

6-2020

Barriers to Sexually Exploited Cambodian Women Integrating into Churches: Perspectives of Sexually Exploited Women and the Christian Community

Tricia J. Hester
New Life Foundation, triciajhester@gmail.com

Sopheak Kong
Precious Women, outreach@preciouswomen.org

Glenn M. Miles
Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, drglennmiles@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity>

 Part of the [Community-Based Research Commons](#), [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), [Other Sociology Commons](#), [Social Psychology and Interaction Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hester, Tricia J.; Kong, Sopheak; and Miles, Glenn M. (2020) "Barriers to Sexually Exploited Cambodian Women Integrating into Churches: Perspectives of Sexually Exploited Women and the Christian Community," *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 4.

DOI: [10.23860/dignity.2020.05.01.04](https://doi.org/10.23860/dignity.2020.05.01.04)

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol5/iss1/4><https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol5/iss1/4>

This Research and Scholarly Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu.

Barriers to Sexually Exploited Cambodian Women Integrating into Churches: Perspectives of Sexually Exploited Women and the Christian Community

Abstract

The aim of this cross-sectional study is two-fold. First, it investigates the barriers experienced by sexually exploited Cambodian women when integrating into Christian churches. Second, it explores pastors' perspectives towards sexually exploited women integrating into churches. A mixed-method approach to data collecting was designed. Participants' answers were gathered by the staff of a faith-based non-governmental organization (NGO) in Cambodia that assists women in exiting the commercial sex industry. The concept of spirituality is important to distinguish, within the context of this study, because it has been found within research to play a meaningful and relevant role in the (re)integration process. Several important discoveries were made at the completion of the study. The pastors' surveys revealed that respondents were extremely open to reach out to sexually exploited women; however, understanding how to strategically accomplish this was a significant barrier. Another major discovery revealed that the majority of the women listed job commitments and family as the predominant barriers to attending church when (re)integrating into the community. None of the women listed discrimination by church congregations as a barrier. Three main areas were identified in this study that need further consideration. More research needs to be done regarding the social, cultural, and religious influences of family members as a primary barrier to attending church. In addition, deeper exploration and closer analysis need to be done into how faith-based NGOs operate to reach spiritual outcome goals during the (re)integration process. Lastly, church congregations need additional educational support services regarding the existing barriers to church attendance for sexually exploited women.

Keywords

Key Words: Cambodia, Christian churches, discrimination, integration, NGO, (re)integration, sex industry, sexual exploitation, sexually exploited women, stigma

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by The Oxford Centre for Mission Studies. The authors thank Dr. Bill Prevette for his critical review of this study. Our deep appreciation and admiration extend to the social workers and individuals who daily give to the lives of many women in Cambodia who were sexually exploited. The authors thank Samuel Dara Pitou, Sam Ol Neang, Shamreum Seng, Solida Seng, Srey Mey Seng, and Srey Oun Seng for their contributions to this work. Dignity thanks Janice Shaw Crouse from The Crouse Institute, USA, for her time and expertise to review this article.

**BARRIERS TO SEXUALLY EXPLOITED CAMBODIAN WOMEN
INTEGRATING INTO CHURCHES: PERSPECTIVES OF SEXUALLY
EXPLOITED WOMEN AND THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY**

Tricia J. Hester

New Life Foundation

Sopheak Kong

Precious Women

Glenn M. Miles

Oxford Centre for Mission Studies

ABSTRACT

The aim of this cross-sectional study is two-fold. First, it investigates the barriers experienced by sexually exploited Cambodian women when integrating into Christian churches. Second, it explores pastors' perspectives towards sexually exploited women integrating into churches. A mixed-method approach to data collecting was designed. Participants' answers were gathered by the staff of a faith-based non-governmental organization (NGO) in Cambodia that assists women in exiting the commercial sex industry. The concept of spirituality is important to distinguish, within the context of this study, because it has been found within research to play a meaningful and relevant role in the (re)integration process. Several important discoveries were made at the completion of the study. The pastors' surveys revealed that respondents were extremely open to reach out to sexually exploited women; however, understanding how to strategically accomplish this was a significant barrier. Another major discovery revealed that the majority of the women listed job commitments and family as the predominant barriers to attending church when (re)integrating into the community. None of the women listed discrimination by church congregations as a barrier. Three main areas were identified in this study that need further consideration. More research needs to be done regarding the social, cultural, and religious influences of family members as a primary barrier to attending church. In addition, deeper exploration and closer analysis need to be done into how faith-based NGOs operate to reach spiritual outcome goals during the (re)integration process. Lastly, church congregations need additional educational support services regarding the existing barriers to church attendance for sexually exploited women.

KEYWORDS

Cambodia, Christian churches, discrimination, integration, NGO, (re)integration, sex industry, sexual exploitation, sexually exploited women, stigma

BETWEEN 2008 AND 2012 there was an estimated three-fold increase in the number of women entering Cambodia's commercial sex industry from 12,762 to 41,622 (Page et al., 2013). Key drivers in the sexual exploitation of

women in Cambodia include limited income-generating activities, mobile workforce, trafficking of women and girls, poverty, and widespread transactional sex (UN, 2009). Prior to 2008, sexually exploited women in Cambodia were categorized as either 'direct', referring to a brothel-based women or 'indirect', meaning women entertainment workers (FEW) (Page et al., 2013). In 2008, brothels became illegal and subsequently, more Cambodian women began entering the sex industry "indirectly." Within the literature, women are defined as workers in entertainment establishments and venues such as massage parlors or karaoke television (KTVs) whose job may include beer promotion and sales, waitressing, hostess, and karaoke singing. According to the director of the NGO within this survey, services provided by the women typically include alcohol consumption and sometimes drug use with customers. In addition, customers may engage the women with sexual touching and kissing inside the venue. The women may or may not engage in selling sex outside the entertainment venue and establishments. It is relevant and meaningful to highlight that although other terms are frequently utilized and commonly found within literature to identify the women, the preferable term that will be used to present this study is sexually exploited women.

The NGO within this study provides program opportunities to women that include vocational training, education scholarship, job placement, sex industry exit strategies, and safe temporary housing, along with counseling and health checks for all women who have been sexually exploited. The program also encompasses a value system that supports the Christian faith through discipleship and accompanying clients, while providing transportation, to those who desire to attend church.

