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# "Disgusted with Myself": Examining the Risk Factors and Vulnerabilities of Hostesses at Karaoke TV Venues in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

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# "Disgusted with Myself": Examining the Risk Factors and Vulnerabilities of Hostesses at Karaoke TV Venues in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

## Abstract

This exploratory study is one of a series of research projects interviewing survivors of sexual exploitation in southeast Asia. It assesses the risk factors and vulnerabilities of young women in Karaoke TV (KTV) venues in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. This research study assesses the risk factors and vulnerabilities of young women in these venues. A questionnaire-based survey was administered to 50 participants to gain a holistic view of the lives of young women working in Karaoke TV (KTV) venues. The survey consisted of a series of questions pertaining to demographics, family background, prejudice and discrimination, sexual risk factors, substance abuse, sexual violence and abuse, income generation, spirituality, and future plans. The key findings of this survey indicate that most of the participants were experiencing physical, sexual and substance abuse, primarily from the KTV venues clients. Furthermore, participants revealed the shame, stigma and discrimination they experience from working at a KTV venue and demonstrate the internal struggle between providing for their families and societal traditions. By truly understanding these effects and the factors leading up to entrance into the sex industry, the needs of individuals vulnerable to sexual exploitation can best be met. Direct service providers can use the findings of the study to provide services that are tailored to meeting the specific needs and to prevent further sexual exploitation of the target vulnerable population.

## Keywords

Cambodia, Phnom Penh, women, discrimination, sexual exploitation, work, alcohol, KTV, violence, sexual abuse

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## **‘Disgusted with Myself’ : Examining the Risk Factors and Vulnerabilities of Hostesses at KTV Venues in Phnom Penh, Cambodia**

In Asia, sexual exploitation through prostitution is on the rise. Countries such as Taiwan, Macau, Philippines, Korea, Thailand, Indonesia, Japan, and Cambodia are well known for commercial sexual exploitation. Japan, for example, represents one of the biggest markets, where there is an estimated 200,000 “women entertainers” from Thailand, the Philippines, and other eastern countries. These women work in clubs, karaoke bars, pornography shops, massage and sauna establishments, snack bars, sex telephone booths, catalogue, videos, and video game rooms. Such high prevalence of sexual exploitation has resulted in its own complications with Asian culture (Dios, 1999).

Asian cultural attitudes and values are a major factor contributing to the vulnerability for sexual exploitation and making Asia an infamous hotspot for commercial sex. While Asians highly value loving one’s family and supporting them, there is also a socially discriminatory attitude toward women and children. Women and children are often seen as less respectable than men and, in some cases, are viewed as property to be bargained and sold. When this attitude is concurrent with situations of poverty, vulnerability is increased. Therefore, recruiters who promise jobs that would help support their family are easily able to deceive young women and their parents. For some women, leaving prostitution engenders mixed feelings for them. While they desire and are willing to leave prostitution, they may also feel a sense of failure in fulfilling their filial duty (Chung, 2006).

Cambodia is infamously known as an origin, transit, and destination for sexual exploitation with a long history of prostitution. After the economic liberation in the 1980s and during the transitional peacemaking period of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), prostitution, then primarily limited to brothels, appears to have increased exponentially (Findlay, 1995, p150). However, in 1997, the Cambodian government decided to close all brothels, a measure considered inefficient by many civil society organizations (Seng, Pol & Srey, 1999, p.). Kim Green, HIV/AIDs Coordinator at CARE, stated that,

“By cracking down, you are losing an opportunity to do something about getting them out of their situation. It also sends a message to brothel owners and pimps who are peddling in the child sex trade that they need to keep children hidden, which further decreases the likelihood of being able to reach them” (2003).

