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## “Why Am I the Only One Responsible for the Whole Family?”: Expressions of Economic Filial Piety and Financial Anxiety Among Female Survivors of Sex Trafficking in Cambodia

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# “Why Am I the Only One Responsible for the Whole Family?”: Expressions of Economic Filial Piety and Financial Anxiety Among Female Survivors of Sex Trafficking in Cambodia

## Abstract

Filial piety has evolved and spread in different ways throughout Asia, with the common thread of deep respect and gratitude towards one’s parents remaining a very strong cultural value. In Khmer culture, filial piety includes the expectation that daughters and daughters-in-law provide daily assistance to parents and parents-in-law. Financial anxiety includes the worry and negative mental health outcomes associated with financial stressors. This article presents findings from the Butterfly Longitudinal Research Study on themes on filial piety and financial anxiety, combining survey results from across multiple years as well as a thematic analysis of themes from focus group discussions and interviews with 77 female study participants over five years in Cambodia. Findings explore the survivors’ feelings of responsibility towards their family and the financial and mental health burden of that responsibility; the cycles of debt experienced by survivors and their families; and the overall feelings of worry, guilt, and stress with respect to financial issues. The research concluded that survivors see filial piety as an expression of gratitude but suffer from financial anxiety as well as financial instability and indebtedness. A framework of financial capability is suggested, acknowledging the centrality of family and the need to embed social work and psychosocial support in any economic reintegration effort. Further analysis is recommended on economic shocks, vulnerable work, and experiences around savings.

## Keywords

Cambodia, economic reintegration, filial piety, financial anxiety, sex trafficking

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**“WHY AM I THE ONLY ONE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE  
WHOLE FAMILY?”: EXPRESSIONS OF ECONOMIC  
FILIAL PIETY AND FINANCIAL ANXIETY AMONG  
FEMALE SURVIVORS OF SEX TRAFFICKING IN  
CAMBODIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

Filial piety has evolved and spread in different ways throughout Asia, with the common thread of deep respect and gratitude towards one’s parents remaining a very strong cultural value. In Khmer culture, filial piety includes the expectation that daughters and daughters-in-law provide daily assistance to parents and parents-in-law. Financial anxiety includes the worry and negative mental health outcomes associated with financial stressors. This article presents findings from the Butterfly Longitudinal Research Study on themes on filial piety and financial anxiety, combining survey results from across multiple years as well as a thematic analysis of themes from focus group discussions and interviews with 77 female study participants over five years in Cambodia. Findings explore the survivors’ feelings of responsibility towards their family and the financial and mental health burden of that responsibility; the cycles of debt experienced by survivors and their families; and the overall feelings of worry, guilt, and stress with respect to financial issues. The research concluded that survivors see filial piety as an expression of gratitude but suffer from financial anxiety as well as financial instability and indebtedness. A framework of financial capability is suggested, acknowledging the centrality of family and the need to embed social work and psychosocial support in any economic reintegration effort. Further analysis is recommended on economic shocks, vulnerable work, and experiences around savings.

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**T**HE SURVIVORS OF SEX TRAFFICKING IN CAMBODIA experience multiple stresses throughout rehabilitation and reintegration. Worry and anxiety about their future, their family, and their contribution to their own and their family’s economic well-being are common. The current study is from the Butterfly Longitudinal Research Project, a 128-participant study of survivors of sex trafficking in Cambodia. Using a mixed-methods approach over 10 years following the same study respondents, the

longitudinal project sought to learn about the (re-)integration of survivors of sexual exploitation and trafficking in Cambodia. The thematic assessment focused on a 77-participant female sub-cohort that had (re-)integrated out of post-trafficking shelters by 2014, exploring their experiences and expressions of filial piety and financial anxiety.

The present article is based on a thematic paper released in 2015 entitled *Economic Reintegration of Survivors of Sex Trafficking: Experiences and Expressions of Filial Piety and Financial Anxiety* (Smith-Brake, Lim & Nhanh, 2015), which used a compilation of data from the first five years of the longitudinal study and analyzed it through the thematic lens of economic reintegration. Specifically, this thematic study addressed two major themes in the reintegration of survivors of sex trafficking in Cambodia: economic filial piety and financial anxiety.

