respondent's common personal feelings of self-blame, shame, and guilt, and discusses a perceived fatalism observed within the social identity of transgender persons in the Cambodian sex trade, and the impact this may have on their perception of alternative employment, future options, and vulnerability to violence. The majority of respondents, or 74%, indicate sexual harassment, and 40% cite physical assault within the past 12 months, as well as more than half of respondents (55%) who cite being forced to have sex against their wishes. In addition, respondents describe diverse and overlapping forms of stigma and discrimination including: loss of employment (39%) and loss or denial of housing (20%), denial of education (12%) and denial of basic health services (10%) as a result of being transgender. Over half of those citing stigma and discrimination and more than one-third of those citing physical assault, cite police as the perpetrators of the violence. This study notes the respondent's common personal feelings of self-blame, shame, and guilt, and discusses a perceived fatalism observed within the social identity of transgender persons in the Cambodian sex trade, and the impact this may have on their perception of alternative employment, future options, and vulnerability to violence.

Keywords

Cambodia, Phnom Penh, sex trade, "ladyboys," transgender, LGBTQ vulnerabilities, discrimination, violence, self-blame, shame

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"THEY CHASE US LIKE DOGS": EXPLORING THE VULNERABILITIES OF "LADYBOYS"¹ IN THE CAMBODIAN SEX TRADE

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ABSTRACT

While the vulnerability of women and girls continues to be the subject of much research and a primary concern among social service providers in Southeast Asia, few attempts have been made to understand the vulnerabilities and lived experiences of transgender females (locally known as "ladyboys") in the sex industry. Among the studies that have been done, most have focused on sexual health and the risk of contracting or spreading HIV/AIDS, and have often neglected to explore other aspects of their lives, including potential vulnerabilities. This study aims to provide a broad baseline of data on the perspectives and experiences of "ladyboys" (transgendered persons) in the sex trade in Phnom Penh, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of their needs, and vulnerabilities, including their trajectory into the sex trade and potential livelihood alternatives. Further, the study aims to aid the development of programming and social services to meet the unique needs of this group individually and holistically. This study notes the respondent's common personal feelings of self-blame, shame, and guilt, and discusses a perceived fatalism observed within the social identity of transgender persons in the Cambodian sex trade, and the impact this may have on their perception of alternative employment, future options, and vulnerability to violence. The majority of respondents, or 74%, indicated sexual harassment, and 40% cited physical assault within the past 12 months, and more than half of respondents (55%) who cited being forced to have sex against their wishes. In addition, respondents describe diverse and overlapping forms of stigma and discrimination including: loss of employment (39%) and loss or denial of housing (20%), denial of education (12%) and denial of basic health services (10%) as a result of being transgender. Over half of those citing stigma and discrimination and more than one-third of those citing physical assault say the police are the perpetrators of the violence. This study notes the impact these negative experiences may have on their perception of alternative employment, future options, and vulnerability to violence.

¹ "Ladyboy" is a term commonly used in a number of South East Asian nations to refer to transgender women. We have opted to use the term "ladyboy" as this is how respondents chose to self-identify—even though this may be used in a derogatory way. Further, this connotes a broader and more fluid range of identities, which better characterizes the diversity of the respondents in this sampling.

KEYWORDS

Cambodia, Phnom Penh, sex trade, “ladyboys,” transgender, LGBTQ, vulnerabilities, discrimination, violence, self-blame, shame

While the vulnerability of women and girls continues to be the subject of much research and a primary concern among social service providers in Southeast Asia, few attempts have been made to understand the vulnerabilities and lived experiences of transgender females (locally known as “ladyboys”) in the sex industry. Most of the completed studies that have been done, most have focused on sexual health and the risk of contracting or spreading HIV/AIDS, and have often neglected to explore other aspects of their lives, including potential vulnerabilities. This research aims to provide a broad baseline of data on the perspectives and experiences of lady-boys (transgendered persons) in the sex trade in Phnom Penh, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of their needs, and vulnerabilities, including their trajectory into the sex trade and potential livelihood alternatives. Further, the study aims to aid the development of programming and social services to meet the unique needs of this group individually and holistically.

This study was conducted as part of a wider research project which has been looking at the vulnerability of sexually exploited populations in southeast Asia, mainly Cambodia, Thailand and the Philippines. When research was conducted into sexual exploitation with young men and boys, it was realized that transgender women were overlooked. Thus, it was decided that it was important to provide a baseline of information on this group to understand them better and provide more informed and nuanced services to meet their needs. In doing so, the researchers were able to demonstrate this group’s particular vulnerabilities to sexual and other forms of violence. There are also transmen, but as they are not highly visible or accessible in the sex industry or as strongly stigmatized as transwomen they are not included in the study.

This paper uses the term “ladyboy” instead of “trans-woman” to recognize the nuances of this unique group, its gender fluidity, and the ambiguity which often exists between gender and sexuality in Southeast Asia. We recognize the term “ladyboy” as a working term and cultural concept within the Cambodian context, which often transcends gender-identity binaries. Rather, we understand this term as an active, and evolving, social identity to which many respondents align. This paper aims to sensitively explore this matter of gender and identity in a respectful and comprehensive manner. However, we also recognize that the language surrounding gender and sexuality is continuously changing to encompass increasingly expansive understandings of gender. Shifting language is perhaps especially true in the rapidly developing and urbanizing ASEAN region. Therefore, despite our best efforts, flaws or inaccuracies in the terminology of this paper may exist, and we ask readers to be gracious as we intend to dignify this important group of individuals, whom we are seeking to understand better.

The LGBT community, especially “ladyboys,” are commonly excluded from discussions and policies on vulnerability and are often greatly stigmatized and discriminated against by family and community member, as well as authority figures. The title, “They chase us like dogs” is a direct quote from one respondent in this study describing her experiences with the police in her community.

Transgender Women in the Cambodian Context

"Transgender" is an evolving term first coined in the United States in the 1980's (Carroll, L., Gilroy, P.J., Ryan, J., 2002). The concept includes a range of behaviors, self-expressions, and personal identities, which challenge and traverse traditional gender boundaries. A binary gender system exists within western societies, where female and male distinctions dominate culture and thought. Behaviors and expressions are associated with "masculine," or "feminine," and gender identity or self-identification is categorized as man or woman. The third category or transgender is a pluralism of traditional male and female expressions and therefore encompasses a wide range of personal identity and self-expression (Carroll et al., 2002).

In Cambodia, as in other Southeast Asian nations, gender is understood in less rigid terms than "female" and "male" (Earth, 2006). In Khmer,² there are five terms to describe gender. "*Srei*" (ស្រី) and "*Pros*" (ប្រុស) are used for describing people's gender; as in "she's a woman" or "I'm a man", respectively. Additionally, "*Gni/Chhmol*" (ញី/ឈ្មោល) are used when talking about the biological gender of a person—not necessarily the person him/herself (Tan, 2008). The fifth term used to refer to one's sexual gender is "*Khteuy*" (ខ្ចីយ), a biological male, with a feminine personality who has sexual attractions to people of his own sex. This is a rather diverse and fluid categorization that does not fit easily into more rigid, academic categorizations and often transcends distinctions of both gender identity and sexual orientation. Within this context, there are no indigenous terms to describe sexual orientation, such as the western concepts of heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual, etc. While the western distinctions of "gay", "straight", and "bi" are often adopted among some young, and generally urbanized, Khmer people, these distinctions are not defined as such within Khmer culture.

