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## **Risky Business: Sex-work and Young Southeast Asian American Women in Oakland**

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**Abstract:** This paper seeks to analyze why many young Southeast Asian American women in Oakland, California, are going into sex-work. I investigate the cultural and social factors that contribute to their popularity as sex-workers, as well as examine the existing structural problems that have led them to sex-work. I also begin to illuminate how these young Southeast Asian American women understand their own reasons for going into sex-work. The number of minors entering sex-work continues to increase, globally, nationally and locally, yet past and current literature tend to overlook the unique problems that exist at the local level that are tempting young women into sex-work. Research on young women and sex-work has identified sexual abuse, drug use and homelessness as risk factors that often lead minors into sex-work, but these risk factors do not apply to the population of young SEA American women in Oakland. Through studying this population who have been in or are at risk of entering sex-work, I attempt to complicate previous arguments that victimize and/or criminalize young sex-workers, by looking at the ways in which these young Southeast Asian American women demonstrate agency within societal and structural constraints.

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## Introduction

The back pages of the free alternative weekly newspaper, *East Bay Express*, provide its readers with numerous advertisements displaying various forms of adult entertainment, from massage therapy to escort services to sexual fetishes. Many of these advertisements attempt to lure clients, also called “johns”, by including sexually suggestive photos of young women in lingerie and employing descriptions such as “young and sweet”. A handful of these ads specifically advertise the women’s race, many of whom are Asian females, with headlines such as “Young Asian Girls!” and “Asian Girl for You!”<sup>1</sup> Scanning the advertisements, one ad in particular caught my attention. This ad included a picture of a young Asian woman and a heading that stated “Absolutely Irresistible Cambodian/Fillipino Beauty [*sic*]” (*East Bay Express*, 2005). This particular ad stood out to me because it was the first time I had seen a heading that advertised the services of a Southeast Asian<sup>2</sup> (SEA) female.

In this paper, I seek to analyze and understand the involvement of young (between the ages of 13 to 17) SEA American women, in Oakland, California, who are going into sex-work.<sup>3</sup> According to the Sexually Abused and Commercially Exploited Youth (SACEY) and Safe Place Alternative (SPA) programs, Oakland is a major hub for commercial sexual exploitation, partly because many foster care and group homes are located in Oakland and pimps will often recruit

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<sup>1</sup> I first noticed these two ads in *East Bay Express* in their December 7, 2005 issue, p. 77

<sup>2</sup> When I use the term “Southeast Asian refugee,” I am including only those ethnic groups that fled from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. When referring to these groups as a whole, many scholars have interchangeably used the terms “Indochinese” and “Southeast Asian” without clarifying why they chose to use one term over the other. I appreciate Sucheng Chan’s (2003) need to explain her position in using “Indochinese” in her work on this subject. Chan illuminates her problem with both these terms and argues that neither one is adequate. She believes that by using “Indochinese”, one is maintaining the French colonial legacy, which is something that she, as an anti-colonial scholar, finds offensive. On the other hand, “Southeast Asia” is an inaccurate term because there are other refugee groups from that area (mostly from Myanmar, formerly known as Burma) who the United States have admitted as refugees, but do not fall into the same category as those from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Thus, Chan reluctantly uses “Indochinese” because she believes it to be more precise and accurate. I agree with both of Chan’s points, but for my own purposes, I will use “Southeast Asian” as I would prefer not to perpetuate the colonial legacy.

<sup>3</sup> I use the term “sex-work” throughout the paper as it is general and non-pejorative and acknowledges that prostitution can be seen as a form of work. “Sex-work” is a generic term used for commercial sexual services, performances, or products given in exchange for financial and material compensation.

young girls from such facilities (Saetern 2007). From 2001-2002, the Oakland Police Department (OPD) identified 218 minors who were prostituted by 155 pimps and by May 2003, an additional 75 sexually exploited youth were identified by the OPD (Loza-Muriera and Hobson-Faure 2002, 2). By 2005, over 300 minors were charged with soliciting or alleged to have solicited themselves (Saetern 2007).

In 2002, Alameda County Juvenile Court judge Brenda Harbin-Forte began to notice more cases coming into her courtroom that involved sexually exploited minors, many of whom were SEA American female minors (Loza-Muriera and Hobson-Faure 2002). Thus, under the direction of Judge Harbin-Forte and Commissioner Nancy Lonsdale, the Alameda County Interagency Children's Policy Council (ICPC) convened a Task Force to address the cross systems issues impacting minors who are sexually exploited through the local sex trade economy. Members of the Minors in Prostitution/Sexually Exploited Minors (MiP/SEM) Task Force (which include city, county, law enforcement, judicial, Oakland Unified School District, and community provider representatives) came together to identify both short-term as well as long-term strategies and solutions to this growing problem.

Observing the high numbers of young SEA American women being picked up by the system, Judge Harbin-Forte became aware of the need to provide not just long-term solutions, but *culturally-sensitive* solutions for this particular group of girls. Although there was a desire and need to create solutions for these young SEA women, there was an acknowledgement by the members of the Task Force that not much was known about this racial group, especially due to the stereotype that they were supposed to be the "model minority" (Thaing interview 2005).

In their article, "Invisible Victims: Asian/Pacific Islander Youth," Thao Le and Janelle Chan state that "most research and studies on youth victimization either does not include or

significantly consider Asian/Pacific Islander (API) youth. However, when they are included, the numbers suggest that they are the least victimized in comparison to other racial or ethnic groups”<sup>4</sup> (2001, 1). They further argue that this suggestion is misleading because most official data do not disaggregate victimization by ethnicity,

Most often, APIs are included within the “Other” category. Moreover, because Asians, Asian Americans, and Asian/Pacific Islanders constitute more than 32 different ethnic groups, youth of particular ethnic groups may be disproportionately affected but are *muted* as their numbers collapse into the social categories of race (2, italics my emphasis).

The danger in collapsing ethnic Asian groups into one social category of “Asian” is that it perpetuates the myth of Asians as the “model minority” and makes invisible the problems of immigrant Asian groups (i.e., Southeast Asian refugees and their families).

