Child Prostitution in Thailand
Imagine that your twelve years old, you live in a small village where your family lives in poverty. Your father is a gambler and he puts the family in debt and because of the debt your father has caused the family, you and your siblings cannot go to school. A stranger comes into your village and tells your parents that they have a job for you in the city for you to be a “maid” at a house. The stranger says that you will work there until the money your father owed is repaid and you can go back to your family. Your parents decide to send you with the stranger and work as a “maid.” However once you’re in the city, you realize you’re not working as a “maid” you work at a brothel and have sex with hundreds and hundreds of men you don’t even know. And that stranger that came to your family was a brothel agent scouting out little girls to work at their brothel. The situation described is what majority of the children in Thailand go through when they become child prostitutes. Child Prostitution is defined as the sexual exploitation of a child for remuneration in cash or kind, usually but not always organized by an intermediary (parent, family member, procurer or teacher).¹ The issue of child prostitution is worldwide. According to Jane’s Springer Listen to Us: The World’s Working Children, Thailand ranks third in having the most child prostitutes.² Thailand is a country that draws more tourists than any other state in Southeast Asia. With its irresistible combination of breathtaking natural beauty, renowned hospitality, inspiring temples, robust cuisine and ruins of fabulous ancient kingdoms, it has been called, by some, paradise. However Thailand is far from that. About 19 million Thais are living in

poverty\(^3\) and some parents force their children to work in the sex trade in order to feed
their family and themselves. This paper will focus on child prostitution in Thailand, and
describe what the situation is, what the cause of the issue is and what is being done.

In 2001, the Namibian World News estimated that Thailand harbours about
200,000 to 400,000 child prostitutes.\(^4\) The children are brought from the poor sections
from Thailand and sold openly on the streets of Bangkok for as little as $150 US.\(^5\) Child
prostitution is illegal in Thailand, however the government and the law enforcement does
very little to stop it because they are often bribed to disregard what they see. According
to an U.N conducted report, prostitution in Thailand is 10-14% of the gross domestic
product from 1993-1995, and about one third of the women who were prostitutes were
girls.\(^6\) With the economic collapse of Thailand’s economy from 1997-1998, child
prostitution has emerged as Thailand’s biggest business venture.\(^7\) Thai child prostitutes
send about US $293 million annually to their families in rural areas, according to
Professor Ngarmpit Satsa-nguan, of Bangkok’s Chulalongkorn University. Despite
international programs within Non Government Organizations (NGOs) and UNICEF
trying to stop sex tourism, the number of tourists coming to Thailand for the child
prostitutes continues to rise.\(^8\)

\(^3\) Stickman's guide to Bangkok . Thailand - Population, Poverty and Prostitution. 3 Dec. 2005
\(^7\) World News Thailand Now Centre for Child Prostitution. 19 Oct 2005
\(^8\) World News Thailand Now Centre for Child Prostitution. 19 Oct 2005
Many Westerners wonder how children end up in prostitution. Majority of children come from small villages where education is limited and poverty is all over. Taking advantage of this information, many brothel agents come to small villages and lie to the parents and say their children are going to be working as a maid. Sometimes, the parents actually know that they are sending their own children into these workplaces, however to them money is more important and they do whatever they can to get their hands on it. There are many examples of parents selling their children to brothels. For instance, a family in Mae Sai, Thailand sold their 13 year-old daughter into prostitution for $114. They regretted that they didn’t ask for more money and felt that they were ripped off.  

Mae Sai is a region of poverty and it’s a known location for brothel agents to recruit children. According to the Development and Education Program for Daughters and Communities (DEPDC) who work with local girls in Mae Sai, about 800 families (around 7 in every 10) have sold at least one daughter into the sex trade. Another example is of a thirteen year old girl named Pen. She was contracted out so that her father could borrow $240. To repay the debt, Pen was sold for $60 a night over a period of three and a half months, sleeping with over one hundred men before her father’s debt was repaid. When she was freed, Pen returned home only to be told, “You have already sold yourself. Don’t embarrass us by being here. Go back.” Her father then resold her to the same brothel for another $400.

