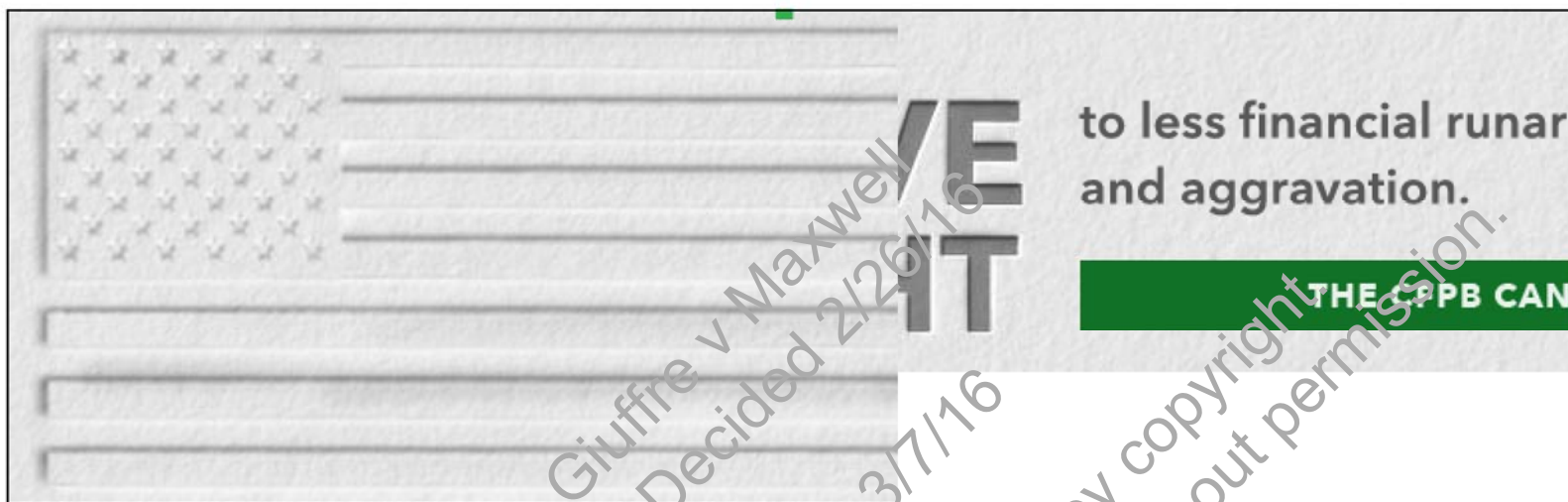


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SOMALY MAM: THE HOLY SAINT (AND SINNER) OF SEX TRAFFICKING

BY **SIMON MARKS** ON 5/21/14 AT 5:49 AM



COVER

STORY

Somaly Mam saved countless girls in Cambodia. Does it matter if her campaign is built on a web of lies?

GERHARD JÖRÉN

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WORLD

SOMALY MAM

SEX TRAFFICKING

CAMBODIA

Nestled on the banks of the Mekong River, Thloc Chhroy looks like the typical rural Cambodian village. Mango trees thick with fruit are everywhere. Fishermen cast their nets from small motorboats. Elders lounge in hammocks, while children on bikes too big for them bounce along rutted dirt tracks.

But this is no ordinary village. Every now and then, a shiny four-wheel drive bounces down the dirt track that leads to a refuge center of an organization whose name in French is *Agir Pour Les Femmes en Situation Précaire*, or AFESIP. (Rough translation: Helping Women in Danger.) Inside the vehicle you may spot a powerful government official, a heavyweight journalist or even an American movie star. They

all come to meet with AFESIP's president and co-founder, Somaly Mam, and support her courageous work fighting sex traffickers.

Mam is one of the world's most compelling activists, brave and beautiful, and her list of supporters is long and formidable. Former U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton and actresses Meg Ryan, Susan Sarandon and Shay Mitchell, as well as *New York Times* Pulitzer-winning columnist Nicholas Kristof, have all toured AFESIP centers in Cambodia. Queen Sofia of Spain has for years promoted Mam's cause and even visited her in the hospital last year when she fell ill. Mark Zuckerberg's former PR guru, Brandee Barker, whom *The New York Times* recently described as "perhaps the most sought-after image consultant in the startup world," is a board member for the Somaly Mam Foundation, and Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg is an advisory board member.

