

Child Prostitution in Thailand

According to the United Nation's Children's Fund (UNICEF), one million children – mostly girls but also a significant number of boys – enter the multi-billion dollar commercial sex trade in Asia every year.¹ The trafficking of women and children into the global sex trade is the third largest criminal activity internationally, and a multi-billion dollar industry.² While other children are sleeping, playing, going to school and enjoying the innocence of their youth, child sex workers in East Asia are dealing with the devastating realities of their exploitation – AIDS, malnutrition, psychological trauma and sexually transmitted disease.

Thailand has long been a top destination for sex tourists and pedophiles seeking to take advantage of the country's thriving sex industry. According to research conducted at Chulalongkorn University, 2.8 million Thais, including men, women, and children, served as sex workers throughout the country from 1999 to 2002.³ Of this group, about 800,000 were under 18 years of age.⁴ Although the exact number of children that are sexually exploited every year in Thailand is unknown, it is significant. Every year, thousands of children are trafficked from rural villages and sold in the cities or overseas for prostitution or pornographic purposes.

¹ UNICEF, "Children on the Edge: Protecting Children from Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking in East Asia and the Pacific." 2001, p. 3.

² Source: Interpol. Qtd. in www.stopdemand.org.

³ Agence France Presse, "Thailand: More Thais entering Sex trade despite improving economy," January 3, 2004. qtd. in www.stopdemand.org.

⁴ Id.

Defining the Problem: What is Commercial Sexual Exploitation?

According to ECPAT (End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism), commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) "comprises sexual abuse by the adult and remuneration in cash or in kind to the child or a third person or persons. The child is treated as a sexual object and as a commercial object. The commercial sexual abuse of a child is a form of violence against that child which amounts to forced labor and a contemporary form of slavery...Commercial sexual exploitation of children includes all forms of prostitution, pornography and trafficking or 'selling' of children for sexual purposes."⁵ A "child" means all those less than 18 years of age.

Children who suffer from sexual exploitation should not be labeled "prostitutes." Prostitution is the selling of sexual acts for money or services. As ECPAT explains, it should not be legally possible to categorize a person under 18 as a "prostitute," since a minor cannot give informed consent to sexual exploitation. Children who are paid for sexual abuse by adults should be described as being abused through prostitution, not as prostitutes.⁶

Who are the exploiters?

It is frequently assumed that only pedophiles or western tourists sexually exploit children in Asia. However, the sex trade mainly caters to local clients, not foreigners.⁷ Like many parts of Asia, the moral double standard in Thailand

⁵ ECPAT, "A Step Forward," Stockholm, Sweden, 1998-1999. p. 7.

⁶ Id.

⁷ UNICEF, "Children on the Edge," p. 4.

condemns prostitutes as shameful, yet it is accepted for both married and single men to use prostitutes. In general, studies show that the majority of abusers, both foreign and local, are males between the ages of 20 and 65.⁸ According to Denise Ritchie of Stop Demand, the majority of adults who buy sex from children and minors are not pedophiles but situational abusers, either morally and sexually indiscriminant or rationalize their behavior with racially biased myths. These men have no sexual boundaries (child sex offenders), and only a minority are men who have a sexual preference for children (pedophiles).

The AIDs epidemic has also fueled the demand for younger and younger sex workers. Both foreign tourists and local men believe that having sex with a younger person is “safer” because they are less likely to have HIV or other venereal diseases. Unfortunately, the greatest risk of transmitting diseases occurs when an adult has sex with a child, particularly through anal intercourse. As Ron O’Grady from ECPAT describes, “The partially developed membranes of a young girl’s vagina or a young boy’s anus are fragile and easily torn. The child kept in prostitution receives many customers and the torn membrane of the small body never fully recovers. The child quickly becomes a walking AIDS grenade.”⁹ What makes this situation even more deadly is the fact that children are generally not well educated about sexually transmitted diseases, and rarely ask the clients to wear condoms.

The Profile of the Pedophile

⁸ ECPAT, “A Step Forward,” p. 13.

⁹ O’Grady, Ron. The Rape of the Innocent. ECPAT, 1994. p. 78.

