

**PROSTITUTION: CHILDREN THE VICTIMS.  
THE EFFECTS OF PROSTITUTION AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION  
ON CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS**

**BY**

**PATRICIA JENNIFER GREEN - RAHAB MINISTRIES, BANGKOK**

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## **This is my virgin body sold to you for a song take, beat, thrust, burn...**

More than one million children become prostitutes every year. Most are in Asia. Children are taken from their villages and sold in the cities or overseas by highly organised syndicates or individuals for prostitution or used for pornographic purposes.

The exact number of children involved in prostitution is unknown and unknowable (Boonchalaksi and Guest in Kaime-Atterhog & Ard-am, 1993), NGO and unofficial sources indicate that upwards of two million females are engaged in prostitution in Thailand alone.

General estimates of the number of Thai child prostitutes vary between 30,000 and 800,000 depending on the age criterion used to define a child. Although the U.N. Convention on Children's Rights defines a child as under 18 years of age local laws vary and in Thailand a child is usually considered to be under 15 years of age. Child prostitution includes boys and girls but in Thailand affects a far greater number of girls. The Centre for the Protection of Children's Rights estimates that in Thailand twenty percent of girls between the ages of 11 and 17 could be prostitutes, (1993). Most of these girls are forced into brothels where they may be required to service up to 20 men per day.

### **Child Prostitution**

Child prostitution and the sexual exploitation of children is not new. The literature indicates that prostitution and exploitation of children has a long history. In Thailand young girls have been sold or forced into prostitution from early times because of family poverty (Rutnin, 1992; Skronbanek, 1990). However child prostitution has increased dramatically in recent years and is a phenomenon spreading rapidly throughout many developing countries in the Asian region. Increasing numbers of adolescent and preadolescent girls are being brought to Thailand from the Northern Hilltribe areas and across international borders from Burma, Southern China and Laos. They are tricked, kidnapped and sold into small town and city brothels. On the wider scene large numbers of Nepalese girls are sold into brothels in Indian cities, Taiwanese tribal and aboriginal girls into the brothels I Taipei. Children from China, Vietnam and Laos are being procured by agents to provide sexual services for tourists and military personnel in Cambodia. This report focuses on child prostitution in Thailand and discusses the reasons why children are forced into prostitution and sexual slavery. Reference is made to the relationship between poverty, economic development, child prostitution and tourism. The paper has two objectives:

- 1 To present an overall picture of the issue of prostitution and sexual exploitation of children, to examine the causes and resulting physical, social and psychological effects.
- 2 To present a challenge to professionals to direct their expertise at confronting these issues not only from a clinical, counseling basis as the 'helper' but from a community psychology base of action research, prevention, education and advocacy.

## METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research methods were used incorporating an ethnographic and phenomenological approach and naturalistic methods of inquiry. These included observations, informal conversations and some structured interviews with girls rescued from forced prostitution. Observations and conversations over a period of four years with girls working voluntarily as prostitutes in the Patpong area of Bangkok were recorded. Discussions were held with care givers in homes caring for girls rescued from prostitution. A sample of files kept on girls rescued from the brothels were examined. Findings are presented in qualitative form.

Child prostitution and trafficking in children is linked to poverty, economic development, industrialization, increasing materialism, international tourism and militarization. Inappropriate development policies have deprived rural people of their land and means of survival. Forced into desperate poverty or lured by materialism, thousands of Thai Villagers have chosen to sell their land, or, knowingly or unknowingly, sold their children to agents for a few hundred dollars. Brokers have promised a 'better life' and a good job for their children.

Traditional cultural and community values have been eroded and replaced by greater emphasis individualism and competitiveness. This value shift has precipitated the sale of children for increasing cash to purchase material goods and thus achieve higher social status.

International tourism has helped propel prostitution into a large international industry which may at times be seen as threatening to human life and dignity. The growth of Third World tourism is increasingly linked to highly organised sex tourism which may be linked with powerful international crime syndicates.

