

# Aid Worker Claims Fabricated Stories Are Common

By *Simon Marks* - November 7, 2013

Weighing in on revelations that fabricated sexual slavery stories were used to promote the work of Agir Pour Les Femmes en Situation Precaire (Afesip) in Cambodia, which was founded by global anti-trafficking activist Somaly Mam, a longtime aid worker said that staff at the organization were aware that some victims were not in the desperate situations they claimed to be.

Pierre Fallavier, who said he advised Afesip between 1999 and 2007, wrote in a series of recent emails that from the beginning of his relationship with the organization, concerns were raised by staff that information on victims that was being disseminated by Afesip was “exaggerated.”

Mr. Fallavier, who holds a Phd from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and has worked for NGOs and multiple U.N. agencies in Africa and Asia, also claimed that, like Afesip, many aid groups create “composite” stories of the lives of people being helped by their organizations as a means to raise funds.

“I started working as an adviser to Afesip in 1999, and stopped in 2007. From the start, people around me—all Khmers—were saying the stories Somaly told about herself and some of the girls were exaggerated. At that time I did not want to listen, because I could see the good Afesip was doing. The level of violence against women then was higher than anywhere else in Southeast Asia,” Mr. Fallavier wrote in an email.

“A few courageous individuals then set up organizations to rescue such women. Among them, Afesip decided it would also lead a ‘political’ struggle to get the rights of women and children recognized.... [S]o at that time, what counted were results. Everyone knew that some victims lied and were not in the desperate situations they claimed to be, but they were still in so much need of help that it did not seem to matter,” he wrote.

“And then, at the same time, donors were getting an interest, and were sending their people with crews of journalists to take pictures and extracts selling stories. I used to tell Somaly to send them away, that all they wanted were exotic stories of violence and sex, with the picture of a beautiful hero saving children so they could sell their papers. But they came with the funders, or with promises their articles and reports would help advocate for the rights of women. And they were the first ones to manipulate the images and the stories.”

Mr. Fallavier said that the recent spotlight on the Somaly Mam Foundation, following revelations that at least two alleged victims of the sex trade helped by her organization had fabricated stories, should be extended to include many other humanitarian groups.

“[I] find it unfair to point solely at Afesip for fabricating stories about its typical beneficiaries. This has been and still is the approach that all major international NGOs use, in Cambodia and elsewhere,” he wrote.

“They take bits and parts of the life stories of different beneficiaries and make up a ‘typical’ sob story that they use to raise funds with.”

Mr. Fallavier, who worked for Handicap International (H.I.), said that he left the organization because of such a practice in 2000 because he believed it to be “unethical.”

“But the point is that all NGOs do so, that they are unapologetic, and that it is well known to anyone working in that sector,” he continued.

“Just take one of the stories from Cambodia that Oxfam, World Vision, Care, etc. use in their advertising campaigns ‘at home,’ and try to trace them. You will see how the majority of these stories are ‘composite’ of different realities,” Mr. Fallavier claimed.

“They justify it very bluntly: This is marketing they need to raise money, and it is only with extreme stories that they will get people to give the cash they need to undertake their work. In fact, in many cases, back home, private marketing companies are in charge of the advertising, and they sell NGO work in the same way they would with any other service.”

Responding to Mr. Fallavier’s claims, the communications department at the Somaly Mam Foundation said it would not comment as Mr. Fallavier had never held an official position with Afesip.

“[W]e can’t speculate about allegations made by someone who had no formal affiliation with the organization,” the communications department said in a statement.

“Mr. Fallavier has been a good friend of Somaly Mam and supportive to Afesip Cambodia on a personal and unofficial capacity. He has never held any official positions or roles at Afesip Cambodia. We do not know when his relationship with Afesip and Somaly Mam began, yet it is an amicable and supportive one that still continues today,” the statement continues.

Pierre Legros, who helped found Afesip in 1996 and is the ex-husband of Ms. Mam, confirmed Mr. Fallavier had advised Afesip.

At one time, Afesip’s funding from the European Union (E.U.) was sent through H.I. and Mr. Fallavier had acted as an intermediary between the two organizations, Mr. Legros said.

