



Starting this month, author Mariane Pearl will travel the world for *Glamour* for one year, reporting stories about women. To see a video of this trip, go to glamour.com/news.

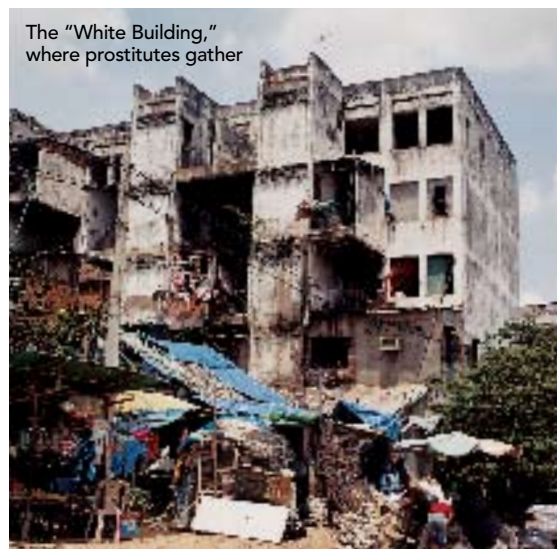


The sex slave tragedy



At 17, Train is one of the older sex workers in her district.

In Cambodia, girls as young as five years old are sold into prostitution every day. New columnist Mariane Pearl meets the woman who's bringing them hope...and freedom.



The "White Building," where prostitutes gather

IT'S NOON AND THE SUN IS GLINTING OFF THE tin roofs of a rundown neighborhood in Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital city. I am standing outside a barrack built of sticks that seems on the verge of collapse, when a door opens to reveal an unlikely young woman. Haggard from a drunken sleep, she is still wearing bright-red lipstick from the night before and carries an odor of sweat, sperm and filth. Her expression is beyond hatred or submission.

This is my first glimpse into the world of sexual slavery in Cambodia.

I peer into her room, a windowless chamber barely big enough to fit a mattress. The dirt floor is covered with cigarette butts, used condoms and Freedent gum wrappers. There is no furniture aside from her bed—not even a little box where a girl might hide her treasures. Like many of us, I thought I had an image of what prostitution is. But I knew nothing.

I've traveled to Phnom Penh to meet Somaly Mam, who



Somaly Mam frees sex workers, like this girl's mother.

has made it her personal mission to help girls like this. Somaly is on the front line of one of the most important societal battles in Asia and perhaps the world. A former sex worker herself—she was sold into prostitution as a child—she's the cofounder of an aid organization that rescues young women from brothels and then trains them for

jobs like weaving and hairdressing. Her group, Acting for Women in Distressing Situations, also known as AFESIP (its acronym in French), has 155 social workers in Cambodia and the neighboring countries of Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. Somaly says the organization has saved 3,000 girls since its founding in 1996. →

JENNIFER MACFARLANE. ILLUSTRATION: ANNE-CECILE BLANCHOT



“It feels like the most fundamental form of betrayal—

My visit with Somaly is the first stop in a yearlong journey around the world for *Glamour*. In this new monthly column, I plan to explore a question that a child could easily ask and an adult could hardly answer: Who changes the world, and how? Senator Robert F. Kennedy once said, “It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped.” I hope to meet women who, by challenging their own fate, are shaping our world and helping to write the history of our generation.

On the day in May that I land in Cambodia, Somaly is in the midst of a personal crisis so serious that it is hard to fathom. Her 14-year-old daughter, Ning, has been missing for almost 24 hours. Somaly fears the worst: that Ning has been kidnapped—perhaps by a young man the family knows—and is at risk of being sold to a brothel.

It sounds simply unimaginable. But as Somaly understands so well from her own line of work, tragedies like this are not uncommon here. Girls are regularly abducted, sometimes right off the streets. Such brutality is fallout from decades of war, totalitarianism and genocide. Still deeply bruised from the dictatorship of Pol Pot in the seventies, Cambodia today ranks as one of Southeast Asia’s poorest nations, where a human life isn’t worth much. Children here are bought and sold into sexual slavery, sometimes by their own parents, for tiny sums of money.

As a result, Cambodia has earned a reputation as one of the worst places in the world for human trafficking. The problem is so severe that Cambodia’s government established a special office, the Anti-Human Trafficking and Juvenile Protection Department, devoted to the issue. Sereyath Ek, Cambodian ambassador to the United States, says, “We’ve made advances,” but still the sex trade thrives, fueled by both local men and foreign sex tourists.