Historically, NGOs have maintained a strong presence within developing countries by filling the gaps that are not provided by the state. In particular, Christian NGOs play an important role in Cambodia by providing services to those vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking (Frame, 2017). While statistics reveal that 95% of the Cambodian population identifies with the Buddhist faith, Christian NGOs are influential actors within the NGO sector; presenting a clear demarcation from secular NGOs by emphasizing spirituality (Frame, 2017; Miles, Lim, & Chanthra, 2020). The concept of spirituality is important to distinguish within the context of this study because it has been found to play a meaningful and relevant role in the (re)integration process. Research shows that spirituality increases and augments perseverance, adaptability in adversity, resiliency, empathy towards others, stronger relationships, and hope for the future (Badaracco, 2019; Miles et al., 2020; Wyatt & Nowlin, 2019). In addition, research has also shown that Cambodians with a history of sexual exploitation do benefit from a spiritual journey (Miles et al., 2020).

The aim of this cross-sectional study is two-fold. The first part was commissioned to develop a better understanding of the local church pastors, leaders, and members' perspectives on the (re)integration of sexually exploited women into their congregations. This includes their mindsets, attitudes, and behaviors. The second part was to assess the spiritual experiences of the NGO's clients as they (re)integrate into church congregations within their communities. One outcome goal, from the synthesized data collected, is to provide the organization with a better understanding of their client's experiences. Subsequently, identifying gaps within may improve upon the social aspects of their (re)integration process.

Background Context

One of the steps of the NGO organization within this research is to assist with the (re)integration, of their clients with family and into the mainstream community following the exit from the commercialized sex and entertainment industry. By definition, social integration is a dynamic and principled process that achieves and maintains peaceful relations, mending conditions of social fragmentation, exclusion, and polarization (UN, 2005). Within the human trafficking sector, (re)integration is defined more clearly as the process of recovery, and economic and social inclusion as well as access to social and emotional support (Surtees, 2013). In summary, social integration is a concept implemented by the NGO in an effort to help foster a community for its clients that is stable, safe, just and tolerant, and respectful of diverse backgrounds. This concept is widely used in contemporary policy development today (Jeannotte, 2008).

Most researchers would agree, however, that for sexually exploited women to leave the sex and entertainment industry and (re)integrate back into the community, involves a long complex process (Baker, Dalla, & Williamson, 2010). Structural, political, cultural, and legal factors along with cognitive transformations are key determinants that may prevent women from exiting (Sanders, 2007). With the (re)integration for sexually exploited women the challenges and complexity of stigma and discrimination also exist.

Traditional gender roles and social norms relating to female sexuality are a focus within Cambodian culture (United Nations Population Fund & National Institute of Statistics, 2015). The female body has been traditionally considered the center of national moral integrity (Hukin, 2012). Furthermore, there has recently been an increase in the national policing of female sexual morality, embracing the notion of sex as an entitlement for men, while women are expected to “remain pure” (Hemmings & Rolfe, 2008; Kent, 2011; Knibbs & Price, 2009; Lopez, Mukaire, & Mataya, 2015). The place and status of women in society are reflected in various Cambodian didactic verses and proverbs (Brickell, 2011), with Cambodian women regarded as the standard-bearers of the culture (Brickell, 2011; Kent, 2011; Maxwell, Nget, Peou, & You, 2015). The traditions expressed in such poems include strictly ordered encoding notions of power and status meant to condition females from an early age as to the nature of the social relations that are expected of them. In Cambodian culture, sexuality is a complex construct deeply interwoven with social and cultural expectations (Springer, Stellman, & Jordan-Young, 2012). This socio-cultural background, as it helps to explain social mores relating to sexual behavior, provides a foundation for a better understanding of the stigma and discrimination that sexually exploited women encounter within Cambodian society.

Various studies within Cambodia have reported continued problems involving stigma from both families and communities towards women who are involved or perceived to be have been involved in sexual exploitation (Morrison et al., 2015). Sexually exploited women will experience many challenges during this (re)integration transition and will confront cultural stigmas (Derks, 1998). In one particular study, researchers reported significant discrimination against women with a history of sexual exploitation, specifically by husbands, long term partners, family members, co-workers, teachers, neighbors, and fellow students (Morrison et al.,

2015). Stigma, experienced by sexually exploited women manifests through cultural contexts and includes negative labels, separation, loss of social status, and discrimination (Morrison et al., 2015).

Talking about sexual issues within the Cambodian church was found to be fairly taboo, according to one study completed by the Chab Dai Safe Community Project Church Leaders Survey (Miles, Phuong, & Sworn, n.d.). This particular research revealed that a large percentage of the church members believed that prostituted women were not welcome in their church, however, a large percentage also responded that they are willing to invite them into their congregation. In addition, findings also revealed that there was “a positive response and openness to church members being trained on outreach to prostitutes” among church members (Miles et al., n.d., p. 31). Alternately, though, some participants of this same survey described the activities of prostituted women as ‘illegal’, believing they are disobedient to God and could corrupt the church (Miles et al., n.d.).

Many Asia Pacific nations live in a traditional family and community environments similar to Cambodia. Across Southeast Asia, although there has been an ever-increasing trend toward premarital sexual relationships (Najafi-Sharjabad, Yahya, Rahman, Juni, & Manaf, 2013). However, the integration of sexually exploited women within family and community environments remains an overall concern globally. As mentioned previously, this is a result of the problem and the complexity of stigma and discrimination. Southeast Asian women who work in the sex industry or in the nightlife are stigmatized and pervasively viewed as deviant and “out of place” (Yeoh, 2016). The migration of men in search of work in one particular Malaysia district has left behind women, resulting in the vulnerability of these women to sexual exploitation by affluent men. The women in this instance are despised by other women and stigmatized by the community at large (Kelly, 2011). Worldwide, research on adolescent sexual behavior has been concentrated primarily in Western countries (Lopez et al., 2015). Premarital sex for girls and unmarried women is so stigmatized throughout Southeast Asia that finding accurate and reliable data on sexual behavior within this cohort is difficult (Gray et al., 2013). This remains a gap in the literature not just for Cambodia, but in the broader Southeast Asian context.

METHODOLOGY

Study Questions

- What are the experiences and challenges that the NGO clients encounter when (re)integrating into Christian churches?
- From the results of this research, how can the NGO staff identify strategies and implement actions within their organization that could bring improvement to their program’s (re)integration process in partnership with Christian churches?

