

# Special Report: Money and Lies in Anti-Human Trafficking NGOs

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The United States' beloved - albeit disgraced - anti-trafficking advocate [Somaly Mam](#) has been waging a slow but steady return to glory since a Newsweek cover story in May 2014 led to her ousting from the Cambodian foundation that bore her name. The allegations in the article were not new; they'd been reported and corroborated in bits and pieces for years. The magazine simply pointed out that Mam's personal narrative as a survivor of sex trafficking and the similar stories that emerged from both clients and staff at the non-governmental organization (NGO) she founded to assist survivors of sex trafficking, were often unverifiable, if not outright lies.

Panic ensued. Mam had helped establish, for US audiences, key plot points in the narrative of trafficking and its future eradication. Her story is that she was forced into labor early in life by someone she called "Grandfather," who then sold off her virginity and forced her into a child marriage. Later she says she was sold to a brothel where she watched several contemporaries die in violence. Childhood friends and even family members couldn't verify Mam's recollection of events for Newsweek, but Mam has suggested that her story is typical of trafficking victims.

Mam has also cultivated a massive global network of anti-trafficking NGOs, funders and supporters, who have based their missions, donations and often life's work on her emotional - but fabricated - tale. Some distanced themselves from the Cambodian activist last spring, including her long-time supporter at [The New York Times](#), [Nicholas Kristof](#), while others suggested that even if untrue, Mam's stories were told in support of a worthy cause and were therefore true *enough*.

Despite Somaly Mam's continued vagaries, insinuations, mischaracterizations and outright lies, her career as spokesperson for the American Rescue Industry seems poised for a full recovery.

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Few countered Newsweek's report, however, until Marie Claire mounted a defensive strike in September 2014, with a new interview with Mam, in which she sought to debunk the allegations against her. The piece also functioned as a PR platform for the announcement of the New Somaly Mam Foundation, a mild rebrand of the original Somaly Mam Foundation (SMF), from which the figurehead had been forced to resign before the organization folded. SMF was the primary funder for AFESIP, the NGO Mam founded to offer services to trafficked victims. In December, the [Phnom Penh Post](#) reported that AFESIP will merge with the new foundation and the [Cambodia Daily](#) added that a recent funding push has proven surprisingly successful among government officials who had publicly forbidden Mam from heading another NGO in the country after the Newsweek story broke, but later reversed their decision.

To date, none of the investigations that suggest Mam had willfully invented facts have been [properly explained away or refuted](#). In fact, although the Marie Claire article was touted by two different PR teams suggesting it would serve as the first of many truth-revealing chats with the self-proclaimed former sex slave, many reporters never received responses to interview requests. One of the few interviews Mam did do, with [Global Dispatches](#) reporter [Mark Goldberg](#), didn't go well. Mam told Goldberg repeatedly that she wasn't bothered by the allegations against her, yet as development reporter Tom Murphy pointed out [on Twitter](#), she was actively participating in the PR push to "correct" them. Even worse, Mam misrepresented the clientele of AFESIP, claiming vaguely that "most of the girls are from trafficking." In fact, an [independent audit](#) of the NGO in January 2014 found that only 49 percent of the 674 women and girls in residence between 2008 and 2012 could be considered "trafficked" under any definition of the term. Many were consensual adult sex workers; others were simply deemed "at risk" of trafficking (a description the report does not distinguish from other women living in poverty.)

Today, despite Mam's continued vagaries, insinuations, mischaracterizations and outright lies, her career as spokesperson for the American Rescue Industry seems poised for a full recovery. Many may balk at the idea that her falsehoods will still generate millions, hundreds of millions or even billions of dollars in donations toward murky ends. Some will write it off as Standard International Aid Procedure.

Others, however, know that in the world of anti-trafficking organizations, money and lies are deeply - perhaps inextricably - tied. The false claims, forwarded as fact, are big. So is the

money that's spent and received in the service of those claims - more than half a billion dollars in recent years. That we know of.

