

Petals and thorns: the dilemmas of PLA and debt bondage

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Introduction

Successful participatory activities rely on community interest and enthusiasm. The very involvement of participants is assumed to demonstrate their consent and the number of activities or rates of attendance often serve as process indicators for monitoring a project. Skilled facilitators try to reduce shyness and encourage active interactions between all the participants, attempting to draw out 'silenced voices'.

What if the community members do not control their daily movements? How can the principles of participation and ownership be maintained if community gatekeepers prevent people who would choose to be involved from attending activities, while they force others to do so? In such circumstances, can participation become a liberating and nurturing process, or does it actually result in collusion with coercion?

This article examines the dilemmas faced by a community development project working with debt-bonded sex workers in Cambodia. It outlines the ethical concerns that the project team has faced so far, and describes in detail what steps were taken to try to address the most important of these issues: that of consent.

When gatekeepers use locks

The district of Svay Pak lies on the outskirts of Phnom Penh and is one of the largest concentrations of Vietnamese sex workers in Cambodia. Approximately 300 young women live in over twenty brothels. Coming from a background of rural poverty in Southern Vietnam, they migrate to Svay Pak either independently or are trafficked by intermediaries. Upon arrival, between US\$300 to \$1000 is made available to their families or escorts, which the women then earn back within the brothel. Most work off their debt within a year, although additional debts for food, clothing, medical care and extra contributions to their families are often accrued.

Until the debt has been paid, a sex worker 'belongs' to the brothel and is expected to spend her time waiting for clients. The brothel managers retain strict control to the extent that the women are not free to leave their brothels

without permission and are often prevented from mingling with other community members lest they defect to a more lucrative establishment. This fear stems from the fierce competition between brothels, which is complicated by numerous financial relationships of patronage and protection with the police and military. Frequent police crackdowns, which can result in extortion, arrests and temporary closures, reinforce a tense atmosphere in this small geographical area.

Despite a majority of the sex workers' coming to Svay Pak knowing and agreeing to the circumstances of their employment, the rare but notorious cases of escape or 'rescue' have solidified the managers' resolve to maintain restrictions. By not complying, a sex worker risks violent repercussions from managers, as well as harassment and arrest by authorities if she strays too far from the protection of the brothel.

Supporting a participatory development process among the Svay Pak sex workers, therefore, mandates not only an awareness of the limitations, but also careful manoeuvring to gain trust without threatening local power-brokers (brothel managers, police) in a way that could jeopardise access to the community.

The Lotus Club

In the mid 1990s, Medecins Sans Frontières (MSF) (Belgium/Holland/Switzerland) established a local community health association which opened a clinic in the middle of Svay Pak. Although its primary focus remains medical services, the clinic has also added outreach activities, peer education and life-skills training for the sex workers.

Under the auspices of the Horizons Project (a USAID-funded, global operations research initiative on HIV prevention and care), the Population Council began conducting participatory activities in the Svay Pak clinic in April 2000. In collaboration with MSF, the Horizons project aims to initiate, support and document community building and mobilisation among the sex workers of Svay Pak. Given the restrictive context, the primary emphasis of the project is to break down barriers of competition and

mistrust between sex workers by giving them the time, space and appropriate encouragement to interact with each other and begin to identify shared experiences and goals.

Specific objectives include improving self-esteem, increasing the women's mobility within Svay Pak and extending their social networks to create a local support structure. Regular group activities offer opportunities for participants to interact with other community members; identify, analyse and prioritise common needs and then begin to act upon those needs by designing and implementing small-scale interventions with assistance from project facilitators.

As a first step, *Câu Lạc Bô Bông Sen* (The Lotus Club) was formed, taking its name from the fact that the women in Svay Pak refer to themselves as 'the women who sell their flower'. A private area in the clinic was designated as a safe space for the women, and a small group of sex workers took charge of the decor. Plants, curtains and floor cushions provide the setting for the participatory workshops held each morning. This project is still in its 'start-up' phase and sessions so far (community mapping, daily routines, life stories; see Figure 1) have addressed basic local issues while participants and facilitators get to know each other. This initial stage has been met with excitement and enthusiasm. Participants have shown increasing willingness to share personal experiences and practical tasks, such as mapping, with women from competing brothels. We receive frequent requests for additional sessions.