Research Design

This study is a cross-sectional survey that used a qualitative, mixed-method approach involving questionnaires, in-depth interviews, focus-group discussions, and case studies. It was carried out over a six-month period, July-December 2016. Each questionnaire was developed to target two distinct cohorts. The first questionnaire targeted respondents who are Christian pastors, and Christian church leaders or members. The second questionnaire targeted female respondents who

were either past or present clients of the NGO. The first survey tool draft was designed by the report author in English. Subsequently, the NGO Cambodian staff social workers made comments and suggestions and edited the draft. The survey was then translated to Khmer, the Cambodian national language, by the NGO Cambodian staff members.

Sampling

The first cohort interviewed targeted a total of 10 Christian churches in four different provinces across Cambodia, each represented by either pastors, leaders, or members who have a history of attending regular church services. Churches are those defined as a local assembly or group of believers in Christianity. The Khmer staff of the NGO use the word “pastor” when translating from Khmer to English. The English word “pastor” for the purpose of this research is defined as a person, male or female, of Christian faith who is a decision-maker, manager of church affairs, leader, Bible teacher or preacher, and maintains guidance for the spiritual needs of the church member within his or her congregation (Jackson, 2019). Churches were selected by three different processes. First, a staff member randomly used the Google search engine to identify churches and contact the pastors by telephone requesting interviews. Second, churches were identified, and pastors contacted who had partnerships with the NGO. The third process was completed by selecting churches that are well known to the staff locally. All respondents were Cambodian nationals except one expatriate who is the regional pastor for a Khmer Church and is fluent in the Khmer language.

The second cohort interviewed were sexually exploited women who had graduated from various vocational training schools sponsored by the NGO such as beauty salons, sewing, and cooking. The total number of clients who had received services from the NGO from its’ founding to the time this research began is 82. The NGO staff randomly selected 50 clients to contact as participants in this study. Subsequently, the staff was able to interview 29 women respondents as part of the data collection phase, either by telephone or face to face.

Data Collection

The interviews were completed by six of the NGO staff members. The interviews were completed face to face within the first cohort of church pastors or leaders. The second cohort involving the NGO clients was completed by both face-to-face interviews and telephone interviews. Respondents were read the questions in Khmer from the questionnaire and responded verbally. Answers were recorded in writing on the questionnaire by the staff. Later, the Khmer answers were translated back to English for the purpose of this report.

Instrument

- Questionnaire for church pastors, members, and/or leaders: 18 questions were designed and written in English, then subsequently translated into the national Cambodian language, Khmer, by the NGO staff. All answers by the respondents were written and recorded by a staff member, and subsequently translated back to English.
- Questionnaire for clients of the NGO: 25 questions were designed and written in English, then subsequently translated into the national Cambodian language, Khmer by the NGO staff. All answers by the respondents were written and recorded by a staff member, and subsequently translated back to English.

Ethical Protection of Respondents

The names of the respondents within this study will remain confidential. The respondents were reassured of confidentiality and only adults were included. Participant interviews were done face to face and by phone. Respondents gave consent to use their answers for data within this study. To maintain confidentiality, the church respondents selected were not informed by the NGO staff if any of the clients attended their congregations.

Limitations and Challenges

The church pastor, church member, and leader survey had limitations due to the small sample of surveys acquired which was 10 out of a total 2,500 nationally registered churches with the Ministry of Religion and Cults (Nou, 2016). This limitation makes it difficult to make a strong summary and conclusion connecting the responses from this survey to the overall views of all church members and pastors across Cambodia.

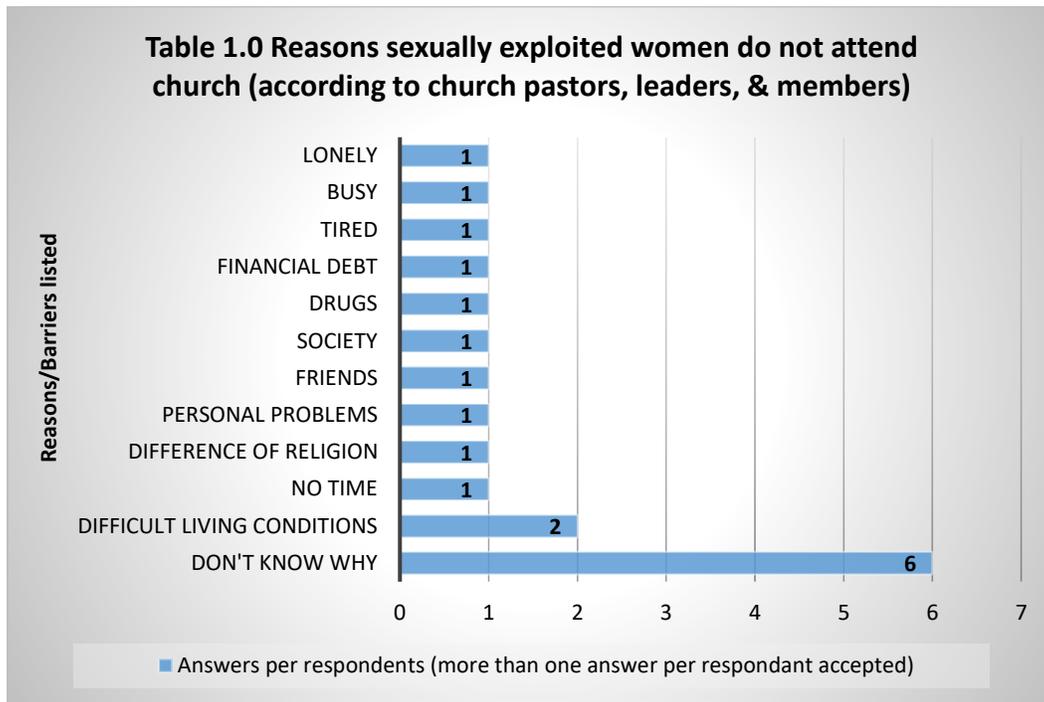
A second limitation for the NGO staff involved non-church partners. Making new church contacts for the purpose of this study was time-consuming. This took significantly more time to negotiate and coordinate interviews with church pastors who were not current partners with the NGO. The targeted churches were those who did have current NGO clients in their membership to avoid “spotlighting” clients and avoid bias. Although this approach does protect client confidentiality, it does limit being able to evaluate the NGO’s current (re)integration program from the perspective of current church partners.

Lastly, bias among the respondents in the client surveys cannot be overlooked as a possibility. Surveyors were the NGO staff. The respondents may have felt compelled not to criticize or give negative feedback to questions that would reflect upon the staff surveyors themselves and the organization. Furthermore, the NGO staff are not professional surveyors and had not been given specialist training on how to ask questions without bias.

