

# Prostitution in Thailand

## **The Sex Trade: Supply and Demand**

The Sex Trade is like any other trade – it is about supply and demand.<sup>1</sup> For the past few decades, Bangkok has been famous worldwide as the international center where those who seek cheap, available sex can find the supply. The sex industry is lucrative and it has expanded rapidly in Thailand within the past few decades. For the men and women working in the sex trade, prostitution provides a way for people of low education to earn a high salary. For the country as a whole, tourism is the major earner of foreign exchange and is vital to Thailand's economy. In December of 2003, the sex trade was reported to be a \$4.3 billion-per-year industry!<sup>2</sup> Approximately 60% of the country's National Income comes from tourism, and sex tourism encompasses a large part of Thailand's tourism industry.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, only within the past decade has the government given much attention to the social costs, such as the spread of HIV and the growth in human trafficking that the sex industry creates.

### *The Growing Demand for Sex*

Prostitution has been present in Thai culture for centuries, but the current level of prostitution is a new phenomenon that was spawned by the

Vietnam War. During the 1960s, the Thai government secured a contract with the United States to provide rest and relaxation services for American troops in Vietnam. The entertainment sector played a major role in the rapid industrialization of Thailand's economy in the 1970s. Since that period, the Thai government began promoting the expansion of tourism and, since 1982, tourism has been the country's largest earner of foreign exchange.<sup>4</sup>

Even though a majority of clients of prostitutes are Thai men, foreign tourists significantly add to the sex industry in Thailand. Each year, around 10 million tourists arrive in Thailand.<sup>5</sup> It is estimated that approximately 60% of the tourists who visit Thailand are males, and of those, 70% come specifically for sex.<sup>6</sup> That means that in the past few years, approximately 4,200,000 men came to Thailand for the sex industry.

Despite the large influence that tourism has had upon the sex industry, there is also an important local demand for prostitution. Visiting prostitutes is seen as a male bonding experience, and many Thai men think it natural to entertain business clients and friends by taking them to brothels. A study at Chiang Mai University found that, in Thai society, boys begin to buy women when they are around 13 years old; 50 percent of 16-year-old boys and 90 percent of university students go to brothels.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ryan Bishop and Lilian Robinson, Night Market. 1998, p. 98.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Economic Report for Thailand 2003, online. In 2002, 10,872,976 tourists arrived in Thailand.

<sup>6</sup> Patricia Green, "Thailand: Tourism and the Sex Industry"

<sup>7</sup> Matsui, Yayori, Women in the New Asia. 1996, p. 34.

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<sup>1</sup> Denise Richards from "Stop Demand," [www.stopdemand.org](http://www.stopdemand.org)

<sup>2</sup> "Sex debate: Prostitution is a \$4.3 billion industry in Thailand," Agents/CNN, <http://www.thaivisa.com>

<sup>3</sup> The Bangkok Post

### *The Supply Side: Who are they?*

Although men also work in the sex industry, the supply side of the sex industry is predominantly composed of young women or minors from poorer, rural areas in Thailand and neighboring countries. Agents seek recruits from minority groups living in Northern Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and China. Eastern European and Filipina prostitutes also work in Thailand, which reflects the increasing globalization of the industry.

Poverty is the primary factor pushing women to join the sex industry. In Thailand, the family is the sole source of social security for individuals. Most sex workers are poorly educated and often have several family members that they are supporting financially. In addition, greed, consumerism, the desire to lead a western lifestyle and own western goods, and the low value that Thai society places on women all contribute to the increasing number of women who join the sex trade.

Prostitution is the most lucrative form of employment that a girl with little education can enter. Families in economic crisis may borrow money from lenders who then take a daughter of the family to Bangkok to work off the family's debt. Girls are sold to brothels for an average of \$2,000 USD.<sup>8</sup> Once sold, an elaborate system of fines and fees makes it very difficult for girls to work off their debt. For example, the bar or brothel owner can fine a worker for being late, refusing to please a customer, or not meeting their quota.

There are many different locations and forms in which prostitution takes place in Thailand. In a 1996 survey, the Public Health Ministry

conducted a survey that recorded 7,318 sex establishments all over Thailand, including: brothels, massage parlors, karaoke bars, discotheques, night clubs, bars, and restaurants.<sup>9</sup> In membership clubs and bars that cater to wealthier clientele, the sex workers generally make a great deal more money and have more autonomy. At the other end of the scale, local brothels are more oppressive to the women who work there than areas that service the international sex industry. Local health checks are rarely carried out, the girls are required to serve a higher number of clients per day, and they receive less money than girls who work in bars that cater to foreign tourists.

According to a study from Chulalongkorn University, sex workers can be divided into four major categories depending on the motives for working in the industry and the conditions under which they work:<sup>10</sup>

1. The lowest income earners who are sold into the trade and are working under some kind of restraint. Generally, these women work in brothels and teahouses and serve a high number of clients per day.
2. The second group consists of those under heavy economic compulsion to work to support dependants. The majority in this group consists of single mothers with low education, typically working to support a child.

