

Bound to the sex trade: Bangkok's red-light districts

by [Bradley Davidson](#) in the [August 11, 2009](#) issue

I arrived at the Bangkok airport at midnight. After making my way through customs and immigration, I was greeted by an airport information agent who helped me arrange transportation to my hotel. I was astonished when he asked me if I would be interested in “the company of some ladies” during my stay. A little groggy from traveling and unsure of what I’d heard, I asked him to repeat himself. When I politely declined, the man persisted in offering to arrange “something nice” for me.

I later learned that, according to United Nations estimates, as many as 70 percent of male tourists flying into Bangkok intend to engage in the sex trade. Western men in Thailand are simply assumed to be sex tourists. The country is a major center of sex trafficking, which globally makes up a huge share of human trafficking—the world’s third most profitable venture, after trade in illegal weapons and drugs.

Prostitution is illegal in Thailand. But as in many other cultures, activities perceived as sordid or seedy are ignored—as if they don’t exist. This is particularly true when the activity infuses untold billions of dollars into the economy, as Bangkok’s pervasive and highly profitable sex trade does.

My taxi driver spoke some English, and after we exchanged pleasantries, he asked about my wife and family. He was curious about what brought me to Bangkok and whether I was traveling with a group. Then he asked if I was interested in taking a look at “some ladies for the evening.” Though I refused, he took a detour and drove slowly along a dark street lined by about 20 women who stood in the steady drizzle, umbrellas in hand, gazing passively in my direction. “Very beautiful, yes?” asked the driver. “You like?”

“They are very attractive, but I’d really like to get to my hotel,” I said.

“OK,” he responded politely. “Maybe later.”

The more than 80,000 taxi drivers in Bangkok know where the strip bars, brothels and massage parlors are located in each sector of the city. Most of them have business arrangements with “mamasans” (prostitution managers). There are even drive-in “sex ports”—curtained carports—throughout the city. The driver parks and excuses himself for few minutes, and the curtain is drawn while the client is serviced. The driver receives a finder’s fee for his trouble.

I took four taxi rides during my week in Bangkok, and each time I was asked if I would require the services of a prostitute. On the way back to the airport, the driver asked if I would like to stop at a premier massage parlor.

Tourism, however, is responsible for just 10 percent of Thailand’s sex industry juggernaut. The vast majority of consumers are Thai men. In Thailand, sex is considered a man’s right. Polygamy is common, with many men maintaining so-called minor wives. Providing sexual favors is part of the business culture—a method of entertaining out-of-town clients and a way for female employees to pursue promotion. And visiting a prostitute is often seen as a right of passage into manhood. It’s estimated that 60 percent of 16-year-old Thai boys have done this, often accompanied by their fathers. HIV is the leading health problem among men and second only to stroke among women. Thanks to their husbands’ behavior, wives reportedly account for the largest share (40 percent) of new HIV infections in Thailand.

The Thai sexual culture is modeled by fathers and perpetuated through generations. Add the fact that many police officers look the other way, and it’s no surprise that Bangkok’s red-light districts have international notoriety.

The Patpong district is the length of a single city block. It consists of two narrow streets, one of which closes to traffic every afternoon at 3:30, at which time a tourist bazaar is hastily constructed. Vastly overpriced t-shirts, hats, wood carvings, watches, knickknacks and postcards are sold to tourists in the street, while the clubs, topless bars, brothels and massage parlors operate on either side until early morning. About 4,000 women work in Patpong; another 20,000 are employed in the larger Nana district.

Most women in the Thai sex trade are trapped there for financial reasons. Thailand is a place of tremendous disparities in wealth. While 16 percent of the world’s wealthiest people call the country home, one fourth of the Thai population lives at or

below the World Bank poverty level of \$2 per day. Most of the financial pressure on the poor is specifically on women. Daughters are responsible for supporting their aging parents financially, even after they have children of their own. In rural areas in particular, family pressure forces many young women to leave school after six years or less of formal education, often with very limited reading and writing skills. Women whose marriages end in divorce—often due to the alcoholism, physical abuse or infidelity of their husbands—are left without the means to provide for their families.

Bangkok has the highest per capita income in Thailand, with a minimum daily wage set at 204 Baht, or a little more than \$6 per day. This results in a great influx of poor rural people coming to seek a better life. But the better-paying jobs are scarce, so it remains difficult for less-educated women to support their children, their parents and themselves. The starting salary for a Go-Go bar worker in Bangkok's Patpong district is up to 6,000 Baht (\$182) per month, plus tips—more than a police officer's. A poorly educated young woman from rural Thailand living in the city is hard pressed to find any alternative more lucrative than the sex industry.

