

just tell.

Karen M. Teoh
Stonehill College

Larissa Sandy, *Women and Sex Work in Cambodia: Blood, Sweat and Tears* (New York: Routledge, 2014). 156 pp. \$145 Hardback.

The value of this new book by Larissa Sandy lies in the important argument that sex workers should not be equated with trafficking victims, that many sex workers choose to engage in this form of labour (though from within a very limited range of options). Sandy “confronts and disrupts two predominant images of the ‘Cambodian prostitute:’” that she is on the one hand a “ruined, destroyed and victimized woman” and that she is a “destroying body that threatens society” on the other – the victim and the vector. Instead she uses narratives from interviews with sex workers to introduce them as agents in their own lives.

The best chapters are five and six, which discuss the contemporary (1990s and 2000s) scene, utilizing the voices of the women interviewed. In chapter five, “Just Choices,” Sandy examines the common claim by those interviewed that they chose sex work. While their options were very constrained, they nonetheless assert self-determination. She tells the women’s stories as short vignettes, discussing at length debt bondage and distinguishing this from the notion of “trafficking.” The women emphasize their responsibility to family and to repaying their debt to their parents especially their mothers. This “dutiful daughter” discourse will be familiar to those who have read other work on prostitution from the region, including Mills (1997), Muecke (1992) and Derks (2008).

Chapter six, “Core transmitter/sex slave,” is a valuable discussion of the impact of the 100% Condom Use Program (CUP) on sex work in Cambodia from 1999-2008. Sandy argues that prostitution was essentially legalized and became much more highly regulated as female sex workers were framed as “perpetrators” and the source of the disease, while male clients were seen as “bridges” to other “innocent” women, their wives. Men were seen as the link between “bad” and “good” women and not responsible agents themselves. The law required brothel-based sex workers to report for health examinations, and established a sex worker registration and management system that heightened the ability of the police to extort money from brothel owners and to collude with the owners in monitoring a sex worker’s debt and preventing her escape.

In 2008, the Cambodian government then passed a Human Trafficking Law, which Sandy argues effectively criminalized sex work and presented the women as “hapless victims.” Sandy links this change to shifts in US government policy in the 2000s. The US passed legislation to fund a global fight against HIV/AIDS, but withdrew USAID support for organisations that advocated legalisation or decriminalisation of sex work. In the Trafficking Victims

Protection Act of 2000 the US set up a system that required a ranking of countries using “Trafficking in Persons” or TIP reports to divide countries into tiers based on the degree to which the US judged they were working to prevent trafficking. In 2005, Cambodia was downgraded from tier two to tier three, threatening bilateral aid and assistance from international financial institutions. The Cambodian 2008 Human Trafficking Law in response led to raids on brothels, arbitrary arrests and detentions, and the opportunity for the police to shake down the industry for bribes and protection money.

This said, there are significant problems with the book, many of which could have been dealt with by careful editing and a wider, more thorough review of the existing literature. At only 120 pages (priced at \$145), reviewers should have sent the draft back for revisions before publication. Perhaps the reviewers were specialists on sex work and not on Cambodian history or culture. A few examples include: the astonishing suggestion that prostitution did not exist in Cambodia until the French era, specifically 1875 (18-19); the idea that the Sihanouk regime was “almost as violent as the Khmer Rouge” (56); and the notion that many Cambodians saw UNTAC as “just an occupying army” only associated with prostitution and nothing else (though this is the official Hun Sen line). Sandy uses Steinfatt’s extremely low number of 9,000 sex workers (59-60), of all types, not just brothel-based sex workers, even though she notes herself that his methods were seriously flawed. She could have made her argument that earlier numbers were inflated without relying so heavily on this and now generally disregarded work. The chapter on the social and cultural context of sex work reads as rushed and lacks adequate references to other works. For example, the term “*khuiy*” (presumably *khuiy*) is defined dismissively in a footnote as “a derogatory term of reference for transgender women” (72) without any reference to the literature on this term in Cambodia and Thailand.

On the final page, Sandy writes that her work has highlighted the weaknesses of the trafficking framework for analysing sex work in Cambodia. The women are not just helpless victims. But she says that “my data do not allow me to praise the existence of the sex industry in Cambodia in its current form” (120). This reviewer wishes Sandy had told us more about the research she conducted, placed herself within the narrative, and included even more interview data. I suspect that the brutality and grim picture that would emerge from a full ethnographic description of the life of brothel-based sex workers in Cambodia (as it does from the much more extensive literature on the lives of sex workers in Thailand) would have given us more insight into the subtitle of the book – blood, sweat and tears. Describing more of the complexity of the situation would not have distracted from her thesis that they are not simply victims or vectors.

Judy Ledgerwood
Northern Illinois University