Does participation imply consent?

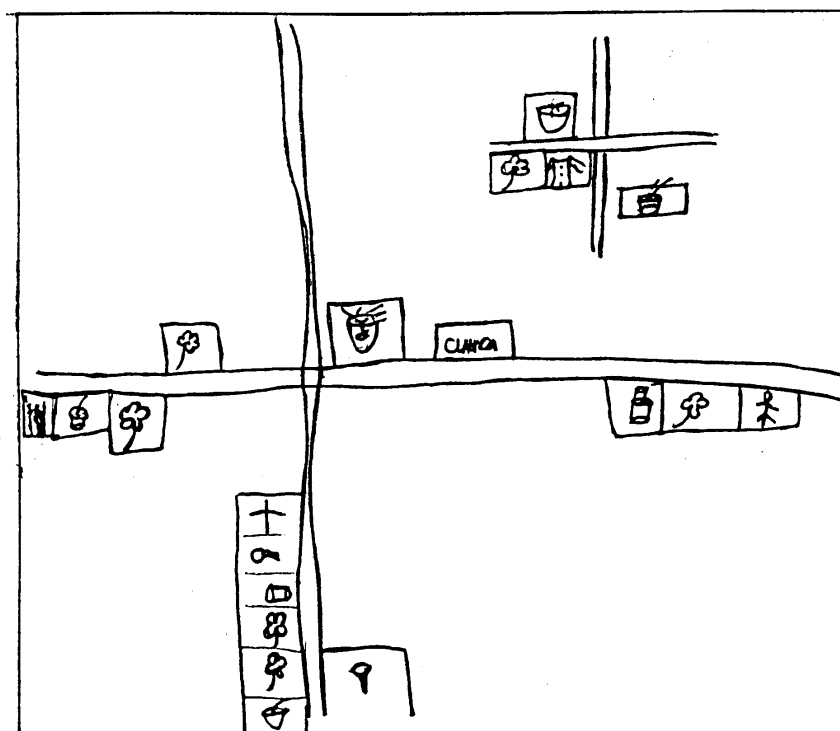
Despite early successes, all has not been rosy. Our biggest challenge has been trying to ensure that the women in all the brothels hear about the project and then have the opportunity to choose for themselves whether to participate, and how often.

Brothel managers currently permit only one to two women to leave work at a time. The project facilitators visit the brothel in advance, make a request for participants and then, in some cases, escort them to the Lotus Club and back again. Furthermore, which sex workers have the opportunity to join an activity often depends on the manager. Those women deemed more attractive, particularly popular with clients or more severely in debt, are least likely to be allowed to go 'off duty.'

Far more worrying to us, however, is that sometimes women who would rather not attend a workshop are being 'sent' by the brothel manager, perhaps as a gesture of goodwill to the MSF clinic. On several occasions, a participant has requested permission to leave a session early or has remained isolated from the group, choosing not to contribute. In at least one case, a sex worker has looked repeatedly at her watch and expressed distress at the possibility of losing clients during the time her manager had 'volunteered' her for the project.

We have tried to address this lack of choice in a variety of ways, including engaging with the brothel managers to continuously emphasise the purpose of the workshops. We also ensure that floor cushions, mattresses and

Figure 1
Mapping the local community helped to introduce the participatory process

