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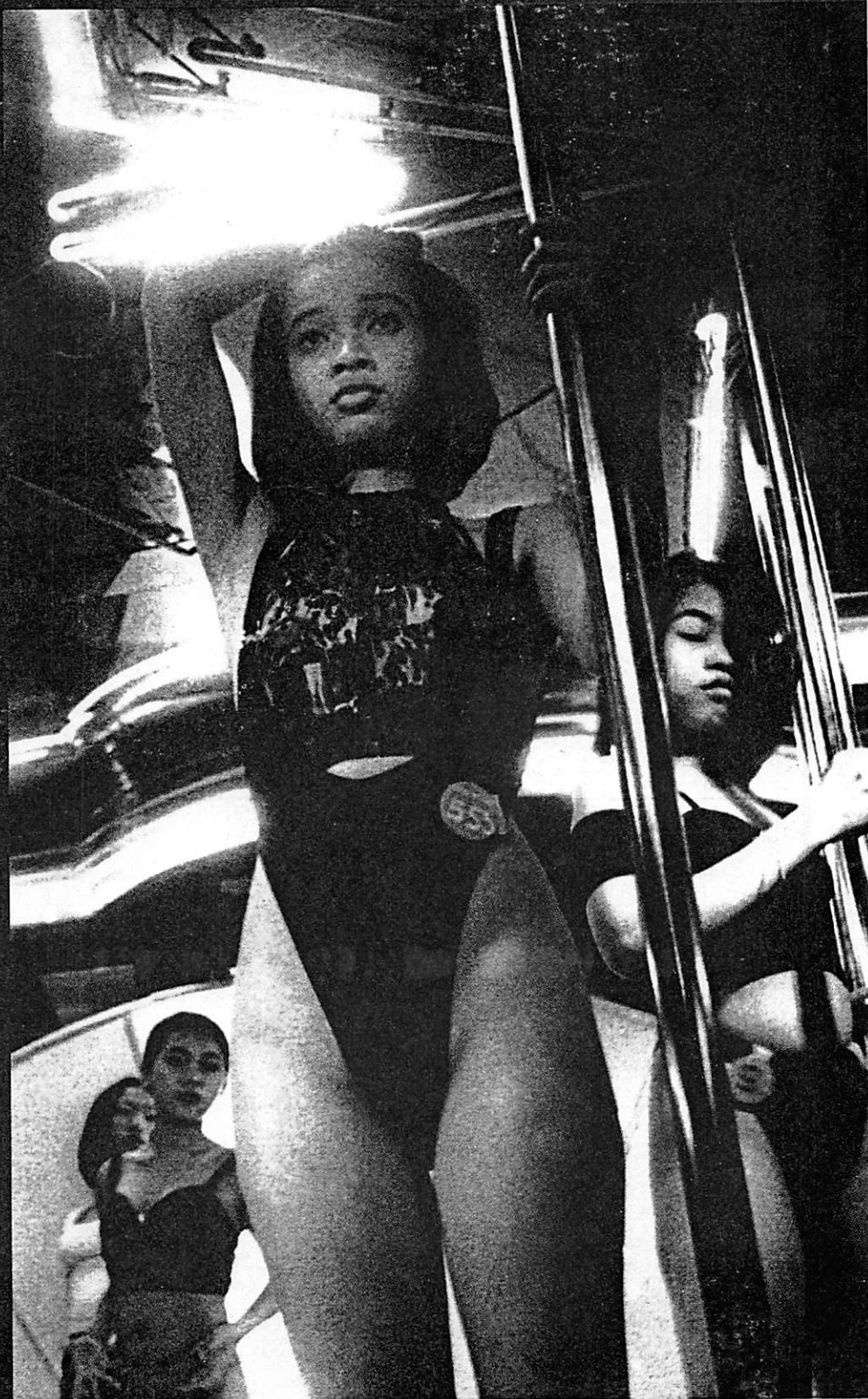
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INTERNATIONAL

Prostitution: Child Chattel Lure Tourists for Sex

Child prostitution is a cottage industry in Southeast Asia. Girls, as well as boys — some as young as eight — are being abducted by brothel agents and, in some cases, sold by parents into sexual slavery.