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Mam has raised millions with a hectic schedule of meetings all over the globe with the good, the great and the super-rich—from the U.N.'s Ban Ki-moon to the pope. One day she will be speaking at the White House, and the next day she'll be entralling schoolchildren in a remote corner of Cambodia.

Mam claims to have rescued thousands of girls and women from sex trafficking, a dangerous and formidable feat. Her story becomes even more inspiring when you hear her shocking tale of being sold into sexual slavery. In 2005, she published her autobiography, *The Road of Lost Innocence*, which became an international best-seller. Mam was one of *Time's* 100 most influential people in 2009 and has over 400,000 followers on Twitter.

She has done so much for so many, does it matter that key parts of her story aren't true? This is a story about a story—but not quite the amazing one Mam has been telling at cocktail parties in Manhattan and Beverly Hills, or on *The Tyra Banks Show*. Nonetheless, it's an astonishing tale.

Book of a Genesis

In 2011, Mam sat down with Sandberg at *Fortune* magazine's Most Powerful Women summit and told the hushed audience what had motivated her to become a crusader against sexual slavery. "I have been sold in the brothel by the man who come and tell me that he's my grandfather," she said. "I stayed in the brothel nearly then 10 years. The brothel owner bring us all together, we all sit on the ground, and he tell us we have to do what he ask us to do. But one girl...she refused to do what he asked to do so he take a gun and kill her, so that is the day that I have been escaped from the brothel."

Mam declined to be interviewed by *Newsweek* for this article and has declined numerous requests for comment since I started reporting on inconsistencies in her stories in 2012. But she has repeatedly claimed that her tragic tale of abuse began in 1979 with a voyage through the rolling hills of Mondulkiri, a part of Cambodia that back then was still dense forest. Accompanied by a man she identifies only as "Grandfather," she trundled past stilted homes inhabited by tribal villagers and forests that were home to sacred spirits.

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In her autobiography, Mam tells how "Grandfather" turned her at a very young age into his domestic slave. He would gamble and drink, and when he came home, he sometimes beat her until she bled. He eventually sold her as a virgin to a Chinese merchant and then forced her to marry a violent soldier when she was just 14. She was later sold to a brothel in Phnom Penh, where she recalls being tortured with electrodes hooked up to a car battery.

But after years of servitude, Mam writes, the brothel owner, Aunt Peuve, began to give her more freedom. She still worked in the brothel, but she sometimes lived with some of the foreigners working for the plethora of humanitarian organizations that rushed in to help the country recover from the depredations of the Khmer Rouge. In 1991, she met Pierre Legros, a young Frenchman working as a biologist in Phnom Penh. This meeting, she writes, changed her outlook on life and convinced her to leave the world of prostitution for good.

She and Legros got married and moved to France in the early 1990s. Legros says he was amazed at how easily Mam took to life in Europe. "She found a job as a maid. She found a job before me. She handled the situation very quickly.... It was the Somaly that I knew. It was a woman, a warrior. She was a small warrior. I worked with her and made a big warrior out of her."

In 1994, they returned to Cambodia. Legros had found a job working for Doctors Without Borders, and Mam began doing volunteer work in one of the organization's clinics for patients with sexually transmitted diseases. Cambodia then had a sex trafficking crisis and the highest rate of HIV/AIDS in the Asia-Pacific region. Mam says her past and future were staring her in the face. Her destiny, she decided, would be to help girls escape her country's notorious brothels. Mam, Legros and a friend started AFESIP, a small but feisty nongovernmental organization.

Mam and Legros were an intrepid and attractive couple fighting for the most worthy of causes, and the media soon began to take an interest. At first they were hard-pressed for cash, but a France 2 documentary broadcast in 1998 gave AFESIP major exposure and helped get Mam chosen as one of seven celebrated women honored with the prestigious Prince of Asturias Award for International Cooperation. Among the other winners were Emma Bonino, a former European commissioner for humanitarian aid, and Olayinka Koso-Thomas, a Nigerian-born doctor who had campaigned for decades against the genital mutilation of women.

Legros was now thinking big, far beyond the borders of Cambodia: AFESIP satellites offices were opened in Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, France and Switzerland. He knew that Mam needed more media exposure if their grand ambitions were to be achieved. "We knew that the visibility on television is very short-lived. You're known and then

you disappear. I always said to Somaly, ‘The real thing to do after the television is to write a book.’”

After Mam made a televised appearance with Bonino in the early part of the past decade and talked about her own story, several publishers expressed interest in a book deal. Legros recalls that an agent working for one publishing house in Paris burst into tears while listening to Mam tell her story in her office. Published in France in 2005; published in America three years later, *The Road of Lost Innocence* was translated into Japanese, Swedish and over a dozen other languages.

