

CHAPTER TWO

Prohibition and Prostitution

Although volume upon volume is written to prove slavery a very good thing, we never hear of the man who wishes to take the good of it, by being a slave himself.

— ABRAHAM LINCOLN

After visiting Meena Hasina and Ruchira Gupta in Bihar, Nick crossed from India into Nepal at a border village crowded with stalls selling clothing, snacks, and more sinister wares. That border crossing is the one through which thousands of Nepali girls are trafficked into India on their way to the brothels of Kolkata. There they are valued for their light skin, good looks, docility, and inability to speak the local language, hindering the possibility of escape. As Nick filled out some required paperwork at the border post, Nepalis streamed into India, without filling out a form.

While sitting in the border shack, Nick began talking with one Indian officer who spoke excellent English. The man said he had been dispatched by the intelligence bureau to monitor the border.

"So what exactly are you monitoring?" Nick asked.

"We're looking for terrorists, or terror supplies," said the man, who wasn't monitoring anything very closely, since one truck after another was driving past. "After 9/11, we've tightened things up here. And we're also looking for smuggled or pirated goods. If we find them, we'll confiscate them."

"What about trafficked girls?" Nick asked. "Are you keeping an eye out for them? There must be a lot."

"Oh, a lot. But we don't worry about them. There's nothing you can do about them."

"Well, you could arrest the traffickers. Isn't trafficking girls as important as pirating DVDs?"

The intelligence officer laughed genially and threw up his hands.

"Prostitution is inevitable." He chuckled. "There has always been prostitution in every country. And what's a young man going to do from the time when he turns eighteen until when he gets married at thirty?"

"Well, is the best solution really to kidnap Nepali girls and imprison them in Indian brothels?"

The officer shrugged, unperturbed. "It's unfortunate," he agreed. "These girls are sacrificed so that we can have harmony in society. So that good girls can be safe."

"But many of the Nepali girls being trafficked are good girls, too."

"Oh, yes, but those are peasant girls. They can't even read. They're from the countryside. The good Indian middle-class girls are safe."

Nick, who had been gritting his teeth, offered an explosive suggestion: "I've got it! You know, in the United States we have a lot of problems with harmony in society. So we should start kidnapping Indian middle-class girls and forcing them to work in brothels in the United States! Then young American men could have fun, too, don't you think? That would improve our harmony in society!"

There was an ominous silence, but finally the police officer roared with laughter.

"You are joking!" the officer said, beaming. "That's very funny!"

Nick gave up.

People get away with enslaving village girls for the same reason that people got away with enslaving blacks two hundred years ago: The victims are perceived as discounted humans. India had delegated an intelligence officer to look for pirated goods because it knew that the United States cares about intellectual property. When India feels that the West cares as much about slavery as it does about pirated DVDs, it will dispatch people to the borders to stop traffickers.

The tools to crush modern slavery exist, but the political will is lacking. That must be the starting point of any abolitionist movement. We're not arguing that Westerners should take up this cause because it's the fault of the West; Western men do not play a central role in prostitution in most poor countries. True, American and European sex tourists are part of the problem in Thailand, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Belize, but they are still only a small percentage of the Johns. The vast majority are local men. Moreover, Western men usually go with girls who are more or less voluntary prostitutes, because they want to take the girls back to their hotel rooms, while forced prostitutes are not normally allowed out of the brothels. So this is not a case where we



A Cambodian teenager, kidnapped and sold to a brothel, in the room where she works

(Nicholas D. Kristof)

in the West have a responsibility to lead because we're the source of the problem. Rather, we sin- gle out the West because, even though we're peripheral to the slavery, our action is necessary to overcome a horrific evil.

One reason the modern abolitionist movement hasn't been more effective is the divisive politics of prostitution. In the 1990s, the American left and right collaborated and achieved the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, which was a milestone in raising awareness of international trafficking on the global agenda. The anti- trafficking movement then was unusually bipartisan, strongly backed by some liberal Democrats, such as the late senator Paul Wellstone, and by some conservative Republicans, such as Senator Sam Brown- back. Hillary Rodham Clinton was also a leader on this issue, and no one has been a greater champion than Carolyn Maloney, a Democratic congresswoman from New York. Likewise, one of George W. Bush's few positive international legacies was a big push against trafficking. Vital Voices and other liberal groups were stalwart on sex trafficking, as were International Justice Mission and other conservative evangeli- cal groups. Yet while the left and the right each do important work fighting trafficking, they mostly do it separately. The abolitionist move- ment would be far more effective if it forged unity in its own ranks.

One reason for discord is a dispute about how to regard prostitu- tion. The left often refers nonjudgmentally to "sex workers" and tends to be tolerant of transactions among consenting adults. The

right, joined by some feminists, refers to "prostitutes" or "prostituted women" and argues that prostitution is inherently demeaning and offensive. The result of this bickering is a lack of cooperation in combatting what *everybody* believes is abhorrent: forced prostitution and child prostitution.

