

# The internet



# prostitution

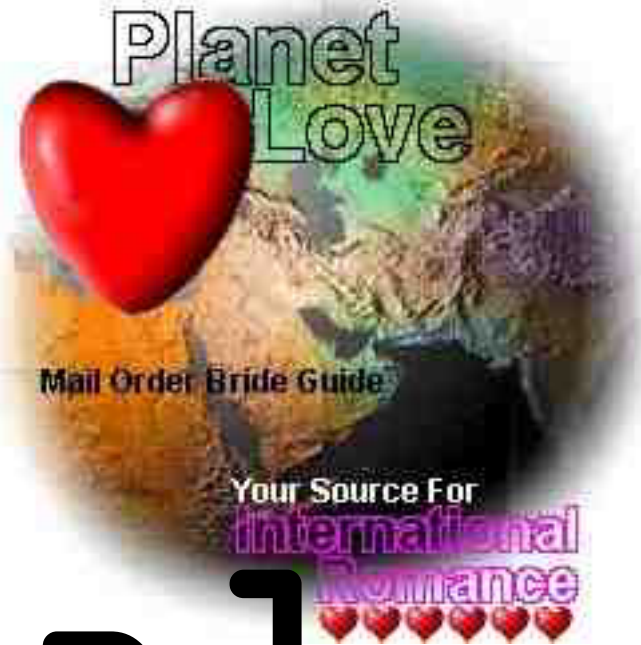
by Donna M. Hughes

**T**he Internet has become the latest place for promoting the global trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and children. This global communication network is being used to promote and engage in the buying and selling of women and children. Agents offer catalogues of mail order brides, with girls as young as 13. Commercial prostitution tours are advertised. Men exchange information on where to find prostitutes and describe how they can be used. After their trips men write reports on how much they paid for women and children and give pornographic descriptions of what they did to them. New technology has enabled an online merger of pornography and prostitution, with videoconferencing bringing live sex shows to the Internet.

## SEXUAL EXPLOITATION ON THE INTERNET

Global sexual exploitation is on the rise. The profits are high, and there are few effective barriers at the moment. Because there is little regulation of the Internet, the traffickers and promoters of sexual exploitation have rapidly utilised the Internet for their purposes.

Traffickers and pornographers are the leading developers of the Internet industry. *PC Computing* magazine urge entrepreneurs to visit pornography Web sites. "It will show you the future



and the

# global prostitution industry

of on-line commerce. Web pornographers are the most innovative entrepreneurs in the Internet." The pornographers and other promoters of sexual exploitation are the Internet leaders in the developing privacy services, secure payment schemes and online data base management.

The development and expansion of the Internet is an integral part of globalisation. The Internet sex industry has made local, community and

even, national standards obsolete. Nichols Negroponte, Director of the Media Laboratory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and founder of *Wired* magazine said, "As we interconnect ourselves, many of the values of a nation-state will give way to those of both larger and smaller electronic communities." The standards and values on the Internet are being set by the sex industry and its supporters and users. This has

meant that women are increasingly "commodities" to be bought, sold, traded and consumed.

#### NEWSGROUPS AND WEB SITES FOR MEN WHO BUY WOMEN AND CHILDREN

The oldest forum on the Internet for promoting the sexual exploitation of women is the alt.sex.prostitution. Its "aim is to create market transparency for sex-related services." Postings from this

newsgroup are archived into a site called The World Sex Guidem which provides “comprehensive, sex-related information about every country in the world.”

**The implications for this type of public exchange in a fast-publishing easily accessible medium like the Internet are very serious for the sexual exploitation of women in the future.**

The guide includes information and advice from men who have bought women and children in prostitution. They tell others where and how to find and buy prostituted women and children in 110 countries. The following are a few examples of men’s opening lines for their reports:

“I have a good knowledge of brothels in Brazil, due to my frequent journeys during the last five years.”— “Having some experience with the scene in New Zealand I would like to offer the following advice...”-- “Another of my ‘catching up’ reports on present knowledge of hot spots around the globe, this time from Bristol, England.”