Recognizing the high numbers of SEA American females being sexually exploited, the MiP/SEM Taskforce collaborated with Oakland’s Asian Health Services (AHS) Youth Office to come up with a culturally sensitive solution to this rising problem. This collaboration, which expanded to include organizations such as East Bay Asian Youth Center and the Asian & Pacific Islander Wellness Center, began a pilot program in the summer of 2004 called *Banteay Srei*.

Based on preliminary research at the *Banteay Srei* program I was able to identify some of the main reasons why many young SEA American women in Oakland, California, are going into sex-work. In this paper, I will examine the cultural and social factors that contribute to their popularity as sex-workers, as well as highlight the existing structural problems that have led them to sex-work. The paper also attempts to illuminate how these young SEA American women understand their own reasons for going into sex-work. Research on young women and sex-work has identified sexual abuse, drug use and running away as risk factors that often lead minors into sex-work, but these risk factors do not apply to this population of young SEA

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<sup>4</sup> Le and Chan argue that due to the model minority stereotype, authorities have higher expectations of *all* Asian youth. They state that in Oakland, while API youth are arrested at a lower rate (2.4%) than the total juvenile population (5.5%), API youth have the highest conviction rate of all races (34.2%), which means 64 out of the 187 arrested youth are adjudicated.

women in Oakland. I attempt to complicate previous arguments that victimize and/or criminalize young sex-workers, by looking at the ways in which these young SEA American women demonstrate agency within societal and structural constraints. I argue that examining how these young women navigate and understand their roles as sex-workers will allow us to break away from the dichotomy that either victimizes and/or criminalizes young sex-workers. This paper begins by first looking at some of the literature that has been written on sex work and minors in prostitution. Much of the discussion around this area focuses more on adults rather than young people; thus, there is a significant gap in the literature. From there, I will provide some historical context so that we can understand the unique migration and resettlement history from which these young SEA women come from. In the subsequent sections I will explore some of the main reasons that have led these young women to enter into sex-work.

### **Minors and Sex-work**

In her article, “The Economic and Social Bases of Prostitution in Southeast Asia,” economist Lin Lean Lim (1998) writes that historically, Southeast Asian women have been considered a highly valued “commodity” in the market of sexual exploitation. Over the last four decades, prostitution as an economic system has expanded dramatically in Southeast Asia.

Lim states that in most Southeast Asian countries today, prostitution has become a highly profitable industry integrated into the political, social, and economic sectors of the country. Sex trafficking has become such a lucrative business in these Southeast Asian countries that “a spiral factor” and a “chain effect” have taken place. The “spiral factor” refers to

The disturbing trend whereby the sex trade is spiraling towards younger and younger victims, not only because of the traditional belief among some customers that they can rejuvenate themselves by having sex with very young virgins, but also because of the more recent belief that they can protect themselves from the threat of HIV/AIDS (Lim 1998, 176).

The “chain factor” indicates that one form of abuse tends to lead to another and often more serious form, so that there is often a culmination of negative consequences (Lim 1998, 176).

Lim provides an example of a child who has been subjected to sexual abuse at home who runs away and then resorts to prostitution and/or pornography as a means of survival. This child may then become dependent on drugs, which in turn leads to greater dependency on prostitution and/or pornography to earn money for purchasing the drugs. The child’s involvement in criminal patterns consequently increases over time.

Lim’s research and study on child prostitution and sexual exploitation is focused on Southeast Asia. Much of the literature on sexual exploitation and sexual coercion focuses on the international scale of these problems. Rarely is sexual exploitation ever spoken of or thought about on a more local level here in the United States, especially when minors are concerned. As observed in her article, “The Invisible Issue: Prostitution and trafficking of women and girls in the United States,” political scientist Dorothy McBride Stetson (2004) astutely notes that there is a striking absence of discussion of prostitution in public debate,

Activists campaigned briefly for decriminalization in the 1970s, but soon feminists were divided over policy options. Most agreed that prostitution is the product of male domination. Liberal feminists, however, accepted the fact that some women choose prostitution, and supported removal of legal and social burdens on that choice. Radical feminists...rejected the idea that free choice is possible and considered prostitution, along with rape, sexual harassment, pornography and child sexual abuse, to be part of systematic sexual exploitation of women by men (245).

The debates over prostitution are usually found within feminist literature that tends to focus on adult women sex-workers and the question around legalization of prostitution, which would lead to the de-criminalization of those involved in sex-work. Radical feminism opposes prostitution altogether on the grounds that it degrades women and furthers the power of the male gender (Bromberg 1998, 7). As noted by Sarah Bromberg (1998), “feminists seek to be supportive of sex-workers while deploring the work itself as inherently wrong” (7). In her article, “Should



Feminists Oppose Prostitution?” Laurie Shrage (1989) argues that prostitution must be seen as a form of sexual exploitation and coercion:

Although the commercial availability of sexuality is not in every existing or conceivable society oppressive to women, in our society this practice depends upon the general acceptance of principles which serve to marginalize young women socially and politically. Because of the cultural context in which prostitution operates, it epitomizes and perpetuates pernicious patriarchal beliefs and values and, therefore, is both damaging to the women who sell sex, and as an organized social practice, to all women in our society (349).

She views “prostitution” as an act where one gender (usually men) takes advantage of its higher social status and manipulates the other gender. Since members of the less powerful group may be compelled or forced, physically or psychologically, to engage in sexual acts, prostitution is fundamentally exploitative and coercive.

While discussions revolve mostly around adult women engaged in the sex industry, there is little analysis and theorizing around youth who are involved in sex-work, in particular in the United States. Literature that does focus on minors in sex-work often centers on the sexual coercion and victimization of these youth, thus creating a division between adult prostitutes who are more likely to be seen as criminals and child prostitutes who are viewed as being “coerced” into sex-work, and therefore, “exploited victims”. Sociologist Dean Knudsen (1991) argues that sexual coercion can take on many forms: force or the threat of force, deception, or trickery, or other actions a minor cannot resist because of her ignorance, immaturity, or mental condition. The two basic conditions for consent—knowledge about the social meanings, acceptability, and consequences or risk associated with the behavior and the right to say yes or no—do not apply to child sexual activities with adults because “children, by their nature, are incapable of truly consenting to sex with adults” (Knudsen 1991, 18). Consequently, according to Knudsen, young women involved in prostitution are being sexually exploited and coerced. Knudsen’s argument leaves little discussion for understanding a “child’s” own reasons for entering sex-work and modes of agency that a “child” displays within the situations that they may face. She also does

not take into account the varying cultural notions of what constitutes a “child.” Thus, what happens to children in a context where they are given “adult” responsibilities and expected to financially contribute to the family, as the case may be for some SEA American children?