“In 1999 we received money from the European Commission. This money we could not receive directly as we had to pass through an NGO that had an agreement with the E.U. So we received money passed to us by an intermediary NGO. It was Handicap International that was chosen to be the intermediary with Afesip,” Mr. Legros said.

“Pierre Fallavier was hired by Handicap International to serve as someone who was responsible for the programs run by Afesip using Handicap International money. He was the adviser to Afesip in making the link between Handicap International and Afesip.”

Mr. Fallavier’s emails followed a recent story revealing that a 14-year-old girl being rehabilitated by Afesip had been coached in 1998 to tell a fabricated story of sexual slavery in a documentary for French television. Other stories promoted by Afesip of sex slavery, trafficking and even killing have also proven to be false.

In his emails on the subject of victim fabrication in the aid industry, Mr. Fallavier reserved some of his harshest criticism for Handicap International France (HIF).

According to Mr. Fallavier, in 1999, when he was working in Cambodia with HIF, the organization launched a campaign to send hundreds of thousands of letters to raise funds from individuals in Europe using stories of child victims of land mines. The campaign, run out of HIF’s headquarters in France, gained immense traction because of its focus on child landmine victims. However, child victims of landmines represented only a tiny proportion of the work HIF was actually carrying out in Cambodia—most of its work was in roads, irrigation and access to water.

Though he does not claim that the landmine stories were fabricated, Mr. Fallavier said they greatly exaggerated the extent of the problem.

“I learned that if work with children victims of landmines represented less than ten percent of HI operations worldwide, the fundraising campaign that showed HI largely as supporting these children brought in 90 percent of the private funds it used to complement institutional funding in all its operations,” Mr. Fallavier said.

“So, somehow HIF was collecting the majority of its funds on a belief they built among the public that the money would be used to support these children,” though Mr. Fallavier admits that a disclaimer was written in tiny print at the bottom of H.I.’s call for funds.

Arnaud Richard, head of the Federal Information team for H.I., said last week that the organization “does not fabricate stories” when publicizing its work in some of the world’s poorest countries.

“The stories are personal stories which give the general public an insight into both the wider situation and the lives of many of our beneficiaries. This enables us to raise the awareness of the public and private donors in countries where HI is represented by national associations (UK, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, Switzerland, Canada and USA). We would also point out that beneficiaries are informed of HI’s actions and are asked to give their permission to use their image,” he said.

“Several people who have worked for our organization for many years remember that Mr. Fallavier once worked for Handicap International. However, he left the organization more than 13 years ago, and we do not currently have any further information on his reasons for leaving Handicap International,” he said.

Mr. Richard said that H.I. promotes its work abroad through a team of four people dedicated to gathering testimonies and information from its operations and programs.

These four people, dubbed the “Federal Information team,” regularly travel to the field to meet with beneficiaries. The stories can then be used as part of the organization’s attempts to raise funds.

Asked about Mr. Fallavier’s claims that H.I.’s fundraising techniques were misleading the public, Mr. Richard said the organization engages in focused campaigns in order to draw the attention of donors to its activities.

“These campaigns were indeed run during the period you have mentioned in order to raise funds,” Mr. Richard said referring to H.I.’s campaign carried out during 1999 and 2000.

“However, to be totally clear, at no point during these fundraising campaigns did the organization state that the money collected would be specifically used for our actions in Cambodia. We are always careful to point out that donations are used to help people with disabilities and to improve their living conditions. For example, we might highlight the cost of fitting a disabled person with an orthopedic device or providing them technical aids in order to give donors an idea of the potential impact of their donation.

“In order to avoid misunderstandings on this point, however, the documents sent out to donors specifically state that the testimonies are offered as examples only. The reply slip also clearly states that, by making a donation, the donor ‘authorizes Handicap International to allocate its aid to the most useful and urgent activity.’”

Mr. Richard also took issue with Mr. Fallavier’s interpretation of H.I.’s work.

“We strongly refute the idea that these stories were invented or that we misled donors regarding the use of their donations. Although we are sure that Mr. Fallavier—who appears to have made a good impression on those who worked with him at Handicap International—is acting in good faith, his interpretation of an activity of which he has very little knowledge—fundraising—is totally false,” he said.