By Christopher P. Baker
Insight

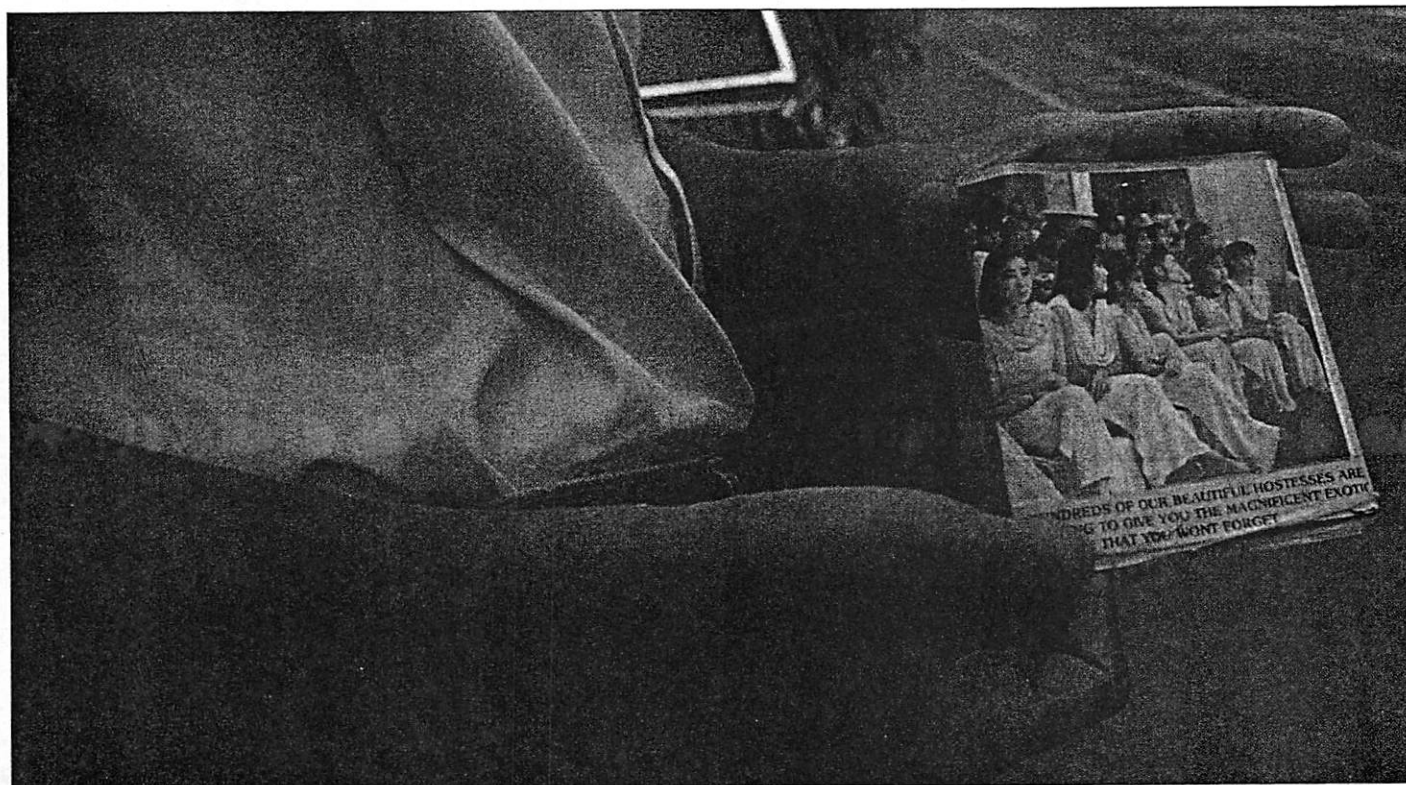
Anastasia Santos last saw her daughter Veronica a year ago, before her child was traded to a brothel for \$500 by a woman

who lured the girl to the city with a vague promise of work. Veronica can't leave the brothel in Manila until she earns the \$500 the owner paid the brothel agent. That day may never come. She services an average of 10 men a day at \$4 per customer, but \$3 of the \$4 are deducted for room, food, and cosmetics; she also must pay the brothel owner for clothes. Today, she is in debt beyond the original \$500 to a pimp and has been infected with HIV. Veronica's life has ended, and she is not yet 12 years old.