Although minors involved in sex-work are legally considered juvenile criminals due to the illegality of prostitution, attempts to explain why and how they got involved in sex-work often posit them as victims. Like Lim’s account of the “chain factor,” many of the inquiries into youth prostitution in the U.S. explain how previous sexual abuse can lead to future prostitution and examines issues of homelessness and/or running away. In their article, “Early Sexual Experience and Prostitution,” Jennifer James and Jane Meyerding (1977) argue that childhood sexual abuse can lead to a separation between emotions and sexual activity. They believe that a young girl’s self concept changes as a result of sexual abuse, which may lead her to eventually identify with prostitution. They state that a “woman who views herself as ‘debased’ may see prostitution as a viable alternative—perhaps the only alternative” (1381). Much of the explanation for youth in sex-work focuses on the history of runaways and homelessness. In his work, *Runaway Kids and Teenage Prostitution*, criminologist R. Barri Flowers (2001) examines the correlation between runaways and sexual exploitation. Flowers explains that most runaways resort to prostitution and/or other forms of sex-work as a means to survive and often become addicted to drugs and alcohol. More importantly he draws attention to the reasons why most young people run away, attributing it to factors such as: poor home environment; broken home (absence of at least one parent); family crises; emotional problems; and sex (promiscuity, pregnancy, marriage) to name a few. He goes on to state that although “many teens and preteens run away to escape an abusive, unhealthy environment, leaving home is largely a reflection of adolescent rebelliousness” (42).

Although Flowers' and other researchers' explanations are helpful in identifying some of the major causes for young people in sex-work, these conventional explanations do not directly apply to the young SEA American women in Oakland who are entering into sex-work. For these young women, running away from home is not something they have chosen, in fact, many of them are still living at home with their families and burdened with responsibilities. It is also not uncommon for most of them to regularly provide an added source of income for their families, and they are usually responsible for watching over younger family members. How then do we start to flesh out the various reasons why these young SEA American women are choosing to enter into sex-work? I begin by connecting the history of SEA refugee migration to the situations that these young women currently face.

### **SEA History and Migration to the United States**

For many young SEA American women, their family history is connected to the refugee migration experience; thus, I argue that you cannot understand their current situation today without understanding and contextualizing the history that they and their families come from. As historian Sucheng Chan (2003) astutely points out, researchers who are interested in the experiences of Southeast Asian Americans tend to have too narrow a focus,

look[ing] mainly at their economic status, degree of acculturation, community organizations, physical and mental health, relationship to the host society, and the academic performance of their children. However, political factors cannot be ignored when we study refugees because politics plays such a central role in determining why refugee seekers flee their homelands and how they are treated by asylum countries (171).

When Americans lost the war in Vietnam and withdrew their troops in 1975, they left behind three countries—Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia—that would be overtaken by communist forces. The legitimate fear of communist rule led to over one million refugees fleeing from these three

countries in 1975 alone<sup>5</sup> (Osborne 1980). For many of the SEA refugees, their flight towards an assumed haven was often met by more deaths and violence. For boat refugees fleeing from Vietnam, there was the constant fear of Thai pirates, for Cambodians trekking to the borders of Thailand, there were landmines to avoid as well as the anxiety of running into Khmer Rouge soldiers who would kill them, and for the Hmong and Iu-Mien, there was the Mekong River that needed to be crossed. A Hmong refugee man who recounted his story of crossing the Mekong with his family describes the danger and death he faced in trying to reach safety,

We fled into the jungle...we started out with a group of 3,000. Some dropped out and many were killed. Maybe 300 reached Thailand safely...I had left with my wife and our two-year-old son...I tied a rope around us in a long chain and we slipped into the Mekong River at night...But there was a patrol boat...and [they] started shooting. My wife shouted to me, 'I think they've hit our son.' I turned around and felt for him in the dark. My fingers went into the hole in his head (Robinson 1998, 104).

The man's story reflects what Khatharya Um (1999) refers to as "compounded trauma". Um uses the term to describe the experience of Cambodian refugees, stating that the "disruption generated by war and revolution was multilevel as well as multidimensional. The scope of dislocation extended from the individual, to the communal, to the nation-state, and involved structural, sociocultural, and psychical dimensions" (265). For the majority of SEA refugees who were able to escape to a Thai refugee camp, life in these camps often involved extortion and abuse by Thai soldiers. Due to the hundreds of thousands of refugees crossing the neutral Thai border, the Thai government enacted a policy of humane deterrence, making life in these camps as unpleasant as possible, and providing refugees with the bare minimum to survive, as a means to deter any further refugees from coming in (Robinson 1998). Writing about the refugee camp conditions, Jeremy Hein (1995) states that,

security [was] a problem, whether the threat came from the Thai military and police or bandits and gangs of compatriots. Social services and recreation were also limited. Many refugees, particularly the Hmong and

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<sup>5</sup> Milton Osborne (1980) points out that accurate statistics for the number of refugees who fled at this period are difficult to establish and that no agreed figure exists due to the unaccounted numbers of refugees who have perished in their attempts to leave their country, and the numbers that were not officially recorded.

Cambodians, lived for many years in these conditions because they were neither accepted for resettlement abroad nor willing to voluntarily return to their homelands ( 41).

Even after resettlement in a third country such as the U.S., most SEA refugees would find that restoring a life of normalcy would be a challenge. As one researcher put it, “Southeast Asian refugees who escaped the hardships of war, poverty, and brutal conditions in their home countries and first-asylum camps [came] only to face poverty, unemployment, and racism in the United States” (Reyes 2007, 23).

### **Life and Resettlement in the U.S.**

Upon their arrival in the United States, SEA refugees found their families and communities resettled and dispersed across the country. The U.S. officials dealing with SEA refugee resettlement decided that in order not to burden any one state with refugees, it would be ideal to disperse the refugees across the states. As a consequence, many SEA refugees found themselves resettled in landscapes they were not familiar with, from cold rural towns such as Rockford, Illinois to poor urban neighborhoods in the Bronx, New York, and San Francisco, California.

