

Sex Trafficking, Human Rights and Social Justice

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The victim staged¹

Nicolas Lainez

Representing sexual exploitation?

From 2000 to 2004, I photographed human trafficking, prostitution² and aids in Southeast Asia for non-governmental organizations (NGO), international organizations, and donors. My stories were displayed in airports or shopping malls, and were published in numerous books and international magazines or used by development organizations for campaigning purposes. My first immersion in Mumbai's infamous Falkland Road red light district at the age of 25 deeply shocked me, and as a result I decided to commit to activism. To do so I started to photograph sex trafficking in Asia simply to raise awareness in Western countries. While studying filmmaking and photojournalism as an undergraduate student, I became partisan of the humanist social photography tradition embodied by Magnum Photos photographers, and above all by the notorious American Life Magazine photojournalist Eugene Smith. Following the basic principles of documentary photography, my work always tried to depict life as it was avoiding staging and voyeurism. My goal was to tell the story of thousands of Asian women exerting prostitution by focusing on their living and working conditions, as well as the social relationships they weave between them, with their families or with their clients. After four years of intense fieldwork in Southeast Asia, my images suddenly began to lose meaning, and to all look alike. How could an Indian, a Burmese or a Cambodian prostitute have the same story? Why does the same narrative scheme seem to reappear again and again? How can a narrator mechanically repeat the same testimony over the years without being aware of the replication process? How do media and NGOs represent sexually exploited children in general? The repetition of the same testimonies through photographed subjects, but also media or NGO communication services iterative demand for identical shed-tear stories, foreshadowed the existence of a conveyed image about sexually exploited children. The questions raised by this chapter emerge naturally: how can a narrator reproduce mechanically the same story during years, subconsciously or not, without being aware of this process? How has this representation been constructed for the last 20 years? What are the implications? And if social actors were not only victims, who are they?

At first the chapter will draw a chronology of the phenomenon of child sexual exploitation in Southeast Asia since the beginning of the 1990s. The victimizing

and highly emotional image of the child sold for prostitution will be analyzed by taking into consideration the stage of cultural differences, physical suffering, and statistical figures. Then this representation will be replaced into what Luc Boltanski (1993) calls the “politics of pity,” namely the stage of victims to distant spectators. Most of the time this stage enrolls a third actor, beneficial or funereal, whose function is to reinforce indignation and therefore the “viewer” call for commitment.

The victim staged

A close look of representations of “child prostitution” or “child trafficking” in Southeast Asia reveals the existence of a standard portrait of the sexually exploited child. Denunciation campaigns first target sex tourism involving children and then human trafficking has massively used stereotypes. These simplifier, anecdotal and shed-tearing clichés have led to elaborating a polished image of the victim whose testimony has been presented as an irrefutable proof of a topic perceived as intolerable.³

The prostituted child

In the 1990s, upon discovering a “horrifying” issue, the NGO offered a uniform vision of the Asian child prostitute using the same narrative scheme (Montgomery 2001: 23). Typically children were neglected by their parents, exploited by local mafias or pimps, rescued by representatives of Western aid organization, and irremediably condemned to a tragic death because of violence or HIV. Such narratives were presented redundantly so that all Asian children involved in prostitution were kidnapped, sold or forced into prostitution, brutally exploited, and finally sentenced to death. Among many similar testimonies, here is the one from Marie-France Botte (1993), a former Belgian nurse who became a famous activist committed to fight child prostitution in Thailand in the mid 1990s before being accused of defecting funds in 1995⁴:

Lao, Sonta, Patchara, three little girls, taken off their families during their childhood, abducted, assaulted, raped in Bangkok brothels. Children like so many others, thousands of Thai children, who are forced to offer their bodies to “gringos” from all over the world, these tourists who buy air tickets to Bangkok to offer themselves a few nights with girls or boys. Today, Sonta and Patchara have died from aids. Lao fights desperately against the disease.
(Botte 1993: back cover)

This narrative uses sociological shortcuts that disqualify and singularize children. On one hand, the shortcut disqualifies because it reduces the identity of the minor to a simple victim of injustice. Indeed, children are victims and nothing else. To effectively arouse the pity of the spectator and its subsequent action, the details of their tragedy are highlighted – children have been kidnapped, beaten, raped,

and “offered” to tourists, but their personal stories are carefully concealed. Here arises the question of the limits of horror because a description that grows excessively describing wretched details causes the opposite effect of what is expected, disgust and repulsion, and may be as reductionist as it qualifies a person solely by its suffering. On the other hand, the shortcut makes multiple stories singular although they are centered on three children – Lao, Sonta, Patchara, if their names were different nothing would be changed. If the shortcut disqualifies, it also reduces the “problem” to the Western child sex offender or pedophile (Montgomery 2001: 40), executioner or evil personification and main target for the NGO whose mission consists of eradicating child prostitution. This simplification creates in fact a distinction between children who are exploited by Westerners and those serving domestic clientele, thus establishing a hierarchy between “good” victims deserving Western attention and piety, and “bad” ones irremediably relegated to the world of marginality and criminality.

