

## SPECIAL FEATURE

# Professional girlfriends: Moving beyond sex work

An American academic has spent seven years researching the local hostess bar scene, and come up with some surprising findings. This is the first in a three-part series.

## Insight

Heidi Hoefinger



This is a story about sex, love and money. It begins in a bar and involves young Cambodian women and foreign men. Another tale of prostitution and exploitation you might think. Another portrait of a sad bar girl in need of rescue from pervy, middle-aged sexpats, and a system that traps her in a life she would obviously never choose. We've all heard it before. But this tale has a twist.

What if, for a moment, we suspend our judgments and scratch just a little beneath the surface. What we'll find instead is the complicated story of curious young women in search of opportunity, excitement and romance; male backpackers, on their gap years in a quest for friends and tour guides with benefits; and long term expats longing for comfort.

We'll also find people, curious to work in live in new places, and exchange cultures and sex, with new global partners. Couples, from two different worlds, making sense of feelings, finances and future hopes for happiness in a world full of stereotypes and stigma. It's here, in this murky space where sex, love and money collide, that we'll find the story of Cambodian "professional girlfriends" and their "western" boyfriends.

It was in 2003, while sharing a drink in her bar on St 51 when Lyli, 23, frowned and asked: "Why does everyone think I'm a taxi girl because I work in a bar and have boyfriends for love and for presents?" Bound up with my own middle-class western assumptions, her confusion confused me: "Well you go with customers right?" Irritated, she replied: "No ... I go with boyfriends!"

Thus began my journey to find out what really goes on in this complicated world of sex, gifts and misunderstanding. Seven years of immersion in and out of the hostess bar scene, and conversations with nearly 300 men and women revealed that the "sex-for-cash" prostitution framework did not always apply. Nor did the "indirect" or "freelance" sex worker label that is so often used in NGO



Phnom Penh has a lively nightlife, and like most big Asian cities, it has an entertainment area that includes hostess bars. BLOOMBERG

reports that attempt to describe this stereotyped group.

My PhD research did reveal patterns, though. Many young Cambodian women move to the cities to look for bar work and nice foreign boyfriends. They hope these boyfriends will support them and their families and buy them nice gifts like clothes, gold and motos. They exchange sex, affection and love for "stuff", and at first, their motivations are materially-based. This is referred to as "transactional sex" (sex-for-gifts) which is different from "commercial sex" (sex-for-cash). And in these relationships, the

term love itself has many meanings. "Do you love him?" I'd asked Lyli of her boyfriend "number one". "Yeah, I love him," she replied. "He doesn't drink too much, doesn't box me, and he's been sending \$300 a month for a year now." Professional girlfriends usually have more than one boyfriend at a time, doing this in order to protect against losses in a city filled with constant goodbyes.

Highlighting these patterns is not to play into the stereotypes of Cambodian women as greedy and calculating. Instead, it's to highlight the creative ways they make the best of situations that are structurally unequal. They know the foreign men they meet earn up to 100 times more than them per month. They know they have easier access to passports and the ability to travel. The women have had a taste of consumerism and a snippet of the outside world, and they want more. They want comfort and happiness like everyone else.

As Veata, 25, explains: "I just wanna have a happy life. I don't care so much about money. I just want a good man who treats me good and have a nice house for my family. I

want my daughters to go to a good school. I work in the bar now so I hope I can meet a sweet *barang* man to help take care."

In this case, the bar is viewed as a place of networking and opportunity. At the time of this interview with Veata, she was lamenting about how a boyfriend she really loved had just gone back to England. He was 23 and had to finish university. He had no money to send her from abroad, but promised he would Skype her regularly. She explained she's used to these farewells, but that they don't get any easier.

Fortunately, she had another older boyfriend, 49, in the US who had been sending her family rent money for two years, and a Frenchman in Sihanoukville who gives her physical and emotional comfort. But Veata clings to the hope that one day in the bar, she will meet "the one" for whom she would cut all ties to other men, and settle down into a monogamous love marriage, which seemed to be the ultimate goal for most of the professional girlfriends.

But this isn't to imply that all bar girls in Cambodia are professional girlfriends. Despite popular belief,

there are actually many virgins who work in the bars. Nor are women who have sex with lots of people for the fun of it – because they might actually like sex – professional girlfriends. As bar owner Saley, 28, pointed out: "I take care of myself. I don't ask for money or anything from boyfriends. Actually, I take care them! I just like to play around with some men for fun."

