Between Vice and Virtue

an Analysis of the Complexity of the Sex Industry in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

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Map of Phnom Penh
Map of Phnom Penh: zoomed in at the main clusters of hostess bar areas

1: Cluster of hostess bars and nightclubs, including street 174
2: Cluster of hostess bars, including street 130, street 136
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1. Prologue

Second Chance Bar had gotten quiet that Tuesday evening, and since there were not many men to entertain, I was accompanied by three girls. I was wearing my mother’s clothes, since I had read before going to Cambodia that women are expected to dress conservatively. My shoulders and knees were covered, and I hardly wore any make-up. As anyone thinking ahead could have anticipated: the sex workers themselves do not dress like my mother. I was conspicuous in this setting and it is likely the girls perceived me as a social worker. This changed when they found out I have an “older boyfriend”, declaring I was a “bad girl”. They seemed both puzzled and delighted with this new information. Even though I thought seven years is not a significant age difference compared to what I had witnessed in hostess bars, I was happy to fit in with the bad girls. While we were dancing to Beyoncé, their excitement grew when they found out I could flick my hair. Fatigued by our dance routine, I sat down while the next song played. Ed Sheeran was blasting through the speakers, and the romance took the better of Hana. She was dancing by herself, holding her own arms and said to me in a melancholic tone: “Sister, this is a good song for slow-dancing with your boyfriend.”

Hana was called by duty when a man, old enough to be my grandfather, entered the bar. She quickly left our table, greeted the man and seated him nearby us. She was chatting him up and scored a lady drink. Meanwhile, Seyha was teaching me Khmer in Khmer, our only shot at a conversation. Despite the language barrier, we had a lot of fun and at the same time we were keeping an eye on Hana. At some point Hana was standing between his legs, giving him soft kisses on his mouth. If one would be unaware of the kind of place we were in and squint one’s eyes, it might have looked like a romantic evening between new lovers. Her face gave away that it was not. Her eyes met ours and the looks she gave us are hard to describe; a particular mix between reckless fun, disgust and pride. A look I recognized.

The next day I called with a friend from the Netherlands, who is familiar with the party scene, often chaperoned by me. I started explaining to her how things work in hostess bars, and what the girls do during their shifts. The fun I had the night before reminded me of the nights I had had with her, and I could not help but recognize certain patterns in behaviour. At the risk of insulting my friend, I subtly made a comparison, but there was no need for me to be concerned. She interrupted and exclaimed:
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But that’s something I always do! I mean when I am out and partying I am always on the hunt. And if that results in free drinks... Hey why not? If it worked that way here [salary based on obtaining ladydrinks] I could be a millionaire! Even if I am not that much into a guy, on certain nights they could still get a sneaky kiss, just for fun.

I also told her about the funny faces Hana was making, and the resemblance was not lost on her:

Yeah same with us. You know the looks we always share? You can always tell if the guy is casual or not. Like that one time in Coco’s [bar in Amsterdam], there was this guy standing next to the DJ booth and he was checking me out. You know it had been months… So I started dancing for him, moving my hips. I handed over my phone to you so I would have my hands free, and I gave you this face. Without having to say anything, you knew my intentions. But I always know that you’re behind me, so if it would’ve gone all wrong, I could always signal to you that I didn’t like it and you would come and rescue me from him.

Before entering the field, I was mentally preparing myself for a culture shock. Not only would I be in Asia for the first time, it would also be my debut in a “red light district”. However, the exotic image I had in my mind was in reality very similar to my experiences in the Netherlands with my friends. We were in a nice bar, drinking beer, dancing to songs we loved, and I was entertained by the girls flirting with men they had just met; as described above, not very different from nights out with my Dutch friend.

The looks shared, with my friend in the Netherlands and with the girls in hostess bars, made me realize that this is probably a universal way of girls literally keeping an eye on each other. It probably generates a greater sense of safety, as well as a way through which friends can be part of the experience. This unconscious behaviour was never obvious to me, until I witnessed it in another setting. Even though I do not fall into the category of “hostess bar girl”, I understood then and there that I am in fact part of the so-called sisterhood culture.
2. Introduction

Through this glimpse of my fieldwork experience, it can already be deduced that the sex industry in Phnom Penh is a twilight zone, often mismatched by stereotyped images people hold concerning prostitution. Typically, prostitution is portrayed either as a grim, ominous industry in which women are forced to participate, or, alternatively, success stories are highlighted in order to demonstrate that sex work can be lucrative or esteem-enhancing (Weitzer, 2009). These competing outlooks can be categorized as the oppression paradigm and the empowerment paradigm respectively. Radical feminists and NGOs usually fall into the first, believing that prostitution is sexual slavery and an extreme form of sexual violence against women that needs to be abolished, the men penalized, and the women saved (Outshoorn, 2005). Barry (1995) for example equals sex with power: male power over women. She believes that prostitution is the cornerstone of all sexual exploitation, and the sex workers “interchangeable with plastic blowup sex dolls, complete with orifices for penetration and ejaculation” (p.35). Like Barry, other writers subscribing to this paradigm often use dramatic language, such as “sexual slavery” and “paid rape” in order to highlight the plight of sex workers (Weitzer, 2009). The women are seen as the victims, and the men as culprits: “When men use women in prostitution, they are expressing a pure hatred for the female body” (Dworkin 1997, p. 145).

According to Weitzer (2009), writers within this paradigm often violate the canons of scientific inquiry in order to support their ideology: anecdotes are generalized and presented as conclusive evidence, counterevidence is ignored, and the sampling is done selectively. However, the diametrically opposed empowerment paradigm similarly fails to depart from severe fallacies. Analysts within the empowerment paradigm, usually including liberal and socialist feminists (Outshoorn, 2005), focus on ways in which sexual commerce qualifies as work, involves human agency, and can be empowering for sex workers (Weitzer, 2009). They support ideas that hold that, in contrast to many traditional jobs, “sex work may enhance a person’s socioeconomic status and can provide greater control over one’s working conditions” (Weitzer, 2009, p. 215). However, empowerment theorists tend to neglect sex workers who have had highly negative experiences.

It becomes apparent that theorists within both paradigms are fuelled by ideologies, resulting in tainted data. Interestingly enough, people are likely to shift from the second paradigm
to the first when it involves “third world” sex workers. Often, a dichotomy is made between “voluntary” Western sex workers and “victimized” third world sex workers (Doezema, 2001). Cambodia’s turbulent and extremely mournful recent history, characterized by a civil war (1970-1975), the bloodshed of the Khmer Rouge era (1975-1978), and Vietnamese occupation (1979-1989), undeniably amounts to Orientalist representations of the “victimized” Cambodian sex workers.

The key question in intense debates concerning prostitution thus seems to be whether women in the sex industry are victims or whether they voluntary chose this profession. In my thesis, however, I wish to abstract myself from this nexus; there is no clear-cut answer to that question, since free choice and coercion co-exist on a continuum (Hoefinger, 2013). Besides, a focus on this dichotomy fails to uncover the experiences and perceptions of different actors in the sex industry in Phnom Penh. I will shed light on the different perceptions of actors concerning the victimization of sex workers, but I am not in search of the “ultimate truth” concerning the division between coercion and choice. Rather, the question I would like to unravel is:

**What are the complexities of Phnom Penh’s sex industry, and how do actors engaged in the industry perceive sex work, and each other?**

In order to answer this question, I interviewed different actors engaged in the sex industry of Phnom Penh in one way or another, such as NGO employees, bar managers, and sex workers themselves. Additionally, in the form of informal conversations, I spoke to anyone in Phnom Penh who was willing to share their opinion on and experience with sex work. Even more telling at times were the observations I made in countless hostess bars, nightclubs, and while observing the bustling streetlife of Phnom Penh. My research has a qualitative nature, which is concerned with “what”, “how” and “why” questions, answered through detailed, rich data, while using a reflexive approach, where my role and perspective in the research process is acknowledged (Ormston, Spencer, Barnard, & Snape, 2013). This qualitative research about the sex industry in Phnom Penh takes the form of ethnographic work, which involves understanding the social world or culture – the shared behaviours, beliefs and values – of particular groups via engagement in their community (Ormston, Spencer, Barnard, & Snape, 2013).

Roughly following the fieldwork chronology and emerging insights, I have outlined eighteen key events on which the essence of my research hinges. Through anecdotes embedded
in context, linked with relevant theories, I will present my data, taking the reader on my journey in Phnom Penh; unravelling the puzzle that is the complexity of the sex industry.

3. Findings

3.1 A digital sex guide to Phnom Penh

A short trip with the family coming up. A couple of days in Phnom Penh and a couple in Siem Reap. Went through the forum and it would appear that most action is to be found in the bars along streets 104, 130, and 136. Unfortunately, I don’t believe I’ll be able to get away for too long. I plan to sneak away for a couple of hours for a ‘drink’. Are there any options for a quickie that I’m missing out?

(“Sex Guide to Phnom Penh”, n.d.)

Just like this man, who was planning his extramarital affair, I stumbled upon websites targeted at people who wish to be educated on the “night life” in Phnom Penh. On these websites and forums, everything is written without even a hint of political correctness, making it an excellent place to gather information for my research. Before entering the field, I read guides on “how to hook up with Cambodian women”, written by experienced experts, and I started reading questions and answers on the forums. With some comments leaving me more appalled than others, all in all I obtained useful insights into where to go and what to expect in my research field.

“Cambodia Red Cat” proved one of the most practical sources. This website is dedicated to mapping out where, when and how one can have sex with Cambodian girls, visualised with pictures and videos of bars, girls, and the main “girly bar” streets. Through Mr. Red Cat, I learned there are generally four different ways to hook up with Khmer girls. Number one being “Cambodian Hookers”:

The most obvious, easiest and quickest way to get laid anywhere in Cambodia. Even though it depends both on the type of girl, her attractiveness as well as your negotiation skills – the going rate for short time sex with Cambodian hookers is 50 USD. If you’re just out for a quick hand relief it gets cheaper of course and you’re looking at 10-20 USD.
If paying for sex is not really your cup of tea then don’t worry, with just slightly more effort you can meet and sleep with hot Khmer girls by going one of the other following three routes ("4 Best Places to Meet Girls in Cambodia", n.d.).

The second route was the one I predominantly followed during my research: bars and nightclubs. There are two types of girly bars in Cambodia: hostess bars, which are oriented towards Western foreigners, and KTV’s, karaoke bars oriented towards local Khmer guys and Asian tourists. At hostess bars, one can buy a girl drinks (also called ladydrinks), which are more expensive and are part of the income of the girls. If one wants to leave the bar with said girl, a “barfine” has to be paid, which usually is around ten dollars. Even though the ladydrinks and the barfine are an addition to the price of the sexual services, this path is encouraged by Cambodian Red Cat when one is scared of disappearing belongings, since “sex with street hookers is like a roulette game with your health and valuables”. According to him, bar girls normally do not cause problems, as you know where to find them the next day. All in all, freelance sex workers are cheaper, bar girls are safer.

The following order of actions proved useful for many men who pick up girls in hostess bars:

So you hang out together and have a good time. The going rule is that as soon as you bought her a drink you may also touch her. Just try and see how she reacts, if she is very young and shy then better wait to touch her boobs and ass later. Just go with her legs, arms and back for now. Smooth as silk as their skin usually is, it would not be a big surprise if you get horny in no time and especially after a few drinks you might want to ask her if she wants to come with you to your hotel ("4 Best Places to Meet Girls in Cambodia", n.d.).

Despite the safety of hostess bars, the hassle is a hindrance for some:

[T]here is one instance I must report, one of the girls from bar [...]. As mentioned earlier, I walked out after just one drink because of the awful atmosphere in the bar and the ridiculous rules around drinks and barfines. But not before I slipped my number to a girl named [...]. This one is easily recognisable, [...] I met her later only to find out that her pussy stinks, so I asked her to do a BJ only. And boy did she deliver, or did she deliver. Easily among the best on this trip, though not the absolute best. I gave her $30 for her 1
hour effort. So, those of you who want a NSA BBBJ [No Strings Attached Bare Back Blow Job; fellatio without a condom] you have been forewarned ("4 Best Places to Meet Girls in Cambodia", n.d.).

The third route one can take is approaching Cambodian girls in everyday situations. Cambodia Red Cat even provides his readers with some pick-up lines such as asking directions for a landmark one can pretend to be interested in. However, this method is perhaps more ambitious and time consuming than the others.

Just to quickly summarize methods 1 to 3: By getting yourself a hooker you need to spend money and be okay with the fact that your girl has seen dozens of other foreigner’s dicks before yours. If you meet open minded Khmer girls in the bars and clubs there’s always the chance that you spend a lot of time digging on her and paying drinks before it turns out she’s a freelancer so you could have easily gotten a hooker in the first place and by doing so saving time and money. Approaching girls in the real life takes the most effort and there’s the possibility that you run in a couple of girls who are too afraid of “Barangs” (that’s how westerners are called in Cambodia) than giving you a chance to take her out. So here comes your option number four to meet and sleep with Cambodian Girls: online dating sites ("4 Best Places to Meet Girls in Cambodia", n.d.).

This fourth and last method is the cheapest and easiest way to meet Cambodian girls who are not prostitutes, as reported by Red Cat. Conveniently, one can plan dates ahead to “watch a movie”. Thus, before hopping on a plane to Cambodia, the act of mating can be planned, but naturally there is a higher chance of strings being attached.

I acquainted myself with the Phnom Penh sex industry through these online sources, which was handy since it gave me an idea about what to expect when I would enter the field. However, this is only the sex scene as experienced by the customers, and I was eager to hear the perceptions of other actors involved.

3.2 Bring your measurement tape!

Street 174 brands itself as “the new gay street” in Phnom Penh, and cannot be missed due to the bright pink neon letters at the beginning of the street, displaying the nickname: Sabay Sabay Street. Sabay translates into “happiness”, which is exactly the sentiment I had the first time I was strolling through the street with my friend Julie. As opposed to the hostess bars targeted at
straight white men, I felt the openness of the employers at the LBGT bars. We were greeted enthusiastically by employees of a variety of bars and were handed a flyer for a drag-queen cabaret show. We decided on a bar called “Happy Man Bar”\(^1\). Since it was quiet that night, and every other night as I would later find out, we decided to sit outside. When the waiter, who introduced himself as Gemini\(^2\), brought our drinks, he asked if it was okay for him to sit with us. Naturally we agreed.

