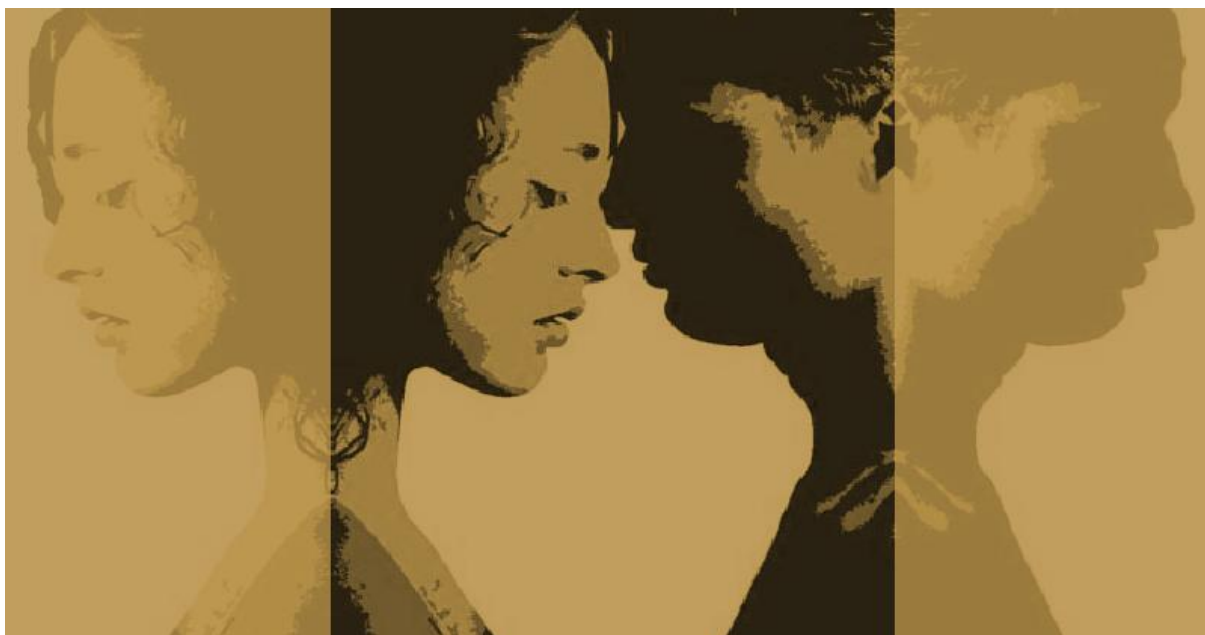




WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION
Regional Office for the Western Pacific

STI/HIV



SEX WORK IN ASIA

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Sex Work In Asia



STH/ITS

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ABBREVIATIONS

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
FSW	Female sex worker
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
MSM	Men who have sex with men
MSW	Male sex worker
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
STD	Sexually transmitted disease

INTRODUCTION



The sex industry in Asia is changing rapidly. It is becoming increasingly complicated, with highly differentiated sub sectors. The majority of studies, together with anecdotal evidence, suggest that commercial sex is becoming more common and that it is involving a greater number of people in a greater variety of sites.

Assessing the size of the market is difficult because the trade is largely illegal and often underground. The most authoritative studies available suggest that the market is vast. The industry in four Southeast Asian countries (Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines) has been estimated to account for between 2% -14% of Gross Domestic Product.¹ Estimates of the Japanese sex sector's annual earnings suggest figures of between 4-10 trillion yen and that the industry accounts for approximately 1% - 3% of Gross National Product.² Between 1993 and 1995 profits from the Thai sex industry were thought to be three times higher than profits from the drugs trade.³

Sources and methodology

We have limited knowledge of commercial sex in the region. There is an acute lack of accurate statistics on sex work and although the numbers that are commonly cited have little basis in reality they have been repeated so often that they have become accepted as fact. All statistics on sex work need to be treated with caution.

Research and publications on sex work within the region fall into five main categories:

- reports, polemical works and newsletters produced principally by NGOs that often either seek to promote prostitution as work or to portray all sex work as exploitation.
- reports, particularly by international agencies, focussing on the issue of trafficking for prostitution and children in prostitution.

¹ Lim, Lin Lean (1998) **The Sex Sector: The Economic and Social Bases of Prostitution in Southeast Asia** Geneva: International Labour Organisation, p.7.

² Human Rights Watch (2000) *Owed Justice: Thai Women Trafficked into Debt Bondage in Japan*.

³ Phongpaichit, Pasuk, Sungsidh Piriyaarangsarn and Nualnoi Treerat (1998) **Guns, Girls, Gambling, Ganja: Thailand's Illegal Economy and Public Policy**, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, p.8.



- academic books and articles that concentrate especially on Thailand.
- surveys and reports written with reference to HIV/AIDS.
- sex guides aimed primarily at visiting foreigners.

These sources give us a partial view of commercial sex within the region – and there are major gaps. This applies to whole sub sectors of the industry – particularly the activities of indirect and part time sex workers, MSW and also to the sex industry as a whole in certain countries (e.g. Pakistan and Burma).

Even the best works are sometimes one-dimensional: the most authoritative and widely quoted survey of sex work in Asia, for example, approaches the industry as if it can be explained primarily in terms of economics. There is a notable absence of detailed work on clients. And research related to HIV/AIDS, which generally provides the most sophisticated available analysis of commercial sex, is limited in large measure because it concentrates on behaviours at sex work sites rather than on the broader socio-cultural context in which the sex acts take place.

This report has been compiled from an examination of these sources coupled with extensive fieldwork in sex work sites throughout Asia between 1997-2001.

The structure of the market

The Asian sex market is highly segmented. There is an international market catering to foreigners.⁴ This market is relatively small in terms of the number of sex acts performed but it is comparatively lucrative for workers because of the ability and willingness of relatively affluent foreigners in less developed Asian countries to pay higher prices per act than most domestic sex consumers.

⁴ See Bishop, Ryan and Lillian S Robinson (1998) **Night Market: Sexual Cultures and the Thai Economic Miracle** London: Routledge; Seabrook, Jeremy (1996) **Travels in the Skin Trade: Tourism and the Sex Industry** London: Pluto Press; Moon Katherine H.S. (1997) **Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in US-Korea Relations**, New York: Columbia University Press; Sturdevant, Sandra Pollock and Brenda Stoltzfus (1992) **Let the Good Times Roll: Prostitution and the US Military in Asia** New York: The New Press.



The domestic market catering to local men is much larger but far less visible.⁵ Neither of these markets is sealed – local men may patronise sex workers who entertain tourists, and tourists may visit sex work sites that are patronised by local men but, in general, there is a division based not only on price but also on the preferred form of sexual advertisement.

The sophistication and level of differentiation between sub-sectors of the industry varies according to a country's level of economic development. As economies develop, more men have greater spending power. They can spend this on commercial sexual encounters and upon doing so in increasingly luxurious sites. Less developed economies have a large mass market for sex work, a far smaller middle-income sector and a tiny group of elite sex workers. Highly developed economies have a far greater number of sex workers operating in the middle-income range and in a variety of sites, often catering to niche markets. This breakdown of sex work into sub sectors defined by income-levels mirrors class and income distribution within society as a whole.

The clients and the demand for commercial sex

The bulk of research and literature on sex work in Asia focuses on the supply side of the trade: on the women who provide sexual services as opposed to the men who buy them. The nature of client demand and its cultural foundations are rarely analysed. This is a major failing because the success of the sex industry is dependent not only on there being a supply of women to the trade but, perhaps more importantly, on there being consumer demand.