The policy of dispersal was enacted also due to the belief that it would discourage the creation of ethnic enclaves, therefore allowing SEA refugees to assimilate much more quickly into American mainstream culture. The policy meant that arriving refugees without immediate family in the U.S. would not necessarily be resettled in areas containing large numbers of refugees (Hein 1995). One of the biggest consequences of the dispersal policy was the lack of community and networks for SEA refugees who were trying to rebuild their lives here in the States. Jacqueline Desbarats (1985) writes that for SEA refugees,

the psychological and physical cohesion of the extended family unit assumes paramount importance...Sociocultural factors should be all the more significant, as the traumatic circumstances of the refugee's flight and resettlement have reinforced their reliance on the support of family and

community...the early dispersal policy sometimes involved the fragmentation of extended families, whose subsequent reunification could only be accomplished through secondary migration (530-531).

Coming from a war experience that had already fragmented their families through death and relocation, the desire to re-establish a sense of family and kinship was important for many refugees. For SEA women who had lost their husbands due to the war and were now single mothers, the need to be closer to their families and communities was all the more important to create a support network. For example, the 2000 Census revealed that 10.1 percent of Laotian households and 17.3 percent of Cambodian households were led by females with no husbands present, compared to 8.2 percent for the U.S. population overall (SEARAC 2004).

The arrival and resettlement of the SEA refugee cohorts also coincided with a U.S. economy that was facing a period of high inflation and unemployment, which meant anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiments (if there was a distinction) among many Americans. SEA refugees often reflected on the blatant racism they faced in the communities they were resettled in across the U.S. (Kibria 1993; Hein 1995; Ong 2003). Um (2005) highlights that

The negative association with a lost and brutal war is further accentuated by the resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees in visible clusters, largely in neighborhoods that are already adversely impacted. Unable to distinguish war-displaced refugees from economic migrants, most Americans perceive Southeast Asians with conflictual bifocality, as foreign opportunists bent on taking jobs away from Americans or as social burdens on the welfare state, bestowed with privileges not afforded to native poor (138).

In a documentary that explores the bombings of a Laotian Buddhist temple in Rockford, Illinois, a white resident flagrantly expresses how much she hates the Laotian refugees that have been dispersed into her small town. She goes on to blame these refugees for taking government resources away from the white and black residents of the town (Siegel and Johnson 1988). In her study on a Vietnamese community in Philadelphia, sociologist Nazli Kibria (1993) writes about how Vietnamese Americans felt their racial-ethnic marginality on multiple terms, “They felt themselves to be outsiders not only among whites but also in relation to other minority groups—

African Americans as well as many, if not most, segments of the Asian American population” (74). Consequently, it was no surprise that the U.S.’s policy of dispersal backfired, leading many SEA refugee communities toward secondary and even tertiary migration after they were resettled into an unwelcoming environment. Secondary migration was common among SEA refugees who wished to not only reunite with family members and be among a community of co-ethnics, but to also obtain some of the welfare benefits offered by specific states such as California.

SEA refugees were not only eligible for federally and locally funded assistance programs such as Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) or General Relief, but also for special Refugee Cash Assistance, which was a central component of the refugee resettlement program. These special assistance and welfare programs for the SEA refugees were supposed to be a temporary means to help them re-establish their lives, but as scholar Sucheng Chan (2004) highlights, Cambodians (and I would add the general SEA refugee population) in California have become “trapped in a vicious cycle of welfare dependency, helplessness, hopelessness, and despair, they live in environments that are often filled with crime and violence” (155). After their initial arrival to the States, SEA refugees were often helped out by their sponsors and voluntary agencies (volags) who explained the welfare system and helped them fill out applications for welfare assistance. Chan believes that the volags and other sponsors did what they could by helping many refugees apply for public assistance once the money provided by the Refugee Cash Assistance program ran out. She argues that,

The agencies were not purposely trying to create a refugee underclass. Rather, they were overwhelmed between 1979 and 1982 when refugees from Southeast Asia were pouring into the United States in far larger numbers than resettlement workers were prepared to handle and had no choice except to resettle each airplane load as expeditiously as possible (155).

Eric Tang (2000) underscores that “a large segment of Southeast Asian refugees who fled their homelands...are now entering a third consecutive decade of welfare dependency, contrary

to government officials' predictions of a seamless transition into American labor markets" (55). According to the 2000 Census, 29.3 percent of Cambodians, 19.1 percent of Laotians, and 37.6 percent of Hmong were living below the federal poverty level, compared to 12.4 percent of the general population (SEARAC 2004). The lack of education and transferable skills among SEA refugees has often been used to explain their economic marginality, but they do participate in the labor force. In fact, as Um (1999) astutely observes in writing about Cambodian refugees, "Statistics on labor participation and income level obscure the fact that many refugees hold multiple, low-paying jobs without employment security, health and retirement benefits. With over 40% continuing to live below poverty line, Cambodian refugees constitute not only a community in transition, but one clearly at risk"<sup>6</sup> (Um 1999, 271).

### **Disruption of Cultural and Traditional Institutions**

As they resettled into an unfamiliar structure and culture, SEA refugees were faced with the changing concepts of traditional roles and the modifications of cultural norms. Within the family institution, there was a considerable shift in power dynamics, where SEA refugee men found themselves emasculated as their wives found it easier to obtain jobs and soon took on the role as the household "breadwinner." Um writes that "the high percentage of fragmented families and widowhood within the Cambodian refugee community...has led to the displacement of the male figure as the head of the household...women are now compelled by economic necessity to seek employment outside of the home" (271). Kibria also notes that the shift in gender balance of resources led to an acute source of tension and change between Vietnamese American men and women. One of the men she speaks with relays that "in Vietnam, the man of

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<sup>6</sup> The "over 40%" is reflected in the 1990 Census, which showed 43.8% of Cambodians living below poverty line.



the house is king. Below him the children, then the pets of the home, and then the women. Here the woman is the king and the man holds a position below the pets” (108).