We had been talking to Gemini for a while, when Julie offered to buy him a drink: she was quicker than I to realise Happy Man Bar was a hostess bar. Gemini warned us that his drink would be expensive, but we enjoyed talking with him, so we did not mind. When he went inside, I read on the back of his uniform: “bring your measurement tape”, visualised with a banana; which amused me enough to ask if the T-shirts were for sale.

I was curious to find out what the common thought was regarding homosexuality in Cambodia, as experienced by Gemini. He spoke freely and disclosed how, according to him, it is okay to be gay in Cambodia and how gay bars are accepted. However, his mother does want him to get married with a woman in order to be secured of offspring. When we tried to ask him questions about the government and the elections, he suddenly started whispering and he was giving us vague answers.

The conversation changed to a lighter topic: the type of men we were into. Gemini preferred older man, with a beard and a beer belly, the latter for “comfortable cuddles”. In addition, Gemini announced he was attracted to European men, since he thought them to be honest. Even though I had seen plenty men as described by him, Gemini did not get lucky yet and was still in search of a boyfriend. Working at a hostess bar did not mean that he would partake in sexual activities with just any man; having a connection with someone was important to him.

Gemini kept himself busy by studying during the day and working at the bar at night. In his rare spare-time, he enjoyed singing songs by Rihanna and practicing his make-up skills. When he showed us pictures of himself with a full face on, a good bra and a pretty dress, we were fascinated. One of his other hidden talents was hairstyling, which he demonstrated by furnishing my friend with a complex braid.

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\(^1\) Throughout this thesis, I use names of existing hostess bars and clubs in Phnom Penh, however, all the names are randomly picked in order to ensure anonymity.

\(^2\) All the names used for the respondents are changed, in order to secure anonymity.
We considered going home, but Gemini assured us that we could not miss the show inside. The picture of the show as Gemini drew it made me think the show would be a steamy striptease, but it turned out to be a remarkably tame dance routine, performed by two bashful guys. Nonetheless, the performance was applauded enthusiastically by the audience, consisting of Julie and I exclusively.

The way Gemini had talked about homosexuality gave me the impression that in Cambodia, sexual orientation is not considered part of one’s fixed identity; instead of constructing his sexual identity as “gay”, Gemini merely stated that he is currently looking for a boyfriend. Tarr (1996) correspondingly states that most Cambodians do not consciously reflect on their sexual identity, but rather as females and males living in Cambodian society. Besides, she found that “young males were not violently opposed to same sex activities involving other males” (Tarr 1996, p. 165). Gemini talked openly about his attraction to men and claimed he felt accepted in Cambodian society. However, according to Hoefinger (2013), compared to male homosexuality and the accepted image of ladyboys, lesbians face more discrimination. During my fieldwork, I had indeed encountered men identifying as gay, ladyboys, and gay bars, but no lesbian bars nor women identifying as gay.

An example of a public demonstration of discrimination towards lesbians is when in 2007, Prime Minister Hun Sen legally disowned his adopted daughter, after she “married a wife”, claiming “she was of bad behaviour” (Sokheng, 2007). However, government spokesman Khieu Kanharith stated that the remarks about Hun Sen’s daughter were concerned with her behaviour, not her sexual orientation. Hun Sen then called on the nation not to discriminate against homosexuals since “they are valued members of Cambodian society” (Kimsong & Naren, 2007). Hun Sen even exemplified this statement with some stereotypes: “Those kinds of people are good in studying and have business sense”, he stated. “Gay men are good in the service industries. They are doing great services such as hairdressing, nail trimming” (Kimsong & Naren, 2007). Interestingly enough, while arguing how homosexuals should be accepted in Cambodian society, Hun Sen only talked about male homosexuals. Even though there is not a visible lesbian community in Phnom Penh, there is “a great deal of homosocial and heteroflexible behaviour among young women” (Hoefinger, 2013, p. 132). I will elaborate on my personal experiences with this phenomenon in a later chapter.

At this stage, I was still at the beginning of my research, and eager to dive into the hostess bar scene, exploring hostess bars targeted not only at gay men.
3.3 Same Same Backpacker

After an intensive day of starting up my research and acclimatizing to the hectic street life of Phnom Penh, I decided to reward myself with pizza and beer. While I was eating at a bar called Same Same Backpacker, a man sitting close-by asked me about my food. We talked for a bit and when the unavoidable topic as to why I was in Phnom Penh came up, I explained that I was researching the stigma on sex work. The man pointed to one of the three other men sitting with him and jokingly said: “Oh, then you should definitely talk to him!” I laughed and joined their table, hoping this joke had some truth in it.

The light-hearted tone of the conversation vanished abruptly when Robert explained what they were doing in Phnom Penh: “Yesterday my brother Thomas died. He had been sick for a year. We all came to Phnom Penh since he was taken into the hospital here. Now we are planning the cremation.” The group consisted of four British men who only knew each other through Thomas. “I’m sorry, we didn’t mean to drag you into all of this.” They decided to honour the life of Thomas by drinking his favourite drinks and sharing memories they treasured.

However, they were also appreciative to the possibility of talking about a light topic. The men had been living in Southeast Asia for more than twenty years and had plenty experiences to share regarding sex work. They spoke as if everything coming out of their mouths was pure gold and needed to be written down. And so I did.

I was an excellent audience yearning to be enlightened. Gavin, a Scotsman who spent his twenties in the Netherlands, started to explain how these girly bars work. He had long hair, tattoos, and friendly brown eyes. According to him, the girls working there earn their money through so-called ladydrinks. These drinks, as I’ve seen them, are just like any other regular drink but then twice as small, full of ice and with a pink straw, and – most importantly – three times as expensive. “My ex-girlfriend used to work in a girly bar. Chatting up strangers all night, getting ladydrinks and tips, but not doing anything sexual. Then after her shift she would come back to me”, he spoke in vain. I was a bit sceptical about his confidence, but hoped it was the truth.

One of the other men, Neil, who had just been injured in a motorbike crash, confessed he made use of the services the sex workers provide in abundance, back in the days. He explained how the prices of spending the night with a Cambodian sex worker had skyrocketed, caused by the law of supply and demand. Neil sat close to me, making direct eye contact while talking about his escapades, and I could not help staring at the broken blood vessel in his left eye. He told me
he was not using the services anymore, since “erections are not the same after you hit thirty”. The other men, all in their fifties, seemed to agree with this statement, and I was awkwardly nodding.

The topic had changed and perhaps this was for the best; I still had months ahead of me, and talking about sex with strangers was draining for my unaccustomed ears. I continued sipping from my cocktail: a mix between vodka, rum, gin, whiskey and lime. I had a hard time drinking this odd and very strong drink, but the men had no mercy: Thomas used to love the drink so we were drinking it.

Even though they were the ones proposing to introduce me to the hostess bar area the next day, which they knew like the back of their hands, they were all too afraid to give me their phone number. “My partner will be too suspicious if she sees I have the number of a young Dutch girl in my phone.” I sighed. We decided on meeting each other at the same place the next day, which was a plan doomed to fail in this digital age. Only months later I saw Gavin again by accident, right in front of a girly bar.

In the meantime, I had to find my own way through the Red Light District of Phnom Penh. On the bright side, I felt safe enough in hostess bars, and in the literal sense of the word I had easy access to my research site. However, the bars I visited had a fairly homogenous crowd: white, older men and Asian women. Since I do not fit in either description, my presence did not go unnoticed. In the words of Spradley (1980), while doing research I “stood out like a giant sunflower in a field of daisies” (p. 48). I did not feel welcome in the hostess bars I visited, and I did not think I would get meaningful access to my research site.

3.4 Researcher, friend or lover?

Just when I was about to give up my hopes of finding sex workers as respondents, I coincidentally stumbled into them. After exploring the city by evening along with a fellow researcher, we looked for a venture to consume a late-night snack. We decided on an eatery crowded with many older Western men, since fieldwork never stops. As if destined to happen, we were seated on a long table alongside Cambodian women who were dressed more promiscuously than the average local, which immediately rang a bell. At first I was slightly uncomfortable; I was excited to finally interact with female respondents, but since I was unprepared, I was unsure how to start a conversation with them. We smiled at each other and I offered them a slice of my pizza, which they politely declined. Thereafter, we introduced ourselves and the ice was broken. While sharing a beer pitcher, we discussed a variety of topics including make-up, family and music. One of the
girls, Chanmony, put on a music video and showed it to us, claiming the singer was her boyfriend. Another girl who was sitting next to me, Mliss, expressed her sadness regarding a boyfriend who had abruptly stopped calling her. They met while he was on a holiday in Cambodia and after spending a lot of time together and showing him around she had considered him her boyfriend, but apparently the feelings were not mutual.

My fellow researcher left, and the thought of going home as well crossed my mind, but fortunately I decided to stay. While time passed and the beer inside the pitchers dwindled, the Western men became more obvious in their advances and my assumption that the girls were sex workers was confirmed. A man who was previously sitting at a table next to ours, stood behind Chanmony and gave her an unsolicited neck massage while he asked his friend “Is she smiling?” After a disapproving nod, he did the same to the girl sitting next to her and worked his way around the table without acknowledging me. Chanmony looked at me and rolled her eyes, as to condemn his behaviour. However, later on, while I was talking Mliss, who was excited to find out that we are “same same person” since we both like to dance when we are drunk, Chanmony had moved over to the table of the man. She was leaning in and he was squeezing her buttocks. After exchanging contacts with the girls and making arrangements to go dancing the next night, I said my goodbyes. Full of new and somewhat nauseating impressions, I left the place. And so did Chanmony.

My new Facebook friend Chanmony had sent me some pictures of the night, along with a voice message, saying: “How are you... friend? Mhh I like you. Mhh very beautiful girl. Beautiful girl. How long you go back?” The weary voice message had left me slightly confused. On top of that, during the night, Mliss had given me a hug in a way I would not hug my friends: it was a tight and long embrace, and I did not know what to make of it. I did not think they understood that I was a researcher, due to their limited English. However, neither did I think during the evening that they perceived me as a potential customer. According to Hoefinger (2013), homosocial and heteroflexible behaviour among young Cambodian women often manifests in physical affection, which she refers to as “girls locker room behaviour”, such as “playfully tickling or grabbing each other’s breasts or buttocks; holding hands; rubbing each other’s arms, legs, or backs; holding one another from behind; and embracing each other as they sleep” (p. 132). Later on in my research I would experience more of the behaviour as listed by Hoefinger, whereby the line between “sexual touching and sisterly affection were, at times, very fuzzy” (2013, p. 132). It is unsurprising that I could not place this behaviour in my own
framework concerning what counts as a friendly touch and what counts as a sexual touch. As Kulick (1995) points out:

what ‘counts as sexual’ differs in different contexts and cultures: Foucault taught us that sex is not a transhistorical, transcultural, natural drive; it is, rather, a social construct with a past… Because of its historically and culturally contingent nature, what is meant by “sex” is impossible to delimit in a general way ... We can never know in advance what will “count” as sexual in another culture (Kulick, 1995, p.6).

3.5 Of course I like foreigners, I fall in love with them
Since I wanted to obtain a holistic perspective of the sex industry and the actors involved, I decided it was essential to understand how Western men and Cambodian women become romantic partners outside of the red light district. When walking through the streets of Phnom Penh, it is not necessary to actively look for these couples. They are everywhere: at my hostel quietly sharing breakfast, couples walking hand in hand on the boulevard, or lavishly drinking cocktails at fancy rooftop bars, most of the time while the girl is mentally in another world through her phone.

After experiencing awkward interactions where the men reacted defensively and suspiciously when I tried to interfere with their dates, I took my chances and signed up for Cambodian Dating. This way, I hoped to find respondents who are actively seeking a relationship where the West meets the East. However, I soon found out that it is less burdensome to start and maintain a meaningful conversation with the women on the website than with the men. As an illustration:

If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you want to go?

I am not on this dating site to find someone actually.
I am doing research in Phnom Penh on how people find love
So if you'd like to share your experiences on dating Cambodian women?

Never dated a cambodian, you dont look like one of those cambodians....

That is probably because I'm not Cambodian
So why are you on Cambodian Dating? Do you live here?
After many similar conversations, where men stopped replying to my messages as soon as they found out my sole purpose was gathering information for my thesis, I started pointing my arrows to the Cambodian women on the dating site. They were, as women are probably more often than men, overjoyed to share their feelings and experiences regarding love and relationships.

The first woman I messaged with is Kesor, who gave me her number as she deemed WhatsApp a better communication channel than the chat box. I sent her a message, and could sense her paranoia immediately: “Are you from Cambodian dating site?? Because your profile picture is not the same person.” I had used pictures of myself, thus I assured Kesor that both pictures were indeed the same person. Her trust was restored, after which she started confiding in me concerning her dating experiences. It became evident that she was interested in Western men mostly because she admired Western culture: “I like Western culture. Not make human get street. All they do is reasonable. Feel freedom, can express mine. Respect human right. The way they teach children. Not greedy.” However, she is not determined to actually move to the West. She stated that if she would find someone on the dating site who wants her to move to the West she would, but having a man migrate to Cambodia for her would be convenient too. Thus, location is less important to her than having “Western values” in her relationship. According to Kesor, Cambodian culture is troubled due to the fact that people care if someone has had sex before marriage, which she had. The combination of her idea that Western culture is based on freedom and human rights, and her bad experiences with a Cambodian boyfriend, resulted in her desire to find a boyfriend from the West. At this moment her wish is still unfulfilled, but she remains hopeful.

At the same time, I was texting with Boupha, who was already in a relationship with a Canadian man, whom she met through Cambodian Dating. Like me, she was not keen on online conversations so we decided to meet up at a coffeehouse. After a stressful tuktuk ride, where the driver took me to the opposite side of town due to miscommunication, I showed up fifteen minutes late. Boupha was already sipping from her iced latte when I arrived. She had long black hair, rouged lips and was wearing a warm jumper. After apologizing for my tardiness, my first question to Boupha was how she could survive the heat wearing such warm clothing. With a bashful smile she told me that, of course, Cambodians are used to the heat. After apologizing for my tardiness, my first question to Boupha was how she could survive the heat wearing such warm clothing. With a bashful smile she told me that, of course, Cambodians are used to the heat. After apologizing for my tardiness, my first question to Boupha was how she could survive the heat wearing such warm clothing. With a bashful smile she told me that, of course, Cambodians are used to the heat. After apologizing for my tardiness, my first question to Boupha was how she could survive the heat wearing such warm clothing. With a bashful smile she told me that, of course, Cambodians are used to the heat. After apologizing for my tardiness, my first question to Boupha was how she could survive the heat wearing such warm clothing. With a bashful smile she told me that, of course, Cambodians are used to the heat. After apologizing for my tardiness, my first question to Boupha was how she could survive the heat wearing such warm clothing. With a bashful smile she told me that, of course, Cambodians are used to the heat. After apologizing for my tardiness, my first question to Boupha was how she could survive the heat wearing such warm clothing. With a bashful smile she told me that, of course, Cambodians are used to the heat. After apologizing for my tardiness, my first question to Boupha was how she could survive the heat wearing such warm clothing. With a bashful smile she told me that, of course, Cambodians are used to the heat.

