

# Methodological Issues in Trafficking Research

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## Preliminary Remarks:

### 1. Quantitative and qualitative methodologies

Forget about them. They don't exist. Research begins with a **Research Question that drives everything else**, from selecting a sample size to drawing the sample to determining the method of measurement and the statistical analysis of the data.

[Socio-cultural Research Methodologies must be related to the problem under investigation, qualitative, quantitative, whatever.]

### 2. Reasons for accurate numbers:

In finding accurate numbers we also identify the locations and many of the methods of trafficking in persons. Knowing the numbers allows the government to assess and set trafficking policy in the most efficient manner and evaluate the effects of trafficking reduction programs (are the #s going up or down? Can't know effects of interventions if you don't have a baseline).

### 3. Consequences of accurate numbers:

Searching for high numbers of victims alleged to exist w/o evidence keeps attention focused away from the smaller number of actual victims who desperately need help.

### 4. Sexual Trafficking vs. Trafficking –

I studied only sex trafficking, following the Principle of the Drunkard's Search (from Abraham Kaplan's The Conduct of Inquiry). A drunk lost his keys in the alley, but is looking for them under a streetlamp. When asked why, "Because the light is better here." One looks where one has the ability to look.

### 5. A Good Theory also helps

I learned my theory from Bob Woodward and Mark Felt: Follow the money. It's not evil lustful men. Trafficking has an **economic** motive. Figure out how these men and women can maximize profit. **They have to "advertise,"** to have a way of letting new customers know they exist and how to find them. Repeat customers will never maximize profit.

*This is just as true for "hidden" brothels with children.* There is no such thing as a hidden brothel – if it exists it can be found. Taxi drivers are paid by brothels to bring customers to them. Brothels seek out taxi drivers to offer them kickbacks. Thus: use taxi drivers to find brothels. Methods based on this economic theory should work on TIP in general, (not just on women & Children.)

### 6. Need additional theory of why men would pay for sex but undermost conditions women wouldn't

Women Sell, Men buy – why? (Oversimplification but generally true). Not due to male/female differences in **power or money or sexual inequality or sexual pleasure or the experience of sex itself**. But rather due to *a fundamental biological difference in the*

*sex drive in men and in women* – **Sociobiology** has some very good explanations based on survival properties for genes of men v. women, and the sexual conditions necessary for that survival.

**Women need one constant & protective man to maximize the survival properties of their genes. Men maximize survival probabilities of their genes through sex with multiple female partners. Sex work and male/female sexual differences are explainable by that single proposition.**

## Remarks:

### I. Quantitative and qualitative methodologies commonly used in socio-cultural research on trafficking in the Asia – Pacific Region

#### Measurement Methodologies Stem from Definitions

##### **Compare HIV/AIDS vs. Trafficking**

While the socio-cultural consequences of AIDS are not so easily measured, **AIDS** (as an infective virus) is well defined and **has**:

- (a) Single definition – advanced infection with HIV
- (b) Known external causes such as
  1. HIV1
  2. HIV2
- (c) Several known and recognized methods of identification, with well defined test procedures, such as:
  1. ELISA
  2. Western Blot
- (d) Each test has known alpha and beta properties allowing calculation of **sensitivity** (1- Beta, **Power**) and **specificity** (1- Alpha, **Confidence**).  
(Have to drag these error rates out of out of NIH & the CDC — If you want them they are in Ch. 9 of my book, *Working at the Bar: Sex work and health communication in Thailand*). (Easiest way to get the book is through [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com) -- just search for *Steinfatt* under *books*.)

But **Trafficking** is **not** well defined and **has**:

- (a) Multiple conflicting definitions:
  1. Forced work of any kind
  2. Forced sex work
  3. Sex work under 18
  4. All sex work (Convenient for right wing feminist views: No woman would ever voluntarily have sex in exchange for money [Sometimes reduces to: No woman would ever voluntarily have sex ])
    - i. This ignores marriage and dating\*
    - ii. \*Money & Sex are inherently related in human society – People ‘cherry-pick’ their examples on sex work, selecting the lowest

class form of street work as exemplary, cases where the pro violence-against-women norms are at their strongest

5. Forced migration
6. All trans-national migration
7. All migration involving sex work
8. All migration (Convenient for governments wanting to force migrants back across the border)