## Shedding Light and Casting Shadows

Considering their common mythical enemy - the nameless and faceless men portrayed in TV dramas who trade in nubile human girl stock - one would hope anti-trafficking organizations would unite in an effort to be less shady. With names reliant on metaphors of recovery, light and sanctuary, anti-trafficking groups project an image of transparency. Yet these groups have shown a remarkable lack of fiscal accountability and organizational consistency, often even eschewing an open acknowledgement of board members, professional affiliates and funding relationships. The problems with this evasion go beyond ethical considerations: A certain level of budgetary disclosure, for example, is a legal requirement for tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organizations. Yet anti-trafficking groups fold, move, restructure and reappear under new names with alarming frequency, making them almost as difficult to track as their supposed foes.

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To begin connecting the dots in this ever-shifting matrix, Truthout looked at 50 of the most prominent domestic groups founded or organized to limit or eradicate human trafficking, or to assist trafficking victims. This includes organizations that do not use the term "trafficking" in mission statements, but either designate human trafficking as a major issue area or work in a related area (such as violence against women), have a consistent history of trafficking focused projects and are regularly designated as anti-trafficking focused by other anti-trafficking organizations. Budgets of multi-issue organizations were considered as a whole, on the presumption that such organizations operate intersectionally. All organizations included were mentioned in news media or conversations with media professionals or concerned activists at least twice during this reporters' six-month study, except in cases in which the organization changed names, when the founder's name or previous organization had appeared at least twice. Not included are one-off anti-trafficking campaigns or projects of organizations that do not deal primarily with trafficking issues. The intention here is to look at the level of transparency employed and the often outsized claims these organizations make regarding their impact.

The 50 organizations were located throughout the United States. California, Arizona, Washington, DC, Florida, Texas, Massachusetts, New York and Washington State were each healthily represented on the list; single organizations were also located in Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Illinois, Kansas, Missouri, Nevada, Tennessee and Virginia. (No South Dakota organizations appear on this list, although one exists; it should be noted that despite its lack of prominent anti-trafficking organizations, that state leads the nation in life sentences for traffickers.)

In recent years, trafficking has become a major domestic concern. The United Nation's International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates, worldwide, a forced labor population of 21 million people - 11.4 million women and girls and 9.4 million men and boys - 4.5 million of which, or 21 percent, they suggest are victims of forced sexual exploitation. These are not hard numbers; they are estimates. But they are the bedrock on which the global anti-trafficking movement is set.

Each of the 50 prominent anti-trafficking organizations discussed below focuses primarily on female victims of forced sexual exploitation - no more, in other words, than a slim fifth of what the ILO suggests is a global labor crisis. This distinctly salacious myopia has been noted by groups such as the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, which point out that many organizations foster moralizing legislation that downplays the human rights of sex workers and immigrants. One organization addressed below, the Polaris Project, would seem to justify the narrow focus on the sex trade, claiming to have received calls to the hotline of their National Human Trafficking Resource Center reporting 2,740 cases of sex trafficking in 2013, compared to 634 reporting labor trafficking. Yet since Polaris and many other organizations are heavily invested in "raising awareness" of the potential for human trafficking in what may well be benign or legal situations, there's no telling how accurate their findings are.

Human trafficking is the "recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation."

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Despite the apparent confusion, human trafficking is quite clearly defined, at least by the United Nations. It is the "recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation." It is distinct from debt bondage, forced labor and modern slavery, and the ILO is careful to warn against slippage between these terms. However, most organizations in this study use these terms interchangeably, even occasionally substituting "trafficking" with "sexual exploitation," "prostitution," "porn" or similar terms. It would be difficult to charge that such confusion is always a deliberate act of deception, but if we consider the comparative implications of actual trafficking and legal pornography (say, Playgirl - legal porn so mild this reporter might share it with her grandmother), we can see that the lack of clarity most organizations create serves to clump a wide range of very different activities together, many of which may raise moral questions but do not raise legal ones.

