

Mother of lost children

by Feature desk
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When Somaly Mam feels depressed, she drives to the countryside of Kampong Cham province – two bumpy, dusty hours from Cambodia's capital Phnom Penh. Away from the hectic city, with its countless brothels, beggars and tourists, water buffalo doze below wooden stilt houses and the Mekong River flows slowly through paddy fields.

Here, the woman who is Cambodia's symbol of the fight against child prostitution feels at home.

In front of a long stilt house in Thlock Chhroy village, Somaly Mam stops. Immediately, a giggling bunch of girls rushes up to the delicate woman who almost disappears among ponytails and embracing hands. "My girls," the 37-year-old, herself a mother of three, says lovingly.

The children's gaiety belies trauma and turmoil. Each one of the girl's has experienced more suffering than most adults could ever bear: abused and sold by their own families, forced to have sex with anonymous men, finally expelled from society like garbage.

Little Mok Teta was just five when police found her in a brothel. Her face was so swollen from beatings that she could hardly open her eyes. Her body was covered with scars from stubbed-out cigarettes. In her head was a hole: somebody had hammered a nail in it.

At least she is not HIV positive like her friend Srey Maeh, who at the same age almost was raped to death by her father, uncle and neighbors, before she was saved by social workers.

Such tortured children don't want to have anything to do with adults, including psychologists. They are aggressive and shut themselves off. Nevertheless, Teta and Maeh now go to school and are able to integrate themselves into a group. Together with 32 other abused girls from age 8 to 16, they found a home in the shelter of the non-governmental organization

AFESIP, the abbreviation for Acting for Women in Distressing Situations, which Somaly co-founded. Here, they can share their suffering without words: Somaly understands them by just taking them in her arms. She has experienced their story herself.

Somaly never met her real parents. Born in the mountain region of Mondulkiri, she lived with people of her tribe, the Phnong. When she was 10, she was sold to a traveling trader, whom she called grandfather. She had to cook and



Today, there is nothing left of the obedient, uneducated mountain girl. Since her biography was published in 2005, the human rights activist has been featured frequently in the international media, expressing herself in fluent self-taught English and French. Her office is crammed with photos of herself with such famous figures as Hillary Clinton, Sandra Bullock and the Queen of Spain. "I am not famous," Somaly says, but she admits a preference for traditional silk and chic shoes – things she couldn't afford 10 years ago.

It is a cruelly won self-confidence Somaly demonstrates. She spent six tormenting years in different brothels, where she and other girls were broken physically and spiritually through beatings and other abuse. When a pimp shot a friend in front of her eyes, because the girl refused to sleep with a client, Somaly decided to do something against forced prostitution in her country as soon as she was able to free herself.

In 1992, she got her chance. A year before, the United Nations sent 24,000 peacekeepers to Cambodia to oversee the peace process in the war-torn country. Prostitution boomed even more due to this influx, but the strong-willed Somaly saw an opportunity: the foreigners were usually less brutal and paid better than Asian clients. With their help, she was able to make contacts outside the red-light scene.

At a party, she met the man who would later become her husband and the father of her children, the Frenchman Pierre Legros. Together they opened a bistro, which enabled her finally to quit prostitution. Images from that earlier time, however, haunt her to this day in nightmares and within the stories of "her girls".

Yet, she never went into therapy. "Some problems cannot be solved with words. I deal only with myself."

In 1996, she and Legros founded AFE-SIP. A year later, they opened a shelter for prostitutes in Phnom Penh. Today, AFE-

SIP runs three shelters in Cambodia and offices in Thailand, Laos and Vietnam, and employs more than 300 people. The organization has rescued almost 4,000 women, offering them psychological and medical treatment and vocational training.

"Most important is that they learn to say no. They must understand, that they have their own rights," Somaly says.

When Vorlak Ta came to AFESIP after being raped two years ago, her life seemed hopeless: a girl who has lost her virginity is an outcast in Cambodia's traditional rural society.

"It was only here that I learned that there are rights for women and children," the 16-year-old says. "Now I want to finish school and become a lawyer to help other girls avoid the same destiny."

Somaly mentions three reasons for child prostitution in Cambodia: poverty, the authoritarian culture and poor education. There is even the vicious belief that a man can rid himself of HIV by raping young virgins. That is not to forget the complete loss of values during 30 years of war and the total self-destruction by the murderous Khmer Rouge regime.

Some families in the countryside sell their children for as little as US\$60 – about as much as the average family earns in two months. In Phnom Penh, the asking rate for a foreigner to spend a week with a virgin is US\$1,500. According to the Ministry of Women's Affairs, there are 100,000 prostitutes in Cambodia. An estimated 70 percent have been forced to prostitute themselves, and 40 percent are younger than 16.

"We can only help a few girls. Against trafficking, we are powerless," Somaly says bitterly. "The government doesn't do enough, too many people are corrupt or profit themselves from the business. In the more than 10 years I have been fighting, almost nothing has changed."

Her forthrightness has won her friends and enemies, and she has received death threats. But she's not intimidated.

"If they want to kill me, they'll kill me. But before, I want to continue building up my organization."

However, she does worry about the safety of her children, and recently sent her 14 and 16-year-old daughters to school in France. She recently separated from her husband and now lives with her 5-year-old son, who is watched by a bodyguard around the clock.

Yet, Somaly has powerful friends, too. In 1998, she won the Prince of Asturias Award, the Nobel Prize of the Hispanic world, and has since received support from Spanish royalty. Being named Glamour's Woman of the Year 2006 was her entry into the United States, where with much pomp the Somaly Foundation was founded last November to raise donations for AFESIP.

"AFESIP is my life," she says. "The girls in the shelters break my heart. I try to give them love and warmth, like in a real family. And they give me the same back. That's where I find my strength to continue."

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Halle Berry and Daily Hot



Leighton Meester

Before heading downtown to the Tribeca Film Festival premiere of *Killer Movie*, Leighton Meester took care of business, filming scenes for *Gossip Girl* on location in New York City.



Ashlee Simpson and Pete Wentz

Though Ashlee Simpson and Pete Wentz have been the talk of the tabloids lately, it was boy band the Jonas Brothers who generated the most buzz at the White House Correspondents' Association dinner. "I'm a very big fan," Martha Stewart told E! as she snapped pictures of the trio



Rosario Dawson and Amy Smart

Environmentally-friendly celebrities Emmanuelle Chriqui, Rosario Dawson and Amy Smart banded together at the GUESS GREEN launch party, held at the GUESS store on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills. GUESS by Marciano, Vogue and the Environmental Media Association (EMA) hosted the socially conscious soiree to unveil the label's new line of chemical dye-free denim and organic cotton tops for and women.



Laura Prepon and Brittany Snow

Laura Prepon and Brittany Snow enjoyed the opportunity to kick up their heels when they hit the grand opening of Maxim Bungalows in the Dominican Republic



Joel Madden and Nicole Richie

Nicole Richie cheered on fiance Joel Madden as he spun tunes at the BPM magazine Coachella Valley Lounge, held at a private Palm Springs residence. Richie danced and snapped pictures as her main man provided the soundtrack for the evening.



Eva Longoria Parker

Eva Longoria Parker showed the sexy side of ice cream, when she attended a press conference to promote Holanda's Magnum Devotion Ice Cream at the Hotel Four Seasons Mexico City

Ciao, Bella

Paltrow wowed the Italian crowd in an elegant frock by Jean Paul Gaultier and matching diamond cuffs at the premiere of *Iron Man*, held at the Warner Moderno Cinema in Rome.