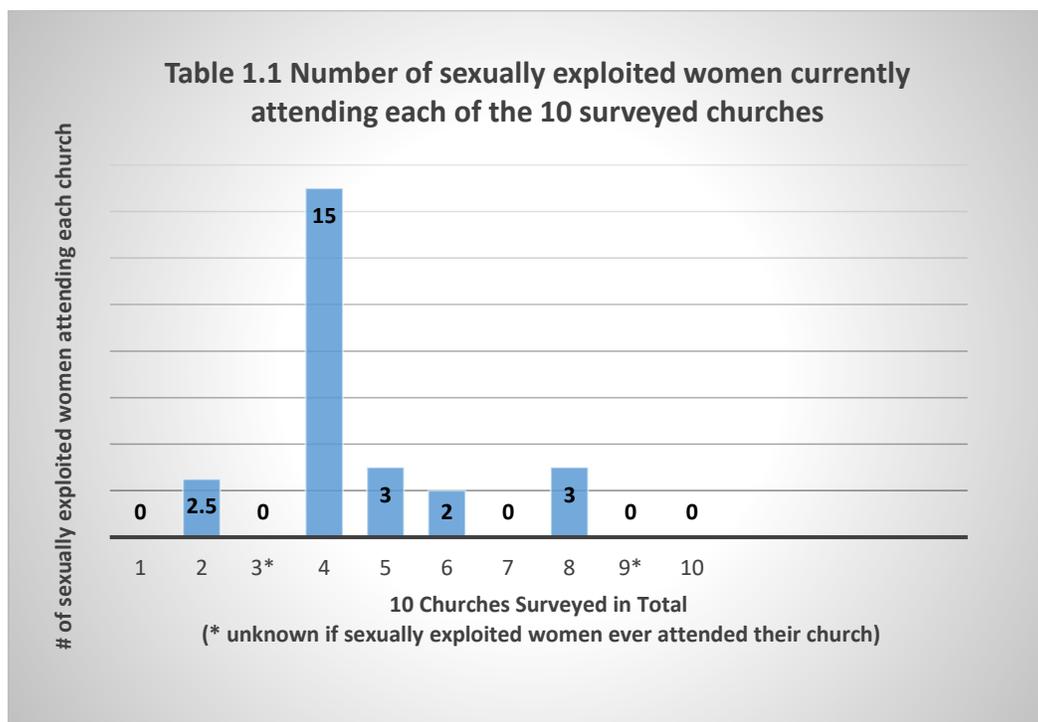
FINDINGS

Church Pastors, Leaders, and Members Responses

The majority of responses among church pastors, leaders, and members, reflected that they did not know why sexually exploited women, who identify as Christians, would not attend church. (See Table 1.0 below.) It is interesting to note that only one pastor listed “society” [discrimination or stigma] as a barrier. However, approximately four out of 10 of the respondents openly admitted that they themselves or other church members have participated in discrimination against sexually exploited women, describing specific behaviors by members such as “ignoring” or “excluding from activities.” Approximately 66% of the responses varied greatly to perceived barriers to church attendance while only 11% of the responses listed home living conditions as a barrier. Respondents were allowed to provide more than one answer for each question.

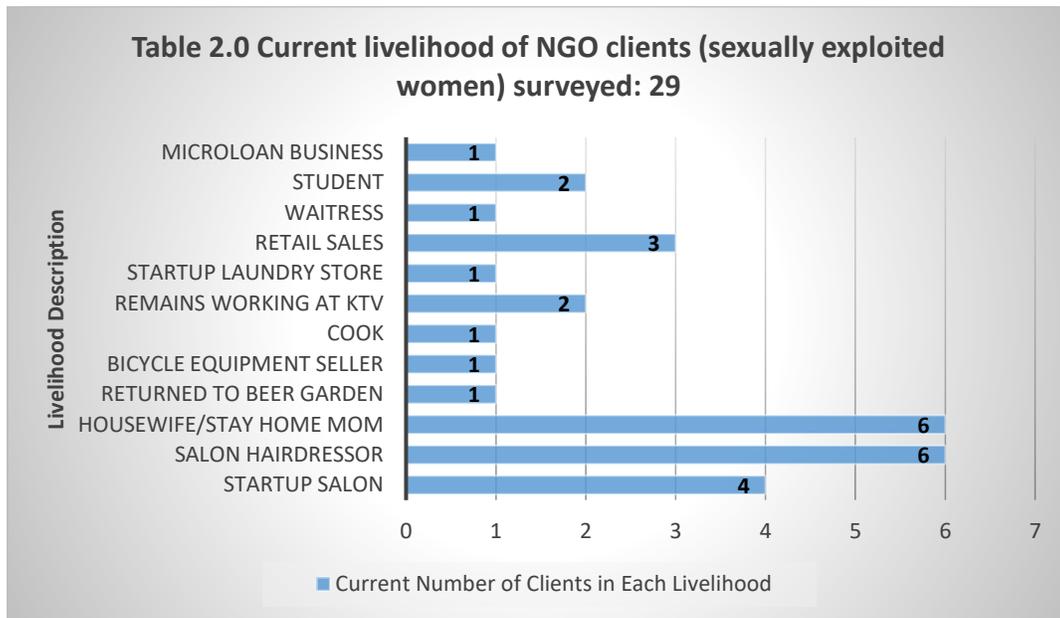


The presence of sexually exploited women in churches is not uncommon in Cambodia nationally. Half of all the respondents stated that they do have sexually exploited women currently attending their church. (See Table 1.1 below.) In addition, approximately eight of the 10 church respondents stated they have had in the past sexually exploited women visit their church services. Most respondents had a desire to become more knowledgeable about how to help sexually exploited women. Eight out of 10 respondents were open to having a staff member of the NGO come and provide training and informational materials to their congregations. In addition, four of the 10 of respondents stated their church has had “someone” come to share within their church about how to encourage and support sexually exploited women. During the church surveys, three out of the 10 respondents offered the NGO organization the use of their church building without a fee for programs such as “outreaches” or “fellowship parties”. One respondent offered to purchase bicycles for clients to assist with transportation needs.