I’m not on Cambodian Dating. I live in USA
stammering about how, of course, I wanted to be friends. But I also needed an interview. Even
though I was certain I mentioned the interview, since that was how our conversation online had
started, I was annoyed with myself for failing to communicate clearly what my genuine intentions
were. So far, my research-day was not going great.

Nevertheless, she agreed to do the interview. I had to assure her that there were no wrong
or right answers to my questions, and besides I told her that she could ask me anything too. At
first during the interview I felt like somewhere between having an awkward first date and a
difficult job interview:

Maxime: How do Cambodians in general think you should find a partner?
Boupha: mhh?
Maxime: What do people in Cambodia think is a good way to find a partner?
Boupha: I don’t understand
Maxime: Is it good to find a partner through family, in a bar or online, or?
Boupha: I don’t really have an answer to your question?
Maxime: Okay
*long silence*
Boupha: Maybe they meet at school. Sometimes from Facebook. Family as well.
Maxime: Okay
Maxime: Do you think it is important in Cambodia to get married?
Boupha: [very fast] Yes! Yes very much

Halfway through the interview we were both more at ease and Boupha started sharing her views
and experiences on love, relationships and marriage. I learned that she is not interested in dating
Cambodian men. She stated: “But of course I like foreigners, I fall in love with them. Not
Cambodians. [They are] not honest, lying and cheating. But maybe all men do.”

I was curious to find out more about the Cambodian values concerning dating and
marriage. Boupha told me that in Cambodia a couple cannot live together before they are married,
but dating is fine. According to her, it depends how long people are going out before becoming
an “official” couple. When I asked her how long she was talking to her Canadian boyfriend
before they became a couple she told me: “Not too long! Not too long. I know him for one month
and then he came. Yeah really fast.” She had an amazing time when he came to Cambodia for
two weeks. They explored different regions of Cambodia together and she was very much in
love. Now he is back in Canada and the time difference makes it hard to call and text each other. The next possibility to see each other will not be within a year, but she remains hopeful and claims their love is strong enough. Boupha is hoping to marry him someday, better sooner than later, as she considers herself very old already. She thinks that people should get married around twenty-two, and being thirty-six herself means that time is running out.

The way I perceived Cambodian Dating, it resembled the structure of international marriage agencies, better known as the “mail-order bride” companies. For instance, the website was full of older white men looking for “someone special”, and Cambodian women eager to get married, describing themselves as excellent housekeepers and cooks. The women I spoke with indeed expressed their desire to marry a Western man, hoping to find an eligible partner through this dating website. Even though I did not interview male dating site users, it is interesting to see how this particular dating site was listed at websites such as Cambodian Red Cat, as a way through which a man can “easily hook up with Cambodian girls”. He claimed that this way of finding a sexual partner is perfectly suited for men who do not enjoy the idea of having sex with a prostitute, but do wish to have easy access to sex ("4 Best Places to Meet Girls in Cambodia", n.d.). Not only did Cambodian Red Cat associate this type of dating sites with prostitution, so does Lee (1998) in her article concerning global sexual exploitation in the international marriage industry. She implicates that the stigmatization, which comes with the sex work label, can be avoided through the use of dating sites and mail-order bride agencies.

Traditionally, only the bad girls serve as male sex objects, while good girls assume the roles of mothers and nurturers. Society nevertheless gives men rights over both good and bad girls; the only real question is which role patriarchal society desires to assign to a given woman. The mail-order bride is ideal, from the perspective of the male consumer, because she fulfils both sides of a male fantasy: she is both the good and bad girl, proficient both in the kitchen and in the bedroom. He can buy not only her domestic services, but her sexual services as well. The male consumer looks upon her as he does any prostitute, except that he knows once he acquires her, he will most likely be her first, and thereafter only, customer. Confident that she is a virgin or very close to being one, he does not attach to her the stigma of a prostitute and is willing to take her as his wife. (Lee, 1998, p. 161)
The way Lee describes the men’s perception of mail-order brides, they can be seen as a fusion between a private prostitute and a housekeeper. The women I spoke with definitely did not identify themselves as sex workers: they were merely looking for a Western husband. However, Boupha’s boyfriend might have different intentions. It is possible he used her for sex and companionship without the motive of maintaining a transnational relationship. Since they will not see each other for at least a year, I would not be surprised if the Canadian boyfriend will not stay as faithful as Boupha is determined to be.

Considering Lee’s article was written in 1998, it is interesting to notice how the power relationship between the Western man and the Asian woman has shifted. While Lee (1998) elaborated on how the women seek to “escape adverse home-country socioeconomic circumstances through one of the few avenues open to them” (Lee, 1998, p.140), twenty years later the Cambodian women state that they do not necessarily want to leave the country. Hoefinger (2013) also found that many Cambodian women are now hoping to find a generous Western man who is willing to settle back in Cambodia.

The Cambodian women lusting after Western men are under the impression that they would be more loyal and honest, and in addition the women claim to be attracted to the Western physique. When I asked Boupha why she liked her Canadian boyfriend, she said: “I like his eyes… Just like your eyes. And his hair, blond. Good nose.” Luckily for these women, plenty of Western men in return seek (sexual) relationships with Asian, in this case Cambodian, women. But where does this desire stem from?

Unfortunately, as established before, I did not have the possibility to research the motives of the Western men first-hand. However, according to Lee (1998) and Hoefinger (2013), these Western men – often divorced, over thirty and embittered by the feminist movement – express their desires for “submissive” women, who “act and dress like women and not men, who never tell you they have a headache” (Hoefinger, 2013, p. 162). The repulsion of the “intolerable attitude of feminist women” (Lee, 1998, p. 145) is nicely illustrated by the reasoning of one of Hoefinger’s respondents, who stated that “he much prefers playing Connect Four with bar girls, than chatting about gender workshops with uptight little NGO interns” (Hoefinger, 2013, p. 162). Even while playing Connect Four, Asian opponents are much preferred due to their submissiveness, in contrast to their Western counterparts. While searching online for ways not to be humbled yet another time while playing this game, I came across the following tip:
Drop your first chip while they’re still setting up. By the time they are ready to play, you’ve already moved. You can do this again and again at the start of each game, and an Asian girl will just smile and go along with it. This would never work with Western broads. They would make bitchy comments like “Why don’t you set it up?” “I’m not doing all the work” or “No way, you went first last game, pencil dick!” ("Gavins Guide To Playing Connect Four with Khmer Bargirls", 2006)

Even though this tip was fruitless in my presumptuous goal to win at least one game from a bar girl, the statement concerning the back talk of Western women is telling. Western men going to hostess bars, looking for interactions with Cambodian women, indeed do not seem to be searching for disobedient feminists. Rather, the opposing characteristics are glorified, idealized, and projected on the Khmer bar girls, making them desirable for men who seek submissive women to have uncomplicated fun with.

Similar to the way in which stigma attached to prostitution can be largely avoided through the use of online dating sites and mail-order bride agencies, the hostess bar girls and their clients slash boyfriends negotiate their relationship. This notion of “transactional sex” will be discussed in the next section.

3.6 Beyond sex for cash
I had not been comfortable observing hostess bars without informing anyone about my intentions. One the one hand, my ethical compass was telling me it is wrong not to inform the people you observe about your intentions, and, on the other hand, the stares of the older women behind the bar and the fact that I received my bill simultaneously with my drink made me feel unwelcome. Admittedly, my ethical obligations were not the decisive factor, but nonetheless I started reaching out to owners of hostess bars. At first I tried calling, but after a handful of confusing phone calls I started sending messages on Facebook Chat. This strategy was successful straight away, and the owner of Why Not? Bar gave me a call and told me I was more than welcome to observe in his bars. Besides, he was happy to be interviewed about his bar, his life, and any other questions I would have.

We met at a restaurant on street 136, right between the hostess bars, which were not very lively this time of day. In order to mentally prepare myself, I had looked at Facebook pictures of the bar, trying to figure out what Matthew would look like. I came earlier than we had arranged
for, so I could go over my questions once more and calm myself: I did not know what to expect from a man who runs a hostess bar.

I was pleasantly surprised when he walked inside; he had a very friendly face and seemed like a stand-up guy. Matthew did not sit down. Instead, he informed me that he had to go to one of his hostess bars, as a group of Australian men had unexpectedly entered the bar. Usually, hostess bars are not busy during daytime, so he had to make sure everything in the bar was up and running. We relocated our interview to the hostess bar. When we entered, I saw four men sitting at the bar, talking to a few girls. Matthew seated me at the back of the bar on a red velvet couch, brought me a Coke and then went on to arrange some necessities. I did not mind waiting, since I had a clear view of what was happening at the bar, while I was not very visible sitting at the back. The bright lights were dimmed, and music started playing. Matthew made a few calls and then joined me. He excused himself with his polite, British accent, and then the interview started without me realizing it.

Shattering one myth after the other, I learned that hostess bar girls do not consider themselves sex workers. Matthew explained how the girls working behind the bar, or the cashiers, are usually virgins who do not engage with men sexually. These often young and attractive girls might flirt for ladydrinks, but stay behind the bar where nothing happens. Sometimes these girls save their virginity for financially difficult times. In Asia, many men believe that they will obtain luck and health by having sex with a virgin. “Oh and there is this one chubby girl, not very attractive, working behind the bar. My wife took pity on her so that’s why she is working here. She is really friendly though and always smiles.” In sum, girls working behind the bar do not receive money for sex, according to Matthew.

Then there are the other girls. Contrary to common belief, these girls do not go home with just anybody. Matthew stated that only 30% of his employees leave the bar with a man. The ones who do get their barfine paid, being freed from their shift by a man, do not necessarily do anything sexual with this person. They might go out to dance, for dinner, and if they do go to the hotel of a customer they might just cuddle with their clothes on. I wondered out loud why men would pay a barfine and not have sex with the girl, since it did not make sense to me. It does to Matthew: “Because it’s Disneyland for adults! All these gorgeous women giving them attention. That’s usually different than in their own country.”

Another prejudice I had was that girls prefer Western man. Even though this might be true in a lot of cases, the girls are cautious when it comes to having sex with them for a reason I had not thought of: they are afraid it will not fit.
Cambodian girls are generally petite and they hear from their friends that white men have big cocks. So they touch the cock over the clothes, and if they think it won’t fit, they just flirt with them for ladydrinks, or they just won’t have sex with them.

It all did not seem so bad; the bar itself had a nice atmosphere, and from what I understood, the girls enjoyed working there. Even Matthew’s Khmer wife worked at the bar, and the fact that he did not mind her working there made me see the hostess bar in a positive light. He walked me outside and the bright sun made me realize it was only midday. He introduced me to his wife, and I found out that he had a one-year-old baby, since his wife was holding her in her arms. To Matthew’s surprise, there were construction guys renewing the “Why Not? Bar” sign in front of the bar. He told me he had not arranged for this to happen, but he could use a new sign anyway. He shrugged and exclaimed: “This is typical Cambodia. I guess you just have to go with the flow.”

Matthew had told me that the base salary for his employees is $200 a month, which is comparable to wages in garment factories. On top of that, girls keep $1.50 for every ladydrink they score, and drunk customers give generous tips as well. In addition, many girls have a boyfriend, often several, sending them around $200/$500 a month. A flirty, young, and attractive girl could easily combine all these revenues and generate a comfortable income, without having to engage in sexual activities at all, at least not in the form of direct sex-for-cash. Hoefinger (2013), who has conducted extensive research on the ways in which intimacy and commerce intersect in the everyday lives of Khmer bar girls, labels the indirectness of this transaction as “transactional sex”, where intimacy is traded for material benefits. Even though, in transactional relationships, initial motivations to engage in intimate relationships are material, this does not exclude the possibility for the development of true feelings. However, what counts as “feelings” is entirely subjective, of course. According to Hoefinger (2013), for many Western men, “love” is associated with pure, unadulterated, trusting romance, passion and sex, whereas for Cambodian women, “love” is inseparable from the view of a man who provides, treats her well, and cares for her (Hoefinger, 2013). Besides the inference of “feelings”, transactional relationships differ from sex work because participants do not refer to themselves as respectively service provider and client, but rather as girlfriend and boyfriend whereby payment is not prenegotiated, but rather disguised as a gift. The crux of the transactional sex phenomena is that “the multi-layered exchanges of material goods, gifts, bodies, fluids, sex, thoughts, ideas and
emotions are what constitute the quintessence of interpersonal (sexual) relationships, where economics and intimacy collide, become enmeshed, and result in the construction of ‘connected lives’” (Hoefinger, 2013, p. 24). For the girls as well as their boyfriends, labelling their interactions as a relationship is a way to escape the stigmatizing label of sex work. Making a clear-cut distinction between a normative relationship, a transactional relationship and prostitution is nearly impossible, since it can all exist on a spectrum (Jewkes et al., 2011). Besides, meaning can only be ascribed to a relationship by the participants, making the borders between a sex for cash arrangement and a normative relationship blurry.

3.7 My first time in Disneyland
The day after my interview with Matthew, I called him to ask when I could make observations in his bar. Any day, any time after nine pm I could observe. I figured better sooner than later, so I told him I would come that same evening around ten. Usually my time-management is poor, but due to my restlessness I was in front of the door exactly at 10:00. I took a deep breath and entered the bar. My nervousness was justified: all the girls working in the bar simultaneously welcomed me by shouting “HELLO, WELCOME!” in a high-pitched tone. In the blink of an eye, one of the girls took me by the hand and brought me to a table at the back, around seven girls following her. They were all looking at me, talking to me, and touching me: I was feeling extremely uncomfortable. After ordering a beer I looked around, hoping Matthew would rescue me from my awkwardness. Meanwhile, one of the girls was waving a menu in order to cool me off, and another one was pulling at my eyelashes since she was convinced they were fake. It hurt because they were not. I received more compliments in those ten minutes than I would usually get in a year. When I calmed down and could reflect on the situation, I understood why Matthew had called it Disneyland for adults. Even though I knew the attention and the compliments were not completely genuine, I was still flattered.

