Professional girlfriends: Moving beyond sex work

An American academic has spent seven years researching the local hostess bar scene, and come up with some surprising findings. This is the first in a three-part series.

Insight
Heidi Hoetinger

This is a story about sex, love and money. It begins in a bar and involves young Cambodian women and foreign men. Another tale of prostitution and exploitation you might think. Another portrait of a sad bar girl in need of rescue from pervy, middle-aged sexpats, and a system that traps her in a life she would obviously never choose. We’ve all heard it before. But this tale has a twist.

What if, for a moment, we suspend our judgments and scratch just a little beneath the surface. What we’ll find instead is the complicated story of curious young women in search of opportunity, excitement and romance, male backpackers, on their gap years in a quest for friends and tour guides with benefits, and long term expats longing for comfort.

We’ll also find people, curious to work in new places, and exchange cultures and sex, with new global partners. Couples, from two different worlds, making sense of feelings, finances and future hopes for happiness in a world full of stereotypes and stigma. It’s here, in this murky space where sex, love and money collide, that we’ll find the story of Cambodian “professional girlfriends” and their “western” boyfriends.

It was in 2003, while sharing a drink in her bar on St 51 when Lyth, 23,pronounced and asked: “Why does everyone think I’m a taxi girl because I work in a bar and have boyfriends for love and for presents?” Bound up with my own middle-class western assumptions, her confusion confused me: “Well you go with customers right?” I reiterated, she replied: “No … I go with boyfriends!”

Thus began my journey to find out what really goes on in this complicated world of sex, gifts and misunderstanding. Seven years of immersion in and out of the hostess bar scene, and conversations with nearly 300 men and women revealed that the “sex-for-cash” prostitution framework did not always apply. Nor did the “indirect” or “freelance” sex worker label that is so often used in NGO reports that attempt to describe this stereotyped group.

My PhD research did reveal patterns, though. Many young Cambodian women move to the cities to look for bar work and nice foreign boyfriends. They hope these boyfriends will support them and their families and buy them nice gifts like clothes, gold and motos. They exchange sex, affection and love for presents.

Professional girlfriends usually have more than one boyfriend at a time, doing this in order to protect against losses in a city filled with constant goodbyes. Professional boyfriends support them, and at first, their motivations are materially-based. This is referred to as “transactional sex” (sex-for-gifts) which is different from “commercial sex” (sex-for-cash). And in these relationships, the term “love itself has many meanings. “Do you love him?” I’d ask Lyth of her boyfriend “number one”. “Yeah, I love him,” she replied. “He doesn’t drink too much, doesn’t box, and he’s been sending $300 a month for a year now.” Professional girlfriends are resourceful and calculating. Instead, it’s to highlight the creative ways they make the best of situations that are structurally unequal. They know the foreign men they meet earn up to 100 times more than them per month. They know they have easier access to passports and the ability to travel. The women have a taste of independence and a snippet of the best of situations that are structurally unequal. They know the foreign man they really loved had just gone back to England. He was 23 and had to finish university. He had no money to send her from abroad, but promised he would Skype her regularly. She explained she used these fareswells, but that they don’t get any easier. Fortunately, she had another older boyfriend, 49, in the US who had been sending her family rent money for two years, and a Frenchman in Sihanoukville who gives her physical and emotional comfort. But Veata clings to the hope that one day in the bar, she will meet “the one” for whom she would cut all ties to other men, and settle down into a monogamous love marriage, which seemed to be the ultimate goal for most of the professional girlfriends.

But this isn’t to imply that all bar girls in Cambodia are professional girlfriends. Despite popular belief, there are actually many virgins who work in the bars. Nor are women who have sex with lots of people for the fun of it – because they might actually like sex – professional girlfriends. As bar owner Saley, 28, pointed out: “I take care of myself. I don’t ask for money or anything from boyfriends. Actually, I take care of them! I just like to play and work with some men for fun.”

Some observers argue, well – the women who exchange affection for gifts with several different men are still prostitutes, or at least like escorts providing the western-style “girlfriend experience” (GFE). But this type of transactional sex is different because the people involved view themselves as boyfriends and girlfriends, the relationships aren’t viewed as work or commercial exchange; there are no pre-determined time limits, prices or services discussed, and the exchange of gifts for sex is part of a broader set of obligations and expectations.

