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Sexual exploitation in Cambodia

Thousands of young girls from the rural areas of Cambodia are being sold into sexual slavery, reports Dr Wendy Freed, after a recent visit to that country.

AN extremely disturbing form of the commercial sex industry is on the rise in Cambodia, where thousands of uneducated young girls in rural areas are being sold into brothels, often because their families are deceived by false promises of job opportunities for their daughters. The girls and young women are virtually enslaved by the brothel owners, confined to tiny rooms, and forced to have sex with many customers to pay off their 'debt' - the cost of their acquisition.

This situation is cause for concern for many reasons, particularly because it involves slavery (the buying and selling of human beings) and because Cambodian sex workers suffer an alarmingly high rate of HIV infection.

In April and July 1996, I travelled to Cambodia as a consultant to Physicians for Human Rights and interviewed a dozen young brothel workers about their plight. While each of the young women with whom I spoke had a different story, their situation collectively reflects the legacy of 25 years of civil war and poverty in Cambodia, in addition to attitudes toward women and girls prevalent in Cambodian society.

The individuals I interviewed entered commercial sex work by one of two avenues: either voluntarily, usually to relieve extreme conditions of poverty in the family, or by deception and coercion. Today, there are an estimated 57,000 commercial sex workers in Cambodia, and the average age of the workers is fast falling below 18.

Among the many girls with whom I spoke was 'K', a 17-year-old whose father had died several years earlier. Her stepmother had remarried and her stepfather drugged her and raped her when she was 16. K's stepmother blamed K for the rape and sold her into a brothel, where she had sex with up to five customers each day. She was rescued four months later. 'N' was 16 years old when a woman promised her a well-paying job but instead brought her to a brothel, where she was beaten into submission and worked for seven months.

'K', 'N', and the other young women I interviewed described symptoms of depression and suffered from guilt and shame, as well as a well-founded fear of contracting the HIV virus. One girl described how she 'goes away in her mind' when having sex with a client and said she feels that her soul has left her body.

International covenants

Cambodia is party to several international covenants prohibiting the trafficking of persons and the exploitation of women and children. But in Cambodia, an old adage says, 'Men are gold, and women are cloth.' Men are expected to have many sexual partners. Society does not frown upon brothels, and there is an increasing demand for virgins as male sex tourists seek to avoid the risk of HIV infection. Once the girls are 'deflowered', brothels await them.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic in Cambodia takes on a frightening dimension when one considers statistics from a recent US Agency for International Development study.

Researchers found that as many as 50% of commercial sex workers in Cambodia are HIV-positive. Worse still, the brothel worker cannot insist that her customers wear condoms. Several of the young women I interviewed indicated an understanding of the risk of acquiring HIV, but all lacked the power to assert protection.

In this climate of fear, anxiety, and depression, it is clear that for the girls who have managed to escape the brothels, psychosocial interventions can make a difference. The goals of any intervention should be to restore a sense of cohesive identity, to help the young women re-establish trust, to provide skills training and family reintegration, and ultimately to change the societal attitudes that condone commercial sex work.

There is hope.

In July 1996, I visited the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) Young Women's Project in Battambang, a project that provides residential rehabilitation and skills training for about 40 young women rescued from a brothel during a police raid in August 1995. There, the young women have produced a one-hour play called 'My Life' about their experiences in the brothels. Their ability to perform in the play is a positive indicator of their recovery process.

The ICMC project should serve as a model for helping exploited women and children. Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) supports the efforts of those working in Cambodia to stop the trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of women and children and hopes the international medical and human rights community will mobilise to take action. Sex trafficking in women and children must cease, and those who have been forced into commercial sex work must be given the chance to live decent lives. (Third World Resurgence No. 81/82, May/June 1997)

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Copies of the report 'Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Women and Children in Cambodia: Personal Narratives/A Psychological Perspective' are available from PHR at 100, Boylston Street, Suite 702, Boston, MA 02116, USA.

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