Veronica is just one of more than a million young victims lured, sold, or forced into prostitution worldwide every year, according to a recent Norwegian government report to the U.N. Working Group on Slavery. "Selling a 14-year-old girl has become so commonplace, it is banal," laments Wassyla Tamzali, director of UNESCO's women's rights department. In Bogota, Colombia, the number of prostitutes under 13 has quintupled since 1987. Brazil now has more than 250,000 child prostitutes; Moscow, more than 1,000.

In Asia, child chattel has reached epidemic proportions. In Thailand, a country of 56 million people, relief agencies estimate that there are now two million prostitutes — up to 800,000 of them children under 16. Studies suggest there are at least 300,000 child prostitutes in India. In the Philippines, the Institute for the Protection of Children reports that nine percent of prostitutes were less than 10 years old when they were sold to a pimp. And researchers in Sri Lanka believe that the island has at least 10,000 boy prostitutes, each receiving as little as \$1 per day for fulfilling the whims of pedophiles, many of them Westerners directed by gray market guidebooks and pedophile newsletters such as *Spartacus International Gay Guide*, published in Germany in several languages.

Even as AIDS sweeps through Asia, a recent survey suggests that 420,000 Thai men visit a prostitute every day. Taiwanese men still arrive by the busload at the Mona Lisa massage parlor on Bangkok's Petchaburi Road, and charter sex tours from Germany, Japan, and Korea continue to



Bangkok taxi drivers advertise and earn commissions for customer referrals.

Photo: Steve Lehman/SABA

bring lustful tourists to Thailand and the Philippines by the plane-load. Customers, fearful of AIDS, are turning to younger and younger prostitutes, and virgins are increasingly in demand. As a result, the prostitution of children in Asian countries has skyrocketed in recent years. "A whole generation of young girls (and boys) is being turned into commerce by Westerners lured by governments hungry for tourist dollars," claims Ron O'Grady, international coordinator for End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism, or ECPAT, and author of the book *The Child and the Tourist: The Story Behind the Escalation of Child Prostitution in Asia*.

Affluence born of Southeast Asia's economic boom is fueling the prepubescent sex trade on a scale never seen before. "Every day you see buses full of men from Singapore coming into our southern cities," says Thai child rights worker Koompraphant. "There is no tourist business there, no industry. Only lumber plantations and sex services."

Ever since the 1960s, when American soldiers in Vietnam took their leave on Asia's beaches, visitors have flocked to Manila, Bangkok, and Pattani, Thailand for sex. It is unclear exactly how many come looking for love. More than 70 percent of the five million tourists who visit Thailand each year are male, and 20 percent are day trippers from nearby Malaysia and Singapore. More than 85 percent of Pattani's visitors are single men who have heard that this erstwhile small fishing village on the Gulf of Siam is a beachside brothel full of lithe, olive skinned girls with sloe eyes and bewitching demeanors. "We estimate three-quarters of the 200,000 German visitors each year are men, and three quarters will have come for sex," says Koompraphant.

Package holidays to the red-light districts of Southeast Asia, first offered in the early 1980s, are now an established part of the child-sex business. Most originate in Germany and Japan (the Japan Travel Agency is held by many to have been the first), where local operators promote heavily. In the Philippines, five-star hotels such as the Ramada in central Manila block off whole floors for the exclusive use of Japanese sex tourists. More than 20 prostitution hotels in Manila cater exclusively to Japanese tourists.

Americans, true to their individualistic

spirit, travel alone to have sex. "Promoting sex tours in the United States is risky business," says 56-year old Gunter Frenz, owner of Miami based G&F Tours, which operates a 12-day Love Tour of Bangkok. "Sure, we sell sex," says Frenz, "but we have to refrain from mentioning it in our brochure. If we sold sex directly, we'd be selling prostitution, and that's illegal in Thailand as well as America." Frenz's potential customers receive copies of articles written for men's magazines by past customers, replete with photos of sex action and a brochure showing Frenz in a bar with a semi-naked young girl perched on his lap, clutching her teddy bear.

The demand for children is so great that procurers are competing to reserve girls who will be "raised," like livestock, to be sold into brothels.

