

How Women in Poverty Are Supplying America's Market for Hair

Country: Cambodia

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia — Pheng Sreyvy wears a hooded sweatshirt as she handwashes her children's clothing in the sweltering Cambodian sun. The hair that peeks out from under the hood is split and uneven. On closer examination, her roots are copper but fade to black as the strands reach her neck.

Sreyvy, 39, explains that her hair used to be down to her waist. That was before hair traders offered her \$15 to sell it. "I feel regret for cutting my hair off. I don't feel made up," she told NBC News while working underneath her makeshift home on wooden stilts. Her 13-month-old son, Nau, cried faintly in a hammock nearby.

Sreyvy lives in the Ponhea Leu district of Cambodia. The community is about 90 minutes outside of Phnom Penh, the country's capital. The province is quiet and dusty with gutters filled with mud, water, flies and garbage. Barefoot toddlers play with stray dogs and crowing roosters near a barren well.

The scene here is a dramatic contrast from Phnom Penh's Orussey Market, a massive, loud arena crowded with people, hammocks, fruit, vegetables, candy, roasted pigs, bright fabrics, gold-plated jewelry — and rows upon rows of long, raw Cambodian hair.

Local actresses and other women buy hair from vendor Keo Vorleak's stall at Orussey almost daily, Vorleak said. Also a hairdresser, Vorleak manages several cubicle-like salons — all of which were bustling with Cambodian women from Phnom Penh on one Saturday afternoon in July. They were getting their hair washed and trimmed before having the rows of hair hanging along the walls attached to their heads by Vorleak and her staff.

Sreyvy's hair might well have ended up displayed in a loose bundle on that wall, woven into the hair of a woman at the market or sewn into a wig resting atop an American woman's head in New York City.

Cambodian hair has particular appeal to black women, said Janice Wilson, an African American woman who ran a business collecting hair from women in Cambodia that she then sold in the United States and internationally. "There is a variety of patterns and it varies from straight to tightly coiled," Wilson said, adding that she stressed the variety in texture as compared to hair from [India](#) — which [leads the world in exporting human hair](#) and where the hair is often donated as a religious practice.

In Cambodia, the international trade can start at markets like Orussey, where hair is sold to international customers at prices starting at \$120 for 16 inches of hair on a weft or \$50 for raw loose hair in a bundle. “They put it in their suitcase and go,” Vorleak said.

From Phnom Penh, the chopped tresses then end up for sale as hair extensions, weaves and wigs in a global market. The international resale value for hair claiming to be raw Cambodian hair can start as low as \$100 for 12 inches of loose hair in a bundle to over \$300 for longer lengths, also in a bundle.

That’s a far cry from the amount women like Sreyvy receive for their hair. She said hair traders frequent the village looking to cut and buy long hair from women. Sreyvy has sold her hair three times since 2012: The first time she was living under a tent in Phnom Penh. She sold it again six months ago to buy her son medicine. “He was sick with a fever and cough,” she said.

A Backup Plan for Vulnerable Women

Van Sariem, 33, lives in the same community as Sreyvy. Sariem’s hair used to be waist length. When the hair traders offered her \$25 for her first hair sale, she took it, using the money to send her youngest children to school.

The money didn’t go far. “After school my children go to the temple to beg for money from tourists,” she said. Sariem said she’s a scavenger and struggling to provide for her three children since relocating to this district. She said school costs about \$8 a month per child.

Sariem sold her hair a second time for \$15 when it was shorter. Her hair is now long enough to be slicked back into a bun.

“One day someone approached me and wanted to buy my hair again, but my hair is still short. They offered me just \$8, and I said no because it was very cheap,” Sariem said.

She described a husband and wife hair trader team — the husband set the price of the transaction and the wife used scissors to cut the hair “quick and fast,” grabbing the longest lengths in bunches. The ends of her tresses are now thin and tattered. She created a concoction of water and residue from leaves of a Kapok tree in an attempt to make her hair shiny and long.

For women here with such little means, their hair can at times serve as an insurance policy, backup plan and rainy day fund. “I will sell it again if I don’t have money,” Sariem said.

Shampoo and conditioner in this community are hard to come by — as are food, plumbing, electricity, sanitation, medical care, a sustainable income and job skills.

Lim Khim lives across the street from Sariem. Her hair is too short to hold a ponytail, mainly because she recently sold it for \$30. The traders told her they were going to resell it to salons. “I need the money so I have to sell my hair. They just cut it from behind. Just chop, chop, chop,” Khim said.

Sariem, Sreyvy and Khim are friendly with one another. They met as neighbors in Phnom Penh, prior to being forcibly evicted from their homes due to longstanding “land conflicts” of the [Khmer Rouge regime](#) and [land concessions](#) of 2012. Families like theirs worked in housekeeping and garbage collection in the capital city. Husbands often worked in construction. Prostitution and sex trafficking were sometimes the only viable way for women to make money there.

The “rising price of land is one of the main parts for the relocation,” said Soeng Sen Karuna of the [Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association](#). “The provision of economic land concession to private companies that come to invest in Cambodia is also another root cause for the land disputes.”