With the changing roles and the emasculation of their status and power, divorce and domestic abuse have become a means through which SEA refugee men have attempted to regain their patriarchal power (Kibria 1993; Um 1999; Ong 2003). Anthropologist Aihwa Ong (2003) spotlights the problem of domestic abuse within the Cambodian refugee community in particular, arguing that “feminist-infused refugee love—which goes back to the work of good church women among poor people at home and abroad” has created a process of “genderized ethnicity,” whereby Cambodians as a group are feminized by a strategy of ethnic transformation that aimed to empower “weak” refugee women and marginalize the “patriarchal-deviant” refugee men (147). Thus, in an attempt to give Cambodian refugee women more autonomy and agency, the plan in some ways backfired, in that it led some refugee men to resort to domestic violence as a means to preserve their power.

Power relations also changed between SEA refugee parents and their children, where parents often found themselves relying heavily on their children for help in adjusting to the new country. Since children are able to pick up the English language at a faster rate than their parents, it is not uncommon for SEA children to become the cultural brokers. Um (1999) writes that

Alterations to the parent-child relationship have led to Cambodian youth being forced to assume responsibilities inappropriate for their age. This coupled with the mounting disempowerment that Cambodian parents feel, has a definitive effect on family dynamics. Some Cambodian youths have used their newfound leverage to disregard parental authority (273).

In general, SEA youth are finding it more difficult to relate to their parents’ cultural and traditional expectations. Especially for young SEA women, where previous cultural norms emphasized a young woman’s virtuousness, the American popular culture and peer influences

that many of these young women face here in the States challenge the traditional roles and cultural expectations of young SEA women. For example, within Cambodian culture, there is the *cpap*, or didactic codes, that are Khmer texts that provide advice and rules of behavior on how to lead one's daily life for several different and overlapping groups within Cambodian society. Accordingly, there are the *cpap srei* for women and the *cpap prus* for men.

Anthropologist Judy Ledgerwood (1990), who has studied the *cpap srei*, writes that these codes instruct on how to be the idealized Khmer woman, i.e., the “perfectly virtuous woman”. As she describes, this virtuous Khmer woman is,

almost invariably described as *dan bhlan*, soft, and *phqaem lhaem*, sweet...[she] is slow, quiet, and controlled in her movement and speech. She glides gracefully, soundlessly across the room...when a virtuous woman walks, the sound of her silk skirt rustling cannot be heard. Many women recall their mothers or grandmothers chiding them about walking noisily often comparing them to animals (97-98).

The majority of young Cambodian American women have never heard of the *cpap srei*, but as Annuska Derks (2005) observes from her experience with Cambodian women, “the advice young women get from their mothers and grandmothers as they grow up seems indeed to be very similar to the advice put down in the [*cpap srei*]” (68).

Based on her work with young Laotian American women, Bindi Shah (2004) notes that by the time Laotian girls are eight or ten, many of them are expected to cook, clean, care for their younger siblings, and sew in preparation for their adult roles as wives and mothers. Shah writes that for young Laotian American women, “cooking and cleaning and listening to one's parents are part of a ‘good’ Laotian daughter code...Second-generation Laotian girls are also expected to maintain cultural boundaries through appropriate dress codes and behavior norms” (109). An important observation that Shah makes is that although the second-generation Laotian young women are not always able to challenge the hierarchical relationships within their family, they struggle to contest and negotiate parental expectations in other aspects of their lives. They “rebel

against patriarchal gender relations and assert dating and marriage preferences to gain control over their own lives” (112). Shah argues that these young women are navigating two sets of cultural norms, that of their parents and that of their peers, and that “they fulfill these multiple expectations by leading dual lives” (110). Thus, by extending this argument, we can apply it to better understand the young SEA American women who are participating in sex-work in Oakland. This paper seeks to find out whether they are entering the industry in part as a means to also express their rebellion against cultural and parental expectations. Alongside the existing structural problems, such as poverty, how do these young women understand and explain their own reasons for entering into sex-work? And how does the demand and popularity of SEA sex workers affect the ease in which young SEA American women can enter the sex industry?

## **Methodology**

### **Banteay Srei**

As mentioned earlier, the creation of *Banteay Srei* was a collaborative attempt to provide a long-term and culturally sensitive solution to the growing problem in the Bay Area where sex-work and sexual exploitation of young SEA American females had become a noticeable trend. *Banteay Srei* translates to “Temple of Women” in Khmer and is named after a sacred temple in Cambodia built in honor of female deities. It was started as a summer pilot program intended for young SEA women engaged in or at risk of juvenile sex-work. The curriculum of this summer program was “developed through a literature review of assets-based approaches, gender specific programming, critical pedagogy, and an examination of the impacts of immigration and acculturation on Southeast Asian youth and their families” (Lee 2005).

*Banteay Srei* works to establish a safe space that can provide critical skill-based learning, social support, and community building activities as a means to foster self-empowerment and

leadership skills to better prevent and protect young SEA women against sexual exploitation. The organization and its board do not condemn sex-work, but what is made clear is that *Banteay Srei* does not condone the exploitation of young women by pimps. Young SEA American women were initially recruited through pre-existing relationships with youth-serving providers such as school counselors, social workers, case managers, and health educators. Initial participants who were recruited were also encouraged to bring a peer that she thought would be interested in attending the program.

Since the pilot program in 2004, *Banteay Srei* has expanded to a program that serves approximately 20 to 25 young SEA American women each year. The curriculum has developed to include year-long after-school programs such as SAUCE (Southeast Asian Unity Through Cultural Exploration) which is a traditional SEA cooking class that meets once a week and teaches the young women how to make dishes from scratch. The participants have been given a plot of land in which they are allowed to grow and harvest their own fruits and vegetables, and afterwards, taught how they can create SEA meals from what they have grown. Another program is SREI (Self-Reliant and Empowered Individual), which is a curriculum offered every other month for four weeks at a time. SREI is a space to learn, ask questions and share knowledge about topics that include, but are not limited to: sex, women's health issues, overcoming violence, healthy and unhealthy relationships, and self-empowerment.