Some enter the industry out of desperation; others do so involuntarily.

Recruiters—employed by Bangkok's mamasans and bar owners—come to rural areas promising young women good jobs and wages. These girls later discover that they have been lured into a life of stripping, prostitution or both. Under the financial pressure of family obligation and the paralysis of shame, many women are bound to the sex trade and see no way out.

A customer at a tourist bar pays 500 Baht (\$15) to release a woman from her employer for the night. The woman is expected to service the customer; she may or may not be tipped for her services. And Thai men, unlike tourists, often pay only 30-50 Baht for a prostitute. This means that in order to make Bangkok's minimum wage, women must serve four to six customers per day. Along with HIV and other health risks, prostitutes also face the possibility that they will be beaten or even killed.

Buddhism—the faith of 90 percent of Thai people—teaches that humans slowly attain freedom from suffering through many cycles of rebirth, life and death. Thus it promotes a strong sense of fate. Many women feel trapped—spiritually, socially and financially—and hopelessly resign themselves to their perceived fate. Bar owners and mamasans further enforce this fatalism by fitting their employees with necklaces or bracelets that are more than a simple reminder of social obligations:

they bind the women spiritually to their employers.

Some well-intentioned groups have arranged “rescue raids” on strip bars and massage parlors, rounding up women from their places of employment to free them from their lives of bondage. Some go so far as to detain, interrogate, forcibly retrain and even deport newly “freed” women. Unfortunately, the complex social, spiritual and economic web that ensnares sex trafficking victims is not easily untangled, and such attempts usually fail miserably—often alienating the subjugated from their would-be liberators. Women may be led out of the industry for a night, but social obligation and economic expediency almost always push them back into the life they know. (The Empower Foundation, an organization of Thai sex workers that seeks better working conditions and benefits in the industry, has spoken out against such tactics.)

Other organizations employ more effective strategies against sex trafficking and prostitution. The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, Free the Slaves, International Justice Mission, Compassion First, Human Rights Watch and the Not For Sale Campaign, among others, have done much to raise public awareness, lobby for government action and provide resources for antitrafficking and reintegration work.

Shared Hope International, founded by former U.S. congressperson Linda Smith, is a world leader in this effort. In 2001 Shared Hope, along with Johns Hopkins University, International Justice Mission and the Salvation Army, started the War Against Trafficking Alliance. WATA has been instrumental in mobilizing world leaders to address the issue of sex trafficking, raise awareness and coordinate regional efforts to disrupt trafficking networks. Shared Hope also maintains a number of international social service partnerships that help to liberate women and children from sexual slavery and care for their physical needs, along with a network that develops vocational opportunities for the women to preserve their economic freedom.

In Bangkok, local programs include Rahab Ministries, which operates primarily in the Patpong district, and Nightlight, which works in Nana. Both are Christian-run organizations that provide women with hope and the tools needed to escape the sex trade—friendship, emotional support, life-skill education, basic medical care, English instruction and vocational retraining.

Rahab and Nighthlight's female staff members and volunteers comb through the red-light districts every week, seeking to build relationships with women. These ministries have grown popular among the working women, who appreciate the staff and volunteers' willingness to befriend people whom others only wish to manipulate, exploit and abuse. Rahab and Nighthlight have even built a surprisingly good rapport with the bar owners, who view the medical care, literacy, English education and life-skills classes as a valued service rather than a threat to their business.

Both organizations also offer vocational training, educating women in jewelry-making, card-making, sewing and hairdressing. About 30 women come to Rahab each night to have their hair done before going to work in the bars. Thai and English language classes enhance their future employment opportunities. Rahab also operates a small Internet café and is seeking to expand its vocational work by starting a microenterprise program.

Rahab and Nighthlight offer emergency shelter, counseling and medical care to women and their children. Safe houses are provided where women can live with their children, rather than leaving them with extended family or paying for child care. Staff members also live in the houses, giving the residents a sense of security and fostering strong relationships.

The work is slow and challenging, but over the years Rahab Ministries and Nighthlight have been instrumental in liberating many hundreds of women from the Thai sex industry. Their beacons of hope continue to shine brighter than the lurid neon signs of Bangkok.