Some observers argue, well – the women who exchange affection for gifts with several different men are still prostitutes, or at least like escorts providing the western-style "girlfriend experience" (GFE). But this type of transactional sex is different because the people involved view themselves as boyfriends and girlfriends; the relationships aren't viewed as work or commercial exchange; there are no pre-determined time limits, prices or services discussed; and the exchange of gifts for sex is part of a broader set of obligations and expectations.

Sound familiar? That's because transactional sex happens all the time – the girl who goes home with a random stranger who bought her drinks all night; the guy who sleeps with his teacher for a grade; the women who marries the rich doctor for his money. Lots of us do it – or have done it before.

Just because Cambodian women have transactional sex with different people does not mean they are bad or broken. When western women do it, they are considered smart, and even powerful. Bar girls and professional girlfriends don't want to be viewed as prostitutes by default, but instead as sexually active women by default – who live in a consumerist society and want to have sex with the men of their choosing.

Bar manager Sophea, 29, expressed her frustration with the position of women in her country and the stigma people have against women who work in bars: "I really want people to stop looking down on bar girls. We're not bad girls. We help our families. I want to see women come up ... to be treated the same like men. Not more than men. Just the same ... like equal."

In the end, the main point of this story is to show that instead of being "cheating whores" or "poor victims" who should learn how to sew, bar girls and professional girlfriends are resourceful and entrepreneurial people who use the tools around them to improve their lives and find enjoyment in a sea of constraints and uncertainty. Rather than needing saving by those who think they know best, these clever young women are essentially saving themselves. ■

## AUTHOR BIO:

Dr Heidi Hoefinger has been researching the hostess bar scene in Phnom Penh since 2003. She received her PhD from Goldsmiths, University of London, and is author of upcoming book titled *Sex, Love and Money in Cambodia* (Routledge 2013).



Some of the names of bars leave little to the imagination. BLOOMBERG

# Professional girlfriends:

## Why western boyfriends? A cultural perspective

An American academic has spent seven years researching the local hostess bar scene, and come up with some surprising findings. This is the second in a three-part series.

### Insight

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One night while sipping a drink in a hostess bar in Phnom Penh with Sam, 31, from England, he shared the most common stereotypical complaint about “professional girlfriends” – or those women who exchange love and affection with multiple boyfriends for material things: “They’re all liars ... you can’t trust any of them ... they just want one thing ... they’re straight hoodrats [conniving people].”

In a typical here-there comparison, he continued: “The difference between slappers [prostitutes] in the UK and here is that, here, they are more manipulative, more devious, more calculating ... there’s a financial motivation behind everything ... their intentions are different, because that’s all they know.”

Because his Cambodian neighbour, Sreymau, 26, had worked in a bar and had a few boyfriends that she dated, he immediately labelled her a prostitute and assumed she was only motivated by money and greed. He associated this with an innate fault – as if “they know no better”, and are incapable of feeling/being/acting any other way.

Despite the fact that the women’s motivations to get involved with certain men are complicated and varied, it is this idea of ulterior motives which many men sometimes use to position themselves as innocent victims of female manipulation. As Tom, 36, from Australia pointed out about his ex-girlfriend: “She wanted everyone to feel sorry for her. But really, I was the victim in that relationship. She just used me for my money.”

But what if we stop for a moment and look at these relationships between Cambodian women and foreign men through an historical and cultural perspective? The very foundations of Cambodian culture are based on what’s called the patron-client relationship – the overall framework of which is Buddhist and refers to the ways in which people accumulate merit by redistributing resources and wealth to others further down in the pecking order. Basically, someone in a position of power grants favours and gives stuff to people with less power in exchange for loyalty or practical help with things. The entire Cambodian government is run in this way, for example.

It’s an unequal, but mutually beneficial system of exchange. And one could possibly view the relationships between western boyfriends (read patrons) and professional girlfriends (read clients) through the same cultural lens. The Cambodian women attach themselves to foreign men in the hopes of gaining social status and material things. The foreign boyfriends have economic power over the local girls and, in return, they gain not only personal satisfaction from their philanthropic



contributions of support (what I refer to as hero syndrome), but also practical assistance with translating from Khmer to English, or securing land, for example.

In exchange for financial security, girlfriends are intimate, nurturing and wait – sometimes years – for the men to return and hopefully marry them. The girl’s security and status, then, grows with her affiliation to this man. As historian Dr Trude Jacobsen, author of *Lost Goddesses: Denial of Female Power in Cambodian History* (2008) points out: “The women who enter into partnerships, however brief, with western men, are seen as having improved their access to wealth and opportunities.”