However, I was uncomfortable with the girls touching me the way they did: one was massaging me, and another girl had her hand high on my leg. At the other side of the bar I finally saw Matthew, and to my disappointment he smiled at me, at the situation perhaps, but remained motionless. I walked over to him and asked him to explain to the girls, in Khmer since their English proved limited, what I was doing in the bar and that I was not interested in having a romantic or sexual relationship with them. Matthew laughed and assured me: “The girls just want to be your friend, they are just excited because Western girls rarely enter the bar.” I was not convinced, and in a desperate attempt to talk to the girls without being felt up, I showed a picture
of my boyfriend on my phone and asked if they had boyfriends. They all did: some had several, some were engaged, married, had babies and I noticed how the atmosphere changed and how their hands were suddenly not on my body anymore. After buying two girls ladydrinks, the other girls started hanging around other customers and I could finally relax.

One of the girls could barely speak any English and thus the other girl translated everything for her. Later on, Matthew took a seat at our table and I asked him how she could communicate with her boyfriend. He told me, with a smile on his face, that the other girls often text him for her, and that in some cases he gets a phone pressed in his hand and is texting boys all over the world “I miss you, I love you”. He asked a girl from behind the bar to join us, since “her English was good and she was a nice person”. She explained how she studied during the day to become a nurse, and at night she worked at the bar to pay for her studies. She looked at me thoroughly, and said I looked just like Matthew’s daughter. I was amused and asked him to see a picture, and I could see the resemblance. After all the positivity concerning hostess bar work, I could not help but wonder how Matthew would feel if his own daughter would work in a bar like this. It took him a while to gather his thoughts, and finally he said that it is hard to answer the question since his daughter is born and raised in the West.

It is a different situation. Girls here [in Cambodia] live from day to day. If I would be in their shoes, I would not think it is an ideal situation, but I would understand if my daughter would want work in a hostess bar then. In Cambodia, if you don’t have a dollar you need to work for that dollar. There is no welfare here.

His daughter did not applaud the type of business he was running, and his sadness regarding her disapproval was noticeable.

Behind me, on one of the couches, a Western man was accompanied by three girls, all kissing him and talking to him. I had observed the situation in a millisecond, but tried not stare since I did not want to make him feel uncomfortable by my presence. However, later that night he was the one to establish contact with me. He asked me what I was doing in Phnom Penh, so I said I was doing research for my Master’s thesis. When he asked about my topic, I just said “this” and made a gesture with my hand, and he understood immediately. Eager to share his side of the story, he started talking about how hostess bars are not as bad as they might seem. He was visibly upset with the victim label the girls usually get, because he was convinced the girls choose to work in a hostess bar. They earn ten times more than they would at any other job in Cambodia.
where there are no qualifications required. Matthew shared this sentiment, earlier he had told me that from time to time,

Christians with folders in their hands enter the bar, trying to save the girls. Their idea of saving them is making them work in a garment factory. But this is way more fun than sewing and the salaries are much better. A lot of the girls actually used to work in those factories.

Even though Matthew claimed the girls enjoy working in his bar, he also told me that the girls do not tell their parents about the kind of bar they work in. Often families think, or want to believe, that the girls work in a “normal” bar, or a restaurant. Matthew’s daughter does not approve of the business he runs, the girls’ families would not approve of their profession, and the girls often do not wish to be perceived as a sex worker. Sex and sex work are highly stigmatized, but what is the origin of the taboo on sex?

Since sex is necessary to avoid the extinction of the human race, it is interesting to think about why a biologically necessary act is considered taboo in a myriad of contexts. In order to obtain a better understanding as to why sex work is highly stigmatized, I will shed light on the arguments of a scholar who tried to unravel the core of the taboo on sex itself, and later on following this line of reasoning concerning the taboo on sex work.

According to cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, the taboo on sex is grounded in our inherent fear of death. In his book, *The Denial of Death*, he states that humans cope with the fear of mortality by embedding themselves in cultural symbolism or immortality beliefs: as a way of struggling against one’s animal fate. Accordingly, animalistic, physical behaviour, is threatening since it destabilizes the idea that humans are spiritual beings (Becker, 1973). Every person is both a self and a body. Who you really are, is that then based in the symbolic inner self, or in the physical body? Humans like to perceive themselves as spiritual beings and, according to Becker, this desire is the reason why it is difficult to have sex without guilt: what we like to see as our “real” self is, through the act of sex, forced into a standardized, mechanical, biological role. Thus, sex reminds us that we are mortal animals. While having sex, our physical body takes over the whole self and this is a threatening thought due to the fear of the disappearance of the symbolic, inner self (Becker, 1973). Becker continues his reasoning by declaring that especially women need to be assured that the man is interested in the inner self, and not just their physical body. When men only want the body, the complete identity of the woman is reduced to nothing more
than an animal role. Guilt can be separated from sex when love is involved, since it is usually accompanied by trust and assurance, and in this way the collapse of the individual into the animal dimension does not mean that the inner self is negated (Becker, 1973).

When following the line of reasoning that sexual activity forms a threat to our identity of the inner self, it is unsurprising that discourses of sexual normality and deviance emerged since the body needs to be regulated and controlled. According to Foucault, the ultimate representation or manifestation of such power is the self-regulating conforming individual (Maksimowski, 2012, p.1). Both public and academic discourses are used as a tool for the construction of sexual bodies, identities, practices and communities politically and historically situate them in a manner that reifies categories, creating people within them as objects for control as well as subjects for community and disunity (Maksimowski 2012, p.1). This is why talking about sex is often accompanied by a sense of embarrassment, since from an early age people learn that the line between normal and deviant sexual behaviour is very thin, and in order to fit within the community, it is a dangerous line to be crossed.

The “normal” married heterosexual couple has never been the object of study, since they are legitimate and do not need to be “fixed” (Foucault, 1980). Foucault argues that our repressed sexuality is an important tool in constructing the normal and the deviant, and that therefore prostitution has been tolerated through history since it is viewed as a necessary institution to maintain the social order (Foucault, 1980). Prostitution can prevent other deviant acts, such as relationships outside marriage and divorce, and thus has a clear function within society (Foucault, 1980). Even though prostitution has been tolerated throughout history, prostitutes and other “lustful” women are often labelled as nymphomaniacs and immoral people (Maksimowski, 2012).

I feel inclined to understand the differences between “normal” and “deviant” sexual behaviour in the light of the theory of Mary Douglas, who claimed that dirt is matter out of place. In her book *Purity and Danger* (1966), Douglas states that dirt is never a unique, isolated event. What is considered dirt is highly contextual. Every society has sets of ordered relations, and any violation of that order is perceived as dirt. According to Douglas, dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements (Douglas, 1966). In a later chapter I will discuss how the concepts of “normal” and “deviant” behaviour come to the fore in the Cambodian context.
3.8 Not without a Johnnie

At a sports bar full of testosterone I watched how Liverpool got defeated by Man United. Many expats based in Phnom Penh gathered to watch this important match, and the only place available was a stool at the bar. I asked the man next to the empty seat if it was okay if I sat down there, and I was very much welcome to join since we supported the same team. During tedious moments we discussed what brought us to Phnom Penh, and he said he “feels really bad for the women I research”. I jokingly said that it was just his Irish Catholic guilt speaking, and he genuinely agreed.

After Liverpool’s loss I looked around the bar, and suddenly saw a familiar face. Perhaps due to his distinctive appearance, I was fairly certain that this man, whom I recognized from pictures, was a friend of my boyfriend. Since I had never met him in real life, I sent my fellow Liverpool supporter to investigate if the mystery man was indeed who I thought he was. I overheard him saying he was Irish while showing his sunburnt skin, and indeed he used to live in Amsterdam. So I interrupted and asked: “are you Tom?” The shock on his face was evident, and presumably partly due to being intoxicated, he was overjoyed to meet “the girlfriend”, and we started talking. After a few years spent in San Francisco, Tom had decided to move to Phnom Penh along with a childhood friend to teach English. They planned on staying around a year, but the job hunt had not started yet. “Ideally we find a good enough paying part-time job, working just enough to have a grand time around here. A dollar goes a long way in Cambodia.” Later, the conversation moved to Pontoon. When I explained my research topic he exclaimed: “Oh, I definitely have a story for you about those fecking sex workers. I’ll tell you another time.”

The “other time” came while my boyfriend was visiting me and we decided to meet up with Tom and his friend for dinner. Before we were even seated, the endless stream of crazy stories started, and I wondered how so many insane things could happen to one person. Naturally I was most excited to hear the story about the sex worker, and I did not leave the table disappointed.

During his first week in Phnom Penh, Tom was still very much in holiday mode. While partying, Tom had met a Cambodian girl whom he took back to his hostel. He did not perceive her as a sex worker, since she did not state a price or anything related. His image of her changed when, the next morning, he was asked to meet her brother at the hospital. Allegedly her grandmother was sick and needed some money. For unidentified reasons he went along, and ended up paying 200$ in medical bills for a person he was not acquainted with. This incident made him question his decision not to wear a condom while having sex with her, leading him to
go to the doctor to find out if he had any sexually transmitted diseases. He did. Luckily for him, it was treated fairly quickly and he was happy to know -for the first time in eight years- that he was STD-free. This incident was an eye-opener for him, and he decided to use condoms henceforth. “Then there was this other girl.”

At their go-to club, Love, his friend Chris had a Cambodian girl following him around for many nights, and he made it very clear that he was not interested. The girl in question would not take “no” for an answer, which annoyed Chris to no end. Tom did not take interest in her, until she randomly jumped in his tuktuk at dawn. Conveniently, he was on his way home and took advantage of the situation. This time he was determined to use protection, and thus explained to her that he only had two condoms left. They apparently made good use of those two, and fell asleep. Hours later, Tom was pleased to find out she had cooked for him, and he fell asleep again after. “Next thing I know, she was riding me without a johnnie!” We were laughing at his misfortune, but Tom was seriously upset. His morning glory had proved to be more of a curse than a blessing. “You know if this had happened to a girl, people would say it was rape. I made it very clear that I only wanted to have sex with a condom.” So why not use condoms?

[Condoms] cut your risk of infection by at least 80 per cent, without your having to cut down on sex. What’s not to like? There’s quite a lot not to like, actually. The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth: sex without a condom is more fun than sex with a condom. So help me God, but it really is true. Men don’t use condoms for lots of reasons. Reasons one, two and three are that sex is more fun without condoms. (Pisani, 2010, p.210)

Rationally, everybody understands why condoms should be used. However, sex and rationality do not always go hand in hand, and the greater extent of fun without a condom is not restricted to men. As illustrated by Tom’s story, it is not always the case that the woman has to convince the man to wear a condom.

According to Pisani (2010), more than 80% of the time condoms are used in commercial sex. Even though these statistics are promising, more problematic is the data showing the fall of condom use with “special friends”: “Men are three times more likely to use a condom with a woman they describe as a sex worker than someone they say is a girlfriend, even when the girlfriend is actually a favoured hooker” (Pisani, 2010, p.66). Especially in Cambodia, where the line between a girlfriend and a prostitute is blurred, this is concerning. During Tom’s first
encounter with a Cambodian girl, he did not perceive her as a sex worker and thus did not use a condom. With the second girl, he was more cautious and insisted on using condoms since he was more or less convinced she was a sex worker. Considering the second girl had cooked for Tom, he was frightened she wanted to become his girlfriend. When taking into account that the girl persisted on having sex without a condom, it is possible she was negotiating her identity through the absence of condom use. When protected sex characterizes prostitution, it is understandable why she would want to leave condoms out of the equation.

### 3.9 Welcome to the age of un-innocence

Girls dancing on table tops, ping pong balls flying through dimly lit clubs, and beers too cheap for your own good. All these things and more characterize the red light district in Bangkok. One of the nights I dragged my boyfriend to a sex club; the things you have to do in the name of research. One might think this would be an exciting experience for any man, but life, as they say, can turn on a dime. At the entrance of a ping pong bar, he turned to me and said with confidence: “Max, I know how to handle these things. Follow my lead.” Even though I was not convinced, he had more experience than I, so I let him. It was my first time at the scam capital after all.

The show had already started when we entered the club. We were seated and ordered a drink to cover our unease. Three girls on the stage were dancing unrefined and unmotivated, each with their own acts. One girl was blowing a horn, the other was smoking a cigarette, and the third one was waving a flag; all executed with their reproductive areas. As soon as our drinks were brought to us, all the other guests left the place and suddenly we were the entire audience. As a result, the girls were making direct eye contact with us all throughout their performances, and I had never felt this uncomfortable in my entire life.

Then the interactive part started. We were supposed to participate and play ping pong with the girls, but they started shooting ping pong balls without us having our bats yet. The stickiness will never leave my memory. Feeling disgusted, we were ready to leave the place. However, balloons were pressed in our hands as the second interactive part had begun, and the girls started shooting dart arrows. Since their aim had not proved to be very accurate while playing ping pong, we covered our eyes in fear. As a souvenir, one of the girls wrote a card with my name on it, which was obviously not handwritten.

We asked for the bill and suddenly four people surrounded us while displaying on a calculator what we were supposed to pay. Luckily for me, I had a self-proclaimed negotiation expert with me who never loses his calm. “Are you fucking scamming me?” he exclaimed while
looking at a ridiculously high number on the calculator. I was slightly scared, but my love for
drama was stronger than my fear. The haggling was done through both parties aggressively
typing on the calculator what they thought was a fair price for the show we had just witnessed.
In the end, the tension was broken when the boyfriend jokingly gave them 4000 Cambodian Riel,
which is worth less than 1 euro.

Even though we had been inside for less than thirty minutes, it had felt like an eternity
with all the particular things we had seen. We went back to the street with all the girlie bars to
unwind. While sitting at a terrace, we could observe everything going on. The street was filled
with many bar girls dressed in nothing more than just a bikini and high heels, men having a hard
time making their choices, and groups of friends looking for adventure. In the midst of all the
chaos, we spotted a family asking for directions: “I wouldn’t be surprised if they were Dutchies”
said my research assistant of the night.