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9 Perrin, Andrew. “Thai Families Partners in Child Sex Trade Border Area’s Products Are Drugs and Daughters.” San Francisco Chronicle 6 February 2002
10 Perrin, Andrew. “Thai Families Partners in Child Sex Trade Border Area’s Products Are Drugs and Daughters.” San Francisco Chronicle 6 February 2002
Some questions need to be answered in the situation in Thailand. Such as what is causing these children to solicit themselves? Why are parents willing to sell their own children? One of the answers is poverty. For the Thai government to eradicate child prostitution, they must eradicate poverty. At the turn of the century, the UN developed Millennium Development Goals to help fifty under developed countries become more developed. Thailand is not one of the bottom fifty however it does not mean that Thailand is developed. Despite the prosperity Thailand has through tourism, the country is still considered a second world country. Thailand’s government has a long history of doing little for the poor. In the 1960s, the country had a series of development plans, yet they didn’t make poverty reduction a major objective. As well, a research conducted in 2001, has the gap between the poor and rich getting larger because of past inequalities. This ratio shows of Poor: Middle income: Well-to-do (%). In Northeast Thailand its 70:25:5. North 60:30:10. Central 50:40:10 and South 50:35:10. This illustrates that majority areas in Thailand are poor compared to the small percentage of the people that are wealthy. The most concentrated area for the poor in Thailand is in rural areas. In 1992, 85% of the poor lived in North and Northeast Thailand. In these areas their children work to earn money for the family, and one of the jobs is soliciting themselves.

Many children in Thailand lack education. Children, who are prostitutes, will probably stay as prostitutes when they are older. The reason is because they don’t have

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the education to find another profession. Education in Thailand is divided into four levels: preschool (kindergarten), primary education (grade 1-6), secondary education (grade 7-12) and higher education.\(^{15}\) Most children do not attend school after finishing their primary education. The reason is because the effect of developed inequality and poverty that makes the parents unable to support the school supplies, food, and the living expenses, which are not covered by the government’s mandate.\(^{16}\) Mostly, these rural families live by subsistence farming in a hostile landscape shattered, in season, by flood and drought, malnutrition and extreme poverty. In Isan (northeastern Thailand) the average per capital income is $350 per annum, which is about a third of the average in Thailand.\(^{17}\) Children are needed to work on the land to help with their family's struggle for survival. In these circumstances, the education that could be the key to the children’s future becomes an unaffordable luxury. Most students tend to quit their secondary school in order to help their families.\(^{18}\) They try to find jobs that are high paying, but their lack of education hinders their search. Sometimes, they turn to prostitution. If Thai government wants to eradicate child prostitution, they must first eradicate poverty and increase education and job opportunities so that these girls can have a future.

Child Prostitution is an immense problem in Thailand, however what is going on to fix it? Many people from the international community, who hear these stories of child prostitution, are outraged. As a result, organizations such as UNICEF and other groups have been in Thailand to help stop child prostitution. One is the organization called the Daughters Education Program for Daughters and Community Centre (DEPDC). It began

in 1989 by Mr. Sompop Jantraka, an Ashoka Fellow, who is a part of many associations and takes part in conferences related to child trafficking and the sex industry. The aim of the program is to prevent children from being forced into the sex industry or child labour. It supports educational opportunities for disadvantaged children and children from poor and broken homes, and it gives the children an opportunity for life development and life skills training.\footnote{Development Education Programme for Daughters and Community Centre. \textit{DEPDC's Projects}, 17 Oct. 2005 \textless http://www.depdc.org/index_eng.html\textgreater .}

It takes boys and girls, who are under the age of 20, and gives them basic education and teaches them essential skills such as cooking and cleaning. Other projects that the DEPDC is involved with include the Patak School.\footnote{Development Education Programme for Daughters and Community Centre. \textit{DEPDC's Projects}, 17 Oct. 2005 \textless http://www.depdc.org/index_eng.html\textgreater .}

This school teaches basic education of the Thai language, math, social skills and basic living skills. Having the Patak School provide skills that the children need to be successful in the future, will help them not fall into the prostitution trap.