Traditionally, Cambodians have derived their understanding of sexual orientation from concepts of gender, character, and personality (Cambodian Center for Human Rights, 2010). Thus, notions of gender identity and sexual orientation are often merged into an integrated concept of who a person is (Earth, 2006). Men are understood in terms of their demonstration of a masculine character and females in terms of their demonstration of a feminine character. Males are believed to be born into two categories: *reng peng*³ (រឹងប៉ឹង) and *tuon phluon*⁴ (ទន់ភ្លន់). *Reng peng* males are understood to be firm, strong, and energetic and are often expected to perform heavy tasks. On the other hand, *tuon phluon* is the softer, more feminine category, a distinction which is believed to be natural or innate and definitive of the male's personality. The word "*pros*" is not used for *tuon phluon* (ទន់ភ្លន់) males. *Tuon phluon* (ទន់ភ្លន់) are said to identify themselves as women, and are inevitably drawn to the opposite or *reng peng* (រឹងប៉ឹង) as noted by Tan. These feminine males may categorize themselves as *khteuy* (ខ្ចីយ) or as members of the "third gender." This person is not understood to be male, but rather a kind of intermediary gender, neither male nor female, thought of as a kind of woman-like person who has sex with men (Tan, 2008). For this group, romantic relationships are often perceived to be marked with disappointment (Tan, 2008). While *khteuy* (ខ្ចីយ) are understood to be attracted to *reng peng* males, the *reng peng* are understood to solely be attracted to members of the biologically opposite sex and would not naturally find the *khteuy* appealing. Thus, it is believed the *khteuy* (ខ្ចីយ) needs to put forth extra effort in order to "trap" or "catch" a man—a process

² Official Language of Cambodia

³ Means firm, tough

⁴ Means gentle, docile

described euphemistically with allusions to hunting, eating or consumption (2008).

Prejudice and Discrimination of Transgender Communities

Qualitative and quantitative research studies have been instrumental for awareness and advocacy in Asia, including Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. They reveal that transgender persons experience some of the highest overall rates of stigma, violence, prejudice, and discrimination in all facets of society (Catalla, T.A.P., Sovanara, K., van Mourik, G., 2003; Ho, 2006; Käng, 2012; Salas, 2013; Sood, 2009; Winter, 2012).

- Studies conducted in Thailand, Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, and Vietnam find transgender persons to be stigmatized, discriminated against, and often considered the “lowest of the low” people groups in society, even among other sexual minorities (Catalla et al., 2003; Sood, 2009).
- A 2012 study on first-generation, transgender Asians living in the US (Grant, J., Mottet, L., & Tanis, J., 2012) finds suicide rates to be more than twice as high among persons coming from non-accepting families (35% compared to 17%), homelessness rates to be 2.2 times higher (20% compared to 9%). And the HIV prevalence rate to be 2.3 times higher (2.78% compared to 6.38%) in comparison to persons coming from families that accept their gender identity.
- A gender-based violence study conducted by Wong & Noriega (2011) in Bangladesh and Papua New Guinea among sexual minorities found instances ranging from people being teased to being raped and murdered because they had violated existing societal norms. Perpetrators of the violence included members of the respondents’ communities and families.
- Stigma and discrimination are reported to be common facets of daily lives for transgender persons interviewed in Cambodia (Phlong, P., Weissman, A., Holden, J. & Liu, K.L., 2012).
- The rape of a transgender person is not a criminal offense in many countries in Asia. Apart from Thailand, rape laws in the other 11 countries⁵ including Cambodia did not afford protection or legal recourse for men or transgender people, as reported by Sood (2009).
- A study in Thailand by Guadamuz et al. (2011) found transgender persons had a significantly higher history of forced sex (26.4%) as compared to men who have sex with men (19.4%) and male sex workers (12.1%). A second study by Chemnasiri et al., (2010) showed similar results with transgender people reporting the highest history of forced sex (29%) among MSM and MSW. A study in Cambodia among transgender sex workers found 37.5% report being gang-raped by clients and 52.3% by gangsters, at least once over the past year (Jenkins & Sainsbury, 2006). The act of gang rape included an average number of six men.

⁵ Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, and Vietnam

- In Cambodia 29.9% of transgender sex workers reported being beaten by policemen, 41% were robbed, 23.9% were raped, and 18.2% were gang-raped. The study went on to interview 58 policemen and reports "almost all" had witnessed physical abuse, robbery, and rape of sex workers by gangsters and other police officers (Jenkins et al. 2006).

Almost no studies in Asia focus on transgender children and adolescents looking at stigma, violence, prejudice, and discrimination. Research suggests the transitions in self and identity for transgender people occur earlier in life in Asia compared to North America and Europe (Winter, 2009). Studies have shown transgender youth experience substantial victimization (Garofalo, R., Deleon, J., Osmer, E., Doll, M., & Harper, G. W., 2006; Stieglitz, 2010). Research in the U.S. showed verbal abuse and threats started at an average age of 13, physical abuse, including rape, began on average at age 14, and 77% of transgender youth experienced verbal harassment by parents, 48% by brothers or sisters, and 65% by police officers (Garofalo et al., 2006). Based on these results and discrimination and violence already discussed in Asia, it is likely transgender youth in Asia experience multiple cycles of violence and discrimination starting as early as childhood.

Vulnerabilities and Resiliencies of Transgender Persons

The LGBT community, especially transgender persons, are commonly excluded from national discussions on vulnerability in Cambodia and currently are not defined as a vulnerable people group within the 2011-2015 National Strategy for Social Protection, The Royal Government of Cambodia (2011), defines vulnerable people groups as: infants and children, girls and women of reproductive age, households vulnerable to food insecurity, and a list of other "special vulnerable groups" (Salas, 2013). Within Cambodian society, it is common for those who do not conform to gender norms to be subject to various forms of exclusion, stigma, and discrimination, which can result in higher levels of poverty and vulnerability.

Social exclusion, particularly by family, has been found to be a key vulnerability among LGBT people in Cambodia. Openly gay or transgender people often face ostracization from families and are often provided with no social or economic support system, leaving them even more vulnerable (Cambodian Center for Human Rights, 2010; Phlong et al., 2012). Research showed 87% of transgender persons experienced verbal insults from family, 24% say family tried to stop their school or work because they were transgender, and 79% indicate family had told them they would now get AIDS because of their life decisions. These findings were substantially higher than other sexual minorities in the report. In addition, also 66% of transgender persons experienced domestic violence, again the highest among sexual minorities and almost three times the national average for women in Cambodia in 2009 (Sood).