Even though I was only in Bangkok for a couple of days, which means I cannot and will
not make an informed comparison, it did become apparent that the level of nudity and the
explicitness of the sex industry which can easily be found in Bangkok, is more hidden in the
streets of Phnom Penh. This made me wonder, where does the modesty of the Cambodian sex
workers stem from? To answer this question, I will concisely outline historic events known to
have shaped the conservativeness of Cambodian women.

According to Hoefinger (2013), Cambodia’s political past has a direct impact on all
contemporary young women, including sex workers, whose overall status started to decline
during French colonialism (1863-1953), since they were framed as the “savage” antithesis of the
French woman. Concurrently, in 1885, colonial police closed brothels and arrested sex workers
due to the fact that French administrators deemed selling sex a concerning activity (Jacobsen,
2008). Concerning for Cambodians, that is, who were thought to be fated to immoral
selfindulgence, while the colonial men were believed to be undefiled, and blameless for their
participation in the sex for cash trade (Jacobsen, 2008). Undeterred by the police efforts to shut
down brothels, and the imprisonment of sex workers known to have transmitted sexual diseases,
the number of sex workers in Cambodia increased rapidly throughout the twentieth century
(Jacobsen, 2008).

When Cambodia left 90 years of French colonialism in 1953, the Cambodians had to
reinvent their national identity, and for gender representations they turned to the infamous Chpab
Srei (Hoefinger, 2013): a pre-colonial manual providing guidelines for women’s behaviour. The
essence of the Chpab Srei is that “it is the responsibility of wives to ensure the good reputation
of the family by maintaining a harmonious image of the home, regardless of what occurred behind closed doors. This was best achieved by total obedience to one’s husband” (Jacobsen, 2008, p.120). To this day, Cambodians still refer to the *Chpab Srei*, and NGO’s I spoke to concerned with gender, ascribe the lower status of the Cambodian women to the *Chpab Srei* from which pressure to be a “good”, obedient girl stems from.

Gender inequalities were somewhat evened out during the Khmer Rouge Era, as both teenage male and female comrades were trained in military actions (including torture and murder by bludgeoning) and the handling of guns and weapons. Both dressed in the same loose-fitting black tops buttoned to the neck, and baggy black trousers (Hoefinger, 2013, p.84). Prostitution was once again abolished, and made punishable by death, which all the same did not stop the Khmer Rouge cadre from trading food for sex (Hoefinger, 2013).

A recurring pattern throughout the relatively recent history of Cambodia thus seems to be the authoritarian leaders abolishing prostitution, sentencing sex workers, while enjoying the services themselves. Simultaneously there is a quest for clear guidelines for the behaviour of women, fuelled by confusion around the Cambodian national identity. This all relates to the moral order in Cambodian society, which will be discussed in section 2.15.

### 3.10 Worthy of intimacy?

One night, I met a fellow anthropology student: Elijah. His ambition was to enlighten the Thai children with the English language, but due to unfortunate circumstances he was stuck in Phnom Penh for a couple of extra days. When I explained my research topic to him, he was happy to gallivant around the city with me and to make observations of the hostess bar nightlife scene in Phnom Penh. His company was valuable to me since an extra pair of eyes is always useful while making observations, and additionally I was curious to find out if his companionship would alter my findings. Beforehand, it became evident that his view on sex work was less liberal than mine, which increased my interest in finding out how he would experience the encounters lying ahead of us.

After a bit of Dutch courage, our first stop of the night was Phnom Penh Hilton, one of the most infamous hostess bars in Phnom Penh. We decided to sit on the balcony at the second floor, so that we could observe what was happening on the bustling streets of the hostess bar area. We saw many young Cambodian women escorted by, often much older, Western men. While we were looking at the couples and discussing whether we thought it was a mere business transaction or a proper love relationship, one of the hostess bar girls came by and we offered her
a drink and asked her to join us. Devi displayed her happiness and quickly came back with her ladydrink. Even though she did not finish school, her English was excellent and we complimented her on it. She explained that she became fluent in English through her experiences working in the bar and talking with Westerners. She asked us to guess her age and was very pleased with our answers. In return she sprayed us with compliments and the ambience was amiable. When I jokingly said that she would be a good match with Elijah, she turned to me and exclaimed: “No, no, no! He is just a friend, just like you!” I could not help but chuckle at her fast and firm statement and Elijah laughed about the fact that at his first interaction with a sex worker he “got friendzoned”. Devi wanted to meet up again to get our nails done so we exchanged contacts. It almost seemed like a normal night out, making new friends; until we received our bill and were counting our dollars to pay for her ladydrinks.

It was very obvious that Devi was only flirting just to get us to buy her ladydrinks, but we did not mind. It did show that for Devi, likewise for many bar girls, it is possible to carefully select what customers she deems worthy of her intimacy. Dani seemed to have excellent people skills: she was entertaining us through conversation while at the same time manipulating us into buying her more drinks. Another valuable skill she learned through her job is the English language: even though she did not finish school, her English was better than many Cambodians I encountered who obtained a university degree.

3.11 If she’s a 10 out of 10…

Our next stop was Bar 69; another hostess bar in the heart of the tourist sex industry area of Phnom Penh. When we sat outside and looked around, one person in particular caught our eye: a girl in a bright red dress, walking gracefully up and down the street talking to a variety of men. We were dazzled by her beautiful face and amazing body. When we struck up a conversation with her and got a closer look, we noticed her Adam’s apple. I suddenly remembered that a friend once told me: “If she’s a 10 out of 10, it’s a man”, and it seemed to be true. Even though she agreed to sit with us and accepted our drink, she was very much distracted by her own reflection in the window, as well as by the myriad of men on the streets looking for an adventure, which made it hard to make conversation. She found a client and left us, but put her sister in the chair to talk to us. When it became evident that the sister was not able to talk to us in English, we decided it was time for our next stop of the night.

Unfortunately, I did not encounter many ladyboys in my fieldwork nor would I have had enough space in my research to include transgender sex workers. However, I did hear
innumerable stories about unsuspecting Western men who were hoping to spend the night with a pretty Cambodian lady, only to find out in the heat of the moment that they were in the possession of male sexual organs. Considering that 46% of the ladyboys identify as a woman, it is imaginable how these situations are distressing for both parties (Davis & Miles, 2014).

3.12 Come on, something scandalous!

Even though I had gathered useful information through the night, certain blunt questions I had were still left unanswered, since these topics usually do not come to the fore through regular conversation. Due to the fact that most hostess bar girls do not identify as sex workers, it is hard to ask certain questions without implying that I perceive them as such. Ironically, we found a way out of this dilemma at bar Catch-22. After ordering our drinks, we decided to stir things up and play a drinking game with some of the girls. We asked two girls who allegedly had the best English to join us, and we started explaining the game:

Elijah: Okay, so the game is called “Never Have I Ever”
Sophean: What?
Elijah: Never have I ever. We go around one at the time-
*Sophean and Pith giggling*
Elijah: And when it’s my turn, I’ll start, I say something I’ve never done before. If any of you have done it, you drink. So if I say: never have I ever been to Sihanouksville, then if you have been to Sihanouksville then you drink.
Maxime: Do you understand?
Sophean: Yes, a little bit, I never play.

After a few more examples, the girls understood the game design and were excited to play. Several rounds later, we had only talked about which provinces in Cambodia everyone had been to, and Elijah grew impatient which led him to blurt out: “Come on, something scandalous! You guys are playing it all wrong. Stop thinking in provinces, start thinking about actions!” The innocence of the conversation had left soon after his statement, and as a result the giggles of the girls became almost deafening. Sophean leaned towards me and said: “Happy happy. Are you happy too?”

Not only did we want to learn more about the girls, in return they overcame their embarrassment and asked us cheeky questions as well. At some point the girls and I all had to
drink to a certain question, which made Sophean exclaim that “we are bad girls!” Since it was not the first time Sophean and Pith had referred to themselves as being “bad”, Elijah made it clear that he disagreed with this statement: “All you guys are freaking good girls!” Besides, while playing the drinking game, it became apparent that the girls do not receive nor give oral sex, much to our surprise. Even if Sophean and Pith were lying, their giggles and the shock on their faces revealed that oral sex is very much taboo in Cambodian culture. E could not stand the thought of the girls missing out, and insisted: “Next time you hire- you have a guy: ask him to do it. It’s really good.”

During the game I was faced with my own prejudices concerning hostess bar girls; I blindly assumed that they would perform fellatio. Not only in normative and transactional relationships, but also during “sex for cash” arrangement, it is plausible the men expect the same. As Hoefinger (2013) found, many Cambodian girls would not perform fellatio on the grounds that they deem this specific sexual act disrespectful towards Buddha, and besides claim that their “mouth is for eating rice only” (p. 129).

With regards to my position in the field, I had read Feeling Gender Speak (2005) by Lorraine Nencel while preparing for my research. Nencel shows in her article that the way the women perceived her influenced their willingness to be open and answer her questions. Nencel describes how there were various positions belonging to men in the nightlife and sex work scene: clients, husbands, pimps, managers, bouncers and waiters. However, there was no existing role for a woman who is not a sex worker, and it was even harder since Nencel was a foreigner in her research site. Due to this fact, the sex workers assumed she was financially well off. Besides, she was the professional, she had a love life and in general a gratifying life, and the perceptions that the sex workers had of her constructed barriers between them. Nencel believed she was a reminder of the dreams and desires the sex workers were unable to achieve, which made them feel uncomfortable telling stories to her. “Hence, if I was the good woman then indirectly within our relationship they positioned themselves as bad” (Nencel, 2015, p. 351).

Since there are many similarities between Nencel’s story and mine, I was worried the girls would not want to share their experiences with me. I noticed how, especially during first interactions, the girls had a hard time figuring me out. As described above, I did think the girls perceived me as a “good girl” in the beginning which would, as a result, make them the “bad girls”. However, through conversation the girls learned we had more in common than both parties perhaps would have expected. While interacting with sex workers, I noticed how, partly consciously, I tried not to position myself as a “good girl”, in order to create distance between
my persona and that of NGO workers. Through this distancing, I hoped to come closer to my respondents.

It was noticeable the sex workers had certain perceptions of me, which possibly was cause for jealousy, but not antipathy. On the contrary: characteristics of me which they told me they desired, like my pale skin, Western nose, and Western appearance in general, made them proud to call me their friend, since being friends with a Westerner improves their status. As Willson (1995) explains: “The Westerner is often perceived by people in a non-Western host society as a commodity for future wealth and prestige” (p. 262). This became evident while video calling with them; they would always show me to their friends and they were eager to take pictures with me. Their status could thus improve by being friends with a Western girl: “Social capital stems not from what you know, but from who you know. Connections in the form of friends, relations, associates and acquaintances can all bestow status” (Thornton, 1995, p. 202). Since contact with a female westerner is rare for bar girls, compared to the endless stream of Western men entering the bars, it can be understood how a friendship with a Western girl generates additional status.

With regards to my position in the field as a woman, I also found it to be easier to make conversation since they did not have to keep up appearances since I was (usually) not perceived as a potential customer. Thus, even though there was no existing role for a woman who is not a sex worker, as Nencel describes, this was not a hindrance for my research.

3.13 She could be sewing there too, right?

We are deeply committed to changing the world by starting from within. Weekly, our team members are offered academic courses that cover an array of topics ranging from nutrition and physical wellness, to female empowerment, English classes, and professional & budgeting skills. It is our belief that from knowledge springs strength, and from strength springs reform. (https://www.penhlenh.com/impact).

The statement above is written by former model scout and current philanthropist Rachel Dodson. Her fast-paced job in New York City had left her unfulfilled, leading her to migrate to Cambodia in order to work with disadvantaged women. Her brand, Penh Lenh, is featured in popular Western media such as People Magazine, the New York Post, OK! Magazine and Teen Vogue. Her aesthetic website is full of expensive jewellery and other accessories, even for Western standards. I was intrigued to obtain a better understanding of her motives to help out the women.
in Cambodia. However, I never received a reply to my request for an interview, and I had almost forgotten about this socially responsible company, until I accidentally entered the store.

After an afternoon spent at the Russian Market, I wandered around the trendy area with a friend from the Netherlands, Zoey. I had heard many expats reside in this area, and the countless trendy bars and charming streets made it clear why. When we walked past a store which had T-shirts with “The future is female” printed on it, I could not resist entering. The bright, white, stylish shop looked very Western, and when I looked at the price tags I realized that we were in Penh Lenh. I recognized the lady behind the counter as the owner of the shop. She was staring at us with a polite smile. I could not wait to get out of the shop and ask my friend what her thoughts were on the atmosphere, since I was not sure if I was the only one feeling uncomfortable.

It appeared my sentiments were shared with Zoey, because when I asked Zoey about her thoughts, her reply was:

I was shocked! Sincerely, I was kind of in shock. Because when you enter the store, that blonde was standing behind the counter, and the rest was quietly working behind her. Not very cozy or anything. But this is exactly the image you have of those factories. And again, now those Cambodian women are placed in the way we perceive them. You know? And this is probably better for them than the work they had to do before this. But I felt weird, you could see the power difference as the blonde was standing there with her back to the other women. She could be sewing there too right?

Not to discredit Dodson’s efforts, nor to judge her particular intentions, but with regards to a broader occurrence: the high number of white, Western, often female (Chant, 2016) foreigners aspiring to “save” the Cambodian people can be problematic. Considering Cambodia is the country with the second highest number of NGOs per capita (Domashneva, 2013), it is unsurprising that there are amongst them quite a few NGOs and social enterprises targeted at “powerless” Cambodian women who will be “empowered” by Westerners. Many organizations resemble the aspirations as described by Penh Lenh Designs; whereby the target group is educated on topics they are thought to be ignorant of, such as: female empowerment, nutrition and budgeting skills. The overkill of the buzzword “empowerment” is troublesome since, as Bowes (1996) stated, the notion of “empowerment” is problematic in itself for the ways in which it connotes “powerful outsiders” injecting power into “powerless insiders.”
In addition to this connotation, Easterly (2006) argues that trendy but meaningless objectives, which cannot be measured, such as “improving governance” and “empowering women”, should be abandoned in order to make aid effective. Rather, he favours objectives which can be measured and judged such as the provision of roads, electrification, water and policy reforms (Easterly, 2006). In his book *The White Man’s Burden*, Easterly (2006) elaborates on his view that while the West is trying to aid the Rest, past mistakes are repeated due to the presumptuous idea that “we” know better what “they” need. Accordingly, colonial sentiments are reincarnated in the form of foreign aid (Easterly, 2006).