In its first two years, most of the young women who participated in *Banteay Srei* were court-ordered to enter into the program, and the majority of them were Cambodian-American, with a few Mien-American women and lowland Laotian-American women. Their age ranged from 15 to 19 years old. Because of its open-door policy and peer-recruiting, *Banteay Srei* now

primarily serves young women between the ages of 12 to 16 years old, many of whom are at-risk of entering and not necessarily involved in sex-work.

## **Methods**

As a Cambodian American woman who grew up in Oakland, I found myself drawn to *Banteay Srei* and its mission. For the last three years (2005-2008), I have been volunteering my time with *Banteay Srei* and currently serve as a board member. Much of my time with *Banteay Srei* was spent attending and holding monthly board meetings and doing participant observation during the Thursday afternoon SAUCE programs. I have gotten to know the program coordinator as well as the SEA American girls who have participated and are currently participating in the program. For this paper, I am using interviews that I have done with three of the founding members of *Banteay Srei* (one of whom is the current program coordinator) as well as interviews with police and probation officers of the Oakland Police Department. Each of the interviews lasted approximately one to one and a half hours long. Interviews with founding members entailed questions about the creation of *Banteay Srei*, the background of past and current participants, as well as about their personal experiences with the organization. Interviews with the police and probation officers were on the demographics of young women being picked up by the city for sex-work, and I also asked specific questions about the rise of young SEA American women going into the sex industry. I have not yet done in-depth interviews with any of the program participants because I lacked a more developed relationship with most of them. I am all too aware of my position as a researcher and due to the sensitive nature of this topic—sexual exploitation and sex-work—my status as an “outsider” (as well as “researcher”) coming in to speak and ask personal questions of these young women, might not

only offend these girls, but also affect the establishment of *Banteay Srei* as a safe space where these girls should feel protected.

This paper also draws from a set of oral histories of five young women who previously participated in *Banteay Srei*. The oral histories were recorded by a past health educator of the organization. These oral histories provided a space where these young SEA American women were allowed to tell their stories and they reveal the ways in which these young women demonstrate agency within societal and structural constraints. The research that I have done thus far has led me to identify two key themes that are leading these young women into the sex industry—economic motivation and familial responsibility, and cultural rebellion and gender norms—which I will discuss further below. In my future research, I plan to do in-depth interviews with current and former *Banteay Srei* participants to examine the relevance of these themes to their lives and lived experiences.

## **Navigating and Understanding the World of Sex-work**

### **Cultural Popularity of Asian Sex-workers**

The documentary “Slaying the Dragon” (Gee 1988) analyzes the roles and images of Asian women that have been promulgated by the Hollywood film industry and network television over the past fifty years. Through film clips and interviews with Asian American actors, actresses, and media critics, the documentary traces the history of how various stereotypes of Asian/American women have entered American culture over the years. Two of the most common stereotypes of Asian/American women are the “Dragon Lady” and the “Lotus Blossom.” In brief, the Dragon Lady stereotype is closely related to the idea of the “yellow peril” and depicts the Asian woman as beautiful, mysterious, seductive, and yet evil (Prasso 2005). The Lotus Blossom, on the other hand, is seen as the quiet and sexually submissive

Asian/American woman. With both stereotypes, Asian/American women are seen as exotic and sexually available.

These two stereotypes, in particular the latter, of Asian/American women have translated into their popularity as sex-workers here in the United States and overseas. The popularity of sex-tourism in Southeast Asia, especially Thailand and more recently Cambodia, has also influenced even the ways in which young women advertise themselves here in the Bay Area in order to promote business. In writing about sex-work and power hierarchies, Julia O'Connell Davidson (1998) lucidly observes the racist and patriarchal attitudes that sex tourism generates:

When sex tourists visit SEA Asian countries they view local women as naturally subservient and eager to please them sexually. When they visit Caribbean and Latin American countries they view local women as animalistic and hypersexual. Without exception, the sex tourists...re-produced the classic racist opposition between the 'primitive', who exists in some 'state of nature', and the 'civilized', constrained by powerful legal and moral codes, in their (mis)understandings of their host cultures. Prostitutes are not prostitutes out of economic desperation, then, and there is nothing untoward about a fourteen-year-old girl going off to have sex with a man old enough to be her grandfather or a 'beautiful' girl going off with an ugly man. It does not mean they are like Western prostitutes (far less that they should be considered child prostitutes). They are just doing what comes 'naturally' to them (178).

Although O'Connell Davidson is discussing the racialization of overseas sex-workers, these racial stereotypes heavily affect the self-images of young SEA American women here in the States. In an on-line advertisement, an Asian American female advertised her escort services by stating she's "100 % Thai girl...born and raised in the states so sorry I don't have that...accent but I make up for it..." (*East Bay Express* 2008). Here the woman recognizes the clients' desire to have an "authentic" Thai woman who speaks with an accent, and although she cannot provide the accent, she highlights her Thai ethnicity to make herself more appealing. In another advertisement, a woman by the name of "Sara" employs the stereotypes of Asian/American females by stating that she is "very exotic...always pleases to meet your needs and desires [*sic*]" (*East Bay Express* 2008).

In speaking out about her experiences as a sex-worker, Elizabeth Sy, co-founder and current program coordinator of *Banteay Srei*, writes about the ease of entering sex-work as an Asian American woman,

I remember being hired on the spot because I was considered “eye candy” because I was an Asian woman. I was told that because of my Asian features, it would be much easier for me to make more money. I was one of the three Asian women that worked at the club and was given advice early on how to milk my Asian status to make more money...when I did play into these very stereotypes, I made more money (2007).

In an interview, Sy recalls being told that she had to be more “Asian” by talking less and becoming more subservient. She also stated that she was able to get away with breaking certain club policies simply because she was an Asian (American) sex-worker (Interview 2008).

Officer Jim Saleda, who works with the Oakland Police Department’s Vice & Children Exploitation Unit, explains that in general, “Asian girls are more popular because they’re seen as exotic and pretty...and sometimes they’re easier to exploit” (Interview 2008). Consequently, the very fact that a young woman is Asian makes her a more popular target for pimps who recognize her higher value and marketability in the sex industry. In his work with young female sex-workers, Saleda states that he has not worked with many young SEA women, partly due to the fact that they are not being picked up by the OPD as easily as other females as he believes they work “more in their own community...and aren’t out on the streets as much...they do more in-house calls” and that the sex services are often masquerading as massage parlors (Interview 2008). Saleda reports that his unit has been trying for some time to get into the general Asian community in Oakland, but he considers it an “isolated community” that is difficult to “break into.”