Stigma and social exclusion are factors that can commonly lead to other key vulnerabilities such as involvement in the sex trade. Family discrimination and poverty are identified as a primary factor contributing to the trajectory of transgender persons into the sex trade (Phlong et al., 2012). A study conducted in 2002 surveyed both MSM and transgender persons in three cities in Cambodia (Carroll et al., 2002). A survey of MSM and transgender persons indicated 25% of their primary source of income was in the sex trade and nearly 70% reported they sold sex for money at least once in their lifetime. In a quantitative survey of 200 transgender persons in Phnom Penh, only two percent of the respondents list sex work as their primary source of income, although 52% indicate they sold sex for

money in the past six months (Schneiders, 2013). While many transgender persons may not consider selling sex to be their primary source of income, a substantial number remain vulnerable.

Resiliency

Psychologically, resilience is the capacity to withstand challenging life circumstances and persevere in the face of adversity (such as stress, violence, the death of a loved one). Resiliency comes from supportive relationships with family, friends, and others who help to cope with challenging circumstances.

Few studies look at resiliency in transgender persons, no known studies exist in Asia, and it is recommended to provide a better understanding of the resilience of transgenders in Asia. There is a lack of broad-scale studies highlighting strengths among transgender persons, results from a study focusing on protective factors and social cohesion would provide a greater understanding and identification of resiliency factors, which could be taught in transgender communities (Winter, 2012).

METHODS

Sampling

This study employed both purposive and “snowballing” data sampling methodologies to conduct a total of 50 interviews with self-identified transgender people working in the sex trade. Sites for data-gathering were primarily uncovered through interviews working with transgender populations, sexual health clinics, and from anecdotal conversations with field informants in various LGBT bars and sex trade establishments in Phnom Penh.

For inclusion in the study respondents were required to meet four criteria:

- Biologically being male at birth
- Self-identifying as “female” (*Srei*/ស្រី), “ladyboy”, or “third gender” (*Pe tibuy*/កេ ទីប៊ុយ)⁶
- Reporting to have been paid for sex within the past three months; and
- Able and willing to give informed consent to participate in the study

All field research and data gathering was conducted in January-February of 2013.

Research Instrument

The research instrument used was adapted from a study used to survey vulnerability among street-based male masseurs in Mumbai, and was adapted for usage

⁶While all of our respondents self-identified as either “female”, ladyboy, or “third gender”, three of our respondents--after further questioning--stated that they still understood themselves to be male to some extent, even though they commonly self-identified as third gender. Because of this stated self-identity, these respondents were included in the sampling.

in studies with male and later women masseurs and street children in Cambodia and beyond. In adapting this survey for the present context, questions were reviewed and scrutinized to ensure their relevance among transgender persons, and additional questions were added to create an expanded section on social stigma, exclusion, and discrimination. The final survey was a combination of multiple choice and open-ended questions covering areas including the following: demographics; relationships; personal and family finances; social exclusion, prejudice, stigma and discrimination; migration and entrance into the sex industry; sexual history and sexual health; personal sexual history; substance abuse; violence and sexual abuse; income generation; dignity and future planning; spirituality and existential well-being.

Ethical Considerations

All interviewers and field researchers were trained prior using UNIAP Ethical Guidelines for Human Trafficking Research (United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking, 2008). All interviewers were familiarized with survey questions and trained using role-playing scenarios. References for sexual health, counseling services, and legal aid were able to be provided to respondents when relevant or requested. Before beginning each interview, respondents were familiarized with the purpose and the kinds of questions to be asked during the interview. Respondents were informed they could choose to skip any question or stop the interview at any time. Interviews lasted 45 minutes and following each interview, respondents were able to choose a telephone card or a handbag each with a value of 5 USD as a way of thanking them for participating in the study. By necessity, all interviews for this research were conducted in public or semi-private areas near members of the research team to provide security and accountability. Often interviews were conducted close to peers for their comfort. All interviews were conducted in Khmer by a team of three Khmer-national field researchers.

Limitations

Data were self-reported, therefore only what the respondents were willing to disclose can be discussed. Throughout interviews, it was common for some respondents to give seemingly contradictory responses. For instance, a number cited that they like sex for money, yet went on to describe graphic acts of physical and sexual violence committed against them. While we understand this data to be contradictory and perhaps somewhat confusing, we can only provide analysis on what some of these contradictions might imply and essentially take what the respondents said at face value.

"Ladyboys" in Cambodia have their own culture; some even have a distinct language. Although much was done so the interviewers were non-discriminatory, it is understood that cultural differences and therefore misunderstandings are possible. A much more nuanced anthropological study is needed.

While attempting to gather a sampling that was representative of transgender people in the sex trade in Phnom Penh, researchers were limited to interviewing only respondents who were readily accessible in areas of data collection, self-identifying as those selling sex, and willing to be interviewed. It should be noted ages shown here are "reported ages" and it should be understood some respondents may be younger than they self-reported due to increased vigilance and legislation for child abuse and endangerment.

Definition of Terms

The diagram below (see figure 1) depicts how gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation (sexual attraction and romantic attraction), and biological sex, are separate components within each human being as noted by Killerman (2013). In this research, respondents do not fit within the traditional Western gender binary. In this paper, we have been opted to use the term “Ladyboy” as it is how our respondents most commonly chose to self-identify. “Ladyboy” is used to refer to people whose gender identity differs from their biological sex, as well as a general term to encompass a range of gender identities and expressions falling outside the traditional gender binary. Within Western constructs terms such as “trans,” “trans-,” and “genderqueer” are sometimes used to encompass a range of gender identities and expressions. For simplicity, as well as to respect our respondents self-identification we have opted to use the term “Ladyboy” within this paper.

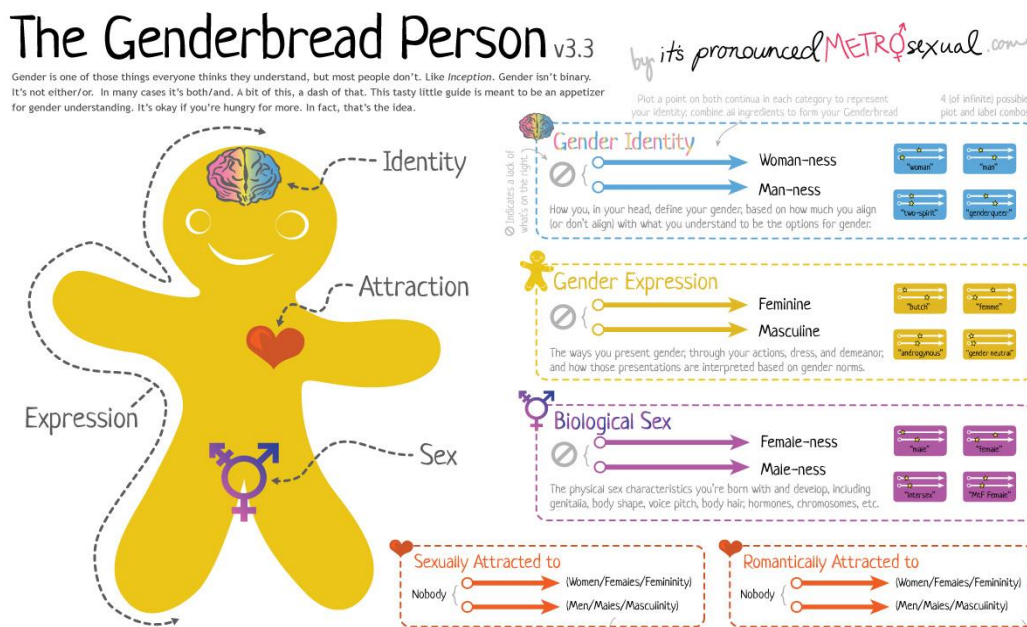


Figure 1: The Genderbread person, which was designed as an approachable model for understanding the social construction of gender, based on the input of thousands of voices over several decades. For more information, see: <http://www.itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/genderbread-person/>