"The debate is being carried on in a theoretical framework at universities," Ruchira Gupta of Apne Aap said, rolling her eyes, as she sat in her old family home in Bihar after a day in the red-light district. "Very few of those theorists come to the grassroots and see what is going on. The whole debate about what we should call the problem is irrelevant. What is relevant is that children are being enslaved."

What policy should we pursue to try to eliminate that slavery? Originally, we sympathized with the view that a prohibition won't work any better against prostitution today than it did against alcohol in America in the 1920s. Instead of trying fruitlessly to ban prostitution, we believed it would be preferable to legalize and regulate it. That pragmatic "harm reduction" model is preferred by many aid groups, because it allows health workers to pass out condoms and curb the spread of AIDS, and it permits access to brothels so that they can more easily be checked for underage girls.

Over time, we've changed our minds. That legalize-and-regulate model simply hasn't worked very well in countries where prostitution is often coerced. Partly that's because governance is often poor, so the regulation is ineffective, and partly it's that the legal brothels tend to attract a parallel illegal business in young girls and forced prostitution. In contrast, there's empirical evidence that crackdowns can succeed, when combined with social services such as job retraining and drug rehabilitation, and that's the approach we've come to favor. In countries with widespread trafficking, we favor a law enforcement strategy that pushes for fundamental change in police attitudes and regular police inspections to check for underage girls or anyone being held against their will. That means holding governments accountable not just to pass laws but also to enforce them, and monitoring how many brothels are raided and pimps are arrested. Jail-like brothels should be closed down, sting operations should be mounted against buyers of virgin girls, and national police chiefs must be under pressure to crack down on corruption as it relates to trafficking. The idea is to reduce the brothel owners' profits.

We won't eliminate prostitution. In Iran, brothels are strictly

banned, and the mayor of Tehran was a law-and-order hard-liner until, according to Iranian news accounts, he was arrested in a police raid on a brothel where he was in the company of six naked prostitutes. So crackdowns don't work perfectly, but they tend to lead nervous police to demand higher bribes, which reduces profitability for the pimps. Or the police will close down at least those brothels that aren't managed by other police officers. With such methods, we can almost certainly reduce the number of fourteen-year-old girls who are held in cages until they die of AIDS.

"It's pretty doable," says Gary Haugen, who runs International Justice Mission. "You don't have to arrest everybody. You just have to get enough that it sends a ripple effect and changes the calculations. That changes the pimps' behavior. You can drive traffickers of virgin village girls to fence stolen radios instead."

Many liberals and feminists are taken aback by the big stick approach we advocate, arguing that it just drives sex establishments underground. They argue instead for a legalize-and-regulate model based on empowerment of sex workers, and they cite a success: the Sonagachi Project.

Sonagachi, which means "golden tree," is a sprawling red-light district in Kolkata. In the 1700s and 1800s, it had been a legendary locale for concubines. Today it has hundreds of multistory brothels built along narrow alleys, housing more than six thousand prostitutes. In the early 1990s, health experts were deeply concerned by the spread of AIDS in India, and in 1992 they started the Sonagachi Project with the backing of the World Health Organization (WHO). A key element was to nurture a union of sex workers, Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), which would encourage condom use and thus reduce the spread of HIV through prostitution.

DMSC seemed successful in encouraging the use of condoms. It publicized its role as a pragmatic solution to the public health problems of prostitution. One study found that the Sonagachi Project increased consistent condom use by 25 percent. A 2005 study found that only 9.6 percent of Sonagachi sex workers were infected with HIV, compared to about 50 percent in Mumbai (the city formerly known as Bombay), where there was no sex workers' union. DMSC became media-savvy and offered tours of Sonagachi, emphasizing that its members block the arrival of underage or unwilling girls, and that selling sex is at least a way for unskilled female laborers to earn a

decent income. The Sonagachi model has also had the indirect support of both CARE and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, two organizations that we greatly respect. And many development experts have applauded the model.

As we probed the numbers, however, we saw that they were flimsier than they at first appeared. HIV prevalence was inexplicably high among new arrivals to Sonagachi—27.7 percent among sex workers aged twenty or younger. Research had also shown that, initially, all sex workers interviewed in Sonagachi claimed to use condoms nearly all the time. But when pressed, they admitted lower rates: Only 56 percent said they had used condoms consistently with their last three customers. Moreover, the contrast with Mumbai was misleading, because southern and western India had always had far higher HIV rates than northern and eastern India. Indeed, at the time the Sonagachi Project began in Kolkata, HIV prevalence among sex workers in Mumbai was already 51 percent and in Kolkata 1 percent, according to a study by the Harvard School of Public Health. DMSC may well have encouraged the use of condoms, but the public health benefits seem more modest than supporters claim.

Nick criticized DMSC on his blog, and an Indian responded:

It never ceases to amaze me how supposedly feminist, progressive thinkers like you often get weak-kneed at the prospect of women actually owning decisions about sex and work. . . . It is highly unsavory of you to exploit the difficult stories of sex workers as an argument against sex work as a profession at a time when sex workers are finally making some headway in creating safety for themselves. Your stance . . . smacks of the Western missionary position of rescuing brown savages from their fate.