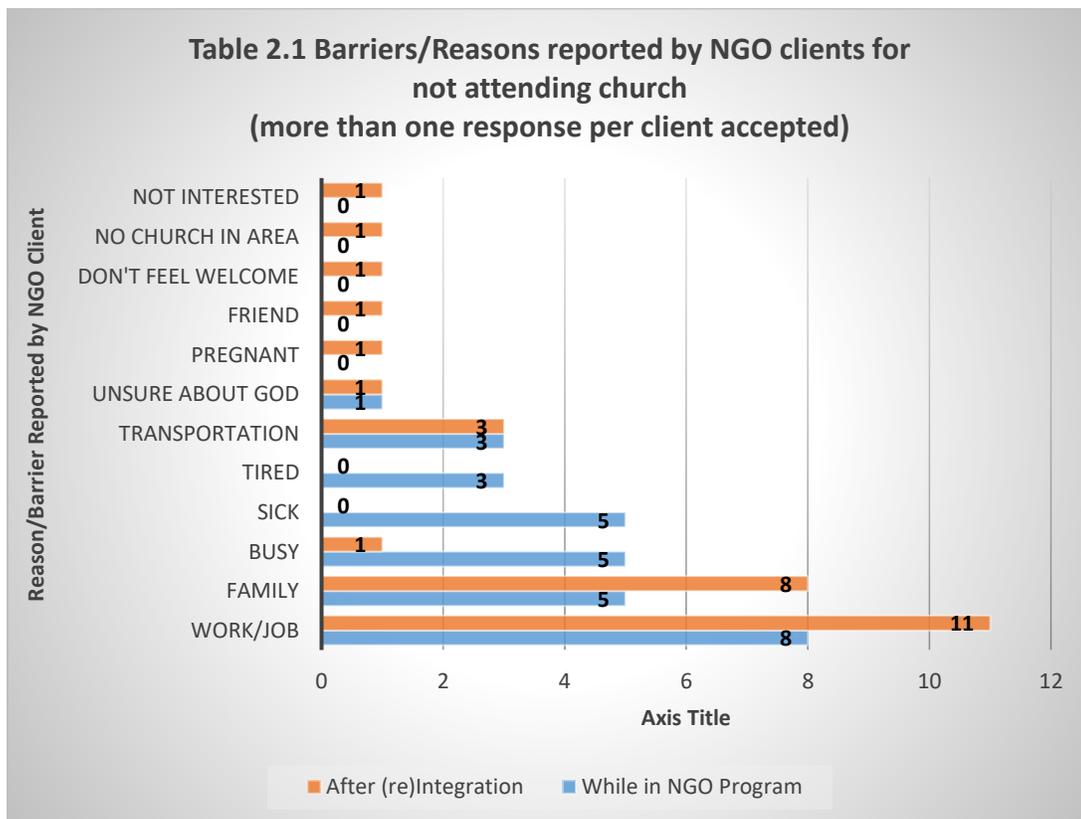


NGO Clients Surveyed (sexually exploited women)

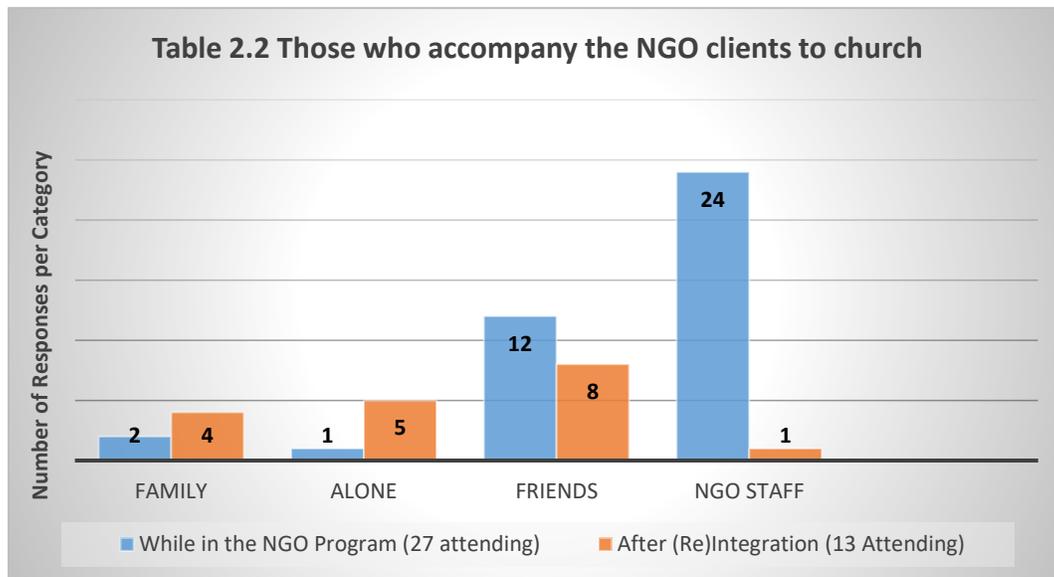
The NGO clients were asked questions with two different objectives. The first half of the survey questions were targeted to their experiences while in the NGO program. The second half of the survey targeted their experiences after they either graduated vocational training or completing the NGO program. In summary, one client in the survey returned to working in a beer garden after completing the program, and two clients continued to work at karaoke television after completing the program. The remaining 26 of 29 clients exited the entertainment and sex industry at the time of this survey. (See Table 2.0 below).



The results from the client surveys reflected that consistent opportunities to attend church while in the NGO program were given and Christian spiritual support was provided by the NGO. This is reflected in the survey which shows that 86% of the respondents state they were provided with personal Bible study discipleship. Furthermore, 93% of the clients stated they had voluntarily attended church services while in the program, and 78% of those clients stated they attended church services three to four times per month. Relationships outside family played an influential support role for attending church while in the program; 93% of the clients having attended church services with either an NGO staff member or friend. However, only 5% of the clients stated they attended church with a family member while in the program. (See Table 2.1 below for reasons why clients were either unable to attend a church service or did not attend church.)