### **Economic Motivation and Responsibility**

*“These girls, they care about the money more than they do about themselves. If this guy is giving her \$8,000 she’s gonna go there really fast. They don’t even care what’s going to*



*happen. They could be a cop. Or they could be serial killers. I watch American's Most Wanted and stuff, and they have guys that love to kill prostitutes."* – Koliyan (Tan 2006, 24)

Unlike past and current research that points to homelessness and run-aways as a key connection to why young women enter sex-work, most of the young SEA women involved in *Banteay Srei* still live with their families. In fact, the family institution plays an important role in the lives of young SEA American women. Bindhi Shah (2004) asserts that even despite difficult parent-child relationships among young Laotian women, family relationships and ties were still very close. In his study on ethnic self-identities among immigrant children, sociologist Ruben Rumbaut (1994) surveyed 5,000 teenage children of immigrants and noted that all SEA groups scored higher than Mexican respondents on notions of familism, which is worth mentioning because it underscores the deeply ingrained sense of obligation and orientation that these youth have towards their family.

According to Jennifer Lee, co-founder of *Banteay Srei*, many of the young women that have participated in *Banteay Srei* come from the housing projects of Oakland and from households with single parents working two or more jobs to support their families (Interview 2005). As a result, there is often very little family structure and/or parental supervision being given to young women. Very early on, these young women are given responsibilities and are expected to financially contribute to their family's income. Often, these very young women who are engaged in sex-work are responsible for raising not only themselves, but their siblings as well. Shah's research also highlights the perceived gender inequity within the family structure, where her informants resented that their brothers often had far more freedom and flexibility than they did. One informant noted that "when her brother is ill she is expected to miss school and stay at home to look after him. But when she is sick, her parents tell her to take medicine and go to school" (109).

Um (2003) highlights the breakdown in cultural expectations and misunderstandings between generations, writing that,

Parents who grew up in Southeast Asia have different values, perspectives, and expectations from their children who grew up, or were born, in the U.S. In Southeast Asia, obedience, filial piety, and deference to the larger collective of family and clan are moral virtues taught in school and reinforced in the home and community. From very early on in their youth, many Southeast Asian parents were given responsibilities because of the need or the obligation to assist their families. As a result, they expect similar levels of early maturity, responsibility, and self-sacrifice from their children (17).

Consequently, from early on, young SEA women are given more responsibilities than their male counterparts, which is often reflected in their motivation to find work and financial compensation. As pointed to earlier, a high percentage of the SEA American community is living below the poverty line, which makes it even more pressing for the children in these families to financially contribute. Lee mentioned that the recent cuts in government programs and aid were a factor in forcing young girls into sex-work, “because the salary is good, experience needed to start is minimal, and with the government programs to help poor people being cut back or terminated, street prostitution is a tempting choice that many young SEA females in Oakland have turned to” (Interview 2005).

Echoed throughout the oral histories from the young SEA women is a yearning to do more than just sex-work and to leave “the game,” but the difficulty in finding jobs often makes sex-work all the more tempting. As “Koliyan” expresses in her story,

I dunno what I even want to do with myself. Kind of right now, I still want to go back into the business...I been trying to be really really good. But I been broke. And I been trying to do these agencies and stuff and have them help me to find jobs. I been doin’ my resume, I been doin’ everything I can. I been goin’ around a lot of job interviews. And I can never get a job, and that really hurts my feelings because I try really really hard. So I was like forget it. I’m just gonna go back to doin’ it...and it’s about to make me cry right now...that shit is crazy. (Tan 2006, 25).

Here “Koliyan” articulates how she has attempted to find other means of financially supporting herself, but the lack of job opportunities draws her back to “doin’ it” and “the game”. As alluded to earlier, because many of the young women come from households with single parents who are

often working two or more jobs to support the families, there is often very little parental supervision. Unlike research that claims homelessness and lack of family as important reasons for youth sex-workers (Hoyt, Ryan and Cauce 1999; Flowers 2001a), most of these young SEA women are still living at home and financially contributing to their families' income

### **Cultural Rebellion: Going Against Traditional Gender Norms**

In his work on identity among second-generation Vietnamese Americans, sociologist Hung Cam Thai (2002) discusses the various ways in which gender conflicts can create tension within a Vietnamese American family. One of the young Vietnamese American women he interviews recalls,

I think throughout my life...I've always battled with the two sides of me. Always at home, I was the Vietnamese daughter and sister; at school I was supposed to be like everyone else: I'm a student, I'm supposed to be independent and think for myself. But when I'm at home, you are expected to act within the tradition...I always had problems when these two values conflicted...my father and I didn't get along because of that, especially when my father let my brother do something and not me (62).

Thai highlights the levels of ambivalence that young Vietnamese American women (and SEA American women in general) face in working out their cultural identity. This ambivalence is a result of the conflicting expectations that come from of their Vietnamese parents to be traditional and their own desires to maintain American values of independence and self-sufficiency.

Another interviewee echoes a similar ambiguity, stating,

When I was in high school, my father was afraid that I would have a boyfriend, because in Vietnam, girls don't date, they're only "given off" to their husbands' families. I guess when my American friends started dating at the beginning of high school, I wanted a boyfriend, too. I wanted to do my own things, sort of being independent from my parents, like my American friends (63).

As I mentioned earlier, Bindi Shah's work with young Laotian American women also underscores the struggle young Southeast Asian women face in trying to contest and negotiate with their parental expectations and those of their "American friends." Shah noted the various ways young Laotian women were expected to behave to maintain the "good Laotian daughter

code” by cooking and cleaning and listening to their parents (109). Often, these traditional gender norms and codes of conduct contradict with what young Southeast Asian American girls observe and experience in their everyday lives outside of their household. In particular, pressure from their peers, who they may deem “more American,” to behave and dress a certain way is enforced by the popular culture they consume, such as the shows they watch on television to the music they listen to on the radio.