Other organizations in Cambodia working with women and children also denied Mr. Fallavier’s claim that they engage in exaggerating stories, and that any stories on victimhood are presented accurately using real, consenting people or composites of real life situations.

Talmage Payne, CEO of Hagar International, said the practice of using victim testimonies in order to sell an NGO’s work abroad raises serious questions due to the pervasiveness of using images in fundraising that fully identify the face and names of sexual abuse or trafficked minors.

“This violates a number of best practice protocols about protecting clients and many national laws—even if the story is true,” Mr. Payne said.

He added that the Somaly Mam Foundation’s use of a 14-year-old alleged victim of sex slavery could even be in violation of Cambodia’s Law on the Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation, which states that “Newspapers and all other mass media shall be prohibited from publishing or broadcasting or disseminating any information which can lead to public knowledge of identities of victims in the offences stipulated in this law.”

“The well known and well regarded [NGO] brands are very careful about this with strict protection standards. It’s a problem on the fringes. It’s not a norm or mainstream,” Mr. Payne said.

Mr. Payne said that in his organization’s publications a researcher may create a composite case study of many stories in order to “create victimology of certain types of abuse and recovery,” all of which is disclosed in any writing on the matter. He added that all stories are based on the subject’s consent and that identifying images are never used in cases of trafficking or sexual abuse.

Andrew Moore, country director for Save the Children, also said fabricating victims’ stories is not practiced by his organization.

“Save the Children does not fabricate stories for fundraising purposes,” he said. “We adhere to high standards of child protection and child safeguarding in gathering stories from the field, and all our staff are trained on child safeguarding.

“Our publicity work is done in-house, with thorough approval protocols that ensure that only factual reports that safeguard the interests of children are released.”

In a recent article, Sebastien Marot, executive director of Friends International, an NGO that helps disadvantaged children living in urban areas in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Indonesia, Honduras, Mexico, Egypt and Burma, said the situation regarding the fabrication of victims’ stories had arisen as “a direct consequence of the interconnected actions of the child protection organizations, the media, the donors and the general public; all wanting the best for these children, but instead turning them into victims.”

“[A] large number of organizations get sucked into using children to raise funds: making them talk about the abuse they survived in front of a camera, having their picture in a pitiful situation published for everyone to see, allowing non-professional visitors into their centers [like orphanage tourism],” Mr. Marot wrote.

“In worst cases, the truth is distorted or the stories invented to attract more compassion and money,” Mr. Marot said in the article published on his organization’s website.

“The impact on the lives of these children is terrible: if they come from an abusive situation, such a process retraumatizes them and in any case it stigmatizes them forever.”

Mr. Marot said the media was complicit, and searched out and published emotionally-charged stories in order to attract readers. Moreover, donors tend to react to these stories.

“As regulators of the money it is easy, if specific guidelines are not in place, to fund projects on a purely emotional basis. For example we have witnessed a rapid increase of orphanages in Cambodia (funded by local and foreign private donors), despite the fact that most of these children are not orphans and it is against current Cambodian Government policies,” he wrote.

“Like the general public, donors react to highly emotionally charged stories that in some cases are built to please them or are told at the expense of the same children they want to protect. Many donors do not have the capacity or desire to check these stories, so we end up in situations of ‘embellished’ story lines.

“A main consequence of this is that in some instances organizations end up selling the wrong problem to the donors: since donors will fund based on emotions and not on the more mundane facts, this can lead to the creation of programs built on entirely wrong assumptions which do not provide the right solutions to the beneficiaries. They may give the ‘right’ message/image back to the donors but end up further hurting the children with the money that was intended to protect them,” he continued.

Aarti Kapoor, who was a legal adviser to Afesip between 2003 and 2006 and still works to combat sexual abuse against children, said child protection has become highly sensationalized.

“The image of human trafficking has become highly sensationalized, often to get media attention and raise funds through emotive reactions. The reality of trafficking is often more complex,” Ms. Kapoor said.

“The tragedy is that sensationalized perceptions of trafficking end up hindering our ability to identify and respond to the majority of cases on the ground.”

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