Seventy percent of tourists visiting Thailand are males. Sources indicate up to sixty percent of these males come specifically for sex (Kaime-Atterhog & Ard-an, 1993). To meet the demand of sex tourists, particularly Middle Eastern and Asian men, younger and younger children are forced into sex slavery. Children of 3 or 4 years of age are purchased and used for pornographic purposes and abused by both men and women.

## Studies

Recent surveys by the Thai foundation for Women found that in 9 villages in 3 Northern provinces, only 5 girls between 13 and 16 plus years of age remained in the village.

An analysis (Skrobanek, 1998) of why Thai girls and women enter prostitution indicated that less than ten percent of adolescents entered willingly. Ninety percent entered because of family poverty, they were sold, deceived or pressured by parents into believing that they were fulfilling their obligation of gratitude to family. Naowarat (1998) found that 13 out of 19 village girls were deceived into entering prostitution. Other factors were lack of education and alternative employment opportunities. Another study showed that in 1 village in the Chiang Rai province 41 out of 170 households had sold their daughters, 5 of these families were acting as brokers to sell other girls in the village. A further study estimated that in one northern province 80% of all girls grow up with the expectation of being sold at 12-13 years old.

A 1990 survey of northern villages reported that of the girls under 16 years of age who had been sold into prostitution, sixty three percent were sold directly by parents, twenty one percent neighbours or friends and sixteen percent by agents. Of these families, forty two percent had an annual income above the poverty village level. Thus desire for material goods and the 'good life' rather than true poverty may also be reasons why parents sell their children. Selling children was viewed by some helpers and researchers as seventy percent greed and thirty percent poverty

Studies show that sexual abuse and prostitution has a devastating effect of children and adolescents. In one study where 1012 Thai adolescent and young adult prostitutes were interviewed ninety percent disapproved of prostitution and what they were doing, fifty percent felt society showed contempt for them, forty percent felt hopeless, disappointed in themselves and trapped and twenty six percent stated that they would commit suicide if they know they had contracted AIDS, (Thailand World Bank. Conference, Bangkok, 1991)

A Canadian study on 229 juvenile male and female prostitutes indicated an association between poor and mental health and gross childhood sexual trauma. This study indicated that eighty percent of the juvenile prostitutes suffered serious depression, seventy percent had a sense of devastated self esteem and the subjects were 3 times more likely to have suicidal tendencies than the control group

Graipatsapong, (1993) lists having a negative opinion of one self, lack of self confidence, low self esteem and think of oneself as stupid and dirty as psychological symptoms experience by child prostitutes.

## Findings

Findings of this research are consistent with other research findings on the effects of sexual abuse of children and adolescents

## THE EFFECTS ON THE CHILDREN

Wan is not sure how old she is but thought she was 13 when her mother knowingly sold her into prostitution some years ago. Her life is spent in one small room, she is provided with food, clothing and some medical care. Every three months her father comes to visit her and arrange with the brothel owner to raise a further loan against payment for her services. Wan has no idea how many men she has serviced, but says she often has between five and ten a day. If she refuses to work she is beaten. She has not been told if she has AIDS but she has many diseases and is often sick and in pain.

### Physical Effects

Many victims suffer severe physical damage as well as Sexually Transmitted Diseases, including AIDS. Of the sample interviewed sixty three percent had gonorrhoea or syphilis, most had been tested for HIV but had said they had not been told whether or not they had AIDS or not. In some areas up to eighty seven percent of low class prostitutes, mostly children and adolescents are HIV infected. The Centre for the Protection of Children's Rights states that eighty percent of girls under 17 years of age rescued from the brothels are HIV positive (ICCB, 1993). The younger the girl, the more susceptible she is to damage and infection. Some girls complained of being forced to continue serving customers in spite of severe internal damage consistent bleeding and pain.

