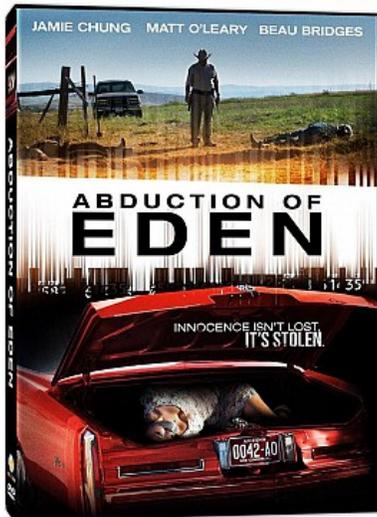


## Another High-Profile Sex Trafficking Tale May Be Falling Apart

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"Based on a true story"

In 2012 filmmaker Megan Griffiths debuted *Eden*, the tale of "underage women conscripted into sexual slavery by a criminal enterprise from which there is seemingly no escape," as *The New York Times* review described it.

"You may call me naïve," wrote reviewer Stephen Holden, "but it is deeply upsetting that *Eden* is set in the United States and that the organization's boss, Bob Gault (Beau Bridges), is a law-and-order-preaching United States marshal. We imagine this kind of crime flourishing in the shadows of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. But in the United States, with a backslapping good old boy running the operation? Could it be?"

No. And it wasn't supposed to be, not exactly—Griffiths' film was not a documentary. But it did advertise itself as being based on a true story, that of Chong Kim, a Korean-American trafficked into sex slavery in the mid-1990s.

When the film came out, the real Kim made the media circuit telling her story: handcuffed to a doorknob for months by a man she thought was her boyfriend; held in a Vegas warehouse full of other teens; forced to work as a prostitute around the country; rising to madam; and escaping on her own two years later.

As a public speaker, and activist, Kim had already told this story many times—here's her being interviewed for the 2011 book *Not in My Town: Exposing and Ending Human Trafficking and Sex Slavery*. She describes how she was kidnapped and trafficked as so:

I had a gun to my head. The head person that does the trafficking was a consultant with the FBI in Las Vegas. So it was very corrupt.

Though she was 18, Kim says she was forced to pretend to be 13 to appeal to an array of unsuspecting pedophiles.

Um, it was an international criminal organization, but the majority of customers were white Americans. And the customers were anywhere between CEOs, lawyers, police officers, we've even had really high-echelon pastors, different types of men. They were high status; there were even political figures that were there that bought me.

*Eden*, the film based on Chong's story, premiered at the South by Southwest festival in 2012, nabbing the audience choice award for best narrative feature. Outside the festival, the film was heralded as "powerful," a "masterpiece," and "a sobering thriller that puts many human faces on

an international crisis."

Women in Hollywood interviewed Griffiths at the time, leading in with this:

We all think the sex trafficking occurs over there in countries far, far away. But it happens here ALL THE TIME. ... The thing about trafficking is that it happens in plain sight and many people in the culture perpetuate it - even guys with daughters.

It's a pretty good summary of the standard narrative on sex-trafficking these days: it's everywhere, all the time, and we don't even know it; the only way to combat it is to keep throwing cops and money and laws at it; and anyone who questions any of this is only aiding the evildoers. It's almost impossible to argue with people who buy this narrative, because the more evidence you present challenging sex trafficking's pervasiveness, the more they see proof that sex trafficking is so under the radar we need to throw more cops and money and laws at it.

As we've seen time and again, however, these tactics tend to under-produce on the *stopping sex trafficking* front and overcompensate by targeting consenting adult sex workers—either by arresting them or labeling them victims and sending them to things like "prostitution diversion therapy"—and their clients. The majority of genuine sex trafficking cases that are uncovered tend to be older teenagers—still terrible, but far from the horror stories we hear from anti-trafficking advocates, who insist throngs of young girls are being sold as sex slaves.