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<sup>9</sup> Phongpaichit, Piri-arangsan, and Treerat, Guns, Girls, Gambling, and Ganja: Thailand's Illegal Economy and Public Policy. Silkworm Books, 1998. pp. 199.

<sup>10</sup> Phongpaichit, Piri-arangsan, and Treerat, pp. 208-209.

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<sup>8</sup> UNIFEM

3. The third group is comprised of women who are young, attractive, and entrepreneurial and enter the sex industry because of the economic incentive. They typically work in Japanese bars and other high-end establishments.
4. The fourth group includes women who perform sex work part-time to supplement their income. They may be students or have regular jobs.

### **The Life of a Sex Worker**

The life of a sex worker in the bars is extremely demanding and difficult. Patricia Green, founder and former director of Rahab Ministries describes the conditions that the girls working in the bars endure:

The girl only has one day off per month. If she is late or sick and doesn't fill the minimum quota of drinks to be bought by customers, then she has to pay a bar fine. The average worker doesn't make much. Some of the girls start young which makes the experience even more traumatic for them. In some bars the girls are not allowed to go out unless accompanied by a pimp. Many girls feel that because of the sex work, no one wants them so they might as well carry on with prostitution. Several of these girls use drugs and alcohol to help them cope with their difficult circumstances.

In many ways women in Thailand are still treated as second class. Boys are generally favored and more likely to be educated. Some girls earn money in prostitution to put their brother through school. I knew one prostitute who told me that with her earnings she had bought a house for her parents and land for her brother but she had nothing left for herself. For these girls, just coming into an environment where they are loved and know that we love them helps.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Wong, Wilfred. "Setting Sex Slaves Free," *Woman Alive*, November, p. 20.

The effects of prostitution and sexual exploitation can be devastating to the mental and physical health of the women and children involved. Many sex workers suffer severe from physical damage, including sexually transmitted diseases, and put themselves at higher risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. The psychological harm can be equally destructive. Many women who work in the sex industry experience feelings of extremely low self-esteem and self-worth, self-blame and guilt, and extreme depression. Many sex workers also undergo denial of their involvement in prostitution and many sex workers have suicidal tendencies.

### **Personal Stories**

These stories are merely a few of the numerous accounts of sexual exploitation in Thailand. Unfortunately, many women's stories are similar to the ones that follow.

*Twelve-year-old Fon wanted to earn money to help her family, so she went to Bangkok and worked in a restaurant. She was later lured to another city and forced to work in a brothel. The owners made Fon have sex with a succession of different customers each day. When she and a friend tried to escape, they were severely beaten. She never recovered fully from the beating and became increasingly sick. Fon was released because she was too sick to be profitable. She later discovered that she was HIV positive.<sup>12</sup>*

The following two excerpts have been taken from the personal account of a staff member at Rahab Ministries, Bangkok:

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<sup>12</sup> Wong, Wilfred.

*Super Queen is a dark show bar. The women were dancing on the stage, naked, doing unnatural tricks. The song ended and the women swarmed toward us. The nearest one to me, Jiap, had only been there a month. Her only child had died a year ago. She was 18. She put her head on my shoulder and I turned to look at her and saw tears slipping down her cheeks...*

*There was a third girl that night at Super Queen who didn't leave. Two weeks later, after testing HIV positive she came to Rahab for help. She was scared, depressed, and out of hope. My co-workers left me to talk with her. What do you say to someone who has just found out at 22 they have AIDS?<sup>13</sup>*

### **Statistics: How many people are Involved in the Sex Trade?**

Because of the large number of temporary sex workers and the migratory nature of prostitution in Thailand, it is difficult to accurately estimate the number of women involved in the sex industry at one point in time. Estimates of the number of people involved in prostitution in Thailand range from 70,000 to 2.8 million. However, NGOs generally agree that the figure given by Thailand's Ministry of Public Health (approximately 70,000) is too low.<sup>14</sup> In truth, nobody knows how many people are involved in Thailand's sex industry. Some estimate that the number of men, women, and children who work as sex workers may be as high as 2 million.

### **Prostitution and Thai Law**

Prostitution in Thailand has been illegal for over thirty years, but the existing laws are poorly enforced. The Anti-Prostitution Law of 1960 made procurers and prostitutes subject to a fine or jail sentence, but did not impose a penalty on customers. The 1996 Prostitution Prevention and Suppression Act re-oriented Thai law from emphasizing punishment of prostitutes towards punishing pimps, procurers, brothel owners, and certain customers. The Thai law imposed harsher penalties in clients found violating girls under 18 (and increases more substantially for girls under age 15) and also introduced penalties for parents who sold their children into the sex trade. However, this law is poorly enforced. The Thai police and public officials are often involved with mafia who run drug and sex trafficking operations. Establishment owners pay regular protection fees to the police.<sup>15</sup> The combination of the widespread corruption among public officials and the lax enforcement of laws pertaining to the sex industry mean that sex workers are often doubly exploited by their employers and by the police.