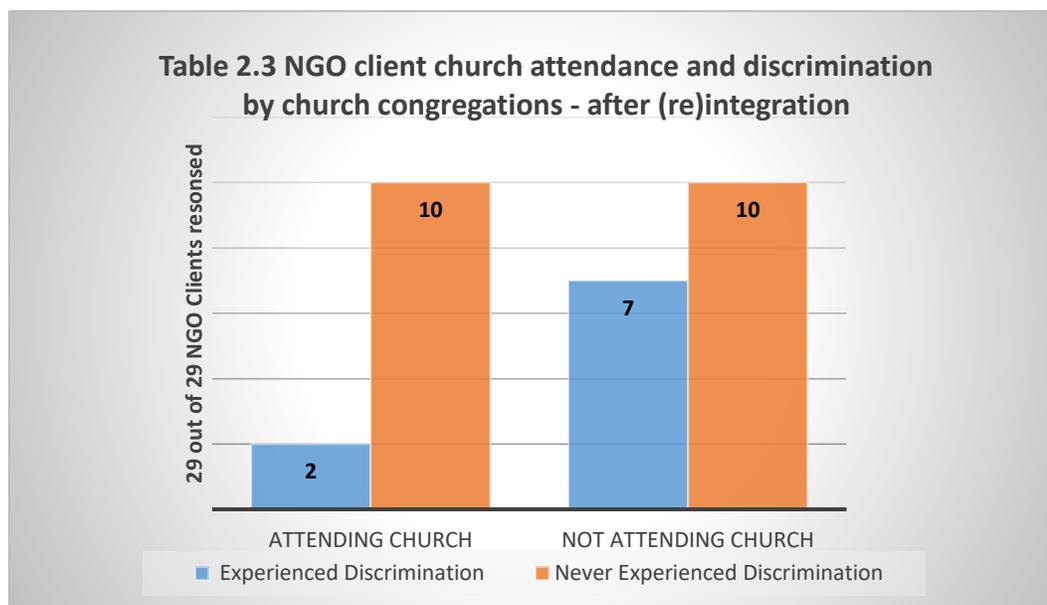


The second half of the client survey targeted client experiences after graduating/completing the NGO program as previously mentioned. Attendance at church services declined significantly after (re)integration into the community: 45% of clients reported still attending church services, and 55% responded not attending church. (See Table 2.2 below.) It is interesting to note a substantial drop in church attendance when clients no longer had an NGO staff member or friend to accompany them. When the clients were asked “If you are still attending a church service, who do you attend church services with?” 68% were attending either with friends or alone. When all 29 were asked, after completing the program, “Do you still accept Christianity for your faith?”, 72% responded “yes”, 3% were unsure, 14% stated “no” and 10% did not respond.



Questions targeting barriers or reasons why clients no longer attended church services after leaving the program were administered within the survey. When asked if a church was located near your home or village, 41% responded “yes”, and 59% of clients said “no”. Furthermore, 53% of the respondents stated “yes” when asked, “If transportation prevents you from going to church, then would you attend if someone provided transportation?” However, clients did not state that transportation was a major barrier preventing them from attending church. When asked, after exiting the program “Who or what prevents you from going to church services?”, only 10% of the clients' listed transportation as a barrier.” (See Table 3.1 above.)

The majority of clients, 65%, listed job commitments and family as the reason after (re)integration for no longer attending church services. (See Table 2.1 above). “Busy” and “sick” followed at 34%. Although the opportunity was given to report discrimination by church congregations as a barrier to attending church, no NGO client listed it. Even though discrimination was not listed as a barrier, it does not mean that discrimination does not exist. (See Table 2.3 below which compares client church attendance with discrimination by church pastors, leaders, and members towards the NGO clients.) Respectively, 7% of clients attending church services experienced discrimination by church congregations while 29% not currently attending church experienced discrimination in the past. Discrimination does exist. When clients were asked “Have you ever attended a church service and felt discriminated against by other church members because of your past?” 31% said “yes” and 69% said “no”



Sample Interviews Collected

Male Pastor

How do you do! My name is [Name] and I am a pastor of [Church] in Kampong Cham province. We think that the places where the women and girls who work at night are dangerous for their lives. Even though they may have left or won't get involved with the church, we always give love and care to the women. We want to see their futures be better and don't want them to work in danger like that. When they come into the church, we always have our team help to take care of them and we show them, love. We also motivate them to study the Gospel of God and encourage them to join one of our classes to help them grow in their spiritual life, become strong women who have control of their lives, no longer struggling with anger or difficulty to make decisions and to give them clarity. It is not only entertainment workers or women who are easily exploited. We are to value all women, whether they are orphans, widows or just starting to come to church. We have a vision that we want to lead them to and what is important is that they become a student of Jesus Christ to produce fruit. Our expectation is to see them become leaders in their communities also.

NGO Vocational Training Student

I am a student at [NGO name]. When I lived with [NGO name], they taught me how to sew. [NGO Name] shares the stories of women, which made me happy and change my life. Now I have successful sewing skills! [NGO Name] allowed me to live in their [Name Home] and gave me food and tools. I have since stopped studying and have returned to my province, where I run my own business. I have a good husband, am pregnant and have a sewing machine that [NGO Name] gave to me (which is great because I can use my skill). I would lastly like to say thank you to [NGO Name] for supporting me for the year. Even though it was for only a short time, it was great for me.

Female Pastor

Pastor: “Hello, my name is [Name] and I am a pastor at [Name] Church in [Name] market.

NGO: “Hello Sister! How many members are in your church?”

Pastor: “We have 36 members but only 30 come regularly.”

NGO: “So as you know, we are from [NGO Name] which gives help to the women who work in the Entertainment Industry. How do you feel about entertainment workers and what do they look like to you?”

Pastor: “I don’t think that they are bad but others do not think it is good. Some cannot relate to them. For me, I think that it shouldn’t matter if the women work in KTVs because some of them do not want to work there and others want to work for themselves.”

NGO: “When you say that some women don’t like to work, what is it that the women don’t like?”

Pastor: “Because of their family situations- poor families and parents sell kids to KTVs for basic needs for the family.”

NGO: “Currently, do women come to pray to the Lord in church?”

Pastor: “No entertainment women come to the church.”

NGO: “What do you think if [NGO Name] refers women to church? How would you and your members treat them?”

Pastor: “Entertainment workers have the right to come to the church. Members and I will welcome them if they come. The Bible says that women talk to the Lord in their hearts and always speaks of women who work in the night, so we also provide value for them.”

DISCUSSION

Church Pastor, Leader, and Member Perspectives

The Christian church community seems to be unaware that home living environments, including family, may influence church attendance as evidenced by the survey results. The NGO serves as a bridge in building relationships between the church members and sexually exploited women. The majority of women exiting the commercial sex industry need considerably more help and support than their own social networks can offer (Baker et al., 2010). It is very important that the NGO continues to be proactive in helping church members understand this concept and recognize the impact their role can play in the recovery and (re)integration of sexually exploited women. The (re)integration phase is a vulnerable time for the women who have exited the sex industry. Their greatest need for help and support

is during both the *breakaway* and *after the breakaway* stages from the sex industry (Baker et al., 2010). Church pastors, leaders, and members can be key supports for (re)integration particularly in the *after breakaway stage*.

There also appears to be a lack of recognition or understanding that discrimination could create a barrier for church attendance. Evidence was well-founded that discrimination is a strong response to sexually exploited women. However, there was not a single response within the surveys that listed social rejection or discrimination as a barrier to church attendance. Furthermore, the majority of responses by church members and pastors as to why sexually exploited women do not attend church were listed as “unknown.” Knowledge gaps are apparent regarding barriers.