A strict sexual double standard operates throughout the region. Sex outside the confines of marriage is not considered acceptable in the official codes of most Asian societies – at least for women. In practice, men's purchase of commercial sex is tolerated and, in some instances, may be actively encouraged by local definitions of masculinity. Cultural models in the region foster the sex industry by dividing women into two principal categories: good women who are wives and who are not suppose to

⁵ See Sinha, Indrani and Carolyn Sleightholme (1996) **Guilty Without Trial: Women in the Sex Trade in Calcutta** New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press; Skrobaneck, Siriporn (1997) **Traffic in Women: Human Realities of the International Sex Trade** London: Zed Books; Brown, Louise (2000) **Sex Slaves: The Trafficking of Women in Asia** London: Virago.



enjoy sex very much; and bad women -the prostitutes - who do like sex (or who have no choice in the matter). It is a common expectation that men will turn to sex workers when they do not find sexual satisfaction in marriage or when single men do not have sexual access to women because of strict norms prescribing virginity and chastity as essential characteristics of respectable unmarried women. A flourishing sex industry and a supply of prostituted women therefore contribute to the construction of sexuality and the maintenance of gender roles in some Asian societies. It has been argued that they are the logical outcomes of sexually repressive cultures and highly unequal gender relations.⁶

There is a reluctance to acknowledge the size of the sex industry within the region. In some countries, most men will pay for sex at some point in their lives and many will do so on a regular basis. In South Asia the practice of commercial sex appears to be less prevalent but it is still grossly underestimated by governments, health departments and by public opinion. This unwillingness to confront uncomfortable issues extends to all aspects of sexuality including basic sex education, the prevention and treatment of STDs.

Throughout the region mobile populations of men form a large proportion of sex consumers. Transport workers, seafarers, businessmen and men who are separated from their families and communities either by migration or by joining the armed forces are regular clients.

Urbanisation, the associated loosening of traditional social controls and the emergence of new avenues for sexual expression are encouraging the growth of a market for commercial sex.⁷ The spread of consumer cultures has also had a dramatic impact on the Asian sex industry. It has created a growth market by commercialising sex acts. Sex can be seen as a product through which men define themselves. Men wish to buy the commodities they associate with an exciting, modern, urban lifestyle: women are one of these commodities. Materialism has also created a supply of women for the trade. It encourages women's involvement in sex work by offering them the opportunity to buy coveted symbols of modern consumer culture and it has simultaneously turned women into a tradable commodity. In this context, materialism

⁶ Brown, Louise (2000) **Sex Slaves: The Trafficking of Women in Asia** London: Virago.

⁷ Herdt, Gilbert (ed.) (1997) **Sexual Cultures and Migration in the Era of AIDS: Anthropological and Demographic Perspectives** Oxford: Clarendon Press.



and the financial benefits to be gained from selling sex outweigh customary social disapproval. This process is occurring at different speeds throughout both developed and less developed parts of the region and is encouraged by the fact that women's traditionally low social status in Asian societies, and their unequal access to economic resources, permits their easy exploitation within the sex industry. In some areas of Thailand, Nepal, India and China prostitution is socially accepted.

From direct to indirect prostitution - and the limitations of statistical analysis

A narrow definition of prostitution limits our understanding of commercial sex. If we assume that prostitution is the exchange of sex for some form of material reward then sex work involves a substantial proportion of the general population. Sexual intimacy may be exchanged for a variety of resources – food, shelter, clothing, transport and social capital. Some people do this on a regular basis. Others do so occasionally - sometimes for fun and sometimes because of need. Many of these individuals would never perceive themselves to be sex workers and sex work is not their primary occupation (even if it is their primary source of income).

The sex industry in Asia is moving out of traditional sites and concentrations in red light areas and becoming dispersed throughout cities, in suburbs and along highways. It is straddling international borders and growing wherever there is a high density and movement of people. There is a clear move away from direct sex work and towards indirect prostitution in all Asian countries. Bars, clubs, massage parlours, karaoke bars, restaurants and hotels are typical venues. Sex workers increasingly operate in private houses in suburbs and they may use mobile phones or the internet to contact and negotiate with clients. This makes mapping of sex work sites, the control of exploitation within the industry and dissemination of advice on sexual health extremely problematic because the industry has no geographically defined borders and only a minority of sex workers can be labelled as having a sex worker identity.

Customers may believe that there is more to their relationship with an indirect sex worker than an exchange of sex and money and, indeed, this may be true. The worker maintains the fiction that they are not selling sex and the client is not alarmed that he is courting health risks by having sex with a prostitute. The perceived nature of a



commercial sexual encounter may be changing and this has implications for the mapping of sex work sites, gauging the numbers of sex workers, and in particular, the promotion of condom use in high risk situations.⁸ Amongst many sex workers and their clients there may no longer be a perception of high risk precisely because they are not self-identified as 'workers' and 'clients'.

A false sense of security is gained in mapping and analysing known sex work sites. NGOs and health departments concentrate their activity in these areas while the industry is changing around them. Statistics can mislead because they appear to impose order on an infinitely complex industry. Figures produced by anti-prostitution NGOs are inaccurate in that they probably overestimate the number of trafficking victims. Statistics produced by governments, by contrast, probably underestimate the number of sex workers because they are based on a very restricted view of sex work and fail to adequately enumerate indirect and part time sex workers. Quantitative medical epidemiological analysis of sex work is troubled by the fact that surveys and questionnaires rarely establish 'truth'. Both clients and sex workers may not wish to give interviewers accurate descriptions of their lives, work and sexual behaviours for complex reasons of pride, status, shame and fear. Long-term, qualitative ethnographic research coupled with quantitative studies will produce more reliable results but, to date, this kind of work is almost totally absent.

Prostitution and the idea of 'choice'

Most of the people who sell sex in Asia do so because they are compelled by economic and social inequality and by terribly restricted life chances. Especially in the poorer countries of the region, they have no other realistic option. Some moreover are physically coerced and a large proportion of women staffing the brothel sector have been trafficked into the business. Those women who are held in debt bondage may receive only a fraction of the money paid by clients. On the other hand, in patriarchal societies in which women have inferior access to economic resources, sex work gives many uneducated and unskilled women an income that far exceeds that which they can obtain in any other occupation. The same is true for MSW. Elite sex workers in both developed and less developed countries can earn substantial sums in a very short time.

⁸ World Bank (2000) *Thailand's Response to AIDS: Building on Success, Confronting the Future* Thailand, p.3.



Many people are selling sex because of relative deprivation rather than absolute poverty. An undocumented number of young women from Asia's middle classes are now selling sex – often on a part time basis - to supplement salaries or to provide extra money while they are in education. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these part time sex workers are attracting business away from traditional sex work venues and full time workers.

Contentious debates over sex work in the region have done a great injustice to many sex workers and those who are held in sexual slavery because it creates an artificial dualism of passive victim versus the sex worker who exercises agency. Most sex workers in the lower ranks of the industry are victims of many kinds of social and economic injustice and it is inaccurate and patronising to exaggerate their degree of agency and their power to negotiate with clients and the management of the industry. Some sex workers profit well from their work but the sex trade, as a whole is exploitative of the women and men who work within it.

Trafficking, migration and the links with crime

The conflation of trafficking and migration and the muddling of definitions have obscured the fact that many sex workers are increasingly mobile and will migrate in search of work. There are increasingly complex regional linkages throughout Asia that are expressed in terms of economics, trade, population movements and sexual networks. This phenomenon is apparent, for example, in the Mekong Delta, the 'Golden Triangle' island, Southeast Asia, and the Indo-Nepal border.

The financial rewards of elite and middle-income prostitution have also encouraged sex workers from outside the region to migrate to Asia. It is possible, for example to find highly visible sex workers from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe working in clubs, bars and hotels throughout both poor and affluent Asia.

In most Asian countries prostitution is illegal. The sex industry is regulated by legal codes, social custom and organised crime. These factors determine the type and form of sex work. They also penalise the sex worker in different forms: either by punishing workers with imprisonment or fines, stigmatising and shaming them, or economically exploiting them. Organised crime reaps enormous profits from the sex industry. In more developed Asia the forces of poverty bring many girls and young women into trafficking networks and agents. Within cities, organized crime is heavily involved in the sex trade. And throughout Asia police forces are often involved in the sex market.



In areas where efforts have been made to tackle abuses the result has been to clean up recognised sex work sites but also to push the most exploitative aspects of the industry further underground. In particular, young, vulnerable, trafficked women and girls find themselves locked into socially invisible systems of sexual exploitation.