Since the closure of brothels, it appears prostitution has branched out and taken on different facades. Prostitution can now be found at beer gardens, night clubs, snooker clubs, massage salons, karaoke parlours, barber shops, hidden brothels and on the street (Monto, 2014). After observing this transition of prostitution, the local and international audience called for some of these places to be shut down. In response to

this pressure, the Prime Minister of Cambodia ordered an abrupt closure of all karaoke bars in order “to protect people from criminal activities associated with the venues” (Green, 2003). However, karaoke bars were soon allowed to resume operation and based on the statistics compiled by the Ministry of Tourism, there were 400 karaoke venues operating again by the year 2010 (Sun, 2011).

The origin of karaoke is disputable, but it is thought to have originated from Japan in the 1970s. Since then, it has spread to the rest of Asia and other parts of the world. The word karaoke is a combination of two words: kara and okesutora. Kara means empty and okesutora means orchestra (Long, 2009). In Cambodia, a karaoke venue, commonly referred to as Karaoke TV (KTV), is unique. Once inside, one could see young women all “dolled up” sitting on long sofas and waiting to greet customers. Upon arrival, the customers are ushered to a private, air-conditioned room with exotic lightings that exude fun, relaxation, and pleasure. A short while later, the supervisors parade and showcase the young women who are then chosen by the customers. Once picked, the young women stay with the customers to sing, drink, and dance. However, some customers expect more than that: holding, touching, kissing, and fondling. These behaviors very much cross the cultural boundaries of space between a man and a woman, and if such behavior takes place, the woman are looked down upon by their family/friends/community and are considered not valuable. Amir and Almog explore the concept of this specific harm referred to as a social infamy tax (2018). In the current context, the social infamy tax placed upon young women working as KTV hostesses can potentially be understood by their ability to convert their individual identity into a one-dimensional identity as a “KTV girl.”

Upon understanding the harms associated with working as a KTV hostess, it is imperative to look at the trajectory that leads young women to this profession. Lorrissa Sandy, in her article entitled *Representations of Choice and Coercion in the Sex Work in Cambodia*, asserts that certain structures in Cambodian society have narrowed women’s options into making this choice. She states, “[...] in the transition to a market economy, young women’s choices are constrained by hierarchical structures as gender class and socio-cultural obligations and poor employment opportunities” (Sandy, 2007). In addition, Hoefinger explores the idea of ‘professional girlfriends’ and proposes that young women utilize the bar girl subculture to improve their social status (2011). These paradoxical ideologies bring into question as to whether it is indeed truly voluntary entry and the need to further understand the lives and vulnerabilities of women working as KTV hostesses.

In 1999, ADHOC conducted a research on the causes of prostitution in Cambodia. Out of this work, the researchers were able to identify a vulnerable group to prostitution. This group consists of females, between sixteen and twenty years old, poor, single, widow, living in Kompong Cham, Prey Veng, Kandal, Phnom Penh, or Svay Rieng. These young women are uneducated, having uneducated parents or nobody to depend on (father and/or mother died) (ADHOC, 1999). Applying what

Sandy has observed to this group, structural oppression causes the women to come into this job ‘voluntarily’. If these situations were absent, the women would not have come here in the first place, which will then place them in a vulnerable position to being exploited. Only a look into the lives of these women will provide an explanation and *understanding* as to how they arrived in so called ‘voluntary’ entry of this ‘lucrative’ industry.

The current research aimed to attain a both a qualitative and quantitative insight into the lives of these young women. This paper will focus on the sexual and physical abuse of KTV workers, as well as, their lives in a broader capacity including public attitudes, family situation, and spirituality in order to understand the impact of social harm related to working in a KTV. The researchers hypothesize that there will be a significant number of KTV workers experiencing physical and sexual harm as well as social harm.

