

When the rescue causes harm

Is there enough support for underage girls freed from working in the sex industry?

Published: 11/05/2014 at 06:04 AM

Newspaper section: [Spectrum](#)

A visit by Chantawipa Apisuk and a group of sex workers to a Thai shelter for girls rescued from prostitution last April is a memory she will never forget.



PHOTOS: BANGKOK POST ARCHIVE

In the morning they had tried to speak to a young girl who seemed anxious to talk to the 66-year-old director of the Empower Foundation, whose members include sex workers from the Mekong region. Empower makes annual visits to offer emotional and material support to the 300 inhabitants of the Kredtrakarn Protection and Occupational Development Centre in Nonthaburi province, the majority of whom are under 18.

"The children there are told not to talk to visitors, but one in particular looked extremely desperate to talk to us. I could see that she was very afraid," Ms Chantawipa said. "When the guards weren't looking, I told her to write down the phone number of her relatives so that we could talk to them."

Ms Chantawipa's instinct that something was wrong was correct. When she turned on the television that evening she learned that 10 girls had tried to escape from the centre.

Two drowned in the river surrounding the shelter; one of the victims was the girl she had met earlier that day.

"I thought that maybe it was our fault, that our presence made her think about her family and freedom," Ms Chantawipa said. "But then I realised that it wasn't our fault. Detaining them against their will is not right."

Last year, the centre was home to 160 Thai women and girls and 140 from Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam. They are detained there while court cases proceed against those who have allegedly exploited them in the sex industry.

Ms Chantawipa said for foreign women held in the shelters, sometimes for years in "prison-like" conditions, it is another indignity when considering what they have been through as young victims of human trafficking.

PROTECTED AND PUNISHED?

The recruitment or transportation of a child below the age of 18 for the purpose of exploitation is automatically considered human trafficking under the UN Trafficking Protocol.

This means that in a trafficking situation, when one rescues a child, there is no need to prove that they were tricked or lured.

Many NGOs cooperate with the police to conduct rescue missions, but Eaklak Loomchomkhae, director of missing persons for the Mirror Foundation, said it is important to be able to verify there is a victim before such operations occur. Often the victim cannot be identified, and some do not want help.

"What we do is we ask the caller to go back to the child and ask him or her to come on the phone," Mr Eaklak said. "What we don't want to do is interfere with those who are working voluntarily and are over 18 years of age."

The police receive reports through three channels — via the 1191 hotline for human trafficking, from the victim's relatives who have been contacted by phone or social media and by police investigation.

After conducting raids, the police work with the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security to identify victims of human trafficking. Questioning of the victims is done by social workers and psychologists.

Pol Col Chitpop Tomuan, a superintendent at the Anti-Human Trafficking Division of the Royal Thai Police, said the government tries to fast-track cases involving trafficked children and, in all cases, advanced examination of the witnesses is done instead of the usual practice of first gathering evidence.

"In the past we admit that there have been problems [concerning lengthy procedures], but we have asked the courts to give priority to cases related to child trafficking," Pol Col Chitpop said.

But NGOs say children who are apprehended do not want to be identified as victims of trafficking, and most want to return home as soon as possible.

Ms Chantawipa said rescue missions do more harm than good because, after the raids, the children are confined to shelters against their will. At the government-administered Kredtrakarn, children are forced to cut their hair short and wear uniform-like clothing. Visitors are not allowed to give food directly to the children, she said.

"It seems like the shelter staff do not want us to visit. It's basically a prison, and I can't think of a reason why we need a shelter," she said.

"By making the children learn how to sew clothes and style hair, it's like a punishment."

Kredtrakarn's director was not available for comment. The Bureau of Anti-Trafficking in Women and Children did not respond to interview requests.

Lily, a member of the Empower Foundation, said that during a trip to Kredtrakarn in April last year she saw a young Vietnamese woman who had been at the shelter for four years.

"I walked into the basket-weaving room and saw a Vietnamese woman, probably in her twenties, crying. She said she didn't know where to go after being released. And then the staff came and told her not to cry in front of the kids," Lily said.

Some who have avoided being confined in the government centres have sought temporary shelter with Empower by studying Thai and English, attending courses in health, labour and immigration law.