Moreover, this narrative scheme stages two actors, the narrator and the victim, who merely recount stories that people expect of them. On the one hand, the narrator is convinced he knows beforehand what a sexually exploited child is. Meanwhile, on the other hand, the viewer imagines his suffering. Besides, the victim anticipates the impact that her suffering will have on both the narrator and the viewer.⁵ This could explain why all victims seem to have the same story, or why some viewers might feel that journalists tirelessly rewrite the same report. Indeed, why should they change a conveyed testimony that has proved its efficiency? This also legitimizes the confiscation of the victim’s speech by narrators who most often do not know the linguistic or cultural codes of those whose story they carry. Some journalists go as far as to select witnesses who best meet readers’ expectations. An example of casting⁶ is made visible in the controversial rescue by *New York Times* notorious journalist Nicholas Kristof of two Cambodian prostitutes working in a brothel in Poipet, a small town on the Thai–Cambodian border. In January 2004, Kristof publishes five subsequent columns (Kristof 2004a; 2004b; 2004c; 2004d; 2004e) where he describes how he frees two trafficked girls, Srey Neth and Srey Mom, by buying their freedom from the brothel-tenant for US\$ 150 and US\$ 203, respectively. Not knowing what to do with them, he brings them back to the village while he offers US\$ 100 to each in order to help them start a small business. Srey Mom gets angry with her mother and returns to the brothel afterward while Srey Neth becomes a hairdresser. Kristof’s doubts and actions are carefully annotated and published in the newspaper as well as in his blog. This affair led to a controversy and the author finally admitted his naiveté and the failure of his maneuver.

The trafficked child

During the second half of the nineties, the emotion caused by the issues of “child sex tourism” and “commercial sexual exploitation of children” increased. Campaigns like the one developed by the NGO “End Child Prostitution in Asia Tourism” or ECPAT⁷ that focuses on moral concerns over minors soon after

the International Convention of the Rights of the Children, held in 1989, helped to inscribe childhood as a new global ethical priority (Roux 2005: 2). This campaign leaves aside adult prostitution torn by the insoluble question of consent, and introduces among aid organizations the assumption that a child cannot choose to exert prostitution knowingly. ECPAT organized two international congresses dealing with sexual exploitation of children. The first took place in Stockholm in 1996, the second in Yokohama in 2001, and the third was held in Rio de Janeiro in November 2008. Subsequently the organization reinforced its legitimacy by positioning itself as the leading organization when dealing with the issue of commercial sexual exploitation of children. Soon after the organization started its global awareness-raising campaign, it diversified its activities by developing new topics of indignation (Roux 2005: 6–8): the first is child pornography, the second is the trafficking of children for sexual exploitation. By doing so, the ECPAT acronym changed in 1996 to stand for “End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes.”

At the end of the 1990s, organizations like ECPAT or Acting for Women in Difficult Circumstances (AFESIP-Cambodia) established by Somaly Mam, United Nations agencies, or government bodies like the US State Department participated in a gradual displacement of the concern on the “prostituted child” and towards the “child sold for prostitution,” and gradually the “women and children trafficked for prostitution.” This shift can be explained by the exhaustion after 10 years of battle of the “child sex tourism” phenomenon, as well as by political, social and economic changes in post-cold war Asia that favored legal and illegal cross-border mobility across Southeast Asia. To illustrate this focal shift we thereby quote Human Rights Watch’s notorious report published as early as in 1993 about Burmese women and children trafficked to Thailand:

The trafficking of Burmese women and girls into Thailand is appalling in its efficiency and ruthlessness. Driven by the desire to maximize profit and by the fear of HIV/AIDS, agents acting on behalf of brothel owners infiltrate ever more remote areas of Burma seeking unsuspecting recruits. Virgin girls are particularly sought after [...] The agents promise the women and girls jobs as waitresses or dishwashers, with good pay and new clothes [...] Once the women and girls are confined in the Thai brothels, escape is virtually impossible. Any Burmese woman or girl who steps outside the brothel risks physical punishment, retribution against her parents or relatives for defaulting on her debt and/or arrest as an illegal immigrant – by the same police who are often the brothel owner's best clients.

The worst brothels in the southern Thai town of Ranong are surrounded by electrified barbed wire and armed guards. The women and girls face a wide range of abuse, including debt bondage, illegal confinement, forced labor, rape, physical abuse, exposure to HIV/AIDS, and in some cases, murder.