## **Methods**

### **Materials**

A questionnaire-based survey was administered between June and July of 2013 to young women working as hostesses or service young women at KTV venues in Phnom Penh, Cambodia (Appendix A). The survey was adapted from a similar survey used in a study of male masseurs in Siem Reap (Davis & Miles, 2012). The survey was tailored to adequately assess the risk factors and vulnerabilities specific to hostesses. The survey consisted of a series of open and closed questions pertaining to demographics, family background, sexual risk factors, substance abuse, sexual violence and abuse, income generation, prejudice, spirituality, dignity, and future plans. Within these 11 topics a range of 5-24 questions were asked dependant on the topic.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Because of the sensitivity of the questions asked, careful consideration was taken to address ethical concerns during the interviews. The interviews were presented by two Khmer women who have been trained on the ethical guidelines for research as outlined by the UNIAP on Human Trafficking (Steinfatt & Baker, 2011). Each participant gave informed consent to participate, was not forced to answer any question that she did not want to answer and could stop the interview at any point. In addition, researchers maintained complete anonymity regarding the participant’s responses and identity. Interviews were conducted in a quiet and private location at each KTV venue. Special care was taken to ensure that others did not overhear the interviews. If others were near, they were either asked to move away or the interview was delayed until the participant’s answers would not be overheard. Participants were made aware that their responses were to be kept confidential, no identifiers would be connected to their responses, and no videos, photographs, or recordings of the interviews were taken.

## **Pilot Study**

During the period of formulating the research question, a small pilot study was conducted with five participants, four working in beer gardens and one working in a KTV venue. The pilot study revealed the diversity and complexity of understanding the various venues for sexual exploitation present within Phnom Penh. The researchers found that working as a hostess at either a beer garden or KTV venue was not synonymous with prostitution. In fact, a majority of the young women in the pilot study said that they were not meeting customers for sex. However, participants discussed many push and pull factors that contributed to their vulnerability of being sexually exploited. Unlike other professions, working in the culture and environment surrounding both beer gardens and KTV venues significantly increases the susceptibility to sexual exploitation.

## **Participants**

A total of 50 participants (n=50), who were working as hostesses in a KTV venue, were interviewed for the study. The KTV venues chosen for the study were in one of three different areas in Phnom Penh: Mai Da Street, Toul Kork, and Russey Keo. Even though they are well known they are not listed here as it is felt to be inappropriate to give directions to sex buyers who may be reading this. Researchers visited each KTV venue, discussed the purpose of the research with, and gained permission from the owners of the KTV venues. At some venues owners refused permission for their workers to participate, possible participants were therefore excluded from the study which is understood may have impacted the results if they had been included. The young women who were working as hostesses and were available were then informed of the research and asked if they would like to participate. Some participants refused to answer certain questions and one potential participant was unable to complete the interview due to emotional distress and was referred to a non-governmental organization (NGO) for support.

## **Procedure**

Prior to interviewing the participants, the owners/supervisors of each KTV venue were contacted to receive permission to conduct interviews with employees prior to working hours. Researchers conducted interviews at a location and during a time that does not interfere with the participants' work hours. All interviews were conducted in a quiet and private location at each respective KTV venue. Two Khmer research assistants conducted the interviews in Khmer and therefore translators were not needed. One expatriate researcher was also present during the interviews to assist with various questions and/or needs if they were to arise. Prior to each interview, participants were once again informed of the purpose of the research, estimated length of the interview, sensitivity of the questions, assurance of confidentiality, and right to refuse to answer questions or to stop the interview at any time. After the completion of the questionnaire participants were thanked for their participation and offered phone cards in the amount of five USD as a token of appreciation for giving their time to participate.

## Results

Results from the surveys were analysed using SPSS 20.0 (SPSS Inc). Descriptive analyses were used to examine the frequencies of various responses. Thematic analysis was used to explore the responses to open-ended questions included in the survey, with key features of this data coded and sorted in a systematic manner to reflect patterns in the data and inform themes and subthemes relevant to the questions used in the survey (Boyatzis, 1998).

### Demographics

Several key pieces of demographic information were recorded in this study such as the age of the participants; time spent living in Phnom Penh; time spent working at a KTV venue; the age they began working at a KTV venue; and their level of education (see table 1). The key findings to report here are that 66% of the participants were between the ages of 15-24 years old, UNICEF's definition of 'youth' (UNICEF, 2015). Furthermore, the nearly three quarters of the participants (74%) would have been regarded as 'youth' at the time they began working at the KTV venue.