The demand for youth

Youth is an essential prerequisite of sex workers throughout the world but in Asia there appears to be an even greater client demand for the very young. The premium age for sex workers in many Asian societies is between the ages of 12 and 16.

A complicating factor is that the transition from childhood to adulthood, commonly defined in the West as occurring at eighteen years of age, does not have cultural resonance in many Asian countries – especially less developed South Asian countries.⁹ Here the acknowledgement of a female's adult status may occur at puberty or marriage - whichever is the sooner. Definitions of child prostitution as the prostitution of those under eighteen years of age may seem meaningless in a context in which cultural norms encourage females to marry when they are fourteen, fifteen or sixteen-years-old.

Like females in their early teens, adult women may also be vulnerable to economic, social and psychological pressures. There is nothing magical about a girl's eighteenth birthday that guarantees that she can make free and unpressured choices. What is important in the context of prostitution and the controversy over 'choice' is an individual's ability to manage power hierarchies and to retain an element of control within them. For the youngest women and for those from ethnic minorities, fragile communities, despised social groups and castes (in other words, those who commonly fill the lowest rungs of the sex work ladder) this power and ability to control their lives is negligible.

The youngest girls are too young to make an informed choice to join the sex industry. They are extremely vulnerable. Their youth contributes to their powerlessness and makes them less able to negotiate with clients on anything approaching an equal basis.

⁹ Blanchet, Therese (1996) **Lost Innocence, Stolen Childhoods** Dhaka: University Press. Pp.37-69.

HIV/AIDS



The understandable preoccupation with HIV/AIDS has sidelined many other problems relating to sex work. HIV/AIDS intervention programmes correctly identify workers' powerlessness as an important factor in transmission of the disease because it makes them less able to negotiate the terms of the sex act and client condom usage. Reports throughout the region consistently state that sex workers' ability to negotiate condom usage is limited. Many programmes seek to empower women and hence, by extension, to tackle a whole range of problems. Yet for many women involved in the trade, avoiding the threat of AIDS does not appear high on their list of priorities when they are faced with more immediate concerns such as debt, violence, ill-health and social exclusion for themselves and their children.

It appears that condom usage has been increasing in key sex work sites but that safe sex practices are **not** necessarily followed by those who are most vulnerable: particularly by young women. Nor is condom use thought to be high or consistent amongst indirect sex workers.

Condom promotion programmes have been extremely successful amongst direct sex workers in countries like Thailand and in select sex work sites in other countries. The link between the condom and commercial sex is reflected in consistent reports throughout the region that indicate that although many sex workers use condoms with their clients they do not do so with their regular partners or lovers. This behaviour expresses the non-commercial nature of their relationship.

Male Sex Workers



Analysis of sex work in Asia concentrates on FSW and child prostitution. Female sex workers outnumber MSW in most Asian societies. The failure to address the incidence of men who sell sex – and therefore the failure to meet their health needs - derives from cultural patterns that do not allow the social expression of male-male desire. Homosexual behaviours are commonplace. Frequently these behaviours are non-commercial but they also take the form of commercial encounters that fulfil sexual desires whilst at the same time posing no challenge to heterosexual norms and family structures because of their fleeting and anonymous nature.

Many men who sell sex will have a variety of partners – some commercial, some non-commercial, some male and some female. They may not identify themselves as homosexual. Crucially, just as with indirect FSW they will not necessarily see themselves as sex workers. Neither will anyone else. Many will be married and will have non-sex work occupations. In terms of analysing sex work it is important not to apply western categories defining sexual identity to people in non-western cultures¹⁰ and to recognise the fact that many of those involved in sex work have overlapping identities. This applies to both workers and clients.

¹⁰Weeks, Jeffery (1995) 'History, Desire, Identities', in Gagnon, J.H. and Richard G. Parker (eds) **Conceiving Sexuality** p.43.

COUNTRY REPORTS

SECTION I: EAST ASIA

JAPAN



Japan has a big and lucrative sex industry. Prostitution is illegal but the country's long tradition of prostitution and the highly advanced stage of its economy have given rise to a proliferation of sex work sites often catering to very specialised niche markets. Low-income prostitution consists of brothels, clubs and bars where men can purchase sex acts. Higher in the market hierarchy are health and fitness clubs, *onsen* (hot spring resorts), saunas, 'soap lands', massage parlours, and theme clubs. Bars and clubs cater to clientele from widely different socio-economic backgrounds. Many of these employ workers that have originated from a specific foreign country.

At the top end of the market are call girl services, private clubs and hostess bars. The primary function of these bars is to provide sophisticated entertainment in the form of conversation and a highly stylised serving of drinks and lighting of cigarettes. Hostesses may not necessarily provide sexual services and those that do so will negotiate with clients to perform sex acts in other sites. Many of these workers will not identify as prostitutes: they may have very few clients and may view these as generous boyfriends. High school and college girls also offer sexual services to middle-aged businessmen in return for gifts and extra pocket money. This system of 'compensation dating' is increasingly popular.

The lower sub-sectors of the industry tend to be dominated by trafficked women and those who have migrated from developing countries to work as prostitutes because of the high profits to be made from selling sex in Japan. Women come principally from the Philippines and Thailand but also from other countries such as Columbia.

Other groups of migrants come from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. They generally enjoy better conditions than women from Asian countries. Japanese women tend to dominate in the higher sub-sectors and there is a close relationship between skin colour and place within the sex market hierarchy. Elite sex workers tend to be white-skinned, educated Japanese women and blonde, blue-eyed Europeans and Americans.

Many Japanese men will buy sex at some point in their lives. Today, men go in small informal groups on sex vacations to a variety of sites throughout Asia where they can purchase sex.

CHINA



The Chinese government's crackdown on 'social evils' led to a dramatic decline in the sex trade after 1949 – although this was never as thorough as the party claimed. Since the late 1970's, and the advent of economic liberalisation policies, the numbers involved in prostitution have 'increased rapidly'.¹¹

The resurgence of prostitution was intimately associated with market oriented economic policies which made it acceptable to be wealthy and opened up new economic opportunities. It was associated with greater mobility: the estimated 120 million migrant labourers in China today are mostly sexually active young men¹² who can be assumed to be potential or actual clients of sex workers. There has also been a tendency towards sexual liberalisation that has affected non-commercial sexual relationships as well as commercial ones.¹³ In some instances greater materialism has diminished the social stigma against prostitution.¹⁴ Sex workers today may be poor, ill-educated women in difficult financial circumstances but they may also be well-educated women who choose to sell sex because of the high monetary rewards.¹⁵

The expansion of the sex industry began in the special economic zones -particularly areas in the south and south east¹⁶ where a rapidly developing economy linked to Hong Kong and Macau led to the creation of entrepreneurial classes eager to buy sexual services. Today there are extensive sexual networks linking the fast developing

¹¹ Evans, Harriet (1997) **Women and Sexuality in China: Dominant Discourses of Female Sexuality and Gender Since 1949** Cambridge: Polity Press, p.161.

¹² Zhang, K., D.Li, H. Li and E.J.Beck (1999) 'Changing sexual attitudes and behaviour in China: implications for the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases' *AIDS Care* 11(5) pp. 581-589.

¹³ Xin Ren (1993) 'China' in Davies, Nanette J. **Prostitution: An International Handbook on Trends, Problems and Policies** Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, p.99.

¹⁴ Xin Ren (1999) 'Prostitution and Economic Modernisation in China,' *Violence Against Women* 5 (12) p.1428.

¹⁵ Evans, Harriet (1997) **Women and Sexuality in China** p.176.

¹⁶ Skeldon, Ronald (2000) *Myths and Realities of Chinese Irregular Migration*, Geneva: International Organisation for Migration.



parts of China with Hong Kong and the men who pass back and forth are frequent clients of sex workers in the mainland.¹⁷

In Hong Kong in 1993 an estimated 20,000 sex workers serviced a predominantly local market.¹⁸ There is a high turnover of women in the industry and many of these are trafficked or migrate to Hong Kong.