As we will see, many organizations that focus on "raising awareness of trafficking" aren't providing factual information at all. In fact, given their frequently narrow interpretation of "human trafficking," as a synonym for "female sex slavery," and given the wide range of

organizations spread across the United States, the anti-trafficking movement seems primarily intent on raising a moral panic. This may be a good way to push through conservative and, to some, oppressive legislation, as some have suggested. But leading a moral crusade is definitely lucrative.

### **Transparency and Post-Recession Funds**

In all, 50 of the most prominent anti-trafficking organizations in the United States are estimated to share around \$686 million - an amount that would place them approximately 184th on the UN's ranking of nations by GDP, right above Samoa. And that, as we will see, could be a very low estimate.

The organizations included three types of anti-trafficking groups: standard not-for-profits, in which organizations have 501(c)(3) status and are tax-exempt, or work under tax-exempt umbrella organizations; faith-based organizations (those affiliated with churches may have tax-exempt 501(c)(3) status, but are not required to file annual returns); and public-private partnerships. The former two may also have non-governmental organization (NGO) status if they operate internationally; a public-private partnership may consider itself an organization and use the language of nonprofits to describe its mission, vision and service, but may not have tax-exempt status (a fact which is supposed to be disclosed if the organization is soliciting donations). Tax-exempt organizations that are affiliated with public-private partnerships are bound by financial disclosure laws.

Of the 50 organizations tallied, three were public-private partnerships and the rest were not-for-profit organizations. Many stated they were faith-based, but only some claimed church affiliation. Only 33 of the 47 nonprofits - 70 percent - made their financial information publicly available, whether on an organizational website, upon direct contact with the organization or through Guidestar.com, an online charity rating service that offers direct links to IRS 990 forms. (Several organizations announced on websites that they would provide financial data via email, but only three organizations responded to this reporter's requests ranging in dates from July 2014 to January 2015. Additionally, two groups' annual budgets were estimated based on the finances of affiliated organizations.)

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In sum, nine organizations failed to disclose any fiscal information whatsoever, including two of the three public-private partnerships and several organizations that may be affiliated with religious institutions. If the remaining organizations earn less than \$50,000 per year, they are not subject to the same public disclosure laws. Otherwise, the IRS is fairly clear: "Tax-exempt organizations must make annual returns and exemption applications filed with the IRS available for public inspection and copying upon request."

Not included, therefore, are accurate annual incomes for the Abolish Slavery Coalition (an affiliate of Passport 2 Freedom), Bishop Outreach, Called2Rescue, Escape to Peace, Made in a Free World, No More, Red Light Rebellion, Streetlight USA and the Defender Foundation. (This last organization has a compelling membership-based financial model, in which volunteers conduct rescues following receipt of a \$100 application and \$480 membership fee, but an initial email bounced back). Additionally, the financial information for the Half the Sky Movement is based exclusively on its affiliated 501(c)(3) organization, which took in \$2.2 million through grants and donations in 2012. This, however, does not include book sales, screening revenues and author appearance fees that Kristof and co-author Sheryl WuDunn took in during that and subsequent years, so the financial totals that follow are certainly low estimates.

Of the 50 anti-trafficking organizations examined, a total of 19 disclosed recent annual budgets of \$1 million or more, most in 2012 or 2013. (Only the Association for the Recovery of Children's financial data is from earlier - 2007 - and was extremely difficult to track down.) Many organizations pulled in more; in fact, the total combined earnings from those 19 organizations were more than \$677.5 million. The remaining organizations that made financial data available, combined, took in more than \$8 million. Presuming that each of the nine organizations that make no financial disclosures earn less than \$50,000 per year - say, \$40,000 (and only two disclosing organizations made under this amount, so this seems low but plausible) - we can add another \$360,000 to this total. (This number is certainly an underestimate, as many of the non-reporting organizations have more than one employee, so likely pull in more than \$50,000 per year; surely, the three public-private partnerships have larger annual budgets.) This suggests the approximate annual income of \$686 million split among the 50 groups.