Many pedophiles travel to countries such as Thailand, the Philippines, or Cambodia to take advantage of the lax law enforcement and the impoverished financial situation of the children in those countries. As ECPAT stated in a report on pedophile behavior: “Pedophile travelers to Asia now have very well-established links. Many of their senior members have found a way to gain permanent residency in an Asian country, either as a retiree or by setting up a small business. From that base they have devised ways to assist friends from their home country.”¹⁰ People who abuse children in foreign countries excuse their actions by saying, “I am helping them by giving them money,” or “Children in this part of the world mature faster.” Pedophiles convince themselves that using children for sex is not abuse, and that the laws and morals they would follow in their own country can be forgotten while on holiday.¹¹

Who is a Pedophile?

The pedophile is a person, almost always male, whose preferred sexual partner is a child of a particular age. Some pedophiles prefer pre-pubescent children while others choose early teen partners. The largest number of pedophiles choose only boys as partners (the term is pederasts). Most of the others choose young girls while a few are bisexual in their choice of partners.

The pedophile learns early in life that his sexual desires are not acceptable to most members of the community and he hides his sexual deviance as much as he is able. This means that he will conform to the most conservative attitudes and standards of society in order to merge into the mainstream of people. He has no ambition to stand out in the crowd and will go to great lengths to appear as normal as possible.

The popular image of the child sexual abuser as a rather nasty and creepy character is far from the mark. Most long-term, persistently

¹⁰ O’Grady, Ron. p 43.

¹¹ ECPAT, “A Step Forward,” Stockholm, Sweden, 1998-1999. p. 13.

offending pedophiles are men who have been regarded as model citizens, some-what conservative in their dress, their religion and their politics. They will be respected by the community because of their interest in children. A large number are engaged in prestige occupations that give them access to children such as social workers, teachers, clergy, doctors.¹²

The Path to Exploitation

Although poverty is one of the major underlying factors that cause children to become part of Thailand's sex trade, poverty alone cannot explain why so many children are involved. Each year, thousands of children are lured, sold, and kidnapped into the sex industry. They are often betrayed by their neighbors, friends, relatives, guardians, and even boyfriends or parents, and they are tricked with false promises of a better life or well-paid work. They are then forced to pay off 'debts' for transportation, health and living expenses, subdued with rape, violence and torture and sold from brothel to brothel.

Women and children are brought to Thailand along major trafficking routes that lead from Vietnam, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and the Yunnan and Guangxi provinces of China. Most victims end up in Thai brothels; however, Thailand has also become a major hub for trafficking girls to other destinations such as Hong Kong, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Japan.¹³ However, trafficking also occurs within the borders of Thailand. Thousands of Thai girls are lured from their villages in Northern Thailand to work in the brothels in Bangkok, Pattaya, and Phuket.

Although the majority of children are trafficked and forced into the sex trade, others move into prostitution 'voluntarily,' fleeing poverty or physical, sexual and

mental abuse at home. Many children have experienced abuse, rape, or abandonment before they even enter the sex trade. A smaller minority may simply leave home for the bright lights of thriving cities, innocently believing that they will find a better life.¹⁴

The increasing incidence of child sexual exploitation in Thailand shows that the problem stems not only from poverty but also from multiple sources. Below is a list of factors that fuel the sex trade in Thailand and the sexual exploitation of children:

- **Consumerism:** The attraction of a substantial amount of money – from 7,000 baht to 30,000 baht per child, depending on the physical attractiveness of the child, makes the offer of the agents nearly impossible to refuse. As Sudarat Srisang, the Executive Secretary EPCAT, stated, "The most important factor leading parents to sell their daughters into prostitution is that they want a large lump sum of money to buy goods that provide them comfort and conveniences or to build houses to compete with other villagers for prestige."¹⁵
- **Family break down:** Most of the victims are street children and children from families that don't take care of their children. As Sudarat Sereewat, the head of FACE (Coalition to Fight Against Child Exploitation) explained, "They [the families] just don't take good care of the children. Their children hang around, stay with friends, disappear somewhere and

¹² O'Grady, Ron. The Rape of the Innocent. ECPAT, 1994. p. 40.

¹³ UNICEF, "Every Last Child," p. 31.

¹⁴ UNICEF, p.5.

¹⁵ Jubilee Campaign, "Child Prostitution in Thailand: Briefing Paper," Kent, England.

the parents don't even know about it.”¹⁶

- **Ignorance:** Agents promise a good job and a “better life” for the children. Often, promises are even made that the child will be receiving education. Traffickers pay the family an “advance” on earnings, which is often tempting enough that families will ignore their better judgment.
- **Sexual Tourism:** Although child prostitution is not a new phenomenon in Asia, tourism has helped propel it into a large, international industry. Pedophiles have long used Thailand as a haven for their sexual desires. Sex tourists who are non-discriminating also add to the problem of child sexual exploitation.
- **Economic Development:** Inappropriate development policies have deprived rural people of their land and means of survival. Forced into poverty, many villagers sell their children to agents for a few hundred dollars.