In order to better situate these themes within the broader literature, the following definitions were established. *Economic reintegration* is an integral part of the reintegration journey of the survivor. It includes not only employment and uses of money but also one's attitudes towards and relationship within one's economic environment, individual finances as well as the surrounding socio-ecological environment (e. g. family, community, society). *Filial piety* is the notion that children have obligations towards their parents; *economic filial piety* is the notion that these obligations are economic or financial in nature. *Financial anxiety* can be described as "feeling anxious or worried about one's financial situation" (Archuleta et al., 2013, p. 58). Financial anxiety is related to both economic stress, which refers to "the pressures and strains that arise from a substantial income loss" (Elder & Caspi, 1988, p. 27), and to chronic hardship and poverty.

The purpose of this article is to situate survivors' economic reintegration in the broader context of their sense of obligation to their family and, more specifically, to their parent(s) or caregiver(s). This paper seeks to examine how financial anxiety relates to multiple factors, including this sense of obligation. We seek to understand how survivors explain and experience their filial duty and how it influences their reintegration journey.

## FILIAL PIETY IN CAMBODIA

Though its Latin translation is used throughout the West, the concept of filial piety can be said to have originated in Chinese Confucianism. When Indian Buddhism entered China, it evolved to support filial piety (Nichols, 2013). Filial piety has evolved and spread in different ways throughout Asia and the Asian diaspora, with the common thread of deep respect and gratitude towards one's parents and elders remaining a very strong cultural value (Ho & Chiang, 2017). In Cambodia, filial piety is found at an intersection of different cultural and religious values, including Theravada Buddhism, Confucianism, and the centuries-old gender codes, *Chbab Srei* (ច្បាប់ស្រី) and *Chbab Proh* (ច្បាប់ប្រុស). In Khmer culture, *Chbab Srei* positions women in opposition to men, and requires women to respect, serve, and obey their husbands (Saing, 2017). Filial piety also includes the expectation that daughters and daughters-in-law will provide daily assistance to parents and parents-in-law. Eng et al. (2019) stated that gender inequality persists within Cambodia's economic environment and, although the value of gender equality in higher education is generally accepted, young people as well as old remain sceptical of women's capacity for leadership. Therefore, women are still largely underrepresented in secondary and post-secondary education, as well as in formal employment.

The proverb-turned-principle of filial piety in Khmer culture is termed តបស្តងសងគុណ-*torb snong sornng kun* (*sornng kun សងគុណ*, in short. Roughly translated, *sornng kun* refers to the cyclical repayment of gratitude and honour to one's parents. Similar to how Buddhism evolved as it spread into China to include emphasis on obligation towards parents and state, so it also changed in its spread into Southeast Asia. The importance of gratitude or the duty of gratitude towards parents is an aspect that distinguishes Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhism from Indian and Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism. Cambodian, Thai, and Lao Buddhist texts indicate that the obligation of the child toward the parent is something no Buddhist can escape (Kou-rilsky, 2008).

The effects of the Khmer Rouge genocide and civil war (1975-79) and beyond exacerbated the country's poverty, which created pressure on young daughters to contribute to the family livelihoods. Brown (2007) likens filial piety in Cambodia to the *rights* of parents to make decisions about, and for, their children. Because parents have raised the child, they have a right to make use of the child's labour. Eng et al. (2019) explored more current generational relations, finding that, in addition to younger people having more freedom to make choices and have varying opinions in their families, "Obligation to family is still the most important expectation among youth" (p. 5). This demonstrates that the ancient Confucian value of filial piety has withstood the influences of the Khmer Rouge period and neoliberalism.

## FILIAL PIETY AND TRAFFICKING: COERCION AND CHOICE

The issue of coercion versus choice in commercial sex and sexual exploitation has long been debated in human trafficking and health literature (Alexander, 2001; Law, 2000; Micollier, 2004). Gray (2002, cited in Reimer et al., 2006) drew a distinction between Western and Cambodian worldviews, stating that "autonomy" and "self-sufficiency" are important aspects of resilience in Western cultures whereas "family and community support" and "connection and support" are important aspects of resilience in Cambodian society (p. 5).