(b) External causes that vary with the definition

1. Greed, Commercial Enterprise, Desire for easy money
2. Lack of concern for others and of consequences for others
3. Uncontrolled male sexual urges
4. Male power and dominance over females
5. Male desire for females who are:
  - i. Young; attractive; unspoiled; easy to manipulate; docile
6. Male desire to rape, torture, kill with impunity

(c) Few known and recognized methods of identification, and within each, few well defined test procedures

1. Use of force, fraud, or coercion (FFC)
  - i. Cannot leave shop under certain conditions
  - ii. Local leave only
  - iii. Escort required for longer leave distance
  - iv. Displayed only to known safe customers
  - v. Worker claims FFC
  - vi. Evidence of physical or psychological abuse
  - vii. Battered appearance
  - viii. Frightened demeanor
  - ix. Cowed resignation
  - x. Etc.
2. Under 18
  - i. Western method X
  - ii. Asian method X + 1
  - iii. Official Govt. Records – e.g., start school =  $\sim X + 1 - 5$
3. Migrant foreigner
  - i. No documentation
  - ii. Lack of local language skills &/or cultural knowledge
  - iii. Nervous in presence of authorities
4. Any migrant foreigner engaged in sex work
  - i. Brothel (etc.) work,
  - ii. No documentation
  - iii. Lacks local language skills/cultural knowledge/nervous
5. Forced migrant foreigner engaged in sex work
  - i. As in (c) 1. above re FFC, and
  - ii. As in (c) 3. above
6. Sex worker

- i. Any form of sex work: street, brothel, etc.
- 7. Foreigner, Documented or not
  - i. They are here to sell sex or
  - ii. To take jobs from citizens
- 8. Migrant
  - i. Any female stranger
  - ii. Any stranger

(d) No good evidence exists on the alpha and beta properties of these measures, thus not allowing calculation of sensitivity (1- Beta, Power) and specificity (1- Alpha, Confidence).

## II. Examples of Methodological Problems with the Measurement of Trafficking

- A. **1988 BKK Post editorial and following articles**: Thailand has **2M SW's, 800K of whom are children**. Visit 2 brothels - count proportion seem underaged - multiply x known-#-of-SWs by 2M that "Everyone knows."
- B. **CIA (1997) estimated 700,000 to 2,000,000 trafficked women and children per year globally** (See Steinfatt, et. al, 2002; and Steinfatt, 2003, for more details).

No report currently exists of how these numerical estimates were obtained, but it was not the result of a study by Richard (personal communication, 2004). The numbers were apparently given orally at a CIA briefing entitled *Global Trafficking in Women and Children: Assessing the Magnitude*, held in April of 1999. It is not known how the CIA compiled a reliable estimate of the extent of global human trafficking in 1999 or before, or how it was in a position to do so, given the CIA's de-emphasis on ground-based sources of information. U.S. Embassies around the world report country numbers on trafficking in persons to the State Department for the country in which they are based, but these reported numbers come from sources that may or may not be in a position to know, and more often than not, do not result from empirical studies. People and organizations usually provide these estimates to the U.S. Embassy based on what they think the number is likely to be. Whether or not these individual country numbers formed the basis for the initial 700,000 to 2,000,000 estimate does not appear to be known outside of the CIA. It seems more likely that the CIA numbers are based on figures reported by immigration officials around the world since the numbers are represented as cross-border numbers and not internal country numbers. How immigration officials, or any other sources, would know the number of persons trafficked into or out of their countries is not known, given that these estimates do not represent numbers of arrests for trafficking in persons.

The numbers produced by ideologically driven research are usually (a) *not verifiable*, (b) *have no original data from which they were composed*, and (c) *usually have no computations or interim data summaries available from smaller scale data sets from which they were composed*. These elements are **hallmarks of fabricated numbers**.

### **C. 80,000 to 100,000 trafficked women and children in Cambodia (1998)**

Cambodian NGOs at the 2001 Second World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation Of Children, held in Yokohama, Japan, claimed the existence of 80,000 to 100,000 trafficked women and children per year in Cambodia alone. With a population of only some 12,000,000 persons, amounting to about 00.194% of the total world population, it seemed unlikely that Cambodia could have a number representing some 11% to 14% of the claimed world cross-border international trafficking total as an internal destination total within its small land area.