Sound familiar? That’s because transactional sex happens all the time – the girl who goes home with a random stranger who bought her drink all night, the guy who sleeps with his teacher for a grade, the women who marries the rich doctor for his money. Lots of us do it – or have done it before.

Jen because Cambodian women have transactional sex with different people does not mean they are sex workers or broken. When western women do it, they are considered smart, and even powerful. Bar girls and professional girlfriends don’t want to be viewed as prostitutes by default, but instead as sexually active women by default, who live in a consumerist society and want to have sex with the men of their choosing.

Bar manager Sophea, 29, emphasizes her frustration with the position of women in her community and the stigma people have against women who work in bars. “I really want people to stop looking down on bar girls. We’re not bad girls. We help our families. I want to see young girls come up … to be treated the same as the men. Not more than men. Just the same … like equal.”

In the end, the main point of this story is to show that most Cambodian women are not being “cheating whores” or “poor victims” who should learn how to sew, bar girls and professional girlfriends are resourceful and entrepreneurial people who use the tools around them to improve their lives and find enjoyment in a sex of constraints and uncertainty. Rather than needing saving by those who think they know best, these clever young women are essentially saving themselves.

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Professional girlfriends: Why western boyfriends? A cultural perspective

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One night while sipping a drink in a hostess bar in Phnom Penh with Sam, 31, from England, he shared the most common stereotypical complaint about "professional girlfriends" – or those women who exchange love and affection with multiple boyfriends for material things: "They're all liars ... you can't trust any of them ... they just want one thing ... they're straight hoarders (consuming people)."

In a typical here-there comparison, he continued: "The difference between slappers [prostitutes] in the UK and here is that, here, they are more manipulative, more devious, more calculating ... there's a financial motivation behind everything ... their intentions are different, because that's all they know."

Because his Cambodian neighbour, Sreyman, 26, had worked in a bar and had a few boyfriends that she dated, he immediately labelled her a prostitute and assumed she was only motivated by money and greed. He associated this with an innate fault – as if "they know no better", and are incapable of feeling/being/acting any other way. Despite the fact that the women's motivations to get involved with certain men are complicated and varied, it is this idea of an innocent motivate ... many men sometimes use to position themselves as innocent victims of female manipulation. As Tom, 36, from Australia pointed out about his ex-girlfriend: "She wanted everyone to feel sorry for her. But really, I was her a prostitute and assumed she was only motivated by money and greed."

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What do you think of the hostess bar scene in Phnom Penh? This is a typical opening question I’d ask people while interviewing for my research on bar work and professional girlfriends in Cambodia (professional girlfriends are women who date multiple western boyfriends in exchange for gifts). Most often, well-meaning folks offer bits of sympathy, such as 20-year-old Dutch backpacker Annie: “I feel bad for the girls. They work in these bars and look for rich foreign guys because they have no other options. If they did, they would never choose to be here.” It’s true – there is a tension between “free will” and the larger structural issues that make bar work a viable option for women. But it is too simplistic to say that the women wouldn’t be there if it were just a matter of other options. With hostess bar work, there exists a number of constraints which make it more appealing than other types of work – like street trading or garment factory work. There are also lots of practical constraints that have to be dealt with. This article highlights the good bits, the bad bits, and the practicalities in between.

Let’s start with the negative. Aside from the large structural pressures related to economics, gender roles and social control, loneliness, hospitality work itself comes with downsides. Most of these have to do with unwanted sexual advances, touching, rudeness, lewdness, verbal abuse, racism and sexism from intoxicated customers as well as management.

Chanthy, a 22-year-old bar worker on St 136, explains: “I like one guy, you play with him … flirt … give massage on his back. But sometimes I don’t like men and they touch me anyway. I don’t like when they do this. I smile … then I walking away.”

As Dy, 24, points out: “Some bar gang men drink a lot! They talk very nasty and talk bad about Khmer girls. I say I not bad girl … but they shouting and spitting … very angry … but I worry … just ignore … and talking with Khmer girls [instead].”