Another example of a program is End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking in Children for Sexual Purposes (ECPAT). It’s a NGO program from Thailand that seeks to persuade the world community to make sure children in all places can benefit from their basic rights free from all forms of commercial sexual exploitation. The program started in Thailand in the early 1990s, where they had an activist who was concerned about the growing rate of commercial sexual exploitation of children in Asia.\footnote{Human Trafficking.org. (ECPAT) End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking in Children for Sexual Purposes, 20 Oct. 2005 \textless http://humantrafficking.org/countries/eap/thailand/ngos/intl/ecpat.html\textgreater .}

One of the important activities of ECPAT is the promotion of the development of legislation and child-friendly legal procedures to protect children against sexual exploitation. As well, Thailand has a National Policy to Combat Human Trafficking, it
has three important goals. First, there must be a total elimination of commercial sex trade by children, both boys and girls, under 18 years of age. Second, there will be punishment for all persons who take part in the prostitution of children. And lastly, there will be punishment for officials who fail to enforce compliance with relevant policies, laws, and rules. Moreover to the policy, there will be a prevention, protection, prosecution, repatriation and integration program which describes what the government will do to implement the policy and make it more efficient. For example, to prevent the number of children from entering prostitution, the Thai government will employ several strategies to ensure that every child has access to 9 years of quality basic education, and children aged 12-15 have access to vocational education.

Furthermore, in the past, the government and the police would ignore the child prostitution problem because it brought in revenue for the country and brothel owners would bribe the government officials and police to ignore what they saw. Despite the fact that child prostitution is illegal in Thailand, many citizens break the law knowingly they will face no consequences. More recently there have been regulations introduced by the Thai government to deter men from child prostitution. In April 1996, the Thai government passed many anti-prostitution laws which called for harsh penalties to customers, procurers, brothel owners, and the parents. For example, if a person in Thailand were involved in a child prostitution case: penalties relating to sex offences and crime against children in the country for the sex exploiter (customer) would be 2-6 years

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in jail if the prostitutes are under 15 years old. If the prostitutes are between 15 and 18 years old the person will get 0-3 years jail. Another example is penalties relating to sex offences and crime against children. The procurer or trafficker, who procures, seduces or traffics another person for prostitution, get 1-10 years jail if the prostitutes are over 18 years old. If the prostitutes are between 15 and 18 years old the person would get 5-15 years jail and if the prostitutes are under 15 years old they will get 10-20 years worth of jail.²⁵ This is an excellent deterrent for people to not participate in child prostitution, however, the problem is that once the person gets out of jail, there is no way to stop them from doing it again. People constantly re-offend; the government should develop regulations and rules for someone to follow once they get out of jail because of the crime they commit. Some organizations lobby foreign countries not to invest in Thailand because of the child prostitutes in there. An operation called "Don't! Buy! Thai!" from Thailand lobbies against other countries to not invest in the country²⁶ and now Thailand is no longer the major offender, nor is the traffic so concentrated in any one country.²⁷ Thailand appears to have changed both its laws and its enforcement to some significant extent aided by numerous reports of child sex tourists being imprisoned there.²⁸

Essentially, Thailand is changing its reputation and with programs such as ECPAT and government enforcement, child prostitution in Thailand will decline. Yet, will child prostitution ever be eradicated worldwide? The answer is no. Child

prostitution will always be there, the criminals of the world will always find a way for the child prostitution business to keep continuing. However, if the international community can work together, and make poverty history, then maybe child prostitution will be a minor problem in the future. It will be long and tedious to try to eradicate the issue but if the world wants to get rid of it, it can happen and hopefully it will.
Bibliography:


Perrin, Andrew. "Thai Families Partners in Child Sex Trade Border Area's Products Are Drugs and Daughters." San Francisco Chronicle