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#### Descriptive Statistics:

	Median	Range
<b>Current age (Years)</b>	22	16-32
<b>Time spent in Phnom Penh (Years)</b>	2	.08-25
<b>Time in KTV venue (Years)</b>	.25	.04-4
<b>Age the P's began work at KTV venue (years)</b>	21	15-32
<b>Education Level (Grade)</b>	7 <sup>th</sup> -10 <sup>th</sup>	none-11 <sup>th</sup> +

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Other key demographic factors not included in this table include where the participants are originally from. The highest frequency (20%) of migration was from the Kandal province that surrounds the Phnom Penh municipality. The furthest that a



participant travelled from to live in Phnom Penh was Battambang (2%) with the closest being Kandal. This is not including the 10% of participants that already lived in Phnom Penh. As expected, a large percentage, 72%, of participants stated that their reason for moving to Phnom Penh was for work and to earn money. Other reasons for living in Phnom Penh included: already living in Phnom Penh (10%), visiting a relative (6%), relocating with their families (4%), study (4%), and fleeing from strained family relationships (4%).

Most of the participants (86%) lived at the KTV venue while the remaining 12% stayed with friends. Those who are living at the KTV venue stated that their rent and food is provided at no cost and in addition to the salary they are given. Marital status among the participants was as follows: 66% single, 30% divorced, and 4% married. Of the total participant's, 26% had children. However, all the children were staying with relatives in the participant's village and were not currently in their care. Although the researchers did not include questions related to abortion in the survey, three of the participants stated that they had received an abortion when asked if they had children.

### **Family Background and Income**

When asked about saving money, 52% stated that they keep their savings with themselves while 38% stated that they do not save any of their earnings. When asked what they did with their earnings, the number one and most common response was sending money home to their families. This is consistent with another key finding that a majority (64%) of the participants stated that their family owes debts. Additional top expenses listed were clothing and hair and makeup. Overheads such as lodging, and food were not listed as common expenses because almost all the participants live at the KTV venue and, therefore, do not have to pay for lodging or food. Most participants stated that a friend introduced (56%) them to the KTV venue. The remaining participants were introduced to the KTV venue through a family member (18%), by a recruiter (4%), by themselves (10%), or other means (10%).

### **Income Generation**

A majority (74%) of participants indicated that they were working elsewhere prior to working at a KTV venue. Of that 74%, two thirds (66%) reported working in a factory. Participants stated poor working conditions, low salary, and health problems as reasons for leaving the factories to seek employment elsewhere. In addition to working at a factory, 17% were selling products, 11% were working at a restaurant, and 6% were working at other jobs. Various reasons were cited for choosing to work at the KTV venue instead of another job (see diagram 1).

However, when asked if they would take another job that pays 80 USD a month over half (54%) said 'definitely', another quarter (26%) said 'maybe', and the remaining fifth (20%) were uninterested. Several participants said that they would consider taking another job if the job offered good working conditions. The primary

reason for saying that they would not take another job is that 80 USD a month would not be enough to provide for their needs and to continue sending money home to their families.

The number of hours worked ranged from 49 to 99.5 hours per week, an average of 70.7 hours per week. Income for past three months ranged from 50 to 1450 USD and the median income was 420 USD. The range of weekly income for participants was from 17.50 to 95 USD while the average was 42.18 USD. A participant's income was divided into three different components: salary given from the owner of the KTV venue, tips from the customers, and financial incentives for drinking beer, ordering food, or booking rooms for customers. Weekly salary ranged from 12.50 to 35 USD and averaged 24.45 USD. Tips earned in the previous week ranged from zero to 50 USD and averaged 16.85 USD. Finally, five participants indicated receiving incentives ranging from 1.50 to 30 USD and averaging 10.90 USD within the previous week. Overall this suggests that participants on average were receiving approximately half of their income from their salary, a third of it from their tips and a fifth because of other financial incentives e.g. selling beer quotas.