Demand for sex workers is increasing and appears to be common in both urban and rural settings and amongst both local men and visitors.¹⁹ China's unbalanced sex ratio may also be contributing to the demand for sex workers because men cannot find women with whom to have more formal sexual relationships.²⁰ The shortage of women is increasing demand for trafficked brides in rural areas and, in the coastal provinces, it is leading to the trafficking of women for prostitution.²¹ The conditions under which these women and girls work are not well understood and there is no real idea of their number.

Prostitution is a criminal offence and sex sites tend to be indirect: clubs, bars, teashops, dance halls and hairdressers. The authorities organise periodic clampdowns on the industry and a small percentage of the women are re-educated and rehabilitated.

¹⁷ Lau, J.T.F. and J. Thomas (2001) 'Risk Behaviours of Hong Kong Male Residents Travelling to China: A Potential Bridge Population for HIV Infection,' *AIDS Care*, 13(1) pp.71-81.

¹⁸ Emerton, Robyn (2001) *Trafficking of Women into Hong Kong for the Purpose of Prostitution* Occasional Paper No. 3, Centre for Comparative and Public Law, University of Hong Kong, p.14.

¹⁹ Xin Ren (1999) 'Prostitution and Economic Modernisation in China,' p.1414.

²⁰ Ibid. p.1429.

²¹ Evans, Harriet (1997) **Women and Sexuality in China** p.170.

SOUTH KOREA



Most analysis of sex work in Korea is concentrated upon military prostitution: in the form of sex work around US military camps²² and Japan's record of forced military prostitution during the Great East Asian War.²³

Sex work in Korea is divided into two categories - those catering to the foreigners and a local market. There is a large demand for commercial sex in Korea. Prostitution has long historical roots and, despite the illegality of sex work, sexual services can be bought in a multitude of sites: in brothels, tea-houses, saunas, Turkish baths, karaoke bars, hotels and barbershops. These venues vary from the most basic to extremely luxurious and their diversity reflects the rapid development of the Korean economy and rising standards of living in the post-Korean War years.

Sex workers increasingly come from all socio-economic classes. Poorer women work in the lower sub-sectors of the market and service American military forces, but there is also anecdotal evidence that educated middle class Korean women turn to sex. This was thought to become a marked trend during the economic crisis of 1997-98. These women will not be perceived as sex workers and will not identify themselves as prostitutes.

²² Moon, Katherine H.S. (1997) **Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in US-Korea Relations** New York: Columbia University Press; Sturdevant, Sandra Pollock and Brenda Stoltzfus (1992) **Let the Good Times Roll: Prostitution and the US Military in Asia** New York: The New Press.

²³ Hicks, George (1995) **The Comfort Women: Japan's Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the Second World War** New York: W.W.Norton.

SECTION TWO: SOUTHEAST ASIA

THAILAND



The best research and analysis of sex work in Asia has been focussed on Thailand – much of this associated either with sex tourism, gender and identity, trafficking and migration for prostitution and HIV/AIDS related issues. Thailand provides a good example of the way in which the sex industry has become institutionalised, more sophisticated, diversified and how, in recent years it has altered under the impact of new legislation and changing social patterns.

Sex work is intrinsic to the fabric of gender relations and socio-economic hierarchies. Sex workers are frequently rural-urban migrants – particularly from north and northeastern Thailand, and the money they earn brings buying power to families in poor villages. Many of these women migrate to find lucrative sex work and many others are trafficked in the sense that they leave their homes for sex work in the city when they are still children. In parts of northern Thailand, in particular, sex work is socially accepted.

In addition to these rural-urban migrants are tribal girls from the north and women from Burma and the southern Chinese province of Yunnan. Since 1990, around 80,000 women have moved to Thailand for prostitution.²⁴ The majority of these women are from Burma. Many of them have not been ‘trafficked’ but have migrated - yet their status as illegal migrants in Thailand makes them vulnerable to abuse. Most of these women work in shadowy brothels and venues at the very cheapest end of the sex market. They have little negotiating power and very little awareness of health issues.²⁵ There are an estimated 16,423 foreign prostitutes in Thailand – 30% of whom are younger than 18.²⁶ This may well be an underestimation given the clandestine nature of their work.

²⁴ ILO:IPEC (1998) *Trafficking in Children for Labour Exploitation in the Mekong Sub-Region: A Framework for Action*.

²⁵ Based on interviews with the staff of EMPOWER in Chiang Mai and Mae Sae in 1998 and August 1999, and the staff of the World Vision HIV/AIDS intervention programme, Mae Sae, August 1999. Also World Bank (2000) *Thailand's Response to AIDS: Building on success, confronting the future* Thailand, p.20.

²⁶ ILO:IPEC (1998) *Trafficking in Children for Labour Exploitation in the Mekong Sub-Region*



The sex tourist industry in Thailand is well documented by the international media. It is staffed, in general, by women who are ethnic Thai. Despite its high profile this sub sector of the industry is comparatively small. It appears to be of greater significance than it really is because it is visible and highly concentrated in a few tourist destinations (Bangkok, Pattaya, Phuket).

The domestic market is far more important both in terms of its economic turnover and the numbers of workers and clients. Low priced services are provided by Burmese women. Their clients may be both low-income Thai men and male Burmese migrants. Often they work in a brothel-like setting: many of these establishments are underground and many of the women are held in debt bondage.

The middle- income market has diversified greatly over the past ten years. The government has clamped down on child prostitution and in 1996 the Prostitution Prevention and Suppression Act whilst still retaining the illegality of prostitution concentrated its force against activities associated with prostitution. A result of this has been for the sex industry to reorient itself away from direct prostitution and turn towards indirect prostitution. Brothels disappeared and then reappeared as karaoke bars, massage parlours and restaurants.

During the mid-1990s commercial sex was thought to have declined in Thailand, even though the level was higher at the end of the decade than at the beginning. This decline was thought to be a result of demographic and economic factors but was interpreted principally as an outcome of the AIDS epidemic, which reduced the supply of Thai women willing to work in the industry.²⁷ Men were also supposed to have decreased their use of sex workers and compensated for this by increasing their number of casual female partners and girlfriends.²⁸ However, it is possible that the changing structure and visibility of prostitution masked similar levels of commercial sexual activity.

²⁷ Hanenberg, R. and W. Rojanapithayakorn (1998) 'Changes in Prostitution and the AIDS Epidemic in Thailand' *AIDS Care*, 10(1) p.70.

²⁸ UNAIDS (2000) *Evaluation of the 100% Condom Programme in Thailand* UNAIDS Case Study, p.41; World Bank (2000) *Thailand's Response to AIDS* p.18.



Estimates of the number of sex workers in Thailand are subject to wide variation. The most reliable suggestion is that there are between 150,000 and 200,000 sex workers.²⁹ Certainly a large proportion of sex workers enter the trade before they are eighteen. A third of women working in massage parlours and brothels started sex work before they were eighteen and a fifth of brothel based women were between thirteen and fifteen.³⁰ The problem of child prostitution is particularly acute in border provinces and to a lesser extent, in Bangkok and tourist centres. Many of these youngest and most vulnerable children and women will work in the cheapest establishments and service large numbers of clients.³¹

There has been a proliferation of sex work sites. Fitness clubs, massage services and beer halls are increasingly popular. Sites may not necessarily be in the entertainment sector but can include shopping malls and department stores. Indirect sex workers generally have fewer customers who pay higher fees. Frequently they may work in the sex industry on a part time basis and may not classify themselves as prostitutes.

Similar trends mark the market for MSW. The most authoritative estimates on the numbers of MSW suggest that there are around 5,600 workers in Thailand³² – but this figure is likely to be an underestimation. Like FSW sites venues have been diversifying away from bars and a-go-go bars and towards saunas, fitness clubs, massage services and beer halls. Sex workers work in department stores, can be contacted through callboy services and through internet-based services.³³

A number of excellent NGOs and sex worker organisations operate in Thailand. Significantly however they do not work extensively in the south of the country. Little is known about sex work venues in the area bordering Malaysia.

²⁹ Boonchalaksi, Wathinee and Philip Guest (1998) 'Prostitution in Thailand' in Lim, L.L. **The Sex Sector** p.160.