Alexander (2001) argues that context must be accounted for when looking at the choice someone makes to enter the commercial sex industry. He wrote, "The decision [to do sex work] is more or less a 'free' or active 'choice' depending on the degree of desperation. However, we cannot ignore the effect of a context imposed from outside, within which the decision is made" (p. 2). This context, consisting of family obligations, dire poverty, and systemic gender injustice, among other factors, makes the issue of *choice* complex. Chung's 2006 research in Southeast Asia suggests that filial piety and the economics of work in the sex industry are interconnected. In the dual context of filial piety and economic hardship, agency becomes a function of the family's needs and not the individual's. The duty of the daughter towards her parents, especially, has been documented as a push factor into exploitation and trafficking in Cambodia and Southeast Asia (Freed, 2004; Miles et al., 2019; Reimer et al., 2006; Rushing, 2006; Vijayarasa, 2010).

Regarding expressions of filial piety in reintegration, Cordisco Tsai (2017) reported that survivors in the Philippines implemented a range of coping mechanisms to manage the pressures from family, including providing for their parents. Vijayarasa (2010) concluded that survivors in Vietnam were often pushed into trafficking because of their family obligations, but subsequently faced dishonour and stigma from them upon reintegration. Finally, an earlier report of the Butterfly Project reported links between family obligation and economic/employment decision-making: "Supporting one's family financially is a major concern and source of anxiety for

participants. When participants spoke of where they would like to be and what work they would like to do in the future, family considerations were a major contributing factor” (Miles et al., 2012, p. 90).

## FINANCIAL ANXIETY IN SURVIVORS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

A significant body of research has focused on the links between financial stressors and mental health. Gresenz, Sturm and Tang (2001) reported a strong association between individual income and mental health, another important association being between mental health and socioeconomic environment.

Nussbaum (2005) posited that violence against women affects many of their capabilities, including their control of environment. Therefore, issues of financial independence, increasing skills and knowledge for employment readiness, access to systems and structures, and concerns for safety are all important to the rehabilitation and reintegration processes of survivors of trafficking (Surtees, 2012).

Brown (2007) concluded that most victims of trafficking come from situations of severe poverty, with the entailing issues, such as lack of food, early education withdrawal, and the inability to meet basic subsistence (p. 52). This poverty is often exacerbated by a major incident prior to the victim entering an exploitative situation, such as illness, the death of a parent, or recurring debt. One of the major vulnerability factors for survivors who are reintegrating is that they often return to the same situation from which they were exploited or trafficked in the first place, often with the same expectations to provide for the family financially. A survivor’s ability to seek and secure sustainable employment is influenced by both internal (e. g. residual trauma and anxiety tied to trafficking, educational and employment background) and external (e. g. unstable economic environment) factors (Surtees, 2012). Finally, Morrison et al. (2015) concluded that some survivors overcame their stigma and anxiety through their economic reintegration, reporting that they “earned honour” through willingness to work and perseverance in learning a trade. The current study examines with whom trafficking survivors interact when expressing filial piety and, especially, how these expressions relate to their financial anxiety.

## METHODOLOGY

The Butterfly Project incorporated a prospective panel design and collected longitudinal data from a cohort group composed of 128 individuals between 2010-2019. These survivors were all recruited through NGO partner programmes that were providing aftercare. Participants were selected if they fulfilled the criteria of being a sex trafficking survivor defined by the 2000 Palermo Protocol (United Nations Officer of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, 2000).

The sensitivity of research topics and the vulnerability of the study participants was appreciated, and every effort was made to abide by strict ethical standards, as found in *Ethical Guidelines for Reaching Children and Vulnerable People* (Ennew, 2010) and *Human Rights Counter Trafficking Research and Programming* (United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking, 2008). In addition, the National Ethics Committee of the Royal Government of Cambodia, Ministry of Health granted annual approval for research and data collection. Additional details regarding the Butterfly Project study formation, including the cohort selection process, methodologies and changes to methodologies from year to year, ethical standards followed, specific data collection tools and techniques, and strengths and weaknesses of the methodologies chosen are outlined in Miles et al. (2021).

The Butterfly Project used a mixed method approach over five years. The research team used survey tools, asking both closed- and open-ended questions, as well as a number of qualitative data collecting methods, such as focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, informal interviews, play, art projects, and participant observation. The present thematic assessment drew from a subset of participants within the larger pool of data collected in the Butterfly Project. This thematic assessment focused on a sub-cohort of 77 female participants who had been (re-)integrated by 2014. The survivors were included only if the case study showed at least four visits from the research team from 2011 to 2014.