(Human Rights Watch 1993: 2)

This description, which does not denounce sex tourism involving children but the trafficking of young Burmese women into Thailand for sexual exploitation, initiates the construction of a new intolerable issue. Clearly, the sexually abused child narrative inspires this new one equally emotional. The main claims are: 1) trafficking is aimed at young girls, preferably virgins, 2) traffickers are motivated by profit, 3) they use a wide range of subterfuges to deceive, among them false promises of jobs, 4) traffickers are often family members or neighbors, and 5) the victims are confined and subjected to physical and psychological violence. The executioner is no longer the mafia or the Western pedophile, but the trafficker, the brothel tenant and the corrupted police officer who make profit and abuse trafficked women. It seems this narrative has become standardized by today.⁸ Usually, the victim is a young peasant girl, naïve, helpless, and unable to raise reasoned judgments or to fully assume her decisions. Typically traffickers deceive her with false promises of work in order to confine and exploit her in a foreign country. Often, transportation, deception and exploitation are highlighted, three prerogatives that allow granting the status of “victim of trafficking” in accordance with the United Nations Convention against organized cross border crime and its Additional Protocol.⁹ The conception that prevails is the “Madonna”¹⁰ or the “good” and innocent women deserving help, which is an expressed opposition with the “whore” or the “bad” girl irremediably condemned. Indeed, most NGOs are showing less inclined to help “bad girls” who deliberately choose to migrate illegally for the purpose of prostitution. Instead, they deserve all their attention to those they considered as “good” and innocent victims.

Culturalism and sexuality

When physical violence is not explicit or when the injustice endured by the victim is not emphasized, her exoticism, beauty, appearance or religious beliefs can be used to rend her more attractive for Western audiences. Indeed many documentary films about prostitution or human trafficking in Asia interspersed shots of pagodas, Buddhist ceremonies, palms or exotic sunsets between shots of go-go bars filmed with hidden cameras. This visual representation of an exotic and familiar Far East comforts the viewer. It is the “weight” of Asian traditions that can explain why practices that disappeared long ago in the West still persist in Asia. Real or imagined cultural differences – those related to sexuality are precocious marriages, long traditions of polygamy and concubinage, or large tolerance to homosexuality in Thailand – justify sexual practices regarded as permissive for some or offensive for others. These images are clearly part of a continuum of Orientalist narratives traditions from Bougainville, Enlightenment, colonial imaginary to Western tourism iconography that establishes an image of the “other” irremediably unequal, different, and mysterious. For centuries, colonial representations have extensively described sexual mores of “Asian others” by qualifying them as “exotic”. These representations have fashioned imagined beliefs about Asian sexualities that have been reinterpreted by institutions and tourism entrepreneurs to justify the development of a prostitution industry

doomed to meet a Western demand. The case of the Thai sex industry set up to serve first American GI troops stationed in the “Rest and Recreation” areas during the Vietnam War, and then mass tourism during the 1980s, is therefore a good example. Prostitution relies on history and local traditions; it therefore becomes a product of the culture.

Amid Orientalist works, Emmanuelle d’Arsan’s novel is of particular interest. *Emmanuelle, la Leçon d’Homme* and *L’Anti-Vierge* were illegally published by Eric Losfeld in 1959 and 1960, respectively. Before the first official print in 1967, Emmanuelle had become the famous French erotic literary work. The success was immense. Firstly adapted to screens in 1973 under the title *Emmanuelle in Bangkok*, it would lead to over 40 soft-core remakes. Pierre Bachelet soundtrack sales rose up to four million single and a million and half LP. The book describes the erotic journey of a 16-year-old photojournalist who after joining her husband Jean, a French diplomat posted in Bangkok, experiences sexual liberation by following instructions from Mario, a sexual guru. The location is referred through floating markets, swarms of children running in the streets, colonial houses surrounded by palm trees, twilights, or Thai boxing scenes. Thailand is depicted as a perverse and lascivious site where Europeans live their hidden sexual desires. Emmanuelle rejects monogamous heterosexual relationships and advocates for sexual liberation, freedom, non-sentimentality, and non-guiltiness. She equally values her love for Jean as well as her ephemeral relationships with Mario and other lovers. Throughout the movie, a Thai woman is repeatedly reduced to a body desired by males. The erotic show scene is of importance for it anticipates the Thai go-go bar icon: a dancer smokes a cigarette in her vagina, afterwards two women make love on stage and seek Jean for sex. Alternately, the Thai woman embodies eroticism, lesbianism, voyeurism, and prostitution. Emmanuelle nurtures an image of Thailand as a sexual paradise, a place of debauchery, experimentation and satisfaction, “a world elsewhere, far from ordinary attachments, far from sentiments and values from the Western world” (Said 1968: 190).

