

A woman in profile, looking out a window with curtains. The image is in a dark, sepia tone. The woman's face is in silhouette, and she is looking towards the right. The curtains are pulled back, revealing a bright light source. The overall mood is contemplative and somber.

# Cambodia's 'buy-a-bride' trade thrives

With an influx of rich Chinese tourists, the safety of Khmer women is being endangered. Deepanshu Mohan examines the growing problem in Cambodia

Enjoying a warm, pleasant sunset evening at Ochheuteal beach in the Sihanoukville coastal province of Cambodia, it is hard to avoid noticing the multitude of Chinese tourists, seen shepherding towards the beach with travel buses parked at the beach. A few weeks back, on one such evening at the beach, I observed a man, seemingly a native Cambodian, waiting at the corner of the beach with around fifteen-twenty Cambodian female teenagers, all dressed up in bright coloured skirts.

Over the next hour or so, one by one, some of the Chinese men (mostly in their mid-30s) approached the Cambodian man, exchanging cash in USD, and then picking one Cambodian girl to go along with them. The shocking ordeal went around for the next two hours, while others on the beach continued to enjoy the sea waters.

On following one such Chinese man from the beach, I could find a number of *Tuk-Tuks* (auto-rickshaws) waiting near the beach to go along with the Chinese men (and the girl) and to help later check them in at nearby guest houses (including some premier hotels located near Independence beach). Later, getting back to the hotel, it was hard to get even a few hours of rest after what one saw.

I spent the next week speaking to a number of people across the Sihanoukville province itself, while corresponding with some known friends working at international organizations in Phnom Penh to help me understand what was happening at Ochheuteal beach (otherwise in Sihanoukville) and what was the nature of this 'trade', that somehow (according to most responses) has proliferated with a rising number of rich Chinese tourists (mostly men) coming down to coastal province.

From discussions, it appeared that most refer to this as 'buy-a-bride' trade where most young Cambodian teens are now being 'hired' to accompany Chinese men during their time visiting the country and charge them for the days

they are with them. The 'trade', according to one source, is 'thriving' now and is pretty normal across the province of Sihanoukville and other parts as well where there are more Chinese tourists.

Some confirmed that a lot of Chinese men who visit the coastal province are single or widowed and rich, with a willingness to pay as much as USD\$1,500-2,000 for three days of 'bride-company'. Recently, the *International Phnom Penh Post* [reported](#) about the trade as well, explaining its prevalence across other Cambodian provinces, including other countries like Vietnam, Laos, where a number of young Vietnamese women are forced into the practice.

*... the identity and safety of Khmer women is being endangered every passing day in Cambodia, especially in the cities*

Zhou Xinsen, a 41-year old Chinese man, now has his own match-making business which he prefers calling as a 'public service', taking a small slice from China's multi-million-dollar annual trade in overseas brides. Zhou charges around 120,000 yuan (\$17,400) to connect middle-aged Chinese men with Cambodian and Vietnamese brides via his website, showing photos of girls and women (across age-groups), 'waiting to be married'.

At the same time, the rate of human trafficking of young women in the Mekong region ie. Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia has drastically increased from the 'profitability' of 'buy-a-bride' business. From an international perspective, the Cambodian state, fails to meet even the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking, which is fueling the 'thriving' business of 'buy-a-bride' across the country.

As per a 2017 report, *"despite endemic corruption that contributes to trafficking in many sectors and among several vulnerable demographics, the Cambodian government fails to investigate, prosecute or convict any complicit officials"*.

There is still no process on anti-trafficking data collection, information-sharing nor any official, formal guidelines provided on the use of undercover investigative techniques in anti-trafficking operations - a critical factor that impedes any official's ability to fully hold sex-offenders accountable.

Further, the dreadful practice has further had a dismal social impact on the independent position of young, unemployed lower-class women migrating to parts of urban Cambodia. With limited government action undertaken to stop the practice or deter the traffickers or those running the business (like Mr Zhou), young teenagers during evenings find it 'preferable' to work as 'brides', including in some of the largest casinos located within the city where most Chinese tourists visit nowadays for gambling.

At the same time, the socially reverting moral practice of *Chbab Srey* (a moral code on Cambodian women) makes the social position of young Cambodian women ie. those working in cities, extremely difficult. As an implicitly practiced social code of conduct - *Chbab Srey* - refers to a social practice requiring women to maintain 'absolute obedience' to husbands at all times (doesn't matter who the husband is).

This deeply patriarchal, social belief is an age-old moral imposition on women who are required to 'serve their husbands' with the intention to foster a stable family life (for whatever time that may be).

What it simply means, regardless of the financial independence of a working woman in a city, she is supposed to serve her husband as a wife who, as per the code, is categorized into roles of a 'wife-mother', 'wife-sister', 'wife-friend' and 'wife-slave' (see Mern Mei's fascinating historical work on women's code of conduct in Cambodia). Beyond these classified role-based functions, a 'wife' must not question the will of her husband at any point.

From the modern practice of 'buy-a-bride' to the regressive social code of *Chbab Srey*, the identity and safety of Khmer women is being endangered every passing day in Cambodia, especially in the cities. In a brief stay of over ten days, it was appalling to observe and learn about the deprived condition of lower-class young women, migrating to cities and living in a society which has idolized the feminine identity historically, and where women have always out-ranked men in the performance of most socio-economic indicators (as discussed [here](#)). ■

**Deepanshu Mohan is Assistant Professor of Economics and Executive Director, Centre for New Economics Studies at Jindal School of International Affairs, OP Jindal Global University. He is a Visiting Professor to the Department of Economics at Carleton University**