Many Indian liberals agree with that perspective. But we heard contrary views from women with long experience fighting trafficking in the red-light districts of Kolkata. One is Ruchira Gupta. Another is Urmi Basu, who runs a foundation called New Light that fights for current and former prostitutes. Both Ruchira and Urmi say that DMSC has become a front for the brothel owners, and that well-meaning Western support for DMSC has provided cover for traffickers.

Urmi introduced us to Geeta Ghosh, who portrayed a very different Sonagachi than the one seen on DMSC tours. Geeta grew up in a poor

village in Bangladesh and fled from abusive parents when she was eleven. A friend's "aunt" offered to help Geeta and took her to Sonagachi, where the aunt turned out to be a brothel owner. Geeta never saw any hint that DMSC was blocking the trafficking of girls like her.

At first, the aunt treated Geeta well. But when Geeta was twelve, the aunt dolled her up with a new hairstyle, gave her a skimpy dress, and locked her in a room with an Arab customer.

"I was terrified to see this huge man in front of me," she said. "I cried a lot and fell to his feet, pleading. But I couldn't make him understand me. He pulled off my dress, and the rapes went on for a month like that. He made me sleep naked beside him, and he drank a lot. . . . It was a very painful experience. I had lots of bleeding."

During her first three years as a prostitute in Sonagachi, Geeta was not allowed outside and had none of the freedoms that DMSC claims exist. She was beaten regularly with sticks and threatened with a butcher's knife.

"There was a big drain in the house for sewage," Geeta recalled. "The madam said, 'If you ever try to run away, we'll chop you up and throw the pieces down this drain.'" As far as Geeta could see, the supposed campaign by DMSC to prevent trafficking was simply an illusion peddled to outsiders. Even when she was finally allowed to stand on the street outside the brothel to wave to customers, she was closely watched. Contradicting the notion that the girls get a decent income, Geeta was never paid a single rupee for her work. It was slave labor, performed under threat of execution. Other women who worked in Sonagachi after DMSC took control offered similar stories.

Anybody can walk through Sonagachi in the evening and see the underage girls. Nick toured Sonagachi several times, entering the brothels seemingly as a potential customer. He saw many young girls but wasn't allowed to take them off the premises, presumably for fear that that they would flee. And because they spoke only Bengali, Nepali, or Hindi, and he speaks none of those languages, he couldn't interview them. But Anup Patel, a Hindi-speaking medical student at Yale University, conducted research on condom use in Kolkata in 2005. He found that not only is the price of sex in Sonagachi negotiated between the customer and the brothel owner (rather than with the girl herself), but the customer can pay the brothel owner a few extra rupees for the right not to use a condom. The girl has no say in that.

Anup joined a DMSC tour and listened as a madam boasted how

almost all of the prostitutes come to Sonagachi on their own to enter "the noble profession of sex work." In one brothel, Anup and two others sat on a bed in the back, near a prostitute who was listening mutely as the madam claimed that the girls chose voluntarily to earn the quick money and human rights that DMSC can assure them. He explained:

While the madam spoke with others in the room, gushing about the group's success, the three of us on the bed asked the prostitute in Hindi to tell us if those things were true. Afraid and timid, the prostitute remained silent until we assured her that we wouldn't get her in trouble. Barely audible, she told us that almost none of the prostitutes in Sonagachi came with aspirations of becoming a sex worker. Most of them, like herself, were trafficked.... When I asked her if she wanted to leave Sonagachi, her eyes lit up; before she could say anything, the DMSC official put her hand on my back and said that it was time to move on....

We continued to the next brothel on the tour, passing hundreds of prostitutes along the way. A person in our group asked if we could visit Neel Kamal, the brothel that was rumored to still prostitute minors. The DMSC official quickly rejected the idea, suggesting that the DMSC had not asked for prior permission and didn't want to violate the prostitutes' rights before warning them. Big talk goes far in India—faced with a stern threat to "make the appropriate phone calls" if the terrified-looking DMSC official did not cooperate, she took us in the direction of the notorious Neel Kamal.

Five pimps guarded the locked gate that marked the entrance to the multistory brothel. While one pimp unlocked the gate, the four others ran inside with a clarion call: "Visitors are here!" Our group rushed in, climbing the staircase to the first floor, but stopped dead in our tracks: Dozens of girls, no older than sixteen, with bright red lipstick, began running down the dingy hallways, disappearing into hidden rooms.

The pimps kept shouting as the DMSC official told us to remain still. Everywhere I looked, girls were fleeing. In the meantime, I had managed to block a doorway where two teenage girls, no more than fourteen years old, were sprawled on the bed with their legs wide open, their genitals visible through denim miniskirts.

While the Sonagachi Project enjoyed some success in curbing AIDS, there is an intriguing contrast with the big-stick approach taken in Mumbai. Mumbai's brothels historically were worse than Kolkata's, and they are famous for the "cage girls" who were held behind bars in brothels. Yet as a result of crackdowns, in part because of American pressure, the number of prostitutes in central Mumbai fell sharply over several years. The central red-light district of Mumbai may have just six thousand prostitutes today, down from thirty-five thousand a decade ago. The number in Sonagachi remained unchanged.

