

## THAILAND – TOURISM AND THE SEX INDUSTRY

### **Overheard at the meat market:**

*Customer:*

“Lately, I’ve been feeling poorly – tired and weak – not myself. Do you have a nice cut of meat that might perk me up?”

*Butcher:*

“I have just the thing. Something special: goat, fresh and young! A succulent kid. With a fine glass of red wine, it will do the trick. Guaranteed!” (Swartele, 1996)

**“Fresh Meat”** or Asian woman or child, caught in the sex industry and ‘food’ for the sex tourist?

**In** recent years international tourism has become an increasingly influential factor in the Thai economy. In Thailand tourism is bringing in hundreds of millions of dollars into the country. Thailand, like much of Asia, is a magnet for Western tourists as well as tourists from surrounding Asian countries. For westerners, attractions are the constant sunshine, beautiful beaches and islands, once deserted but rapidly being transformed into tourist resorts with accompanying bars and nightlife. As throughout South East Asia there is a fascinating culture and interesting people. Underlying the beauty is the exploitative and sometimes violent world of sex tourism. Sex tourism, the result of the increasing desire of Western men for Asian women, children and young men to satisfy sexual fantasy and provide material for pornography. Added to this is the ready availability, for little cost, of women and children to feed the Western market for ‘Exotic Delicacies’, Asian Babes’ and ‘Fresh Meat’. Little cost in terms of hard cash for the users, but for many of the used, a high price is to be paid. The price of emotional and often physical pain, of shame, loss of dignity and self worth. No longer a person but a commodity to be bought and sold, used and tossed away.

**Sex** tourism in Asia is big business. In 1999 approximately eight million tourists visited Thailand. It is commonly estimated that 70% of all tourists are men travelling alone. Of this figure it is estimated that 70% come specifically for sex! So in 1999 3,920,000 men came to Thailand for sex. Of these sex tourists, 1.4 million came from Europe. This does not mention the numbers that travel to the Philippines, to Bali in Indonesia, to Sri Lanka for sex with boys, and to other Asian destinations. (figures: Department of Immigration, Thailand)

**Sex** tourism is defined as ‘people (men and women) from the economically developed nations travelling to underdeveloped countries specifically to purchase the sexual services of local men, women and children’. (Davidson-O’Connell, 1996.)

### **Who are the sex tourists?**

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' or the business man. Very often this group includes the pedophile looking for sexual experience that is forbidden in the home country – sex with children. These groups 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 not or would not indulge in at home. This may involve sex with male as well as female prostitutes and/or children. Finally those men, who get once in Thailand get swept into sexual encounters, often through either loneliness or the 'hospitality' of Thai business hosts.

### **Why Asia? Why Thailand?**

One British tourist comments: 'I just get turned on by Oriental women'

**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. She may also serve as a cheap or unpaid tour guide, interpreter and maid. Through the mirror of Asian eyes the aging, fat and balding westerner see himself again as young, sexy and virile. This is all a part of the fantasy in the land where the ex tourist advertisements say

'Come to Thailand where all your fantasies will be made to come true'.

**Frequently** the relationship of the western sex tourist with the Asian woman is abusive, subtle, emotional abuse rather than physical violence. For some there may be violence, especially for the young girls sold into the brothels who may be raped and beaten into compliance with customers demands. These clients are usually local men or Asian tourists. But the for the majority it is the abuse of power. White male superiority, economic and psychological power, the abusive power of rich over poor.

For the woman loss of dignity and personal worth is brought about by a sense of powerlessness, patronage of the client and the false stereotypes of Asian woman. the clients wishes. The relationship is unequal as it is based on need and power. Her need for money and his economic superiority, his sexual need or desire and her ability to 'fulfil his fantasy'.

The relationship is also one of dependency. This can be emotionally abusive for the man. He may fall in love but she may only see the relationship as means to money. He may return time and again to search for her or possibly become involved in a life time financial commitment to her family. Conversely the woman may swear undying love but to the sex tourist on his return home, she is just another part of his 'holiday in paradise'.

**For** the women, particularly in Thailand, the foreign tourist is seen as money, money for the family, or maybe 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 (7% of the population) earn an average income of 1,166 baht (\$US45) 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 sufficient for their families. Many are married who have been widowed or deserted by 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 maybe proud that their work is giving their children the opportunity to go to school.

