

FOR OUR STUDENTS

Research Report: Economic and Cultural Supports for Trafficking and Prostitution in Thailand and Cambodia

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Introduction

In the summer of 2004, three Eckerd College students, Ronald Porter, Carla Stehman, and Kathryn Peacock, along with an Eckerd alumna, Becky Day, accompanied me to Thailand and Cambodia for a two-month field study of the sale and trafficking of women and children into the sex trades. Our study was generously funded by a student-faculty research mentoring grant through the Freeman Foundation which my colleague from Asian Studies, Andrew Chittick, had acquired for the college. We were hoping to uncover the underlying reasons why this problem does not disappear despite what seem to be honest efforts on the part of the national and international communities to make it do so. Our goal was to visit various NGOs and government offices in-country that were attempting to address the problem, and, most importantly, to gain an understanding of those factors in Thai and Cambodian society which mitigate against their efforts. Each student had a particular focus, including gender relationships, international and domestic law, and social service provision to trafficking victims, and my focus was to pull all of our findings together into a solid understanding of the social and cultural underpinnings of the commercial sex trades in these countries.

It is first of all important to understand what is meant by trafficking. According to the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (2000), trafficking involves

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of

persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or



Our research group with the hill tribe girls rescued from prostitution in Cambodia.

benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs (p.3).

It is well known that there is a flourishing, lucrative sex industry in Southeast Asia. It is also well known that prostitution provides fertile ground for trafficking in persons. Since the time of the Viet Nam War, when thousands of United States military men took their rest and relaxation in Bangkok, Thailand gained the reputation of being the world sex capital. The industry took hold later in Cambodia, when the United Nations

mission arrived in 1993 in order to ensure free and safe elections, bringing approximately 20,000 men with money to spend on their own pleasures. Through recent crackdowns by the Thai government on sex with children, there has been a diminishing of sex tourism with children as the intended partners in Thailand, and a significant increase in sex tourism by pedophiles into Cambodia.

Prostitution may be a career choice for women throughout the world. It is unquestionable that in Thailand and Cambodia, a female prostitute can earn far more money than she would earn as an agricultural worker, street vendor, or any of the many other low paying jobs available to rural women. The literature is in conflict as to whether all prostitutes are victims, or only those who are coerced to sell their bodies. Our interest in undertaking this field study, was to examine those issues specific to the women and children of Thailand and Cambodia who do not make this choice for themselves.

Entry into Prostitution

There are fundamentally three ways that women and children enter prostitution, two of which involve trickery and coercion. The first way is voluntary entry; simply making the choice to work in the sex trades. The second way is called debt bonding. In debt bonding, the parents or guardians of a girl are approached by a recruiter, often a person well known in the village, perhaps even a friend. The recruiter typically approaches a poor family and offers money to the family that then sends its daughter to work in the sex trades as collateral against the loan. The amount of the loan can vary from up to \$15,000 in Thailand to a mere \$100 in Cambodia. From the perspective of the parents, they are not selling their daughter; they are simply using her as collateral in order to purchase for

themselves and, ostensibly for her, a better life. What they do not know is that the girl may be sold over and over again to brothel owners and pimps, and that her debt will continue to grow as the traffickers impose fines to make up their own “expenses” in moving her, in getting her false papers if necessary, and as they charge her rent, food costs, medical costs, and the condoms which she may hope that her customers will use. They also are ignorant of the risk of AIDS that their daughters will encounter.

The third entry into prostitution is involuntary. Often involuntary prostitution begins the same way as debt bondage. Recruiters make promises to poor families of good jobs for their daughters in the cities. Sometimes they approach the young women directly. They do not talk of prostitution, but rather of jobs as hotel employees, waitresses, domestic workers, models or factory workers. They promise to pay for the girl’s transportation and to take care of her, and the families and young women are told that she will be able to send money home. However, once the traffickers leave the village with the girl, her debt begins to accrue, and once again we see a form of debt bondage.