The documentary *Mekong Butterflies* by Spanish director Pedro Barbadillo uses similar techniques to describe an exotic Far East. The movie recounts the journey of a French anthropologist, employed by the NGO AFESIP-Cambodia, who travels from Phnom Penh to Malaysia in search of Cambodian trafficked girls by following indications from Veasna Chan, a rescued “victim”. The Southeast Asia staged in the movie reproduces predictable clichés such as cherished landscapes, rivers shouted in crepuscular light, butterflies flying over plants, children staging traditional dances, violent slums. However, the staged Asia is not only exotic but also heavily sexualized because of a lot of brothels in Cambodia, go-go bars in Thailand, and Chinese hotels employing trafficked young women in Malaysia. Prostitution establishments, venal sexuality, sexual slavery, brutality, human traffickers, and Chinese transnational mafias are virtually everywhere. The scene appears apocalyptic, and the only relief comes from the well-intentioned anthropologist, the filmmaker, and AFESIP president Somaly Mam. The film uses similar techniques as those employed 30 years earlier by Jaeckin to portray a wild

and debauched Southeast Asia. Barbadillo denounces a supposed pervasiveness of slavery and injustice while framing a heavily sexualized culture in which sex is ubiquitous. Jaekin describes an initiative journey that promotes sexual liberation in an equally sexualized scenery. Similar images about otherness accuse and free Western viewers, guarantors of European values, by making them feel more civilized than Asians.

The body in pain

Staging the body in pain is a common technique used by media and aid organizations when representing sex trafficking. How many images show victims exposing physical pain, lacerations, cigarette burns, self-mutilations or drug punctures? Among countless examples, let's mention Marie-France Botte. Physical violence is a central theme in *Mekong Butterflies* too. Veasna shows the scars on her forearm as an evidence to denounce the exploitation and the drug addiction she has gone through. "I want to free myself from the past" she claims. But in order to start a new life, she first needs to get rid of all the marks that embody her painful past, and that is her main concern throughout the movie. So, screening brutality proves to be an effective strategy to make audiences indignant, but only to a certain point. Indeed, staging excessive violence turns indignation into repulsion, and therefore leads the viewers to disinterest. Generally speaking, the human body repels hyperrealist descriptions, and that is especially true for physical violence. The success of a horror movie stands on a good balance between showing enough terror so to effectively frighten the viewer, but not excessively so to avoid him turning his head. It should be added that a viewer who coldly observes the effects of violence risks to be accused of sadism. Typically, narrators face the difficult challenge of how to display physical suffering without trespassing the limits of repugnance so to keep the viewer's attention and interest. As a consequence, many narrators prefer suggestion rather than frontal exposure, by a far less risky technique that can be more effective. As a matter of fact, current denouncing campaigns tend to follow the more conservative trend rather than the direct and "bloody" one.

Every evening, TV news show individual bodies mistreated, tortured, raped, or wounded, a number of bodies debased, soiled, contaminated, or eliminated in the name of a nation, a religion or an ethnic group. The body's integrity is a key element when representing facts that are perceived as intolerable. According to Fassin and Bourdelais (2005: 9), body integrity must be considered on two levels. It is physical when inscribed on individual and material bodies, or where the corporeal pain is experienced, but it is also political when suffering affects the social space of the body, its humanity or dignity. Thai tortured children or Veasna's physical integrity are individuals having suffered from a particular violence, but it is also the violation of all Asian children's physical integrity that is denounced by narrators. Physical integrity ensures rights to individuals. Denouncing the suffering of an abused child automatically grants him with unprecedented legal and social recognition. How many victims are invited to tell

their stories on TV shows or at international congresses? Veasna and the French anthropologist were invited by Barbadillo to join an international tour through Europe in order to raise awareness against sexual slavery, but also to promote the movie. Frequently questioned by journalists, Veasna repeated again and again the same story on how she became a victim of “sexual slavery.”

Representing the body in pain also purifies the victim because blood is an undeniable proof of the veracity of suffering and innocence. Indeed, exposure of the body suffering is not enough to move the viewer. To effectively move the spectator, the victim must be innocent, and the endured violence must be unfair, and undeserved. The issue of choice is central here. On the one hand, the “innocent” victim suffers a tragic fate that she doesn’t deserve. She is irresponsible and has no choice, and therefore she deserves pity and assistance. On the other hand, the “guilty” victim agrees to follow the trafficker or to migrate illegally in order to sell her body. This characterization relegates her to marginality irremediably.

Figures and estimations

Given that emotion is not always sufficient to convince the audience, denouncing campaigns to help eradicate child sexual exploitation and child trafficking have been reinforced by figures. The concern to quantify the issue is understandable. It is undeniable that figures have helped not only to map the magnitude of the phenomenon but also to raise awareness globally. However, such achievement would have never been possible without a growing social and institutional demand for objective data, which in most cases was little or nonexistent. Although figures are too abstract to efficiently represent the victim’s suffering, at least they justify the action and therefore the existence of aid organizations whose mission is to eradicate what they consider a “scourge.” Even though it can’t be denied that figures have helped to sensitize Western countries, it should be pointed out that alarmist statistics are also designed to draw the attention of media, donor funding and policy-makers.

