

‘The Storm Makers’ Shows Life After Human Trafficking in Cambodia

By [Lucy Westcott](#) 8/29/15 at 2:09 PM



Aya, a victim of human trafficking who shares her story in "The Storm Makers." Tipasa Production/Bophana Production

Every year, thousands of Cambodians travel abroad to work in Thailand, Malaysia and Taiwan. After hearing fantastical stories of the material wealth and success available to them overseas, they often return with very little. Others return with scars, other forms of trauma and children.

The Storm Makers, a documentary from French-Cambodian director Guillaume Suon, explores the dark undercurrent of Cambodia’s mass migration boom: Half a million Cambodians work abroad and many will be sold as slaves. The film follows the lives of women who have returned after being enslaved overseas and those preparing to make the well-trodden journey, as well as a trafficker who claims he has sold more than 500 Cambodian girls, some as young as 14. The traffickers are known as “storm makers,” for the damage they wreak on families and villages.

Cambodia, with its population of 15.4 million, experiences “significant internal and cross-border trafficking, and is a country of origin, transit and destination for trafficked persons,” [according](#) to the United Nations Action for Cooperation against Trafficking in Persons. Both men and women are affected. Despite recent economic growth, [26 percent of the adult population is illiterate](#) and nearly 20 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. The ongoing political tensions in the country combined with the significant unemployment triggered by the 2008 financial crisis led to hundreds of thousands of people desperately looking for work.

“When you talk about human trafficking, you talk about all the social issues in Cambodia right now,” including land-grabbing and violence, Suon told *Newsweek*.

He was based in Cambodia for seven years, including in the country’s villages, where most of Cambodia’s trafficking victims come from. Nearly everyone knows someone who has taken the journey, and villagers were quick to point out the “storm makers” within the community. Due to the sensitivity of the issue, Suon and his small team had to spend time gaining the trust of locals.

“Then the film started to be real when I met Aya,” said Suon.

Much of *The Storm Makers* revolves around the story of Aya, a woman in her early 20s who was trafficked to Malaysia when she was 16 to work as a maid. Her story is common, said Suon: Aya's employer was abusive, so she escaped from the house, only to be raped the night she ran away and then held prisoner for two months. The rape resulted in a son not wanted by his mother or grandmother; in the film, we see Aya's mother call her a "slut" and complain about her grandson. Later in the film, Aya says she hits her son when she is reminded of his father and what he did to her, a moment that has angered many audience members, said Suon.

"In almost all the cases the children are not wanted, it's rape or prostitution," said Suon. "A lot of girls start to work as a maid or a factory worker, then they are transferred to prostitution."

Aya scrapes together money for her son by washing dishes and cooking for her neighbors and hauling bricks—for \$1 a day—on a construction site for one of many new apartment buildings and factories being built in the capital Phnom Penh. Meanwhile, the head of a job agency, Pou Houy, is shown enjoying a life of luxury. Without hesitation he explains how he recruits poor, often illiterate villagers for overseas work, a lucrative business that has afforded him a gold Lexus and other ostentatious trappings of wealth. He also prides himself on being a good Christian.

"I target the poorest ones. These people are easy to lure, to convince and recruit," Houy says during the film. Most have their passports taken away. Houy has never been investigated by the police.

While Suon said Houy was bothered by stories of violence and sexual abuse, he does not see it as his fault but as the actions of employers and people abroad.

"He's not responsible at all for what happened," said Suon, adding that people willingly sign up with the job agency. "What is he thinking when he looks in the mirror every morning? I don't know."

Cambodians will continue to travel abroad for work, leaving their families and villages—often called "ghost towns" because of their depleted populations—behind them, said Suon. He hopes to eventually screen the film at the United Nations, and he wants viewers to consider the decisions that lead workers overseas and traffickers to sell human beings.

"I made this film so people watch themselves in the mirror," he said.

Suon pointed out that Cambodia is not the only country where human trafficking occurs. An estimated 100,000 children are believed to be involved in the U.S. sex trade, although there is no official tally of the number of human trafficking victims in the U.S., according to the [Polaris Project](#), a Washington-based organization that helps victims of human trafficking.

"If a very powerful country like the U.S. can't handle it, then how can Cambodia?" Suon asks.

The Storm Makers will be shown on PBS at 10 p.m. on August 31, as part of the documentary series [POV \(Point of View\)](#).