"First we wanted to teach law, but what they [sex workers] really wanted to learn was how to say 'hello', 'I love you', 'I want your money', 'my father died', 'my buffalo died,'" Ms Chantawipa said at Empower's office in Patpong.

Ms Chantawipa believes that language helps people make decisions and minimise exploitation. For the past 30 years, Empower has provided support and access to education to more than 30,000 sex workers in Thailand. She estimates that there are about 300,000 female sex workers nationwide, of which a third are either male or transgender.

ROAD TO RECOVERY

Hagar Cambodia is an NGO based in Phnom Penh that provides assistance to women and children who are victims of human trafficking. One of its staff said survivors of sex trafficking may experience anxiety and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Suicidal and self-harming behaviours are also common among adolescents.

Another social worker based in Bangkok who has worked extensively with human trafficking victims across the region for 13 years defended shelters as necessary steps to rehabilitation.

"This is why they [the children] need to be placed in shelters — to provide total protection and to foster an environment where they can reflect on their thoughts and recover," said the social worker, who requested anonymity. Government shelters use three guiding principles to determine whether or not a child should be sent home, she said. These three conditions include a safe environment at home, continued services at home and a partner (usually an NGO) that can guarantee the first two conditions.

In some cases, the children return to Thailand after being repatriated.

"Many children have asked me to leave them alone, but what I ask them to think about is whether they will be proud of what they are doing once they are mothers," said the social worker. "We want them to have safer and more sustainable jobs."

Hagar Cambodia said that while voluntary entry into prostitution suggests free will, at times women enter this sector of work because of dire economic need and a lack of alternatives. Voluntary entry into prostitution can also lead women and girls into abusive situations, such as being forced to work long hours, receiving very little or no payment, being held against their wishes, being forced to have sex and being abused physically.

PROGRESS REPORT

Every year, the US publishes a Trafficking In Persons (TIP) report, and Thailand's is due to be released next month.

Under the TIP system, countries are ranked in three tiers. Tier-1 countries that meet all the minimum standards, Tier-2 countries that do not meet the minimum standards but are making significant efforts to do so, and Tier-3 countries that do not meet the standards and are not making significant efforts to do so.

Thailand has been in the Tier-2 bracket for four years, and it was feared the country would be moved to Tier-3 this year, because last year's TIP report expressed dismay at Thailand's slow progress in prosecuting human trafficking cases.

Ms Chantawipa said Thai police were casual about enforcing laws, but annually made a concerted effort during a three-month period to reach arrest targets to give the impression that they were cracking down on human trafficking.

"March to May is when the police are ready to go out to the border areas and conduct raids," Ms Chantawipa said. It is well known that massage parlours and some karaoke bars and pubs are prostitution venues, and the penalty for employing children is up to 2,000 baht under the Entertainment Act.

Ms Chantawipa claimed that around 500 bars in and around Patpong, a well-known entertainment district, pay 20,000 baht per month as bribes to the police to avoid being shut down for any reason.

Pol Col Chitpop said police conduct crackdowns on human trafficking all year round — not just three months as Ms Chantawipa claims — but admitted there has been some pressure to increase the number of cases on an annual basis, although no specific target has been set.

He said the US TIP report is mostly concerned about trafficked labour working in factories rather than the sex industry.



taking a stand: Empower Foundation director Chantawipa Apisuk says girls rescued from sex work still face tough obstacles, including virtual imprisonment in shelters.

The Anti-Human Trafficking Division last year reported a total of 102 cases of human trafficking for sexual purposes involving people under the age of 18, of which 28 were Thai nationals.

In 2012, the figure was 66, of which 26 were Thais.

Thailand has three main laws to deal with human trafficking; the Penal Code, the Prevention and Suppression of Prostitution Act and the 2008 Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act.

Overall, the penalties for the prostitution of children range from one year to life imprisonment and include the death penalty for cases of extreme exploitation and violence.

Mark Capaldi, a senior researcher at End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes, said Thailand has a very strong legal framework, but there is a need to commit to providing specialised services to victims after rescue.

This includes shelters, psychological counselling and medical services.