In hanging out with group of young Mien and Cambodian youth in a housing project in Oakland, California, sociologist Russell Jeung (2002) noted that for young Southeast Asian America girls, they “clearly observe and often reject the traditional roles of their parents and grandparents” (64). In fact, one of the young Mien girls he interviewed, “spoke often about being ‘totally free’ from rules, the old ways, and people telling her what to do” (64). This young woman equated “totally free” to being more American, and her image of the free American woman was a social construct that was mediated by popular culture. According to this young Mien girl, the polar opposite of the traditional Mien woman, who is expected to be married off to a Mien man, is a strong American woman like Madonna, a woman she considers totally free who can take charge of her own life. Jeung astutely writes that “Mien youth contrast their views of traditional Mien culture, which deal largely with gender and marriage relations, with their conception of what modern Americans are like...Not wanting to be bound by rules, they come to desire autonomy and egalitarianism in relationships with parents and future spouses” (64-65). Consequently, for the young SEA women who are involved in sex-work, I suggest that they see sex-work as a form of self-liberation from expected traditional roles and believe that by bringing in money, they also provide themselves with a notion of self-reliance. This notion of self-liberation and self-reliance is a theme that I will pursue further in future research.

In some cases, the very families that these young women are helping to financially support are also sources of physical and emotional abuse. As discussed earlier, refugee migration often causes a breakdown in family dynamics, often where SEA refugee males feel a need to reassert their patriarchal power by resorting to domestic abuse. Jennifer Lee disclosed that some of these young SEA American women come from a history of family abuse, where they have either been mentally and/or physically abused by a parent or have witnessed abuse in their families (Interview 2005). As a result of the violence faced at home and the lack of physical affection from family members, these young women do turn away from their family as a means of love and support and “find love and kinship with fellow sex-workers and their pimps” (Lee Interview 2005).

In fact Lee revealed that many of the young SEA women in Oakland initially hear about and get involved in sex-work through their older siblings, friends and/or peers. This approach is often referred to as “peer pimping,” the sexual exploitation of one school age youth by another youth. These friends and siblings are usually connected to pimps of the same age, who they call their “boyfriends”: “many of the girls prefer not to call them ‘pimps’ because many consider the person exploiting them their ‘boyfriend’, which is indicative of the connection and relation of support that they are receiving” (Interview 2005). In discussing the influence of media and popular culture, Officer Jim Saleda emphasizes that “everyone is pimping now...pimping is a ‘cool thing’ to do!” (Interview 2008).

In some cases, it is their “boyfriends” that will bring these girls to and from their johns’ homes. In one of the oral histories, “Koliyan” provides readers a glimpse into her life as a sex-worker. She talks about one of her johns as being a “stalker” and when she discovers her photos posted across his wall, she calls her boyfriend, who is waiting outside of the john’s house. She

states, “I walked in the bathroom and I called my boyfriend and I told him, ‘I don’t want to stay here, the dude has my pictures all over his walls.’ He said, ‘Ok, come outside.’ My boyfriend was standing outside waiting for me to come outside” (Tan 2006, 22).

For some of these young SEA American women, their parents and their home no longer represent a space in which they feel completely safe and comfortable; instead, the sex-work “family” comes to signify both economic and emotional security. As a result, Lee notes, the love or the promise of love, along with the “easy money” often keeps these younger girls in the sex industry.

### **Conclusion**

In writing about black women and sex-work, cultural historian Robin Kelley (1997) acknowledges the violent and exploitative nature of sex-work and prostitution. Yet, at the same time, he cautions against “stripping women of any agency or removing...the issue of female desire” (73). In this case, the desires of these young SEA American women in Oakland who enter into the world of sex-work are layered. In many ways, their age and naïve attitudes can leave them vulnerable to pimps, where one can argue that although they see themselves as rebelling against the patriarchal traditions of their family, they are also entering into another form of abusive patriarchy. However, Kelley appropriately underscores the notion of agency: these young Southeast Asian American women do have their own reasons and convictions for entering into this business. Consequently, there is a real need to hear directly from these young women and to include more of their voices in future research. In trying to understand the reasons for youth entering sex-work and in attempting to create solutions, one cannot erase how these young women understand the relationships they have with their communities and their families.

In the next phase of my work, I plan on interviewing those young SEA American women who have entered the sex industry so that their voices are heard. At the same time, I argue that it is just as important to include the experiences of young SEA women who are not in sex-work, but are experiencing the same societal and structural constraints growing up and living in Oakland. In what ways are they using a different roadmap to navigate through the streets and systems of Oakland? Contrasting and comparing the various experiences and strategies of young SEA American women who are involved in sex-work to those not involved will provide a fuller and picture of the lived experiences of young SEA women in Oakland. I hope to inform policy makers how to create more effective policies and solutions for youth who are being exploited within the sex industry. Current and future policies around youth sex-workers should reflect an understanding of their needs and desires.

In examining these young SEA women in Oakland, this paper has attempted to break away from the simple criminal/victim binary that exists around young people and sex-work. It has provided another dimension in how we can further understand what has been deemed a “crisis” on the streets of Oakland (Payton 2005). In the city of Oakland in particular, the rhetoric around youth in sex-work claims that the system has switched over to viewing youth sex-workers as “victims” and not criminals (Rojas 2008). As Officer Tom Hogenmiller states, "If we find very young girls we try to help them... We treat them as victims and try to make cases on their pimps" (Harris 2007). Unfortunately, although according to this rhetoric the police no longer treat young people in sex-work as criminals, actions and policies have to yet to reflect this change. When asked how public policy can begin to protect young women in sex-work, Officer Jim Saleda recently stated,

We have nothing to hold these girls on... I can stop a girl on the street and she's a runaway, but I have no other charges. So I have no other choice but to put her right back into a group home which I know 10 minutes, she's gonna be out of that group home before I get back to my office. We need to be able to find

some place...a place where we can send them...a semi-locked facility, make it hard for them to get out.  
(KQED, "Forum with Michael Krasny", 4/24/2008)

While I did not have the opportunity to discuss Officer Saleda's statement with him, I can still ask: if the current system wants to treat and "protect" young sex-workers as "victims", how is simply putting them in a "semi-locked facility" any different than previously treating them as criminals? There is still a serious need for actions and policies to better address the needs of young people who have chosen or are at risk of falling into the business of sex-work.



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