Pastors often responded that they either did not feel equipped or did not have enough staff to develop a special program or leadership assistance. The surveyors in this study agreed that the local churches who they interviewed did not have a plan on how to reach out to sexually exploited women. Pastors openly admitted in the surveys that they were “too busy” to identify a member of the church who is willing to commit time to help this marginalized group (re)integrate into the church community. Creating a special program by church congregations for these women may not be a favorable approach. According to the director of the NGO, many of the women in their program do not want their identity to be associated with the commercial sex industry.

Sexually Exploited Women’s Perspectives

The understanding of household and community influence in Cambodia can often be overlooked by those from individualistic cultures. In addition, the poor live in households as economic and social units of importance. They understand themselves as part of a social unit rather than thinking of themselves so much as individuals (Myers, 1999). While the clients of the NGO have a strong relationship and social unit with the NGO social workers and friends when in the program, it appears these relationships may not continue after (re)integration into the community. Where NGO funding, staffing, and time are limited, it may be challenging to follow up. This may be particularly true for clients who live some distance away from the NGO. Society in general places expectations on people and requires obligations to one another as well as needs and wants (Friedman, 1992). It should be noted that financial obligations to the family are included in this expectation within Cambodian society. Furthermore, households are the building blocks of larger social systems, and the need for affection, self-expression, and esteem arises from human encounters within these systems (Friedman, 1992).

It is possible that once these social systems no longer exist with the NGO staff after (re)integration into communities, the clients may choose not to attend church. This may be explained by their entering into another system that does not support church attendance. While discrimination does exist within church congregations, none of the NGO clients listed discrimination as a reason why they no longer attend church services after (re)integration. It is possible that the two main reasons that the clients listed for no longer attending church, job obligations and family, maybe strongly influenced also by the loss of frequent relationship interaction with the NGO staff who no longer accompany them.

One cannot negate the fact that Cambodia’s population is 95% Buddhist (Ray, 2009). Consideration should be given to the possibility that the Christian social

unit created by the NGO social workers is frequently replaced with social family units that do not support a different religious faith. Pressure from immediate family and relatives to return to Buddhism may be underestimated as an influencing factor (Miles et al., 2020). The majority of clients, 73%, who attended church after (re)integration, attend with either friend, an NGO staff member, or alone. As mentioned previously, further study needs to be undertaken to investigate family influences placing a barrier to attend church services with consideration for religious differences.

CONCLUSION

In looking forward, this study has been a great benefit to the NGO organization, as expressed by the staff social workers. As a result, the organization's staff recognized gaps regarding current church partnerships and have realized the benefits of building new partnerships with churches across Cambodia. While discrimination by church pastors, leaders, and members is still present, this was not identified as a barrier for why sexually exploited women of this particular NGO no longer attend church services after (re)integrating into the community. However, the data clearly demonstrated the need for the NGO staff to continue with education support to church congregations on the impact of discrimination related to stigma, as well as the imperative need for the development of friendships and fellowship between sexually exploited women and church members. This study also provided the organization with the opportunity to evaluate the long-term spiritual impact it has had on its clients since its inception. Three main areas were identified in this study that need further consideration. Firstly, more research needs to be done regarding the social, cultural, and religious influences of family members as a primary barrier to attending church. Secondly, deeper exploration and closer analysis need to be done into how faith-based NGOs operate their organizational practices to reach spiritual outcome goals during the (re)integration process. Lastly, church congregations need additional educational support services regarding the existing barriers to church attendance for sexually exploited women along with clearly defined strategies for how to overcome these obstacles.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported by The Oxford Centre for Mission Studies. The authors thank Dr. Bill Prevette for his critical review of this study. Our deep appreciation and admiration extend to the social workers and individuals who daily give to the lives of many women in Cambodia who were sexually exploited. The authors thank Samuel Dara Pitou, Sam Ol Neang, Shamreum Seng, Solida Seng, Srey Mey Seng, and Srey Oun Seng for their contributions to this work. *Dignity* thanks Janice Shaw Crouse from The Crouse Institute, USA, for her time and expertise to review this article.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPIES

Tricia J. Hester has been living in Cambodia for over 8 years, working to advocate for access to sexual and reproductive healthcare for Cambodian women. She is a health education technical advisor and educator for organizations in Cambodia. Her current project involves advocating for cervical cancer awareness, screening, and interventions at the local and national level. Her educational background in global health, education, and nursing has given her a broad base to approach many health issues specific to developing countries. You may learn more about her experiences and what she does on her LinkedIn page, Tricia Hester.

Sopheak Kong is from Chbar Mon, Cambodia. She has been working with Precious Women organization, Phnom Penh, since 2012 and is the Operations Director. Her educational background is in social work. She has a passion to help women who are exploited, by promoting their value, dignity, and rights. You may learn more about Sopheak at www.preciouswomen.org

Glenn M. Miles resides in the UK and has dedicated his life for the past 25 years to working on issues around children at risk and vulnerable young adults. He is currently an independent evaluation research and training consultant and partner for Freedom Resource International. He is a pioneer in the facilitation of a series of research projects, bringing global awareness to the vulnerabilities of sexually exploited children that includes boys, young men, and transgender people living in Cambodia, India, Philippines, and Thailand. His educational background includes a Ph.D. from the University of Wales, focusing on child's rights and sexual exploitation. You may learn about Glenn and his published research at <http://gmmiles.co.uk/about-us/>

RECOMMENDED CITATION

Hester, Tricia J., Kong, Sopheak, & Miles, Glenn M. (2020). Barriers to sexually exploited Cambodia women integrating into churches: Perspectives of sexually exploited women and the Christian community. *Dignity: A Journal of Sexual Exploitation and Violence*. Vol. 5, Issue 1, Article 4. <https://10.23860/dignity.2020.05.01.04> Available at <http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol5/iss1/4>.

