

# Sex Tourism in Thailand

*I just get turned on very much by Orientals...They're completely different...You...take a girl from a bar, and it might be eleven or twelve at night, and you have a shower and get in bed and have sex, and then most guys go sleep till next morning. Then they'll have a bit more in the morning and then she'll go. I've had them tidy up the room, fold me clothes up, even wash me socks, stuff like that...I think they might've been after an extra tip on top...*

*You should never fall in love, or you'll be heartbroken when you leave. They might be heartbroken too. Because quite a few of them have got cuts on their arms here. They cut themselves with a knife. They get drunk and just slash themselves. I find that terrible. When I see a girl, when I'm looking to buy her, I always look at her arms to see what she's been doing to herself.<sup>1</sup>*

*-British Sex Tourist to Thailand*

The tourism industry in Asia has exploded within the past 30 years. The Thai government, in particular, saw tourism as a way to earn foreign exchange and thus boost their economy. During the 1980s, the Thai government began vigorously promoting tourism and poured substantial amounts of government funds (504 million baht in 1988) to fuel this industry.<sup>2</sup> By the end of the 1980s, tourism had become the number one source of export revenues, surpassing even rice and textile exports.<sup>3</sup> As a result, international tourism has become an increasingly influential factor in the Thai economy. Tourism brings in billions of dollars (US) each year. In 1998, two American economists estimated the tourism to be a US\$ 4 billion industry in Thailand.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, the government's plan to promote tourism merely added to the already flourishing sex industry in Thailand. In 1989, over four million tourists visited Thailand, and that figure has rapidly increased over the past decade.<sup>5</sup> In 1999, approximately 8,652,000 tourists visited Thailand, and by 2002 that number rose to about 10,873,000.<sup>6</sup> Out of all the tourists that visit Thailand each year, approximately 60% are male, and NGOs estimate that 70% of male tourists in Thailand are sex tourists.<sup>7</sup> That means that in 2002, about 4,560,000 male tourists came to Thailand specifically for sex! And the tourism industry continues to

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<sup>1</sup> Davidson and Taylor. Research paper for the Department of Sociology, University of Leicester, U.K., published by ECPAT, 1994, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> "Women Protest Sex Tours," *The Bangkok Post*, May 11, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson, David. "Churches work to break link between tourism and prostitution." *The Bangkok Post*, July 14, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Qtd. in Outlook, "Amazing Sex: The Selling of Thailand," *The Bangkok Post*. April 7, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Id.

<sup>6</sup> 2003 US Economic Summary of Thailand. Embassy of the United States, Economic Section, Bangkok Thailand. <http://bangkok.usembassy.gov>.

<sup>7</sup> Thailand Immigration Bureau, Police Department.

grow. For 2004, the Tourism Authority of Thailand forecasts that tourist arrivals will be up by 20% from 2003.<sup>8</sup>

## What is Sex Tourism?

Sex tourism takes place in many different parts of the world, particularly Brazil, certain African and Caribbean countries, and South East Asia. Although the term 'sex tourism' usually brings to mind the image of western businessmen being herded onto buses and into juicy bars in South Korea or go-go bars in Thailand, it actually transpires in a variety of ways and in many different locations.<sup>9</sup> The most widely used definition describes sex tourism as "consisting of people from economically developed nations traveling to underdeveloped countries specifically to purchase the sexual services of local men, women, and children."<sup>10</sup>

Travel agents in Asia, Europe, and the United States promote sex tour packages, usually to groups of men. Brochures advertise trips with slogans such as, "Sex tours, real girls, real cheap!" One American brochure stated, "Each tour (to Bangkok, Manila) includes our famous Nite Life Package. Price includes introductions to lovely ladies throughout your stay."<sup>11</sup> Although the sayings vary, they all promise the same thing; sex with exotic, beautiful women that cannot be found in the sex tourist's home country.