Glossary of terms⁷

Biological Sex: anatomy and hormones one is born with, usually described as “male” or “female.” “Intersex” people are born with anatomy/hormones that do not fit with male/female categories.⁸

Gender Expression: how one chooses to show their gender, usually marked on a scale of masculinity-femininity, displayed through clothing, behavior, language, and more. Cross-dressing means to wear clothes conflicting with the gender under the traditional gender binary, often those

⁷ Adapted from: Killermann, 2013, p. 226-237

⁸ Formerly called hermaphrodites however this term is outdated for a number of reasons

who partake in this are called transvestites; not to be confused with being transsexual.

Gender Identity:⁹ how persons perceives their gender and labels themselves.

Cisgender: one whose gender identity, gender expression, and biological sex all matches up. This category includes: cis-man: man, masculine and male, or cis-woman: woman, feminine and female.

Transgender: an umbrella term that is used to describe a range of non-cisgender people who fall outside the gender binary, including but not limited to:

“Ladyboy”: a term used in many SE Asian countries, including Thailand and Cambodia, to refer to a transgender woman. This term is often understood in a broader sense to include some fluid gender identities.

Third-Gender: a term usually used in countries/cultures that recognize three or more genders, to describe people who neither identify as “man” nor “woman.”

Sexual Orientation: describes the kind of attraction (including, but not limited to sexual, romantic, physical, spiritual attractions) a person feels towards other, usually labeled according to the genders of that person and those to whom they are attracted to.

Gay/lesbian (homosexual): describes people who are attracted to others of the same sex.

Straight (heterosexual): describes someone who is attracted to people of the other sex.

Bisexual: describes a person that is attracted to both people of their gender and another gender.

RESULTS

Gender Identity

Nearly half or 48% of the respondents, self-identified as “transgender” (“ladyboy”/Khteuy), 46%, self-identified as female and only 6% stated they understood themselves to be male.¹⁰ Ages at which respondents first began dressing as a female ranged from one to 26 years old; the mean age is 15. The transition from a masculine to a feminine gender expression was not uniform but seemed to occur most

⁹ Pansexual, omnisexual and gender nonbinary might also be included. (all these terms are ever-changing as we learn and listen more to the experiences and perspectives of people)

¹⁰ It is not clear why they identified as male but on observation some of what appeared to be the apprentices of ladyboys still dressed as men and may not have graduated or wanted to be full ladyboys yet. Alternatively, some may have been male sex workers who dressed as women.

commonly during two spans of time: five to eight years of age and 12-16 years of age. Many respondents seemed to indicate this was a choice proceeding from their understanding of their gender. A few respondents cited experiences in which parents began dressing them as females. One respondent reports his mother dressed him as a girl for as long as he¹¹ could remember, citing: “My mother dressed me as a girl because she wanted a girl.” More analysis can be found in the discussion section of this report.

All respondents indicated their first sexual partner was male. One in five respondents indicate their first sexual experience was forced or coerced. However, there seemed to be some confusion about what constituted force or coercion as discussed below.

Demographics

The age of respondents was between 18-52 (see Figure 2), with a mean age of 27, and 45% fall within the UNICEF definition of youth¹² which indicates working later than males in the sex industry. The mean age for entering the sex industry was 20, 84% were between 12-24 the first time they were paid for sexual services. Seven respondents started in the sex trade between 15 and 17 and one respondent at 12 years old. Half of the respondents (50%) indicated that they had stopped attending school between the seventh and tenth grades¹³. One-fifth (10 people) indicated having a fifth to seventh-grade education, 10% (seven people)

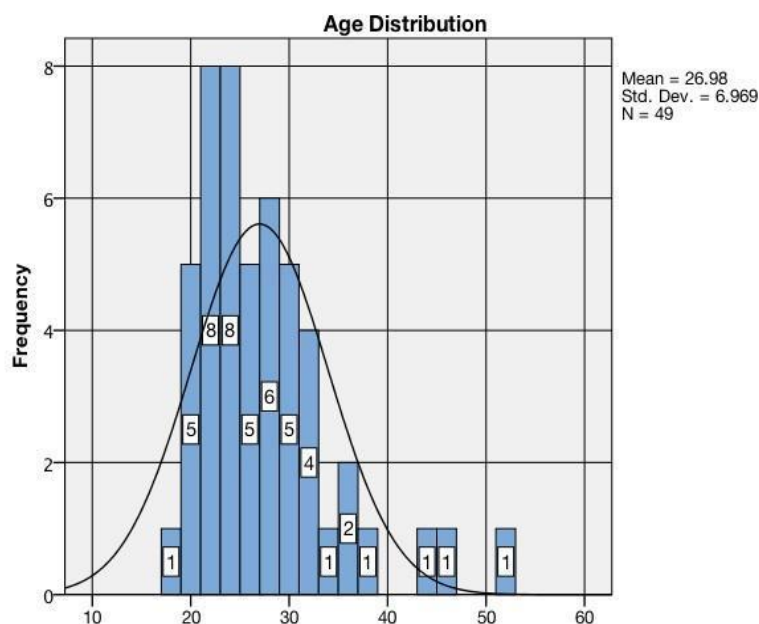


Figure 2: Distribution of the stated ages of all respondents

cited that they were not able to complete any education beyond the primary level (two having no education, and five having left school after the fourth grade). Five respondents cite attending school until the 11 to 12th grades. Lastly, university or

¹¹ The masculine pronouns “he,” “his,” and “him” are used in this instance. This is to both denote the biological gender of the respondent at the time what he was first dressed in female clothing, as well as the fact that this respondent cites that he still understands himself to be male, although he self-identifies as transgender.

¹² Ages 15-24 years old

¹³ These grades are hard to compare to rates found in the general population because of the different ages involved but it may not be that different from the general population.

college attendance was reported by three respondents, but none of them had graduated.

Social Identity and Reasons for Involvement in the Sex Trade

Economic need is a common reason for both trans and cisgender persons to enter the sex industry. However, stigma and social exclusion seem to play a unique role for transgender persons, affecting their likelihood to enter the sex trade. Respondents indicated consistent difficulty in obtaining and maintaining employment as "ladyboys." Thirty-eight percent of respondents cited being fired or refused employment within the past 12 months due to their gender identity. Numerous respondents reported they had entered the sex industry due to lack of employment options for "ladyboy" persons and often explained that involvement in the sex trade was an "easy" way for them to earn money to meet their basic needs. One respondent noted,

I entered (the sex industry) because I didn't have money and I have no choice for another job.

