

# Human Sciences Encounters in Phnom-Penh: Past Presentations: Representations of Mobility and Prostitution

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## REPRESENTATIONS OF MOBILITY AND PROSTITUTION AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY OF VIETNAMESE SEX WORKERS MIGRATING TO CAMBODIA

This ethnographic paper addresses the issue of women cross-border mobility for the aim of prostitution between Southern Vietnam (An Giang province) and Cambodia. The goal is to update existing research carried out in Cambodia in the late 1990s by Western researchers commissioned by aid organizations (Derks 1998, Baker 2003), and to bring a Vietnamese perspective into the picture. Existing research explains mobility from Vietnam in terms of the easy money female migrant prostitutes could earn in Cambodia. According to our findings, the situation has changed and this paper explores why. Although illegal migration for prostitution from Vietnam to Phnom Penh remains an easy alternative, it appears less attractive than in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

First, the paper discusses methodological issues. Several significant barriers were encountered when conducting field research – complex administrative procedures to obtain research permits, police surveillance, informant’s fear and distrust – which may call into question the validity of the data, and thus need to be discussed in detail. Second, the paper examines the situation on the ground in the late 1990s: cross-border mobility and routes in the Mekong delta, and Vietnamese prostitution in Phnom Penh. Third, the paper explores the reasons underlying the obvious change of perception by potential unskilled migrants who no longer perceive Cambodia as some sort El Dorado and therefore an appealing destination. Different reasons help explain this change, such as increased awareness of risks of deception and exploitation thanks to massive campaigns against so-called “social evils” and against “human trafficking.” Another factor is the increased availability of more attractive professional options, such as internal migration for prostitution to provinces from the Mekong delta, to Ho Chi Minh City and its suburban provinces undergoing rapid industrialization and economic growth (Binh Duong for instance), or to Asian countries like Taiwan, South Korea, or Singapore. This paper demonstrates that contemporary mobility is no longer a clandestine phenomenon originating from remote, rural and porous borderlands. Instead, it tends to be transnational and framed by international legal standards and discussions. The paradigm of human trafficking from the late 1990s and 2000s which presented the image of an innocent peasant girl who becomes a “victim” lured by a trafficker at the border, is now outdated, and no longer corresponds to realities on the ground.

This paper is based on 18 months of fieldwork in the Mekong delta. It results from collaboration between the Ho Chi Minh City

University of Social Sciences and Humanities, the University of An Giang, the NGO Alliance Anti-Traffic (Vietnam), the Observatory of Illicit Traffics in the Mekong (Thailand), and the Institute for Research on Contemporary Southeast Asia (IRASEC, Thailand). A French version of this paper will be published in spring 2010.