It's true that the crackdown in Mumbai drove some brothels underground. That made it hard to determine how successful the crackdown truly was, and also harder to provide condoms and medical services to prostitutes. It's possible that HIV prevalence among them rose, although it's impossible to be sure because there is no way to test girls in clandestine brothels. But the crackdown also made prostitution less profitable for brothel owners, and so the price of a girl bought or sold among Mumbai's brothels tumbled. Thus traffickers instead began shipping young flesh to Kolkata, where they could get a better price. That suggests that there is now less trafficking into Mumbai, which represents at least some success.

The Netherlands and Sweden highlight the differences between the big-stick approach and the legalize-and-regulate model. In 2000, the Netherlands formally legalized prostitution (which had always been tolerated) in the belief that it would then be easier to provide health and labor checks to prostitutes, and to keep minors and trafficking victims from taking up the trade. In 1999, Sweden took the opposite approach, criminalizing the purchase of sexual services, but not the sale of them by prostitutes; a man caught paying for sex is fined (in theory, he can be imprisoned for up to six months), while the prostitute is not punished. This reflected the view that the prostitute is more a victim than a criminal.

A decade later, Sweden's crackdown seems to have been more successful in reducing trafficking and forced prostitution. The number of prostitutes in Sweden dropped by 41 percent in the first five years, according to one count, and the price of sex dropped, too—a pretty good indication that demand was down. Swedish prostitutes are unhappy with the change, because of the falling prices, but that decline has made Sweden a less attractive destination for traffickers. Indeed,

some traffickers believe that trafficking girls into Sweden is no longer profitable and that girls should be taken to Holland instead. Swedes themselves believe the measure has been a success, although it was controversial at the time it was instituted; one poll showed that 81 percent of Swedes approved of the law.

In the Netherlands, legalization has facilitated health checkups for women in the legal brothels, but there's no evidence that sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) or HIV has declined. Pimps in the Netherlands still offer underage girls, and trafficking and forced prostitution continue. At least initially, the number of illegal prostitutes increased, apparently because Amsterdam became a center for sex tourism. The Amsterdam City Council found the sex tourism and criminality so vexing that in 2003 it ended its experiment with "tolerance zones" for street prostitution, although it retained legal brothels. The bottom line? Customers can easily find an underage Eastern European girl working as a prostitute in Amsterdam, but not in Stockholm.

Other European countries have concluded that Sweden's experiment has been more successful and are now moving toward that model. We would also like to see some American states try to determine if it is feasible in the United States as well.

In the developing world, however, this difficult, polarizing debate is mostly just a distraction. In India, for example, brothels are technically illegal—but, as we said earlier, they are ubiquitous; the same is true in Cambodia. In poor countries, the law is often irrelevant, particularly outside the capital. Our focus has to be on changing reality, not changing laws.

Congress took an important step in that direction in 2000 by requiring the State Department to put out an annual Trafficking in Persons Report—the TIP report. The report ranks countries according to how they tackle trafficking, and those in the lowest tier are sanctioned. This meant that for the first time U.S. embassies abroad had to gather information on trafficking. American diplomats began holding discussions with their foreign ministry counterparts, who then had to add trafficking to the list of major concerns such as proliferation and terrorism. As a result, the foreign ministries made inquiries of the national police agencies.

Simply asking questions put the issue on the agenda. Countries

began passing laws, staging crackdowns, and compiling fact sheets. Pimps found that the cost of bribing police went up, eroding their profit margins.

This approach can be taken further. Within the State Department, the trafficking office has been marginalized, even relegated to another building. If the secretary of state publicly and actively embraced the trafficking office, taking its director along on relevant trips, for instance, that would elevate the issue's profile. The president could visit a shelter like Apne Aap's on a state visit to India. Europe should have made trafficking an issue in negotiating the accession of Eastern European countries wishing to enter the European Union, and it can still make this an issue for Turkey in that regard.

The big-stick approach should focus in particular on the sale of virgins. Such transactions, particularly in Asia, account for a disproportionate share of trafficker profits and kidnappings of young teenagers. And the girls, once raped, frequently resign themselves to being prostitutes until they die. It is often rich Asians, particularly overseas Chinese, who are doing the buying—put a few of them in jail, and good things will happen: The market for virgins will quickly shrink, their price will drop, gangs will shift to less risky or more profitable lines of business, the average age of prostitutes will rise somewhat, and the degree of compulsion in prostitution will diminish as well.

We saw such a shift in Svay Pak, a Cambodian village that used to be one of the most notorious places in the world for sex slavery. On Nick's first visit, brothels there had seven- and eight-year-old girls for sale. Nick was taken for a prospective customer and was allowed to talk to a thirteen-year-old girl who had been sold to the brothel and was waiting in terror for the sale of her virginity. But then the State Department began putting out the TIP report and severely criticized Cambodia, media reports put a spotlight on Cambodian slavery of girls, and the International Justice Mission opened an office there. Svay Pak became a symbol of sexual slavery, and the Cambodian government decided that the bribes paid by the brothel owners weren't worth the hassle and embarrassment. So the police cracked down.

