

Once Coached for TV, Now Asked to Keep Quiet

By *Simon Marks and Kuch Naren* - November 4, 2013

The woman who claims she was coached by global anti-sex trafficking advocate Somaly Mam to fabricate a story of sexual slavery for French television in 1998 says she has been approached by a Somaly Mam Foundation (SMF) staff member, who has begged her to stop talking to the media.

Meas Ratha, 32, revealed last month that as a young teenager she was selected by Ms. Mam to appear on the France 2 television channel in 1998 after undergoing rehearsals with a group of other young girls to falsely recount how she was sold to a brothel owner in Phnom Penh.

Days after her revelation was published on October 12, Meas Ratha said she received her first visit from the SMF staffer.

“There was a girl...came to me begging with tears to stop speaking to the media. Of course whatever I told you was true—that I was filmed to lie to the world and that I was a victim even though I was not,” Ms. Ratha said in a telephone interview on October 24.

“But now I can no longer speak,” she said.

Ms. Ratha identified the visitor as Sina Vann, a longtime employee of the SMF in Cambodia and program manager for the organization’s Voices for Change (VFC) program. The VFC program is run by SMF and aims at giving a voice to victims of sex trafficking in order to raise awareness about the issue.

The second visit by Ms. Vann was on October 23, said Ms. Ratha, adding that the SMF staff member had stressed that speaking out about her past could greatly damage the reputation of Ms. Mam’s organization.

“She was not here to intimidate me. But she begged me and cried in front of me and said that it would be a disaster for the organization if I keep talking to the media. She also asked me not to talk to other journalists if they approached me,” Ms. Ratha said.

“If I keep talking it will bring trouble to everyone: myself, the organization and you [journalists]. I used to stay inside the [SMF] organization so I want to help it,” she said, adding that she would heed the call and no longer speak about the fabricated story from 1998.

Ms. Ratha, who is now a streetside food vendor to garment factory workers on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, said she was admitted to Afesip in 1997 because her family of nine was struggling to survive.

Her parents and sister—who also stayed with Ms. Ratha inside an Afesip training center—backed-up Ms. Ratha’s claim that she was never enslaved as a prostitute inside a brothel in Phnom Penh.

Ms. Vann could not be contacted for comment.

Afesip CEO Sao Chhoeurth said on October 24 that he was not aware of any visit having been made to Ms. Ratha.

Hayle Welgus, policy and liaison manager for SMF in Cambodia, said Ms. Vann had not been sent by the organization in an official capacity.

“SMF hasn’t sent Sina [Vann] in an official capacity so I need to speak to her to see if she visited on a personal level,” Ms. Welgus said on October 24.

Contacted on Friday, Ms. Welgus declined to comment and referred questions to the communications department at SMF.

Asked about Ms. Vann’s alleged visit to Ms. Ratha, the SMF communication’s department declined to comment.

“The statement that was sent to you previously is all that we have to share on this matter,” the communications department at SMF said in an email.

The SMF communications department was referring to a statement in which Afesip said in October that it would not speculate on why Ms. Ratha had denied the story she had told France 2.

Afesip has also declined to say from which brothel Ms. Ratha had been allegedly rescued or to which department of the police her case of alleged enslavement and rescue had been filed.

Though Ms. Ratha insists the visit from the SMF’s Ms. Vann was only beseeching, she admits that she is now unwilling to speak out about the truth behind her story due to any repercussions that could stem from harming Afesip’s reputation in Cambodia.

After The Cambodia Daily reported its findings in October 2012 into the story of Long Pros, one of SMF’s most publicized members of the Voices for Change program, the young woman’s father, Long Hon, said he was paid a visit from Afesip staff who had also asked him to cease speaking to the media.

Ms. Pros had long told a horrific story of having an eye gouged out at the hands of a brothel owner. However, medical records show that Ms. Pros’ eye was removed by an eye surgeon in hospital—the victim of a large benign tumor that covered one of her eyes for many years during childhood.

Ms. Pros was only sent to Afesip after undergoing her operation at the Takeo Eye Hospital, her parents said, a claim that was also confirmed by medical records and images obtained showing Ms. Pros' medically-removed eye.

While members of the SMF staff now appear reluctant for Ms. Ratha and the family of Ms. Pros to continue speaking to reporters, a huge amount of Ms. Mam's success and global fame stems from the highly public testimony and many media interviews conducted by the young women inside her organization who tell harrowing tales of sex trafficking.

The high-media profile of the SMF, and support from board members such as Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg and Hollywood actress Susan Sarandon, has helped the foundation's revenues and expenditures rocket in recent years.

In 2011, the latest year for which figures are available, spending by the SMF increased to \$3.53 million. The SMF's annual fundraising gala in New York on October 23 was a star-studded event where tickets for some tables went for \$100,000.

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