In 1989, ECPAT and the Centre for the Protection of Children’s Rights Foundation (CPCR) announced, with no explanation, that 800,000 children were exerting prostitution in Thailand for a total population of 60 million inhabitants. If true, this figure would mean that one child over four would have been prostituted, an estimation that sounds lightly exaggerated. In 1994, The Norwegian Government claimed to the Council of Europe, again without evidence, that “every year one million children are sold in the world for prostitution.”¹¹ Gradually, the prefix “over” was added and this figure was taken for granted, without allegiance, by the vast majority of NGOs attending the first Congress on child sexual exploitation organized by ECPAT in Stockholm in 1996. Gradually, the assumptions “800,000 prostituted children in Thailand” and “a million children are sold every year into prostitution worldwide” became norms that are still in use today (Montgomery 2001: 38). Sex trafficking is trapped in the same logic. In 2000, the US State Department claimed that between 700,000 and two million

women and children were victims of trafficking around the world. In 2003, the figure inexplicably climbed to four million, and in 2006, it descended to 800,000 without explanation. According to the 2008 *Trafficking in Persons* report (US State Department 2008: 7), the number of trafficked persons remains the same, however “this figure does not take into account millions of victims of internal trafficking, 80% of whom are women, and 50% are children.” On the same page it is claimed that “there are 12,3 million people in forced labor, bonded labor, forced child labor, and sexual servitude at any given time, other estimates range from four million to 27 million.” The 1:6.5 ratio for the second figure proves how inaccurate, and therefore dangerous, such estimations can be. One could also wonder what happens every year to the victims trafficked the year before. At this cadence, in 10 years, eight million trafficked victims will have to be added to the existent ones. How many millions of victims will the world have then? In the 1990s, when figures were not overwhelming enough, they were replaced by platitudes such as “the sale of children for prostitution increases day by day,” “is it a crisis of epidemic proportions,” or by exaggerations such as “children of only five are massively sold for prostitution”, or “they carry out up to 10 sexual services by night” as if this was the norm, or by metonyms such as “the price of one service is equivalent to the cost of a plate of noodles” (Mongomery 2001: 36). Today, similar subterfuges and assumptions are used to describe trafficking: “it is now acknowledged that trafficking is a global plea that spreads at alarming speed,” “human trafficking has attained an epidemic level,” or “the magnitude of both prostitution and sex trafficking is high and has greatly increased in recent years.”

A dilemma arises at this point. On the one hand, one cannot deny the need to assess the situation and to fulfill the social demand for statistical data. On the other hand, figures assessing an issue that is largely criminal, thus hardly visible, are typically unverifiable and incredibly elastic whereas in fact they should be handled with great caution. The real problem comes when these figures become generalities and are massively spread in Western societies thus reaching policy-makers. For instance, in the United States, the *Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act* was passed in late 2000 under Bush’s administration, and the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons within the State Department was created *inter alia*.¹² Every year this office publishes the *Trafficking in Persons Report* that assesses worldwide countries with regard to the situation of trafficking and efforts extended by the States to combat it. Notes range from Tier 1 to Tier 3 and “a country that fails to make significant efforts to bring itself into compliance with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking in persons, as outlined in the TVPA, receives a ‘Tier 3’ assessment. Such an assessment could trigger the withholding by the United States of non-humanitarian, of non-trade-related foreign assistance” (US State Department 2008: 5). Figures become a key element to enforce worldwide international norms and ideologies defined by the United States. Therefore one can easily understand that statistics become an obsession for diplomatic bodies, institutions from developing countries, and international aid organizations.

The “politics of pity”

Luc Boltanski (1993: 15) describes how Western households watch calamities like wars, natural disasters or epidemics every evening on TV news. He opposes two types of viewers’ reactions: compassion and a “politics of pity.” Compassion flees generalization and folds over individual human beings. Little emotional and rooted in silence, it leads to practical actions rather than words – what concrete action can I do now to relieve this person’s pain? The “politics of pity” consists of staging victims to distant viewers. This politic generalizes by reassembling individual situations. It also transforms the distance into temporary emotions. To be effective, the apparatus requires two elements: first, a division between men, some are marked by happiness and others by misfortune. These two groups are not linked by any sort of community, shared interest, friendship or kinship tie. Totally unconnected, the misfortunes of the second do not affect the life of the first. Second, the apparatus requires the observation “at distance” of the unfortunates by the fortunate ones. This apparatus generates two types of emotions rooted in pity. The first, tenderness, points towards beneficial action whereas the second, indignation, is built upon justice and points towards accusation. To be truly moved, the viewer must experience a genuine emotion that can only come from the inside. To do so, he needs to listen to his heart, his interiority. Indeed, an emotion felt inside is true simply because the heart does not lie. And since the heart does not deceive, emotions are truths that elude material evidence and overcome any doubt regarding the authenticity of the staged suffering. But observing suffering “at distance” raises a fundamental problem: how to conciliate the distance that separates the observer and the observed? On the one hand, the viewer enjoys a unique privilege because he can observe without being seen. On the other hand, the victim must be transported as if she was there. To do so, individual situations must be assembled and transported to the viewer’s eyes through a space-time shaped by modern technologies. The obstacle is easily overcome through imagination. The viewer does not identify with the victim, but rather he imagines who she is, what she feels, and why she suffers. The capacity to imagine others’ suffering is nurtured by representations and personal experiences. But the distance is also a safety valve as it avoids potential invasion into the viewer’s private space by wretched victims who therefore become monstrous. To establish a connection between the suffering of ones and the happiness of others, the apparatus deploys techniques to generalize. One is the principle of equivalence rooted in figures or statistical evidence, which has been discussed above. Another technique is comparison. Let’s consider the cliché of the Thai child selling flowers to tourists in central Bangkok streets. The call for commitment will point towards indignation if the victim’s figure contrasts with the opulence of wealthy and modern buildings surrounding the street.

