

Nighttime in Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, where thousands of young teenagers are sold into life on the street.



The Garden of Evil

RESCUING THE WORLD'S GIRLS, PART 2 Their bodies are cheap currency in Cambodia, where girls — many of them under 16 — turn tricks for pennies, often with dozens of men a night. Why is this still going on? Blame poverty, blame corruption, blame a society that views women as a disposable resource. **CAROL MITHERS** talks to an amazing crusader named Mu Sochua about her fight to stop the tragedy.

FROM TOP: REDUX PICTURES; BROWN W. CANNON III; STYLIST: GEORGINA RESKALA; HAIR AND MAKEUP: BERNADINE BIBIANO FOR CELESTINEAGENCY.COM.



Mu Sochua at the offices of the Global Fund for Women in San Francisco, February 2004.

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MIDNIGHT—PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA. IN THE WARM, HUMID night, men seeking sex cruise the groups of women clustered at the edges of parks in this graceful capital city. The typical encounter is brutish, raw. Under a large tree almost within view of the home of the country's prime minister, a man paws a woman's breasts and pushes her onto the grass for intercourse. He's done in minutes; then she rejoins the others. As the hours pass, the scene repeats again and again. The laughing customers probably know that most of these young women have been trafficked—forced or tricked into becoming sex workers. The men seem not to care. They don't want to hear stories of bitter childhood poverty, of parents so frantic to survive that they said yes to a stranger's vague promise of a big city "job" for their daughter. ▶

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“You can’t end trafficking until people have another way to live. Five million men, women, and children make less than 50 cents a day—so 85 percent of our women and girls go out of their villages to look for work.”

But these are the tales that obsess one woman who stands among them. Although she’s considerably older than the others, in the dark she blends in, with her slender build, heavy makeup, and tight, sexy clothes. When customers appear, the young women move protectively in front of her; she is there to bear witness. Mu Sochua, 50, began this work while serving as Cambodia’s minister of women’s and veterans’ affairs. Last summer she left her post to join her country’s opposition party; she continues to learn the harsh truth by walking with those who walk the streets. “I am very frightened on these nights. But I want to feel the violence, the abuse, the reality of these women,” she says quietly, with controlled passion. Her gestures are economical and contained. “There is no way I could learn about this by reading a report.”

The street is where Sochua hears about police who extort bribes or rape the women they arrest; of the shanties where young men from wealthy families bond by gang-raping streetwalkers; of the methods by which poverty-stricken women and children are drawn into the sex industry. It’s where she absorbs the harsh details of that life: Sex in the park is exchanged for the equivalent of one U.S. dollar, even less after 10 P.M., with as much as half given to

Mu Sochua with young women learning to weave—a skill that can lead them out of abject poverty.

a pimp. Sochua counts hundreds of young girls, many infected with HIV, some the same age—13—as her youngest daughter. “I am always holding back tears,”

Sochua says. “With all the power I have, how can I not stop this?”

More than two decades ago, Sochua finished graduate school in the United States. She could have stayed to enjoy a relatively comfortable career in social work. Instead she returned to her homeland to become a passionate fighter for girls and women. Her drive to transform a society shattered by war into one that’s fair and equal has led her to tackle one of the worst human rights problems of our time.

SEX TRAFFICKING IS A GLOBAL outrage that victimizes millions: Nepalese women are sold into India; sub-Saharan Africans into Belgium; Nigerians into Italy, Germany, and France; Filipinas throughout much of the world, including North America; and those from the former Soviet bloc all throughout Europe. In 2000 the United States passed the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, which calls for a yearly evaluation of more than 100 countries. In 2003 it became much easier to prosecute U.S. citizens traveling abroad for the purpose of

having sex with children. Yet roughly 10,000 girls and young women, mostly from East Asia and the Pacific, are in the United States, working in strip clubs, massage parlors, and brothels.

Cambodia is one of the most active trafficking centers in the world. In theory prostitution is illegal, but in practice a majority of Cambodian men regularly buy sex. The country, with a population of 13 million, has as many as 80,000 sex workers, a huge number of whom are under 16. And children as young as 5 are smuggled from Vietnam into Cambodia, where, in a village just outside Phnom Penh, they service a local and international clientele of pedophiles. In 2002 *Time* magazine reported a description of Cambodia as a “pervert’s paradise.”

Trafficking here works the way it does everywhere else: Some women are abducted, others tricked with the promise of a job or told they’ve been sold and have to work off the “debt.” Children are often sold by parents desperate enough to sacrifice one daughter to feed the rest of the family. Many of these girls are imprisoned, beaten, and forced to service dozens of men daily. If they’re taken to foreign countries and escape, they may be jailed as illegal immigrants. And girls who manage to make it home are often rejected by their families.

