

said eight girls she had rescued from the sex industry were killed by the Cambodian army after a raid on her shelter in 2004.

Rights workers and police officials, including Deputy National Police Chief Lieutenant General Un Sokunthea, who was head of the Interior Ministry's anti-human trafficking department in 2004, and a senior official at the U.N.'s Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Phnom Penh, have also strongly denied highly publicized claims by Mam, in *Glamour* magazine and *The New York Times*, that traffickers kidnapped her 14-year-old daughter in 2006 and videotaped the girl being gang-raped in retaliation for Mam's work. Legros and Aarti Kapoor, a former legal adviser to AFESIP, both say the young girl was never kidnapped; instead, they say, she had run away from home with her boyfriend.

Legros, who split from Mam in 2004 and lost custody of their children in Cambodia now says he is not surprised that the truthfulness of her autobiography is being questioned. And although he brokered the book deal and selected the ghostwriter, he denies helping Mam make up her stories. He adds, however, that "I did not search the truth. My objective was that she felt good with herself."

Mam Dearest

Many of the people who have been charmed by Mam refuse to believe that she is anything other than what she claims to be. They talk of how inspiring she is and how holy her mission is. Fashion photographer Norman Jean Roy, who in 2008 documented Cambodia's sex trade and shot some heartrending portraits of Long Pross, once said of Mam, "One of the things that's unique about her is that she has this almost saint-like quality about her when she walks into a room, when she walks around the children."

But those who have worked with Mam in Cambodia say there is a vast difference between the image she puts forward in the media spotlight and the one she shows in Phnom Penh. "[With donors], she's very polished and very on and very charming...*exceedingly* charming," says Candace Blase, who worked as a volunteer psychologist for AFESIP in 2011. "And when people are not there, she can be tyrannical; she's moody, she's erratic, she's entitled." Blase adds that she saw Mam ordering the girls she looks after to carry out personal chores for her.

Another former employee of the Somaly Mam Foundation in Cambodia recalls conversations with Mam in which she said she was invincible. “She feels unstoppable. She used to talk to me about wanting to put things in people’s food and how easy it would be to poison someone.

“It was such a traumatic and hostile environment,” the former employee continues. “We were treated very much in a hostile and aggressive way. You’re either part of the group or you’re not, and if you’re not part of the group, bad things can happen to you. And that was said in sometimes very direct terms.”

Former employees in Cambodia of both AFESIP and the foundation admit they knew about some of the questionable techniques used to raise awareness and funding, but they say nobody spoke up due to a mixture of fear of Mam and threats from others. “Why does everybody keep quiet about everything?” Blase asks. “I think it’s very hard to accept that a woman who is in a nurturing position, which she sort of is, has the capacity to be the way Somaly is.... People keep their mouths shut because it’s in their own self-interest to do so.”

Daniela Papi, founder of PEPY, an organization that promotes education and youth leadership, argues that those doing heroic aid work become immune to criticism. “Most people want to believe that people are good,” she says. “We see this hero and we buy into the hero, and actually the person we are defending is ourselves. It’s not them anymore, it’s yourself for being duped.”

According to a close acquaintance of Mam’s in Phnom Penh, who insisted on remaining anonymous for fear of retribution, there have been doubts about Mam’s life story for years, but “it’s all about image, getting to the big shot who has a lot of money and who feels sorry for this kind of story. They’re very successful, and they have been very successful in an incredible way because they connect with the right people, and they have all the movie stars, famous rock stars and famous people supporting them, and [all those people] are still being taken for a ride now.”



Somaly Mam at the Somaly Mam Foundation Gala "Life Is Love" in New York City, Oct. 23, 2013.

MIKE COPPOLA/GETTY

“Pull Out the Most Gory Story”

At the heart of the questions surrounding Mam is a debate within the nonprofit sector on the acceptable tactics for fundraising and educating the public. For a long time, there has been a strong push to move away from using children to raise funds. “If your goal is fundraising, you actually have an incentive to pull out the most gory story,” Papi explains, “and so we get completely false realities of the world.”