Chong Kim/Facebook

And now we are seeing so many of these horror stories fall apart. First it was Somaly Mam, the activist whose own sex trafficking story, as well as those of some of her star "rescues," turned out to be false. After years of international support and acclaim, Mam—a favorite of *The New York Times*' Nicolas Kristof—was exposed by *Newsweek* as a fraud.

Now Kim's story, too, may be coming apart. Last week Breaking Out, a nonprofit organization that fights human trafficking of all forms, posted the following message on Facebook:

We regretfully want to inform everyone the results of a year long investigation by our highly experienced investigative unit, that Chong Kim whom has claimed to be a survivor of human trafficking is not what she claims to be.

After thorough investigation into her story, people, records and places, as well as, many interviews with producers, publishers and people from organizations, we found no truth to her story. In fact, we found a lot of fraud, lies, and most horrifically

capitalizing and making money on an issue where so many people are suffering from.

According to Breaking Out's founder, James Barnes, it and several other organizations were defrauded by Chong, who was collecting money in their names without actually passing any of it on. "We are ready with others supporting us to take full legal action against Chong Kim," Barnes' statement said.

Kim responded to Breaking Out in a Facebook post:

I don't appreciate you spreading lies about me ... Whatever you claim to have I have the right to see it otherwise I will send you and your organization a formal complaint.

For the record, I reached out to Kim, with no response yet. Update: "I have my attorney on them," Kim told me. "We sent them a cease & desist letter Monday."

In subsequent Facebook updates, Breaking Out elaborated on its allegations and said it was "working with a reporter to get an interview" with Kim. In an interview with Christina Parreira, Barnes—a private investigator for 15 years—explained that Kim approached him about working together. He agreed, but found parts of her story suspicious and began poking around.

Earlier this week, Noah Berlatsky wrote at *Salon* about "Hollywood's dangerous obsession with sex trafficking." Berlatsky watched *Eden* and did not see the same poignantly realistic drama so many movie critics had.

The familiarity here is the familiarity of exploitation tropes, which are clustered about so densely and insistently that it's hard to believe anyone missed them. (...) The film isn't badly made, as these things go—Jamie Chung as the lead Hyun Jae in particular is more talented than the script deserves. But that anyone took this clearly fanciful, clearly derivative fiction for fact is, in retrospect, somewhat shocking. Even at the time, some folks saw through it; sex worker Mistress Matisse tried to convince David Schmader at *The Stranger* that the whole thing was bunkum.

Matisse, who has apparently been patiently poking holes in Chong's story for a while, is the one who pointed me to this story. "In the wake of the Somaly Mam scandal, people are suddenly examining the stories told by professional anti-trafficking activists more closely," wrote Matisse in an email. "Chong Kim's story was never fact-checked or substantiated in any way, it has varied quite widely in the numerous tellings over the years, and it is falling apart."

Back to Berlatsky on *Eden*:

To just point out the most obvious issue, the movie details a copious number of murders, several of them committed by the main character herself. This is standard issue for a Hollywood film, but in real life, this amounts to mass murder, including the killing of multiple law-enforcement personnel. That's a major story—if this happened

in anything like the way Kim said, where's the massive investigation? Why is this being covered in an entertainment review, rather than on the front page?

The absence of any attempt at verification—from the authors who repeated Kim's story, the journalists who interviewed her, the organizations that brought her on as a speaker, or any of the myriad people behind the "based on a true story" *Eden*—makes it pretty clear that nobody wanted to find holes in Kim's story. We want victim narratives so badly that we refuse to listen to sex workers when they say they're not victims and leap at the chance to tell the stories, no matter how apocryphal, of those whose tales conform with our expectations.

"Moral panic deployed to appeal to outraged empathy, or sexploitation deployed to appeal to giggling prurience; they both function in much the same way," wrote Berlatsky. And with sex trafficking tales, we get a two for one. It's almost too good to resist. But let's try.

*Here's Kim on CNN in October 2013:*

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