The things gained in the exchange

are shared with her family, which then increases her own good karma, power and prestige. Although this model can’t be applied in all cases of foreign-local relationships, there needs to be some understanding of patronage in the Southeast Asian context in order to understand how the girls might view their relationships with foreign men.

As Pich, 22, pointed out: “I have two boyfriends send me money to help with my family. I pay for school for my brothers, and I buy a moto for my father. When I go to the province, I bring a big bag of rice, and sometimes small gold for my mother. In my family, I’m the rich girl! I’m happy I help them a lot. I wait and I hope one boyfriend will

marry me sometime. Then I give my family the milk money.”

This leads to another cultural concept that should be considered in these foreign-local relationships – the idea of bride wealth, or milk money. This is the practice of men giving gifts and literally paying back the “mother’s milk” that was spent on raising the daughter, to the family of potential brides in order to secure marriage.

According to Dr Jacobsen: “It is important that the groom’s family show that they value the bride, or her family will not permit the marriage; the ability of the groom and his family to support the couple and any future children is a matter of prestige.” The practice of paying back the milk

money to the female’s family in the form of a gift is still practiced, but as she continues: “Value is more often shown today in the form of the latest equipment, an apartment in a desirable location, or modern furniture.”

As Khmer male student Rattana, 27, explained: “I want to get married, but I cannot. I do not have milk money to pay the family. So I work first [as a tuk tuk driver], then I have money to marry.” What this highlights is that it is culturally expected that a daughter’s marriage will bring status and material benefits to the entire family. So, a Cambodian woman’s desire to meet a man who will support her and her family should not be attributed to some form of inherent greed, but rather, to a deeply rooted historical and cultural expectation.

Something else Dr Jacobsen points out is the timescale of inter-racial, inter-ethnic, foreign-local partnerships in Cambodia, which, she explains have been taking place for nearly 2,000 years. First, the pre-classical Khmers and Chams (Cambodian Muslims) were mixing with Chinese and Indian merchants, diplomats and kings, and as early as the 9th century the historical records show that foreign men were offering gifts to families to secure their marriage to Cambodian women.

These political and economic alliances between Cambodian females and the first Europeans extend into to the mid-16th century, when Spanish and Portuguese mercenaries, merchants and missionaries entered Cambodia. The local women would offer themselves as “temporary wives”, which lasted as long as the foreign men were in town.

Once compensation was agreed upon, the female moved into his house, served him by day as a maid/servant, and had sex with him at night. The relationships were mutually beneficial: the men got help with translation and trading in the market, and the women got improved status, prestige and wealth associated with their “marriage” and patronage to Europeans. These foreign-local relationships, which have been happening for hundreds of years, have interesting similarities with contemporary partnerships between professional girlfriends and western boyfriends.

So the next time you overhear someone accusing a Cambodian bar worker or professional girlfriend of being a greedy thief, take a moment to educate them on the cultural and historical relevance of the women’s motivations. As Socheata, 27, concludes: “I wait to meet a good *barang* man in my bar. I want to get married so he give us [her family] money to build a big house. Then I love him forever. This is my tradition.” ■

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# Professional girlfriends

## The bar: The good, bad and practical

An American academic has spent seven years researching the local hostess bar scene, and come up with some surprising findings. The final installment of a three-part series.

### Insight

Heidi Hoefinger



‘What do you think of the hostess bar scene in Phnom Penh?’ This is a typical opening question I’d ask people while interviewing for my research on bar work and professional girlfriends in Cambodia (professional girlfriends are women who date multiple western boyfriends in exchange for gifts). Most often, well-meaning folks offer bits of sympathy, such as 20-year-old Dutch backpacker Annie: “I feel bad for the girls. They work in these bars and look for rich foreign guys because they have no other options. If they did, they would never choose to be here.”

It’s true – there is a tension between “free will” and the larger structural issues that make bar work a viable opportunity for women. But it is too simplistic to say that the women wouldn’t be there if it were just a matter of other options. With hostess bar work, there exists a number of freedoms which make it more appealing than other types of work – like street trading or garment factory work. But there are also lots of practical constraints that have to be dealt with. This article highlights the good bits, the bad bits and the practicalities in between.

Let’s start with the negative. Aside from the larger structural pressures related to economics, gender roles and required family loyalty, bar work itself comes with downsides. Most of these have to do with unwanted sexual advances, touching, rudeness, lewdness, verbal abuse, racism and sexism from intoxicated customers as well as management.

Chanthya, a 22-year-old bar worker on St 136, explains: “If I like one guy, I play with him ... flirt ... give massage on his back. But sometimes I don’t like men ... and they touch me anyway. I don’t like when they do this. I smile ... then I walking away.”