Effects of Prostitution and Sexual Exploitation on Children

Sexual abuse is extremely damaging to a child's mental and physical health. In one study where 1012 Thai adolescent and young adult prostitutes were interviewed, 90% disapproved of prostitution and what they were doing; 50% felt society showed contempt for them; 40% felt hopeless; and 26% stated that they would commit suicide if they

¹⁶ Sudarat Sereewat, interviewed by Simon Baker, “The Sexual Exploitation of Thai Children by Foreign Paedophiles,” *Child Workers in Asia*, Vol. 16. No. 1, January – April 2000.

knew they had AIDS.¹⁷ Sadly, even if a child successfully escapes prostitution, it is often exceptionally difficult for them to return to any kind of “normal” life afterwards. Below the physical, psychological, and behavioral effects are broken down.

Physical

Living conditions in brothels are frequently unsanitary and cramped. Girls attest to being beaten or jumped on when pregnant to induce a miscarriage. Severe physical damage contributes to health problems, trauma, and poor mental health.

- Severe physical damage, internal and external
- Venereal Diseases and HIV/AIDS (In some cases up to 73% of girls tested in brothels were HIV positive.)

Psychological

Many of the girls were traumatized, raped or beaten into submission if they did not comply with a customer's demands. Such stories have been substantiated by police and press reports.¹⁸ The psychological effects of enduring such treatment

- Trauma
- Extreme low self-esteem and self-worth
- Self rejection, self blame, guilt, and shame
- Sense of uncleanness
- Poor mental health
- Extreme Depression
- High suicidal tendencies

¹⁷ Green, Patricia. “Prostitution: Children the Victims.”

¹⁸ Green, Patricia.

- Denial of involvement in prostitution
- Denial and confusion in family relationships
- Fears: rejection of others, further violation, being resold
- Distorted perceptions of sex – view sexual intercourse as being disgusting, and associate it with deception, pain, and violence

Behavioral

- Excessive attention seeking behaviors
- Excessive emotional attachment to new care givers or anyone they feel they can trust
- Lack of motivation to consider alternatives or make decisions
- Learning disabilities, lack of concentration, and very short-term memory span
- Escapism – avoiding reality by escaping into sleep or fantasy
- “Cinderella Syndrome” – clinging to the fantasy that some man will come and take them away and offer them a life of ease and happiness ever after¹⁹

Nat’s Story

Nat’s memory fails her. She doesn’t remember when or where she was born. Without a date of birth, she cannot be entirely sure at what age she ran away from her home in the highlands of Chiang Ray province or when it was that she was forced into prostitution.

She thinks it was at about age 10 that she grew sick of her stepfather’s verbal abuse. He was

a heroin and opium addict, out of work and hostile to Nat and his two stepsons. Required to work in the fields and perform household chores, Nat, like most girls, did not get much schooling, probably a year or two at most.

One day, together with a friend, the young girl simply took off without saying good-bye and boarded a bus bound for Bangkok, hoping to escape to a better life. Free from the control of her stepfather, in a world far away from the isolation of her remote community, Nat thought Bangkok would be ‘paradise.’

Instead, she found work in an unglamorous noodle shop and was paid a modest 1,500 baht per month, along with her board and food. Sometime later, Nat doesn’t know when, the girlfriend who had traveled to Bangkok with her resurfaced to tell Nat of a wonderful job serving drinks in a bar in the Patpong district of Bangkok, the city’s notorious red light area.

Nat served drinks at the bar for two months before she was forced by the owner, a Thai police official, to sell herself to the bar’s customers. She was coerced with threats against the life of her mother if she dare tell. Her first customer was a sex tourist from the United Kingdom. Nat was then forced to take five or six customers a week.

For four years or so, Nat was confined to the bar and her quarters, never allowed to see daylight or wander freely. She was told that without identification papers she would be imprisoned. She never knew differently, and in a moment of desperation, she strung up some cord and tried to hang herself. Nat was stopped only by a co-worker.