It may not seem like much, for 50 organizations spread across a giant country, working on what may be one of the most pressing human rights issues of our day. Yet \$686 million breaks down to about \$13.7 million per group, per year - money most organizations of any size would be thrilled to get their hands on. And this amount doesn't include federal funds spent to fight human trafficking, rumored to be between \$1.2 and \$1.5 billion per year.

Considering that most of the groups were founded *after* Somaly Mam began appearing regularly in US media between 2006 and 2008, it's notable that the US anti-trafficking movement seems to be one of the few reliable growth areas in the United States' post-recession economy besides low-wage service work.

### **Hard Numbers and Malleable Data**

Numbers throughout the murky world of human trafficking are notoriously hard to verify. How many traffickers? Uncountable! How many victims? So many! How old are they? Too young! How much money changes hands? Zillions upon gajillions of dollars, daily! "Scarily lucrative," Time declared it in a May 2014 headline. Sound unbelievable? It is, and aid groups will claim it's because the unvarnished truth of human slavery is incomprehensible to most living Americans today.



Many of the most frequently cited statements are easily disputed, if factual at all. Demand Abolition, a part of the \$4.4-million Hunt Alternatives group of nonprofits based in Massachusetts, calls a section of its homepage, "Know The Facts." "Zero men should be purchasing sex," says one (actually an opinion), and similarly, "Prostitution is not a victimless crime."

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Another reads, "About 10 percent of men in the US buy sex from prostituted or trafficked individuals." The statistic is difficult to verify, since few reliable studies have ever been done on consumers of commercial sex - fewer can be done now, as "end demand" campaigns and anti-trafficking legislation make customers less willing to come forward. One study in the *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* suggests that only 1 percent of men in the US purchase sex in a year, but that 14 percent of the male population have done so over the course of their lives. More dubious is whether they did so from trafficked persons, as such studies have never been conducted, or from "prostituted" individuals. This last phrase is anti-trafficking code for consensual sex workers, filtered through a definition of trafficking that defines all sexual labor as necessarily forced.

"The average age a girl enters prostitution in the US is 13," reads another of Demand Abolition's facts. Scholar and activist Emi Koyama has pointed out the logical fallacy in this statement, on her blog and in independently published works, where she has also tracked the gender and age of folks caught in the FBI's Operation Cross Country raids. When The Atlantic investigated, Koyama noted that most of the young people detained in raids are 16 or 17. "There are rarely any under the age 13," she said. "For the average age to be around 13, there needs to be many more 5-12 year olds that are forced into prostitution than are empirically plausible."

The DC-based Polaris Project, with a \$7.3 million budget, is slightly more careful to word unverified statements, but rarely offers any corroboration. "In street-based sex trafficking, victims are often expected to earn a nightly quota," one reads, "ranging from \$500 to \$1,000 or more, which is confiscated by the pimp. Women in brothels disguised as massage businesses typically live on-site where they are coerced into providing commercial sex to 6 to 10 men a day, 7 days a week." The uses of "often" and "typical" are cues that the numbers are shady, but the only resource cited on the page is Polaris' own National Human Trafficking Resource Center, which makes no claims regarding sex work earnings or numbers of clients. The "nightly quota" may have come from The Urban Institute, which notes that 18 percent of the pimps they spoke to in major US cities set quotas between \$400 and \$1,000 per night. But most of the pimps they spoke to didn't set quotas and sex workers often distinguish certain pimps from traffickers in the first place. A 2011 study by the Young Women's Empowerment Project (YWEP) found that, of 205 interviews with sex workers in the street economy, fewer than 7 percent of their experiences were with pimps; even fewer report having been trafficked.