This notion is elaborated on further by Bandyopadhyay & Patil (2017), who criticize volunteer tourism and development; similarly claiming that through these discourses colonial narratives are retold. Namely, Western philanthropists inherit and reproduce distinctions between an independent, active, rational West, and a childlike, passive, irrational Non-West (Bandyopadhyay & Patil, 2017). As a result of modern discourses of volunteer tourism and development, people in the global South come to believe that they have lower capacity for development and have inferior science, technology and resources (Kothari, 2006). Thus, Cambodian women can internalize the notion so often raised by Western philanthropists that they, indeed, are in need of foreign help and require empowerment. But why is the West so eager to help the Rest?

Zakaria (2014) argues that while designer clothes and fancy cars signal material status in the global North, the stories of volunteers embracing poverty, discomfort, and helping others signal perceived superiority of their characters. For this reason, taking pictures with the people one is helping is a common practice, through which the philanthropic self is constructed (Bandyopadhyay & Patil, 2017). Thus, the “helping” of people in the global South can generate status for the Western humanitarian. Bandyopadhyay & Patil (2017) illustrate that the eagerness to help in the global South is somewhat paradoxical, since there are plenty social problems and struggles in the global north needed to be solved - for example- 32% of children in the USA live in poverty (Bandyopadhyay & Patil, 2017). Helping in one’s own country is a less popular choice however, due to the fact that other people’s problems seem less complicated and easier to solve than those of one’s own society (Bandyopadhyay & Patil, 2017). Besides, a recognition of problems of poverty, inequality, and oppression within one’s own country requires a fundamental disruption of the dichotomy between the “West” and the “Rest” (Bandyopadhyay & Patil, 2017). Thus, foreign aid executed by white Westerners, aimed at the empowerment of
Cambodian women, can be accompanied by the unwanted by-product of reproduced, essentialized, and internalized divisions between the rational West, and the irrational Rest.

When talking about this dichotomy, I must include the term Orientalism, which is a term often used in academic discourse, evangelized by Said (1978), to describe the condescending attitude of the West towards Middle Eastern, Asian and North African societies. Said (1978) argues that Orientalism should be examined as a discourse, since it is an enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage and produce the Orient:

[...] a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orients' special place in European Western experience. The Orient is not only adjective to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest, richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience (Said, 1978, p.1).

The Oriental culture is essentialized by the West, whereby a view is created that Oriental culture can be studied, depicted, and reproduced (Said, 1978). All the writing, and even thinking about the Orient is limited and imposed by Orientalism according to Said (1978), making it necessary to inspect my own participation in the Orientalist discourse.

First of all, while critiquing the white, Western volunteers “helping” in the Orient, I must acknowledge that, similarly, I could have researched sex work in the Netherlands, just like the volunteers could have helped in their home country. Even though I do not claim to have “grasped the Cambodian culture”, I nonetheless make claims about a country in which I have spent a mere three months, without speaking the local language. Similarly to White (2012), my privilege becomes apparent through the way in which my class, nation, colour and education make it “natural” that I should be the analyst of other people’s lives. White (2012) illustrates this notion of self-evidence by drawing the following image:

Imagine for a moment that a 22-year-old Bangladeshi who speaks a smattering of English could stay 18 months in Britain and then return to write a PhD in Bengali on people in Britain. Which is subsequently used as a teaching resource on British society in British universities. The idea is laughable. And yet that is exactly what I did in reverse. The whole situation is structured in and through racial advantage. (White, 2012, p.409)
Besides, in spite of the limitation of the scope of my research, I still reproduce Orientalist discourse through exhausting predominantly from Western scholars who write about the Orient.

### 3.14 Hate the sin, not the sinner

Roughly speaking, negative sentiments concerning sex work can be divided into two categories: either people feel bad for the women who have to sell their body in order to survive, or sex workers are seen as dissolute women without virtue. As discussed in the introduction, many NGO’s fall into the first category and try to rescue the victims. An example of an organization as such is Sisters of Esther: “It is because of Jesus’ life, love and sacrifice that we are doing what we do”, as goes the slogan of the Christian based organization. Intrigued by their online video wherein an American woman explains in a husky voice accompanied by melodramatic music why the women need to be saved and how the organization is rescuing lives, I decided I wanted to learn more about the organization and I arranged an interview. The woman I was meeting proclaimed herself a Jesus lover who is transforming lives, and to say the least I was curious to find out what kind of person would be sitting at the other end of the table.

Our interview took place at their cafe, where ex-sex workers are trained to be waitresses. While waiting for Marni, I was drinking my coffee and reading the menu. It was filled with sad stories about their employees, and I wondered if I would feel comfortable if I had to wait tables where the customer knew so many details about my personal life. Marni walked in and was not at all what I expected. She was a very lively woman in her early thirties, and arrived with her backpack on one shoulder and her bike helmet in her other hand. We started talking about travelling and our lives, and I learned we have a shared love for dogs and that she brews her own beer. She seemed very open minded and spoke passionately about the organization. At Sisters of Esther, the girls can get practical training, and the program is meant to help the girls move forward in another career, without getting dependent on charity.

Even though I thought their mission was worthy and admirable, I was concerned about the emphasis put on Christianity. According to Marni, the girls are not forced to go to church meetings, but through experience she learned that Jesus helps the girls to make peace with their past. Since she is a missionary after all, it is unsurprising that while leaving the sex industry, many girls rescued by Sisters of Esther enter Christianity. I did not even bother asking her if she thought that voluntary sex workers are sinners, but I did ask her if she thought that trafficked girls are sinning while working. After some hesitation, she cautiously claimed that, indeed, it
would still be a sin, but God would be able to forgive them. Despite our disagreements, we had a nice and open conversation and both got acquainted with different views. At the end of the interview she recommended me some Christian books on sex work and sexuality, and I recommended her some academic articles that would probably be of a very different nature.

At Sisters of Esther, they claim the social stigma attached to sex work prevents the women from finding a regular job. In my view, organizations like Sisters of Esther are part of the problem when sex work is constantly described as unworthy, and when the possibility of women voluntarily choosing sex work as a profession is overlooked. By implying all sex workers should be “saved” by Jesus, from prostitution, stigma stays attached to the profession.

Elizabeth Pisani, an epidemiologist who did a great deal of research on HIV in Asia, views the victimization of sex workers as problematic as well. In her book *The Wisdom of Whores* (2010), she states that it is fashionable to treat prostitutes as victims, constantly subject to the threat of violence, powerless before their clients, pimps and club owners. “The ‘victim’ thing takes us back to the religious convictions of right-wing voters in the United States. In recent years they have launched a crusade to equate prostitution with human trafficking, and they’ve scored some important converts” (Pisani, 2010, p. 212). She acknowledges that, indeed, there are cases of sex trafficking where women are more or less treated as slaves. However, these stories have assumed a life of its own, being told in a number of dramatic television documentaries. During her longitudinal research on the sex trade in Asia she has spoken to many sex workers and combed through data of tens of thousands more. Most women she has spoken to say that sex work is not their dream job, but Pisani compares this sentiment to employees flipping burgers at McDonalds: they do it to make money. For many women, selling sex is a job with a fair degree of freedom and for some there’s job satisfaction, too. Her statistics show that sex workers in Cambodia earn five times more than the general unskilled population in the country (Pisani, 2010). Pisani gives examples of sex workers cheerfully admitting to having made up their mournful histories in the sex industry to meet the researchers’ and or social workers’ expectations.

Thus, whether or not sex workers should be seen as victims, the victimization can be harmful for the status of the women in question. Equating all sex work with oppression leads to efforts to eradicate the supply side, but according to Pisani (2010), prostitution is driven more by demand than by supply, “So you’d also have to wipe out whatever it is that makes men buy sex” (Pisani, 2010, p. 220).
3.15 Men are gold and women are like a white cloth

However opposed I usually am to organizations which are based on the White Man’s Burden and religion: my rationalism, cultural relativism and scepticism vanish abruptly when it concerns helping children. As recommended by Marni, I contacted Daniel, who works at an organization which provides safe homes for survivors of sexual exploitation: girls younger than sixteen. They provide families with vocational training, financial management, education, safe employment and competitive wages. In this way they try to combat the cycle of vulnerability and poverty which, according to them, causes sexual exploitation and trafficking.

We met at a cafe close to my guesthouse, and we had no trouble recognizing each other since we were the only Westerners there. We sat down and I learned that Daniel had moved from Australia to Phnom Penh along with his wife and children. Customarily I asked him if I could record our conversation and if he wished to remain anonymous in my thesis. Initially he was indifferent, but when I started asking questions about the role of the government, the only thing he disclosed was: “I am not going to say anything bad. I will say that they have improved...”

All my other questions were answered elaborately. I had heard from other organizations and residents of Phnom Penh that brothels were largely closed and that trafficking is not as common anymore in Cambodia. Daniel attributes this improvement to the existence of NGO’s in Phnom Penh:

Trafficking over the last 10 years has gotten a lot better in Cambodia, but it does still exist. Ten years ago it was just everywhere whereas now it is a lot more underground and a lot of NGO’s have been here for a very long time and really reduces that... but it certainly still exist and we get girls who were being trafficked. So that does happen. The majority of the girls that we get now are being raped. So that has become a huge problem in Cambodia. And part of that is access to smartphones and online pornography. And there is also a prevailing cultural understanding that men are very significant and women are less valuable. ‘Men are gold and women are like a white cloth’, I’m sure you’ve heard it ha. So because of that the men don’t see women and girls as having worth so that’s a huge issue.

Since correlation does not prove causation, I was not convinced that the prevalence of pornography and smartphones leads to more sexual abuse. However, we did see eye to eye when it came to the status of women in Cambodia influencing abuse. I had indeed heard the phrase
“Men are gold and women are like a white cloth” many times when being explained how women are perceived in Cambodia. This idiom implicates that men can be sexually free whereas girls have to be cautious, since a stain on a white cloth cannot be erased and is visible to anyone.

When girls lose their virginity they are seen as not worth anything, which then increases the risk of trafficking as well. When a girl is raped sometimes the parents say like she is not good for us anymore. We’ve seen that happen as well. And often you find that there is a huge stigma to that and in Cambodia what they do better than in the West is community. But the problem with that is when a girl has been raped, everybody knows about it. Cause everyone knows everybody and knows what happens. So that’s the downside to that community aspect. So we’ve had cases where the family wanted the girl to marry the perpetrator. It is a fairly common solution to that problem. Or the family just pays the family of the victim. So yeah there is very much a stigma when a girl is being raped.

Sexual abuse is always devastating, but it is even harder to understand and heart-breaking to hear when this happens to children. Daniel claims that in Western culture paedophilia is more of a sexual perversion, whereas in Asia it is a cultural one. Since having sex with a virgin is believed to cure diseases and be beneficial to your health, many girls lose their virginities to older men, often against their will. After being raped, girls are more likely to enter prostitution since they are considered “damaged goods”. According to Daniel, many girls in the safe houses do not understand what happened to them. Partly because they are just children, but another reason is that there is no sex education in Cambodian schools at all, and parents do not talk about it. Since the subject is so taboo, the girls do not have the language to explain what happened to them. Another organization I had an interview with is EduNow, which tries to preclude prostitution by providing education for young girls. Daniel knew the organization and praised them for doing “a really great job”. I explained how EduNow puts emphasis on the importance of education in terms of equality within a marriage, since it is harder to escape an abusive relationship when the abuser is the breadwinner of the family. Daniel was familiar with this problem in Cambodia and said that besides domestic violence, it is culturally accepted for men to sleep with prostitutes. He called the fact that men can sleep with prostitutes, but women cannot be one an “interesting paradox”. “So girls will really lie about themselves, girls in hostess bars often don’t call
themselves prostitutes they’ll say they are professional girlfriends, which is, haha, an interesting way to think of yourself.”

I agreed that it is an interesting way to think about yourself, which would have been an appealing topic to discuss for my research, but hostess bars were not Daniel’s expertise. Daniel had left to go to another appointment, and I finished my coffee while all the things he had said were replaying in my head.

The far-reaching importance of remaining a virgin until marriage, can be understood in the light of theory concerning Cambodian moral order. In Khmer, “order” can be translated as the phrase robib rap roy, which means “the way things are properly arranged”. The proper way of arranging is hierarchically, and in the way it has been done before (Hansen & Ledgerwood, 2008). When looking at the semantics of Cambodian concepts of order, it becomes clear that the relationship between things as they are when they are properly arranged and things as they ought to be is a close one. Namely; the word for “to be”, chea also means “normal” (Hansen & Ledgerwood, 2008). Both linguistically and in daily life there is a strong link between normality and social order. Many Cambodians have the idea that things, ideas, people and societies “are safer and more authentic when they are ranked and in balance, arranged into the same hierarchical pattern that they had occupied before” (Hansen & Ledgerwood, 2008, p. 32). The notion that wildness, innovation and change should be feared becomes apparent in the following Cambodian proverb: “Don't avoid a winding path, and don’t take a straight one either. Choose the path your ancestors have trod” (Hansen & Ledgerwood, 2008, p.33). Thus, continuity seems to be an important factor in maintaining the social order in Cambodia. Since family and community are important aspects of Cambodian social life, and having a baby outside of wedlock puts the order and continuity of lineage in danger, it can be deduced that remaining a virgin until marriage is critical. For women, that is. Since men do not acquire visible bodily changes after a baby is conceived, they are not forced to take responsibility and face the stigmatization of the community. By any means, women hold an inferior status to men in Khmer Buddhist conceptions of social order, due to the fact that women can never be ordained as monks and never gain the power of “old and secret” Buddhist knowledge (Hoefinger, 2013). However, women can accrue merit and move between various positions between the social order by contributing to their families’ income, and through their chaste sexuality (Hoefinger, 2013). Ledgerwood (1990) explains that this requires girls to be virgins when they marry, since losing that aspect of life is not just to lose what it is to be female in Khmer terms, but also to lose what it is to be Khmer.
According to Chandler, an important dichotomy in the Cambodian moral order is between the rice field and the forest. The rice fields (veal srae) represent a place full of rice, families and the artefacts of civilized life, whereas the forest (prei) symbolizes a place of fearful death and wild power (Kent & Chandler, 2008, p. 135). The rice field is thus desired and equals order. “Deviant” behaviour is linked with the forest, and “normal” behaviour with the rice field. What is interesting when looking at this dichotomy, is that the dangerous forest is feminized, while the rice fields appear masculine and full of order (Kent & Chandler, 2008, p. 135). As Daniel stated, it is accepted, and in a way expected, for men to have sex with a professional, even when they are married, but actually being a sex worker is highly stigmatized. This links with the notion that women are associated with the dangerous forest, which can be stigmatizing for the woman, but exciting for the man. Thus, since women are more likely to be linked with danger anyway, and considering the importance of remaining a virgin until marriage, it can be understood why sex workers are seen as threatening and face stigmatization, contrary to their clients.