“Every day I cried,” Nat recalls. Her co-workers, who never knew of the threats used to keep Nat submissive, gave her a teddy bear to console her. It was one of her only possessions when an American girl called Annie, a volunteer with Rahab Ministries, rescued her from the bar. At first Annie paid the owner 500 baht to take Nat on a shopping trip, her first outing in four years. When Annie tried to secure her release, the owner insisted Nat’s long-lost brother had run up debts of 5,000 baht and demanded compensation. He received his payment and Nat her freedom.

Now safely in a shelter run by the New Life Center Foundation in Chiang Mai, Nat and other girls are seeking to rebuild their lives. Nat, 18, may not remember ages, but memories of her recent past are still raw and a matter of personal

¹⁹ Green, Patricia. “Prostitution: Children the Victims. The Effects of Prostitution and Sexual Exploitation on Children and Adolescents,” Unpublished paper presented at a conference on Women, Sexuality, and Development. Women’s Studies Centre, Sydney University, November 1994.

*shame. Nat is hoping her past will not be the future of others.*²⁰

Justice for Children in Thailand

In the early 1990s, several influential NGOs such as the Coalition to Fight Against Child Exploitation (FACE) and ECPAT were founded in Thailand with the purpose of raising awareness of commercial sexual exploitation of children in Thailand and to ensure that improvements were made in Thai Law to better protect exploited children. However, by the mid-1990s, the problem had become too great for any one agency to handle. The increasing intensity of these issues led the Thai government and concerned NGOs to undertake collective action. In 1996, a National policy and a Plan of Action for the Prevention and Eradication of the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children received Cabinet approval.²¹ Moreover, in 1996, the national parliament passed the Prostitution Prevention and Suppression Act, which introduced harsher penalties for offenders caught sexually exploiting minors. Under the new law, the emphasis of prosecution was shifted to charge brothel owners, procurers, pimps, and clients who had sexual relations with persons under 18 years of age. Sexual offenders caught with a young Thai girl or boy will face 10 or 15 years in a Thai prison, and those found with a child younger than 13 will face a greater penalty.²² In addition, penalties were introduced for parents who sold their children into the sex trade.

In June 1999, the Thai police and NGOs signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to cooperate on the issue of trafficked children and to better assist trafficking victims. The goal of the Memorandum was to improve the treatment of non-Thai children by the police when they are arrested and to encourage the police to treat all trafficked children as victims. Previously, foreign children were not afforded the same rights as Thai nationals, thus, the legislation significantly improved the situation of children trafficked from foreign countries. Under the MOU, policemen, hospital staff, and social workers attended training courses that helped ensure that trafficking victims received proper treatment.

In September 1999, Thailand introduced changes to the Criminal Procedure Amendment, making court procedures more child friendly. Psychologists or social workers and lawyers are now required to be present during police interviews of minors. And children are no longer required to stand up in front of the abuser to give evidence in court.²³

Although Thailand's laws on child prostitution are well crafted, corruption poses a major impediment to the prosecution and conviction of sex offenders. However, extra-territorial laws have been enacted in over 30 countries, making it possible to prosecute offenders in their home country who have sex with underage persons while abroad. Today, most countries are sending the message to their citizens that sex offenders can be caught wherever they travel and that having sex with children anywhere in the world can result in significant punishment.

²⁰ UNICEF. pp. 32-33.

²¹ ECPAT, "A Step Forward," Stockholm, Sweden, 1998-1999. p. 59.

²² Baker, Simon. Interview with Sudarat Sereewat of FACE.

²³ UNICEF.

Organizations that Focus on Child's Rights

- The Center for Protection of Children's Rights
- The Foundation for Better Life of Children
- End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism (ECPAT)
- The Coalition to Fight Against Child Exploitation (FACE)
- The Chiang Mai Child Protection Committee
- UNICEF
- Stop Demand
- World Vision, USA
- Child Rights Information Network

What you can do:

- **Pray**
- **Be Informed** – Change can only occur when enough people become involved in the fight against the sexual exploitation of children. Read news updates and articles on websites such as www.stopdemand.org or www.ecpat.org.
- **Inform Others** – Email articles and websites to friends and family. Spread the word.
- **Speak Out** – Speak out against attitudes or practices in your home community that might encourage sexual tourism or sexual exploitation of minors.
- **Support** the work of organizations such as ECPAT, Stop Demand, UNICEF or FACE. Donations are vital to the sustainability of their work.

Below are some links that deal with the sex trade and child sexual exploitation.

- www.captive Daughters.org
- www.stopdemand.org
- www.ecpat.org
- www.unicef.org
- www.crin.org
- www.ilo.org
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Links