

# Women and Commercial Sex in Thailand

by Saisuree Chutikul

*Cet article met l'emphase sur l'ampleur que prend le marché du sexe thaïlandais et il examine quelques-uns des facteurs qui y contribuent tels la pauvreté, la*

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*désintégration de la famille, le manque d'éducation et de formation, la politique nationale sur le tourisme et une hausse du crime organisé. L'auteure suggère des mesures de prévention et de réhabilitation qui pourraient encourager les femmes à choisir d'autres façons de gagner leur vie.*

The exploitation of women and children through commercial sex has been a cause for alarm in the last decade. Official statistics indicate an increase in numbers of women and girls involved in commercial sex, but the figures vary from one office to another. For example the Ministry of Health reports about 75,000 prostitutes working in Thailand while the Foundation for Children (an NGO) estimates that there are two million prostitutes and 800,000 children in commercial sex. The latter figures are impossible demographically.<sup>1</sup>

Official estimates by the National Commission on Women's Affairs identify 150,000 to 200,000 prostitutes, of which 15 to 20 per cent are children under the age of 18. At present, the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare is conducting a national survey on this group and results will be available by the end of the year. Hard data will be difficult to obtain, due to the migration of these

women and the 'undercover' nature of the trade.

Concerns about this situation are increasing because the trade is involving persons at younger and younger ages; boys are now becoming involved as well, which has not been the case in

the past; HIV/AIDS cases are increasing in this group; and international trafficking of girls and women for commercial sex is also increasing.

Various investigations, interviews, and informal studies by both government and non-governmental organizations have indicated a number of causes for the growth in the commercial sex trade.

Poverty is considered to be one of the main causes propelling girls and women into prostitution. In a country where economic growth has been at a level of eight per cent and over in the past decades, the distribution of wealth still remains a major problem. At the beginning of this decade, the top 20 per cent of the population earned 54 per cent of the national income while the lowest 20 per cent of the population earned only 4.5 per cent.

However, poverty by itself does not drive the girls into prostitution. If this were the case, more girls from the poorest 20 per cent of the population would be expected to be engaged in the commercial sex trade. Poverty combines with other interrelated factors to prompt these girls and women to take up this trade.

For example, in Thailand, the sense of gratitude towards parents is very strong and ingrained. The "paying back" of "the breast milk" by the offspring is a prevalent social-cultural value. Parents receive part of their children's earnings. As a result, children and especially women find what-

ever job they can get—including prostitution—and share their income with their family.

Furthermore, fathers are often irresponsible economically to the family or the parents are divorced or separated. This leads children to run away from home and turn to prostitution for survival. Maltreatment from family members, such as violence and abuse, also drives girls and women to leave home.

One study found that one fourth of women in the commercial sex trade have never been to school. Another one fourth did not finish primary school. Most have no vocational training of any type. As a result, these women are easily exploited.

Some women are lured into prostitution by false promises of jobs (usually as waitresses in restaurants). As part of the job, they are forced to entertain "customers." Some are raped or subjected to other forms of sexual abuse.

"Traditional" sexual behaviour of men also encourages greater "demand" for and therefore greater "supply" of extra-marital and pre-marital activities with prostitutes. Thai society generally accepts this unrestricted sexual freedom.

The national policy on international tourism has encouraged the establishment of entertainment places for tourists where sex services are available. Foreign paedophiles and their international networks have also recently begun recruiting street boys from tourist areas or resorts for sexual purposes.

There has also been an increase in organized crime, including crime related to the trafficking of Thai women to more developed countries as well as trafficking of women from neighboring countries into Thailand. These women are sometimes recruited in the guise of employment as housemaids and entertainers or even as "wives." They are then coerced into

becoming commercial sex-workers.

Lack of law enforcement is one of the weaknesses which encourages proprietors, pimps, and agents to continue "business as usual." Some police officers are known to be involved in bribery and corruption. Brothels are clearly illegal under Thai law but some manage to remain open for business under the closed eyes of officials.

### Measures to eradicate underaged children in commercial sex

In an effort to stamp out the practice of sexual activities with children, the Thai Government has formulated a national policy protecting underaged girls and boys through two revised bills, one on prostitution and the other on the trafficking of women and children. It is expected that these bills will be passed by the Parliament in June 1995. These bills also decriminalize the participation of women in commercial sex, increase penalties for those involved in this "business," and offer rehabilitative measures to women who want to pursue other ways of making a living.

Other preventive measures include:

- encouraging continuation of education for girls and women through scholarship programs;
- providing vocational training;
- providing employment services for those who are looking for jobs;
- providing outreach programs to high "risk" groups;
- increasing the roles and functions of village, community, and religious leaders;
- giving special courses for women and girls in high "risk" groups on self-esteem, and on the "recruitment" techniques used by sex trade agents;
- including content in the curriculum on prostitution in "risk" areas;
- informing girls and women's groups under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Types of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), under the rules and laws relating to child labour, and under the new revised bills;

- providing information about HIV/AIDS;

- using the mass media to portray the reality of the commercial sex trade and its risks;

- distributing information for girls/women who intend to go abroad;

- strengthening family stability and security;

- establishing "hotlines" for girls/women;

- revising laws and regulations;

- establishing "rescue" processes to help women abroad who become victims in being lured into commercial sex;

- providing income-generating skills for those who seek other alternatives;

- improving law enforcement practices.

It is hoped that with continued and concerted efforts by both governmental and non-governmental organizations, the problem of prostitution will be alleviated. Prostitution must

be seen as a form of human exploitation, and any national program for the advancement of women cannot proceed without efforts to solve the problems of commercial sex.

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<sup>1</sup>There are 28 million females of all ages in the country from a total population of 56 million. If one uses these figures as baseline, it would have to be concluded that one out of every 14 females is a prostitute. There are 3.1 million girls age 12 to 18. If the figure is used as a baseline it means that one out of every four girls is involved in commercial sex. Therefore, these estimates cannot be accepted demographically and yet they are quoted around the world.

### *Recommendations Concerning the Trafficking of Women*

These recommendations are from the Proceedings of the Asian Pacific Symposium of NGOs on Women in Development in Manila, September 1993.

- Expand the concept of trafficking in persons to include besides prostitution, false marriage, forced domestic labour, clandestine employment and false adoption and enforce stringent penalties on the perpetrators.

- Set up regional and bi-lateral agreements to control and eradicate trafficking in women across borders and allocate resources to ensure the speedy repatriation and social integration of all affected women.

- The Convention prohibiting slave trade and exploitation through prostitution and the CEDAW should be strictly observed and national laws reinforced accordingly. Control over trafficking in human beings should be tightened and victimized women should be rescued and protected fully.

- Rights of prostituted women should be recognized, individual women in prostitution should be de-criminalized, clients of prostitutes should be penalized.

- Sex industries should be fully investigated and counselling and crisis services should be installed.

- Prostituted women willing to undergo a new life should be provided with alternative sources of income and livelihood.