

Human Trafficking, Poverty, & The Sex Industry in Thailand

Some Ground Level Observations and Insights

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When people from the outside think about Thailand, many things may come to mind; exotic food, culture, tourism, and temples are a few examples.

But another main thought that comes to mind for many people throughout the world is sex trafficking and prostitution.

Thailand has been placed on many international "watch lists" because of its status as a well known country for trafficking and a thriving sex industry that draws foreign tourists from all over the world and many times uses trafficked women and children as its "product."

Within these two justice issues facing Thailand also lies complex issues of poverty, greed, exploitation, and the laws of supply and demand.

Recently, I set out to visit a few key locations to meet with some key Westerners who are working on the ground to bring real solutions to this problem in Thailand.

I talked with them about the issues and complexities surrounding these issues, the rise in number of people bringing awareness and wanting to help, and their sometimes misguided presuppositions and actions that end up doing more harm than good.

My first stop was a border town in Thailand near Myanmar (Burma) where I met with friends who were working diligently to help rescue and care for children, who were either about to be sold to a trafficker, or who were at great risk to being sold because of their family's poverty.

I hope that by sharing the insights I have drawn from conversations with my friends and personal observations, you will get a clearer picture of what is happening here in Thailand.



Here are a few key things I learned near the border of Thailand and Burma.

- Children were often being sold by their parents or relatives for as little as \$15 us or less.
- Strategies have to be worked out to where those helping are not perpetuating a problem by "buying the children" from the prospective traffickers.
- You can't just come in on a short-term mission with lots of money and expect to rescue a bunch of children.
- There are not warehouses of children waiting to be rescued as some might think.
- Finding the ones who need help is much more complex and requires the groups to be on the ground, learning some language, ministering among the people, and forming trusted contacts in the right places at the right time.
- Corruption in certain levels of government makes it almost impossible to effectively work through local law enforcement.
- When families are desperate, children are seen as liabilities, and some in the community try to find ways to make a profit.
- There are female "recruiters" who are sent to canvass poor areas and find children to purchase. Families need education.
- The Burmese people are the most trafficked group in Thailand and

many young boys are sent to work arduous duty in Thailand's fishing industry, others such as children and women end up in organized crime rings such as sweat shops, selling flowers and begging on the streets of Bangkok

- Rescuing children means that you are now responsible for them until and through adulthood.
- Agencies like the U.N. can be bureaucratic, writing reports about situations, but not actually doing anything to really make a difference.
- Some NGO's can find situations where help is needed, but they are not in the position to be able to care for the child.
- Some NGO's can help the children but are not doing anything to introduce them to Jesus and care for their hearts even though they would consider themselves "Christian" in background.
- But I did meet up with one group, who are not only Christian in their motivation & emphasis, but are doing the real work of caring for children who were going to be trafficked. They are paying the price to dig in and reach the kids before the traffickers do. They are engaged in key locations where traffickers like to frequent.

I wish there were many more like them. They deserve our support!

My next stop was the massive Thai capital city of Bangkok.

While in Bangkok I met with a woman who has given her life to help other women who are caught up in the sex industry of the city as well as those who have been trafficked there from other countries. I also met with two young ministers who are reaching out to the men who are coming to Thailand as customers in the sex industry.



Here is what I observed and learned:

- There are women who are working in Bangkok who are not trafficked and are not under compulsion, but they are trapped in prostitution and kept in it through the cycles of poverty, debt, domestic violence, and care of their relatives back home
- There are many women who are trafficked out of Thailand to other countries to work in karaoke bars or massage parlors that are fronts for prostitution. There are also many women who are trafficked in from parts of Africa and the former Soviet Union.
- Helping women who have been trafficked is a highly dangerous and complex work that very few are actually involved in doing.
- Many people are raising "awareness" about human trafficking, but many times the resources do not make it to the few on the ground who are doing the work. Do your homework before you support.
- Working within the legal system of a country where there is corruption, you have to learn cultural methods of forming alliances within the system, rather than trying to plow forward into a situation with a sense of justice and being "right."
- Help is offered to women, but sometimes there are many factors that keep them from receiving the help. Intimidation and threats of death to the women's family members back home are some things used against them.
- Most of the women need in depth personal counseling, deliverance, inner healing, and new job skills.
- My friend created a successful business that gives the women a new

job and hope. Her monthly budget pays the women's salary. Each and every month is a faith journey to know how God will provide, but He has been faithful always.