With regards to breaking the social order, Pisani (2012) found in her research that throughout Asia, the majority of the sex workers’ clients are married, due to the simple fact that more adult men are married than unmarried. Men who can afford to, will often buy sex even when they can have it for free at home (Pisani, 2012). Since it is believed that “men are gold, and women are like a white cloth”, men can have many sexual partners without losing their value, while when a white cloth is stained, it can never be clean again, and the stigma sticks. Pisani (2012) also elaborates on this double standard:

Several hundred million years of evolution have loaded adolescent bodies up with hormones that drive people to have sex. Sperm costs a body far less to produce than eggs, so men have a greater incentive to spread their reproductive capital than women do. That means men are more likely to try and clock up lots of sex partners. But they also want to try and keep other men away from the women most likely to reproduce their own genes, i.e. their wives. As human societies evolved, they tended to press women firmly into the mould of chastity and fidelity, while accepting that boys will be boys (p.182).

Naturally, it is impossible to only have “honourable”, abstaining women when the world is full of libidinous men, because “who will the philandering men sow their oats with? Enter the sex worker” (Pisani, 2012, p.182). Especially in a society where virginity is highly valued, sex workers should be appreciated, since they are the ones enabling continuity in the moral order.
Some sex workers indeed see themselves as guardians of virtue (Pisani, 2012).

### 3.16 Rights not rescue

“Don’t talk to me about sewing machines, talk to me about workers’ rights”, as goes the slogan of the Women’s Network for Unity (WNU). This slogan makes clear that the approach of this organization is entirely different than the many NGO’s based in Phnom Penh, which do include sewing machines more often than not in their solutions to the problems in the sex industry. WNU was founded in 2002 by over 160 male, transgender, lesbian and heterosexual female sex workers, with its first election to recruit seven secretariat members to work on behalf of WNU (http://www.wnu.womynsagenda.org/whoweare.php).

I made an appointment for an interview to learn more about the organization and their approach. Before my interview, I received an email from the director, elaborating on their approach, since she was aware that this organization is different than most organizations in Phnom Penh focused on sex work:

> WNU is working to strengthen the network of sex workers to advocate for their greater participation in the development of program, laws and policies related to sex work that will give them greater access to social services, and freedom from violence and discrimination. We do not work to offer and employ them either provide them alternative ways or in a different field since we only focus on some areas described above and under the theme sex work is work.

Mealea welcomed me enthusiastically when I entered the office. I took off my shoes and followed her upstairs, where we sat down in a room without air conditioning. Right between us she placed a fan, which was a great way to cool down on this especially hot afternoon. However, later I would learn that my recordings were almost impossible to transcribe with the noise the fan produced. Mealea wore purple nail polish and purple jewellery. She explained to me during the interview that when she was younger, her mother did not allow her to wear purple, since in Cambodia purple is a colour for girls “who have many partners”.

Mealea was well prepared, and had written down points she wanted to discuss. One of my first questions was what the main goal of WNU was. Mealea explained:
Our vision is that we want to support the rights of sex workers as well as their choice. Whether they were trafficked or they decided voluntarily, we promote their rights. Because we believe that everybody has the right to do what they want to do as long as they don’t hurt anyone. People only think about trafficked sex workers, but some people physically just want more sex than other people. So that is why they want this job because they can satisfy themselves and also earn money. And some people don’t want to work under the sun, they want to work at night-time… Easier you know.

Mealea explained to me how in 2003 a law was proposed, under the pressure of the United States, which would criminalise prostitution and trafficking. The enforcement of this new law has led to sex workers facing human rights violations, imprisonment, raids, physical, and sexual abuse. The imprisonment of sex workers is a large problem, especially for sex workers with children, since they are either also locked up, or forced to cope without protection of their parents. Naturally WNU is opposed to human trafficking, but the criminalisation of prostitution makes it difficult for voluntary sex workers to do their job. Due to their fear of being caught, the women try to hide: at restaurants, beer gardens, and bars. When a sex worker tries to find clients on the streets, they are often arrested. The police can arrest sex workers if they see that she is attracting clients, dresses provocatively or has a condom with her. Mealea calls this exploitation, since fines up to 50$ have to be paid when arrested, which is around a third of their monthly income.

Last year there was a case of a sex worker, a woman named Kunthea, who turned to the sex industry to supplement her income in order to take care of her sick son. While working around Wat Phnom on the night of January 1, she and four other sex workers were chased by a group of district security guards. While jumping between tourist boats on the riverside in an attempt to escape, Kunthea slipped, hit her head and fell into the river. The security guards were accused of having watched her drown and preventing bystanders from rescuing her (https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/sex-workers-death-haunts-women-wat-phnom).

WNU is working hard to find justice for Kunthea and to prevent similar incidents in the future.

Salaries of sex workers vary greatly, and, according to Mealea, a girl can make “much money if she is young and has much beauty”. Women who do not fall into this category struggle to make ends meet. Often their children do not go to school and are likely to end up in the sex industry as well. WNU tries to find a place for sex workers in society, where they can be accepted and will have the same rights as any other person. Besides, WNU sets up monthly meetings.
where sex workers come together to share their experiences, advice and laughter. In addition, WNU has two drop-in centres and schooling for the children of sex workers.

We teach them how to read, Khmer and English lessons. The children of the sex workers have to go to school. Because we know that the sex workers don’t have the time to send their children to school. They work until late at night and maybe at 11 they wake up. They don’t care much for their children. Because you know the condition of their work, makes it very hard to think about the children’s future. We are not blaming them but we are trying to understand the situation.

With little funding and even less support, WNU is doing the best they can in improving the rights and supporting the choice of sex workers. Even though they have a long way to go, Mealea is determined to improve the situation for sex workers, since she believes that sex workers should have rights equal to any other person in Cambodian society, because they do not hurt anybody and thus deserve to be supported in their choice.

### 3.17 Status loss through stigmatization

The largest cluster of hostess bars is located right behind the Riverside, making it an excellent spot to observe the lonely Western men looking for adventure and company, and men who got lucky already; flaunting their girls up and down the streets of the Riverside. A Western man accompanied by a Cambodian lady walked into the restaurant where I sat at the terrace. I looked at them and the girl was staring back at me. Later than I would like to admit, I recognized the girl, but I could not place her face yet. Nevertheless, I blurted out: “Hey, how are you?!”. She came to talk to me, her date awkwardly standing a few meters away. During the conversation I remembered her name was Peou, one of the girls working at The After School Lounge, and we discussed her activities during Khmer New Year and she showed me her new nail polish. I introduced her to my friend, but she did not introduce me to her “friend”. They sat down at a table behind me and ordered some cocktails. The man was trying to hold her hand, while she was scrolling through her smartphone. I did not want to interrupt their date, so I was trying to mind my own business. Only a few minutes later I got distracted again.

At a table to the left of me, there was a Cambodian girl video calling with her boyfriend. She was blowing kisses, and showing her beer. There was not much of a conversation going on. After a few minutes, she just hung up and video called another boyfriend. While video calling
with boy number two, she was texting other people on her phone. I could not resist staring at the scene. She video called boyfriend number one again, and much to my shock I saw more of him than I had wanted to. Even though she was in the middle of the restaurant, she did not seem to mind other people being able to see her boyfriend’s private parts.

Meanwhile, Peou was still on a date, but since there was not much to interrupt I struck up a conversation with her again and she seemed relieved. I knew she had at least two other boyfriends, a Khmer boyfriend and the Australian Mike. Nevertheless, she enjoyed her cocktail with this new guy, who was not very comfortable with my presence. Since Peou does not speak much English, I was showing off the Khmer sentences she had taught me during a night at The After School Lounge. I turned to her date and told him that she was a great teacher, and he laughed nervously. Nevertheless, he started talking to me and told me about his travels, what he does for a living in Germany, and he even tried to discuss politics. Questions concerning what I was doing in Cambodia were left unasked.

Peou told me she had to work after eleven that evening, so I promised her I would stop by. I did, but she was very popular that night and had already left the place by the time I arrived at the After School Lounge.

Not only are sex workers often stigmatized, their clients similarly face stigmatization which was obviously internalized by the German man whose embarrassment I could smell from a table away. In previous chapters I have already shed light on different forms of stigmatization, but what is stigma exactly and how does it work? According to Goffman:

> The Greeks originated the term stigma to refer to bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier. The signs were cured or burnt into the body and advertised that the bearer was a slave, a criminal, or a traitor—a blemished person, ritually polluted, to be avoided, especially in public spaces. (Goffman, 1963, p.2)

Presently, the term is applied more to the disgrace itself than to the bodily evidence of it, with Goffman (1963) defining stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting, and that reduces the bearer from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (p.3). Even though Goffman’s definition is commonly quoted when stigma is explicitly defined, other varieties of the meaning of the term have emerged since. Crocker et al (1998) for example state that “stigmatized individuals possess some attribute, or characteristic, that conveys a social identity that is
devalued in a particular social context” (p.505). Believing that sex workers are devalued in more than one particular social context, and that their persona is often reduced to a polluted one, I prefer to use Goffman’s definition in my thesis.

Through labelling, and the linking of undesirable characteristics to certain people, a rationale for devaluing, rejecting and excluding them is constructed (Link & Phelan, 2001). Sex workers are often belittled through the use of dishonouring labels such as “hooker” and “whore”, and are linked to the undesirable characteristic of being sexually perverted. Since stigmatization is dependent on the access to social, economic, and political power, the term stigma can be applied when labelling, stereotyping, discrimination and status loss co-occur in a power situation (Link & Phelan, 2001).

Concurrently with the negative labelling and stereotyping, the stigmatized person in question faces status loss in the eyes of the stigmatizer, and is thus placed downwards in a status hierarchy (Link & Phelan, 2001). Since status and stigma only exist in a power relation to each other, it follows that it is beneficial for the “normal” people in the social order to stigmatize “deviant” behaviour in order to secure a safe spot on the status ladder. Thus, it can be expected that the German man in the anecdote feared status loss through stigmatization, since he was aware that I was informed about the nocturnal activities of his date, which is labelled “deviant” by many.

So far, I have discussed how the women working in the sex industry, their clients, and the bar owners experience stigma. As Goffman (1963) noted, those closely connected to a stigmatized person or group often experience the same social stigma, and thus there is another actor I cannot leave out: myself. Although in a less discriminatory way, since “the stigma for the academic is far less severe because conducting research on sexuality is considered more legitimate than participating in the experiences that we study” (Israel, 2002, p. 256), I still noticed how my research topic was prone to ridicule at times, and the serious nature of my fieldwork topic disregarded. This was noticeable especially among peers before entering the field, which confirmed my idea that the taboo on sex and the stigmatization of people engaged in the sex industry is very much real, relevant, and needed to be studied.

During my research, the projection of stigma came from another crowd: the Western men I spoke to. As Zurbriggen (2002) noted, they might have assumed that solely due to the fact that I was researching the sex industry, I must be sexually liberal, interested, and available myself. As a precaution, I changed my Whatsapp profile picture to one with my boyfriend, and in general I was quick to disclose that I was in a relationship, as not to have any confusion.
regarding my availability. However, these safety measures were to no avail: during my research I more than once had been told that “If you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you’re with”. Even though I cannot know if I would have been perceived as an unfaithful person had I studied a more “safe” and “legitimate” topic, nonetheless I do believe that talking about sex work is seen by some as a bridge to the subject of my personal sexuality and availability.

Similarly to the way in which, during encounters with bar girls, I tried hard not to come across as a “good girl” because I thought I would gather more useful data if they perceived me as “one of them”, I did position myself as a “good girl” while talking to their clients. This way I tried to distance myself from the stigma and assumptions of the bar girls in an attempt to avoid undesired advances. Besides, I am not unaffected by stigma labels myself, and I feared being perceived as a nymphomaniac.

Even though some experiences were uncomfortable, and I had experienced feelings of awkwardness while disclosing my research topic to certain people, I recognize that these reactions are data in themselves (Hammond & Kingston, 2014). The importance I attached to my own distance to sex workers when talking to non-sex workers, the mockery of peers, and the way I was perceived by clients of the sex industry, tell me a great deal about the social context of sex work (Hammond & Kingston, 2014), and the taboo concerning the topic.

3.18 Tales I’ve been told

I had been under the impression that seeking sexual pleasure would be the main motive for clients to have sex with a professional. However, if I were to believe what most male respondents declared, then the sole reasons seemed to be: group pressure, the use of drugs and alcohol, and “being young.”

While celebrating King’s Day with my friends in a touristy hostel bar in Phnom Penh, I thought I would leave my research at home for the night, and thus I was not actively looking for potential respondents. Being slightly disappointed with the lack of Dutch songs, I requested a tearjerker, and walked back to my friends. Meanwhile, a young man struck up a conversation with me, by stating that I was very tall. I assured him I was aware of this fact, but he kept on talking about my height nevertheless. As not to waste any opportunities, I steered our uninspired conversation to the topic of my research, and I bluntly asked him if he had any experience with a sex worker. It was a Dutch themed night after all.

The poor gentleman was clearly caught off guard. He started laughing nervously and gathered his thoughts, after which he started explaining to me, by screaming in my ear due to the
loud music, how and where he had had an erotic escapade with a sex worker. Many years ago, when he was “only twenty-two”, he had just started working at a new job in South-Korea. One night he was partying with his new colleagues, consuming substantial amounts of alcohol. They brought him to a sex club, and apparently he felt obliged to have sex with a prostitute. He spoke to me in an apologetic tone, repeating how “young and dumb” he had been. I did not think he owed me any justification for his actions, thus I guaranteed him that I was neither judgemental, nor in the possession of strong morality. Our paths diverged when my requested song was finally played.