The **80,000 to 100,000 Cambodian sex workers figures** refer to an official Cambodian government report (**Cambodia Human Development Report, 2000**) prepared with the assistance of UNDP (so joint UN/Cambodian Govt. Figures) with **17,000 said to be in Phnom Penh, 5,000 of whom are children.**

- (a) CHDR 2000 is incorrect in citing HRVC 1995 as the source of the 17,000 sex workers in Phnom Penh figure;
- (b) HRVC 1996, not cited by CHDR 2000, does say 17,000 sex workers in Cambodia, but not in Phnom Penh, but lists CWDA as the source for this number; but
- (c) CWDA is in fact not the source for the 17,000 figure either for Phnom Penh or for Cambodia;
- (d) UNICEF (1996) may be the source of the 17,000 figure since that publication lists no other source for the number, but the source may be HRVC (1996);
- (e) HRVC (1995) does not provide support for the 80,000 – 100,000 figure as suggested in CHDR 2000;
- (f) HRVC (1995) does not say 5,000 sex workers under 18 in Phnom Penh as suggested by CHDR 2000, but rather 1,800 spread across 12 provinces including Phnom Penh; and
- (g) **the Cambodia Human Development Report 2000 appears to have created out of thin air the 5,000 estimate of child sex workers in Phnom Penh based on incorrect information, and counter to what its cited sources report.** (This is just the beginning of the problems: See Steinfatt, et. al, 2002; and Steinfatt, 2003, for more details).

### **III. Common Methodological Errors in Measuring Trafficking Numbers**

- A. No Study is Conducted –**  
**One just cites numbers from someone else’s report. These numbers are often just Fabricated Numbers, made up as a pure guess in response to a question**
- B. Arrogance – Don’t Bother me with Research, Evidence, or the Facts**  
**I’m right, you’re wrong, and that’s all there is to it. Propaganda and Suppression of/Attacks on, Empirical Research**

### C. The “Impossible,”-“Estimated,”- Published & Cited Cycle

- (a) A commonly held and oft repeated belief is that it is difficult or impossible to know the extent of trafficking throughout the world.
- (b) Such statements are often followed by pronouncements of the "estimated" numbers of persons trafficked.
- (c) If the numbers are difficult or impossible to obtain, then where did these “estimates” come from?
- (d) In attempting to trace the "estimates" back to the methods that produced them, it appears that many and perhaps most may be little more than wild guesses, or even pure fabrications.
- (e) Once published, this initial publication of the “estimate” is cited by other publications as the source, and the numbers, whether fabrications or valid measurements, take on a credibility of their own.  
(These begin to look like the ‘begats’ of the Christian Bible.)

### D. Impossibility/Difficulty of Measurement – An Example

Perrin, Majumdar, Gafuik, and Andrews (2001) in their report for the Futures Group *The Future of Southeast Asia: Challenges of Child Sex Slavery and Trafficking in Cambodia* state: It is exceedingly difficult to determine accurate figures for the number of sex slaves in Cambodia as a result of six factors:

- 1) Illicit nature of the sex trade
- 2) Transience and trafficking of sex slaves
- 3) Demographic data on the population alone is not well known
- 4) Security risks of monitoring or recording data about number of sex slaves through direct observation
- 5) Information becomes rapidly obsolete due to the constant flow of victims in the sex trade and evolution of the problem
- 6) Blurring of lines and differences in definitions between which types of women and children are considered to be sex slaves (Perrin, et al., 2001, pp. 11 - 12).

The six factors affect the way in which measurement in commercial sex and trafficking is conducted, but they can be taken into account.

1) The *Illicit nature of the sex trade* does not make it impossible to measure. It simply creates a situation where **questionnaires and other common accompaniments to social scientific measurement are likely to produce invalid responses** (Steinfatt, 2002, Appendix on Data Collection Methodology, pp. 363-364). Attempts at using questionnaires and similar methods of recording data will assure that the interviewer is not welcome in the establishment at future times as well as assuring that little valid information will be collected on the current attempt.

(If management believes that the interviewer is working with the police or other forces against the best interests of the business, then the security of the interviewer may be compromised.)

2) The *Transience and trafficking of sex slaves* involves two different issues with respect to measurement. a. Transience creates a potential problem of **double counting**, and

b. the possibility that workers have been **moved recently and not replaced**.