Bangkok is a languid and sensual town after dark, with residual heat and the smell of night blooms in the air. The lights have come on in Yaowarat behind the curtains of brothels. And on the garish neon-lit streets of Patpong, perfumed, high-heeled teenagers call out to the casual tourist, male and female. "Hey ma'am! Hey mister! You wanna see good show?"

No sooner have I joined the hundred or so other *farangs* (Westerners) inside than a lively wisp of a girl squeezes in beside me, puts her hand on my knee and asks if I will buy her a drink. Her face is cute as a button, her body brown and supple. "You like me?" the young beauty croons, rubbing her half-formed breasts up against me. For an \$8 bar fee, I discover, I can take the girl back to my hotel for the night and send her away in the morning with whatever payment I feel she has earned. A lonely night in my hotel room can be transformed into sexual bliss for just a few dollars, and nobody need ever know. She looks 14.

"Me? I am 17," she replies — the mandatory answer. The American tourist next to me smiles knowingly.

Few things bring out more anger in people than the idea of adults having sex with children. In April 1993, a man who kidnapped a young girl for sex in California was sen-

tenced to 106 years in prison. In Florida, the crime of pedophilia can carry the death penalty. In Asia, however, crimes that would earn a 100-year sentence in the United States can be forgiven for a fine of a few hundred dollars. "If you fancy extremely young girls or, generally speaking, if you want something for which you would get 'hanged' in your home country, you can find it," says Jacky Ott, a German who publishes a series of bilingual guidebooks for tourists seeking sex beneath the palms.

As a result, many pedophiles have gone into business opening up small hotels, guest houses, and "safe resorts" in quiet areas around Asia to serve fellow pedophiles from America or Western Europe, where laws they consider "repressive" have prevented them from indulging their whims. Many such specialized brothels — often well guarded compounds where the police never venture — are promoted by fancy brochures and videotapes available through international

pedophile networks such as the North American Man / Boy Love Association and the Pedophile Information Exchange, which provides tips for keeping ahead of the law.

Sri Lanka is an increasingly popular destination for pederasts. Another favorite is Pagsanjan in the Philippines, the setting for the film *Apocalypse Now*. According to a 1987 study, three quarters of the town's young boys (known locally as *pompons*) sell their frail bodies in guest houses. And social workers report an increasing number of tourists coming to India in search of sex with young boys and girls.

Most tourists who have sex with young prostitutes while abroad would probably be repulsed if called pedophiles. "Those of us in midlife crisis may not be as interested in having a lot of girls as we are in having younger girls," says Jacques Chessex, a Stanford University researcher who makes an annual pilgrimage to Asia for sex. "Girls young enough to be our daughters. Girls who can make us feel youthful and sexy again."

As in Dickens' England, endemic rural poverty continues to provide an enormous pool of children waiting to be exploited to meet the increasing demand. "It's difficult to create viable income-earning alternatives in poor villages that can compete with the earning power of prostitution," notes Deborah

Almost 40% of the children lured or abducted into prostitution are from the 2% of aboriginal people who live in the mountain provinces on the east coast.

Kacane, a volunteer with Bangkok's Population and Community Development Association. Agents scour the countryside to find children who can be bought or, if necessary, abducted. Most girls are selected from the most marginalized cultures, where parents are so desperate for money that they are easy prey for the claims that the children will be able to send money home. Police in Taiwan report that almost 40 percent of the children lured or abducted into prostitution are from the two percent of aboriginal people who live in the mountain provinces of the east coast. In Thailand, the majority of "masseuses" come from the peasant families of the north and northeast. There are villages in northeast Thailand where it is now difficult to find any children at all, and the border regions have been preyed upon to such a degree that relief workers fear entire hill tribes soon will be wiped out.