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Reliable studies on the wages or labor practices of street-based sex workers and massage parlor employees in the United States are hard to come by, although writer and researcher Brooke Magnanti debunked similar numbers tossed around the UK recently [for The Baffler](#). In 2014, the Office for National Statistics in London announced plans to add estimates of earnings by sex workers of 10 billion pounds to its GDP, a number it appeared to have arrived at by multiplying a single nonprofit's estimate of the number of sex workers in the country by an online escort website's listed prices, which would not incorporate, say, the lower earnings of street workers or dancers. On top of which, the wages appear to be multiplied by a very high 25-client-per-week estimate, which Magnanti, a former escort, calls "eye-watering." (Polaris' above suggestion that massage parlor workers see 42 to 70 clients per week could be similarly side-eyed.)

As for the full scale of the problem at hand, the California-based group Not For Sale, with a \$3.5 million budget, claims that "there are more than 30 million people around the world affected by slavery - more than at any point in history," a figure that comes from the Global Slavery Index (GSI), but doesn't stand up to basic logic. GSI has since upgraded their estimate to [35.8 million](#) slaves, although both [OpenDemocracy](#) and [The Guardian](#) challenge the methodology behind the index. (The latter suggests that extrapolating a tiny amount of available data across hundreds of nations - GSI's basic methodology - "verges on the ludicrous.") The phrase "affected by" seems intended to soften the hardness of the dubious number, yet the statement is still difficult to defend.

Aiming to address the question of scope, the "Awareness" section of the Defender Foundation's website asserts, "Human Trafficking is the 2nd largest criminal enterprise in the world. . . . It is growing so fast, it is quickly heading to the number one spot." [The ILO](#) does suggest that forced labor generates \$150 billion annually and adds that \$99 billion of that may come from commercial sexual exploitation. But to label this as anything other than an estimate is unfounded. Magnanti's takedown of wage estimates of sex workers in the UK should indicate how difficult it is to reliably predict criminalized economies, but the drug trade, the illegal arms trade and the trade in counterfeit goods have all, [in recent years](#), been thought to pull in more than \$150 billion.

There's also no real evidence that human trafficking is growing.

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There's also no real evidence that human trafficking is growing - by law enforcement logic, in fact, the means by which perpetrators are being investigated and prosecuted are actually advancing. Even GSI admits that rising numbers don't seem to point to rising numbers of slaves. Instead, the [website states](#), "the increase [from 30 million to 35.8 million] is due to the improved accuracy and precision of our measures and that we are uncovering modern slavery where it was not seen before."

Yet challenging faulty data in a field that offers great economic incentive to exaggerate truth



gets to be like a rousing game of Whac-a-Mole. Organizations habitually link to or cite other groups' dubious lists of facts (the \$48 million International Justice Mission in DC and \$235,000 Colorado-based Truckers Against Trafficking, for example, both attribute statistics to the Polaris Project), or recycle the same disproven or vague statistics without citation. Ronald Weitzer, in the May 2014 Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, states the matter cleanly: "None of the trafficking claims - huge magnitude, growing problem, ranking among criminal enterprises, most prevalent type - have been substantiated. It is impossible to satisfactorily count (or even estimate) the number of persons involved in or the magnitude of profits within an illicit, clandestine, underground economy at the macro level - nationally or internationally."

Indeed, there is no agreed-upon manner by which to describe the problem. Victim tallies seem simplest and the US Department of State in 2003 began requiring foreign governments to report identified victims, criminal prosecutions, convictions and new policies to ensure increased protections under the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act. The 2014 Trafficking in Persons Report (TIPR) lists 9,460 prosecutions (only 1,199 of which were labor trafficking cases); 5,766 convictions (470 labor trafficking cases); 44,758 identified victims (10,603 labor trafficking cases); and 58 new laws passed - nearly triple the previous year's new legislation. Those are international numbers and only from friendly nations, but it's useful to compare approximately 45,000 identified trafficked persons around the world to the ILO's estimates of 21 million people living in forced labor: Already the numbers don't track.