The last couple of times Nick visited Svay Pak, girls were not openly on display and the front gates of the brothels were chained. Brothel owners, imagining him to be a customer, nervously whisked him inside the back entrances and brought out a few prostitutes, but there seemed

to be at most only one tenth as many as there had been. And when Nick asked to see young girls or virgins, the owners said they were out of stock and would have to make arrangements to bring one in for an appointment a day or two later. This is a sign that meaningful progress is possible. Some degree of prostitution will probably always be with us, but we need not acquiesce to widespread sexual slavery.

Rescuing Girls Is the Easy Part

We became slave owners in the twenty-first century the old-fashioned way: We paid cash in exchange for two slave girls and a couple of receipts. The girls were then ours to do with as we liked.

Rescuing girls from brothels is the easy part, however. The challenge is keeping them from returning. The stigma that the girls feel in their communities after being freed, coupled with drug dependencies or threats from pimps, often lead them to return to the red-light district. It's enormously dispiriting for well-meaning aid workers who oversee a brothel raid to take the girls back to a shelter and give them food and medical care, only to see the girls climb over the back wall.

Our unusual purchase came about when Nick traveled with Naka Nathaniel, then a *New York Times* videographer, to an area in northwestern Cambodia notorious for its criminality. Nick and Naka arrived in the town of Poipet and checked in to an \$8-a-night guesthouse that doubled as a brothel. They focused their interviews on two teenage girls, Srey Neth and Srey Momm, each in a different brothel.

Neth was very pretty, short and light-skinned. She looked fourteen or fifteen, but she thought she was older than that; she had no idea of her actual birth date. A woman pimp brought her to Nick's room, and she sat on the bed, quivering with fear. She had been in the brothel only a month, and Nick would have been her first foreign customer. Nick needed his interpreter present in the room as well, and this puzzled the pimp, who nevertheless accommodated.

Black hair fell over Neth's shoulders and onto her tight pink T-shirt. Below, she wore equally tight blue jeans, and sandals. Neth had plump cheeks, but the rest of her was thin and fragile; thick makeup caked her face in a way that seemed incongruous, as if she were a child who had played with her mother's cosmetics.

After some awkward conversation through the interpreter, as Nick asked Neth about how she had grown up and about her family, she began to calm down. She stopped trembling and mostly looked in the direction of the television in the corner of the room, which Nick had put on to muffle the sound of their voices. She responded to questions briefly and without interest.



For the first five minutes, Neth claimed that she was selling her body of her own volition. She insisted that she was free to come and go as she pleased. But when it became clear that this wasn't some sort of test by her pimp, and that she wouldn't be beaten for telling the truth, she recounted her story in a dull monotone.

A female cousin had taken Neth from their village, telling the family that Neth would be selling fruit in Poipet. Once in Poipet, Neth was sold to the brothel and closely guarded. After a check by a doctor confirmed that her hymen was intact, the brothel auctioned her virginity to a Thai casino manager, who locked her up in a hotel room for several days and slept with her three times (he later died of AIDS). Now Neth was confined to the guesthouse and was young enough and light-skinned enough to rent for top rates.

"I can walk around in Poipet, but only with a close relative of the owner," Neth explained. "They keep me under close watch. They do not let me go out alone. They're afraid I would run away."

"So why not escape at night?" Nick asked.

"They would get me back, and something bad would happen. Maybe a beating. I heard that when a group of girls tried to escape, they locked them in the rooms and beat them up."

What about the police? Could the girls go to the police for help?

Neth shrugged uninterestedly. "The police wouldn't help me because they get bribes from the brothel owners," she said in her robotic way, still staring at the television.

"Would you want to leave here? If you were set free, what would you do?"

Neth suddenly looked away from the television, a flash of interest in her eyes.

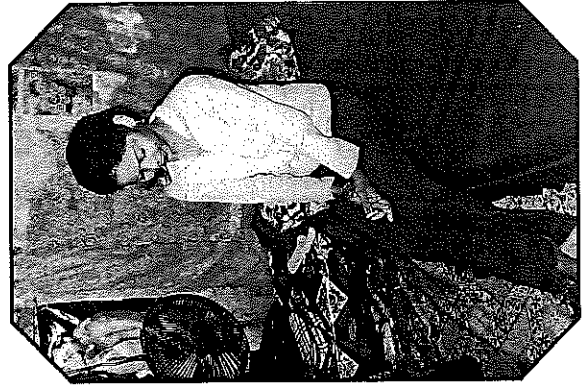
"I'd go back home," she said, and she seemed to be gauging whether the question was serious. "Back to my family. I'd like to try to open a little shop to make money."

"Do you really want to leave?" Nick asked. "If I were to buy you from the brothel and take you back to your village, are you absolutely sure that you wouldn't come back to this?"

Neth's listlessness abruptly disappeared. She turned completely away from the television, and the glaze slipped away from her eyes. "This is a hell," she snorted, speaking with passion for the first time. "You think I want to do this?"