### **Rahab Ministries: Our Position on Prostitution in Thailand**

Rahab Ministries believes that prostitution is inherently damaging and exploitative to women. Our experiences in Thailand have shown that legalization will not help women in prostitution; rather, it will put more money and power in the hands of the procurers, pimps, and brothel owners. Legalization will also put women at risk of increased sexual harassment, contribute to further family

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<sup>13</sup> Rahab Ministries (A.7.7.1)

<sup>14</sup> US Human Rights Report, Thailand 2003.

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<sup>15</sup> Phongpaichit, Piri-arangsan, and Treerat, p. 210.

breakdown, and lead to younger and younger girls becoming involved. We believe that the legalization of prostitution says to men, “Go ahead—it’s OK to sexually abuse women.”

Research from countries that have already legalized prostitution shows that the legalization or decriminalization of prostitution does not empower the women in prostitution but does everything to strengthen the sex industry. Research conducted by the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women International (CATW) proves that:

1. Legalization/decriminalization of prostitution and the sex industry promotes sex trafficking.
2. Legalization/decriminalization of prostitution and the sex industry increases child prostitution.
3. Legalization/decriminalization of prostitution and the sex industry does not protect the women in prostitution and does not promote women’s health.
4. Legalization/decriminalization of prostitution and the sex industry does not control the sex industry—it expands it. It boosts the motivation of men to buy women for sex in a much wider and more permissible range of socially acceptable settings.
5. Women in systems of prostitution do not want the sex industry legalized or decriminalized.<sup>16</sup>

### **Please Help Fight!**

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<sup>16</sup> Raymond, Janice. “Ten Reasons for Not Legalizing Prostitution,” Coalition Against Trafficking in Women International, March 25, 2003.

You can help fight sex tourism and the commercial sexual exploitation of women and children by increasing awareness in your own country.

### **What You Can Do:**

- **PRAY**
- **CREATE AWARENESS** by: Talking to your family, friends, neighbors, work mates, and by presenting information to the media (newspaper, radio, or TV).
- **LOBBY/BOYCOTT** travel agencies who sell sex tours to Thailand and other Asian destinations.
- **PUBLICLY CONDEMN** travel agencies who promote sexual exploitation of women and children through sex tourism.
- **LOBBY** your government opposing commercial sexual exploitation of children and women for prostitution, servitude, and slavery like practices. Request that they uphold and promote Human Rights Standards for the Treatment of Trafficked Persons. State that action to combat human trafficking must be targeted at the **offenders**, not the **victims** of trafficking.
- **LOBBY** your government to structure laws to end discrimination against women who have been trafficked and to provide protection and assistance to these women. This includes judicial, social, and financial assistance.
- **SUPPORT** international organizations working to combat trafficking of women and

children and the sexual exploitation of children. Ask what you can do.

### Other Resources:

### Organizations in Thailand

- **Friends of Women Foundation (Grassroots Women's Network-GROWNET)**

218/16 Soi Pradipat 18,  
Phayathai, Bangkok 10400  
Thailand

Tel: 662-279-0867, 662-278-3551

Works for legal protection of women's human rights.

- **Global Alliance Against (GAATW)**

PO Box 1281, Bangkok Post Office, Bangkok 10500, Thailand  
E-mail: [gaatw@mozart.inet.co.th](mailto:gaatw@mozart.inet.co.th)  
URL:

<http://www.inet.co.th/org/gaatw>

Fighting against trafficking of women.

- **EMPOWER** Foundation, supports women in the sex industry.

57/60 Tivanond Road  
Nontburi 11000, Thailand

Tel: 662-526-8311, 662-968-8021, 662-968-8022

- **Foundation for Women**

35/267 Charansanitwongse Road  
62, soi Wat Paorohit, Bangkonoi,  
Bangkok 10700, Thailand.

E-mail: [FFW@mozart.inet.co.th](mailto:FFW@mozart.inet.co.th)

- **Foundation for Women, Law and Rural Development (FORWARD)**

Chiangmai University  
Chiangmai 50200, Thailand

- **Women's Studies Center**  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
Chiangmai University  
Chiangmai, 50200, Thailand  
Tel: 66 53 943 572, 6653 943 592-3

E-mail: [wsc@chiangmai.ac.th](mailto:wsc@chiangmai.ac.th)

Website:

<http://www.soc.cmu.ac.th>

### Web Resources

Below are some websites that provide further information on prostitution-related issues.

- **Prostitution Research and Education (PRE), USA,**  
[www.prostitutionresearch.com](http://www.prostitutionresearch.com)
- **Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, USA,**  
[www.catwinternational.org](http://www.catwinternational.org)
- **Gabriela Network, USA,**  
[www.gabnet.org](http://www.gabnet.org)