**"None of the trafficking claims - huge magnitude, growing problem, ranking among criminal enterprises, most prevalent type - have been substantiated."**

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To illustrate the domestic scope of the problem, the 2006 TIPR is often cited: The State Department estimated that between 14,500 and 17,500 individuals are trafficked into the United States each year. However, this was later thought to be too high and only accounted for immigrant populations. More recently, the TIPR has taken to logging data from the three main agencies that investigate federal trafficking offenses: the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); the Department of Homeland Security's US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Homeland Security Investigations (ICE HSI); and the Department of State's Diplomatic Security Service (DSS) Human Trafficking Unit. In 2013, these agencies - plus the Department of Defense, which opened nine cases involving military personnel - investigated a potential 1,937 cases of human trafficking and an additional 100 cases were prosecuted at the state level. (A frequently cited statistic, from Polaris' National Human Trafficking Resource Center hotline, suggests significantly higher numbers of sex trafficking cases for that same year - 3,609. However, because these are referred to law enforcement officials for investigation, they would be included in the above official tallies.)

Given the \$686 million anti-trafficking budget shared by 50 of the most prominent organizations (which doesn't count federal costs), this breaks down to an average budget of \$343,000 per case - certainly enough to secure each victim a safe place to live for at least a

year. Yet a [2013 report](#) found only 682 beds available, nationwide, to victims of trafficking, with another 354 more planned for 2014.

## **A Surplus of Victims**

Yet funding for anti-trafficking groups isn't the only disproportionate side of the equation. Judging by all credible estimates, claims made by anti-trafficking organizations about how many trafficked persons they serve are out of proportion with the actual number of people in the world considered to be trafficked by official sources.

Of the 19 anti-trafficking organizations earning more than \$1 million annually, 11 claim to rescue victims from situations of trafficking, or in the parlance of nonprofits, offer direct client exit-care services. Occasionally this is coded as, "assist[ing] trafficked persons," "outreach," "intervention," or "eradicating" or "combating" slavery, or may be included in the emerging (and slightly less abrasive) notion of "restoring victims" - possibly "to justice." (Although few organizations describe their own work in such violent terms, media tend to refer to "rescue operations" from situations of sexual exploitation as "brothel raids," both of which remove women, with varying degrees of consent, from situations deemed exploitive by the organization and which occasionally end with the incarceration of supposed victims.)

All in all, the impact numbers presented by anti-trafficking organizations - their justification for existence and, of course, funding - are simply absurd.

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In other words, 60 percent of our top-funded anti-trafficking organizations claim to actively remove people from trafficking situations, a percentage that, from what this reporter can see, appears to hold true for organizations earning less than \$1 million as well. Eight of the top-earning organizations that claim to offer rescue services reported numbers in annual or impact reports; one organization that makes no such claims also reported having assisted a certain number of persons in leaving trafficking situations.

More than half of top-earning anti-trafficking organizations claim to rescue victims; two-thirds of them report numbers of victims "rescued." Most focus primarily on sex trafficking. (Groups like International Justice Mission, which works around a variety of issues including all forms of trafficking, lists having assisted 2,266 persons from labor trafficking and 239 persons from sex trafficking in its most recent annual report; Truthout considered only the latter figure.)

Slightly less than half of the top-earning anti-trafficking organizations in the United States claim to have saved 8,676 total individuals from sex trafficking: in other words, over four times as many victims as there were potential cases of both labor and sex trafficking investigated in the United States, at federal and state levels, in 2013. That's slightly more than 1,084 trafficked persons saved per top-earning organization, which we could use to estimate that 11 organizations might claim to save nearly 12,000 persons from sex trafficking, primarily in the United States, or speculate from there that the approximately 20 organizations that also conduct rescues but have smaller budgets freed perhaps 250 from sex slavery in 2014, to arrive at a wild, two-ballparks-away guess that the 50 most prominent anti-trafficking

organizations in the United States could conceivably claim, in a year, to release nearly 17,000 individuals from sex trafficking. This figure represents about half the number of sex-trafficking cases the State Department suggests may have occurred, through the entire world, in 2014.

This purely speculative exercise only provides a glimpse of how outsized the claims made by anti-trafficking organizations are. Some of this can certainly be accounted for by human error, the overly optimistic language of annual reports or the inclusion of a group's overseas efforts (few, indeed, made national distinctions in client tallies). The overlarge figure *isn't* explained by the same clients accessing multiple services, however, as the organizations are spread throughout the United States.