So, quietly and carefully, Nick schemed with Neth to buy her from the brothel owners and take her back to her family. After some dickering, Neth's owner sold her for \$150 and gave Nick a receipt.

In a different brothel, we met Momm, a frail girl with oversized eyes who had been pimped for five years and seemed near to cracking from the strain. One moment Momm would laugh and tell jokes, and the



Momm in her room in the brothel in Poipet
(Nicholas D. Kristof)

next she would dissolve into sobs and rage, but she pleaded to be purchased, freed, and taken back to her home. We negotiated with Momm's owner, who eventually sold her for \$203 and filled out the receipt.

We took the girls out of town and back to their families. Neth's home was closer, and we left her money to open a little grocery store in her village. Initially it thrived. American Assistance for Cambodia agreed to look after her and help her. Neth had been away for only six weeks, and her family accepted her story that she had been selling vegetables and welcomed her home without suspicion.

Momm lived all the way across Cambodia, and with every passing mile of our long drive, she became more anxious about whether her family would accept or reject her. It had been five years since she had run away and then been sold into a brothel, and she had had no communication with her family. Momm was bouncing up and down nervously as we finally approached her village. Suddenly she screamed and, although the car was still moving, yanked open the door and leaped out. She hurtled over to a middle-aged woman who was staring wonderingly at the vehicle, and then the woman, Momm's aunt, was screaming as well and they were embracing and crying.

A moment later, it seemed as if everybody in the village was shrieking and running up to Momm. Momm's mother was at her stall in the market a mile away when a child ran up to tell her that Momm had returned. Her mother started sprinting back to the village, tears streaming down her cheeks. She embraced her daughter, who was trying to drop to the ground to beg forgiveness, and they both tumbled down. It was ninety minutes before the shouting died away and the eyes dried, and then there was an impromptu feast. Family members may have suspected that Momm had been trafficked, but they didn't press her when she said vaguely that she had been working in western Cambodia. The family decided that Momm would sell meat in a stall in the market right next to her mother, and Nick left some money to finance the project. American Assistance for Cambodia agreed to monitor Momm and assist her transition, and in the next few days Momm phoned repeatedly with updates.

"We've rented the stall right next to my mom's, and I'll be working there tomorrow," she told us. "Everything is going great. I'll never go back to Poipet."

A week later, an excruciating e-mail arrived from Lor Chandara, our interpreter.

Very bad, bad news. Srey Momm has voluntarily gone back to the Poipet brothel, according to her father. I asked the father if anyone beat or blamed her but he told me that nothing bad had happened to her. She left the village at 8 a.m. on Monday without telling her family. Srey Momm left her phone with the family, and she called them last night to tell them that she is in Poipet.

Momm, like many brothel girls, had become addicted to methamphetamines. Often the brothel owners give girls meth to keep them compliant and dependent. In her village, the craving had overwhelmed her, and she was consumed by the need to go back to the brothel and get some meth.

As soon as she had gotten her fix, Momm wanted to leave the brothel. Bernie Krisher of American Assistance for Cambodia set her up in Phnom Penh twice more, but each time she ran away after a few days, desperate to get back to her meth supply. Momm is by no means a "hard woman"—she's sweet, even a bit cloying, and is always buying gifts for her friends and praying at the Buddhist altar for divine intervention on their behalf. She yearned to leave the brothel behind, but she could not overcome her addiction.

The next time we visited Poipet, a full year had passed. When Nick walked into Momm's brothel, she saw him and dashed away in tears. After she had composed herself, she came out and kneeled on the floor and begged forgiveness.

"I never lie to people, but I lied to you," she said forlornly. "I said I would not come back, and I did. I didn't want to return, but I did."

Neth and Momm underscore that many prostitutes are neither acting freely nor enslaved, but living in a world etched in ambiguities somewhere between those two extremes. After her return, Momm was bound to the brothel by drugs and debts, but the owner let her leave freely with customers, and Momm could easily have escaped if she had wanted to do so.

Over the years, as she grew older, Momm's price to customers dropped to just \$1.50 per session. She was assigned a roommate to

share her cubicle in the brothel, except when either was entertaining a man. The new roommate, Wen Lok, was a sixteen-year-old who had run away from home after the family's motorcycle was stolen from her; she couldn't bear to face her father's wrath and fled. A trafficker promised her a job as a hotel maid in Poipet and then sold her to Momm's brothel, where she was beaten until she accepted customers. Momm became the new girl's minder, ensuring that she did not escape.

Momm had been brutalized for years in the brothels, but now she seemed to be slipping into a managerial role; if that continued, she would be breaking young girls into the business—or beating them, just as she herself had been beaten. The slave was becoming the overseer.