Adding a third actor? Toward a strong commitment

Boltanski (1993: 122) adds a third actor to the tandem “victim/spectator” whose action directly affects the former. This agent can be physically present or

metaphorically suggested. He can be either a benefactor, who helps the victim and moves the viewer, or he can be a persecutor responsible for her outrage and is in charge to make the viewer feel indignant. At times, the persecutor's figure is clear: it is the mafia or the pedophile for Marie-France Botte, the trafficker, the brothel tenant and the corrupted police officer for *Barbadillo* or Human Rights Watch. Here, physical proximity facilitates condemnation, whereas in other cases distance complicates the connection. Indeed, how to consider an agonizing AIDS patient who regularly visits prostitutes in poor Cambodia? Is he a victim of the virus? Or should he be condemned for going to the brothel without protection? Who is the persecutor here? The sick client? The prostitute who contaminated him? The Ministry of Health that lacks adequate healthcare infrastructures? Or the pharmaceutical corporation that prohibits manufacturing generic anti-retroviral drugs at a cheap price? Given the fact that the link between the victim and the persecutor can be hard to erect, a direct and causal relationship is needed to guarantee an effective accusation. Things are easy when a police officer raids a hotel and photographs a pedophile molesting a naked child. They become more complex for cases like the HIV-positive client of prostitution. The threat is a key element to construct an efficient persecutor. Pedophile networks, human traffickers, or organized crime are representations of an enemy easily identifiable, necessarily condemned, and easily instrumentalized by policy-makers who therefore present trafficking a national security issue.

The benefactor is the doctor or the humanitarian employee rescuing victims – Botte dressing wounds of sexually abused children in the double-page of her book (Botte 1993: 123), the social worker distributing condoms, the teacher schooling rescued children in a shelter, the “savior” journalist who frees the slaves – Kristof in *Poipet*, the anthropologist in search of trafficked victims in Southeast Asia in *Barbadillo*'s film, or the head of an NGO raised as a charismatic hero. An example of the latter is Somaly Mam who, in 1996, founded the organization AFESIP-Cambodia. Mam has been awarded numerous prizes in recognition for her work and has become an international figure in the arena of sex trafficking in Southeast Asia. She clearly presents herself as a victim of the cause she fights, and justifies her accusation and her subsequent saving mission for the reason that she was herself sold and sexually exploited.¹³ A reader's reaction to her autobiography (Mam 2005) shows how indignation reveals:

Somaly! Hello! You are a woman that I would take in my arms if I could. You are a woman of heart, of character, of feelings, of life! I just finished reading your book, *Silence of the Innocence!* For the first time in my life I cried after reading a book. A book that sickens us about everything that takes place in the world and that is conveyed by humans! I knew that all this existed but I would have never thought that everything could be so horrible! All this suffering, this martyrdom, this physical and mental violence, if I could ... if we could ... but how to act! This should stop! You all have the right to be happy! I cried.

(Annie 2007)

At first, distance frustrates the reader, who is in symbiosis with the author. The suffering personified by Somaly is then generalized and magnified. Sensitivity is materialized by tears that trigger indignation and accusatory words against sexual slavery. But next, what can a distant viewer condemned to inaction do, if not feeling sympathy for the benefactor and contempt against the persecutor? Tenderness and indignation lead to commitment.

After the victim's suffering has been shown to the viewer, his action must be returned to the victim to avoid being accused of indifference, even though she is physically absent. The obligation to assist the victim is based on a moral responsibility, which in turn stems from causal liability. But what can the viewer do? According to Boltanski (1993: 34–37), he has three options: to pay, to speak, or to run off. *Paying* is an action that makes the viewer's good intention clear. "Mr. Kristof illustrates how very sad and atrocious this world can be, and also how a single act of courage can be so inspirational. Thank you for your article. My donation is off to Mr. Krisher"¹⁴ writes a reader in reaction to another of Kristof's columns about sex trafficking in Cambodia published in the *New York Times* in December 2006. Nevertheless, sending an impersonal check can be frustrating as it does not relieve immediately the victim's suffering, not to mention the risk of embezzlement to benefit the cause, and not the victim. In addition, the financial solution can be interpreted as being a quick way to get rid of the burden of guilt. The *accusatory word* has a major drawback since it appears far from action and it does not reveal its cost. Indeed, words do not reveal the magnitude of the sacrifice committed by the well-intentioned viewer. Generally, it precedes the action, that is to say sending the check, or a stronger commitment like volunteering. Finally, the viewer can *run off*, turn off the television, close the newspaper, or ignore the umpteenth call for donations, and eventually opt for defection. He therefore risks to be accused of indifference while knowing that suffering socially points towards a moral duty of assistance. In general, a strong focus on what is intolerable favors mobilization around issues of injustice that generate pity and indignation, which leads to the establishment of common causes. Indeed, nothing is more favorable to build humanitarian causes than the stage of human suffering. Child sex exploitation and sex trafficking are good examples.