REFERENCES

- Badaracco, J. (2019). *Posttraumatic growth in Cambodia: A mixed methods study*. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/openview/737cec2d7b08fcc5026d20880c9350e2/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>
- Baker, L. M., Dalla, R. L., & Williamson, C. (2010). Exiting prostitution: An integrated model. *Violence Against Women*, 16(5), 579-600. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801210367643>
- Brickell, K. (2011). "We don't forget the old rice pot when we get the new one": Discourses on ideals and practices of women in contemporary Cambodia. *Signs*, 36(2), 437-462. <https://doi.org/10.1086/655915>
- Derks, A. (1998). *Reintegration of victims of trafficking in Cambodia*. [DX Reader version]. Retrieved from <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.568.916&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- Frame, J. (2017). Exploring the approaches to care of faith-based and secular NGOs in Cambodia that serve victims of trafficking, exploitation, and those involved in sex work. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 37(5/6), 311-336. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-04-2016-0046>
- Friedman, J. (1992). *Empowerment: The politics of alternative development*. New York: Blackwell Publishers.
- Hemmings, J., & Rolfe, B. (2008). *Abortion in Cambodia*. London: OPTIONS Consultancy Services.

- Hukin, E. (2012). *Contraception in Cambodia: Explaining unmet need*. (Doctoral dissertation. London School of Economics and Political Science). Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/297063333_Contraception_in_Cambodia_explaining_unmet_need.
- Jackson, J. (2019). What is a "pastor"? Retrieved February 1, 2020 from Christian Courier website <https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/1178-what-is-a-pastor>
- Jeannotte, S. (2008). *Promoting social integration - A brief examination of concepts and issues*. Paper presented at the Expert Group Meeting on the priority theme of the 47th session of the Commission for Social Development "Promoting Social Integration", Helsinki, Finland. Retrieved from https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/social/meetings/egm6_social_integration/documents/Jeannotte_Concepts.pdf
- Kelly, P. F. (2011). Migration, agrarian transition, and rural change in Southeast Asia: Introduction. *Critical Asian Studies*, 43(4), 479-506. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2011.623516>
- Kent, A. (2011). Global change and moral uncertainty: Why do Cambodian women seek refuge in Buddhism? *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 23(3), 405-419. <https://doi.org/doi:10.1080/14781158.2011.601858>
- Knibbs, S., & Price, N. (2009). Peer education in sexual and reproductive health programming: A Cambodian case study. *Development in Practice*, 19(1), 39-50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614520802576369>
- Lopez, J. R., Mukaire, P. E., & Mataya, R. H. (2015). Characteristics of youth sexual and reproductive health and risky behaviors in two rural provinces of Cambodia. *Reproductive Health*, 12(1), 83. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-015-0052-5>
- Maxwell, T., Nget, S., Peou, L., & You, S. (2015). Becoming and being academic women in Cambodia: Cultural and other understandings. *Cogent Education*, 2(1), 1042215. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2015.1042215>
- Miles, G., Lim, V., & Chanththa, N. (2020). *Children of the wood children of the stone: The journey of faith for survivors of trafficking*. Retrieved November 27, 2019 from Chab Dai Coalition website <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55a81f9be4b01a30079bb9d3/t/5ddc0fc6567fe44ced942dac/1574703097323/Spirituality+Thematic+Paper.pdf>
- Miles, G., Phuong, S., & Sworn, H. (n.d.). Chab dai safe community project church leaders survey. Retrieved November 27, 2019 from Chab Dai Coalition website <http://gmmiles.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Chab-Dai-Safe-Community-Project-Church-Leaders-Research-Compressed.pdf>
- Morrison, T., Miles, S., Vannthear, L., Chanththa, N., Phaly, S., & Davin, B. (2015). *Survivor experiences and perceptions of stigma: Reintegrating into the community*. The Butterfly Longitudinal Research Project. Precious Women Research. Chab Dai Coalition. Retrieved from November 27, 2019 from Chab Dai Coalition website <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55a81f9be4b01a30079bb9d3/t/56a6adde3b0be349ebc235d0/1453764069780/Butterfly+2015+Stigma+Thematic.pdf>
- Myers, B. L. (1999). *Walking with the poor*: New York: Orbis Books.
- Najafi-Sharjabad, F., Yahya, S. Z. S., Rahman, H. A., Juni, M. H., & Manaf, R. A. (2013). Barriers of modern contraceptive practices among Asian women: A mini literature review. *Global Journal of Health Science*, 5(5), 181. <https://doi.org/10.5539/gjhs.v5n5p181>
- Nou, V. (2016). *Promoting Christian ministry to men in order to increase the impact of the church on social issues in Cambodia*. Retrieved February 27, 2019 from Glenn M. Miles PhD website <http://gmmiles.co.uk/>

- Page, K., Stein, E., Sansothy, N., Evans, J., Couture, M.-C., Sichan, K., . . . Kaldor, J. (2013). Sex work and HIV in Cambodia: trajectories of risk and disease in two cohorts of high-risk young women in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. *BMJ open*, 3(9), e003095. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2013-003095>
- Ray, N. (2009). *Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos & the Greater Mekong*. Franklin, TN: Lonely Planet.
- Sanders, T. (2007). Becoming an ex–sex worker making transitions out of a deviant career. *Feminist Criminology*, 2(1), 74-95. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1557085106294845>
- Springer, K. W., Stellman, J. M., & Jordan-Young, R. M. (2012). Beyond a catalogue of differences: A theoretical frame and good practice guidelines for researching sex/gender in human health. *Social Science & Medicine*, 74(11), 1817-1824. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.05.033>
- Surtees, R. (2013). After trafficking: Experiences and challenges in the (re) integration of trafficked persons in the greater Mekong sub-region. Retrieved November 14, 2019 from website <http://un-act.org/publication/trafficking-experiences-challenges-reintegration-trafficked-persons-greater-mekong-sub-region/>
- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN). (2005). Division for Social Policy and Development. *Working Definition of Social Integration*. Retrieved September 29, 2019 from United Nations website http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/sib/peacedialogue/soc_integration.htm
- United Nations News (UN). (2009). *More women in Cambodia turning to sex trade amid financial crisis -UN report*. Retrieved September 30, 2019 from United Nations website <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=31541#.WF4YHFxWV5Q>
- United Nations Population Fund, & National Institute of Statistics (UNFPA). (2015). *Sexual and reproductive health of adolescents and youth in Cambodia analysis of 2000-2014 Cambodia demographic and health survey data*. Retrieved May 27, 2019 from https://cambodia.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNFPA_Final_Report_10_October_2016_5pm%28NRT_reformatted%29.pdf
- Wyatt, Z., & Nowlin, M. (2019). Spirituality and resilience in Cambodia: A trauma-informed perspective. *Global Journal of Human-Social Science Research* 19(1-C). Retrieved from <https://socialscienceresearch.org/index.php/GJHSS/article/view/2805>
- Yeoh, B. (2016). Migration and gender politics in Southeast Asia. *Migration, Mobility, & Displacement*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.18357/mmd21201615022>