Details of the reports include: information on where to find prostitutes, hotel prices, telephone numbers, taxi fares, cost of alcohol, the sex acts that can be bought, the price for each act, and evaluations of the women’s appearances and performances. One man includes a rating scale on the likelihood of getting mugged in

that neighbourhood. The men go on to describe, often in graphic detail, their experiences of using women and children. The scope and detail of this exchange is without precedent. The women are completely objectified and evaluated on everything from skin color to presence of scars and firmness of their flesh. Women’s receptiveness and compliance to men buyers is also rated.

The men buying women and posting the information see and perceive the events only from their self-interested perspective. Their awareness of racism, colonisation, global economic inequalities, and of course, sexism, is limited to how these forces benefit them. A country’s economic or political crisis and the accompanying poverty are advantages, which produce cheap readily available women for the men. Often men describe how desperate the women are and how little the men have to pay.

The postings also reveal that men are using the Internet as a source of information in selecting where to go and how to find women and children to buy prostitution. Men describe taking a computer print out of hotels, bar addresses and phone numbers with them on their trips, or describe how they used the Internet search engines to locate sex tours. “This three-day trip happened in June 1995. On the flight I read all the information I had printed out from The World Sex Guide—I had a lot of expectations of the City of Angels (Bangkok).”

Information on legal prostitution in Nevada, USA, includes photographs of the road signs leading to the

brothels and of their entrances. One man calling himself Cybersuck provides a list of legal “whorehouses” in Nevada with detailed driving instructions on how to get there.

This rapid publishing electronic medium has enabled men to pimp and exploit individual women. Now, men can go out at night, buy a woman, go home, and post the details on the newsgroup. By morning anyone in the world with an Internet connection can read about it and often have enough information to find the same woman. For



example, in Nevada, one man bought a woman called “Honey” and named the brothel where she could be found. Within a couple of weeks other men went and bought “Honey” themselves and posted their experiences to the newsgroup. Within a short period of time men were having an orgy of male bonding by describing what each of them did to this woman. The men are keeping a special Web site on the Internet for men to post their experiences of buying this one woman. Additional sites have been created for other identifiable women. To my knowledge this is completely unprecedented. The implications for this type of

public exchange in a fast-publishing easily accessible medium like the Internet are very serious for the sexual exploitation of women in the future.

The most voluminous coverage is on Bangkok, Thailand. The men give information on everything from currency exchange rates to how to run a bar tab. The names, addresses and phone numbers for 150 hotels where men will feel comfortable are listed. All the city sections and their sexual specialties are listed and described. Does the man want a massage? Discos? Escort services? A lady house? Japanese clubs? A short-time hotel? A blow job bar? At these Web sites the men are presenting an etiquette and buyer's guide on how men should behave and solicit in all of these places.

One colorful page on the Web promotes special shows in Bangkok where men can pay to see women smoking cigarettes with their vaginas. Another page describes and shows a color picture of the razor blade show in which a woman dances and pulls two dozen razor blades connected by a string from her vagina. A woman named Cleo Odzer owns this web site. She did her Ph.D research on prostitution in Bangkok and presents herself as an objective researcher, but on her Web site she refers to the women in the bars as "my prostitutes" and has a picture of herself with a pimp named Choo Choo Charlie. She seems to have taken on the role of pimp on her Web site. At another site a man describes a show in Bangkok in which a woman dances with two pythons and



inserts the head of one into her vagina.

Some of the men posting information on the alt.sex.prostitution newsgroup are quite straightforward about their misogyny and sadism. Other men, who I'm sure would deny that they have ever done so, reveal quite inadvertently their abuse of women. To the men who buy women and children, a "bad experience" means they didn't get their money's worth or that the woman didn't keep up the act of enjoying the men. It means she let her true feelings of pain, desperation, and hopelessness show.

The men exchange information on child prostitution. One man says, in Bangkok "there is child prostitution. I have been offered 9-year-olds, and 14-year-olds." His solution: "If child prostitution turns you off, be careful when you select your girl." Another man described which street corners are the best for finding pimps who can supply preteen girls. He said not to worry if you ask the wrong guy, he will probably

just direct you to the right one. The men assume that the whole town is there to serve their demand for women and children.

