

The Road of Lost Innocence

Somaly Mam

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Trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and children has become one of the most brutal forms of modern slavery and violates these individuals' basic human rights. There is very little consensus as to the exact number of women and children that are sexually exploited worldwide. Within Cambodia, it is estimated to be somewhere between 40,000 and 100,000 individuals. This means that 1 in every 150 people in Cambodia is a sex slave or prostitute (Perrin et al. 2001:13). The experiences discussed by Somaly Mam in this memoir provide intense and raw insight into the atrocious realities of sexual slavery, allowing the reader to develop a deeper understanding of the problem that goes beyond the statistical facts. Somaly Mam's memoir is a heart-rendering story filled with deceit, violence, and hope as she came of age in Cambodia. Yet by sharing her story she has become a powerful and inspiring figure in the fight for women's rights. She brings hope to those women in similarly horrendous situations, for she is no longer a silent victim but a survivor who has devoted her life to bringing awareness and help to other women forced into sex slavery.

Somaly Mam was born into the rural jungles of Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge regime, one of the most tumultuous times in the country's history. From a very young age Mam discusses her helplessness to control the direction her life should go. Her parents abandoned her during civil unrest causing her to become an orphan surviving off what the jungle could provide. At the age of ten she was sold to a violent man who called himself her Grandfather. At the hands of this man she was subjected to beatings and sexual abuse. Shortly after, he sold her to a brothel in Phnom Penh. She

was forced to prostitute under the threat of death. She was also led to believe, much like the fellow women imprisoned with her, that she owed the owners a sum of money and needed to work to pay off her debt.

Mam goes into graphic detail about the conditions she and other sex slaves endured; from unsanitary environments and disease to chambers used only to torture and break the women into submission. Beyond the descriptions of physical abuse, she subtly mentions her emotions--how she felt then and how she is still scarred today. The sense of hopelessness and lack of self-confidence and self-worth are all issues she battles daily. Most shocking is her description of how girls as young as four years of age are becoming the newest victims in the lucrative sex industry. They are sold as virgins, then stitched up, and resold for their virginal value until they are used up and, many times, die young from HIV/AIDS infections.

Mam's life changed when a new foreign clientele entered Cambodia. Several foreign clients, many working for NGO's, helped educate Mam in Western culture and also made it possible for her to advance her status within the brothel and community. Although these men were kinder to her than local men, they all still used her for her occupation, one about which she had no choice. Eventually she married a French man and moved to France with him. During this time, she grew and discovered her inner voice. She was no longer going to just accept the way things were. This same voice screamed to her when she returned to Cambodia and saw the appalling treatment and living conditions of women and children imprisoned in brothels. She knew what her calling was, to not only educate these women, but more importantly to save them from the terrible situations in which they were trapped. She felt that the best solution to ending sex slavery was the raising of awareness and the provision of education,

rehabilitation and reintegration for the victims. Today she is a worldwide figure who has devoted her life to the emancipation of women and children who are trapped in sex slavery.

Somaly Mam's book should be on every woman's bookshelf for the sheer fact of what she has accomplished both for herself and for those who could not help themselves. She is an inspirational and strong woman who believes that the wrongs in the world should not just be accepted, but fought against. Mam's book is unabashedly candid and presents her story and the severity of sex trafficking in a dry and disengaged tone. She does not sugar coat the realities of sex slavery but starkly reveals them so that others will grasp a better understanding of the brutal realities of the lives to which these women and children are bound. One can only imagine the emotional difficulties she faced in writing such a book and the courage it took to do so.

This book is one you will not want to put down and it will forever change your perception about the human capacity to not only survive but then find the inner strength to help others. The greatest contribution of this book is that it discusses the world epidemic of sex trafficking and makes it personal through the first-hand narration by Mam of her own experiences. The reader is enveloped by her story, feeling her pain and triumphing along with her in her accomplishments. The only slight drawback to this book is that Mam provides no detail on the history that caused Cambodia to be in such a state of social and economic unrest, which is obviously important to a full understanding of how the sex trafficking industry in Cambodia developed. She also gives no insight into the demand side of trafficking, other than to discuss the violence and deceit she suffered at the hands of nearly every man in her life.

This is a great book for women, especially those in need of empowerment in their own lives, as well as for students and government officials who are interested in equal human rights for all. Somaly Mam went on to develop AFESIP, Acting For Women In Distressing Situations, in Cambodia and surrounding countries and The Somaly Mam Foundation in the United States. Both of these foundations are dedicated to providing worldwide awareness about sex trafficking, education for men patronizing the brothels and rehabilitation to victims rescued from brothels. The foundations work to give hope and lives back to women who were forced into prostitution. The most important lesson to take from both her book and her foundations is that each of us has a voice and the ability to change whatever horrible and seemingly hopeless situation in which we may find ourselves.

References:

Perrin, B., Majumdar, S., Gafuik, N., and Andrews, S. (2001). *The Future of Southeast Asia: Challenges of Child Sex Slavery and Trafficking in Cambodia*. Phnom Penh: The Future Group, Motorola Printers.

Biography: *Mindi Seeman is a M.A. Candidate at East Carolina University in the Department of Anthropology. Her concentration is in both historic bioarchaeology and forensic anthropology. Her thesis is the analysis of the skeletal remains excavated from the 19th century family burial vault at Foscue Plantation in Pollocksville, N.C, in order to create osteobiographies for eastern North Carolina antebellum plantation owners.*

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