

Cambodian Activist's Fall Exposes Broad Deception

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Somaly Mam left the foundation bearing her name after questions arose about her history. Credit Mak Remissa/European Pressphoto Agency

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia — The fall from grace of one of Cambodia's most prominent social activists and the unraveling of her sad tale of being an orphan sold into sex slavery has highlighted what aid workers here say is widespread embellishment and in some cases outright deception in fund-raising, especially among the country's orphanages.

Somaly Mam, who rose from rural poverty in Cambodia to become a jet-setting and glamorous symbol of the fight against the exploitation of women and children, stepped down last month from the United

States-based charitable organization that carries her name after details of her widely publicized story were thrown into question.

Ms. Mam — who has been praised and supported by Hollywood stars and United States government officials and celebrated by the American media — reinforced the image of Cambodia as a destitute country still suffering from its legacy of genocide, helping generate millions of dollars for charities.

But activists say her story is part of a larger tale of deception meant to attract foreign money into impoverished Cambodia. Such duplicity, they say, has drawn some foreign donors into unwittingly perpetuating a system that keeps thousands of poor children with parents in orphanages for years.

Although some families send children because they cannot provide basic care, others are lured by the institutions' promises that the children will receive a better education. But child advocates say the orphanages are often more intent on making money and too rarely make good on their promises.

Sébastien Marot, the director of Friends International, a charity that specializes in helping children in Cambodia and neighboring countries, said the organizations misrepresented themselves as orphanages because it helped them raise money. "An orphanage is an easy sell," he said. "They are distorting reality so that they can attract more compassion and money."



Somaly Mam left the foundation bearing her name after questions arose about her history. Credit Mak Remissa/European Pressphoto Agency Cambodia's Scam Orphanages In Cambodia, less than a quarter of children in orphanages are actual orphans. Credit By Poypiti Amatatham on Credit By Poypiti Amatatham on Publish Date June 14, 2014

A government study conducted five years ago found that 77 percent of children living in Cambodia's orphanages had at least one parent.

The empathy of foreigners — who not only deliver contributions, but also sometimes open their own institutions — helped create a glut of orphanages, according to aid workers, and the government says they now house more than 11,000 children. Although some of the orphanages are clean and well-managed, many are decrepit

and, according to the United Nations, leave children susceptible to sexual abuse.

“The number of orphans has been going down and the number of orphanages going up,” said Sarah Chhin, who helps run an organization that encourages children in orphanages who have families to return home. “We are forever having people say, ‘I’ve come to Cambodia because I want to open an orphanage.’ ”

A United Nations report three years ago said some orphanages “exploit the problem of poverty by actively recruiting children in poor families by convincing, coercing or even paying parents to give their children away.”

In many cases, human rights activists say, the children are ordered to pose as orphans to attract foreign donations.

“Pity is a most dangerous emotion,” said Ou Virak, the founder of a human rights organization in Phnom Penh. “Cambodia needs to get out of the beggar mentality. And foreigners need to stop reacting to pure emotion.”

Hong Theary, a 22-year-old university student who spent more than four years in an orphanage in Phnom Penh, says she was one of those forced to lie and beg for donations from foreigners, although she comes from what she calls a “happy family” of rice farmers. Her parents sent her to the orphanage thinking she would get better schooling.

“It was a waste of time — I didn’t get anything out of it,” Ms. Theary said of the orphanage, which has since shut down. “The only person who benefited was the owner.” The head of the orphanage instructed her to take on a Canadian couple as “adoptive parents.”

"I regret that I did not tell them the truth," Ms. Theary said of the Canadians, who visited Phnom Penh a number of times and gave financial support that ended up with the orphanage director. "They were always good to me."

For a time, Ms. Mam was considered the country's most famous orphan. She wrote an autobiography that described her as an orphan trafficked into sexual slavery, and she was often described in heroic terms in the American news media, including in columns by Nicholas Kristof of The New York Times. Mr. Kristof wrote in a recent blog post that given the doubts the recent revelations raised for him, he wished he had never written about her.

Her accounts were called into question last month in a report in Newsweek that quoted childhood friends and local government officials from Ms. Mam's native village disputing her story of orphanhood and teenage sexual slavery. The report also quoted a woman who said her own story of sex slavery was "fabricated and carefully rehearsed for the cameras under Mam's instruction."

Ms. Mam stepped down last month from the American foundation, which is dedicated to eradicating the trafficking of women and girls in Southeast Asia, after the organization received the results of its own investigation by a law firm. The foundation now plans to change its name. Ms. Mam stands by her account.

Cambodia had an acute need for orphanages three and a half decades ago after the rule of the Khmer Rouge, which left 1.7 million people dead and many children without parents.

Yet after the genocide ended and the number of orphans declined, the global spotlight on the issue seemed to intensify. In 2002, the high-profile adoption of a Cambodian child by Angelina Jolie rekindled global concern about the plight of Cambodian orphans. Many young people traveled to Cambodia to work as volunteers in orphanages.

The number of registered orphanages rose to 225 this year from 154 nine years ago.

Many orphanages solicit donations online, and visiting orphanages is now part of the tourist itinerary. Taxi drivers show lists of attractions that include the Royal Palace, a Khmer Rouge torture center and a visit to an orphanage, where donations are encouraged.

One orphanage in Phnom Penh, the Cambodian Light Children Association, has posted a sign on a nearby road saying "tourists welcome," though the orphanage also indicates that only some of the children there are orphans. On a recent visit, the paint was chipping, the courtyard was filled with trash, and an emergency exit was padlocked.

"We ask the families whether they have enough income to take care of the children," said Thoern Chandhorn, a manager there. "If their parents say, 'We don't have the ability to send the children to school,' I say, 'We can help you.'"

Sam Soy, 27, who spent more than seven years in the orphanage in Phnom Penh where Ms. Theory, the university student, lived, described it as a moneymaking enterprise for its owners. The orphanage director threatened to withhold food if Mr. Soy did not appear pathetic for visitors, he said.

When tourists came to the orphanage, Mr. Soy said, the children “were trained to say: ‘I have no food to eat. We have many, many mosquitoes. We have no rice.’ ”

And when donations of rice or mosquito nets were sent, the director would sell them for cash, keeping the proceeds for herself, Mr. Soy said.

The former head of the orphanage could not be reached for comment.

Among the critics of orphanages are Cambodian officials charged with registering them. Since 2006 the Cambodian government has had a policy of returning children to their communities whenever possible. But law enforcement here is weak, and Oum Sophannara, the director of the child welfare department at the Cambodian Ministry of Social Affairs, said orphanages were often uncooperative. The business is too lucrative, he said.

“They believe that if they can keep the ministry out,” he said, “they will continue to get funding.”