³⁰ Ibid. p.150.

³¹ Asian Research Centre for Migration *Migrant Children in Especially Difficult Circumstances in Thailand* <http://chula.ac.th/INSTITUTE/ARCM/child.htm>

³² Ibid. p.6.

³³ Ibid. p.10.

CAMBODIA



Prostitution in Cambodia has expanded greatly in the past few years. There is a large market for commercial sex. Visits to brothels are a routine activity for young men in urban areas. Prostitution outlets have been opening in boomtowns such as Siem Reap to cater to both the tourist market and the male migrant labour force involved in construction work.³⁴ Following the pattern throughout the region, there are sex work sites along highways and in border towns. Most of the client groups are local men. The tourist market is far smaller.

Sex work sites have been diversifying rapidly. These now include indirect sites and the sex workers may be 'beer promotion' girls, waitresses, guest relations' officers or be employed in entertainment/service sector occupations without identifying as sex workers.

Although prostitution is illegal the government has taken a pragmatic line, and is in the process of implementing a 100% condom use programme nation-wide. Estimates of the number of sex workers are unreliable and the high turnover of FSW makes the task of enumeration difficult. Workers tend to stay in the trade for a short period and not to stay in any specific location for any length of time.³⁵ Very young females are found in the brothel sector. Lower ages are associated with increased numbers of customers and brothel-based women as a whole report a higher number of customers than indirect workers.³⁶ There is anecdotal evidence, however, that this commonly reported link between indirect workers and lower numbers of customers may be changing in Cambodia.

A significant proportion (perhaps as high as 30%) of sex workers are migrants or trafficked women from Vietnam. Some of these women are culturally and socially isolated and have communication problems. Cambodian FSW suffers problems of disempowerment particularly within a brothel setting. The youngest debt bonded girls have very little control over their lives. On the other hand, in a society in which there are few avenues for female employment that will provide a basic standard of living, women who are successful in negotiating their way through the exploitation of the commercial sex market can make a relatively good living selling sex.

³⁴ Erna Seghers, Coordinator, Medecins Sans Frontier STI/HIV/AIDS Project in Siem Reap Province. Personal communication June 2001.

³⁵ Ibid. p.8.

³⁶ Prybylski, D. and W.A.Alto (1999) 'Knowledge, attitudes and practices concerning HIV/AIDS among sex workers in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.' *AIDS Care* 11(4) p.463.

VIET NAM



Client groups include those that are usually cited in the region as important consumers: mobile men; workers in the transportation sector; construction workers; traders; seafarers and businessmen. Widespread rural unemployment has led to the migration of young, unaccompanied men to the cities thus increasing consumer demand for commercial sex.³⁷

Prostitution is illegal and the government periodically organises heavily purges of the industry. This encourages the camouflaging of sites so that around 70% of the market comprises indirect sex workers.³⁸ Sex sites are increasingly indirect and sex work is largely non-brothel based. Low income FSW work from the streets or in brothels near transportation hubs and important routes like the north-south Highway One.³⁹

Other low and middle-income workers are based in 'hugging bars', hairdressing salons, restaurants and karaoke bars. High income prostitutes work out of dancing clubs and through call-girl networks. Significantly middle-income workers will not necessarily see themselves in the mould of the average sex worker. They are less likely to use condoms in commercial sexual transactions because their perception of risk is reduced by their 'non-sex worker' identity and because they believe that wealthy clients will not be infected with HIV.⁴⁰ This phenomenon is repeated throughout the region. In addition to local client groups there is also an expanding sex tourist sector.⁴¹

³⁷ Elmer, Laurel (2001) *HIV/AIDS Intervention Data on Commercial Sex Workers in Vietnam: A Review of Recent Findings* Submitted to the National AIDS Standing Bureau, Hanoi, Vietnam, p.4.

³⁸ MOLISA (2000) 'Draft Report on the Current Data and Information Related to Prostitution and HIV/AIDS/STD Hanoi'. Hanoi: Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, Government of Vietnam. Cited in Elmer, L. (2001) *HIV/AIDS Intervention Data on Commercial Sex Workers in Vietnam* p.iv, 8.

³⁹ UNDP (2000) *HIV Vulnerability Mapping: Highway One, Vietnam* UNDP South East Asia HIV Development Project.

⁴⁰ Le Truong Giang, Nguyen Thanh Son, Le Thuy Lan Thao, Lan Vu, Esther Sid Hudes and Christina Lindan (2000) *Evaluation of STD/HIV Prevention Needs of Low- and Middle Income Female Sex Workers in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam* AIDS and Behaviour, 4(1) 2000, p. 86, 90.

⁴¹ Ngo Vinh Long (1993) 'Vietnam,' in Davies, Nanette J. **Prostitution** p.349.



Many of the sex workers are very mobile, moving from one area of Vietnam to another - and sometimes to Cambodia. This puts them beyond the control of the police and the health sector.⁴² It is thought that there are approximately 300,000 sex workers⁴³ and that the commercial sex market is most vigorous in southern Vietnam.

LAOS

There is little research on prostitution in Laos and it is generally believed that Laos does not have a very large commercial sex market. This however is likely to change as the commodification of sex spreads from neighbouring countries. There is evidence of child and adult female trafficking from Laos to Thailand for the purpose of prostitution.⁴⁴

BURMA

We know little about commercial sex in Burma. What information we have has been based on anecdotal evidence, work by journalists and travel writers, short-term assessments of a few sex work sites by NGOs and testimonies of Burmese FSW in Thailand.

There is an increasing commercial sex market in Burmese cities and there is widespread rural prostitution especially around border areas (e.g. on the Burmese-Chinese border and in areas on the northern Thai - Burmese border). As well as cross-border trade in women there is also internal movement as women migrate to serve male migrant workers in mining areas, construction sites and logging camps.⁴⁵

⁴² Ibid. p.21.

⁴³ HCMC AIDS Committee (1998) *Summary report of AIDS prevention activities*, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

⁴⁴ UNHCR (1998) Mission of the Special Rapporteur to the Lao People's Democratic Republic on the Issue of Trafficking of Children.

⁴⁵ UNICEF (2000) *Prevention of HIV/AIDS through Promotion of Reproductive Health in Myanmar* Myanmar p.10.



Anecdotal reports indicate that the average age of sex workers is declining.⁴⁶ The sex trade is closely linked with the trade in drugs that runs between Burma, Yunan and Thailand. These trades are often run by the same people and making young women dependent upon locally manufactured amphetamines is an increasingly common way of securing malleable sex workers from southern China and Burma.⁴⁷

UNICEF estimates that there are between 30,000 and 50,000 sex workers.⁴⁸

MALAYSIA

Comparatively little research has been done on the Malaysian sex industry. The size of the sector is hard to gauge because much of it exists underground. Although prostitution is not illegal, brothel keeping, trafficking, pimping and soliciting are offences. It is illegal to run 'places of assignation', that is establishments which can link clients with sex workers. The result is an underground sex trade that is hard to monitor and control.

The most authoritative source suggests that there are between 43,000 and 142,000 sex workers.⁴⁹ They work in highly differentiated sub sectors. At the lower end of the market are workers servicing poorer local men and a large number of low skilled international migrant workers. The sex workers may be brothel based, may work in another form of direct sex work establishment or they may be streetwalkers.

Many venues provide access to sexual services: fitness clubs, hairdressing salons, karaoke bars, coffee shops, nightclubs and hotels. These do not operate openly and the women working in them may not admit to being sex workers. Many will not perceive themselves to be prostitutes because they service a small number of clients or do so for payment in the form of gifts. Many will have daytime jobs as clerks or in factories and will only sell sex on a part-time basis.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 12.

⁴⁷ Information supplied by Oxford Analytica, September 2000.

⁴⁸ UNICEF (2000) *Prevention of HIV/AIDS through Promotion of Reproductive Health in Myanmar* p.8.

⁴⁹ Nagaraj, Shyamala and Siti Rohani Yahya (1998) 'Prostitution in Malaysia', in Lim, L.L. **The Sex Sector: The Economic and Social Bases of Prostitution in Southeast Asia**, Geneva: International Labour Organisation p.88.