Many bars also impose a strict system of fines, which means a portion of the girls’ wages are deducted for certain infractions. These fines vary and can be created and enforced by management. As Chanthy, 27, told me the story of how she was once fined $1 for eating one peanut from her bag. “I never did like her. Thinking she was joking, she ate another one, and he then charged me $2, which out of $50 per month salary, is the equivalent of an entire day’s pay.”

Many bars also charge fines for talking on mobile phones, or eating “personal” food while on duty. I heard stories of bars charging fines for chewing gum, for mixing up drink orders or making drinks improperly, for not wearing name badges, for not cleaning glasses properly, or severly, for cleaning glasses when they shouldn’t be.

The fine system is used as a form of control over the women, and a way for management to exert authority by punishing them financially. But other downsides sometimes include unreasonable expectations from managers (eg to live at the bar or come in outside of scheduled hours), excessive alcohol and drug use, and probably the most common workplace hazard – a broken heart—which leads to depression and sometimes even self-harming/cutting arms with razors or “taking too much medicine”.

These last hazards have less to do with the bars themselves, than they do with Cambodia’s complete lack of mental health resources and services. During times of depression, the women, instead, turn to their friends and co-workers for support and comfort, which points to some of the highlights of working in a bar.

For many women, the bar is a place of freedom, solidarity and support. As many women move on their own from the country to the city, the bar, and their friends there, act as a type of family. As foranrai, 19, explains: “When I sad about my ex-boyfriend, I cry and cry. I go my bar and my sisters help me. They make me laughing and I forget boyfriend!”

While in the bar, the girls enjoy the freedoms of movement, of being with their friends, of chatting with different foreigners, of dancing, drinking, learning English and of hearing about the world outside of Cambodia. They have the freedom to play with their identities, and as Sochua said: “I like my bar because I like to be myself” – whoever that self might happen to be.

Bar life also allows much more freedom than the loneliness and isolation of being confined to the house as a wife or long-term girlfriend—which was a complaint of many women, and the reason many continued working in the bars after promising they wouldn’t while their partners were away.

The ability to work on again, off again in the bar also allows the women great freedom. Sochua has been working at the same bar for nearly 10 years, and now has a good relationship with the European owner. Many times, she’s taken long breaks from work – to have her children, or to go to the countryside. Knowing that the bar will always be there and that her boss will take her back is a great relief to her, and a form of stability in what is sometimes quite an unstable life.

But there was also a certain network logic which defies the common argument that if there were other options, the women wouldn’t choose hostess bar work. Tina, 25, was once offered a receptionist job at a small western-run boutique hotel. The hotel promised to quadruple her $50 per month salary and put her through university after she completed her first year at the hotel. The job was easy and the potential career opportunities seemed tremendous. But after the first night, she walked out, and went back to work at her old bar. When asked why she would pass up what seemed to be such an amazing opportunity, she explained: “[The hotel] was too quiet. No customers ... bar is better ... learn more English ... meet more people.”

According to her logic, the potential for long-term security — which was via meeting people who might “open doors” for her — was greatly decreased at the hotel. The lower monthly salary at the hostess bar was secondary to the opportunity to meet more customers, which could potentially translate to increased economic, romantic, travel and learning opportunities in the future. Tina found more value in the ability to network with a range of potentially useful people, than in pursuing a potentially unuseful long-drawn-out academic path.

As author of upcoming book titled Sex, Love and Money in Cambodia (Routledge 2013), I am a professional girlfriend. While in the bars, the young women find them useful in different ways. Bar work tends to be seen as a means to an end, and a place of opportunity. For professional girlfriends, bars offer unlimited networking possibilities which leads to potential future security.

Rather than being viewed as victims who are trapped in oppressive jobs and have no control over their lives, the plethora of young women I spoke to instead revealed they are hard-working mothers and daughters, loyal employees, dedicated girlfriends and wives and creative young women who are pulling up their bootstraps and taking on this world, despite all those who doubt them or try to get in their way. And the bar is often the first stop on their journeys.

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