All in all, the impact numbers presented by anti-trafficking organizations - their justification for existence and, of course, funding - are simply absurd.

### **Somaly's Legacy**

"When you work in this world, you know fabricated stories are used by everyone to get funding," Pierre Legros told the GlobalPost in October. A co-founder of AFESIP in 1995 alongside then-wife Somaly Mam, he left the organization in 2004. A French national, he and Mam subsequently divorced.

When he speaks of Mam's fall from grace, however, Legros doesn't place the blame solely on the former partner with whom he has a famously acrimonious relationship. Media, he said, were "very pushy and wanted to show extraordinary stories." The organization was lucky to have a "beautiful, sexy, charismatic and determined" spokesperson on hand.

**Sexual harassment, abuse and fraud at anti-trafficking organizations are not exclusive to Cambodia.**

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"Every NGO dreams of having its Somaly and every media wants her on camera," he said. AFESIP "soon became very much high profile and we welcomed a lot of journalists. They all wanted to make something sexy, to draw attention and mark everyone's mind."

But, as we've seen play out on a larger scale among US anti-trafficking organizations, the downside of the media focus on sex is that they tended to miss the point - sometimes even overlooking the safety of the supposed victims. "A lot of false stories came out, based on misunderstandings or the will to report about something extraordinary," he said. "Faces were shown, testimonies were wrong. The media just betrayed us for sensationalism and efficiency of information."

Indeed, Legros charges that in the wake of the Newsweek story, media continued to focus on Mam, as opposed to any of the larger issues in the world of anti-trafficking NGOs that had emerged.

One lingering concern is of fiscal malpractice at AFESIP: things like duplicate invoices and confusing budgets. Another, however, is worse for an organization claiming to save women from commercial sexual exploitation. A 2013 report in El Mundo reported sexual harassment and abuse by two former AFESIP employees, allegedly documented in a private investigation.

"They are responsible for forcing the residents working in the center to have sex," according to the document, El Mundo reported. Spanish officials are also quoted saying that they threatened to withhold funding unless Mam addressed the allegations; they claim Mam responded by characterizing the situation as a misunderstanding and noting her close relationship with the Queen.

In 2012, researchers at YWEP found sex workers experienced nearly as many incidents of institutionalized violence from police as they did from workers at care facilities - seven times as many, by the way, as they experienced from pimps.

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Yet sexual harassment, abuse and fraud at anti-trafficking organizations are not exclusive to Cambodia. Dan Benedict of Defender Foundation was revealed by the Florida Times-Union to have a history in weapons stockpiling, former ties to a white supremacy group and a felony child abuse conviction. An organization that did not appear in Truthout's study, the Rescue Children from Human Trafficking Foundation in California, was discovered in July 2014 to be headed by Lady Katerine Nastopka, formerly known as Lady Catarina Toumei, a con artist who claimed to be a member of the Guggenheim family and European royalty before she was forced to defend to a San Diego news crew that her organization had helped two girls escape trafficking. Even a former acting director at the US Department of Health and Human Services was convicted on child pornography charges in August 2014.

Many key figures in anti-trafficking organizations come directly from law enforcement, a field known to harbor sexual abusers and perpetrators of violence against women. In 2012, researchers at YWEP found sex workers experienced nearly as many incidents of institutionalized violence from police as they did from workers at care facilities - seven times as many, by the way, as they experienced from pimps.

However, those realities are rarely acknowledged on a broad scale and least of all by the organizations themselves. When it comes to the anti-trafficking movement in the United States, the terms of engagement seem to mandate a degree of dishonesty about the scope of the problem, as well as a lack of transparency about the money at stake. Those who are genuinely concerned about human trafficking, forced labor and sexual exploitation, it seems, may not be able to address these issues until they have quelled the rising moral panic surrounding the mythology of sex trafficking in the United States.