Bryman's (2012) four stages of analysis were used to develop coding categories to present a comprehensive picture of the group's expressions and experiences of filial piety and financial anxiety. Relevant longitudinal data were compiled as they related to several basic themes involving financial anxiety, economic stability/instability, and filial piety (including feelings of financial obligation). These included the participants' responses, attitudes, perceptions and experiences relating to "worry" (about money, about debt, about the future, about their families), work satisfaction, family obligations, and money management. The qualitative coding was undertaken mainly by a non-Khmer researcher; therefore, the two Cambodian co-authors were deeply involved in reviewing analysis, translating and back translating concepts, and formulating themes alongside the non-Cambodia co-author. All themes, positive and negative concepts of "debt," "burden," "gratitude," and "honour," were formulated by the authors as a team and further confirmed with the larger data collection and translation/transcription team.

### LIMITATIONS REGARDING DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The sample sizes were unequal with respect to the numbers of yearly visits because not everyone was available during each round of interviews. Surveys and interviews were all conducted in Khmer and were later translated into English. Transcripts and narratives were cross-checked to ensure translation accuracy. Surveys and preliminary findings were reviewed as a team to avoid cultural bias in translation and ensure that cultural perspectives are retained in data evaluations.

Another limitation may be the fact that the primary analyst was not Cambodian. Although having lived and worked in Cambodia for numerous years, cultural and linguistic nuances may have been missed. The analyses were discussed and confirmed during multiple analysis meetings with the research team, in order to mitigate any cultural and other contextual misunderstandings that may have occurred. The research team, then, included judgments and opinions about the qualitative data, but were careful to achieve consensus about including any analyses in the final report. Further, the foreign author was responsible for much of the writing, however, as many Khmer voices as possible were included in the literature reviewed.

## RESULTS

The results are divided into themes of feelings of responsibility and survivors' duty to support family members financially, general feelings towards family, debt and anxiety regarding debt as well as anxiety around finances in general.

## REMITTANCES AND FEELINGS OF RESPONSIBILITY

In response to a 2011 survey of all the Butterfly Project study participants, the majority noted that parents should be financially responsible for their children under 18; children under 18 should not be responsible to support or to repay the debt of their families, but children over 18 should. The participants mainly disagreed that children are destined to become like their parents. These survey results also overwhelmingly showed that survivors agreed or strongly agreed that men over 18 should be more responsible than women over 18 to support their families.

The themes and categories identified from the interviews among the 77-woman sub-cohort clarified whether the participants had sent remittances and given money to their parents or other members of their family: 52 (68%) reintegrated survivors, both over and under the age of 18, gave money to their parents or wished that they could but were unable to. In the majority of cases, money was given directly by the survivor to their parents; in a smaller number of cases, survivors gave the money to their in-laws or to *acting* parents (such as an aunt or grandmother).

Regarding themes of feelings of financial responsibility towards one's family, 17 (22%) of the survivors felt responsible to take care of their siblings and 32 (42%) felt responsible for supporting their family. They frequently mentioned the desire, in addition to a responsibility, to provide for or support one's family. These expressions suggested that the survivors felt isolated and as though they were solely responsible for their families:

I feel responsible to my family. When I worry or have problems, I do not know who I should talk to.

I don't have any plans yet and I don't know what to do because I think a lot about my family, and I have many responsibilities for my family.

Before I felt the burden to carry all these responsibilities. I felt upset. I cried. I suffered - why am I the only one responsible for the whole family?

The respondents commonly expressed guilt and worry associated with being unable to support their families. As one survivor commented, "My grandfather is sick because of blood pressure. I cannot focus or think of anything because I cannot help them," while another simply stated, "What I am concerned about the most are money and my mother."

## FEELINGS TOWARDS ONE'S FAMILY

These results focused on worrying about one's family financial situation, whether or not a participant believed that they could trust their parents, feeling cared for by one's parents or not. The women worried a great deal, continuously and cyclically, and over many years. One of their greatest worries was for their family's survival. Forty-two percent (32 women) expressed worry for their family's livelihood at least once over the course of the study. One participant commented, "I am in deep pressure [for my parents' livelihood] and now I am thinking of looking for a nighttime job."

The survivors were asked whether they had anyone that they could *trust* in their lives. At least once over the span of the study, 42% stated that they trusted one or both parents, most often with respect to their mothers. In contrast, nearly 30% of



participants commented at one point that they did not trust their parents, most of whom did not trust *anyone* in their lives.