The moment Somaly tells me of the unfolding tragedy with her daughter, I understand her fears as if they were



my own. Four and a half years ago, my husband, Danny, a journalist, was kidnapped and ultimately killed by Islamist militants in Pakistan. It gives us a strange but undeniable bond that the two of us feel instinctively, and we embrace.

Somaly tells me she is going to meet with the police about the search for her daughter, so I set out to learn more about the sordid world in which she works. It turns out to be surprisingly easy. Far from being hidden, Phnom Penh’s brothels operate in the open, some right in the heart of the city, even though prostitution is officially illegal. I travel to one of the sex districts with a team of Somaly’s social workers, who are allowed into the brothels by the owners because they bring supplies like condoms, soap and toothpaste.

Thus my encounter with the haggard young woman—I learn that her name is Apov and that she’s 22—and her sad

JENNIFER MACFARLANE

Mou, six, an ex-sex slave, lies ill with fever at Somaly's compound.



city to an AFESIP center that houses 30 former prostitutes. The eldest is 16, Somaly says, and the youngest, five.

In the car on the way there, Somaly refuses to panic about Ning. Instead we joke around, as if in defiance to despair. "I don't dislike men," Somaly tells me. "I just can't stand most of them."

Her driver smiles. Somaly notices and quickly adds, "He's different," and refers to him as her brother in suffering. Last month, he lost five family members, all in separate car accidents. Suddenly I notice the chaotic traffic swirling around us. A family of five passes us, all riding on a single motorcycle. Bicycle rickshaws weave among buffalo-drawn carts. There is a complete absence of order or logic.

Somaly continues joking. "I fired my last driver because he smelled like garlic," she says. But then her tone changes. "I need a mother," she announces abruptly.

Somaly means that literally. She is in her late thirties, but doesn't know her precise age because she has no information about when or where she was born. Nor does she know her mother. Her earliest memories are of working as a domestic servant for various families in Phnom Penh. Eventually, one of those families sold her to a brothel.

The defining moment in her life came, she says, when she

being sold by the very woman who brought you life. ”



A sex worker's room: a mattress on the floor

little room. As I step outside the brothel, I see a girl with a bandage on her head, stained with iodine. A social worker, Chantha Chhim, asks what happened. The girl points to a metal stool and answers in Khmer, the national language. "A man hit me for talking badly to him," Chantha translates. The girl also has rows of parallel scars on the inside of her arm. "Amphetamine," says Chantha. When girls get high, she explains, they sometimes engage in self-mutilation.

A female pimp reclines nearby in a purple hammock, watching us nonchalantly. As we leave, the girls give us faint, almost apologetic smiles. They service about 15 clients a night, mostly migrant laborers. Men pay the equivalent of a dollar for sex, but most of that money goes into the pimp's pocket. The girls themselves get a salary of about \$15 a month, which amounts to mere pennies for each sex act.

The next day, Somaly tells me she has heard no news of Ning, but, she says, the police have made finding her a priority. Somaly's attitude is one of fierce determination, despite the circumstances. "We have work to do," she says. "I need you to see how we are helping girls." So we drive outside the

brothel. Somaly saw a pimp kill one of her best friends in the brothel. Somaly says she looked the girl in the eye as she died, and realized not only that she needed to escape this life, but also to return and save others. She then left prostitution with the help of an aid worker, attended school and eventually married a French citizen, Pierre Legros, with whom she had three children. Together they founded AFESIP, although they are now in the midst of divorcing. "He is a good-hearted man," Somaly says simply, and then sighs with frustration.

When we arrive at the center, Somaly introduces me to Pou, a 15-year-old former prostitute who is in charge of the cooking. As we approach, Pou is sitting on the floor skillfully chopping vegetables. Somaly puts a hand on her shoulder, and for a while the only sound is that of a knife on the wooden cutting board. Pou begins to tell her story, in a low, broken voice. Somaly translates: "She says she was sold by her mother when she was seven. She gripped her mother's ankles and begged her not to leave her with strangers." The price for Pou: the equivalent of \$10.

Somaly continues the tale. First Pou was "fattened up and given treatments to whiten her skin," a common beauty practice in Asia. Then she was sold to a man who chained her to a bed and raped her until she fainted. Angry, he returned her to the brothel, where she was punished by being held in a chicken cage; the pimps put chili peppers in her vagina and beat her. "She finally broke," Somaly says. "For the next three years, she had up to 30 clients a day."