[Tear gas and electric batons](#) were used to forcibly move hundreds of families from Phnom Penh to resettlement communities on the outskirts of the city. The tent-filled slums are on bumpy dirt roads, devoid of everything from clean water to opportunities for gainful employment.

According to the World Bank, 4.5 million Cambodians are near-poor. Ninety percent of them live in the countryside. Their poverty and abandonment leave them vulnerable.

“They are still struggling to make income and send their children to school since the schools are far away from their homes. They are still facing a lot of challenging issues, coercing them to sell their hair,” Sen Karuna said. “Nobody wants to sell their hair.”

He added that the relocation creates areas of centralized poverty. “That’s why the traders target these areas to buy hair from the people who are desperately poor,” he said.

About two hours outside Phnom Penh is Kampong Chan Province, where Lang Heang Khim, 22, lives. She’s disabled and walks slowly with a limp. She said cancer runs in her family. Heang Khim sold her hair not only for the money but also as a convenience, as one side of her body appeared immobile.

“My hair was long and nice about three months ago,” Heang Khim said. “They came to my house and asked if I am thinking about selling my hair. I said yes. I can only do my hair with one hand.”

The \$45 exchange left her locks a tattered, uneven mess. “I would do it again, but I won’t let them cut it like this,” she said. “If we can agree to make a style for my hair to go to my neck. If not, I won’t sell it.”

Sen Karuna, of the human rights association, said these women don’t know how to barter over the price of hair before they decide to sell. “They decided to sell their hair because they are poor, and they don’t know where to sell their hair for international market price,” he continued. “Only the brokers know the markets where to sell hair at (a) high price. The villagers have no choice but to sell their hair when they meet the brokers.”

Janice Wilson started working in the hair trade industry in Cambodia in 2008, initially selling hair through [Black Hair Media](#). In 2010, she launched [Arjuni](#), which manufactured and exported Cambodian hair extensions, grossing over \$1 million a year.

Wilson, now based in Seattle, said her staff cut and collected hair from women in Cambodia. “It felt better when we were leaving them with a cute bob for sure,” she said. Wilson said that although her business was run ethically, she faced an internal conflict for trading third-world hair for first-world vanity.

“On the other side of it, you’re like, for this company to work, there needs to be a certain population that does not exceed a certain income (and) that they are in the position where they have to sell their hair. That never felt great for me in the business,” she said. “You realize the money is assisting, but what woman doesn’t appreciate her long locks.”

Wilson stated that beyond a cut for cash transactions, Arjuni provided jobs to young women who were victims of sex-trafficking within the country. “Some of our NGO partners specialized in extracting women from sex-trafficking,” she said, referring to nongovernmental organizations. After the women received therapy services for the trauma of sexual exploitation, Wilson explained that her former shop taught the women how to manufacture the collected hair as a job. She said they also took English and math classes and had opportunities to become managers.

“Sex trafficking is still on the rise,” said Am Sam Ath, chief of technical investigation at the human rights NGO [Licadho](#). “The issue is still a concern for the government and particularly for the tourists who seek sex-trafficking in Cambodia.”

He said many of the victims are [younger than 18](#), and technology is affecting sexual exploitation. “The government should provide more education to (Cambodian) people on how to prevent sex-trafficking and prevention should be done in the tourism places.”

Arguably, the dire situations experienced by many Cambodian women are represented by each strand of their hair that is shipped across the world, ending up on the heads of many women in the United States.

U.S. imports make up a majority of the world market in human hair products. Note: Products include wigs, false beards, eyebrows and eyelashes, switches and the like, of human hair, and articles. Image by Jiachuan Wu.

Black women in America were Wilson's top clients. A [2019 Mintel Consumer Research report](#) showed that black consumers, particularly women, are moving toward protective styles, including braids with extensions, weaves and wigs. Protective styles require purchases of hair, human or synthetic.

According to Mintel, there is no UPC code on extension sales, making it difficult to track the origins of the hair.

Wilson said many of her clients admitted that they couldn't find Cambodia on a map. The mystique created a "trendy" allure about the country, which was attractive to customers. "In the world of beauty, it was something different," Wilson said.

Arjuni closed in 2017, and Wilson now runs [Mane Moguls](#) for hair industry entrepreneurs looking for more insight into the hair extension business. Her program includes a module about ethics on the ground.

Still, fair trade and transparency aren't enough to fully combat poverty in Cambodia, according to Sen Karuna. "I don't want to see our people falling poor until they have to sell their hair, but I want the government to quickly start thinking about the standard of living of the people," he said. "But if this hair trade occurs, the government should think about the people. We should not allow excessive exploitation to take place."

As for the future of the hair industry, Wilson predicts that synthetic hair technology will catch up and make fake hair indistinguishable from the real thing. "And for those that are insistent upon the real thing, there will always be some authentic human hair around, but you will pay a pretty penny for it," she said.

In the meantime, Sariem, Sreyvy and Lim Khim are three Cambodian women whose hair might now be for sale online, in hair supply shops and salons — or resting atop a stranger's head halfway across the world.

"It's so easy to pick up that hair and not give it a thought about where it came from," Wilson said.