- As they plan to expand so that they can help more women, she could use longer term thinking workers who know and understand both the business world in a cross cultural setting, and sales & marketing.
- It is my personal observation that Thailand is a fairly conservative Buddhist nation overall, but known world wide for its sex industry. The fact that this does not seem to embarrass the Thai government enough to put an end to it tells me that there is a higher cultural value at work here than religion. It is the love of money and greed.
- Most of the women working in the sex industry in Bangkok are from the Northeast of Thailand, the poorest part where their parents may earn less than \$5 a day for a hard day's work. However, these daughters can make \$30 is less than an hour. The issue of poverty and job creation has to be dealt with if this situation will ever change. Demand must cease as well.
- If the hearts of people are not changed first and foremost, then the sex/human trafficking in Thailand will never end. This is the work of the Church, to be the salt and light in any nation. Justice issues are first and foremost heart issues.
- Men coming to Thailand are not just old white foreign men, but men from every nation. I also saw many deformed and handicapped men. Their need is not always simply for sex. They are coming to fill deficits in their own hearts.
- The Church has to be willing to extend mercy to these men and suspend judgment long enough to engage them in real conversation. When it does, many of them open their hearts, come to their senses, and repent of their lifestyles choices.
- This type of outreach to men can and should be done by the Church in any and every red light district in the world. And my friends are working to make this a reality, starting from Southeast Asia and beyond.

My last stop was in the infamous Thai port city of Pattaya.

This was the first city I entered as a young Navy man over sixteen years ago. Thankfully I was a new believer back then and was not a part of the nightlife. Returning as a married Pastor who speaks Thai gave me a perspective I didn't have before. My heart broke for this place.



Here is what I observed and learned:

- Pattaya, and its surrounding areas, are part normal Thailand and part "sin city." I only had seen it as sin city before. There are good decent normal Thai people living in and around parts of the city, other than the decadent "Walking Street."
- Walking Street is a den of devils, a place where they have taken hold of people through greed, lust, drunkenness, desperation, and exploitation. It is a spiritually dark place that needs an army of light moving through the streets.
- Men from many nations are everywhere looking at women as if they were truly a product to be bought and sold.
- I noticed what seemed like mobs of men from the Middle East and Russia, more than I remember before.
- Teens were offering me drugs on the streets in broad day light and prostituting themselves. I witnessed an elderly European man making a deal for sex with a 15 year old boy who was also trying to

work his 14 year old sister into the deal.

- I saw women who looked like they were grandmothers, wearing heavy makeup, and prostituting themselves. I saw many girls who I knew were Isaan, on the streets being watched over by their pimps who were my age.
- I stopped and talked to many types of people during the day. Most of them all were willing to sit and here me talk about God. Most didn't have a clue about Him, what Jesus did on the cross, and what it meant for them. After sharing, I left them with my Gospel tract and walked wishing I could see that army of light engaging these people on a daily basis.
- The one man I didn't try to talk with was the pedophile. I felt a fierce indignation rise up in me and I chose rather to confront him to his face and put the fear of God in him, rather than speak kindly. But that is another story for another time.
- The best part of my time in Pattaya was spent ministering with some dear new friends who run an orphanage, mercy center, and international church in the city. I loved being with this group, pouring into them, serving both in teaching, preaching, and physical labor, and loving on the precious children under their care.
- Each of the children's stories are so heart breaking. They have lost their parents to the Pattaya sex and greed machine. Yet, I took great comfort knowing that they were being lavished with love and being given a great new future and hope thanks to the servant's of God who chose to say yes to the call.
- Two little sisters caught my attention while I was there. My wife and I have started talking about what adoption could look like for us. We are not sure what we could do yet, but our hearts are opening.
- I think that if everyone chose to do something to be a part of the solution, helping out through praying, giving, and going, and letting their light shine however they could then we could really begin to see the darkness flee in places like this.

In every place I visited and ministered, I learned that there are no easy solutions, no easy answers to the problems.

Many well meaning people have wanted to do something about the problem, but they have not yet fully understood the complex local issues involved.

A Couple of Final Thoughts:

First of all, it is important to understand that when it comes to human trafficking, exploitation of the poor, and the sex industry, each country's issues are different.

Agencies who are wanting to help advocate for the issue of human trafficking only muddy the waters when, for instance, they talk about the problem in Thailand, but show pictures and video from Cambodia or India.

Each location is different from the other, but one place may be more out in the open and able to capture with media. Each of these locations and stories should be displayed and told separately to avoid confusion.

If not, this type of "advocacy" can make people think that the work in one country is just as out in the open as the work in the other. This can cause a disillusionment when people wanting to help arrive to find out that the problems are much more complex and hidden than they first realized.

**For those who are wanting to minister in these types of areas:
It's better to come with eyes wide open and a willingness to work
on a longer term basis if you are going to come and make a real
difference in this type of ministry.**

So for me, as a missionary evangelist, seeing and understanding is one of the first steps in actually being able to do something of substance to help. I am thankful for the opportunity to do both, better.

I am also more solidified in my desire to focus on the hearts of the people as a part of the overall solution. Each of us can play our own part as we are directed.

I know that there are many other facets to the human/sex trafficking, poverty, and prostitution situation in Thailand that I may not have covered.

My goal was not to be comprehensive, but rather to share my insights and observations from the three key locations that I visited recently.

If you would like to help any of these ministries financially, please contact me and I will put you in direct contact with them.

Each one of them mentioned are some of the best of the best working in Thailand. They are not simply run of the mill NGO's, but real Christian ministries with both a heart for God and a heart for the people.

For security reasons and based on the insights I have shared, I have chosen to keep their names from this article and therefore from the general public.

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