Because many workers do not wish to be identified as sex workers, and because of the legal restraints upon the industry, the sex market has become very mobile and innovative.⁵⁰ Venues move frequently. In the upper end of the sector clients belong to discreet networks and mobile phones are used to negotiate business. Sex acts take place in hotels or apartments and the existence of the trade is hidden from public view.

Relative, as opposed to absolute, poverty pushes many women into prostitution. Sex workers are commonly from large families and they are poorly educated relative to average women.⁵¹ Average earnings in the sex industry are high and have increased over the past few decades.⁵² As there is an assumption that the numbers of women in prostitution are increasing – and that there is a regular supply of women to the trade, it is logical to assume that income levels are increasing as a result of growing client demand.

Although there is a market servicing sex tourists in Malaysia it is small compared to that in neighbouring Thailand. There are also other significant international linkages. Malaysian prostitutes migrate to work in Singapore. Indonesian women work in the Malaysian industry, as do small numbers of Filipinos and Thais. Some Malaysian men visit southern Thai brothels for short sex holidays. Sometimes it is simply for a day trip. There are therefore extensive sexual networks linking island and peninsular Southeast Asia.

The number of MSW in Malaysia is unknown. Sodomy is prohibited by law.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p.77.

⁵¹ Ibid. p.81-82.

⁵² Ibid. p.90.

SINGAPORE



There are a variety of sites where sex work is occurring in Singapore although only some of these are officially recognised. Prostitution is legal (providing a woman is over 21 year of age). Operating a brothel and soliciting in public are technically illegal but in practice they are tolerated in designated red light areas (DRAs). There is a very high degree of control over this sector of the industry. Workers must be registered, have medical checks and carry cards verifying this.

Sex work outside the DRAs is extensive and growing. There is street prostitution, a call-girl system and a network of mobile semi-permanent brothels. Sex workers in this sub-sector are more expensive and the trade is very hard to monitor and control because it is invisible.⁵³

All classes of people are found amongst sex workers and their clients. There is large local demand and a highly developed market catering to tourists and foreign businessmen and also a low-income market servicing principally male guest workers in the construction industry.

The majority of registered prostitutes are Malaysian and there is a constant flow of FSW to Singapore from neighbouring countries. Workers come from Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Hong Kong and Taiwan, in the process strengthening informal regional linkages in the sex industry – both of sexual networks and of brothel owners who operate exchange programmes. Most of these sex workers are thought to enter Singapore legally⁵⁴ but there is also significant illegal trafficking of women and sexual abuse of migrant women domestic workers.

INDONESIA

The scale of the sex industry in Indonesia is perhaps smaller than that of other South East Asian countries. Even so it is still estimated to account for somewhere in the region of 0.8% - 2.4% of Gross Domestic Product.⁵⁵ As elsewhere, estimates of the number of women in prostitution vary greatly but the most authoritative study claims that a figure between 140,000 and 230,000 is credible.⁵⁶ As a percentage of the population this is a lower figure than that found in neighbouring countries of the region.

⁵³ Ong, Jin Hui (1993) 'Singapore', in Davis, Nanette J. **Prostitution** pp. 248-249.

⁵⁴ Ibid. pp.256-257.

⁵⁵ Jones, Gavin W., Endang Sulistyarningsih and Terence H. Hull (1998) 'Prostitution in Indonesia', in Lim, L.L. **The Sex Sector: The Economic and Social Bases of Prostitution in Southeast Asia** Geneva: International Labour Organisation, p.57.

⁵⁶ Jones, Gavin W. (et al) (1998) 'Prostitution in Indonesia', in Lim, L.L. **The Sex Sector** p.52.



Commercial sex is expanding in Indonesia. Changes in employment patterns, increased geographic and social mobility and a growing tourist industry have created increased consumer demand both amongst local men and visitors to the country.⁵⁷ There are also increasing links between the Indonesian sex industry and those in Malaysia, and Singapore with the creation of sexual networks of both clients and migrating sex workers. The best example of this is the Indonesian island of Batam, which caters to a significant number of clients from Singapore, and Malaysia who avail themselves of cheaper prices than in their home sex market. The increased linkages associated with the sex industry parallel patterns of economic development in the East ASEAN growth area.⁵⁸

The women who enter the trade are usually compelled by economic circumstances. They may be divorced and have families to support. There are no available figures suggesting how common this practise is. Certain parts of Java are well-known prostitute recruiting grounds that have traditionally specialised in providing women for sexual services. In areas such as West and Central Java sex work is an acceptable occupation for girls.

Selling sex is not technically a criminal act, although aspects of the industry such as soliciting, pimping and procuring are illegal. Direct prostitution in brothel complexes is regulated by government legislation and regional authorities on the grounds that this concentrates the problem of vice. The brothels, and the women within them, have to follow strict regulations regarding health, length of service in the complex, age of entry into the trade and willingness of the women to undertake 'rehabilitation' courses.⁵⁹

In practice, concentrating prostitution in these brothel complexes has not been successful because prostitution has flourished outside the designated zones. Massage parlours and unofficial brothels provide direct services and there are many other venues offering indirect sex workers. As the economy has grown and men have gained more purchasing power the industry has diversified and there has been a proliferation of sex work sites. These include nightclubs, discos, hotels and bars. They facilitate indirect sex work as the sex acts take place away from the venue. There is also street prostitution catering to less affluent consumers and a sophisticated system of high-class call girls catering to the rich. Many of these women work independently.

⁵⁷ World Bank (1999) *Indonesia: HIV/AIDS and STD Prevention and Management Project* Staff Appraisal Report.

⁵⁸ UNDP (2000) *Assessing Population Movement and HIV Vulnerability: Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines Linkages in the East ASEAN Growth Area* Southeast Asia HIV and Development Project.

⁵⁹ Ibid. p.60.



There is a very wide variation in income levels amongst sex workers. To date programmes targeting sex workers have failed to appreciate the massive differences between categories of workers.⁶⁰ Mass-market prostitution (principally street prostitution, and official and unofficial brothels) is poorly paid but for women with minimal education and skills the earnings are still far higher than in any other occupation open to them. Amongst elite sex workers earnings are extremely high and are comparable to those of senior professionals.

Many women will exchange sexual acts for a variety of rewards, principally gifts, but will not think of themselves as sex workers.⁶¹ This blurring of the division between commercial and emotional relationships can also be seen in the relationships, which sex workers develop with their regular clients. These tend to be more emotional and more in harmony with traditional Indonesian gender roles. Within this context women have reduced negotiating power.⁶² This pattern is repeated throughout Asia.

THE PHILIPPINES

The market for military prostitution dried up to a large extent with the closure of US bases in the early 1990s. Today sex tourism has replaced military prostitution. Poorly educated women within it can earn substantially more selling sex to foreigners than in any other occupation open to them.

Official surveys indicate that men do not buy sex on a large scale and that sexual networks cannot be extensive because HIV/AIDS prevalence rates are low.⁶³ The most reliable study quotes figures of 400,000-500,000 sex workers.

⁶⁰ Iven Wolffers (et al.) (1999) '*Pacar and Tamu: Indonesian Women Sex Workers' Relationships with Men' Culture, Health and Sexuality*, 5(1) 39-53.

⁶¹ Ibid pp.43-44.

⁶² Ibid pp.47-48.

⁶³ World Health Organisation (2000) *Consensus Report on STI, HIV and AIDS Epidemiology*, WHO, Regional Office for the Western Pacific and the Department of Health, Government of the Philippines.



The division of the sex industry into sub-sectors parallels that in other fast developing countries: there is a mass market, mainly involving brothel and street based prostitution and indirect forms of prostitution based in cheaper bars and cabarets. And there is an increasingly differentiated market catering to the middle classes, which operates out of a variety of venues (karaoke bars, saunas, massage parlours and more sophisticated brothels). The top end of the market is dominated by hotel prostitution and call-girl services. Both local men and foreigners patronise the middle and high sub-sectors of the industry. Local men tend to dominate in the cheaper sectors.

