

What's the truth behind Somaly Mam?



Photo courtesy of [Roland Berger Stiftung](#)

Browsing the chatter around the Internet, I recently came across this potentially damaging *Cambodia Daily* [article](#) from last month that, to my knowledge, hasn't yet sparked a follow-up investigation from other news organizations. (For the moment I'm outside of Cambodia and don't have access to the *Daily*, which doesn't publish an online edition.)

The piece raises questions over whether the prominent anti-trafficking activist, Somaly Mam, exaggerated or fabricated details of a well-known 2004 raid on one of her shelters for former sex workers. It also asks whether, in a supposed revenge attack in 2006, human traffickers really kidnapped and gang-raped her daughter as she claims.

These two episodes bolstered Somaly's heroic image abroad, and probably helped her fundraising efforts. They were documented in detail in her [autobiography](#).

To give some background, Somaly is a global face of the anti-trafficking movement in Cambodia, and a former sex worker who claims to have escaped forced servitude when she was younger. Through her non-profit group [Afesip](#), she now frees other trafficked women through brothel raids that have [attracted controversy](#). She's also a favorite of [Angelina Jolie](#) and *New York Times* columnist [Nick Kristof](#).

Somaly's French ex-husband and former head of Afesip, Pierre Legros, brought forward the allegations in response to claims she made at a United Nations conference last month. In her speech, Somaly said that in 2004, Cambodian soldiers entered her rehabilitation center and took a number of protected girls, killing eight of them. Legros denies the second part, telling the *Daily*:

No one has been killed in that story...We became political actors at that time and Somaly became a political actor. So saying that [eight people were killed] at the UN is, I think, a big mistake from her side.

The story notes that, while the US State Department condemned the raid at the time, no deaths were reported. It also alleges the women in Somaly's center were being held against their will and "forced their way out."

Commenting on the abduction of their daughter in Battambang -- an episode that became a legend thanks to [Glamour](#) -- Legros told the newspaper that she simply ran off with her boyfriend.

Legros says he came forward with this information out of concern for their daughter's privacy. It's not clear whether he's also acting out of a grudge against his ex-wife, who he divorced in 2008, or whether he's onto something that merits a closer look.

After all, Legros is not the first to make these claims. About three years ago, one former Afesip employee and one sex worker who stayed in a center explained to me, in very similar detail to Legros's account, that Somaly may have played with the facts in the abduction account (though they didn't mention the 2004 raid).

That's not to say Somaly is lying, or to diminish the value of her organization's work. It just means that potential donors and volunteers should apply healthy skepticism before they stand behind her marketing pitch, or that of any other nonprofit.

If the allegations against her are true, though, this wouldn't be the first time a prominent activist, campaigning for a trendy cause, has been caught [fudging autobiographical facts](#).