Some men describe finding and buying young girls for sex. Although they are clearly seeking and raping children, they always include a comment that later they found out the girl was really much older than she looked. The men believe that this statement will legally protect them from being accused of buying underage girls.

One man wrote a long description of finding and buying a young girl. This is an excerpt: "Inside the other room sat about 12 girls watching TV. It was obvious that these young things had not yet matured into ladies...their giggles and squirming quickly gave them away. No dummies either, the establishment had no attempts to dress them sexy, but rather clothed them in young girl outfits befitting their age. My attendant assured me that all of them were suitably trained. I couldn't restrain myself! I had to have one of them." This one



concludes with a graphic description of the sex that is so pornographic and abusive I will not reprint it.

We know that many of the girls and women in Bangkok's prostitution industry are virtual slaves. The men who buy them know that. Slavery is accepted and exploited by these men, and their comments prove it. On this newsgroup, the men tell each other that they can exploit the women and girls held against their will for sadistic practices.

Although the basis of prostitution is economic exploitation for the pimps, brothel and bar owners, the men who buy the women and girls engage in enslaving them for purposes of sexual gratification and domination. The following selection, from a man's report in his own words, how the women are constrained and forced to perform sex acts for basic survival:

"You can go to an island...Your party (two or three guys, five or six girls, perhaps) transfers to the ship and is taken to one of the thousand small paradise islands off the coast of Thailand. It will be deserted, maybe with a hut or a bungalow, but with no people at all. Then you agree with the skipper to come by every day with fresh food, and to pick you up again in a week. It is a great way of getting both a good tan, a good relaxation, and all your sexual fantasies fulfilled. Last time I did this, we quickly established a house rule that no girl was ever allowed to wear any piece of clothing except her sandals. That, plus our rule that every girl had to in some appropriate way or another earn her food before every

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meal, turned the stay into a rather pleasant one."

### PROSTITUTION TOURS

Centers for prostitution tourism are also the sources of women trafficked for purposes of sexual exploitation to other countries. For centers of prostitution in European countries, women from poor countries are imported legally and illegally to fill the brothels. Among the largest sources of trafficked women today are the countries of the former Soviet Union. Advertisements for prostitution tours to these sites appear on the Internet, usually described as "romance tours" or "introduction tours."

Prostitution tours enable men to travel to "exotic" places and step outside whatever community bounds may constrain them at home. In foreign cities they can abuse women and girls in ways that are more risky or difficult for them in their hometowns.

As prostitution has become a form of tourism for men, it has become a form of economic development for poor countries. Tourism was recommended by the United States advisory boards as a way to generate income and repay debts (Lee, 1991). Nation-states set their own tourist policies and could, if they chose to do so, prevent or suppress the development of

prostitution as a form of tourism. Instead, communities and countries have to rely on the sale of women and children's bodies as their cash crop. As the prostitution industry grows, more girls and women are turned into sexual commodities for sale to tourists. In the bars of Bangkok, women and girls don't have names—they have numbers pinned to their skimpy clothes. The men pick them by numbers. They are literally interchangeable sexual objects.

Prostitution tourism centers in industrialised countries are receiving sites for trafficked women from poor countries. The Netherlands is the strongest international proponent for legalised prostitution. Its capital, Amsterdam, is the leading prostitution tourism center in Europe. In 1997 the Netherlands legalized brothels. The result has been increased trafficking to Amsterdam from all over the world.

Advertisements for prostitution tours appeared on the Web in mid-1995, when Alan J. Munn, New York City, USA, launched PIMPS 'R' Us. He arranged prostitution tours to the Dominican Republic and Nevada, USA. In his Dominican Republic tour he offered four days and three nights in a "wonderful setting" which includes "many female prostitutes." A tour guide on the trip provided "practical information about how to find and deal with prostitutes and how to arrange group orgies." On one night, courtesy of the tour, "oral sex (fellatio) is provided by an attractive female whore chosen by the tour guide." Participants are also given PIMPS 'R' Us

baseball caps. Munn also arranged group tours to legal brothels in Nevada, providing information on "prevailing prices, what influences how much whores charge, and reputations of the various whorehouses." The package included "round trip transportation from the hotel to one whorehouse daily for a total of four different whorehouses chosen by the tour guide."