The most depressing aspect of ▶

trafficking is its persistence, but Sochua is a formidable warrior in the fight against it. “She has an extraordinary ability to go to the root of the problem,” says Kavita Ramdas, president and CEO of the San Francisco-based Global Fund for Women, which has funded several of her efforts. At that root lie poverty and lack of education. “Sochua has a quality of gentleness, which masks a steeliness below. Once she decides to do something, you can’t stop her. Zen Buddhists would say she’s like water—it may flow very gently but can wear down the hardest stone.”

SOCHUA’S STEELINESS WAS born of pain. She grew up in a relatively affluent Phnom Penh family, with a childhood she recalls as loving, sheltered, and safe. But by 1972, when she was 18, the American war in Vietnam had spilled over into Cambodia. As some 500,000 tons of U.S. bombs blasted the countryside, those who could afford to get their children out did. That June, Sochua and her older sister secured the last seats on a plane to Paris (their brother had already left). “My parents were at the airport,” Sochua says. Her voice is halting; she almost never talks about this part of her life. “We didn’t say goodbye; it was too painful.” The lack of a farewell haunts her, because she never saw her mother and father again. In 1975 the radical Communist Khmer Rouge came to power, and her parents van-

ished into an abyss of death and destruction. Roughly a quarter of Cambodia’s population perished as a result of execution, torture, overwork, or hunger. Sochua later heard her father had died of starvation; her mother’s fate is a mystery. “I wish I knew,” she says in a near whisper. “But you learn to let go.”

After 18 months in Paris, Sochua left for California, where her brother had settled, and attended San Francisco State University. With all her family’s money gone, she went on welfare, and later she found a job helping resettle Cambodian refugees who were arriving in the Bay Area. “But I always wanted to go back home,” she says. “It was a dream I kept alive.” A 1979 invasion from Vietnam routed the Khmer Rouge. In 1981 Sochua received her master’s degree from UC Berkeley. “Then I put nine years of my life in the U.S. into one suitcase, and I left,” she says.

First she worked in squalid, dangerous refugee camps along the Thai border, where she met her husband, Scott Leiper, an American employed by the World Food Programme. They married in 1983, and their first daughter, Devi, was born a year later. “I’d leave her in Thailand and drive half an hour into Cambodia,” Sochua recalls. “Every few hours, wherever I was, in the middle of shelling or at a hospital filled with malaria or TB patients, I’d stop to pump so I could breastfeed. It was very important to me to give her whatever I had.” In 1986 Scott’s job

took them to Italy, where another daughter, Thida, was born. It wasn’t until 1989 that Sochua returned to Phnom Penh. “I went looking for the house where I grew up,” she says, tears coming. “It was gone. Everything was gone. But I said to myself, *I am so lucky to come back. Forget the childhood. My own children have found their roots.*”

In 1991, shortly after Sochua’s third daughter, Malika, was born, she began a women’s organization that put together credit programs, shelters for victims of domestic violence, and demonstrations for peace held in cooperation with local Buddhist monks and nuns. Seven years later, she successfully ran as a national assembly candidate, and soon afterward she was asked to take over the Ministry of Women’s and Veterans’ Affairs, which had always been run by a man. Her first act was to begin a national campaign to rewrite an old Cambodian proverb: “It says, ‘A man is gold; a woman is a white piece of cloth,’” Sochua says. “Think of it. If you drop a piece of gold in the mud, you can clean it, and it will be shinier than before. But if a piece of white cloth is stained, it is ruined. If you’ve lost your virginity, if you’re a battered woman, you cannot be a white piece of cloth. Within a week, someone on my staff came up with ‘Men are gold. Women are precious gems.’”

THE NOW WIDELY RECOGNIZED image of women as gems is central to Sochua’s antitrafficking efforts. Gender inequality is CONTINUED ON PAGE 224

A girl who might otherwise have been trafficked makes a living from her cart in Poipet, on the border between Cambodia and Thailand.



“Women borrow \$100 to buy a cart, and sell locally made products to tourists. The message is ‘Give women a chance.’ I can’t find enough money to help them all get started.”