Yet that fate did not come to pass—and it was a crackdown on the brothels that ended Momm's managerial trajectory. Momm's brothel was owned by a middle-aged woman named Sok Khorn, who was always complaining about the business. "It's only barely profitable, and it's a huge amount of work," she would moan as she sat in the foyer of the brothel (which was also her family home). "Plus those drunken men—they're often so unpleasant—and the cops always have their hands out." Sok Khorn's disillusionment arose in part because her husband never did any chores in the brothel but constantly had sex with the girls, outraging her; they finally divorced. In addition, her daughter had reached the age of thirteen, and Sok Khorn worried about her as she did her homework in the foyer, with drunken men barging in and reaching out for anything female. The final straw came in 2008, when the Cambodian authorities reacted to growing Western pressure by cracking down on sex trafficking. That raised the cost of new girls, and the police began to demand larger bribes from the brothel owners. Any cop in the neighborhood would drop by and demand \$5. At that point, about half the brothels in Poipet folded. Sok Khorn announced in disgust that she would try something else as well. "It wasn't making money, so I gave up and thought I'd open a little grocery shop," she said.

None of the other brothels was buying girls, so Momm suddenly found herself free. It was a giddy but scary feeling. She hurriedly married one of her customers, a policeman, and they settled down together in his house. Over Christmas vacation 2008, we took our family to Cambodia—including our three children—and had a joyous meeting

with Momm in Poipet. "I'm a housewife now," she told us, beaming with pride. "I don't have any customers now. I've left that life forever."

As for Neth, her new grocery shop initially did a booming business, since there was no other store in the village. She and her family were thrilled. But when other villagers saw Neth's business flourishing, they opened their own shops. Soon the village had a half-dozen stores. Neth found her sales faltering.

Worse, Neth's family continued to regard her as a foolish little girl with no rights. So any man in the family who needed something took it from Neth's store—sometimes paying, sometimes not. When a Cambodian festival rolled around, the men in Neth's family didn't have enough money to buy food for a feast, so they came to raid her shop. Neth protested.

Her mother recalled later: "Neth got mad. She said we [the family] had to stay away, or everything would be gone. She said she had to have money to buy new things." But in a Cambodian village, nobody listens to an uneducated teenage girl. The feast went ahead, the store was emptied. Afterward, Neth had no money to replenish her inventory. Four months after the shop had opened, her business plan had collapsed.

Mortified that her capital was gone, Neth began to discuss with a few girlfriends the idea of seeking jobs in a city. A trafficker promised to get the girls jobs as dishwashers in Thailand. But the girls would have to pay \$100 to be smuggled there, money they didn't have, so they would have to go into debt to the trafficker. That's a classic means of gaining leverage over girls: The debts mount with exorbitant interest rates, and when girls can't repay the loans, the trafficker sells them to a brothel.

Neth fretted about the risks but was desperate to make money. Her father had tuberculosis and was coughing up blood, and there was no money for treatment. So she decided to brave the risk and go to Thailand. Just as Neth and her girlfriends were about to leave, an aid worker from American Assistance for Cambodia dropped by to see how she was getting on. The aid worker, wary of the trafficker's enticements, persuaded Neth not to take the risk. But what could Neth do instead?

Bernie Krisher of American Assistance for Cambodia tried another

approach. He arranged for Neth to move to Phnom Penh and study hairdressing at Sapor's, the best beauty shop in the city. Neth lived in the American Assistance compound and studied English on the side, while working full-time in the beauty shop, learning to cut hair and give manicures. She placed third in a competition to apply makeup, and she lived sedately and quietly, pouring all her energy into her studies.

"I'm happy with Srey Neth," the owner, Sapor Rendall, said at the time. "She studies hard." Sapor said she had just one problem with Neth: "She doesn't want to do massage. I've talked to her about it many times, but she's very reluctant." Neth never dared explain to Sapor the reason for her timidity about massages. In a respectable beauty shop like Sapor's, they are not sexual, but for a girl with Neth's past, the notion of administering any kind of massage conjured horrible memories.

Over time, Neth mellowed. She had always been very thin and a bit somber, but she put on a bit of weight and became relaxed, sometimes even vivacious and giggly. She was acting the way a teenager should, and boys noticed. They flirted with her. She ignored them.

"I stay away from them," she explained dryly. "I don't want to play around with boys. I just want to learn hairdressing, so that I can open my own salon."

Neth decided that after completing her course she would work as a beautician in a small beauty shop, to get experience in managing a business. Then, after a year or so, she would open her own shop in the provincial town of Battambang, near her village. That way she could look after her father, as well as raise money to get him medical treatment.

Then Neth's health began to decline. She suffered inexplicable fevers and headaches that persisted for months, and she lost some of the weight she had recently put on. She went to a clinic in Battambang, and the staff gave her a routine AIDS test. Half an hour later, they handed her a slip of paper: The test was positive for HIV.

Neth was shattered. She walked out of the clinic with the paper crumpled up in her hand. In rural Cambodia, an HIV diagnosis felt like a death sentence, and Neth didn't think she had long to live. She spent days crying, and she couldn't sleep at night. Neth was not one to confide in others or to express emotion, but the pressure built inside

her, and she finally shared her bad news with us. American Assistance for Cambodia tried to get her medical treatment, but Neth thought it was hopeless. She was taut with denial and rage, and she drifted back to her village so she could die near her family. A young man named Sothea began courting her. He was a catch for a peasant girl like her: a college-educated man who spoke some English. Tall and scholarly, he was older and more mature, but thrilled to have found such a beautiful woman. She curtly fended him off, but he wouldn't listen.