Living conditions in the brothels were frequently unsanitary and cramped, sometimes with inadequate food and medical care. Girls spoke of being beaten or jumped on when pregnant to force miscarriage. Repeated forced or self induced abortion with no medical after care contributed to internal physical damage and sometimes death. Two girls related how they were knocked unconscious when refusing to work while menstruating. Severe physical damage contributes to health problems, trauma and poor mental health. A depressed self image correlated with the nature, frequency and severity of sexual abuse.

### Psychological effects

Many of the girls were traumatized, raped into submission and expressed fear of repeated beatings, starvation or torture if they refused to comply with customers demands. Stories of young teenagers beaten to death by the pimps for refusing to comply with customers demands or trying to escape. Such stories have been substantiated by police and press reports. In some cases children were subdued with drugs, consequently developing drug or alcohol dependency.

Most of the children expressed attitudes of self rejection and hatred of self for what they had become. They felt rejected by other people. Ninety percent of the girls exhibited very low self esteem, feelings of inadequacy and confusion. They felt humiliated and expressed feelings of deep guilt and shame, with comments such as:

**“I must have been bad or they wouldn't have sold me.”**

Some girls felt they were broken to a point where they could never regain self respect and dignity three or four years later were still tearful when relating their experiences during the interviews. A common observation was:

**“Although I smile on the outside, on the inside I am still crying.”**

Severe depression and high suicidal tendencies were also evident. More than fifty percent stated that while in the brothel they wanted to kill themselves, Suicide was not uncommon. Most girls had strong feelings of hate toward those who had tricked, sold and abused them and wanted to punish them.

Values and family relationships were confused and most children evidenced strong feelings of denial and inner conflict about their families. Difficulty in reconciling that parents loved them but sold them ‘into hell.’ A frequent comment was:

**“If my parents really loved me how could they have sold me into this life.”**

Many children express fear of further violation, fear of being sold again, fear of man, and of violence. Others feared returning home without money and being subjected to beating or resale. Fear of new care givers or ‘helpers’ and authority figures was also evident. Fear of being resold contributed to difficulties in trust building and self disclosure.

Most of the girls interviewed held distorted perceptions of sex. They viewed sexual intercourse as being disgusting, and associated with deception, pain and violence. Few could equate sexual activity with loving or caring but simply saw it as a means of economic exchange. This contributed to a sense of loss of personhood. Children and adolescents seldom gain financially in the sex industry so these is added sense of loss, sacrifice and suffering no gain.

Several girls said that they became desensitized:

**“I no longer care what happens to me.”  
“Nothing more bad can happen to me now”**

Desensitization blanked out their minds to enable them to cope with the constant trauma of abuse and loss. Dissociation and only talking about what happened to others was evident as a coping mechanism. When interviewed, some two or three years later, some girls were unable to recall their life in prostitution or any other significant life event at that time.

Thai cultural patterns such as smiling, conflict avoidance and being ‘Jai yen’ cool hearted - the psychological ability to repress emotion and detach oneself from the reality of the situation, may be a means of stress reduction and coping for some.

Impaired development and psychological damage was unlikely to be noticed or understood by the family if the girl returned home and was likely to be compounded by her being resold or continuing in sexual service. If help and the opportunity for a new life was not available a high percentage returned to prostitution.

Meo at 14, was forced by her mother to sleep with an old man to earn money to pay her mother's gambling debts to keep her out of prison. From this experience and the constant pressure from her family to make money, Meo drifted into the city and prostitution. Now at 19 she is addicted to marijuana, alcohol and other drugs to keep her high to enable her to continue in this work. Meo perceives herself as:

**“A person no good for anyone or anything now.”**

Girls who had been sold and continued in prostitution, in later years tended to imitate parental child rearing behaviours and in turn sell or coerce their own daughters into prostitution.