Experience of stigma and discrimination based on their gender and/or gender expression seems a key vulnerability factor for trans and cisgender persons entering the sex trade. Gender discrimination against those in the sex trade, therefore, is a key holding factor for those in the sex trade once they have entered the sex industry, due to the exploitation of gender norms, blaming and stigmatizing regardless of factors leading to entering the sex industry (Brown, 2007). Transgender persons similarly experience gender discrimination. However, this seems a markedly stronger force pushing them into the sex trade, as numerous respondents implied that being a *khteuy*/"ladyboy" in Phnom Penh was associated with the sex trade, at a base level.

Statements by respondents seem to confirm the link between social identity and the sex trade, evidenced below:

I don't like it but I have no choice. But I like it because it gives me opportunity to have sex with men easily. It is my fantasy.

I like sex work because it's easy to get sex with men as I'm a "ladyboy" and I can earn extra money to support my life.

Factory work allows me to support my family. Sex work should come naturally because it's a part of me.

These are significant statements because as part of their social identity, it's assumed "ladyboys" are attracted to "*reng peng*" cisgender, straight males labeled as "real men" (Tan, 2008). In reference to personal sexual histories, all 50 respondents said they had their first sexual experiences with a cis-man, a fact again stressed when asked about their preferred sexual partners. All but one respondent cites they prefer to have sex with "straight" cis-men. Over half (58%) mention homosexual cis-men as an alternative but their first choice would be a "straight [cisgender] man." Cis-women or other "ladyboys" as sexual partners were not mentioned at all. There is a difficulty here, however, in that "real men" are understood to solely be attracted to cisgender straight women and would not naturally find a "ladyboy" appealing. Despite this, it is often the case within "ladyboy" culture

in Cambodia that there is a demand to find a “real man” who can make the “ladyboy” feel like a “real woman.”

These findings highlight some dichotomies: firstly, despite the self and societal labeling of “*reng peng*” men being straight, cis-gender and the height of masculinity, some “*reng peng*” men do occasionally (at least) have sex with other cis-men, and/or “ladyboys.” This may reflect a lack of clear gender binary in Cambodia and suggests a lack of applicability of English-language terms of “gay,” “straight,” “bisexual,” etc. when looking at gender and sexuality in Cambodia. Secondly, despite respondents expressing the importance of establishing firm self-identity as transgender females, they also express the need for affirmation through having sex with cis-men to feel like “real women.” Does this need for fulfillment on the basis that their clients believe they are “real women” contradict the fact they are trying for form strong self-identities as “ladyboys” in their communities? One respondent in particular proudly cited her clients do not recognize she was not biologically assigned female at birth. More specific qualitative research is required to gain a deeper and more accurate understanding of the self-concept of this group. However, in this initial baseline of data, it seems that work in the sex trade (for some) is seen in this way; the sex trade may provide them with more than just an income, but serve as a platform from which they can express their identity as a “ladyboy.”

Social Relationships

Looking at social relationships, one-third (32%) of respondents lived with “ladyboy” friends, and another third (32%) with immediate family members. Nine lived alone, three lived with cisgender friends, three with extended family relatives, and two with both trans and cisgender friends. Nearly all (90%) said that their “best friend” was also a “ladyboy.” One third (33%) stated that being a “ladyboy” had a “positive effect” on relationships (See Figure 3), with some citing greater acceptance among females and other “ladyboy” friends, as well as support from families and others close to them. One respondent saw the positive effect rooted in the fact that, “I am good “ladyboy.””

While the strong majority of respondents (88%) said their families are aware they are a “ladyboy,” this does not necessarily mean their families accept them. Thirty-five percent stated being a “ladyboy” negatively affected intimate personal relationships. Nine respondents reported their families won’t accept them and actively excluded them, one indicated being disowned by family and has since lost contact with them. Three respondents said they would not want their families to know they are a “ladyboy” for fear of hatred and exclusion. Thirty-eight percent cited friends, neighbors, coworkers or classmates, who verbally abused them, looked down on them, made fun of them, or refused to spend time or socialize with them because they felt ashamed or embarrassed of the respondent. Ten percent stated the

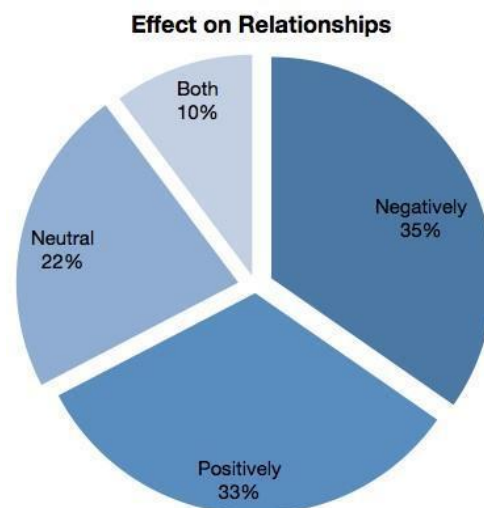


Figure 3: Respondents understanding of the effect of “being a ladyboy” on their intimate personal relationships

effect of being a "ladyboy" on their relationships is a mixture of positives and negatives, even within their family. One respondent mentioned having a father who refused to communicate although the rest of the family still does.

With regard to stigma or discrimination, a significant number reported being restricted from basic human services, including 39% who cited refusal of employment or job loss, 20% who cited being forced to change their place of residence or not being able to rent, 12% who reported being prevented or dismissed from an educational institution, and 10% who said they were being denied health services because they were "ladyboy". A vast majority of the persons described as stigmatizing or discriminating against them are various figures of authority (see Figure 4). More than half (29 respondents) cite the police as a primary source of stigma and discrimination, one-third of respondents (16 people) reported stigma and discrimination from parents and 15 cited discrimination from other people within the family. Beyond this, a significant number (14 people) indicated discrimination from

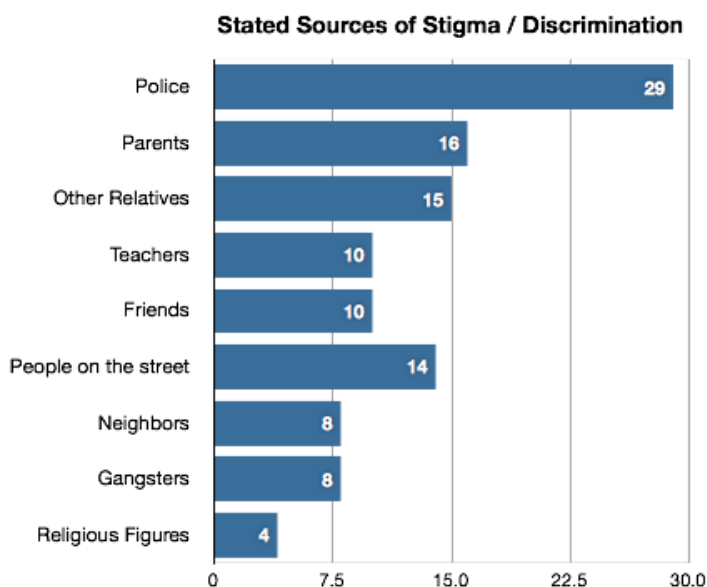


Figure 4: Sources from which respondents cite that they receive stigma or discrimination

discrimination from strangers on the street. Other significant groups include teachers and friends were mentioned by ten respondents each. To a somewhat lesser extent, discrimination from "neighbors" and "gangsters" was cited by eight respondents each and discrimination from "religious figures" reported by four respondents.