### **Prejudice, Stigma, and Discrimination**

Almost all (92%) of the participants stated that the people in their village were not aware of their job as a hostess at the KTV venue. Many noted shame, guilt, and fear of rejection as reasons for not informing people in their village. Participants typically told others they were working in a factory, restaurant, or clothing shop instead of a KTV venue. As a result of this secrecy, most participants felt that working in a KTV venue had little to no effect on their personal relationships (86%).

Participants fear, guilt and shame in telling their family about working in a KTV venue is linked to the perception of KTV workers. Many participants reported feelings that other members of society looked down on young women who work at KTV venues. They stated that others believed that working in a KTV venue was considered a "bad" job. A couple participants felt that other women looked down on them because their husbands would come to KTV venues to waste money and look for a physical relationship. Many participants stated that they felt degraded when they are paraded in front of customers and waited to be chosen as the customers made comments and remarks about each young woman "I felt so cheap, like a dog. I was disgusted at myself when I was being picked by a customer" (See Appendix B for case study). In addition, many participants indicated experiencing a social infamy tax by revealing that customers believe they can "do what they want to them" because they are "KTV girls," a clear marker of their status in the community. Amir and Almog describe social infamy tax as a socially constructed consequence in which one's personal identity is exchanged for a collective, one-dimensional identity such as that of a "KTV girl" (2018).

Participants were also asked to describe their job and what was required of them. Participants listed singing, drinking, greeting customers, being chosen by customers, sitting with the customers, and serving beer as part of their job requirements (see diagram 2). Whereas when asked what customers expected from the young women who work as hostesses at KTV venues there was a clear contrast. Participants listed that, when coming to a KTV venue, customers expect the following from the hostesses: singing and dancing; drinking; having fun; kissing, touching, and hugging; and going out for sex (see diagram 2)

Most of the participants (80%) stated that they felt pressured to do what the customers expected. In addition, 86% of participants noted that a customer had asked them to do something that made them feel uncomfortable. Of those indicating that they had felt uncomfortable, almost all the participants mentioned that customers had asked to have sex with them.

Participants were then asked if they had faced discrimination from others in the community and 76% reported never, 10% sometimes, 8% occasionally, and 6% very often. Of those who faced discrimination, many stated that others in the community give accusing looks and make derogatory comments towards them. Some also noted that others looked down on their families because of their job at the KTV venue. Experiencing discrimination from customers was more frequent for the participants as over half (58%) indicated such: 20% sometimes, 22% occasionally, and 16% very often.

### **Sexual History**

Out of the 50 participants, 34 stated that they had had sexual intercourse and the remaining 16 participants indicated that they had not had sexual intercourse. Participants' age of first sexual experience ranged from 15 to 27 years old and the average (mean) age was 19.6 years old. Almost all (97%) of the participants who stated they had had sexual intercourse, were regarded as youth at the time of their first sexual experience (UNICEF, 2015). When asked with whom they had their first sexual intercourse, 16 stated with their husband, 14 with a boyfriend, three with a client, and one with a neighbour. Three participants stated the first time they had sexual intercourse it was coerced while the remaining 31 participants indicated that it was consensual. Of the three participants indicating the first sexual experience was coerced, two were with their boyfriend and one was with her husband after having an arranged marriage. One out of five participants reported meeting customers for sex. Of the remaining 40 participants that didn't, 25% stated that they would consider meeting customers for sex if they were comfortable with the customer and they were not afraid to go with them.

Almost all (90%) of the participants who met customers for sex stated that the customers use condoms during sex and 80% stated that they encourage condom use and refuse to have sex if the customer refuses to use a condom.

The number of customers met for sex in the past week ranged from zero to seven. Five participants stated they met zero customers, four had met one customer, and one participant had met seven customers for sex. One participant indicated that twice, she and another young woman had sex with a customer at the same time.