There are many advertisements for prostitution tours to Central America and the Caribbean. An advertisement for Erotic Vacations to Costa Rica quotes a price, which includes double occupancy rooms and intracountry flights, booked for two. If the tourist chooses a longer tour his "companion" is changed half way through the trip, so the man gets to buy two women in the longer sex tours. The fees for the "companions" are paid directly to the tour operator, not the women, although the men are encouraged to "tip" the women if they are pleased with their services.

#### **BRIDE TRAFFICKING**

Mail order bride agents have moved to the Internet as their preferred marketing location. The Internet reaches a prime group of potential buyers—men from Western countries with higher than average incomes. The new technology enables Web pages to be quickly and easily updated; some services claim they are updating their selection of women weekly. The

Internet reaches a global audience faster and less expensively than any other media.

The agents offer men assistance in finding a "loving and devoted" woman whose "views on relationships have not been ruined by unreasonable expectations." The agencies describe themselves as "introduction services," but a quick examination of many of the Web sites reveals their commercial interests in bride trafficking, sex tours and prostitution.

The catalogues offer women mostly from Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America,

the U.S. and Western Europe are said to do.

In 1990 the Philippine government banned the operation of prostitution tour and mail order bride agencies in the Philippines. One trafficker lamented this new law, and told his customers that now he was operating out of the United States with his computer. He sent his own Filipina wife back to the Philippines to make contact and recruit women and adolescent girls for his Web site. Another complained that with the ban, the Philippine government is "definitely working against the interests



although in mid-1998 special catalogues of women from Africa appeared. They are called "African Queens," and "Brides of Nubia." Pictures of the women are shown with their names, height, weight, education and hobbies. Some catalogues include the women's bust, waist and hip measurements. The women range in age from 13 to 50. One of the commonly promoted characteristics of women from Eastern Europe is that they "traditionally expect to marry gentlemen that are 10 to 20 years older." The women are marketed as "pleasers," who will make very few demands on the men, and will not threaten them with expectations in their relationships, as women from

of their own people. These girls want and need to leave that country." The same agent also complained that the U.S. government will not allow his youngest "brides" on offer into the country. "The service itself is not restricted by the American government, although they are real picky about getting your bride into the States—they won't give a visa to a bride under sixteen." In his catalog of potential brides 19 girls are aged 17 or younger.

The bride traffickers sell addresses to men. Later they offer to arrange tours for the men to go to meet the woman with whom they have been corresponding, or to meet as many women as possible. Men

pay for these services over the Internet with their credit cards.

Some catalogues list women with young children. One Web site asks if men want women with or without children. On another site there are pictures of naked children playing. I think children are being trafficked also in this way. The men are being subtly shown ways of acquiring women and children—all in one package.

#### LIVE VIDEO CONFERENCING

The most advanced technology on the Internet is live video conferencing, in which live audio and video are transmitted over the Internet from video recorder to computer. This advanced technology is being used to sell live sex shows over the Internet. Real time communication is possible, so the man can personally direct the live sex show as he is viewing it on his computer.

The only limitation on this type of global sex show is the need for high-speed transmission, processing and multimedia capabilities. The software required is free, but the most recent versions of Web browsers have these capabilities built into them. As more men have access to high-speed multimedia computer and transmission equipment, this type of private sex show will grow. There are no legal restrictions on live sex shows that can be transmitted over the Internet. As with all Internet transmissions, there are no nation-state border restrictions. With Internet technology a man maybe on one continent, while directing and watching a live strip show, a live sex show, or the sexual

abuse of a child on another continent. There have been several documented cases of live transmission of the sexual abuse of children through live video conferencing.

**According to the Internet Entertainment Group (EIG), the largest pimp on the Web, the buyers for live strip shows are 90 percent male, 70 percent are between the ages 18 and 40. The buyers are young men in college, and businessmen and professionals who log on from work.**

The first live video conferencing prostitution industry site I saw was in October 1995, running off the CTSNET server in San Diego, California: "Virtual Dreams uses cutting-edge technology to bring you the most beautiful girls in the world. Using our software and your computer, you can interact real time and one-on-one with the girl of your dreams. Ask her anything you wish—she is waiting to please you!"