(These errors should be randomly distributed and their extent can be determined through replication of the study, and through careful distinctions between *point-in-time estimates*, *per-unit-of-time estimates*, and *lifetime ever-worked estimates*, as discussed by Steinfatt, 2002, pp. 17 – 22, & 134 – 144).

Trafficking creates the same problem dealt with in 1) above.

3) *Demographic data on the population alone is not well known.* **False.** Reliable demographic data on the population is in fact both well known and readily available from government ministries and from various Population Institutes, and the United Nations (1999).

4) *The Security risks of monitoring or recording data about number of sex slaves through direct observation.*

a. See 1) above.

b. Sex venues are not inherently dangerous places for an interviewer,

i. especially when the interviewer is from the same culture as the interviewee,

ii. and/or when the interviewer is culturally similar to the expected customer base. (Our interviewers for the Geographic Mapping Study were Khmer moto drivers who are common customers of the type of business they were surveying. Interviewers for the City Block Sampling were culturally similar to the persons in the business, either Khmer or Vietnamese.)

5) *Information becomes rapidly obsolete due to the constant flow of victims in the sex trade and evolution of the problem.*

a. Constant flows do not equate to rapid or even to slow obsolescence. Commercial sex has a high EAR (Employment Activity Rate) as discussed in Steinfatt (2002, p. 134 - 144). But the number of workers remains relatively constant over time,

b. In Cambodia, many of the same workers can be found in the same locations over periods of six to eighteen months, (despite the "closed" appearance that may be presented by the existence of large padlocks on the exterior iron gates of the establishment).

c. Trafficking has occurred for thousands of years and the process does not evolve to new forms at a rapid rate. (Some new locations do open and older ones do close, but that is the natural flow of any form of business responding to market demands. Occasional police raids have little effect on this flow, nor on established trafficking routes).

6) *Blurring of lines and differences in definitions between which types of women and children are considered to be sex slaves.*

a. This issue is clearly a problem, the one of definition discussed above.

b. Recommendation: keep careful note of numbers in specific definitional categories

## E. “It is Estimated that” – The Problems with Key Informants as Estimators

### Key Informants are

- Not Capable of “Estimating” the “size of the problem” unless very local
  - OK for providing leads on where some trafficked persons may be located
- Notwithstanding these stated difficulties, the six factors did not dissuade Perrin, et al. from providing guesses, of unknown and unstated origin and thus unknown veracity, as to the size of the problem.

Despite these significant challenges, ranges of figures on the size of this problem in Cambodia have been made public. On the higher end, it is estimated that there are between 80,000 to 100,000 prostitutes and sex slaves in Cambodia. By far the lowest statistic for the number of prostitutes and sex slaves in Cambodia is between 40,000 to 50,000. With a population of just 10-12 million, Cambodia's sex slave and prostitution problem is enormous. Indeed, **more than 1 in 150 people in Cambodia are sex slaves or prostitutes** (Perrin, et al., 2001, p. 12).

- Perrin, et. al. state that they obtained their estimates by **asking persons associated with trafficking to estimate its extent:**

The most credible experts on this issue who deal with sex slavery, trafficking or associated consequences of these problems were approached to complete an interview. Many of these individuals face this problem on a daily basis and have been active in this area for years or even decades (2001, pp. 5-6).

- How did Perrin, et al., know how to recognize credible experts on trafficking numbers? (an area in which they themselves were not expert)  
(No scientific studies were done either by the Perrin group or by anyone that Perrin's Future Group interviewed.)

The process of asking people who work for an NGO or governmental agency in a specific content area how big they think a problem is, may be likened to asking expert baseball players of long standing to estimate the number of persons currently playing baseball in their country. **Being expert at baseball does not imply knowledge or credibility concerning the number of baseball players.** Without a scientific study to back up the estimate, players can offer no more than a wild guess even though they are quite familiar with the game of baseball, with many other baseball players and managers, and with the lore of baseball which may contain a ‘number of players’ guess that ‘everyone knows is true.’ **The average of a set of wild guesses is simply an average wild guess.** It does not take much effort to “make public” a wild guess, and then have a second party refer to this guess as a “statistic,” attempting to provide the guess with an aura of credibility.