## **Health**

Participants were asked a series of questions related to their health. When asked about their overall health, 80% stated that they had been sick within the past three months. Many cited headaches, stomach aches, colds, and high temperatures as their ailments. Typhoid, post-abortion complications, and difficulty breathing were also briefly mentioned by some participants. Six participants indicated that they had experienced having rashes, ulcerations, or lumps in the genital area, anus, or mouth within the past six months. Furthermore, 22 participants indicated they had experienced discharge or pain in the genital area in the past six months.

A little more than half, 56%, of participants had received both sexual health education and sexual health services from NGOs such as Reproductive Health Association of Cambodia (RHAC), Friends, and Khemara. Of the total participants, 82% correctly identified sexual intercourse as a means of HIV/AIDS transmission and 42% stated that they knew someone with HIV/AIDS.

## **Abuse and violence**

### **Sexual abuse.**

Whilst a third (34%) of the participants were aware of other young women working in KTV venues who were being forced to have sex against their wishes, 10% stated that they themselves had been forced to have sex: 6% occasionally and 4% very often. Others shared experiences of attempted, but not completed, coercive sexual acts (for statistics see diagram 3).

In this case the definitions for different categories of sexual abuse were taken from the centre for disease control (CDC) (Basile, 2014). Non-contact sexual abuse is defined as sexual attention that does not involve any physical contact e.g. exposure to pornography. Abusive sexual contact is touching with intent the genitalia, anus, groin, breast, inner thigh, or buttocks without the consent of the individual. Finally, the criterion for an attempted and a completed sex act is unwanted vaginal, oral, or anal insertion with primary difference being whether the act is interrupted, thereby the completion of the assault is prevented, or not where it is considered completed.

Due to the sensitivity of these questions, the researchers did not ask them explicitly whether they had experienced one of these forms of sexual abuse. Instead responses were categorised based off the stories of participants and their own experiences. This means some participants may have experienced different forms of

sexual abuse but were not given the opportunity to explicitly mention them since it wasn't explicitly asked of them.

### **Physical abuse.**

None of the participants indicated that they had faced violence from the police or from others in the community. When asked, several participants stated that they rarely, if ever, go outside of the KTV venue and, therefore, have little contact with police and/or the community. This also accounts for the 94% of participants that stated they had never experienced discrimination from the police. However, 10% indicated that they occasionally faced violence from their customers. One participant shared of an instance when she refused to meet a customer for sex and he came to the KTV venue where he proceeded to beat her.

### **Substance abuse.**

Only one participant stated that she used illegal drugs but had not used any within the past two years. All 50 participants indicated that they drink alcohol. The number of cans of beer consumed within the past week ranged from eight to 132 cans (see diagram 4).

Some participants kept careful tallies of the number of beers consumed because the owner of the KTV venue offered financial incentives based on the amount of beer each young woman could consume and/or sell within a single month. One participant explained that she would receive an additional 20 USD for every 15 cases (or 360 cans) she could consume/sell within one month. In addition to financial incentives, customers also force some of the participants to drink beer with them which contributes to increased consumption of alcohol. Of the total participants, 60% stated that customers force them to drink; 28% sometimes, 12% occasionally, and 20% very often. Of the ten participants indicating that they meet customers for sex, four stated that they always use alcohol during sex with customers, two stated very often, and two stated sometimes.

### **Faith and Dignity**

When asked about their faith, the clear majority (98%) of participants stated that they have a faith. Of those stating they have a faith, 89% stated they follow Buddhism, 10% stated they follow Christianity, and 2% stated they follow Islam. In addition, 42 participants indicated that they pray and/or worship regularly.

Participants were asked to indicate how much value they had as a person from zero to 100%. Of the 50 participants, 20 stated that their value was between 61 and 80%, 11 stated between 41 and 60%, nine stated between 81 and 100%, one stated between 21 and 40%, and six stated between zero and 20%. When asked if there was anything they could do to increase their value: 16 mentioned to quit working at the

KTV venue, 13 stated to have good behaviour, four indicated to work hard, and three noted to receive an education.