Another man, with whom I had established more rapport, had been naming very similar reasons for being involved with a woman in the sex industry. After graduating, when he was twenty-one, he went to a strip club in South-America with his friends and snorted cocaine off of stripper’s bodies. Being pressured by his friends, he went to a room with one of the strippers where he received fellatio. To me, this scenario did not sound like an unpleasant situation one would be pressured into, but this man was likewise expressing remorse through the telling of this tale.

Much of my data is gathered through participant observation, whereby I engaged in many informal conversations. Even though, initially, my focus was mainly on the stories the sex workers had to tell, I grew more and more curious about the shame that men seemed to experience due to the stigma which is attached to having sex with a professional. This stigma is elevated by the notion that paying for sex falls into a different category than having many noncommercial sex partners, whereby this difference is socially constructed as deviant, and the clients depicted as dirty and animalistic (Sanders, 2008). According to Sanders (2008), paying for sex counts as “bad” behaviour due to the fact that “the specialness of sex is undermined in commercial sex” (p.115).

Every man I had asked directly about their experience with a sex worker, eventually confessed that, indeed, there was a story. All these stories were very similar, and I had the feeling I could not get closer to the “real” reasons and the “real story”, which I believed were blocked by stigma. Thus, during my fieldwork, I deemed these tales as irrelevant for my research. However, through studying the work of Boje (1991) and Gabriel (2004), I learned to understand how these stories are embedded in a significant, deeper meaning. Narratives and stories are sensemaking devices through which we can make sense of facts, since they rarely speak for themselves. Besides, when facts are painful or unpleasant, narratives and stories enable us to make sense of them (Gabriel, 2004). Thus, while the men told me their reasons for having sex
with a sex worker, which I had decrypted as excuses, they were probably constructing a story which was a “real story” in its own sense; I believe that true authenticity does not lie in the facts of an event, but in the meaning actors ascribe to it. Through telling these stories, the men could make sense of their own acts, through connecting certain facts to their actions.

An important question to ask hereby is: what stories are told to whom? As Boje (1991) pointed out: stories are highly variable, and different versions of stories are told to different audiences. The way meaning is constructed can differ from audience to audience, which means that it would be insightful to gather second-hand information concerning the experiences of men having sex with professionals.

Luckily for me, the owner of a certain reggae rooftop bar close to different clubs and bars, had no problem exposing these scoops. Most Western men had told me that they never did anything sexual with Cambodian sex workers, and if they did confess, they orchestrated their story in the past tense. David daily meets many travellers in his bar, and since alcohol generally works as a truth serum, and the young male backpackers would probably not even subconsciously see David as a potential bed partner, he was more knowledgeable about the activities of the Western young men than I was. Since he was so kind to share this information with me, I learned that the tales I had been told were highly altered and that most young men travelling through Asia have one experience or another with a sex worker. On this account, it is interesting to note that many men claimed to feel sorry for the sex workers, while among them a certain percentage nonetheless made use of the services the “poor women” provide.
4. Concluding remarks

By and large: the sex industry in Phnom Penh is complex, which becomes instantly apparent when trying to provide a concise and ordered overview of those complexities. All the actors involved in the sex industry, including NGOs, bar girls, freelance sex workers, clients, and bar managers, contribute to this complicatedness. However, by means of shedding light on four dichotomies: coercion versus choice, status versus stigma, girlfriend versus sex worker, and vice versus virtue, I will untangle this complexity and highlight its implications.

Coercion vs choice

As appeared in the last section, there is a significant difference between the subgroups of sex workers, which contributes to the complexity of the sex industry in Phnom Penh. Namely, the often lucrative nature which characterizes hostess bar work, is usually missing in KTV’s and freelance sex work. The hierarchical differences between hostess bar girls and freelance sex workers, caused mostly by age and attractiveness, translates to large variations of freedom and wealth. As established in the introduction, this thesis does not focus on the choice/coercion dichotomy since that emphasis would have failed to uncover the experiences of the different actors engaged in the sex industry. Besides, for me to determine whether or not the sex workers in Phnom Penh are victims would be like throwing with a loaded dice: my research revolved mostly around the hostess bar girls, whose experiences are in general more positive than those of the KTV- and freelance sex workers.

It is important to stress that sex workers are not a homogenous group. In the same manner that assuming all sex workers act out of free choice is harmful for involuntary sex workers, equating all sex work with oppression is harmful for the women voluntarily choosing this profession. Namely, this notion provokes attempts to eradicate prostitution, and presses all sex workers in the Orientalist mould of powerless victims needed to be saved. Many NGOs claiming to help sex workers, assuming sex workers are forced into prostitution, are quick to put emphasis on the stigma which is attached to sex work, believing that this stigma is inherent in the sex industry, instead of attached to it by society. In this way through victimization the stigma on sex work is reinforced.
Status vs stigma

Through the anecdotes and theory, it becomes clear that sex workers are stigmatized and face discrimination from society at large, their families, and even their clients. “Selling your body” is perceived as a deviant act, especially since conservative sexual values are rooted deeply in Cambodian culture. After a girl loses her virginity, she is seen as “damaged goods”, and it follows that prostitution is regarded as a disreputable occupation. However, the other side of the coin is that sex work can co-exist with status; generated through money, a cosmopolitan lifestyle and new skills. Sex work generates a significantly higher income than other unskilled labour, which enables many bar girls to participate in extravagant activities: most of the bar girls I met went to the hairdresser daily, were never seen with chipped nails, and were in the possession of a variety of party dresses. Besides, their clients would often take them out to fancy ventures or other outings, of which photographic evidence was bound to show up on their social media pages. In addition to their elevated status obtained through their dolled-up appearance, luxurious outings and association with Westerners: the bar girls are often admired for their (comparatively) fluency in the English language. Through their daily engagement with foreigners, bar girls quickly pick up the English language, as well as Western habits. This is not only functional for them while scoring ladydrinks, but due to the fact that most girls working in hostess bars grew up in the province, being a cosmopolitan city girl increases status in their hometown. Thus, for the Cambodian bar girls, status and stigma are intertwined, and stigma does not equal the absence of status.

Girlfriend vs sex worker

Within hostess bars, arrangements are not as clear-cut as sex-for-cash transactions. More often than not, women working in hostess bars look for “a connection” before engaging in sexual activities with a client, and when said connection is found, the man is not labelled as a client, but rather perceived and described as a boyfriend. When this is the case, payment is not pre-negotiated, but rather disguised a gift, whereby “transactional sex” is a concept used to nuance the difference between a sex for cash arrangement, and a normative relationship. Some bar girls do not engage in sexual activities whatsoever, and merely trade their attention for ladydrinks. Even though these flirtations are often feigned, and do not lead to sex, many men nonetheless find pleasure in these interactions since oftentimes they merely look for affection and closeness within hostess bars.
The undivided mental and physical attention given to men in hostess bars, is not always present in other settings. Repeatedly, I witnessed how the tables were turned in broad daylight: men trying hard to entertain their dates, while the Cambodian women seemed indifferent to the point of disdain. The phenomenon is complex and confusing for the participants: some men genuinely look for a committed relationship with a Cambodian girl, while others merely care about their sexual needs being fulfilled and are more comfortable with a boyfriend label, or do not care about the label at all. In a similar way, some Cambodian women are genuinely crazy about their boyfriends and attracted to their Western appearance and projected moral superiority, while others see the men as a business transaction but hope to avoid stigma through the relationship label. In the grey area between a sex-for-cash arrangement and a normative relationship, Cambodian women and Western men negotiate their identity and try to avoid stigma through the use of normative labels. However, this façade does not exclude the intrusion of genuine feelings.

Vice vs virtue
The discrepancy between vice and virtue in the Phnom Penh sex industry is an ambiguous one. On the one hand, sex workers are often seen as dissolute women living a life full of vice, since they defy the unwritten rule that sex should be special and/or functional. Selling sexual services is far from the epitome of the proper purpose of sexual intercourse, namely: it is not used as a way to procreate. However, as established before, prostitution as an institution is functional in another way, since it can prevent divorce and relationships outside of marriage and thus enables continuity in the moral order. Along these lines, sex workers can be seen as guardians of virtue, instead of carriers of vice.

Between dichotomies
The complexity of the sex industry in Phnom Penh lies exactly in between these opposing dichotomies, and sex workers as a whole cannot be assigned to either end of these dichotomies exclusively. With regards to the perception of sex workers: whether the women involved in the sex industry are virtuous women maintaining the social order, victims of male sexual oppression, tainted women living a life of vice, or empowered whores with entrepreneurial spirit: the stigmatization is harmful either way. By breaking out of the stereotyped images of the sex industry and the actors involved, I hope to contribute towards an understanding of the complexity of the sex industry in Phnom Penh.
5. Epilogue

Due to a bag-snatching incident near the end of my research, I had to navigate myself through the streets of Phnom Penh without the use of a smartphone. Considering my sense of direction leaves a lot to desire even with the help of digital devices, I thought it would be a good plan to pick up my translator at her office before going to the location of the sex worker.

In vain I attempted to explain, in English, to the security guards that I had arranged to meet with my translator, Rangsei. Their vacant gazes made me realize it would probably be easier to wait for her outside of the building. I sent her a text saying I had arrived and would be waiting at the entrance. Later, I would learn that I should have included in my message that there was no need to hurry. Right after my text was sent, a helpful employee talked to the security guards and brought me to Rangsei’s building. When I saw a young woman sprinting towards the entrance, I sensed that she might be the person I was looking for. Rangsei saw me and apologized for letting me wait, even though I arrived ten minutes earlier than we had arranged for.

We talked about the interview strategy on our way. Even though I was eager to find out what Rangsei’s opinion was on sex work, I waited until after the interview to ask about her standpoint. After a long ride and a few phone calls concerning directions, we arrived at Tevy’s house. It was located on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, and I was surprised to find out she resides next to a beautiful, golden temple.

Tevy welcomed us into her home, and we sat down on pillows alongside her dinner table. She walked into her kitchen to get us some water, which gave me the chance to look around. The dark room was lit mostly through the television which was still on, but muted. Her one-bedroom apartment was small, but very cozy, and I was thankful for the fans cooling us down. After I asked Rangsei to thank Tevy for her willingness to do the interview, and to ask her if we could record the conversation, the interview started.

I learned that Tevy is in her thirties, that she does not have children nor a husband, and that she has been in the sex industry since 2003. Her parents were in much debt, and in order to support her family she switched her job from selling food, to selling sexual services. Her parents would have never allowed her to enter the sex industry, so she kept it a secret until they passed away. Currently, she is employed at a KTV in Phnom Penh, where she works long hours, seven days a week. When Tevy’s parents were still alive, it was financially more troublesome to make ends meet, since she had to take care of them, and their debt as well. Presently, Tevy states, she earns just enough to survive: “I earn one day, I eat one day”. However, she is fearful about the future. She told us that when she loses her youth and beauty, she will not be able to attract enough
clients to support herself, and since she does not have children, there will be no financial safety net for her. Ideally, she would want to open her own small retail business, but she claims to lack skill and resources. When I asked her about the negatives of working in the sex industry, she told me that the worst part, for her, is that she is not valued as a person and faces discrimination. Tevy only feels understood and valued by people who are in the sex industry as well. Negative reactions come from her house owner, people in the village, and the wives of her clients. “People always put the blame on the girl, but why not put the blame on the boys who look for it? The men are looking for the services, but they tell their wives something different”. Unlike at hostess bars, Tevy’s customers are mostly Khmer and do not have the money to spend on drinks and a hotel room. As a result, sex often takes place at the house of the customer, which heightens the chance of the wife finding out. When this is the case, the sex worker is the one facing aggression, not the client. This double-standard is incomprehensible to Tevy, and she thinks that making prostitution legal would improve the situation for the sex workers. She does not understand the stigmatization on sex work, since “The work doesn’t cheat anyone. The money I own is because of my own power.”

Our interview ended when Tevy had to prepare for work. I did my best *arkoun chraen*[^3^], while placing my palms together and bowing. We were standing at her doorway when Tevy told me, through Rangsei, that she hopes my research “will give more value to the sex worker”. Her sentiments were shared by me. Even though we had politely declined, Tevy insisted we accepted her gift: lotus seeds for on the road.

I was overcome by Tevy’s openness and kindness, and while Rangsei showed me how to eat the seeds, we discussed the interview. I was curious to find out more about Rangsei’s beliefs, considering that during the whole interview she had not once used the word “sex”, and I wondered if she had felt uncomfortable. She told me that until a few years ago, she did think that people should only have “one partner”, since conservative sexual values are rooted deeply in Cambodian culture. However, after engaging in conversation about the topic with different people, her ideas changed and she, too, believes now that sex workers should be valued by society.

I had noticed how every question Rangsei translated to Tevy, started with the word *bong*, so I asked her what that word means. She told me it means “sister”, and that she used it as a sign

[^3^] “Thank you very much” in Khmer
of respect. I admired her kindness and was feeling nostalgic already about having to leave Cambodia.

Full disclosure: while claiming not to subscribe to either the oppression- or empowerment paradigm, I did notice how during my fieldwork I was secretly and subconsciously rooting for the agency of the sex workers to prevail, and how I was happy to discover that the stigma the girls face is often accompanied by status. Even though I was aware, and have declared in my thesis, that there is certainly a difference between hostess bar girls and freelance sex workers and KTV employees, I was not aware how important and substantial this difference was until I heard the story of an impoverished sex worker first-hand.

While hostess bar girls often enjoy freedom and status, the reality of Tevy and many other sex workers does not include ladydrinks, playing connect four, rich Western boyfriends, the luxury of demanding a connection before having sex, cocktails at rooftop bars, and acquired English skills. The latter made it difficult to establish contact with this sub-group of sex workers, and I did not notice, until the end of my research when I interviewed Tevy, how much the absence of contact with struggling sex workers influenced my personal outlook on sex work and the sex industry in Phnom Penh. Even though I never pretended to intend to solve the choice versus coercion dichotomy, by means of showing my cards, my personal beliefs cannot be omitted. Thus, the positive atmosphere in hostess bars overshadowed and covered the dark reality of many freelance sex workers and KTV employees. While I was under the impression that for many girls, selling sexual services was more often than not lucrative, according to Tevy: “There are only a few girls who like their job, it feels natural to them. Those girls compare the job with having a meal, they can’t go without it. Really few though.”
6. References


[Sex guide to Phnom Penh]. (n.d.). Retrieved February 5, 2018, from Internationalsexguide.info/phnompenh