Experts in sex trafficking say that while it is a serious problem, the scale and dynamics of the situation are often misunderstood, in part because of lurid, sensationalistic stories such as those told by Mam and her “girls.” In 2009, 14 organizations and academics, including George Soros’s Open Society Foundations, wrote a letter to Sully Features, an independent film production company based in New York, to thank it for its interest in making a film about Mam’s work in Cambodia.

But they advised against having the documentary focus on Mam due to AFESIP’s lack of understanding of the sex industry. In an interview for Euronews in 2012, Mam said girls as young as 3 are being held in Cambodian brothels. Experts in the field say that

is almost unheard-of. Patrick Stayton, who formerly ran the Christian, faith-based International Justice Mission (IJM) in Cambodia, says, “They may have had a supply of younger girls between the age of 14 and 17,” but adds, “We’ve never seen prepubescent girls, or very, very rarely.”

“[O]ver the last 10 years, the public justice system’s response to commercial sexual exploitation of children has improved significantly,” IJM stated in a report last year, noting a huge difference in donor funding for projects dealing with child victims of the sex industry and sexual abuse. “The decrease has been noted most within the group of young minors.”

Thomas Steinfatt, a professor of statistics at the University of Miami, has done several reports on sex trafficking for the U.N.’s Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking. In a 2008 study, for which he spent months conducting surveys in all corners of Cambodia, he estimated there were no more than 1,058 victims of trafficking in Cambodia and has said the situation has improved markedly since then.

The number of children, both those observed as sex workers and those mentioned by management or by sex workers in the 2008 data, was 127, with 11 of the children verifiably under age 15 and six under age 13. The high-end estimate for the number of children likely involved in sex work in Cambodia in 2008 was 310 children.

In response to a newspaper story about victim stories allegedly fabricated by Mam, Sébastien Marot, the executive director of Friends International, an organization that helps train and educate children in precarious situations, posted a response on the organization’s website: “A large number of organizations get sucked into using children to raise funds, making them talk about the abuse they survived in front of a camera, having their picture in a pitiful situation published for everyone to see. In worst cases, the truth is distorted or the stories invented to attract more compassion and money. The impact on the lives of these children is terrible: If they come from an abusive situation, such a process re-traumatizes them and in any case it stigmatizes them forever.”

A Crack in the Wall

I have spent over two years in Europe and Cambodia unraveling Mam’s many stories

through a series of newspaper articles, and for most of that time, she, AFESIP and her foundation have stonewalled. They have resolutely stood behind their leader, their hero. It was only in the past two months, while I was reporting this story, that cracks started to appear.

In April, after repeated requests from *Newsweek* for an interview with Mam, Gina Reiss-Wilchins, the foundation's executive director, said in a statement on the foundation's website: "Following an internal review, the Foundation has recently launched an independent, third-party investigation to further examine these claims. Somaly Mam is in full support of this review. We can only hope that this does not deter other survivors from sharing their experiences, because it is their courageous voices that bring promise of a world free from trafficking."

The foundation's board retained the law firm Goodwin Procter, which has offices in the U.S., Europe and Asia. The firm also declined to speak to *Newsweek*, citing attorney-client privilege. Goodwin Procter and the Somaly Mam Foundation also declined to say when the investigation would be completed and if the results would be shared.

In April, Mam spoke to her supporters about the controversies swirling around her in a statement posted on the foundation's website. "Many of you know my story of what I have been through. This pain never leaves me.... I have lived my life day by day, with love and forgiveness, and the belief that helping others could give them voice and choice and create change. I wrote my book to shed light on the lives of so many thousands of other women who have shared my fate. They have no voice, so I let my voice stand for theirs."

That message still seems to resonate with many of the people who admire Mam. In October, a post on what purports to be her Facebook page said: "I Fall, I Rise, I Make Mistakes, I Live, I Learn, I've been Hurt, But I'm Alive, I'm Human and I'm not perfect but I learn every day and with every one to be better, but I promise you never perfect...teach and show me on the positive way...thanks."

In response, one of her supporters wrote: "I've been there myself and though mistakes have been made along the way, they were often done so with a much more powerful intention...and that has proved true here. Those mistakes have led to helping so many

people and bringing international attention to a VERY serious problem...kudos to you!”

Correction: Due to an editing error, Pen Chhun Heng was misidentified as a woman.