All 50 participants indicated that they would not recommend their job as a hostess at a KTV venue to their sister. When asked to explain why, the most common response of participants was, “this is not a good job and I do not want others to look down on her like they look down on me.”

### **Future Planning**

Most participants (90%) expressed an interest in learning English if it were available. In addition, participants listed other skills they would be interested in learning if they had the opportunity. While many, 24, stated that they wanted to learn hairdressing, others listed a variety of different skills: five participants want to learn how about cosmetics, three listed wanting to open a small business, two mentioned becoming a doctor, and one participant each desired to study law, tailoring, English, dramatic art, and to work abroad.

### **Discussion**

Overall it can be inferred from the result that a significant proportion of the participants experience a combination of sexual, physical and substance abuse as hypothesised. Furthermore, it can be identified from the results that debt, strained family relationships and having dependants are the primary factors that contribute to the young women staying ‘voluntarily’ in employment that seeks to exploit them.

The extent of the abuse is clearly highlighted in the findings. All 50 participants indicated some form of sexual violence during their interview. The forms of sexual violence experienced by participants ranged from verbal sexual harassment to being forced to have sex with the customers. Feeling degraded, taken advantage of, and violence are clearly cited as common experience in KTV venues. Several participants shared instances where customers had forced them into the bathroom and forced them to have sex there. KTV venues clearly cultivate an environment of fear for many of the young women working as hostesses as they are often uncertain about what their customers will expect or demand and how they may respond if she refuses. If, by chance, the customer becomes angry or begins to force the young woman to do something, then she is at the mercy of the manager or security guard to help her in time.

This exploitation and abuse is not just sexual and violent. Alcohol abuse is also widespread throughout the KTV environment as all 50 participants indicated alcohol use. This is because of some of the KTV venues that placed financial incentives to drink at high quantities e.g. 360 per month and that 60% of the 50 participants reportedly were pressured to drink by customers substance abuse by means of excessive alcohol abuse is rampant in these venues. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), heavy drinking for women is defined as consuming more than one drink per day. Binge drinking for women is defined as consuming four or

more alcoholic drinks within two hours. One 12-ounce can of beer is equivalent to one drink. Based on these definitions, the participants participate in heavy and/or binge drinking on a consistent, and most likely daily basis. While, according to the data, most young women work in KTV venues for less than six months, the implications of the effects of alcohol, even for that short period of time, can be severe.

This raises the critical question, why do the KTV workers remain in this employment despite the multiple levels of abuse, long working hours and no days off? Several participants attempted to justify working as a hostess in the KTV venue by saying that it was acceptable for them because they had been married before, but it was not acceptable for young women who are single to work as hostesses. This is in spite of the fact that the label of a “KTV girl” carries a negative connotation within the KTV environment. Stigma and discrimination in general population but also from within the young women themselves is commonplace in this industry. This is even to the point that one participant stated that “I felt so disgusted with myself when they touch me” . Perhaps the most pervasive harm experienced by young women working as KTV hostesses is the aforementioned social infamy tax placed upon them. Despite decisions made later in life, the impact of the social infamy tax cannot be reversed and are harmful to future life outcomes. The long-term ramifications can lead to poorer life outcomes and reduced opportunities for success.

The perceived voluntary nature of this work is made clear when participants were asked about recommending the job to their sister. During the interviews, it was noted that all of participants would not recommend working at a KTV venue to their sister. The researchers noted that many participants were battling an internal struggle with knowing that working at the KTV venue was not acceptable but also trying to feel justified in their choosing to do so. This conflict highlights the complexity of the various factors contributing to their vulnerability and the need for collaboration and intricate intervention and prevention strategies that address a wide array of concerns. A surprising number of young women (two thirds) said they had previously worked in factories but that they had left due to the conditions and low salaries. It is of concern that two of the major industries available to women both legal (garment) and illegal (sex industry) are both exploitive and underpaid.