Somaly says her workers rescued Pou when she was 10. (The workers, as they make their rounds, keep a constant eye out for very young prostitutes like Pou. Later they may return, and, in collaboration with the police, rush into a brothel and snatch the girls.) Pou stares at her feet. I can't help but think about my own young son and the way he trusts me with his entire life. At the very core of Pou's existence is what feels like the most fundamental form of be-

trayal—being sold by the woman who brought you life.

Next I meet six-year-old Mou, who has a fever. Somaly tells me that Mou was sold by her family to a man who used her as a sex slave. After consulting a psychic, he decided that she brought bad luck, so he kept her in a cage.

We also meet a new arrival, a girl of about 12. Never before have I seen anyone who has so clearly just been tortured. Her eyes are wide with terror. Somaly asks, “How are you holding up?” The girl tries to answer, but what comes out is something like a distant whistle, or a creaking door.

As we prepare to leave, kids come pouring out of a nearby school. A dozen girls in navy skirts and white blouses gather around Somaly like butterflies. They, too, are rescuees, who are learning to read and write. A few of them press into Somaly’s hand folded pieces of paper: “Those are their most hidden secrets,” Somaly says. The notes tell of wounds that have been buried so deep, they are not suited for spoken words. Somaly understands their pain. “Part of me hasn’t healed and never will,” she confides. But I can see how the girls give her hope. There is no telling how many girls she will inspire—and how many of them will rescue their sisters and ultimately change the fate of the next generation.

On the drive back to the city, Somaly gets a call from the police. They’ve tracked Ning to Battambang, a province not far from the border of Thailand that Somaly says is a notorious human trafficking center. This is actually good news because many girls disappear into this world without a trace. Somaly says she must go there immediately. “Keep visiting the girls,” she urges me. “Please.”

That night I head out with the social workers to learn



Sex worker Mao, 18, practices HIV prevention with a condom and a wooden penis.



After school, girls rush to greet Somaly.

“The girls’ notes tell of wounds that have been buried so deep, they are not suited for spoken words.”

about another harsh reality of Cambodia’s sex trade—HIV. An estimated 29 percent of sex workers here have the disease. We drive to one of the city’s sex spots, known as the “White Building” because it is dominated by a squalid white apartment house where prostitutes gather. When we arrive, we see girls who can’t be older than 14 seated out front on colorful plastic chairs, waiting for clients.

The street is lively in unexpected ways. There are stalls selling mangos and kebabs, and naked infants are playing. Yet the atmosphere feels dangerous. Men on motorcycles circle the street—it’s unclear if they are pimps or prospective clients, but either way they’re a discomfoting presence. Adding to the bizarre tableau, a skinny man approaches a girl in a pleated skirt, and a mysterious exchange occurs: He slaps her, and she gives him a single bill.

In a nearby building, Chantha, the social worker, is teaching HIV prevention. She has forgotten to bring her wooden penis model, so she uses a pencil instead. The condom hangs ridiculously on the tiny pretend phallus, but no one laughs. Too many of the girls have lost friends to HIV.

The following day, a social worker calls me to say that Somaly has been reunited with her daughter. The police



Pouy, 15, a former prostitute

found Ning, who had apparently been drugged, in a bar in Battambang. She said she had been raped by her three captors—the young man whom the family knows, along with two others.

When I see mother and daughter again, both are deeply shaken. “I think they kidnapped Ning in retaliation for my work,” Somaly tells me. I see that this is another defining moment in her life. She is deeply hurt. But pausing in her work is not an option. She must keep going—for the sake of all the girls she is helping. For the sake of her daughter. She tells me how earlier, she took Ning’s beautiful, sad face in both of her hands. “You’ve suffered what you’ve suffered,” she told her. “Now you take that pain and you help others.”

When I leave that evening, Somaly smiles at me. Her smile serves as a quiet triumph over despair and human cruelty. I think back to something she told me at the beginning of my visit. “I am not sure what being happy really means,” she said. “But when I cuddle with the girls, giving them the love I never received, then I *do* feel happy.” ©

Mariane Pearl is a documentary filmmaker and the author of *A Mighty Heart: The Brave Life and Death of My Husband, Danny Pearl*. To see a video of her trip, go to glamour.com/news. To donate to Somaly’s cause, go to afesip.org.

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