**F. Equivocation of the Meaning and Reference of the Numbers –**

(The numbers stay the same from report to report but what they refer to is changed)

While the numbers in the initial report were estimates w/o benefit of a study, They are then changed in the next report quoting the initial report to mean something quite different e.g., “80,000 prostitutes in Cambodia” becomes “80,000 sex slaves in Phnom Penh, many of them children”

**G. Double Counting**

10,000 at risk of being trafficked in Vietnam  
+ same 10,000 trafficked in Vietnam  
+ same 10,000 trafficked through Cambodia  
+ same 10,000 trafficked into China  
= “40,000 victims”

Any trafficking of persons shown to exist that uses a given country as a transit point between other countries, be counted in the totals only for the country of final destination.

**H. Location of Measurement**

At Their Location *versus* At Your Location : different conversations/responses will occur based on location – be careful

**I. Failure to Go to the actual site and gather data –**

**AFESIP/Swingle errors e.g., The Phantom City of Prey Veang** (See Steinfatt, et. al, 2002; and Steinfatt, 2003, for more details).

**IV. New and innovative methodologies in Socio-Cultural Trafficking Research**

**A. Use observers who are Familiar with Sex Work,**  
(or with the Form of Work Under Investigation)

**B. Direct, personal, in-country experience with the phenomena is more important than *extensive* training of data reporters and observers**

**C. Cross check validity with other independent studies using good methods**

**D. Use the Multi-trait, Multi-Matrix approach to measurement:**

*Multiple Measures of Multiple Indicators*

To measure these numbers in Phnom Penh, Steinfatt, et al., (2002) used

- (a) A Geographic Mapping Study of Phnom Penh, along with
- (b) Data from the Phnom Penh Municipal Tourism Department,
- (c) Empirical Data from UNDP on the number of sex workers on Routes 1 and 5,
- (d) An additional City Block Sampling study of Phnom Penh.

### **E. The moto driver method**

- (a) **Finding the Locations – Moto drivers and the GPS**
- (b) **Interviewing the Managers for trafficking data**
- (c) **Defining and Counting Underaged Sex Workers**
- (d) **Defining and Counting ‘Trafficking Victims’ over 18**
- (e) **Observing proportions of Khmer, Viet, Other Asian, and Western customers**

### **F. Reliabilities**

- (a) **Calculation**
- (b) **Meaning**

### **G. Local Government Counts**

Government Counts can be good if the Government is efficient and not trying to hide something – but don’t trust them alone.

### **H. National Government Counts**

Commission on Human Rights for the National Assembly (1997)

### **I. City Block Sampling**

- (a) **Rationale**
- (b) **Method**

## **V. Comparisons with Steinfatt, Baker, and Beesey**

Steinfatt, Baker, and Beesey (2002) used data from Phnom Penh and Highways One and Five to estimate **20,829 sex workers in Cambodia**. They report an **indentured percentage of 31.2%** in Phnom Penh, and estimate **2,488 trafficked women and children in Cambodia**.

The (2003) study estimated **18,256 sex workers in Cambodia, an indentured percentage of 20.2% throughout Cambodia, and approximately 2,000 trafficked women and children in Cambodia**.

Thus, a principal effect of observing the countryside rather than estimating it from Phnom Penh and highway data was to lower the estimates in each of these categories.

The National Assembly report estimates 14,725 brothel workers in Cambodia (National Assembly, 1997, p. 3), MoH National AIDS Division counts ~17,000 sex workers in Cambodia (2003).

IJM #s are the same as ours for Svay Pak.

## References

Steinfatt, T. M. Baker, S. and Beesey, A. (2002). *Measuring the Number of Trafficked Women in Cambodia: 2002. Part –I of a Series*. Accepted for presentation at The Human Rights Challenge of Globalization in Asia-Pacific-US: The Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children. Sponsored by the Office to Combat and Monitor Trafficking, U.S. State Department. Globalization Research Center – University of Hawaii-Manoa, Honolulu, Hawaii, USA, November 13-15. Available at: <http://slate.msn.com/Features/pdf/Trfcamf3.pdf>

Steinfatt, T. M. (2003). *Measuring the Number of Trafficked Women and Children in Cambodia: A Direct Observation Field Study*. Sponsored by USAID. Available at: <http://slate.msn.com/Features/pdf/Trfciiif.pdf>

Steinfatt, T. M. (2002). *Working at the Bar: Sex Work and Health Communication in Thailand*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. Available through Amazon.com.

**(References to other reports mentioned in these notes are available in the Reference sections of the three reports listed above)**