Most of the women entering prostitution will do so because of difficult economic circumstances. Many will also have come from impoverished and troubled families in urban slums.

Prostitution is illegal in the Philippines but the government requires that women working as entertainers attend social hygiene clinics for regular health examinations. In addition to the registered establishments and official entertainers there is also a large illegal business organised around *casas*, special tourist agencies, escort services and hotel room service. Few of the women in these latter sub-sectors will acknowledge – or even recognise - themselves as prostitutes. Girls in *casas* will not identify themselves publicly as prostitutes.

There are no figures for MSW in the Philippines.

SECTION THREE: SOUTH ASIA

INDIA



Small, geographically concentrated sub sectors of the Indian sex industry are well documented, particularly from a socio-medical perspective. Brothel based prostitution in Calcutta has received especially detailed attention. There are studies on the history of prostitution, sociological studies of temple prostitution, journalistic articles and polemical works on trafficking and low-income sex work, and some important but largely descriptive work on call girls. This gives us only a partial and inadequate picture and there have been no really reliable regional, let alone national, studies that can suggest the size of the sex industry.

Estimates for the numbers in sex work are high – reflecting, in part, the size of the population. The Indian National Commission for Women quotes figures of two million sex workers.⁶⁴ The number of child prostitutes as a percentage of the total is also quoted as being high. It has been suggested that 40% of female prostitutes begin selling sex before they are eighteen.⁶⁵ All figures on sex work in India (with the exception of HIV-related surveys in a minority of sites) must be treated with extreme caution.

Very little is known about the demand for sex worker services. Sexuality is not a subject that is much discussed in India. Contrary to cultural ideals that stress chastity before marriage and fidelity within it, men commonly stray from this norm. While this behaviour is generally not as pronounced as in societies in East and Southeast Asia there is consistent, although largely anecdotal evidence to indicate that a large minority of men are clients of sex workers. Mobile groups of men: male migrants in the cities; truck drivers; those in the armed forces; and travelling businessmen are frequently cited as important client groups. Many young men are initiated into their sexual lives by prostitutes.⁶⁶ Rapidly escalating prevalence rates for HIV indicate that monogamy is not necessarily practised.⁶⁷ This applies to men from all social classes.

⁶⁴ National Commission for Women (1997) *The Velvet Blouse: Sexual Exploitation of Children* Delhi: Government of India, p.4.

⁶⁵ Ibid. p.7.

⁶⁶ UNFPA (2001) *Adolescents in India: A Profile* p.12.

⁶⁷ Brown, Louise (2000) *Sex Slaves* p.135.



There is a large and relatively visible sex industry in Indian town and cities. This is especially true in north Indian cities where there are traditional brothels that constitute entire neighbourhoods. In the southern cities of Madras and Bangalore there are ill-defined red light areas and a larger population of floating (or in this case 'flying') sex workers who operate on the streets. Agencies and NGOs working on HIV/AIDS, child prostitution and trafficking have focussed their energies on brothel-based prostitution in the cities because this is where concentrations of workers and the exploited are most obvious. Yet there are many other sex work sites dispersed along highways, in suburbs and in small towns. The tendency for commercial sex to diversify, expand and to change forms has complicated this further. In Mumbai, for example, NGO activity is concentrated in Kamatipura yet a recent mapping of sex work in the city revealed that there were at least another thirty-three important sex work sites.⁶⁸ These sites did not include those categorised as indirect.

Like its counterparts in East and Southeast Asia, the Indian sex industry is diversifying away from traditional sites and dispersing into the anonymity of 'ordinary' society. This process is not as advanced in India as elsewhere partly because of low levels of economic development and partly because traditional cultural norms regarding sexuality are less relaxed and more resistant to the idea (if not the practice) of commercial sex. Nevertheless there are a growing number of venues for the purchasing of sex and increasingly sophisticated sexual networks involving low, middle and high-income prostitution.

The vast majority of women who become sex workers do so because of dire economic circumstances. Those entering the brothel and street prostitution sectors tend to be very young. Many – perhaps most – will be children. The situation is thought to be especially acute in northern states where a combination of poverty and the low status of females contribute to their exploitation in the sex industry. In many desperately poor regions it is accepted that girls will become prostitutes in order to help their families.

⁶⁸ Committed Communities Development Trust, Mumbai (1999) Draft report on the development of brothel-based sex work in Mumbai.



A significant number of new entrants to the cheaper sub-sectors of the trade are trafficked. Despite the high profile given to Nepali and Bangladeshi girls who are trafficked into Indian brothels, the majority of trafficked females in India come from poor Indian states. The situation of the majority of trafficking victims is grim: many are held in systems of sexual slavery with minimal control over their lives. There is large demand for females like these because they are young, cheap and submissive.

There is substantial anecdotal evidence indicating that it is not only poor and desperate women but also educated women who are entering the market for commercial sex. Students, professional women and housewives are also selling sex. Workers in traditional lower class brothels complain of their 'quality' trade being taken by educated women.⁶⁹ These women are invisible – purposely so – within the commercial sex market. They will endeavour to portray behaviours that are not those of stereotypical prostitutes.

Research on male sex workers is even more limited. This is to be expected in a context in which male-male sexual desire is a threat to strong, family-oriented social patterns. However, homosexual behaviours are extremely common. Many of these are non-commercial exchanges but many involve material transactions. There are no clear dividing lines separating the male sex worker from the man who has sex with men. In the same way there is no absolute dividing line between the MSM and the person who is a 'regular' family man with wife and children. In many instances all these behaviours and roles are found in the same individual.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Based upon interviews with sex workers in Calcutta, Mumbai and Delhi. Also personal communication with Del Aulich, Sharan, New Delhi.

⁷⁰ Khan, Shivananda (1999) 'Through a Window Darkly: Men Who Sell Sex to Men in India and Bangladesh' in Aggleton, Peter (ed.) **Men Who Sell Sex: International Perspectives on Male Prostitution and HIV/AIDS** London: UCL Press.

BANGLADESH



The Bangladeshi sex industry has been subject to the same kind of changes apparent in other parts of the region. The trade is dispersing. It is moving out from traditional red light areas – which are ghettos in the cities – and dispersing through the suburbs. There is increasing ‘hotel prostitution’: with networks of mobile workers, pimps and clients operating in hotels, hostels, and guesthouses. There may be up to 10,000 women working under these kinds of arrangements in Dhaka and a symbiotic relationship is developing between hotels and the sex trade.⁷¹ Freelance sex workers also operate out of hotels and private apartments. There is a significant street prostitution scene with workers providing sex services in parks and side streets.

Brothel complexes exist in town and cities: over a dozen of these are ‘official’. In the past three years, however, there has been a clampdown on a number of high profile brothels in which thousands of women were based. Kandupatti, Tanbazar and Nimtoli brothels were both closed amidst great controversy and the women made homeless. Although prostitution was not technically illegal (providing the woman was eighteen and of sound mind and had made the decision to sell sex) deep legal, academic and public confusion over the status of prostitution existed up until March 2000 when the High Court ruled the profession to be legal.

Estimated numbers of workers vary significantly. A total of 36,000 workers in the entire country are suggested by one study.⁷² Another study quotes police figures of 25,000-30,000 sex workers in Dhaka alone.⁷³ Whichever estimate is used there is general consensus that the commercial sex trade is expanding, with some sources claiming that there is a ‘phenomenal growth’ in the number of sex workers.⁷⁴

Most sex workers in low-income brothels are the children of workers have been forced into the trade by desperate economic circumstances. Many are children⁷⁵ and a majority are debt-bonded. There is significant client demand for young girls, with a positive correlation between the youth of the worker, the number of clients she services and her level of income.

⁷¹ Dr Malay K. Mridha, Assistant Director, Bangladesh Women’s Health Coalition, personal communication, June 2001.

⁷² World Bank (2000) *Project Appraisal Document on a Proposed Credit to the People’s Republic of Bangladesh for an HIV/AIDS Prevention Project*, p.3.

⁷³ Khan, Z.R. and H.U.K. Arefin (1989) **Patita Nari: A Study of Prostitution in Bangladesh** Dhaka: CSS.