Other expressions of feelings towards one's family included the women disclosing that they had no regrets about their past (e. g. working in the sex industry, being sold into sexual exploitation) because they saw it as a sacrifice for their family (7 women or 10%); missing one's parents, especially, but not only, when staying in an aftercare shelter (14 women or 20%); feeling cared for by their family or having a "warm" feeling being with their family (20 women or 26%) and; feeling uncared for by parents (7 women or 10%).

A 2015 focus group discussion on filial piety with a subset of participants was conducted to identify the survivor's perspective and experience in terms of family obligation and support. Eight women were included in the focus group, all of whom were members of an employment reintegration program. The participants likened the term "obligation" to the words "heavy," "burden," "responsibility" and "difficult."

They also expressed feeling both overwhelmed and needing to persevere in their obligations. The definition of obligation is summed up in one participant's statement, "Obligation is our duty that we need to be responsible in our family."

When asked about the positive and negative impacts of filial piety, few focus group participants articulated any positives, but all commented about the negative impacts of having so many family responsibilities. Their symptoms and expressions of feelings of responsibility included: stress, lashing out in anger, conflict with one's significant other, feeling hopelessness and despair, an inability to concentrate, headaches, crying, sleeplessness, suicidal ideation, physical illness, depression, and lacking motivation. The respondents also spoke of feeling "heavy," "complicated" and "torn."

The survivors disagreed about using the word "owe" in relation to their familial responsibilities, suggesting that it should not be termed "debt" but "responsibility," one that they assumed out of kindness and gratitude. An earlier focus group discussion in 2011 on *Chbab Srey* found a similar expression, with the majority noting that they could help support their families by respecting and obeying their parents. The translation of these words and their meaning were agreed upon by the Cambodian research team. Overall, the participants did not want to use perceived negative words to describe their obligations to their families but did demonstrate negative emotions regarding this obligation.

In informal interviews among the full cohort, the respondents sometimes mentioned feeling grateful when speaking of their responsibilities or feelings towards their parents. One survivor explained feeling responsible to pay her parents' debt, saying that she considered it her "gratitude." Seven participants (10%) expressed one particular indicator of both responsibility and family honour: that they accepted the sacrifice of having been sexually exploited willingly because it was for the benefit of their family. One survivor was clear that she never regretted being sold for sex, as she had sacrificed herself so her family could have a "good future."

## REPAYING AND ANXIETY RELATED TO DEBT

Surveys from 2011 and 2012 asked questions pertaining to accumulating and repaying debt, both personally and in one's family. One question related to the participants' feelings about a hypothetical situation of debt: 91% of participants worried about repaying debt if their household (not necessarily themselves personally) was in debt. On whether the participants felt they had a choice about whether or not they

got into debt, 70% responded *yes* and 30% responded *no*; 49% had been responsible to repay debt in the last year; and 49% stated that someone in their household had been responsible to repay debt in the last year. Qualitative data compiled over the entire study period found a similar result with 42 (55%) sub-cohort survivors ( $n = 77$ ) stating at least once they were currently repaying debt. Additionally, 50 (65%) survivors stated that at some point over the study period their parents were in debt.

The survivor's debt for living expenses was often cyclical and ongoing in nature. Participants or their families would need to borrow some money to make it through the month and they would pay back the lender once they received their paycheck, leaving them lacking funds to make it through the next month. Medical expenses were often related to unexpected illness, childbirth, or caring for an ailing and aging parent or relative. Family-related debt often referred to a survivor incurring debt in order to give or send money to their parents, often to pay the debt of the latter.

Over half the survivors felt responsible to repay debt, whether their own or their family's. Additionally, over a third worried about having and repaying debt. At some point, seven survivors (10%) spoke about their worry and fear regarding moneylenders calling in their debts. Related to the above indicators were direct statements about *not* feeling responsible to pay debt: only 12 participants (16%) overtly stated that they did not feel responsible to repay debt. Anxiety around personal and family debt were expressed in interviews, with one participant stating, "My family has a lot of problems; no income and a lot of debt as my mother does gambling. I feel very hurt about it. I am emotionally hurt by my family's matters."