In Thailand, sex tourism takes place in a variety of ways. The go-go bars of the Patpong and Nana areas in Bangkok and Pattaya, a city just East of Bangkok, are the most infamous locales where sex tourists are found. However, sex tourism occurs in many regions of the country. The islands, especially Phuket, are also hot spots for sex tourism. In 2002, *The Bangkok Post* reported that foreign firms were offering sex-tour programs on board cruise ships, or 'pleasure ships,' for foreigners visiting Phuket and Phangna.<sup>12</sup> The prices ranged between US\$ 1,900 and 12,000 per package, which includes one Thai woman escort per tourist.<sup>13</sup>

## What Drives Sex Tourism?

Many different theories seek to explain what drives the sex tourism industry in Thailand. Exploitative governmental policies, constant demand from foreign tourists, racist and sexist attitudes towards Thai women, and the low cost and unique nature in which sexual services are provided in Thailand are all cited as factors that cause millions of men each year

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<sup>8</sup> Intarakomalysat, Nondhanada. "Industry Set to Boom Next Year," *The Bangkok Post*, December 3, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Davidson and Taylor. Research paper for the Department of Sociology, University of Leicester, U.K., ECPAT, 1994, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Enloe 1989:36. qtd. in Davidson and Taylor. Research paper for the Department of Sociology, University of Leicester, U.K., ECPAT, 1994, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Rahab files.

<sup>12</sup> "Chuenniran, Atchatthaya. "Firms Offer Sex Tours on Cruise Ships," *The Bangkok Post*, April 19, 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Id.

to board planes and head for the 'Land of Smiles' for the sole purpose of sex. The factors that fuel the sex industry are discussed below.

### **Governmental Policies**

The question of whether or not the Thai government purposely promoted sex tourism to drive Thai national growth is a subject of much debate amongst academics, feminists, and economists who study Thailand's sex industry. In 1998, two American scholars, Ryan Bishop and Lilian Robinson, published a book titled *Night Market*, which provided an in-depth study of the development and maintenance of sex tourism in Bangkok. The book begins with a provocative statement; "A US\$4 billion per year tourist industry is the linchpin of the modernization process called the 'Thai Economic Miracle.' And the linchpin of that industry is sex.." <sup>14</sup> The authors argue that Thailand's economic boom was a result of national and international development policies which "deliberately impoverished" (252) rural areas of Thailand to provide more female sex workers and, thus, fuel the sex industry. <sup>15</sup> This view of sex tourism paints the picture of a global conspiracy of sorts between national governments seeking to expand their economies, and lustful western males willing to supply the cash to fulfill their sexual desires. The victims in this scenario are the women who are caught in this exploitative practice.

Whether or not this theory is correct, the fact remains that international tourism is crucial to Thailand's economy, and sex tourism comprises a significant portion of tourism in Thailand. *The Bangkok Post* reported that approximately 60% of Thailand's national income comes from tourism, "mainly sex tourism." <sup>16</sup>

### **Demand from Foreign Tourists**

Sex tourism is often viewed as a problem within the country in which it takes place. In other words, it is seen as a 'developing country' issue or a women's issue, and not a problem that needs to be addressed within the countries that supply the sex tourists. An alternative view is that the problem stems from the constant demand from sex tourists. Despite government policies to prevent prostitution, the receiving countries are powerless to fight sex tourism in the face of a constant demand. In other words, the supply of women will stop as soon as demand stops. As Pavena Hongsakula, a Minister in the Prime Minister's Office in 1999, wrote to *The Bangkok Post*, "...The Thai government does not and will not condone sex tourism. Although sex tours may bring in some foreign currencies, they are against all the moral principles we believe in. The sexual service business is an internal problem that we are trying to curb, but controlling the supply will not help much if the demand keeps pouring in." <sup>17</sup> Thus, demand from foreign male tourists is the root cause of the problem, and it should be dealt with in the countries that supply sex tourists.

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<sup>14</sup> Outlook, "Amazing Sex: The Selling of Thailand," *The Bangkok Post*. April 7, 1998.

<sup>15</sup> Id.

<sup>16</sup> Qtd. in rahab files.

<sup>17</sup> Hongsakula, Pavena. "Less Lusty Tourists are Preferable," *The Bangkok Post*, July 9, 1999.