COURTESY OF MINISTRY OF WOMEN’S AND VETERANS’ AFFAIRS, CAMBODIA

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 220 nothing new in Cambodia, where traditionally girls have been far less likely than boys to be educated, and until Sochua proposed a law addressing domestic violence in 2003, there hadn't been one. (The law is, in fact, still pending.) Publicity is also crucial to Sochua's efforts, and she doesn't hesitate to go for the gut. In one of a series of video and television ads, scenes of a sobbing young girl being taken from her family to a brothel are juxtaposed with those of a squealing pig heading to slaughter. It ends with the sound of the girl's screams as she's raped by man after man and the stern admonition that "women and children are human beings, not animals."

She also takes her case directly to the people in rural villages. "You travel through rice fields, potholes, dust," she says. "Each village has maybe 100 families, and they walk to where we show a movie. I always pick out one old woman in the audience. 'Grandmother, I'll say, your earrings are so beautiful! And old! Where did you get them?' She'll answer, with a big smile, 'Oooh, they come from when I was married 40 years ago.'

"What is their value?"

"Oooh, I don't know. I'd never sell them."

"Why not, Grandmother? How come you've held on to those earrings through the war, through everything?"

"Because they're so precious, Granddaughter."

"And that's it. I've got her. Now I can say, 'What else is precious? Your children are precious. If you let your daughters go, your family heritage is gone. They are your gems. Love them. Educate them. Protect them.' Everywhere I go, women come up to me and say, 'Now I realize what you mean. Find my daughter!' When that happens, we try to get word out. Maybe 10 percent of those girls we find."

Sochua also speaks out against official corruption—"in the ministry of commerce, the ministry of labor, the judiciary, the police. When thousands of children are in brothels practically in the middle of the city, and the foreign press writes about it, how could the prime minister not know?" The blunt truth, she says, is

that while traffickers may be part of organized criminal gangs, in many places local police and village chiefs are involved, and those in power profit from it. (According to Janice Raymond, coexecutive director of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, sexual trafficking is worth some \$10 billion a year globally. Although there are no firm figures for Cambodia, the International Labour Organization estimates that in countries like Malaysia and Thailand, the sex industry accounts for 2 to 14 percent of the gross domestic product.) Sochua has created a list of foreign pedophiles known to patronize Cambodian brothels, aimed at blocking these men from entering the country and at

Children are often sold by parents desperate enough to sacrifice one daughter to feed the rest of the family. Many of these girls are beaten and imprisoned or trafficked to foreign countries.

deporting those who are already there. One deported American, says Sochua, was running a pornographic Web site that featured hundreds of Cambodian children.

In May Sochua helped broker a deal with Thailand allowing trafficked Cambodians to go home rather than be thrown in jail as illegal immigrants; she has crafted a similar arrangement with Vietnam. If these victories seem small, they aren't to the families involved. "Just recently, we were able to bring back seven girls," says Sochua. "Several were under 16. I went to the airport. I saw the mothers, the tears and pain. They grab their children. It's so difficult for me because I'm a mother, too. The guilt you see, the loss of innocence—nothing can give that back. And the story doesn't end there. What emotional and psychological support will these girls get?"

None. Zero. They will have to be strong and pick up their lives. That's why we go back to 'Women are precious gems.' Even after what happened to them, those girls are still precious."

THE FINAL PIECE OF SOCHUA'S strategy is to give women the financial ability to resist traffickers. "You can't end trafficking until people have another way to live," she points out. "Right now about five million men, women, and children make less than 50 cents a day—so 85 percent of our young women and girls volunteer to go out of their villages to look for work. Maybe 15 percent find jobs—where do the rest go? Faced with hunger, women sell their children into the sex industry." She refuses to judge them: "I have to say, 'Did they have a choice when they let their daughters go?' I don't think they did. We have started one great program, though it's very small, at the village level. Women borrow about \$100 to buy a cart, and they sell locally made products to tourists. The message is 'Give women a chance.'" She pauses. "What makes me desperate is that I can't find enough money to help them all get started."

Sochua's willingness to point an accusatory finger at traffickers, police, and her own government carries a high price. She says that her telephone is tapped, and even on trips to the United States, she finds herself constantly looking over her shoulder. The possibility of being killed for her activism "is something I don't want to think about." Constant immersion in human misery also takes a psychic toll. "I have to block it," she says. "When it's too much, I take a shower and I run the water hard, very hot, then very cold, and then I cry and cry and cry. In public I cannot be seen in tears—the men will say, 'See, even as a minister, she cries! Women are so weak.' But if I were not to continue, I could not sleep. I don't think I could face my children." ●

Carol Mithers is the author of Therapy Gone Mad (Addison-Wesley).

For more information or to make a donation to help end trafficking, go to globalfundforwomen.org.