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Thailand—a “penetrated” population

Thailand has earned the reputation as the world’s sex capital. Sex is probably the best lure for tourists here. With a prostitute population between 800,000 to two million, sex tourism is big business in Thailand; the attendant problem of HIV/AIDS is as huge. HIV/AIDS was regarded as a “time bomb” where Thailand’s sex-tourist destinations were likened to the cholera spreading “Broad Street” pump. Pattaya, Patpong and Phuket were named as the “triple-P” of Thailand’s sex tourism favored destinations. The patriarchal nature of the tenets of Buddhism will keep Thai women in a subservient position as mere objects of “penetration.”

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Introduction

Thailand, “The Land of Smiles” has earned the reputation as the sex capital of the world. Sex tourism is probably Thailand’s most visible attribute used for luring foreign tourists (Leheny, 1995). In no other country has tourist motivation been so explicitly associated to sex (Cohen, 1988). Sex tourism whether good or bad has repercussions. Thailand has a serious problem. The problem is the threat of HIV/AIDS, which has exhibited exponential growth within recent times. Governmental inaction to this threat is vast and terrifying (Leheny, 1995). Thai authorities down played the scope of the problem of AIDS in an effort to protect the tourist industry. The AIDS problem was treated as a minor matter because of the small numbers of cases reported (Bangkok Post, 1987, cited in Cohen, 1988). The purpose of study are:

- To highlight the situation with Thailand as a very tourism dependent country “penetrated” by sex tourists.
- To project how sex is used as a lure in such an economy, and the attendant problem of HIV/AIDS.

A pretty bad picture

It is estimated that prostituted women in Thailand number around 800,000 to 2 million (Jeffreys, 1999; Addiction Research Foundation, 1995). Of this number, 20,000 are Burmese. It is to be recognized that women suffer gross vaginal damage, mainly due to abuse by the male. Friction sores develop, and are exacerbated by the use of condoms. The rate of infection with regard to AIDS is related to the number of sex clients via the rate of associated vaginal abrasion (Jeffreys, 1999). Time-off for healing in the sex tourism business is not permissible. In about six months time young, “clean” virgins, mainly Burmese women locked up in Thai brothels, become infected with AIDS. Despite the concern about HIV/AIDS relative to the sex tourism trade, Cohen (1988) disclosed that in Thailand the largest groups of AIDS virus carriers were the drug addicts. Drug addicts numbered some 600,000 in 1988. But beyond any doubt, the spread of HIV/AIDS in Thailand is in proportion to the burgeoning sex trade. In 1987 only a few female sex workers (about five women in 128 cases) in Thailand were infected with HIV/AIDS but by 1991 fifteen percent were found to be positive for HIV/AIDS (Addiction Research Foundation, 1995).

The “triple-P”

Lim (1998) referred to the HIV/AIDS epidemic as a “time bomb.” Young women brought into Thailand for commercial sex purposes from neighboring countries such as Myanmar who contract HIV/AIDS are normally sent back to their homelands to die (Lintner and Lintner, 1996). In the study by Hall (1996) a ministry survey of AIDS in Thailand showed the modest figure of 3,000 prostitutes infected with the disease. A World Health Organization (WHO) report indicated that there were between 45,000 to 50,000 people in Thailand infected with HIV/AIDS. The Addiction Research Foundation (1995) explained that the Patpong district, the resort town of Pattaya, and the island of Phuket, the “triple-P” of Thailand’s sex-tourist destinations can be likened to the London “Broad Street Pump,” only that these destinations are spreading HIV/AIDS; a more vicious and debilitating disease than cholera.

Is there a way out?

A real solution to curb the incidence of sex tourism is not within easy reach in spite of efforts by international, regional and local activists. Caught in the middle are, in many instances, poverty-stricken children in Thailand who produce false identification cards to prove that they are old enough to ply the prostitution trade. The situation is now worsening with the taste for young virgins under age 17 (Leuchtag, 1995). The bodies of pitifully underpaid village girls, some as young as 14 are the assets traded in a network of “cozy relations” between airlines, tour operators, hotels, bars, and brothel owners, agents, and of course bankers (Leuchtag, 1995). The price of a virgin is substantially higher, and it is felt in some cultures, especially the Japanese, that sex with younger women will extend one’s life span.

The commercialization of sex to visitors of more prosperous countries seem at this point in time the only way for many to make a “decent” living. Cleo Odzer, an American anthropologist remarked that being a prostitute for many Thai girls from rural families is a better career choice than marrying the boy next door (Addiction Research Foundation, 1995). The life of a wife in rural Thailand is one of grinding poverty and onerous family responsibilities (Addiction Research Foundation, 1995).

Mere objects of “penetration”

Organized resistance in Thailand to the element of sex tourism is on too small a scale, and it is very clear that there are no easy or immediate solutions to the “dilemma.” Many people may probably advocate the opening of factories instead of brothels and sex houses, but the 1993 fire at a doll factory close to Bangkok is illustrative of the grim picture that young, uneducated Thai women face outside of the sex industry (Leuchtag, 1995). Leuchtag (1995) reported that the Thai sex-tourism industry is so entrenched, and officially sanctioned that many Thai politicians, government officials, and policemen invest in the trade and grow rich from it. In the absence of facilities for the creation, and maintenance of employment, the sex tourism industry will continue to flourish.

Many would disagree but to some extent religious values in Thailand has something to do with the continuance of the sex trade. The patriarchal nature of the tenets of Buddhism will keep Thai women in a subservient position as mere objects of “penetration” (Oppermann, 1999). Western religions promote women as equals who are able to take charge of their own affairs. But the introduction of new tenets of belief to effect change will obviously pose problems. The question is, who will accept the challenge? (Rao, 1999).

The problem of sex tourism in Thailand should be addressed at the local, regional and international level (Leuchtag, 1995). It is not a hopeless situation but unless this beleaguered country, which has found itself under commercial sexual siege, seek to implement developmental strategies to offset the economic woes of its population, the problem of sexual exploitation by tourists will continue to proliferate. But despite plans and purposes, to curb the “scourge” of prostitution tourism, it must be remembered that Thai women still possess the choice to do with their bodies whatever they wish.

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