The debt of a woman or child trafficked for prostitution never actually goes away. Kevin Bales (1999) offers a clear analysis of the money to be made by the traffickers and brothel owners on each woman in their “employ” and reveals how little of their income ever goes to the girls themselves. Their debt increases, they earn progressively less money as their beauty wanes under the continuing stress of serving roughly fifteen clients per night, and they become trapped in a miserable life of desperation.

The recruiters are aware of risk factors which may make it easier to recruit a young woman into debt bondage. Derks (1997) cites the following factors: having an older child, relative or friend who has already been

recruited, family dysfunction including separation, divorce, alcoholism, drug addiction, gambling or high family conflict. Of course, families in dire poverty are more vulnerable than those with subsistence income or better.

Recruiters tend to have territories in which they work. In Thailand, hill tribe areas have been major recruiting grounds, and this may stem at least in part from a racist sense that hill tribe people are not truly Thai. Border communities with Burma and Laos have also been fertile ground for the recruitment of young girls. We learned that in Sangkhlaburi alone (a town of 15,000 people on the Burmese border) there are at least twelve operating brothels. The poor, rural northeast region of Thailand is also a productive recruiting environment.

In Cambodia, there is extensive poverty, and the economy is largely rural and agrarian. Traffickers tend to visit poor villages near the borders with Thailand and Viet Nam. Once a trafficker has a Cambodian girl in his care, he may well choose to traffic her right out of her native country into Thailand, where a prostitute can make more money for him.

Interestingly, we learned that Cambodian girls are typically not taken from Cambodia into the Mekong area of Viet Nam, but that many Vietnamese girls are trafficked into and through Cambodia. Experts viewing the NBC Dateline video aired in 2003 (“Children for Sale”) noted that the children rescued from the Phnom Penh brothel were virtually all Vietnamese.

Both the Thai and Cambodian governments have spoken out about the need to halt trafficking, yet neither government has had overwhelming success in doing so. Both find themselves on the U.S. government’s *Trafficking in Persons Report (2004)* Tier 2 list of countries making efforts to stop trafficking in persons but still falling short of their goals. One method used has been media campaigns. When we

were in Phnom Penh, for example, we saw a poster informing travelers that if they have sex with a child in Cambodia they will go to jail in their own country. In both countries there have been efforts to provide warning information in the rural areas so that families will be aware of what the traffickers are really up to. We learned of efforts by public health workers in western Thailand to go into the villages, ostensibly to show popular movies. Once the villagers are in attendance, half the movie is shown, then stopped while the workers convey their message of the dangers of sex trafficking, HIV, tuberculosis and other grim topics, and then the final half of the movie is aired. We were told that this was the most efficacious way they had found to get the message out to the poor.

The interest of our research group was to learn more about social and cultural supports for prostitution and trafficking that make the problem so resistant to eradication. Through our interviews and extensive reading, we found our answers in religion, male-female relationships, globalization and tourism, and social and economic factors in both countries.

Religion

Both Thailand and Cambodia are largely Theravada Buddhist countries. Inherent in the Theravada Buddhism is the notion of merit making. The Theravada Buddhist strives to make merit for him or herself in this life in order either to reach the ultimate Buddhist state of nirvana, never to reincarnate into another life, or in order to come back into a better life the next time. Along with this notion of merit for the self, comes the belief that a young person must make merit for his or her family as well. The Thai or Cambodian child grows up understanding that his or her relationships with their parents are of paramount importance, and that they accrue a sort of debt to their parents for raising them. A means of paying back the debt is through the making of merit for the family. In both cultures this often translates to helping the family improve their social status.