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Gary Costanza · Ridge, New York

She's a liar at best and maybe a murderer too. If you're a female advocating for females, you can get away with anything.

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Emma House

If you are a man advocating for men you can get away with political and corporate domination, military acts and sexual abuse.

Like · Reply · 1 · Sep 25, 2014 5:54pm



Emma House

Matthew Laforest feel free to correct me Matt - too many facts for my argument - but only a paleeee in yours.

Like · Reply · 1 · Oct 18, 2014 9:11pm



Robert Kabakoff · John Jay College of Criminal Justice

Emma House Maybe. The men's prisons are filled with those who haven't gotten away with it.

Like · Reply · Dec 22, 2014 10:20pm

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Asger Jon Vistisen · Ingeniørhøjskolen i Århus

Sexual abuse of children without a strong parental bond is happening all over the world even in the developed industrial countries and needs to be talked about. What we don't need are sensationalists taking an axe to the credibility of abuse victims.

Like · Reply · 11 · Sep 4, 2014 11:33pm



Jacquelyn Braxton · Indianapolis, Indiana

Thank you!!! All that this bogus article does is discredit victims, promote human trafficking as "not as big of a problem as THESE women make it out to be" and to give yet another reason why victims should be too afraid or ashamed to come forward... The journalists behind this story are disgusting for enabling further sexual abuse like this. Come out with your sources and prove that they are not the same people that claim that their interviews were misrepresented and taken out of context for this article. When you work against victims (whether intentionally or unintentionally), you work for the perpetrators, pure and simple. Too many children are being victimized (most are never found or even live long enough to be interviewed by these skeptics) for something like this to be published so haphazardly.

Like · Reply · 8 · Oct 10, 2014 1:07pm



Robert Kabakoff · John Jay College of Criminal Justice

Asger, what we need above all is the truth.

Like · Reply · 1 · Dec 2, 2014 10:34pm



Jacquelyn Braxton · Indianapolis, Indiana

Robert Kabakoff You have to be joking... People that like to pay for, or get paid for sex tourism, are the main ones interested in trying to downplay and discredit figures trying to bring attention to this plight on society (human trafficking).

Read MORE than just this article on the subject, please, if you do not question the agenda behind this "expose". Human trafficking is a big money industry being covered up by big money makers, THAT is a fact (as I'm SURE you already know).

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/.../who-s-telling-the-truth...>

Like · Reply · 1 · Dec 2, 2014 10:45pm

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Emma House

This was an interesting read but one that won't be remembered, individual self promotion is usually a fleeting act - why has the journalist only focused on discrediting one person, it doesn't uncover the statistics on how many lives have been changed because of this organisation nor what this organisation does for human trafficking. 2 years spent researching one individual I would like to see the evidence to back that - show me the plane tickets, the interview records, the passport, money you spent etc etc.

Like · Reply · 9 · Sep 25, 2014 6:04pm



Jerry Varney

Agree 100 percent, charity is closed now.

Like · Reply · 2 · Nov 5, 2014 6:55pm

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Robert Kabakoff · John Jay College of Criminal Justice

1. Because no one likes being duped, especially not by a personally dishonest huckster (I saw the film and was especially moved by the girl with the missing eye and made some sincere reach out efforts through a common acquaintance - I was played) 2. The numbers and cases she uses to elicit funds are exaggerated. Claiming the army murdered the girls if she knew they hadn't is probably a criminal offense - even in Cambodia. It is certainly deceitful and dangerous. 3. If she lied about her life and misrepresents the lives of those she uses to help elicit funds how can the contributors be sure the money is going where she claims it's going? Who does the auditing? Shall I go on?

Like · Reply · 4 · Dec 22, 2014 10:17pm · Edited



Emma House

Robert Kabakoff yes you should go on. I work with Project Futures in Sydney Australia, the CEO of Project Futures knows Somaly Mam personally and she is an honest reputable person who was a victim of human trafficking. If you control the information you can bend it all you want. This journalist doesn't have to credit himself and has looked to ride off the back of another person. Somaly's work continues, if she was in it for the money why would she continue to work to help trafficked victims? Project Futures has a reputable Board who audits and governs it's work.

Like · Reply · 1 · Mar 4, 2015 6:57pm · Edited

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