There are some factors that occurred during the data collecting process that might affect the key findings that have been illustrated in this report. For example, when obtaining permission from KTV venue owners to contact employees regarding participation in the study, some owners refused permission. Therefore, those who were excluded from the study may have altered the results. Additionally, conducting the interviews in respective KTV venues may have led participants to feel as though they could not speak as openly about certain questions if they feared their responses would be overheard by employers or co-workers. Interviewers also had no previous relationship with participants and, although many participants revealed a significant amount of sensitive information, some participants may have been reluctant to

divulge personal and intimate information. Despite these limitations there are some recommendations that can be suggested to aid the women who work in KTV venues to prevent exploitation and improve their quality of life generally.

### **Recommendations**

The current research sets the stage for further, more in-depth research. A key foundation of future research may be to gain a more thorough understanding, as well as explore the impact, of the social infamy tax of being considered a “KTV girl.” While it may be assumed that this social infamy tax can prevent access to future social and professional opportunities, a longitudinal research study that follows young women leaving KTVs to obtain alternative employment opportunities will help to illuminate the harm and impact they are exposed to. In addition, the current research method can be used as a pilot for future research to study other sexually exploited groups of girls and women in Cambodia.

In addition to expanding the body of knowledge by engaging in future research, the current research recommends that local NGOs consider utilizing the current study to address the needs of young women in KTVs. Participants in the study were asked what measures could be taken to prevent others from coming to work at a KTV venue. They listed three different actions that needed to be taken: offer alternative jobs, provide education, and explain the realities of working as a hostess at a KTV venue. Now whilst many NGO’s attempt to provide these opportunities for children who have been exploited, these services have not been seen in as great a number for older women and especially youth. Providing services not just for children, but women also will be critical in addressing the issues found in KTV venues, especially considering that all but one of the participants said they were over 18 years of age. It is possible that women under 18 years had been briefed not to say they were under 18 years as the managers may be aware that they are not supposed to be working. Research by IJM, “Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Cambodia” found 10.88% of young women in KTV were 16 - 18 years (Van der Keur & Touch, 2013). The Government needs to enforce the law that girls under 18 years old should not be allowed to work in KTV bars and men should be arrested when violence is used or they sexually abuse/exploit children.

The focus and attention of NGO’s in Cambodia seems to be primarily on children. This aligns in with the global view of sexual exploitation which is seen primarily as an issue facing children, not youth and adults. One NGO who helps many young women in the KTV sector refuses to help anyone over 18 years old because they are concerned that their donors will be upset. Perhaps educating donors is also important here then. There is a need for more opportunities outside the sex and garment industries for women to find work and income-generating activities that are not exploitive. NGOs also need to work with men to do training in treating women with respect, the unacceptability of sexual harassment, understanding the importance of consent in sex and informing men that choosing prostitution is a choice with many



negative consequences. For example, this poster has been used with men including police and soldiers in Cambodia <http://gmmiles.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Man-Eg.pdf>.

### **Conclusion**

More research is needed into the implications of sustained alcohol abuse on the vulnerability of young women to sexual exploitation. As well as understanding how time spent in the KTV venue correlates with factors such as consideration of having sex with a client, sexual abuse and substance abuse. A more long-term understanding of the trajectory of a KTV worker from when they first start working to when they 'age out' of KTV venues and back into their communities.

However, because of the risk factors and vulnerabilities established in the current study, the question remains as to whether introduction to working as a hostess at KTV venues is indeed voluntary. NGOs providing services and programs to address demand can utilize the results in the study to explain and understand the realities of the lives of women working in the entertainment industry. Leaders and staff in NGOs should consider programs and interventions that focus on building strong and supportive relationships to address issues holistically. Programs engaging those affected should focus on building trusting relationships to tear down walls built by stigma and discrimination, being responsive to the impact of the social infamy tax, and rebuilding self-worth and value by erasing paradigms of deserving and undeserving.

As seen in the results of the study, the factors contributing to vulnerability and exploitation are vast and intricate. Intervention programs and plans must have components that address all the various factors. Therefore, collaboration between NGOs and community members and leaders is essential to dispel the myths and negative perceptions experienced by KTV workers.

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