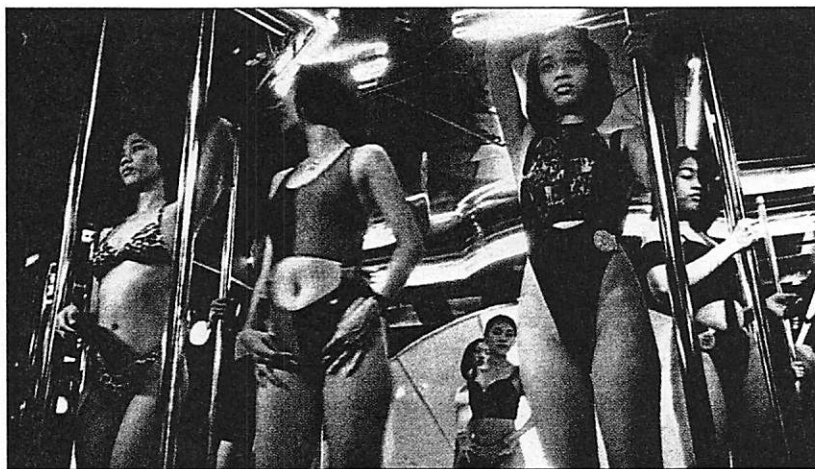
The demand for younger children has grown so great that "procurers are competing to 'reserve' girls who will be raised, like livestock, to be sold into brothels," according to Maj. Surasak Sutarom of the Crime Suppression Division of the Thai police. "They pay the parents an advance, with the girl — often still a baby — as collateral. Increasingly, pregnant women are selling their children into prostitution before they are born," says Sutarom.

Many Western sex tourists are convinced that, in indulging their fantasies, they are helping the young girls at the same time. "The Asian boys who sleep with tourists are markedly more exuberant, happy, and healthy than the hundreds of millions of poor children who are slowly withering away or being crippled by back-breaking labor," writes a Dutch observer, Edward Brongersma.

"To try and solve the terrible dilemma of Third World poverty by suggesting that a

few children will be happier as temporary sex objects for wealthy foreigners is the kind of flippant solution which makes a mockery of human suffering," replies Ron O'Grady, who claims that tourists almost always end up with a distorted view of the reality under which a majority of child prostitutes live.

Most tourists see only the top end of the prostitute market: the "hostesses" in the



Southeast Asia's economic boom is fueling the prepubescent sex trade.

clubs and "massage parlors" catering mostly to wealthy tourists. They tend to be older and have more income and independence. These are the girls — a small percentage of the child prostitution trade, say relief agency workers — who enter the trade of their own free will or, if lured, at least have an avenue of escape. If they can persuade the tourist to part with a good tip, they can sometimes make a reasonable living. A few have even been able to find foreign husbands and fulfill their dreams of escape.

The youngest girls tend to be in closed brothels — teahouses — where they are often kept literally in bondage and suffer more abuse. The cries of these children seldom reach the ears of those who thoughtlessly or unscrupulously exploit their predicament. "At night, I sleep and cry. No one ever sees my tears," says 13-year-old Sawai Chandee.

Yaowarat, in Bangkok's Chinatown, is a center for child prostitution, with at least 50 teahouses where girls as young as eight — delicate little creatures in pink and light-blue

body stockings and the legs and figures of small boys — can be had for 500 *baht* (\$1.50). Contrary to the popular belief that teahouses cater only to local customers, the girls here say they receive many tourists. "It was with mixed feelings that I ventured into Bangkok's Chinatown," admits Chessex. "I feel compassion for anyone who is sold into slavery against her will. But a real, live slave

girl! How erotic! My cock has no sympathy for my bleeding heart."

Children such as Sawai — children born with the same hopes and dreams of children everywhere — are caught in a web from which there are few avenues of escape. Brothel keepers in Thailand, Taiwan, and the Philippines will pay large sums for an attractive virgin. But while a girl's "virgin fee" might be high, her price drops dras-

tically afterward, like a bad stock. The majority are traded between brothels, their value decreasing all the while, until they end up serving the local fishermen and laborers.

A recent study of Bangkok teahouses found that 30 percent of girls are on-call 24 hours a day. The majority are given only one night off a month during menstruation. And many girls receive no money at all; it goes to the pimp.

The girls admit frankly that, if given a chance to escape, they would not know where to go or what to do. They are resigned to their fate, and often because it was their fathers' decision. "The girls are not escaping from the low horizons of village life," says O'Grady. "They enter into this trade in response to the obligations they feel they owe their family." The majority end up with nothing else in life but prostitution. □

Reprinted with permission by Christopher P. Baker. Mr. Baker is an award-winning journalist and author of several travel guidebooks. He is currently authoring the Cuba Handbook.