An easy way for a Thai or Cambodian male to make merit both for himself and his family is to join the monastic order. Giving a son to the

songha brings merit to the family automatically. Merit making options for girls are not so easy to come by, and job opportunities which will allow a girl to send money home and increase her family's status are seen as valuable. This creates a dilemma for the young woman. On the one hand, both Thai and Cambodian cultures look down on prostitutes. On the other hand, even a girl trafficked for prostitution recognizes that she may make merit if she is able to provide money and hence village recognition for her family if she views her situation through a religious lens. Through our interviews in Thailand and Cambodia this theme of merit-making reappeared repeatedly as one of the reasons that efforts to stop trafficking and prostitution have been of only limited success.

Gender Roles and Relationships

A second reason is tied up in women's roles and relationships in both countries. While women are very much valued as mothers, they are considered as inferior to

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men throughout Thailand and Cambodia. In fact, we were often told that if a woman had made sufficient merit in her former life, she would have returned in this life as a male!

It is expected in both Thai and Cambodian cultures that men will frequent prostitutes. It is seen as preferable for a man to have sex with a prostitute than to take a minor wife or establish an emotional relationship outside of marriage. Kevin Bales (2002) explains that on a “night out with the boys” a man would find great ego satisfaction in buying a round of prostitutes for his friends. Perhaps in Thailand this relates to the country's long history of polygamy. In Cambodia, the practice of arranged marriage is seen as a contributor, creating potential family dysfunction and males looking for sex outside of the marriage (Douglas, 2003).

Superstitious notions about the value of sex with a virgin are also significant contributors to the problem of trafficking in young women. According to Douglas (2003) many Southeast Asian men believe that having sex with a virgin will cure HIV and increase virility. From the trafficker's perspective, this demand calls for an ever-increasing supply of virgin girls, and, at least in Cambodia, helps to explain a trend toward the trafficking of younger and younger females. We were also told in-country of a flourishing market in hymen restoration so that girls will be seen as virgins more than once.

Once a young woman has been trafficked into the sex trades, she is typically abused by pimps, customers, brothel owners, and sometimes by corrupt policemen. Despite the dream idea that having money to send home might make merit for her and her family, her self-esteem is destroyed by the abuse. Once this occurs, many girls wind up choosing to remain in the sex trades, no matter how

they arrived there, because they find comfort in the social networks established with other prostitutes, and because they do not see themselves worthy of better lives. Rescue and rehabilitation agencies that we visited in both Thailand and Cambodia said that the majority of

women and children with whom they work wind up returning to the brothels.

Globalization and Tourism

Despite the fact that roughly 95% of the consumers of prostitutes are Thai and Cambodian men, globalization and tourism have had significant effects on the trafficking and sale of young women in Thailand and Cambodia. With globalization has come an increasing porosity of borders between countries, free trade, tourism, and exposure among the rural poor to the lives of the affluent via television and to the lives of wealthy tourists. Loose borders mean easier trafficking of women from country to country, and both Thailand and Cambodia have become both source and destination countries for women being trafficked throughout Asia and the rest of the world. The increase in tourist dollars into the

countries is important to governments, and mitigates their efforts to stop trafficking and prostitution.

As Thai and Cambodian people become increasingly exposed to “the haves” of the world, their own desires for parity increase. This makes the sale of a child or young woman more justifiable in the impoverished rural areas of Thailand and Cambodia. It also increases corruption among police and government officials who are paid paltry salaries. For example, we learned that a police officer in Cambodia earns approximately \$25 per month from his job, while a Thai police officer earns \$175. The attraction of turning a blind eye on illegal prostitution for payoff is fundamentally a way of increasing the policeman's economy. We were told by the Foundation for Women in Bangkok, that they have had to work hard to identify small cadres of honest policemen to collaborate with them in their work to rescue and rehabilitate trafficked prostitutes.

