

The Men Who Drive The Demand

Every night the streets of Bangkok are filled with middle-aged men who walk hand-in-hand with teenage girls. These sex tourists have traveled from all over the world to be here and play out their own private fantasy. Some men pay for quick sex, but most prefer to buy a 'girlfriend' for an entire night or even several days. The johns behave like young adolescents, publicly pawing their "dates," squeezing their buttocks and breasts with little shame.

Specialized travel agencies around the globe promote "exotic sexual adventures" with Asian women "who know how to please a man." After sex tourists experience firsthand how easy it is to buy young girls, they frequently make their own arrangements for return visits.

Thailand, in particular, has been branded internationally as a Disneyland for sexual escapades. A Bangkok-based children's rights group has tracked the country's boom in sexual tourism over the past two decades. Its research shows that 2 million foreigners visited the country in 1984, 4 million in 1988, and more than 11 million in 2003.⁷ Out of the total number of foreign visitors, roughly two-thirds entering Thailand were unaccompanied men. In other words, about 7.3 million unaccompanied men visited the country in 2003. Certainly, not all of these men came as sexual tourists, but it's a good bet that a significant percentage did. In fact, according to a survey of travel agents conducted by international aid agency World Vision, 65 percent of all tourists to Cambodia are men and one-fifth of them travel with the express purpose to have sex.

Male clients from Japan, China, Korea, and Taiwan drive the demand for young girls who are virgins. In these Asian cultures, sex with a virgin is thought to bring good luck to a new business venture. Moreover, virgin girls pose less threat of exposure to sexually transmitted disease.

The lucrative market in virgins tempts parents to sell their preadolescent daughters to a brothel for a high premium. It's a bizarre business: a john may pay \$750 for one night with a young girl, and one week later that same girl may be seeing ten clients a night for \$2.50 a session.

The growing demand for virgins has created a niche market outside the usual channels for commercial sex—the bars, karaoke clubs, and brothels. A growing number of parents market their daughter's virginity like an independent talent agent, selling her to the highest bidder for a one-time sexual experience once she reaches the age of twelve or thirteen. As a matter of propriety, the daughter will be sent away "to visit relatives" for a couple of weeks. After a fixed period of sexual exploitation, the girl will return to her normal life at school or work at home.

Though much less common, Japanese and Chinese men are known to pay parents years in advance to “sponsor” a young child. The families receive a regular payment to raise a healthy daughter, and when the sponsor is ready, he will come and use her for sex.

Western sex tourists, on the other hand, tend to frequent the bars and brothels in major cities. Though some specifically request sex with children, most act in an opportunistic way; that is to say, they react spontaneously to what happens once they arrive at a sex bar or karaoke club. Some men may not even initially plan to engage in commercial sex on their journeys to Southeast Asia, but find it easy to do once they are there.

Sexual tourism clearly feeds the beast of sexual slavery. Nonetheless, its contribution to the sex trade in Southeast Asia is vastly overrated in the global media. By far the largest proportion of johns comes from the local population. “Foreigners are not the only ones who exploit our children,” confirms Cambodia’s former Minister for Women’s Affairs. “The real disease comes from within.”

Particularly in Cambodia and Thailand, men will visit a brothel together during a night of partying; it’s simply a part of the evening entertainment. A number of studies conducted in both Cambodia and Thailand show that approximately 40 to 50 percent of local men pay for commercial sex during the course of a year. 10 Married women quietly accept that their husbands will pay to have sex on a night out with the boys. Men have sexual needs, the wives reason, and at least they will not be in pursuit of eligible single women who could displace them.

Paying for sex has become embedded in many social rituals. Businessmen use paid sex as a courtesy in the arrangement of commercial deals; if a firm does not offer its clients sex, it may risk losing them to competitors who will. Working-class men buy sex for their friends on birthdays and other special occasions. Doting fathers pay for their sons to have their first sexual experience at a brothel.

Sexual tourism could end tomorrow, but it would make only a modest change in the flow of sexual slavery in Southeast Asia. In fact, at the sites frequented by sexual tourists, a minority of the women who work are enslaved. By and large, bar owners consider it too risky to present enslaved women to foreign visitors. While some women may be in debt slavery to the bar owners, most of them work as free agents, paying the bar owner a commission for each trick. Enslaved women, on the other hand, typically are found in brothels that cater to local men.

Used by permission from <http://www.NotforSaleCampaign.org>