Beyond representations

The "politics of pity" is an asymmetrical apparatus that distributes humanity unequally among staged actors. Generally, victims are described crudely whereas all power is given to narrators, spectators and third agents. If subjects have a social identity and a personal story, victims are only suffering bodies or passive objects that merely deserve social and medical treatment, while the idea of being taken in charge is already disabling in itself. If subjects are being given the right to speak, victims see this privilege lessen if not withdrawn. Victims lack initiative and are not very participative. Largely irresponsible, they don't respond for their moral or legal acts. Their destiny is fatally tragic, and only well-intentioned external actions can relieve their pain. However, it is important to note that for

“commercial sexual exploitation of children” or “sex trafficking,” the key issue is not biologic life but rather the victim’s autonomy. Indeed, the victimization process in which trafficked prostitutes are trapped doesn’t fall into the bias of the humanitarian emergency aid, which reduces victims to numbered biological organisms in need of urgent medical relief.

A pitfall must be avoided. If violence and exploitation are sad realities for some children, one should not believe that all Southeast Asian children involved in prostitution have been kidnapped, beaten and raped. The worst scenario might be true for a small number of minors who are deprived of freedom and forced to exert prostitution for little or no retribution. For them, assistance is needed and criminals shall be punished. However, such undeniable reality cannot lead to simplistic generalization as media and aid industry are still suggesting. Indeed, many alleged victims do not have the tragic life that many journalists or activists would imagine. As noted by Montgomery (2001: 39), some Thai children involved in prostitution do not fit with accommodating Western socially constructed categories. Not to deny the fact that women and children are victims of indomitable economic and political forces, or discriminated in terms of race – ethnic groups from the highlands are still deprived of basic rights and access to public services, gender – women still suffer from discrimination in some countries of Southeast Asia, and social class – economic marginalization leads to spatial segregation and to less access to instruction or job offers. Montgomery demonstrates how some children, who are certainly exploited by Western adults who buy their sexual services, use all strategies available for them to fulfill their obligations to assist peers or climb social positions, and more generally to find their ways in life. Paradoxically, she shows how some of these children are engaged in part-time prostitution but only for a short period of time because they know how to put an end to it. In doing so, they are aware of the mental and physical risks they endure, and they know how to effectively protect themselves. Montgomery’s children refuse Western sensitivity and behave like adults beforehand, thus scarifying the sympathy and privileges that childhood deserves. Others, as I have observed in shelters for sexually abused children in Cambodia, refuse literacy or vocational training classes offered by NGOs, which are sometimes too paternalistic or incapable to accept the fact that their beneficiaries prefer deserting shelters rather than attending vocational training classes, in order to return to prostitution because profits are higher and quicker than in other informal jobs. Montgomery findings might appear shocking, if not immoral, as they contradict the polished figure of the passive and helpless victim promoted by militants and media. Hereby the researcher walks on a thin line as intolerable issues, which allows little maneuver out of moral boundaries. Indeed, he risks to be accused of insanity, or worst of promoting child sexual exploitation.

Pushing the argument further, if the alleged victims are not totally dupe, and if they are aware of the risks they take, then they cease to be fully innocent and the common assumption that makes them victims collapses. The issue of consent, classic in prostitution debates either among activists or researchers, is here crucial. Part of the literature on adult prostitution (Agustin 2003; 2005) denies the

presumption of innocence, which characterizes the passive victim. Rather, it awards agency to migrant or trafficked prostitutes. If one cannot deny the fact that adult victims can be fully imprisoned by traffickers and pimps, it has been demonstrated that some others develop survival strategies that allow them to escape from criminals' power. The ratio between agency and victimization is nevertheless impossible to measure as it corresponds to intellectual postures. For adults, how to determine if migration is voluntary or involuntary if both options are often confused in a same trajectory? For minors, the issue of choice has simply been evacuated, while things seem to be slightly different in the field. Agency and victimization are two extreme positions centered around the inextricable issue of responsibility.