By November 1995, "live nude video teleconferencing" was being touted on the Internet newsgroup alt.sex.prostitution. Derek Hamilton said, "With Windows, my 486 and their software, I called a pretty girl's studio with my modem and watched her undress. All of this was live and in color on my computer

monitor. What will they think of next. Sitting at home being entertained by a beautiful girl. Talk about safe sex! I love it."

Who buys women over the Internet? According to the Internet Entertainment Group (EIG), the largest pimp on the Web, the buyers for live strip shows are 90 percent male, 70 percent are between the ages 18 and 40. The buyers are young men in college, and businessmen and professionals who log on from work. This information was obtained from analysis of credit card usage (Wired, December 1997).

#### GROWTH OF THE COMMERCIAL PROSTITUTION INDUSTRY ON THE INTERNET

In the mid-1990s, the hottest place for commercial development was the Internet. In early September 1995 there were 101,908 commercial domains on the Web, which was 26,055 more than at the end of July, and 72,706 more than the end of 1994. The sex industry was leading the way.

At the beginning of 1995, there were just 200 businesses on the World Wide Web selling "erotica services" and products, from condoms to pornographic videos (Strangelove, Internet Business Journal, January 1995). I did a search on Yahoo, a popular search engine, in August 1995 and August 1996. In August '95, the category Yahoo: Business and Economy; Companies: Sex had 391 listings for phone sex numbers, adult CD-ROMS, X-rated films, adult computer software, live video conferencing, sex tours, escort services and mail order bride agencies. In August 1996 there were 1,676 listings—a fourfold increase in one year.

By mid-1995, strip clubs

Table 1  
**1996 U.S. Entertainment Industry Revenue**  
 (Motion Picture Association of America, The National Association of Music Merchants, The Magazine Publishers of America, Live Broadway, Opera America, and Dance USA, 1997)

New books	\$26.10 billion
Magazine publishing	\$11.18 billion
<b>Sex industry</b>	<b>\$ 9.00 billion</b>
Recorded music	\$ 8.15 billion
Film industry	\$ 5.90 billion
Theatre, ballet, opera	\$ 1.69 billion
Computer gaming	\$ 1.10 billion

Table 2  
**1996 U.S. Sex Industry Revenues**  
 (Adult Video News, U.S. News and World Report, Naughty Linx, 1997)

Adult CD-ROMS	\$ 75 million
Cable (pay-per-view)	\$ 325 million
Phone sex	\$ 750 million
<b>Online sex sites</b>	<b>\$ 925 million</b>
Strip clubs	\$ 2 billion
Adult video sales, rentals	\$ 5 billion

had set up advertising on Web sites. Strip clubs from New Jersey, New York, and Delaware, USA, had their own home pages where they advertised their shows. They featured pornographic photos of strippers, they called their “cyberstars” of the week.

The price of magazines, videos, CD-ROMS—any item produced by the sex industry—is always much higher than similar nonpornographic materials. The high prices and profit margins of pornographic materials keeps the revenue and profit high for the sex industry. In 1996 Americans spent more than US\$9 billion on pornographic videos, peep shows, live sex shows, pornographic cable programs, pornographic magazines and computer pornography. That amount is more than many other entertainment businesses, such as film, music and theater (See Table 1). To put that amount in some context, according to War on

Want, US\$9 billion is enough to provide debt relief for the world’s 20 worst affected countries (*The Guardian*, November 1997). These revenue figures don’t include the millions of dollars made illegally through the sale of women in brothels, massage parlors, or on the street, or the sale of illegal materials, such as child pornography.

The highest revenue for legal materials produced by the sex industry was for the sales and rentals of

pornographic videos at US\$2 billion dollars, followed by strip clubs at US\$2 billion. Sex industry sites on the Internet earned US\$925 million in 1996 (See Table 2).