In the past 12 months, 52% reported feelings of self-blame versus 16% who indicated they have blamed others, 46% stated they felt ashamed, followed by 42% who mentioned feelings of guilt. Thirty-two percent indicated low self-esteem, 24% reported feeling they should be punished, and 20% of the group said it had, at times, suicidal feelings.

Sexual Violence

The overwhelming majority (74%) of respondents indicated experiences of sexual harassment within the past year because of their gender expression. One would expect this to happen more very late at night when they are accessible in areas where they are known to frequent. This finding is disturbingly high considering that much of the time they are hidden from sight. The forms of sexual harassment include unsolicited touching, groping, and fondling. Nearly one-third (32%) stated this happens "often," 30% mentions this has happened a few times, three averred this happens "always," and two people cited one incident within the past 12 months. Nearly half (45%) reported experiencing physical assault in the past 12 months due to their gender expression. More than one-in-four (26%) cited this

happening “a few times” and 13% reported it happening once. While nearly a half of physical assault came from people unknown to respondents, 39% said it had been committed by the police. To a lesser extent, 13% were said to have been committed by someone the respondent knew, and one respondent cites assault by an intimate partner.

Over half of respondents (55% or 27 people) described experiences of being forced or coerced to have sex. More than half (51%) said this has happened one-to-five times. Twenty percent cited this happening five-to-ten times, 13% 10-20 instances, and one person recalled at least 50 incidences.

Respondents who reported forced or coercive sexual experiences were asked if they would be comfortable sharing a little bit about what happened during the experience—and nearly all were. Among those who were willing to give details of their experiences, 11 accounts (40%) involved physical assault, 9 accounts (33%) involved forced group sex, four accounts (14%) involve being refused payment for sex, and three accounts involve the use of a weapon, among other experiences such as being forced to have sex without a condom (two cases) and being coerced to use drugs in one case (see Figure 5). The forms of violence described are often diverse and overlapping. Once respondent recounted her experience:

A group of people forced me to have sex with them at the same time. They held me down and had sex with me. When I tried to move, they pointed a knife at me. They would kill me if I didn't (do it).

Another explained:

If I didn't do it well [oral sex and masturbation], they would beat me up. They asked for money but I didn't give it to them, and then they beat me up.

Further discussion with respondents revealed some confusion or ambiguity as to what constitutes “consent” in sexual relationships, as opposed to “force” or “coercion.” Numerous instances, which further description revealed to be coercive, were initially labeled as “consensual” by respondents because there was no physical struggle or because the promise of remuneration or other circumstances led the respondents to agree to sexual advances.

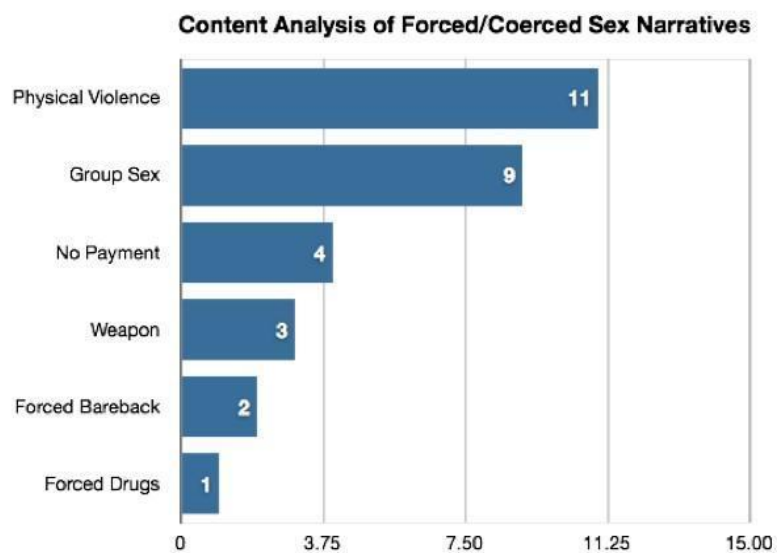


Figure 5: Key themes within narratives of forced or coerced sex among respondents.

Health and Substance Abuse

In addition to substance abuse during sex with clients, anecdotal conversation revealed a number of other drugs. Namely, frequent (and sometimes excessive) usage of estrogen supplements was mentioned by nearly one-fourth of respondents. Anecdotally, health workers who have worked with this client group have said such supplements are often taken too frequently and in too high of doses, which can lead to unhealthy side effects. Additionally, there were signs of other invasive procedures used to make one have a more feminine appearance, such as subcutaneous injections used to make cheeks appear more rounded. Anecdotal conversation during field research and observation indicate these procedures were often done crudely and were known to result in infection and deformation.

Alternative Employment

Seven (14%) reported that job opportunities for "ladyboys" in Cambodia are limited, and five (10%) stated selling sex was an "easy" way to earn money. Their answers suggest the perception of possibilities for "ladyboys" is rather circumscribed. Among work possibilities, 28% cited hairdressing, 26% cite a beautician, 20% cite factory work, and 12% cite restaurant work as possibilities. To a lesser extent, 4% cited selling sex or show business, and 4% said they did not know what work is available to them.

Dignity and Self-Identity

When asked what they hoped to be when they were reincarnated, more than half of respondents (57%) expressed their wish to be cis-woman, 6% wanted to be cis-man, and another 6% say they didn't care. Nearly a third (31%) said they didn't care if they were a man or a woman, as long as they were reincarnated as something definite/cisgender. This desire was presumably because they didn't like the violence and stigma associated with being a "lady-boy." Most respondents used the word "real" when formulating their responses, such as wanting to be a "real woman/girl" or a "real man" and one respondent stated, "I want to be a real person, like a man or a woman."

When asked what the word "respect" meant, their answers suggested the concept of respect wasn't fully understood. Twenty percent say they felt respected when people used kind words when they spoke to them. Eighteen percent reiterated it means "to respect each other." Sixteen percent felt valued, and another 16% felt happy when they were respected. For 14%, politeness was understood as an expression of respect, and 8% felt respected when they weren't being discriminated against.

Respondents were asked what they believe causes someone to be transgender. The majority (54%) cited "nature" 14% understood being transgender as a personal preference, 12% mention believe being transgender is a part of their Karma,¹⁴ 8% indicated a combination of both nature and society, 4% saw society as the cause and 2% said it was a combination of nature and preference. Six percent said they didn't know the answer. Four percent mentioned they wanted to undergo sex

¹⁴ In Buddhist and Hindu cultures, "Karma" is very simply understood to be the accumulation of one's good or bad deeds in life which results in their according fate or destiny.

change surgery, 4% intended to stop being a “ladyboy” and 2% say they wanted to stay in sex work.