Notes

- 1 The author wishes to thank Thien Huong Nhin and Janine Guicheux for the English corrections. A different Spanish version of this paper has been published in (2009) *Revista de Antropologia Social*, 18: 297–316, and a shorter French version is forthcoming in *Migration et Societe*.
- 2 I will use the term “prostitute” rather than “sex worker” by habit and not by ideological choice. Indeed both terms imply different positions that need to be clarified. The “victim” tradition in feminist discourse focuses on politico-economic disadvantages that force women to choose prostitution as an economic alternative. Here the “victim” is viewed as needing help to reenter society as a proper member. The “sex-work” tradition focuses on the high-class or even the middle-class prostitution, and is an expressed opposition to the “victim” tradition above. It claims that those who enter prostitution without being coerced into it by a third party do so for economic reasons, and that prostitution therefore represents a form of work. Here the woman has made her choice and is liberated enough to deal rationally with her life. I am in sympathy with elements on both sides of the debate. On the one hand, I agree with “sex work” feminists' claim for prostitutes to be accorded the same protections and legal and political rights as their fellow citizens, even though in most Southeast Asian countries this is not the case. On the other hand, I do not celebrate the existence of a massive market for commoditized sex as is the case in the region, so I am in sympathy with the feminist abolitionist position too.
- 3 Torture, slavery, war crimes, sexual abuse or human trafficking are elements of what is considered as intolerable. These phenomena, which are perceived as unjustifiable, are socially and legally condemned. Generally, they are regarded as absolute evil, a crossing of moral boundaries historically constructed and therefore relative in time. The concept is further developed by Fassin and Bourdelais (2005: 7).
- 4 In 1995, the Dupont married couple accused Botte of embezzlement and breach of trust in Belgium. They claimed that the former nurse self-attributed merits of the Bangkok-based NGO Centre for the Protection of Children's Rights (CPCR) to raise funds, while she no longer worked for the organization.
- 5 It is what Boltanski (1993: 64) calls the “likeable balance” (*équilibre sympathique*) between the viewer's imaginative offer and the victim's need of attention.
- 6 Kristof details his casting of two trafficked prostitutes in his personal blog on January 20, 2004:

I should explain a bit how I came to choose Srey Neth and Srey Mom, of all the girls in Poipet, as the ones I would try to buy [...] Moreover, I wanted a girl who really wanted to leave prostitution. It's often a difficult adjustment back to the real

world from the sorority of the brothels, and girls who are rescued sometimes “escape” back to the brothels. So I looked for girls who seemed committed to resettling in their villages and who were sure about what they were doing [...] That, in turn, meant that girls who had been sold to the brothels by their own families were typically not suitable. If a girl had been trafficked once by her parents, she might be again. [...] That said, it was very difficult to choose. [...] It was a heart-breaking choice, with so many girls virtually enslaved in the brothels, to choose just one or two to try to free – particularly because AIDS is common enough in Cambodia that a long-term stay in the brothels is almost a death sentence”. Available HTTP: www.nytimes.com/pages/readersopinions/index.html (accessed August 8, 2009).

- 7 In 1988, the Ecumenical Coalition on Third World Tourism launched a study about child sex tourism in the Philippines, Thailand and Sri Lanka. The conclusions of the report were presented in 1990 at a symposium held in Chiang Mai. As a consequence some participants decided to initiate an international campaign to fight child sex tourism in Asia. ECPAT that stands for End Child Prostitution in Asia Tourism was born in Bangkok in August 1990.
- 8 As quoted by the US State Department (2008: 7) from the latest *Trafficking in Persons Report*: “Human traffickers prey on the vulnerable. Their targets are often children and young women, and their ploys are creative and ruthless, designed to trick, coerce, and win the confidence of potential victims. Very often these ruses involve promises of a better life through employment, educational opportunities, or marriage.”
- 9 The “United Nations Convention against organized cross border crime” and its additional protocol, signed in Palermo in 2000 defines the trafficking in persons as the

“recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation shall be irrelevant.”
- 10 The categorization “Madonna/whore” is developed by Darley (2006: 114) for trafficked women in Europe. The same prevails for Asian trafficked women representations.
- 11 It is widely accepted that the trade in youthful flesh is growing, the numbers of children involved are large, and a considerable proportion endure conditions close to slavery. A Special UN Rapporteur on The Sale of Children has been appointed. The Norwegian Government has informed the Council of Europe that: “Every year, one million children are either kidnapped, bought, or in other ways forced to enter the sex market” (Black 1994: 11, cited by Montgomery 2001: 38).
- 12 For a further discussion about the US-based international “moral crusade” against commercial sex, pornography and sex trafficking, refer to Weitzler’s (2007) excellent paper.
- 13 “Somaly was sold into a life of sexual slavery many times by a man who posed as her grandfather. At a very young age, she was forced to work in a brothel with many other young girls and they were all treated horrifically through torture, manipulation, and scare tactics. One night she watched a close friend murdered by a pimp. From this moment on, she made it her mission to escape and later find a way to stop this vicious cycle.” Quote from the website of Somaly’s Foundation, Section “Who we are,” “Somaly Mam Profile.” Available HTTP: www.somaly.org (accessed August 8, 2009)

- 14 Posted by Bob Williams on December 17, 2006 on Kristof blog. Krisher is the head of an NGO. Available HTTP: <http://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2006/12/14/helping-kahan-and-others-in-cambodia> (accessed August 8, 2009).

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