And as Dy, 24, points out: “Some *barang* men drink a lot! They talk very nasty and talk bad about Khmer girl. I say I not bad girl ... but they shouting and spitting ... very angry ... but I not worry ... just ignore ... and talking with Khmer girls [instead].”

Many bars also impose a strict system of fines, which means a portion of the girls’ wages are deducted for certain infractions. These fines vary and can be created and enforced by management on a whim. Sochua, 27, told me the story of how she was once fined \$1 for eating one peanut because the Australian manager didn’t like her. Thinking he was joking, she ate another one, and he then charged her \$2 – which, out of a \$60 per month salary, is the equivalent of an entire day’s pay.

Many bars charge \$5 fines for talking on mobile phones, or eating “personal” food while on duty. I heard stories of bars charging fines for chewing gum, for mixing up drink orders or making drinks improperly, for not wearing name



Girls working the streets do not have the security or support from fellow workers that bar hostesses have. Despite common perceptions, bar hostesses have a tight network.

badges, for not cleaning glasses properly, or reversely, for cleaning glasses when they shouldn’t be. The fine system is used as a form of control over the women, and a way for management to exert authority by punishing them financially.

But other downsides sometimes include unreasonable expectations from managers (eg to live at the bar or come in outside of scheduled hours), excessive alcohol and drug use, and probably the most common workplace hazard – a broken heart – which leads to depression and sometimes even self-harming (cutting arms with razors or “taking too much medicine”).

These last hazards have less to do with the bars themselves, than they do with Cambodia’s complete lack of mental health resources and services. During times of depression, the women, instead, turn to their friends and co-workers for support and comfort, which points to some of the highlights of working in a bar.

For many women, the bar is a place of freedom, solidarity and support. As many women move on their own from the country to the city, the bar, and their friends there, act as a type of family. As Jorani, 19, explains: “When I sad about my ex-boyfriend, I cry and cry. I go my bar and my sisters they help me. They make me

laughing and I forget boyfriend!”

While in the bars, the girls enjoy the freedoms of movement, of being with their friends, of chatting with different foreigners, of drinking, dancing, learning English and of hearing about the world outside of Cambodia. They have the freedom to play with their identities, and as Sochua said: “I like my bar because I like to be myself” – whoever that self might happen to be.

Bar life also allows much more freedom than the loneliness and isolation of being confined to the house as a wife or long-term girlfriend – which was a complaint of many women, and the reason many continued working in the bars after promising they wouldn’t while their partners were away.

The ability to work on again, off again in the bars also allows the women great freedom. Sochua has been working at the same bar for nearly 10 years, and now has a good relationship with the European owner. Many times, she’s taken long breaks from work – to have her children, or to go to the countryside. Knowing that the bar will always be there and that her boss will take her back is a great relief to her, and a form of stability in what is sometimes quite an unstable life.

But there was also a certain net-

work logic which defies the common argument that if there were other options, the women wouldn’t choose hostess bar work. Tina, 25, was once offered a receptionist job at a small western-run boutique hotel. The hotel promised to quadruple her \$50 per month salary and put her through university after she completed her first year at the hotel. The job was easy and the potential career opportunities seemed tremendous.

But after the first night, she walked out, and went back to work at her old bar. When asked why she would pass up what seemed to be such an amazing opportunity, she explained: “[The hotel] was too quiet. No customers ... bar is better ... learn more English ... meet more people.”

According to her logic, the potential for long-term security – which was via meeting people who might “open doors” for her – was greatly decreased at the hotel. The lower monthly salary at the hostess bar was secondary to the opportunity to meet more customers, which could potentially translate to increased economic, romantic, travel and learning opportunities in the future.

Tina found more value in the ability to network with a range of potentially useful people, than in pursuing a potentially unuseful long-drawn-out academic path. Aside

from this network logic, she also enjoyed the excitement, entertainment, social and educational aspects and freedoms of bar life.

So while there are plenty of negative aspects to working in hostess bars, the young women find them useful in different ways. Bar work tends to be seen as a means to an end, and a place of opportunity. For professional girlfriends, bars offer unlimited networking possibilities which leads to potential future security.

Rather than being viewed as victims who are trapped in oppressive jobs and have no control over their lives, the plethora of young women I spoke to instead revealed they are hard-working mothers and daughters, loyal employees, dedicated girlfriends and wives and creative young women who are pulling up their bootstraps and taking on this world, despite all those who doubt them or try to get in their way. And the bar is often the first stop on their journey. ■

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