## FINANCIAL ANXIETY

The survivors were equally divided as to whether they made enough money from their main job. In answer to the statement, "I earn enough money by working at my main job alone," 22 participants (29%) either agreed or strongly agreed and 22 participants disagreed or strongly disagreed. Thematic coding also tracked whether the survivors believed that they had enough money to cover their expenses. Over the span of the study period, 22 (29%) stated they had enough money for their daily expenses, while 32 (42%) stated they did not have enough money for daily expenses. The remaining 30% did not mention whether or not they had enough money for daily expenses.

Other excerpts with respect to financial anxiety included expressing worry or fear about money (separate from worry about debt) (38 women or 50%) and expressing uncertainty or worry about the future (45 women or 59%). Of the 38 participants who worried or had fears related to money, 37 expressed this after their reintegration. Secondly, 45 of 77 individuals (59%) were uncertain or worried about the future, whether this pertained to finishing school, finding a job, earning enough money, or other livelihood and well-being issues; 38 of these expressed this only after reintegration, six expressed it only before reintegration, and one expressed it both before and after their reintegration back into the community.

Symptoms of financial anxiety were linked to the burden of filial piety, as stated by one participant, speaking about the negative impact of feeling financially responsible towards her family:

I have so many responsibilities so if I have capability (higher economic status), I wouldn't feel stress. If I have no ability to handle it, I get aggressive and

sometimes when I cannot control my feelings, I throw my anger on my children.

In summary, a majority of the survivors expressed financial anxiety and burden for carrying their family's economic well-being multiple times over the span of their involvement with the study, and often shared these feelings unprompted. Although the interviews took place months and years apart, the participants often repeatedly expressed the same feelings and experiences. These results changed little over the course of the study; the challenges, feelings of responsibility, and instability were ongoing for most survivors who expressed these themes.

Furthermore, the majority of themes with respect to filial piety and financial anxiety were expressed *after* reintegration, once a survivor had gone back to living in the community; 63% of participants (48 of 77) expressed themes of filial piety and financial anxiety only after they reintegrated and 27% (21 of 77) expressed these themes both before and after reintegration. Only 5% (4 of 77) never expressed any of these themes, and another 5% mentioned these only before reintegration but not after.

## DISCUSSION

Overall, the participants commonly expressed themes of filial piety and, if asked directly, stated that their duty towards their parents was an honour rather than a debt. Nevertheless, the study respondents often felt overwhelmed by worry about their family's livelihood and the responsibility of providing for them. When asked directly about *sangkun* (the debt of gratitude one owes to one's parents), the survivors were reluctant to frame it negatively as a debt, but rather wished to explain it positively as an honour, a responsibility to repay in gratitude to one's parents for raising them.

The survivors' senses of responsibility were actual, as evidenced by the fact that over two-thirds (68%) gave money to their parents at least as some point and, other did this many times, over the course of the study. Their statements regarding worry and responsibility suggested a constant concern for their families' wellbeing and livelihood, and anxiety about being able to provide enough. Survivors put off pursuing plans for themselves in order to help and support their parents. This was most often demonstrated in delaying education, employment, opportunities, and marriage. In addition, many survivors stated that their plans included living with their parents, providing for their families, and a desire for positive family relationships.

The research supports the premise that family is the central focus and influencer of a Cambodian survivor's economic reintegration process (Chung, 2006; Eng et al., 2019; Vijayarasa, 2010). The family is the foundation of the individual, and the individual does not see oneself apart from family. When programs seek to support survivors reintegrating, services must account for and involve family as much as possible. It is, therefore, imperative to include family assessments, social work interventions, and empowerment in reintegration services for survivors. When planning a survivor's reintegration, the family assessment needs to consider environment, expectations, assets, and challenges (Cordisco Tsai, 2017; Reimer et al., 2006; Surtees, 2012).

An interesting tension in the participants' attitudes towards their parents was that they often felt burdened to provide for their parents while also seeing this duty as a sign of gratitude. The burden of filial duties impacted their mental health, with some disclosing feeling suicidal, depressed, and stressed about the need to provide for their families. The survivors also expressed negative feelings and guilt when they

could not adequately support their parents. One participant expressed guilt that she had married and was, therefore, not fully available to provide for her biological family. Some participants expressed feeling looked down on by neighbors for not giving enough money to their parents when they visited home.

Negative decision-making was also tied to the filial burden. Respondents who returned to working in the sex trade, or considered returning to the sex trade, often did so because their families needed money or were pressuring them to earn more.