The popular mainstream pornographic magazine *Playboy* was quick to jump on the Web. The content of the online magazine was designed to appeal to a younger, wealthier audience, 75 percent of whom did not subscribe to the print *Playboy* magazine. In 1996, it was the 11<sup>th</sup> most visited site on the Web. In 1997, the Web site generated US\$2 million in advertising revenue. Many of the advertisers are exclusive to the Web site and do not buy advertising in the print publication. In mid-1998, *Playboy’s* CyberClub had 26,000 subscribers paying US\$60 per year.

In April 1996, another popular pornographic magazine, *Penthouse* went online. Its Web site recorded

the highest number of visits for publication sites in that month.

A 1996 survey found that 20 percent of the users of the World Wide Web said they regularly visited pornographic sites. By 1998, another survey indicated that 30 percent of American households with Internet access visited online sex industry sites at least once per month. In the same year, one report estimated that the Web had 600 commercial pornography sites, which were expected to generate revenues of US\$51.5 million. This does not include the amateur sites, or those that have free sites, but make money only by advertising. Only computer products and travel exceeded pornography sales on the Internet.

The estimated number of pornographic Web sites varies widely. In late 1997, according to Naughty Linx, an online index, there were 28,000 “sex sites” on the Web with about half of them trying to make money selling pornography, videos, or live sex shows. Another study estimated that there were 72,000 pornographic Web sites on the Internet. At the end of 1997, Leo Preiser, the Director of the Center for Technology at National University estimated that 60 percent of the electronic commerce on the Web was pornography.

At the end of 1997, the online sex industry was estimated to be making US\$1 billion a year, just in the United States. In findings from a 1997 survey, *Inter@ctive Week* magazine reported that 10,000 sex industry sites were bringing in approximately US\$1 billion per year. A midsize site that was accessed





50,000 times per day made approximately US\$20,000 each month. Established sex industry sites could expect to make 50 to 80 percent profits. Forrester Research, an Internet analyst firm, estimated that the Internet sex industry would make close to US\$1 billion in 1998. "We know of at least three sites doing more than US\$100 million a year. And there are hundreds of sites out there."

#### REGULATION

The new technologies of the Internet have leapt over national borders and have left lawmakers scrambling to catch up. Internet users have adopted and defend an unbridled libertarianism. Any kind of regulation or restriction is met with hysterics and predictions of a totalitarian society. Even the most conservative restrictions on the transmission of child pornography are greeted with cries of censorship. The December 1996 issue of *Wired*, the leading professional publication on the Internet, stated that a new law in the United States, which made it illegal to transmit indecent materials to minors, was cen-

sorship. Internet libertarianism coupled with United States free speech absolutism is setting the standard for Internet communications.

Expressions of concern or condemnation of forms of sexual exploitation of women and children on the Internet are minimized by claims that pornographers have always been the first to take advantage of new technology—first photography, then movies, then VCRs, now the Internet. Those concerned about the use of the Internet for sexual exploitation are chastened with history lectures on new technology and pornography.

The solution that is being promoted is software programs that will screen out sexually explicit material. U.S. President Bill Clinton just announced that he supported a rating system on the Internet, so pornography would be rated and software programs will screen it out. This is seen as a way to protect children. Most adults are only concerned that their children may see pornography on the Internet. They aren't concerned about the women who are being exploited in the making of the

pornography. In any search for a solution to pornography and prostitution it is crucial to remember, that sexual exploitation starts with real people and the harm is to real people.

We need international judicial and police cooperation in regulating the Internet and ending the trafficking and prostitution of women and the girls. If it is illegal to run a prostitution tour agency or mail order bride agency in the Philippines, then it should be illegal to advertise these services on a computer in the USA. The countries that send the men on tours and receive the mail order brides should also ban the operation of such agencies and prohibit the advertisement of these services from computer servers in their country.

The European Union defines trafficking as a form of organised crime. It should be treated the same way on the Internet. All forms of sexual exploitation should be recognised as forms of violence against women and human rights violations, and governments should act accordingly. Although the Internet offers open communication to people throughout the world, it should not be permitted to be dominated and controlled by men's interests or the interests of the prostitution industry, at the expense of women and children. ♡

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