The following could be the story of thousands of Thai women, but for Pranee, there is a happy ending.

**“My name is Pranee.** I come from a small village in the Northeast of Thailand. My father died when I was 12 years old, and as the eldest child I had to find work to provide for my family. At first I worked in a factory in Bangkok, but I was so young and the hours were long, the work was hard and there was hardly any pay. Then my friends said ‘why don’t you come to Pattaya and work with the foreigners to get money’” So I thought, Okay I would do this. So at 14 years old I began working in the bars and became a prostitute. Some months went by and I met a German man, he was in his fifties and I went to live with him as his wife. The relationship lasted for about three year and then we broke up. I believed that he loved me but after this I didn’t believe that there was such a thing in the world as love. I returned to Bangkok and began working in the bars as a dancer and later in the shows. I believed that I would have to be a prostitute for my whole life. I was only 19. I only thought about making money for my family. But I had a dream that one day I would be able to buy some land and that I would be able to get an education.

About this time I heard of Rahab Beauty shop in Patpong and went in to do my makeup before going to work. They were friendly to me and told me about Jesus Christ who loved me. At first I didn't believe it as I didn't believe in love and I only wanted to make money for my family. Finally one day I went to the church with them, I felt so good, no-one knew what I was or what I did. For the first time in my life I felt like a woman with dignity, like a princess. Soon after I accepted God's love. I was very tired of working in the bars so I asked them what I could do. They said 'go to Bible School'. I did. Now five years later, I have completed a years Bible Training, completed my secondary education and am now studying full time at University. I worked with Rahab for four years as an evangelist and in counseling and helping the girls. Now God has given me a Christian husband and I am finding that I can share the gospel everywhere and bring my friends to know the love of Christ.

**RAHAB MINISTRIES** began as an outreach to the women working in Patpong, Bangkok's infamous 'red-light' where up to 4,000 women work in the bars catering to foreign tourists. In 1988, Patricia Green, a New Zealand missionary started visiting the women in the bars. A year later she and two Thai friends began a small Bible Study and support group in Patpong. So Rahab Ministries began. Last year a second center was opened in Pattaya City.

**The objectives** of Rahab Ministries are to share the love of Jesus Christ through friendship evangelism and social concern; to provide practical help and emotional support to women working in prostitution and through sponsorship provide opportunities for education and vocational training for alternative employment. **Rahab Greeting Cards** provides an immediate source of income for women leaving the bars.

**Each** week 'Rahab' workers visit women in the bars in Patpong and Pattaya, offering friendship and personal affirmation, seeking to build caring relationships with the women and inviting them to the Rahab Centers which are Beauty Salons. Hairdressing, makeup and manicures are a key to making contact with the women, gaining their trust and providing opportunity to share the gospel and to help them in practical ways. The salons provide a place of friendship, relaxation, counseling and informal education. Twenty to thirty women visit the salons each day. Rahab House provides a home for women who leave prostitution as well as for younger girls on the Prevention program. Here the women are given training in life skills and disciplined in the Christian life.

**Over** the years many women have found new life in Christ as the love of God has touched them and given them hope and a purpose and healed their pain and the rejection of the past.

### **What can be done?**

As other countries open to foreign investment, a capitalistic style of development and tourism, so the sex tourists come looking for 'fresh meat'.

You can lobby and boycott travel companies that sell and condone sex tours.

Approach national airlines requesting that they show in flight videos on flights to Asia decrying sex tourism and stating that sex with children is a crime and punishable by national and international law.

Write to you own and to Asian governments stating your concerns about sex to and advocating 'good tourism'.

Above all **PRAY** that Go will intervene.

Rahab Ministries can be contacted at P.O. Box 57, Patpong P.O., Bangkok 10506, Thailand. E-mail address: rahab@bkk.a-net.net.th

### References:

O'Connell-Davidson, J. and Sanchez-Taylor, J. (1996) Sex Tourism – Thailand. A Research Paper. Leicester, University of Leicester, Department of Sociology

Swartele, F. (1996). The Price of Lamb. Sex Tourism and the Abuse of Children. Brussels, ECPAT.