⁷⁴ Ahsan, Rosie Majid, Nasreen Ahmad, Ammatuz Zohra Eusuf and Jagonnath Roy (1999) ‘Prostitutes and their Environment in Narayanganj, Bangladesh,’ *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 40(1) p.34.

⁷⁵ Brown, Louise (2000) **Sex Slaves** p.119.



There are an estimated 700,000 clients of sex workers⁷⁶ (although this figure is based on the assumption that there are 36,000 sex workers). Principal client groups include rickshaw pullers, transport sector workers, students, police, sailors and dockworkers.

There is a significant population of MSW and transgender workers. Homosexual behaviours are common in Bangladesh and many of these will be mediated through some form of commercial exchange. The men involved in these exchanges may not see themselves as possessing a 'homosexual' or sex worker identity.

SRI LANKA

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the size of the commercial sex market has increased in recent years. There is a market catering to local men and a sex tourist market. Contrary to popular perceptions this tourist market does not dominate the local one. Prostitution thrives around the conflict zones: poor widowed women make likely candidates for the industry and there is a large demand for sexual services from men in the armed forces.⁷⁷ Sex work sites include beaches, street prostitution, massage clinics (mainly in Colombo) different classes of brothels and 'satellite' brothels around guesthouses.⁷⁸

The growth of free trade zones and the low wages paid to the women who work there propels some into sex work – often on a part time basis. There appears to have been a growth in this type of part time sex work.⁷⁹ These FSW will have other regular occupations and not necessarily see themselves as prostitutes. Trafficking of women does occur in Sri Lanka and over one third of sex workers who took part in a pilot study revealed that they had been trafficked into the trade.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ World Bank (2000) *Project Appraisal Document on a Proposed Credit to the People's Republic of Bangladesh for an HIV/AIDS Prevention Project* p.7.

⁷⁷ Mallika Ganasinghe, Organisation for the Protection of the Social Environment, Sri Lanka, personal communication June 2001.

⁷⁸ Ratnapala, Nandasena (1999) **Sex Workers of Sri Lanka** Sarvodaya Vishva Lekha, Ratmalana.

⁷⁹ Ibid. p.16.

⁸⁰ Asoka Fernando, Save the Children (UK), Sri Lanka. Personal communication June 2001.



Estimating the number of sex workers is difficult and there are some very wide variations. The most authoritative study suggests that there are around 4,200 street sex workers (the majority in Colombo), around 1,700 based in massage parlours and another 4,800 in the brothel sector.⁸¹ This is probably a very conservative estimate. Although there have been a number of unsubstantiated reports of enormous numbers of children in prostitution, it is likely that they do not exceed 2,500.⁸² These children include both girls and boys although client preference appears to be for boys between the ages of twelve and fourteen.⁸³

Sexual behaviours amongst MSM appear to be altering with growing contact with other cultures. Anal sex, which was not traditionally practised on a large scale, is now becoming far more common.⁸⁴

NEPAL

Debates on prostitution in Nepal have been dominated by the issues of trafficking and the migration of females from Nepal's middle hills to north Indian brothels but comparatively little research has been done on prostitution in Nepal itself.

The subsistence nature of large parts of the rural economy meant that there was no mass market for commercial sex until comparatively recently. Economic development and urbanisation and the increasing integration of Nepal within global consumer cultures has altered this so that there is now an expanding domestic sex market in all parts of the country. There is also a small but expanding trade catering to sex tourists and expatriates. Sex work sites tend to concentrate in urban areas of the Kathmandu Valley, Pokhara and in the cities and towns of the Terai where there are dense sexual networks linking the Indo-Nepal border areas. There are many sex work sites along the main north-south transport routes⁸⁵ and along portage routes. Sex work sites can also be found in the bazaars of the hills. Usual sex work sites include 'drinking pubs', hotels, restaurants and lodges, the worker's own home, roads, bus parks and jungle areas.⁸⁶ Much of the trade is underground and FSW tend to be extremely mobile.

⁸¹ Ratnapala, Nandasena (1999) **Sex Workers of Sri Lanka** p.10-12.

⁸² Ibid. p.37.

⁸³ Ibid. p.36.

⁸⁴ Ratnapala, Nandasena (1999) 'Male Sex Work in Sri Lanka' in P. Aggleton (ed.) **Men Who Sell Sex: International Perspectives on Male Prostitution and HIV/AIDS** London: UCL Press, p.218.

⁸⁵ Family Health International *Final Report of the AIDSCAP Program in Nepal*, August 1993- July 1997.

⁸⁶ UNICEF (1998) *A Situation Analysis of Sex Work and Trafficking in Nepal with Reference to Children* Lalitpur, Nepal, p.11.



Women of all castes and classes become sex workers, although those who are trafficked or migrate to India come primarily from ethnic minority groups in the hills. Contrary to popular belief not all females working in the Indian or Nepali sex industries have been trafficked as a result of abduction, drugging or deception. Many young women and girls are sent into sex work because they can earn relatively high wages that can be remitted back home to support families in impoverished villages.

Confusingly prostitution is neither legal nor illegal in Nepal⁸⁷ - although sex workers are subject to police harassment and arrest. The estimated number of sex workers is over 25,000 with about 5,000 based in the Kathmandu Valley. Around 5,000 children are thought to be exploited in prostitution⁸⁸ and around 35% enter sex work by the time they are fifteen.⁸⁹ Around 100,000 Nepali women and girls are believed to work in the Indian sex industry although this figure is open to question with some estimates being significantly higher.⁹⁰

PAKISTAN⁹¹

Pakistan's sex industry is very poorly documented and analysed. It operates largely underground because prostitution is illegal (as is all sex outside the confines of marriage). Despite this, the sex market in Pakistan is increasing.

There are only a handful of identifiable traditional red light areas remaining in Pakistani cities: most prostitution began a process of moving out from traditional sites in the 1960s. Today prostitution is dispersed throughout urban areas in residential suburbs; it operates in guesthouses and hotels and it is very hard to identify either workers or sex work sites.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that buying sex is common. It is more usual in the urban areas but rural men also buy sex at travelling fairs and when they visit the cities during holidays. More affluent men may have a series of 'second' or 'third' wives: these may be sex workers with whom they will have a semi-permanent sexual relationship in return for financial support. These men and women do not perceive their relationship in terms of client and sex worker.

⁸⁷ Acharya, Usha D. (1997) *Country Report on Trafficking in Children and their Exploitation in Prostitution and other Intolerable forms of Labour in Nepal* International Labour Organisation, Kathmandu, Nepal, p. 32.

⁸⁸ Ibid. p.8.

⁸⁹ UNICEF (1998) *A Situation Analysis of Sex Work and Trafficking in Nepal with Reference to Children* p.54.

⁹⁰ O'Dea, Pauline (1993) **Gender Exploitation and Violence: The Market in Women, Girls and Sex in Nepal** Kathmandu: UNICEF, p.7.

⁹¹ Based upon fieldwork in Pakistan 1998-2001.



The vast majority of FSW are socially isolated. Even when they are based in large red light areas, *purdah* practises mean that they have restricted social networks. Typically females will enter sex work at fourteen or fifteen years of age. Most are trafficked from rural areas in Pakistan, are the children of sex workers or have been abandoned by their husbands and families. Many will be married and pimped out by their husbands (who are often drug addicts) and, in much of Pakistan, the management structure of the trade has a 'family' basis. These women have little control over their lives. In contrast, there are

also groups of women who approximate a sex worker 'caste'. Their families have been in the profession for generations and women within these families do exercise a significant degree of independence because they earn and control economic resources. These women, however, are in a minority. In the north of Pakistan, both female and male refugees from Afghanistan are selling sex in order to survive and in parts of Pakistan the sex trade is closely associated with the trade in drugs.

Women working in the higher levels of the industry have more control over their work and some young women operating in affluent suburbs can command high fees. Many of these young women are educated and middle class. Workers in brothels complain that this new breed of worker is depriving them of business.

Homosexual behaviours are common in Pakistan and many sex acts will be non-commercial. HIV/AIDS awareness is minimal or non-existent in traditional red light areas.