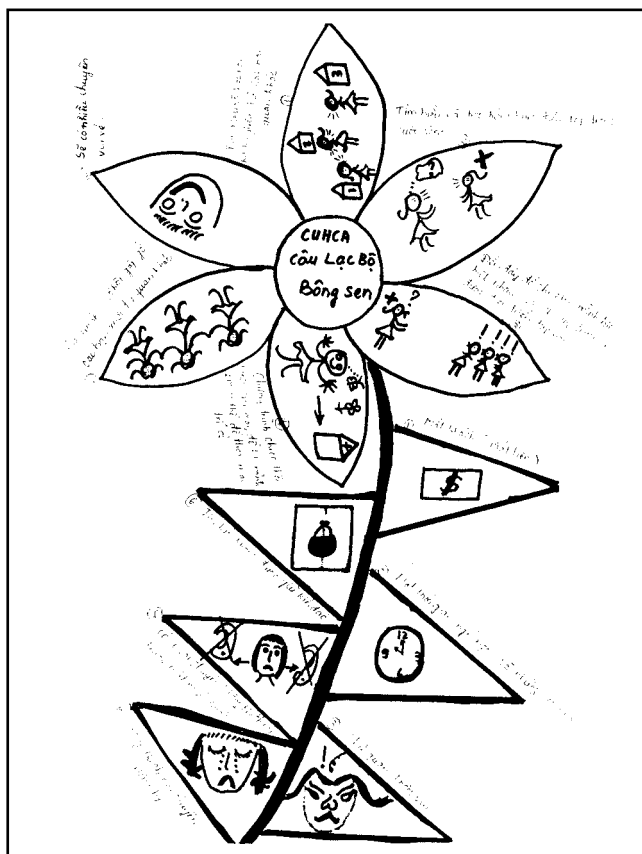


magazines are available at a slight distance from the activity so that women who feel uncomfortable, tired, or unwilling to participate can retire to this relaxation area. The facilitators acknowledge that 'being shy' can be a conscious decision and thus do not make sustained efforts to draw out quiet, unresponsive participants, although this would demonstrate good practice in other participatory projects.

Finally, we decided to explicitly confront the issue of consent through an interactive activity. Because this project is also a research study, informed consent procedures using standardised Population Council forms were already in place. Usually, the consent protocol consists of reading a prepared statement about the possible risks and benefits of joining a research project which a participant then signs for the record.

Given the restricted environment of Svay Pak, however, we felt the very concept of consent was unfamiliar and the existing process did not sufficiently allow for reflection on what participating in the project meant. As a result, we designed a workshop (see Box 1) that would let sex workers decide how best to explain project aims and objectives to their peers and explore the possible risks and benefits of bringing the project into their community.

Figure 2 Flower diagram presenting the benefits and risks of the project, as identified by sex workers during three workshops



Box 1 Flower diagram workshop

The goal of this set of activities was to engage sex workers in discussion about possible risks and benefits of participating in the project, thus facilitating informed consent. Each workshop began with a description of the new project and how the Lotus Club differed from the clinic's usual services. We focused on how the activities would serve as both action and research, including the eventual use of more quantitative, extractive methods such as questionnaires and in-depth interviews in order to enhance documentation. The women practised phrasing the information in terms that were meaningful to them.

We again adopted the image of a flower that the women frequently choose in sessions to represent themselves (see Figure 2). We passed out multi-coloured paper petals and thorns to each participant. First, the women considered what benefits they felt the project could offer them. They chose symbols or wrote a brief description on the petal cut-outs; each petal was then glued around the head of the flower to show what the group hoped could be achieved.

Petals

- Learn more about women in other brothels
- Get new information
- You will learn more about us and life in Svay Pak. We will learn more about you
- We can come here to 'ease our mind' and talk to someone
- Make new friends, have fun

Then the women turned their attention to the thorns, which indicated risks of the project. This proved much more challenging. In all three workshops, no one felt there were any real risks to their participation. The facilitators felt this was partly a reluctance to mention anything negative in case activities would be stopped. With some prompting, however, the women developed a list of possible adverse consequences, although they referred to these as risks for other women in other brothels, not themselves.

Thorns

- During the time spend participating, the opportunity to be with clients would be lost
- Loss of leisure time usually spent napping, relaxing, socialising
- Some (other) brothel managers might not be happy with sex workers who miss time with clients
- Talking about some topics in front of other women could be dangerous. If managers or other sex workers heard some of the information that was supposed to be confidential, it could be damaging

Finally, a role play exercise concluded the workshop. The facilitators pretended to be new arrivals in Svay Pak, asking their peers about the project: 'What is the Lotus club?' 'What if I feel uncomfortable about the questions that are asked?' 'Can I still go to the clinic if I refuse to be part of the group activities?'

After the workshops, all the participants' ideas and phrases were included in a new reproduction of the flower design (Figure 2). This visual will be used in an on-going process of ensuring comprehension and consent throughout the project.

Other ethical concerns

In addition to confronting the lack of personal freedom among participants, other dilemmas related to the local structures of debt-bondage are as follows in the section below.