## **Racist and Sexist Attitudes**

What drives western males to travel thousands of miles to pay for sex, when prostitution exists in their home countries? Although the low cost of sexual services in Thailand is a factor that draws men to this country, some sociologists hypothesize that cost actually has little to do with the reason why so many western men are attracted to Thailand. Foreign men are attracted by the outwardly compliant and gentle treatment they receive from Thai sex workers. As Jeremy Seabrook described this phenomenon, “When they meet these Thai women, these men are only too ready to believe they have found something special...Those who have recently discovered Thailand can be heard praising the superiority of Thai women over those back at home: “They are all women”; “They know how to give a man what he wants”...In this version of woman as nurturer and sensual Oriental there are sexist and racist stereotypes, which the delighted punter does not, at this stage, perceive.”<sup>18</sup>

## **The Non-Contractual Nature of Agreements**

The low cost of sexual services in Thailand, combined with the manner in which the services are provided is extremely appealing for sex tourists. As Patricia Green describes:

Sexual services are cheap, as are accommodation, food, drinks and travel. There is an abundant choice and diversity of settings, services and ‘servers’, all at very affordable prices. The traditional attitude of subservience of the Asian woman to the man guarantees compliance with his desires, not only sexually but in caring for and serving him. This flatters the male ego and reinforces his desire for Asian women. They may also serve as cheap or unpaid tour guides, interpreters and maids. Through the mirror Asian eyes, the aging, fat and balding westerner sees himself again as young, sexy and virile. This is all a part of the fantasy in the land where the sex tourist advertisements say ‘Come to Thailand where all your fantasies will be made to come true.’<sup>19</sup>

Without a doubt, prostitution is available in England or the United States, but many sex tourists prefer to travel to countries such as Thailand rather than deal with the impersonal nature in which sexual services are rendered in their home countries. In Britain, for example, sexual services are generally sold like any other commercial exchange – a price is agreed upon for a specific task.<sup>20</sup> As O’Connell and Davidson wrote in their research paper on British sex tourists, “[In Britain] The narrow and commercial nature of the exchange is more than evident to clients as well as prostitutes and a man would no more expect a prostitute to cuddle or stroke him or act as his companion after sex than he would expect a plumber to do so after fixing a leaking pipe.”<sup>21</sup> For men who do not want to see themselves as a “sex tourist,” the personal manner in which services are provided in Thailand is alluring.

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<sup>18</sup> Seabrook, Jeremy. “Close Encounters with the Global ...” *The Bangkok Post*, January 24, 1997.

<sup>19</sup> Green, Patricia. “Thailand: Tourism and the Sex Industry,” *Women*, No 54, August 2001.

<sup>20</sup> Davidson and Taylor. Research paper for the Department of Sociology, University of Leicester, U.K., ECPAT, 1994, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Id.

## Who are the Sex Tourists?

Sex tourists can be divided into three main categories. As Patricia Green describes:

There are three kinds of sex tourists, ‘Mr. Macho,’ usually semi-skilled workers in their early 20’s seeking as many sexual experiences as possible; ‘Mr. Average,’ the ordinary bloke interested in some romantic or emotional involvement with one or a series of women; and ‘Mr. Professional,’ the businessman. Very often within these groups is the pedophile looking for sexual experience that is forbidden in the home country – sex with children. These tourists can again be divided into four categories. First there are the men who come on sex tours, advertised and organized in the home country. Others travel independently but specifically for sex. The third group come for a ‘holiday in paradise’ but with the attitude that a holiday includes doing things that you cannot do or would not indulge in at home. This may involve sex with male as well as female prostitutes and/or children. Finally, there are those men who visit Thailand once and get swept into repeated sexual encounters, often through loneliness of the ‘hospitality’ of Thai business hosts.<sup>22</sup>

Interestingly, sex tourists often do not see themselves as “sex tourists” and are often quick to judge the morality of other men’s behavior. For example, ‘Mr. Professional’ is often eager to differentiate himself from the lower-class tourists, insisting that he is not a ‘package tourist’; he is ‘spending a few months traveling South East Asia’; or he’s in Thailand ‘on business.’<sup>23</sup> In the Davidson and Taylor report on British sex tourists, they found that the men repeatedly declared that it was acceptable for them to exploit the economic misfortunes of Thai women, but that “homosexual men who do the same thing to Thai men are ‘sick.’”<sup>24</sup> Moreover, almost every sex tourist that was interviewed in the study declared, “Thai women hate ‘the Arabs’ and avoid going with them. This is because the ‘Arabs,’ unlike European men, rape them, cheat them, refuse to pay them, do ‘depraved’ things to them...”<sup>25</sup> Davidson and Taylor conclude that the racist attitudes of sex tourists and their denial “help them to feel all right about their desires and activities.”<sup>26</sup>

