



ECPAT photobank

CHILD PROSTITUTION

The Asian Reality

by Aaron Sacks

Kanita Karmha, a Dutch tour company, recently circulated a brochure that described prostitutes in Thailand as "little slaves who give real Thai warmth."

Two years ago in August, the Austrian airline, Lauda Air, ran a mock postcard in its in-flight magazine that featured a picture of a young, shirtless girl with a caption saying, "From Thailand with love." The back of the postcard explained that the writers didn't have time to say much because "the tarts in the Bangkok Baby Club are waiting for us."

Child prostitution is not new. But today it has assumed the proportions of a multibillion dollar industry, with children being bought, sold and traded like other mass-produced goods. Brazil alone has between 250,000 and 500,000 children involved in the sex trade, and a recent study conducted by the Bogota Chamber of Commerce concluded that the number of child prostitutes in the Colombian capital had nearly tripled over the past three years.

But the centre of the child sex industry is Asia: children's advocacy groups assert that there are about 60,000 child prostitutes in the Philippines, about 400,000 in India and about 600,000 in Thailand. Most of the children are girls under 16, though there are a few parts of the world where boys are sought. For instance, almost all of Sri Lanka's 20,000 to 30,000 child prostitutes are boys.

EXPLOITERS

As troubling as it may sound, the explosion of the child sex trade comes down to two basic market forces: supply and demand. A global society destabilised by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, environmental stress and the rapidly widening gap between the rich and the poor are producing more potential exploiters of the sex industry.

And the criminal sex traffickers, just like other opportunistic middlemen, have stepped in to take advantage of the situation while society has simply looked the other way.

Rural poverty and pressing socio-economic conditions have served to expand the potential supply of child prostitutes. No story is more

wrenching than that of a child who has been deceived or forced by violence into prostitution.

But it is perhaps even more tragic when parents, who have no other criminal dealings, knowingly offer their children to sex traffickers. Without faith in potential economic opportunities, especially for girls, parents see no point in training their female children, either at home or at school.

Many parents can hardly feed themselves and find it nearly impossible to refuse a cash payment in exchange for one of their daughters, whom they often expect to come back a few years later in full health and with substantial savings.

In Thailand, even poor, uneducated villagers often realise that a woman in the sex industry, as a study sponsored by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) has shown, can make about 25 times as much as she could in any other occupation open to her.

The causes of rural poverty in recent times, are even more distressing. Along the borders of Thailand, Burma, Laos and China, people depended on the forest for their subsistence. But logging projects, whether legal or illegal, and

whether initiated by national governments, multi-lateral development banks, timber companies or frontier squatters, have laid waste the area's hillsides over the past three decades. Because the Thai government was investing so heavily in logging and large-scale export agriculture, it has to cut back on its social spending. The poor, with their livelihood deprived and social security withdrawn, had nowhere to go.

Meanwhile the demand for child prostitutes was growing. A mythologising of virginity fuelled it and fear of HIV/AIDS has further intensified it. Sadly, the involvement of children in prostitution is merely facilitating the spread of the disease—and is rapidly killing them. According to Saphasit Koomprahant, director of the Children's Rights Protection Centre in Thailand, the HIV infection rate among Thai child prostitutes is now almost 50 percent.

When brothel owners discover that one of their girls has the deadly disease, they usually send her straight back to her home village. Once there, she gets cut off from medical care. And because such communities have little experience with HIV, the virus may end up spreading even further. Child prostitution is one of the most important forces driving HIV/AIDS from its urban centres out to rural areas, which are still home to about 65 percent of the developing world's populations.

In 1967, when the US government, entrenched in the Vietnam War, signed a treaty with Thailand enabling US soldiers to come ashore for R&R (Rest and Relaxation), a new era dawned, where the sex industry got what amounted to official sanction.

Less than a decade later, Thailand had more than 20,000 brothels and other sex-industry establishments. The hyped mythology of the young, submissive girls waiting for wealthy tourists in sultry southeast Asia was making its way around the world.

Three years ago, the Japanese Foundation for AIDS prevention, an organisation affiliated with the

Japanese government, launched a high-profile poster campaign. Their central image was of a middle-aged man wearing a business suit, grinning, and displaying his passport. The caption read: "Have a nice trip! But be careful of AIDS." The assumptions implicit in this poster point to the major factor behind the increase in demand for child prostitutes: sex tourism.

When challenged, the Foundation justified its campaign as a reality check, citing the statistic that, 60 percent of Japanese men who contracted HIV through heterosexual sex did so overseas. But the language

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of the caption, in the name of AIDS prevention, could be interpreted as endorsing exploitative sexual behavior and giving sanction to those business and travel agencies that arrange sex tours in poorer countries like Thailand, Philippines and Sri Lanka.

"Rich tourists," according to Ellis Shenk, the director of the New York branch of the International Campaign to End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism (ECPAT), "have realised that human life is cheaper in the Third World".

ENCOURAGE

The First World even went so far as to encourage countries like Thailand to develop their sex tourism industries—although not quite so explicitly.

In 1971, Robert McNamara, the president of the World Bank, without specifically mentioning the sex industry, urged Thailand to supplement its export activities with

an all-out effort to attract rich foreigners to the country's various tourist facilities. After all, US spending on R&R quadrupled between 1967 and 1970, from about \$5 billion to \$20 billion.

By 1975, Thailand, with the help of World Bank economists, had instituted a National Plan of Tourist Development which specially underwrote the sex industry. The new plan basically just buttressed the 1966 Entertainment Places Act, the national law that had made possible the international R&R treaty.

Without directly legalising prostitution, the Act referred repeatedly to the "personal services" sector. According to Thai feminist, Sukyana Hantrakul, the law "was enacted to pave the way for whorehouses to be legalised in the guise of massage parlours, bars, nightclubs, tea houses, etc."

EMBEDDED

Of course, child prostitution in Asia is not completely governed by the politics and economics of sex tourism—it is also deeply embedded in many local and national cultures.

In Thailand for instance, according to Harvard researcher Hnin Hnin Pyne, 75 percent of all men have had sex with a prostitute. And on the border between Maharashtra and Karnataka in India, believers in the Hinduist devadasi system, who today number in the thousands, have been dedicating their daughters to a religiously sanctioned life of prostitution for well over a millennium.

In the 1990s, however, the child sex industry is no longer just a shameful reminder of the criminal element lurking beneath the surface of every civilization. It points to a fundamental injustice in the current materialist world order—a global willingness to sacrifice society's most vulnerable members for the sake of other's economic and sexual gratification. We are quite literally mortgaging our future.

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