Transparency

"I don't want the owner [brothel manager] to hear about this and I don't want them to ask me too much... I will say that I came here to study and read books and to learn more about health. I don't want to talk a lot because I don't want to have problems..."

Some brothel managers are happy for the women to attend the clinic for practical training or check-ups, but less likely to condone activities considered social, or worse, subversive. Yet fostering genuine community-building relies on open and co-operative relations with brothel management. As a result we tread a fine line in trying to remain honest about the aims of the project, but being conservative with our information. Some components, such as addressing issues of violence by managers or working toward empowering sex workers to refuse certain clients are discussed only with the women.

This highlights overall difficulties of working with brothel managers. Despite years of tentative trust-building between MSF clinic staff and the brothels and extensive outreach by project facilitators to explain the project and its potential benefits for the entire Svay Pak community, support remains lukewarm at best. Attendance at scheduled brothel manager meetings has dropped significantly. Some managers refuse to speak with project staff when they approach the brothel, although most continue to allow limited participation by their resident sex workers. Our response has been to circumvent restrictions rather than to challenge them directly.

Situating the project within a clinic and integrating community development with medical services has certainly helped to mitigate reluctance among managers. Health concerns are shared by the women and brothel managers alike as profits are highest when workers remain healthy, and additional pressure comes from the national '100% condom policy' which mandates monthly health checks of all sex workers. Thus, as mentioned, some women are able to use seeking care as an excuse for attending group sessions. Brothel managers also approve of specific health-related activities such as training on contraception, condom demonstrations and the introduction of a new protection method (the female condom).

Ultimately, all communities have complex and conflicting interests within them and we do not believe that they can all be reconciled in Svay Pak. Although we continue to try

to improve our relations with brothel managers, we also acknowledge that we are explicitly taking sides by offering ownership to the sex workers, but that this is an unavoidable and integral component of the community building process.

Compensation

"Sometimes we are busy with clients or with something else, so we cannot come, so we have to refuse".

Even when a woman is not already with a client when invited to a workshop, her attendance risks the loss of income. Within Svay Pak there is considerable variation in incomes: some sex workers have large debts to repay, some find clients easily, others less so, still others are between debts, earning additional money to take back to Vietnam. How much a woman needs to work also depends on the brothel's financial status. Managers receive approximately half of all earnings, on top of debt repayment. With voluntary participation so difficult to ensure in any case, we did not want relative wealth to further complicate the women's decisions. The project should be available to all the women, not just those who can afford some leisure time.

We compensate each participant with \$2 for a two hour workshop, slightly less than the earnings from one client. This decision is controversial, and can be seen as undue incentive to participate. It also makes the project more the domain of development workers, rather than located firmly in the hands of the community. We hope to slowly move away from this model as some women have already indicated their willingness to participate without payment or have suggested alternatives such as small gifts (cosmetics, stickers). Others, however, use the guaranteed income as justification for the time spent away from the brothel.

Confidentiality

"If I decide to say something, I will say it and what I say today is a true thing, so I don't care..."

Small incidents have cast doubt on our ability to maintain an atmosphere of trust and confidentiality during group sessions. One woman brought up that her brothel manager was cruel and violent. She later took a facilitator aside and whispered her fears that she had been too outspoken and that it could be dangerous for her complaints to be publicised. At the end of that session, staff initiated a brief group discussion about the importance of privacy, reiterating that the Lotus Club is meant to be a safe space for sex workers. Of course, we have no real control over what information passes back to the brothels. One manager, for example, insists on sending her sister along with the sex workers to keep an eye on things.

Working from the assumption that the sex workers can judge their security far better than we can, project facilitators ensure that participants set the tone and limits of all conversations. Although we would like eventually to move toward sensitive issues and in-depth analysis of the dynamics of Svay Pak, we consciously ask fewer probing questions and make less of an effort to involve reserved participants than PLA practitioners might do in other circumstances.

Conclusion

We are at the very beginning of what will hopefully lead to a sustained process of community building and collective action among the sex workers of Svay Pak. Ensuring ownership and genuine participation among a debt-bonded population is proving difficult and sometimes the principles of PLA seem compromised in this environment. We have found, however, that with vigilance and the willingness to experiment with various facilitation strategies, the potential benefits to the community are numerous and the challenges are not insurmountable.

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