Poverty

Most of the literature on trafficking and prostitution focuses on poverty as the primary motivator, both for the traffickers and for the families who sell their children. Undoubtedly this is a key factor in both Thailand and Cambodia. Despite the illegality of trafficking and prostitution in both countries, the tourist money coming into the country economy, the money coming via collateral loans from traffickers to poor families, and the money crossing the hands of the young prostitutes are all motivators for the problem to persist. Inadequate salaries for governmental and law officials lead to corruption and inadequate implementation of the laws and conventions designed to stop trafficking.

The Tsunami of December, 2004

The Tsunami which hit southern Thailand on December 26, 2004 has had a chilling effect on the Thai economy. Massive amounts of damage occurred in the highly tourist-oriented beach communities. This disaster has shifted the priorities of the Thai government toward rebuilding efforts, both in terms of infrastructure and in the rebuilding of the lucrative tourist industry. The focus has moved away from addressing human

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rights issues and other concerns of the poor to getting the country back on its feet. Efforts to reduce the incidence of trafficking in women and children for prostitution are currently not a primary focus of government effort. At the same time, it has been recorded in the popular press that there was an increase in the trafficking of children from the refugee camps established after the tsunami. Obviously this totally unexpected disaster has been a significant impediment to efforts to slow the trafficking of women and children into the sex industry in Thailand. Fortunately, Cambodia was relatively untouched by the crisis of the tsunami.

Final Words

For Ronald, Carla, Kathryn, Becky and me, this trip provided not only a focus for our research, but a future direction of study for each of us. We presented all of our findings in a remarkably well-attended forum at Eckerd College. My faculty colleagues were amazed by the depth of knowledge the students had acquired, and by the strongly global focus which they were able to take. The political science student made two conference presentations subsequent to our trip, and published a paper in *The Eckerd Scholar*. The student focused on human services is looking closely at comparisons between service provision to needy women in Southeast Asia and those of her home in Washington D.C. The student primarily interested in gender relationships has continued her study of male-female relationships in the United States and is the incoming president of the campus Women's Resource Center.

My own interest is in looking more closely at the interrelationships between cultural factors and the rehabilitation services provided for victims of trafficking and prostitution in Thailand and Cambodia.

Having taught counseling for many years, I was struck by the imposition of Western models of counseling on Southeast Asian women regardless of their Eastern cultural orientation. As one example, all of the NGO's involved in rescue and rehabilitation provided group counseling for the women, although both Thai and Cambodian women told me that they would never share their problems in a group setting in order not to lose face. I am hoping to study more closely the models which counseling personnel are being trained in to evaluate the goodness of fit to the cultures of Thailand and Cambodia. Hopefully, such study may lead to recommendations that could make a difference in the lives of trafficking victims in these countries.

Suggested Readings

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- Derks, A. (1997) “Trafficking of Cambodian women and children to Thailand.” Available online at http://www.casacambodia.org/trafficking_thailand.htm
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- Ehrenreich, B. and Hochschild, A.R. (2002). *Global woman: Nannies, maids and sex workers in the new economy*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women (2001). *Human rights and trafficking in persons: A handbook*. Bangkok: GAATW.
- O'Grady, R. (1992) *The child and the tourist: The story behind the escalation of child prostitution in Asia*. Bangkok: ECPAT International.
- (2004) *Trafficking in persons report*. United States Department of State. Available online at <http://www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/tiprpt/2004/34021.htm>

www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/tiprpt/2004/34021.htm

NGO's Visited:

Thailand

Acting for Women in Distressing Circumstances
Center for the Protection of Children's Rights
Chiang Mai Anti-Trafficking Coordination Unit
ECPAT International (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and the Trafficking of children for Sexual Purposes)
Foundation for Women
Kwai River Christian Hospital
New Life Center
Payap University
Roung Rang Tham Church
Save the Children UK

Cambodia

Ad Hoc (Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association)
Cambodian Center for the Protection of Children's Rights
Cambodian League for the Protection and Defense of Human Rights
Cambodian Women's Crisis Center
Cambodian Women's Development Agency
Khmer Angkor Development Association
Sankheum Center for Children