"When I fell in love with Srey Neth, she discouraged me," Sothea said. "She told me: 'I am poor. I live near Battambang [he is from Phnom Penh]. Don't love me.' But I told her that I still loved her and would love her to the end."

Neth found herself falling for him. Soon he asked her to marry him. She agreed. Neth told him that she had worked in Poipet and was friends with an American journalist, but she balked at acknowledging that she had been a prostitute—or that she had tested positive for HIV. Her secret nagged at her constantly, but she never dared confide.

Soon after the wedding, Neth became pregnant. If a pregnant woman takes a drug called nevirapine before childbirth and does not breast-feed afterward, she can drastically reduce the risk of infecting her child with HIV. But to take that route, Neth would have to tell Sothea that she was HIV positive and had contracted the disease as a prostitute. It was wrenching to watch Neth and Sothea during the pregnancy, because Sothea was so much in love with a woman who was secretly endangering his life and their child's life.

One afternoon we were sitting outside their house as Sothea told us how his parents had looked down on Neth, because she had worked for a time in a restaurant. They considered that low-class behavior for a young woman. "My parents are mad at me, but I promised Srey Neth that I would love her forever," Sothea said. "My parents said they would never allow me to go home. They said: 'If you choose Srey Neth, we don't care about you anymore.' My parents tried to separate us by sending me to Malaysia, but even though I was there with good food, living in a nice place, I missed Srey Neth so much that I had to go back to her. Even if I run into problems, I will never leave her—even if I starve, I want to be with her."

Neth looked uncomfortable with this public pronouncement of love, but they caught each other's eyes and dissolved into giggles. This

should have been a high point in Neth's life, but she was scrawny and looked sickly. She seemed already to have contracted full-blown AIDS.

"She's become weaker and weaker," Sothea fretted. "Normally pregnant women want to eat, but she's not so hungry."

When Sothea stepped away for a few minutes, Neth turned toward us, looking haggard.

"I know, I know," she whispered, sounding anguished. "I want to tell him. I try to tell him. But he loves me so much, how will he take it?" She shook her head and her voice broke: "For the first time, somebody really loves me. It's so hard to tell him what happened to me."

We told her that if she loved Sothea, she had to tell him. When Sothea returned, we tried to direct the conversation to the subject of Neth's health. "You should both check your HIV status before the birth," Nick suggested, in what he hoped was a casual tone. "People get it in all kinds of ways, and it's a good time to check."

Sothea smiled indulgently and scoffed. "I'm sure my wife doesn't have HIV," he said dismissively. "I never go with other girls, or to brothels. So how could she get it?"

On several occasions, we visited Neth and gave her bags of food and powdered milk for her pregnancy, and each time we saw her was heart-breaking. Her brief time in the brothel seemed to have left her with a disease that would kill her, her husband, and their unborn child. Just when her life seemed to be coming together, it was being torn apart.

Then, as the time for delivery approached, Neth agreed to be tested again. And this time, incredibly, the result came back: *HIV negative*. This test was more modern and reliable than the previous one. Neth had definitely been sickly and gaunt, but perhaps that had been from tuberculosis, parasites, or exhaustion. In any case, she didn't have AIDS.

Once she knew this, Neth began to feel better. She put on weight and soon looked healthier. The prospect of a grandchild led Sothea's parents to forgive the couple, and the family was reunited.

In 2007, Neth gave birth to a son. The baby was strong, healthy, and pudgy. Neth radiated joy as she cuddled him in the courtyard of her home. When our family dropped in on Neth and her husband at the end of 2008, she showed the boy to our children and giggled as he tottered about. She had returned to school for her final classes in hair-dressing, and her mother-in-law was planning to buy a small shop

where Neth could set up a little business as a beautician and hair-dresser. "I know what I'm going to call the shop," she said. "Nick and Bernie's." After so many twists and setbacks, she had put her life together again; the young girl who had quivered in fear in the brothel had been buried forever.

For us, there were three lessons in this story. The first is that rescuing girls from brothels is complicated and uncertain. Indeed, it's sometimes impossible, and that's why it is most productive to focus efforts on prevention and putting brothels out of business. The second lesson is to never give up. Helping people is difficult and unpredictable, and our interventions don't always work, but successes are possible, and these victories are incredibly important.

The third lesson is that even when a social problem is so vast as to be insoluble in its entirety, it's still worth mitigating. We may not succeed in educating *all* the girls in poor countries, or in preventing *all* women from dying in childbirth, or in saving *all* the girls who are imprisoned in brothels. But we think of Neth and remember a Hawaiian parable taught to us by Naka Nathaniel, the former *Times* videographer, himself a Hawaiian:

A man goes out on the beach and sees that it is covered with starfish that have washed up in the tide. A little boy is walking along, picking them up and throwing them back into the water.

"What are you doing, son?" the man asks. "You see how many starfish there are? You'll never make a difference."

The boy paused thoughtfully, and picked up another starfish and threw it into the ocean.

"It sure made a difference to that one," he said.