Meanwhile, the services do not differentiate between adults and children, as well as labour and prostitution, which need different care and protection services, Mr Capaldi said.

The majority of shelters worldwide are open shelters that allow children to leave; adopting the same method in Thailand should be an option due to the long legal process, he said.

According to Australia's Anti-People Trafficking Interdepartmental Committee, where a suspected victim chooses not to help law enforcement authorities or the person's evidence is insufficient to help a trafficking investigation or prosecution, the person is assisted in returning to their home country. This is not the case in Thailand.

UNCONVENTIONAL PRACTICES

As awareness-raising campaigns improve, Mr Capaldi said children are being pushed to alternative places that tend to be a little more hidden and not commercial sex venues.

But while much of the attention in Thailand is given to sex tourism, the majority of commercial exploitation in any country involved local men, he said.

Some websites contain information on the names and locations of sex establishments masked as massage parlours.

On the websites some of the men openly exchange information about where to acquire underage sex workers.

Mr Eaklak of the Mirror Foundation, who has been monitoring these online activities, said users provide "treasure maps" on web boards to gain acceptance and appreciation among community members.

"In the internet world, those who give out these locations are considered godlike. They even use the phrase 'having the same wife' as the poster," said Mr Eaklak, adding that many of them mention underage Lao girls.

The keyword for child prostitutes is "aunts and grandmas", so a "70-year-old aunt" would be a 17-year-old girl. They will also type "L" for "Lolita", or a child under the age of 18.

A post on one website under the username "papakung" said he uses a fake Facebook account for targeting underage girls.

"Do not have free sex. Agree on a rate. This is important because if the target is an aunt [underage girl], it is illegal and you have to find an easy way to get out of it. Having free sex might foster a relationship that is deeper than selling and buying," he writes.

Where there is demand, there is supply.

Thailand ratified the UN Trafficking Protocol in October, but that does not necessarily mean the number of victims will fall.

While this shows Thailand has committed itself legally to international standards around prevention, protection and support, and services given to children for recovery and integration, Mr Capaldi said globalisation will make the migration of adolescents even more of an issue due to the greater poverty gap in some parts of the world.

Migration can increase the recruitment of children into trafficking for sexual exploitation, as traffickers operate along migration routes.

As education and awareness levels in Thailand improve, there will be a likely decrease in trafficking of Thai children, Mr Capaldi said, but there could be an increase from neighbouring countries, with a trend for more Lao girls trafficked in the entertainment sector.

Mr Eaklak shared similar observations, saying that there is a large demand for Lao children as they were cheaper to hire and considered beautiful by Thai customers because of their light complexion.

Mr Eaklak also said many of the Lao sex workers were able to communicate with their Thai customers.





Related search: [trafficking](#), [children](#), [missing persons](#)

About the author



Writer: [Nanchanok Wongsamuth](#)
Position: News Reporter

Share or reprint this article:

- [Delicious](#) [Digg](#) [Reddit](#) [Stumbleupon](#)
- [Technorati](#) [Twitter](#) [Republishing permission](#)
- [Print this](#) [E-mail this](#)

Online content: [Breaking news](#) | [Top stories](#) | [News](#) | [Business](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Travel](#) | [Lifestyle](#) | [Learning](#) | [Tech](#) | [Property](#) | [Auto](#)
Online services: [Thailand Guide](#) | [Local event calendar](#) | [Search](#) | [Hotel Booking](#) | [Online puzzle games](#) | [Horoscope](#) | [Forum](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Online member](#)
Bangkok Post Digital Convergence: [SMS Alert](#) | [E-paper](#) | [Print front page](#) | [Digital Archive](#) | [Newspaper Subscription](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#) | [RSS](#)
Post Publishing Online Media Network: [Post Today](#) | [M2Fjob](#) | [M2Fnews](#) | [Elle Thailand](#) | [Elle Décor Thailand](#) | [Student Weekly](#)
© 2014 The Post Publishing PCL: [Terms of use](#) | [Republishing permission](#) | [Help](#) | [Sitemap](#) | [Online advertising](#) | [Classified advertising](#) | [Map](#) | [Contact Post](#) | [Tell us what you think](#) | [Partnership](#)