About a year later, Mam set up the Somaly Mam Foundation, the next step in her long journey to international recognition. As the years went by, Mam and her organization went from triumph to triumph, bringing in more and more money. Mam is now a superstar in the mostly gritty world of nonprofits, and a jet-setting global icon, but she always insists that her real life is with her “girls” back in Phnom Penh.



Somaly Mam at an AFESIP shelter in Kompong Cham province.

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A Chilling Performance

Mam has done much for those girls, and a few of them have done much for her. Mam's success has been due to her energy, her fearlessness and her charisma. It is also due to the shocking stories she and her girls have told.

In 2009, Nicholas Kristof wrote in *The New York Times* about a girl named Long Pross, who had finally summoned the strength to tell her stunning story of sexual slavery. He reported that a woman had kidnapped Pross and sold her to a brothel, where she was beaten, tortured with electric wires, forced to endure two crude abortions and had an eye gouged out with a piece of metal by an angry pimp. Pross, Kristof said, was rescued by Mam and became part of her valiant group of former trafficking victims fighting for a world free of sexual slavery.

Pross also told her disturbing story on *Oprah* and appeared in the PBS documentary *Half the Sky*. "Believe it or not, when I returned home, my mother and father didn't want me around. I wasn't considered a good person," she says in the documentary.

Equally hard to believe is the fact that Pross's family, neighbors and medical records all tell a different story. Dr. Pok Thorn says he performed surgery on Pross when she was 13, after her parents brought her to a hospital with a nonmalignant tumor covering her right eye. Photographs in her medical records clearly show the young girl's eye before and after the surgery.

So how did she come to be one of Somaly Mam's girls? Te Sereybonn, director of Cambodia's Takeo Eye Hospital back then, says his staff contacted AFESIP to see if they could admit Pross to one of their vocational training programs.

Another of Mam's biggest "stars" was Meas Ratha, who as a teenager gave a chilling performance on French television in 1998, describing how she had been sold to a brothel and held against her will as a sex slave.

Late last year, Ratha finally confessed that her story was fabricated and carefully rehearsed for the cameras under Mam's instruction, and only after she was chosen from a group of girls who had been put through an audition. Now in her early 30s and living a modest life on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, Ratha says she reluctantly allowed herself to be depicted as a child prostitute: "Somaly said that...if I want to help another woman I have to do [the interview] very well."

She, like Pross, was never a victim of sex trafficking. She and a sister were sent to AFESIP in 1997 because their parents were unable to care for all seven of their children.



Somaly Mam on her way from Phnom Penh to Koh Kong, where a lot of young women are forced into prostitution and trafficked to neighboring Thailand. June 1, 2005.

Lost Innocence

Interviews with Mam's childhood acquaintances, teachers and local officials in the village where she grew up contradict important, lurid details in her autobiography. Many of the villagers in Thloc Chhroy say they never met or even saw Mam's cruel "Grandfather," the rich Chinese merchant who allegedly raped her or the violent soldier she says she was forced to marry.

Orn Hok, a former commune chief, remembers well the day Mam arrived in the village, noting, "Somaly came here with her parents. She is a daughter of Mam Khon and Pen Navy."

Pen Chhun Heng, now in his 70s, says she is a cousin of Mam's mother and rejects the notion that Mam was adopted or that she was raised (or kept) by "Grandfather."

Sam Nareth, a childhood friend of Mam's, says Mam first attended school in the village in 1981 and remained there until she got her high school diploma. "She finished secondary school in 1987, and Somaly and I went to sit the teachers exam in Kompong Cham together."

Thou Soy, who was the director of Khchao High School in Thloc Chhroy, distinctly remembers Mam attending classes between 1981 and 1987, as does the current commune chief, Thorng Roun, and his two predecessors. Mam was well-known and popular in their small village, a happy, pretty girl with pigtails.

Not even Mam can keep the story straight. In February 2012, while speaking at the White House, she said she was sold into slavery at age 9 or 10 and spent a decade inside a brothel. On *The Tyra Banks Show*, she said it was four or five years in the brothel. Her book says she was trafficked when she was "about 16 years old."

Mam's confusion isn't limited to her book, or the backstory for some of "her girls." In 2012, she admitted—after being confronted with some of my early reporting—that she had made false claims in a speech to the U.N. General Assembly in which she