Sixty two percent of the interviewees who had been sold into prostitution had been trafficked from Burma. Seventy five percent were tribal, Burmese and Thai. They spoke of confusion in not knowing the Thai language and thus not understanding what was being said to or about them. Some had no idea of their location in Thailand as they could not read names and road signs.

Others commented:

**“It was cruel. There was no-one who could tell me where I was, or anything about disease,”**

Several girls commented that they had lost their childhood and had been forced into adult life. They had lost their innocence, lost their body, lost their sense of self. In fact had lost everything and had no future. As Ah Sor commented:

**“I feel ‘Jai Haay’, that my heart has gone from me.”**

Dreams and nightmares were frequent recurrences for some of the girls. Dreams such as being resold, chased by a tiger, and of suffocation.

## **Behaviours**

Some girls exhibited excessive emotional attachment and attention seeking behaviours. For a large majority learning ability was affected, attention and memory span were short. They were forgetful and seemed to find difficulty in applying themselves to even simple tasks. They tended to escape into sleep or fantasy. Many of the adolescent girls appeared to have a ‘sense of floating’ unable to ground themselves in reality, lack of motivation to consider alternatives or make decisions. They spoke of wanting to study, have a vocation but were unable to apply themselves to the process of planning a future and decision making. There appeared to be a strong present time orientation and little sense of past or future. This could be a form of escapism and a result of severe trauma.

Some of the girls who had been placed by rescue organisations in Rehabilitation homes were able to accept help, counsel and adapt to a new life. It was noted that the Tribal girls interviewed, especially the Akka girls seemed more able to adjust and put their experiences behind them than the Thai or Burmese girls.

There were few behavioural differences between girls who had been sold and those who had entered prostitution voluntarily under 17 years of age.

Care givers and social workers commented on some behaviour differences between girls who had been rescued from prostitution and other village girls of the same age. These differences were greater social and sexual awareness, smart talk and boldness in their approaches to males, both their peers and older men. They also noted difficulties in concentration and that they were easily distracted. Although many of the girls wanted education and vocational training they were unable to accept the reality of consistent study.

In spite of their fears and negative experiences some girls did not want to leave prostitution. They saw prostitution as a replacement for family love, acceptance and affection. Others although offered alternatives, tended to drift back into prostitution voluntarily as it was something known and did not make any demands on them mentally. Change of values also affected desire to leave. If money had become their highest value they were more likely to remain. For older adolescents who had voluntarily entered prostitution, the 'Cinderella Syndrome', the fantasy that some man will come and take them away and offer them a life of ease and happiness ever after, also appeared to prohibit them from leaving or contemplating alternatives.

However most considered that their life was a walking nightmare as they were subjected to inhumane conditions and inhumane treatment.

Attitudes toward prostitution vary across Cultures. Thai family socialization processes teach female children to adhere to values where submission behaviour is considered noble and respectful. 'Bun Khun' or attitude of gratitude toward parents for raising, feeding them and educating them is a prime value. Thus willing entry to prostitution is viewed by some parents and children as a sacrifice for the family, and is also perceived as 'gaining merit' according to Buddhist beliefs and principles.

## CONCLUSION

Prostitution, sexual exploitation and sex slavery of children and adolescents is an increasing social problem in some developing countries. Child prostitution is linked to poverty, economic development and may be escalated by international tourism. Child prostitution is destructive to life and an affront to human dignity.

Professional Psychologists are encouraged to direct their expertise into tackling these issues at the levels of prevention as well as cure, as it appears that child prostitution will continue to increase throughout the Asian Region hand to hand with increased tourism and economic development. Action research needs to lead to social change, the change of attitudes toward women and female children and increased education of family values and the value and dignity of life. Community awareness and viable alternatives for employment must also be considered.

Psychologists also need to look at the psychology of the paedophile, the abuser and the exploiter, also the family members who are willing to sell their children to provide a better house, a TV or other material goods. It is hoped that in the process of development in other Third World and Asian nations that this gross violation of the dignity of the rights of Children can be avoided.

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