The survivors experienced anxiety both over their present financial circumstances and about their plans for the future. Reintegrated survivors experienced consistent and recurring financial anxiety. Their anxiety was not only related to the responsibility and burden of providing financially for their families, but also regarding their financial situation in general. Survivors were constantly worried about how much money they made, how they would pay all their expenses, how they would care for their children, how they could, or could not, prepare for economic shocks such as illness or the death of a family member, and how they would pay their own and/or their family's debts.

At some point, approximately half of the survivors were worried or fearful with respect to money, and nearly half did not earn enough to pay their own expenses. This did not improve over time but was a constant worry throughout the study period. Financial anxiety was not only externally motivated, but female survivors, especially, put considerable pressure on themselves to be *good daughters*, and *good women*. Trafficking survivors continually negotiated the balance between their own agency and their perceived and real need to sacrifice their own goals for the sake of their family (Cordisco Tsai, 2017).

Being in debt was among the most identified difficulties. Debt was the most pressing financial concern for the majority of survivors. Debt among survivors and their families was not a single event; debt in these families was a persistent and entrenched cycle from which they did not seem to be able to extract themselves. The top four types of debt disclosed by survivors were living expenses, medical expenses, family support, and housing or asset repair. This demonstrates that debt was often accrued because families had no savings or a safety net for regular expenses and unexpected events, economic stress exacerbating ongoing financial hardship (Elder & Caspi, 1988).

Addressing the reintegration and economic needs of survivors within the context of filial piety requires a holistic model of capabilities in which "empowerment is not the outcome of services, but rather a process in which women engage" (Postmus et al., 2012). Access to resources fosters this process of empowerment, and part of the process is educating survivors about economic abuse and exploitative activities and maintaining safety in order for survivors to thrive (Postmus, 2010; Sanders, 2013).

Financial capability, rather than financial literacy, involves combining elements of financial literacy, vocational training and job readiness, job placement, and access to systems and resources. Sherraden (2010, cited in Sanders, 2013) summarised:

Safe provision of financial education helps women become more financially independent. However, while financial education is vital, it is not sufficient. Financial resources and access to financial services and support make it possible for women to apply financial knowledge and skills and become financially capable (p. 101).

Miller (2020) recently suggested that the capabilities approach to vocational training has potential in the Cambodian context. She proposed that, “the incorporation of the *Critical Capabilities Approach* [*emphasis added*] progresses vocational education beyond skill acquisition, to now also focus on young people’s aspirations for meaningful work and enable actions to lead lives they value” (Miller, p. 8).

Finally, Cambodia is one of the most-served countries by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the world. A large number of NGOs, both national and international, contribute to the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including education, gender equality, economic empowerment, and preventing violence, exploitation and trafficking. Nevertheless, multidimensional poverty persists, and government policy and action cannot be replaced by NGO presence. Strong government partnerships are also needed in NGO programs to encourage aligning programming with government initiatives and so contribute to advocacy efforts for the economic empowerment of the vulnerable.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The study participants framed their filial duty in terms of honour and gratitude; however, burden and difficulty were very high among those who expressed filial piety. Most survivors mentioned financial anxiety only after they had reintegrated out of shelter settings, pointing to the heightened stress during the initial reintegration stage. Many psychological and emotional issues are at play upon leaving the shelter and returning home or re-entering the community. The results of this assessment may contribute to identifying better and more holistic solutions for survivor reintegration, as well as implications for further research.

For example, it is recommended that aftercare programs revisit both their reintegration services strategy and the length of time that they follow-up after reintegration. The economic reintegration environment should be systematically assessed, and increased efforts made to explore any and all economic options for the survivor, outside the traditional job placement options, and taking into account the family’s capacities.

Future data assessment could focus on more specific areas of survivors’ economic environment and economic reintegration services, such as questions with respect to how survivors and their families prepare for or deal with economic shocks, such as medical emergencies or the death of a family member; and, if and how economic shocks played into the survivor’s trafficking experience. Further analysis should include survivors’ and their families’ physical assets and how they acquire and use assets as collateral or livelihood enhancement, their use of assets as savings, and the loss of assets as an economic shock. This would further clarify how survivors of exploitation experience economic stress, as extreme incidents of income loss, as opposed to chronic hardship and poverty in their journey in and out of exploitative work. Related to this, additional research on high risk and dangerous work would further clarify how vulnerable populations interact with the larger economic and work environment and how high-risk work played a role in survivors’ experience before, during, and after trafficking.

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