## What Compels Thai Women and Children to Work in Sex Tourism?

Poverty, Thai cultural values that expect the eldest daughter to provide for the family, and the lack of employment opportunities for women all contribute to the supply of Thai women in this industry. As Patricia Green explains:

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<sup>22</sup> Green, Patricia. “Thailand: Tourism and the Sex Industry,” *Women*, No 54, August 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Davidson and Taylor. p.3.

<sup>24</sup> Davidson and Taylor. p.12.

<sup>25</sup> Davidson and Taylor. p.12.

<sup>26</sup> Id.

For the women, particularly in Thailand, the foreign tourist is seen as money – money for the family or perhaps a ticket to freedom and a new and ‘better’ life in a western country. According to a report by the National Economic and Social Development Board of Thailand, nearly eight million Thai people earn an average income of 1,166 baht (\$US 45) per year. Thai tradition encourages the elder daughters to find work to support the family. If they come from the village and have little education and no work skills, they have little opportunity but to enter the sex trade to earn what is sufficient for their families. Many are married women who have been widowed or deserted by their husbands and have their own children to support and educate. Some may be the only breadwinner in a large family with elderly parents and younger siblings. It is not uncommon to meet 16-17 year old girls working in the bars to support and build houses for their parents. Some women view their entry into the sex trade as a sacrifice for their families and indeed may be proud that the work they do is giving their children the opportunity to go to school.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the relationship between the Thai woman and the western man is one of dependency. The women needs the financial support of the sex tourist, and the foreign man depends on the Thai sex worker to fill emotional and sexual needs. Frequently, the relationship results in emotional abuse – usually for the Thai woman, but on occasion for the western man as well. He may fall in love, but she may see the relationship only as money. He may return to Thailand time and time again to search for her or possibly may become involved in a lifetime of financial commitment to her family.<sup>28</sup> Conversely, the woman may fall in love or hope that the western man will ‘rescue’ her and bring her back to his country, but the man will only see the relationship as sex.

## What Can Be Done?

Sex tourism in Thailand is a complex, global problem that needs to be addressed in both Thailand and western countries. Below are suggestions for how you can become involved in this issue within your own country.

- **Lobby and Boycott** travel agencies that sell and condone sex tours.
- **Approach** national airlines requesting that they show in-flight videos on flights to Asia condemning sex tourism and stating that sex with minors is a crime and punishable by national and international law.
- **Write** to your own government stating your concerns about advocating ‘good tourism.’
- **Pray** that God should intervene.

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<sup>27</sup> Green, Patricia. “Thailand: Tourism and the Sex Industry,” *Women*, No 54, August 2001.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

## Other Resources:

- Third World Women's Health Page. Offers online information on prostitution and sex tourism. <http://www.arches.uga.edu>
- STOP DEMAND. An organization founded in New Zealand that works for change men's' attitudes towards prostitution in Asia. <http://www.stopdemand.org>.
- Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW). A U.S. based organization that opposes all forms of sexual exploitation. <http://www.catw.org>
- Coalition Against Prostitution, Child Abuse & Trafficking. A Thai based organization that works against prostitution, poverty, and child labor. <http://www.capcat.ksc.net>
- Foundation for Women. Based in Thailand, the organization helps create alternatives to prostitution for women. [FFW@mozart.inet.co.th](mailto:FFW@mozart.inet.co.th)
- Equality Now: Based in the U.S., this organization advocates women's rights and recommends direct action in the United States to prosecute sex tourism companies. <http://www.equalitynow.org>
- EMPOWER. Based in Bangkok, offers health education, job training and literacy classes to sex workers. Mail: P.O. Box 1065; Silom Post Office; Bangkok 10504.