DISCUSSION

A Word About Exploitation

Beyond structural exploitation, there is also an indication of exploitative factors implicit within the social identity one assumes as a “ladyboy” within Cambodian society. Data shows “ladyboys” occupy a very limited space within Cambodian society and are offered a very small range of income generation “choices.” More central to this discussion is the “ladyboy’s” own identity that they hold for themselves. Is it possible degradation and exploitation are implicit within the social identities they assume and if it is then how can it be challenged?

Stigma / Discrimination

Over a third of respondents cited coming out as a “ladyboy” has had a “negative” effect on their relationships primarily due to stigma and discrimination from cisgender family members, neighbors, and peers. Another third reported stigmatization by parents on the basis of their gender identity. Similarly, among those who described negative effects on personal relationships, over half mentioned family members as a source of discrimination.

Police officers are cited as the primary source of discrimination in their lives and a significant source of the physical violence they experienced regularly. Nearly 40% of respondents cited police as perpetrators of assault. Respondents reported being dehumanized, framed, and raped at gunpoint by law enforcement as seen in these quotes:

I really hate the police. They chase us like dogs.

Some policemen come to inspect us and put drugs in our pockets. When they inspect us and find the drugs, they arrest us.

Police here pointed a gun at my head, threatening me to have sex with him.

Police discrimination and violence were observed in the field work by researchers who saw one “ladyboy” being kicked by a policeman as he drove past him on his motorbike. At the time of writing, we were not aware of any instances in which police or other legal professionals have been reprimanded for discrimination and abusive treatment.

When asked at what age they first began dressing as a woman,¹⁵ statistical results showed a double bell-curve, indicating two distinct groups within the sampling. One indicated coming out before or after age five years; the other group reported it came out at the age of 16 and beyond. Higher rates of stigma and discrimination from teachers, relatives, parents, and police were found among those who came out at the age of 16. Most significantly, the highest rates of stigma and discrimination had come from relatives and police. Forty-five percent of those who

¹⁵ While we understand that dressing as a woman is not indicative of the onset of one’s gender identity (which is likely to have been present prior to this), it does indicate a significant shift in gender expression.

came out as a "ladyboy" at age 16 and beyond, cited losing employment within the past 12 months due to being a "ladyboy," compared to 28% of those who came out prior to the age of 16. This seems to imply that coming out as a "ladyboy" later in life potentially incites a greater, negative societal response to stigma and discrimination compared with those who come out earlier in their lives.

Positive societal responses

Over one-third of respondents reported that being "ladyboy" had a negative effect on their close relationships, and another one-third cited that it has a positive effect.¹⁶ Respondents citing "positive" effects tend to have come out before turning 16 years, whereas those coming out at after 16 and beyond were more likely to cite having a "negative" effect on those relationships. This may be due to the fact they have been "out" as a "ladyboy" for longer (on average), and have found means of coping with negative reactions, for example through becoming part of the "ladyboy" communities. Notably, those who indicated a "positive" effect on their relationships tend to cite feelings of a closer bond or greater association with their other "ladyboy" friends, as opposed to their cis-gender family and peers. This is exemplified by the quote from a respondent:

It's fine with close relationships. (The trouble) is more with neighbors.

I'm not ashamed that I'm a "ladyboy", but I'm ashamed that my family rejects me.

Alienation from family members, neighbors, and cisgender peers seems to be common. There is an indication of a strong affiliation and self-identification with other "ladyboy" peers. 90% of respondents state their closest relationships are with another "ladyboy" peer. Cohesiveness among in-group peer relationships could play a vital part in forming and/or strengthening positive and sustainable self-identification as the "ladyboy" minority within the cisgender majority. This concept within Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1978) holds that in-group cohesion can be vital among such groups as a means of strengthening self-identity and bringing about a sense of self-esteem.

Gender-based Violence

Often "ladyboys" will experience much stronger forms of violence *because* they are biologically male and do not conform to the masculine ideals that have been set for them in society. Physical and sexual violence toward men is usually excused or ignored because men are not assumed to be vulnerable and have no virginity to lose if they are raped. Thus, violence toward transwomen is often stronger—not because they are seen as women, but because they are seen as men who do not fit masculine ideals, and for whom physical and sexual violence is justifiable.

Respondents reported physical and sexual violence, actions as simple as going outside exposes them to physical or verbal abuse. Data gathering indicates the existence of street gangs that commonly chase, beat, and otherwise exploit "ladyboys." During field research, groups of young Khmer men were observed verbally harassing "ladyboys" and chasing respondents both on foot and on a motorcycle through a well-known public area within Phnom Penh. Although direct physical

¹⁶ Other responses include 22% who give neutral responses and 10% who cite both negative and positive.

abuse was not observed during field research, numerous respondents indicate physical and sexual abuse, including rape, is common.

The rates of sexual violence against “ladyboys” in the sex trade industry in Phnom Penh was compared with previous studies among cis-men in Cambodia and the Philippines. Rates of sexual violence against “ladyboy” respondents in Phnom Penh were significantly higher than those among cis-men in Cambodia and the Philippines. Fifty-five percent of respondents in Phnom Penh indicate being forced to have sex, 56% higher than the average instances of forced sex reported among cis-men in Cambodia and the Philippines. Among these groups of cis-men respondents, the highest rates of forced sex were found in Siem Reap where 43% of respondents indicate instances in which they were forced to have sex against their wishes (Miles & Davis, 2014). In Manila, 38% indicate instances of forced sex (Davis & Miles, 2013) and 13% of cis-men respondents in Phnom Penh reported forced sex (Miles & Blanch, unpublished).

Significantly higher rates of physical violence from law enforcement are found among “ladyboy” persons in Phnom Penh compared to cis-men respondents in Cambodia and the Philippines. Although 39% of “ladyboys” respondents indicated recent experiences of violence, only two cis-men sex workers in Phnom Penh reported experiences of violence from police (Miles & Blanch, unpublished). Similarly, only one of the cis-men respondents in Siem Reap indicate violence from police (Miles & Davis, 2014). Among these studies, the highest rates of police violence were in the Philippines where 12% of respondents reported experiences of violence. However, this is comparably lower than rates experienced by “ladyboy” respondents in our study.

Two variables in the research instrument focused on the difference between forced/coerced and consensual sex. The first variable dealt with coercion at the time of their first sexual experience and the second dealt with coercion during the respondents’ time in the sex trade. One in five cite their first sexual experiences to have been “forced or coerced.” After further discussion, some experiences labeled as “consensual” were found to be coercive. In one instance, a respondent reported being attacked by a group of people and left on the road and being taken by a man to deal with the injuries. Afterwards, the 25-year-old man asked the respondent—who was 12 years old—to have sex with him. Since the man rescued him, the respondent agreed. This was the respondent’s first sexual experience.

Regarding sexual experiences with clients, non-consensual sex seems to involve force and violence rather than coercion. In a content analysis of 15 forced/coercive sex narratives, physical violence is a strong theme in 11 narratives. Of them, nine (60%) include instances of group sex, three narratives (20%) described weapon use, two narratives describe instances where respondents were forced to have sex without a condom, and one in which the respondent described being drugged before being raped. As these instances were identified as “forced or coercive” experiences, it seems a number of respondents are unable to identify force or coercion outside of extreme examples such as these. In future studies, when respondents cite cases of “consensual sex” it would be useful to follow up with additional questions such as “how did this experience make you feel” or “what sorts of words would you use to describe this experience?” Allowing respondents to further describe their understanding of consensual sexual experience could potentially lessen some of the ambiguity between coercion and consent.

Throughout interviews, it was common for a number of respondents to give seemingly contradictory responses. For instance, a number cited that they liked

sex (for money) yet went on to describe graphic acts of physical and sexual violence committed against them. One explanation could be they understand that this is the only way or at least one of the only ways they can have sex with a man but that they do not enjoy the accompanying violence.

Post Research Follow-up

Sexual exploitation research and social programs within the anti-trafficking in persons movement has almost exclusively focused on cisgender girls and some younger women. Young cisgender men and transgender persons need a higher profile in this conversation. While cisgender males and transgender persons are not commonly seen as vulnerable or objects of sexual abuse and violence, data in this study has revealed high levels of physical, verbal and sexual abuse, including gang rape and other forms of dehumanizing violence. They are not merely vectors of HIV as it appears when scanning the literature. It is important that greater efforts be made to underscore the vulnerability of all persons regardless of what gender or social group they may fall into.

Since the research was conducted, we have been able to present the findings to the NGO community to encourage those working to address sexual exploitation to include transgender in their remit. It is of interest that the sex workers unions include men and transgender women but that the faith-based and NGO communities who have developed wide and comprehensive response to the sexual exploitation of women and girls — particularly in Cambodia— yet have neglected transgender people and males.

Following this study, an outreach program was developed to provide information on alternative work opportunities, health and legal support in which a team would visit “ladyboys” in the areas in which the research was conducted. However, the police subsequently clamped down on this location, and it became no longer accessible. Much is still needed to be done to support this minority group, going beyond sexual health, and better looking at their diverse needs and vulnerabilities holistically.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Development of policy and programs

- Cooperation between NGO’s and the Royal Cambodian Government is needed to develop policy and programs, such as the creation of legal, social, and health services that recognize and affirm holistic needs and vulnerabilities of transgender persons, beyond merely addressing sexual health.
- The Royal Cambodian Government should include LGBT people, especially transgender, within their definitions of vulnerable people groups in the 2016-2020 National Strategy for Social Protection (NSSP). Rape statutes protecting “ladyboys” (and indeed men) should be reviewed against from all forms of violent, non-consensual or coercive sex.
- It is important that MSM and Transgender people are not grouped into the same category but are defined as separate groups with unique needs and vulnerabilities. NGOs should work to create community centers that can be safe places for LGBT people--especially transgender people.

- By solely addressing sexual identity a hypersexualized identity maybe reinforced, self-esteem is tied to maintaining that identity, so abuse and exploitation may be embraced as a facet of that identity. An environment which focuses on them solely in terms of sex and sexuality may, in fact, ostracize groups in a kind of over-sexualized social stigma and isolation.

NGO / Police Training

- Sex workers unions and legal support organizations also need to consider how they can help provide legal help when transgender persons experience violence and discrimination. Police, NGO's, legal, health and social workers need education in how to treat transgender persons with dignity and respect, and the needs of transgender persons so they can better understand such groups and ensure that they are acting in supportive ways, rather than in discriminatory ways.
- Faith-based groups have often been key in advocating for the needs and vulnerabilities of cis-women in the sex trade industry, but it is also important they recognize the needs and vulnerabilities of cis-men and transgender persons and work towards a healthy and non-discriminatory way of addressing the developmental needs of such groups.

Alternative Job Options

- The hopes and dreams expressed by respondents would suggest they have not given in to the apparent fatalism often seen within marginalized subgroups in Cambodia. However, the common approach to these goals seems to carry a strong implication that "if I do more of the same (in my current job), it will eventually get me into something new." Such a thought might prove as a dead end instead of a road to the desired transformation of their lives. Thus, there may be a strong need for intervention programs to place a greater focus on identity development, allowing individuals to perceive a greater range of alternative life options.
- It should also be considered to what extent this fatalism is realism, due to the possible fact that transgender persons in Cambodia do have significantly reduced opportunities for employment in Cambodia. Thus, Education, skills training and the creation of alternative employment opportunities should be key priorities for the NGO and Government sectors.
- Further *qualitative research on the formation of identity* and the effects that stigma and discrimination play within the psychosocial development of these groups may be a vital part of holistically understanding the complexities of marginalized people groups such as these.
- Further research would be useful to *explore the existence of trauma and other coping strategies*.
- It is important for researchers to go beyond sexual health and explore the holistic range of social and emotional issues contributing to high-risk activities.

CONCLUSION

This research has sought to provide a basis for understanding the needs and vulnerabilities of transgenders in the sex industry in Phnom Penh in hopes to make such groups more visible, and their perception among service providers more multifaceted to address their needs more appropriately. LGBT and human rights organizations have done significant work in providing such groups with condoms and sexual health education. However, sex and sexuality is often the primary basis upon which transgender and such groups interface, while stigma, discrimination, violence and other forms of abuse often prevent these groups from positively integrating into Cambodian society-at-large. In such a climate, it is vital that NGOs, churches, and the Royal Cambodian government obtain a holistic and balanced view of transgender persons and the vulnerabilities that exist in groups such as these. It is important to develop an understanding of transgender persons that is holistic in nature as individuals with equal hopes, dreams, vulnerabilities, and needs that go beyond social identity and gender. This will require sensitive dialogue where their voices are heard, their input is valued, and their participation is encouraged.

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Jarrett Davis is an independent social researcher and consultant specializing in gender, exploitation, and violence. Over the past six years, his work has focused on developing a better understanding of the vulnerabilities of people groups that are often overlooked in research, policy, and social development initiatives. As a part of this, he has led a variety of studies with up! International, Love146, Terre Des Hommes, and other key organizations, focusing on sexual violence against males and LGBTQ persons throughout the Philippines, Cambodia, and Thailand. Davis completed his graduate studies in intercultural communication in the Philippines, where his research focused on social identity and identity development among marginalized people groups on the outskirts of Metro-Manila. He is currently based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia where he conducts research and consults on a variety of social research projects across the region.

Glenn Miles has spent most of his career in Cambodia focused on the rights of children and vulnerable adults in Asia. Miles possesses a Ph.D. from the University of Wales in childhood studies that focused on Cambodian children's experiences and understandings of violence, including sexual abuse and trafficking, which was used as part of the United Nations Study on violence against children (2005). He has developed a range of trainings on child development and protection, including the www.good-touch-bad-touch-

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